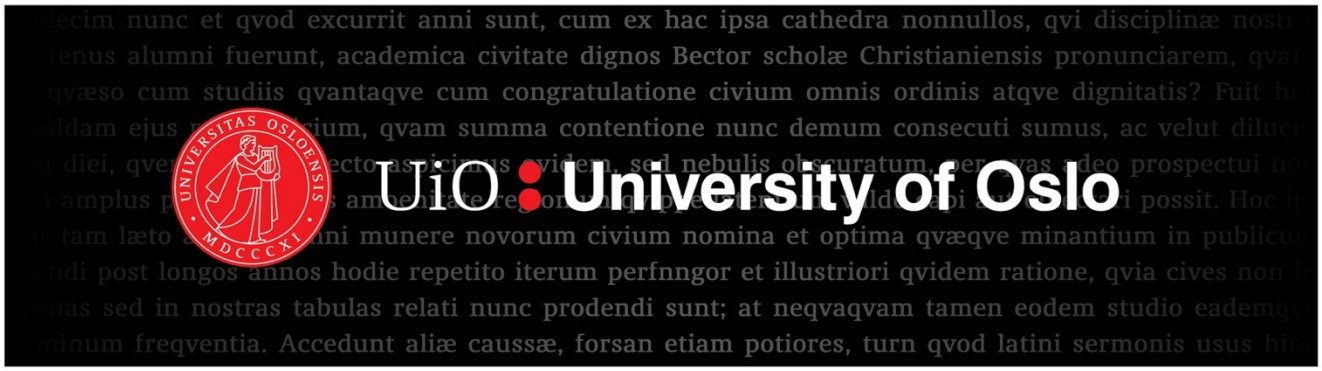

Changing Atmospheres

An Interdisciplinary, Ecocritical Reading of Nikolai Astrup's Understanding of Nature

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Master thesis in Art History and Visual Studies

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http://www.duo.uio.no/

Abstract

This thesis explores Nikolai Astrup's understanding of nature, as it is expressed first and foremost in his letters and personal writing – and uses this as a kind of microcosm to shed light on a larger question about the interrelatedness of nature, culture and religion, within an ecological interdisciplinary discourse. Informed by the discipline of the *Environmental Humanities*, I begin the thesis arguing that nature is a culturally contingent concept that changes over time. Furthermore, I propose the idea that nature is an open, fluid concept that can host a variety of multiple natures, including Dark and Deep Ecology, through the Daoist notion of non-duality and nature as an ongoing process. During Astrup's lifetime, a fundamental change in the relationship to nature, agriculture and habitation occurred. Astrup's place-specific project coincided with a time in history where rural culture as well as vernacular architecture were starting to disintegrate due to the demands of industrial urbanization, technology, and capitalism. This changed people's relationship to time, which in turn affected the physical and spiritual bond between people and nature, a central theme in Astrup's body of work. Astrup's home-bound and regionalist artwork is often understood as being informed by the national agenda, yet visually influenced by both national and international artists. I argue that we must distinguish between *nature* and *nation* to accurately pinpoint the ways in which Astrup's Jølster project were a reaction to the times he lived in. I proceed by interpreting Astrup's understanding of nature by analyzing his letter archives and personal notes, which is further applied to two recurring motifs in his artwork. Astrup did not approach nature as a static 'object', but rather as a *non-dualistic process* with an emphasis on cyclical and non-linear rhythms and repetitions that are in a constant state of *becoming*. Astrup's correlative approach to his environment shows clear proto-ecological sensibilities that is relatable to Daoist notions of the relationship between the self, the community and the cosmos. I introduce in the historical-biographical method, the notion of the *biographical self* taking the form of an *ecological self* that both responds to, modifies and adapts to the environment. In this extended awareness of self, the shifting atmosphere and climatic conditions in the valley both influence and co-narrate Astrup's artistic motifs and creative process.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my supervisor, professor Espen Johnsen, for valuable insights in the thesis-making process. I must also give my utmost gratitude to the people working at the Astrup Research Centre in Bergen, Tove Haugsbø and Tor Martin Leknes, for generous help along the way. From sharing knowledge and advice on where to find material for the thesis, to inviting me along as a project assistant transcribing Astrup's letters. A project that has led to further collaboration with Francesca Nichols, the English translator of Astrup's letters. Astrup relative and psychotherapist, Hanna Sitter Randén, was kind enough to meet me for lunch and share with me her thoughts of the artist and her family history. I must also mention the chance meeting with Astrup enthusiast Ole Petter Løvstad, on a trip to Jølster in the summer of 2018. Not only did he share his perspectives on Astrup's life and work, he also introduced me to members of the Astrup family, including Astrup's son Nikolai (b. 1926). The Astrup family graciously invited me into their holiday camper for strawberries and cream while sharing with me family stories of Astrup and his wife, Engel. Lastly, I would like to thank my network of fellow students, friends, and family– my mother, for her aesthetic appreciation of everyday objects and encouragement, and my father, for academic confidence and English grammar lessons along the way. A final thanks to the good fairy Geir Ramstad Sletvold, who, during the hectic last month of the thesis deadline, invited me to write at the temporarily closed Astronomic Conservatorium of Oslo, as the University libraries and study halls had shut down. In the words of Sun Ra: *Space is the place*.

Notes

I have based my translation of Astrup's letters and notes in the thesis largely upon Francesca Nichols' scientific translations for KODE Art Museum in Bergen. All other translations are my own.

Measurements are presented in the metric system.

Kristiania is the former name of Oslo. Both are used in this thesis.

Please note: Some footnotes lack reference to page numbers (Miller, Garrard, Morton). Because of the covid-19 situation, the access to physical books in the University Library are restricted, and the Kindle app did not supply page numbers for the digital books.

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Preface

My first memory of Nikolai Astrup is this: framed in gold, a sparkling smoky fire with dark greens and night blue hues, perhaps a meadow, or people dancing on the foot of the mountain. Perhaps it was in the 5th grade on a school trip to the National Museum. The story narrated to us then was the story of Norway's national identity; *bunads*, 17th of May, mountain trips, the childhood of my grandparents, and their parent's childhood. I was not sure which time exactly these pictures represented, but 'yore' seemed to be fitting. Hanging next to Adolph Tiedemann, Hans Gude, and J.C. Dahl – Astrup and his fellow men represented the Norwegian national canon. Two decades later, I find myself introduced to the artist again. This time, standing on a narrow road along the south side of the deep mountain lake in Jølster. I start ascending the steep hill and catch a glimpse of several green-roofed timber houses weaved in between tall trees and green bluffs. The winding and steep pathway is made up by distinctive turfed walls. The path leads me to the main plateau, a tiny street with several buildings, creating a variety of resting spots, determined by the sun's movement and the direction of the wind. The path then turns yet again and leads me up to the last building, a former hay and livestock barn that now functions as the gallery. I turn around and see the cluster of green-roofed timber cabins below, as the spectacular panoramic views of the lake and the snowcapped mountains reveal themselves in front of me. It is the summer of 2016, and I have just been guided through a multisensory experience, shaped by the artist himself.

I begin this thesis with a personal anecdote because it was during my first visit to Astrup's farmstead that I became interested in researching the artist from an environmental and ecological perspective where art/life and nature/culture is entangled. Furthermore, I wanted to use Astrup's distinct approach to his environment, on and off the canvas, to address larger concerns about the human–nature relationship, in times of environmental distress. Could Astrup's approach to nature be interpreted as an expression of proto-ecological sensibilities? If so, how to go about addressing this question? What began as a thesis on Astrup's land/art project grew into becoming a broader interdisciplinary question into the discourse on nature itself. Hopefully, the interdisciplinary approach of the thesis can be of value for a broader field of readers; those interested in the artist as well as those interested in the discourse of nature and ecological thinking.

You have a world in you and about you – the rest of us
are just living on the outside.

– Axel Revold to Nikolai Astrup, 27th of February, 1921

1 Stepping into the Landscape

1.1 Presenting the Theme

This thesis explores Nikolai Astrup's (1880-1928) understanding of nature, as it is expressed first and foremost in his letters and personal writing – and uses this as a kind of microcosm to shed light on a larger question about the interrelatedness of nature, culture and religion, within an ecological interdisciplinary discourse.

As growing awareness and concern about our environment is on the rise, there is an increasing realization that human culture is intrinsically intertwined and connected to the environment in ways we have not previously fully considered. A central aim within the field of *Environmental Humanities* is to critically address the separation of nature from culture and religion in Western society and engage in a broad, interdisciplinary quest for other ways to relate to – and understand nature. There is an established consensus that Nikolai Astrup's integral land/art project in Jølster – as in his interdisciplinary approach to making art, farming/gardening, and dwelling reveal a distinct understanding of nature. But what exactly is meant by nature? Most of Astrup's landscapes are infused with human intervention, such as agricultural landscapes and vernacular architecture. Does 'nature' then include humans and human artifacts, or is 'nature' the wilderness that presents itself in the snowcapped mountain peaks, mirroring lakes and birch wood forests? Often the nature of Astrup becomes synonymous with capturing the essence of Norwegian national identity, historically contextualized to the awareness of rural culture in a time of industrialization and urbanization. Does that mean that nature belongs to a nation? Furthermore, Astrup's work is often labeled with a kind of 'nature-mystique,' something beyond the naturalistic depiction of scenery. Does this mean that there is a mystical quality in 'nature' itself that lurks in the woods of Jølster, or does nature-mystique originate solely in the human imagination? In short: *What do we talk about when we talk about nature*?

In the summer of 2018, The Astrup Centre in Bergen generously invited me to work as a research assistant, transcribing Astrup's letter archives as a part of the ongoing Catalogue Raisonné. Astrup's letters and personal writing on his life in Jølster reveal a great deal about the artist's understanding of the environment. The letter archives are thus in themselves a

historical document worthy of ecocritical investigation and attention. Furthermore, Astrup used text as a tool in his artistic process. By interpreting Astrup's nature-narrative in his writing, one could further apply this perspective to the the visual storytelling in his artwork. Thus, I decided to dedicate the primary analysis of this thesis on an larger ecocritical interpretation of Astrup's letters, further relating these findings to two recurring motifs in his artwork.

The main question of the thesis is:

Can a broader discourse on the nature/culture relationship help shed light on Nikolai Astrup's understanding of Nature?

1.2 Presenting Nikolai Astrup's Jølster Project

Nikolai Astrup made a distinguishing mark on Norwegian Art History in the early decades of the 20th century. The artist is nationally renowned[1] for his cyclical and color-infused mood variations of the lush landscapes and rural life of his home village Jølster, in the mountains of Western Norway. Although not widely known outside of the country, Astrup is currently gaining recognition abroad[2], with the traveling exhibition *Painting Norway*, currently launched to tour the USA in 2021.

Stylistically, Astrup was influenced by the visual language of his native predecessors, such as the folkloric enchantment of Theodor Kittelsen, and the reduction of aerial perspectives in Harriet Backer's landscapes. Drawing the landscape near by deep saturated greens was favored over the grand aerial perspective and 'awe,' expressed in the sublime wilderness landscapes of J.C. Dahl (1788-1857) and Hans Gude (1825-1903). Astrup did also pick up contemporary transnational influences from his travels abroad, such as Rousseau, Kandinsky,

[1] According to Tove Haugsbø's Ph.D. research, during the period 1901–2014 Astrup's work has been presented in at least 48 solo exhibitions and 87 collective exhibitions. During his short life, Astrup had 4 solo exhibitions and at least 15 collective exhibitions, in Norway and abroad.
[2] England and Germany in 2016.

and Böcklin. The Japanese printmaker Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) made an impression during a visit to Paris, which influenced Astrup's development with woodcuts.

Astrup experimented technically with crossing woodcuts and painting to create individually distinct versions of the same motif. What may have started as a woodcut often evolved into a painting, making each print a "variation on a theme, never an 'edition.'"[3] In Astrup's lush landscapes of mountains, birchwood and meadows, we also find the presence of humans engaged in contemplative and habitual activity on the land, such as harvesting, planting or picking berries. The almost ritualistic and spiritual emphasis on the repetitive bodily motions echoes the cyclical and mystical atmosphere in his repetitive, yet varied, landscapes. In a sense, the viewer is visually narrated by a form of oral storytelling of relationship between humans and place over time.

In addition to approaching landscape on the canvas, much of Astrup's time was dedicated off the canvas, observing the changing landscape of Jølster. However, Astrup was not a passive observer. He would, to a degree, modify his environment to enhance the specific characteristics or moods of his 'motifs'. For instance, he would trim tree branches to create troll-like resemblances or add moss to stone to enhance the folkloric atmosphere[4].

From 1911 until his death in 1928, Astrup built and cultivated a unique farmstead and garden at Sandalstrand[5], on the north-facing mountainside overlooking the Jølster lake (ill.1–2) . Astrup took considerable effort and care in building the traditional farmhouses to his personal preferences. He shaped the landscape into pathways of green turf walls with a variety of viewpoints and cultivated a distinct garden with exotic as well as local and endangered plants. He also experimented with extensive plant-crossing, such as ten different strains of rhubarb that grew in his garden. Astrup's garden is, according to Astrup scholar Tove Haugsbø, "a significant example of a garden used as an integral part of its artist-maker's creative practice."[6] In the last part of his career and life, his farmstead and garden became the main motifs in his work. Astrup's aesthetic landscape modifications and creative botanical experiments went far beyond the pragmatic need for food production and housing. Instead,

[3] Dejardin, "Painting Norway: Nikolai Astrup and the Jølster Project", 13.
[4] Haugsbø, *Fortida Gjennom Notida*, 316.
[5] Today known as the artist home and museum Astruptunet.
[6] Haugsbø and Myerscough, "Astruptunet", 61.

what is revealed is a distinct approach to nature and the human-nature bond. A view that spanned outside of the four corners of the picture frame and weaved itself into with his project of dwelling in place, to a larger symbiotic whole.

1.3 Presenting the Theoretical Approach and Discourse on Nature

1.3.1 Environmental Humanities

The field of Environmental Humanities was initially influenced by the environmental movements from the 1960s and 70s. A mainly political and natural science-oriented protest against the destruction of the environment and the detrimental effect of limitless-growth capitalism enabled through industrial societies. What started as a protection of the environment through policy change and activism soon expanded into a critique of an anthropocentric thought mode in Western society. *Anthropocentrism* is understood as a human-centered worldview that asserts mankind's superiority over other beings and organisms on earth. In an anthropocentric view, humans are not only distinctly separate from nature and animals, but inherently more valuable.

As explained in chapter 2, the development of anthropocentrism is believed to have been shaped by the mechanized worldview of the scientific revolution, as well as the removal of God from nature in the Christian religion. Seen together, the removal of the significance of nature in both culture and religion transformed nature to an externalized object ripe for exploitation.

As a counter-reaction to the split between nature, culture and religion, the environmental movement began, over a few decades, to include areas of interdisciplinary research in fields such as sociology, ethics, literature, anthropology, philosophy, history, gender studies and religion. The critique of western society has led many scholars to search for alternative narratives to the nature/culture divide in non-western and pre-modern cultures and belief systems. Although Environmental Humanities was not established as an independent academic discipline until the beginning of the twenty-first century, the common aim of its predecessors from the 1970s and 80s was to unsettle *anthropocentric* and compartmentalized views of the 'traditional humanities' through *bio*- or *ecocentric* perspectives and interdisciplinary research.

1.3.2 Ecocriticism and Ecocritical Art History

Ecocriticism is a field of critical studies that initially grew out of literary studies and 'nature writing,'. In 1995 Lawrence Buell defined ecocriticism as a "study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis."[7] Since then it has expanded into the areas of film and media studies, art history, religion, cultural geography and anthropology. When Environmental Humanities was established as an academic discipline at the beginning of the 21st century, Ecocriticism became a subfield to this broader umbrella term.

Ecocritical Art History is a quite recent development within the field of Environmental Humanities, rooted in literary Ecocriticism from the 1990s. In the field of Art History, the cartesian dualism between nature and culture might have caused us to treat landscape paintings as a static term, *nature* simply being *nature,* neglecting the opportunity to research and study the various ways we have perceived and related to our environment over time through studies of visual culture. To quote one of the establishers of *Ecocritical Art History*, Alan C. Braddock: "When historically oriented, ecocriticism may bring attention to neglected evidence of past ecological and proto-ecological sensibility or it may cast canonical works and figures in a new light by revealing previously unnoticed complexity regarding environmental concerns." [8]

In an interview for the podcast *Edge Effects,* Braddock explains that forms and materials in art can shed light on the various ways environments have been perceived and interpreted over time. While the artist might not give us scientific data, they do give a clear indication of people's values at certain times in history, as well as their ideological frameworks, something data rarely provides.

In 2018-2019 Braddock co-curated the traveling exhibition, *Nature's Nation: American Art and Environment*, initiated by the Princeton University Art Museum. The exhibition juxtaposed well over 100 multi-modal artworks and crafts, both canonical and indigenous, from the colonial period to the present, and re-interpreted them in relation to environmental history, colonialization, industrialization, and the evolvement of ecological perception. It also

[7] Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,1995), 430.
[8] Braddock, "Ecocritical Art History," 26.

critically discussed the concept of nature as wilderness, and how these artworks reflect on the nature/culture relationship.

Because the analysis of this thesis is rooted in a literary reading of Astrup's letters., ecocriticism is approached in its broader sense, incorporating literary and visual interpretations. Ecocriticism does not however, provide any united perspectives on what nature is or how it should be understood. Instead, ecocriticism, can be understood in much of the same way as queer, feminist- or postcolonial critique, where the broad aim is to shed light on gender/racial power structures within a culture or society's historical context, but the perspectives vary greatly.

1.3.3 Daoist notion of Non-Duality and Nature as Process

As mentioned, the Environmental Humanities often look outside the Judeo-Christian religion to find alternate views to the nature/culture dichotomy of the West. However, there is an anachronistic caveat when using ancient mystical texts from, for instance, China and Japan, on more contemporary Occidental environmental discussions. The critique being that eastern philosophies created within a context of their own time, cannot be transferred to contemporary place and time, without a loss of original intent. This is humorously referred to as 'fantastical poohism' by James Miller, a leading Daoist scholar. There is also the question if appropriating non-western cultures and ideas, is not in fact heavily rooted in colonialist thinking and romanticized notions of 'the indigenousness, natural way of life' and therefore being a form of dualism in its own. However, since Environmental Humanities in large is a critique of western society, there must be lenience towards investigating non-western ideas as alternatives to western thought. At the same time, one must respect the vast gap between the original context and intent and the new implementations of this within the environmental challenges of today. There is also the historical fact that eastern culture and ideas has repeatedly influenced western society through various ways and at various times in history. The use of ideas borrowed from Daoism in this thesis is therefore proposed here rather as the "New Non-Dualism", i.e. a contemporary translated version of an ancient perspective, carefully threading the path of the unfamiliar. In chapter 3 and 4, I will, by way of discourse propose a 'middle ground' between Dark and Deep Ecology through the Daoist notion of nature as a process and unity of opposites.

1.4 Presenting the Structure

The main structure of this thesis is divided into two parts, each part approaching the main question: *Can a broader discourse on the nature/culture relationship help shed light on Nikolai Astrup's understanding of Nature?*

Environmental Humanities is not, as of today, a formalized academic discipline at the University of Oslo. Nor is the hypothetical reader of a thesis on Astrup perhaps familiar with the broad, interdisciplinary and ecocentric approach of the field. It is therefore important to dedicate proper space for the question of *what we talk about when we talk about nature*, in this thesis.

Part 1 will address the broader discourse on nature, unsettling the notion of nature as 'static'. Through a selection of 'nature' perceptions in both western and eastern culture, I will show the various ways nature is a culturally entangled and an ever-changing concept related to mythical and religious narratives embedded in all cultures. Furthermore, I will propose a way of bridging diverging perspectives of Deep and Dark Ecology with the idea that nature is an open, fluid concept that can host a variety of multiple natures through the Daoist notion of non-duality and nature as an ongoing process.

During Astrup's lifetime a fundamental shift in the relationship to the environment occurred, that affected architectural traditions, farming culture, the spiritual roots to place and the experience of time. At the same time, an active shaping of the Norwegian national identity took place. Astrup's home-bound and regionalist artwork is often understood as being informed by the national agenda, yet visually influenced by both national and international artists. Part 2 will begin by addressing Astrup's Jølster project from an ecocritical perspective, by distinguishing between the notion of *nature* and *nation*, as well as contextualizing Astrup's Jølster project as a reaction to the split between nature, culture and religion that occurred during his lifetime. I proceed by performing an ecocritical reading of Astrup's letter, where I will be using the Daoist notion of *non-duality* and *nature as process*, further applying these findings to two recurring motifs in Astrup's work. As mentioned, Astrup used text as a tool in his artistic process. In my reading of Astrup's letters and notes I suggest that we consider why Astrup was interested in this medium, and in what ways the nature narrative in his letters is echoed in the visual storytelling in his artwork.

1.5 Primary Research Material

Astrup's letter collection and private notes are the primary source material of the thesis. The letter archive consists of at least 355 (publicly accessible) letters, mainly distributed between Astrup Research Center in Bergen, The National Library of Oslo, the University Library in Bergen, as well as Jølster Library.

In addition, there are two documentations on Astrup's farm and garden, from 2016, which have been used:

- *Astruptunet, Sandalstrand Jølster*, an assessment of the architectural heritage value of Astruptunet performed by Siv Leden, Anne-Cathrine Flyen, Brit Heggenhougen and Annika Haugen under the direction of NIKU, the Norwegian Institute of Cultural Heritage Research.

- *Astruptunet in Jølster*, a registration on the development of Astrup's garden, carried out by landscape architect Ingeborg Mellgren Mathiesen

1.6 Existing Research on Nikolai Astrup

1.6.1 From Biographical and National, to Transnational and Multimodal

As Astrup's central theme was the landscapes of his home and childhood memories of Jølster, one can hardly escape an interpretation of Astrup that omits the relationship between the artwork and Astrup's biographical life. However, one can say that there has been a development from a historical-biographical interpretation of Astrup's art, to a broader, transnational contextualization. The initial research of Øystein Loge sought to map out Astrup's life and work within a biographical-historical and national tradition, where an analysis and placement of Astrup in his own time, as well as his personal relationship to Jølster, are central. The second and more recent leading researcher, Tove Haugsbø, seeks to detach the Astrup research from Loge's somewhat narrow perspective that kept Astrup's work within a national and regionalist framework.

In her Ph.D., Haugsbø analyzes Astrup in a contemporary, transnational and multimodal perspective, leaning on the theoretical framework of cultural theorist Mieke Bal, where art

from the past gains new meaning through the present. For instance, Haugsbø looks at Astruptunet as a form of performative Land Art and shows how Astrup deliberately shaped and cultivated the garden to use the cultivated landscape as motifs for his painting series from Sandalstrand. In other words, Haugsbø re-incorporates the value of Astrup's farmstead by hypothesizing if the farmstead can be interpreted as part of his art project. Her research brings a fresh perspective on the artist's life and work by taking Astrup's farmstead into theoretical, artistic consideration.

Haugsbø's research shows that the reception of Astrup in his own time was affected by the ongoing shaping of a national identity in Norway that wanted to frame Astrup's visual language as quintessentially Norwegian. His influences stretch far beyond the national borders of Norway, and his many travels abroad reveals that he was highly aware of, and inspired by, the transnational and modernist discourse. Furthermore, the understanding of Astrup as a rural traditionalist critical to modern technologies is unsettled. Haugsbø questions the omittance of his photographic interest, by Loge's framing of Astrup. Her investigation of Astrup's photographs shows that he was highly interested in the medium.

1.7 Thesis Aim in Relation to Existing Research

My agenda is to integrate several of the already established perceptions of Astrup into a broader ecological context. I also propose that we make a proper distinction between *nation* and *nature*, in order to fully consider the ecological implications of Astrup's Jølster project. Furthermore, although his letters and personal notes are extensively used by researchers, a literary interpretation of these have not yet been done[9], much less in the realm of ecocriticism and ecology. As I have focused the thesis around an ecocritical interpretation of Astrup's letters, the visual analysis of two of Astrup's motifs is merely thought of as a beginning inquiry into a potentially much larger field of study, where for instance an ecocritical visual comparison of Astrup's artistic influences (or rejections) could be performed. My aim is that the literary analysis, although diverging from the path of visual analysis, can spark an interest in several varied ecocritical approaches to the artist's project in Jølster.

[9] Except from author Sivert Nesbø, who performed a literary analysis of a letter to Astrup's childhood friend Arne Giverholt, referenced in chapter 6.

In this way, my agenda differs from both Loge and Haugsbø. As I see it, Loges agenda was to catalogue and present the collected work of Astrup to a Norwegian audience, thus stressing the context of the national and home-bound framework. Haugsbø agenda is perhaps to bring Astrup out of the narrow confinements of the national narrative and induct him into the western modernist canon. My agenda, however, is environmentally informed; how we can use Astrup's understanding of nature to discuss a larger question of the relationship between nature and culture?

This thesis questions how Astrup's understanding of nature was informed by his experience of dwelling-in-place and the environmental changes of his time. My position is not that Astrup's style was uninfluenced by artistic movements, unaffected by the milieu of the national discourse at his time, or that he was only influenced by the 'changing atmosphere of the Jølster sky'. My hypothesis, however, is that Astrup's interconnected and symbiotic approach to his environment, is informed by a distinct *ecological thought mode*. A thought mode that unsettles the nature/culture dualism and allows the realms of art and life, to interchange.

1.7.1 The Biographical Self understood as the Ecological Self

Because of Astrup's self-biographical project of recollecting his childhood home and life in Jølster onto the canvas, a connection between life and art has been drawn in the reception of Astrup's art work. Haugsbø writes that although she discusses obvious relationships between Astrup's art and life, she refrains from using traditional artist's biography such as Øystein Loge does in his research, claiming that this method imposes a limit on the artwork and encloses the understanding.

Using private letters and notes to read into an artist's intention can perhaps be seen as traveling down a well traversed path of the historical-biographical method. Though I am aware of the pitfalls of bringing Roland Barthes' author back from the dead, I question if there is not another way of understanding the biographical self. By allowing for environmental influences and the Daoist notion of the merging between subject and object, the *biographical self* can take form as *the ecological self* that modifies the landscape as well as is modified *by* the landscape. I argue that this is a third position that is not contextualizing Astrup through 'biographical facts' nor through 'artworks' as removed from the author. This approach to the

biographical self can open new ways of interpreting not only the artworks but the *artist in situ*, where the definition of 'self' as an enclosed unit is unsettled.

Part I: Mapping the *Nature/Culture* Landscape

2 What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Nature?

The title of this chapter is a play on Raymond Carver's short story *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.* A story that revolves around the difficulties of defining the meaning of love. Ideally, to be in a relationship means to cultivate a shared life with the other while simultaneously developing one's own potential. However, when one tries to dominate, instruct, or mold each other into pre-conceived ideas, things quickly start to go awry. As tricky as the inter-social relationship can be, the relationship between humans and nature is even more complicated.

As mentioned, the field of Environmental Humanities was initially influenced by the environmental movements from the 1960s and 70s. What started as a call for protection of the environment through policy change and activism soon expanded into a systemic critique of anthropocentrism and the split between nature and culture. By now, environmental reports by leading research groups such as the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), have made it clear that global warming is human-made. As of today, the widespread degradation of highly biodiverse habitats such as coral reefs and rainforests, as well as the extinction of plants, insects and animals, are happening on a global scale. The current rate of species extinction, also known as the *Holocene*, *Anthropocene* and *Sixth mass* extinction, is now 100 times that of the 'normal rate' throughout geological time[10]. If drastic reduction of our energy consumption on a multitude of levels is not enforced, and annual temperatures continue to rise, it will drive life on this planet to a tipping point with irreversible, catastrophic consequences.

2.1 An Ongoing, Pluralist, Experimental Ethos

Environmental Humanities examines the underlying causes of the continuous exploitation and domination of nature. This is done by asking *how* this relates to the dualistic and hierarchical belief that human beings are superior to nature and all living organisms, *why* this has come to be, and *what* other ways we can perceive and approach the relationship between nature/culture. Environmental Humanities has been explained as a "fundamentally integrative

[10] Ceballos and Ehrlich, "The Misunderstood Sixth Mass Extinction", 1080.

and interdisciplinary project that challenges and indeed transforms traditional disciplinary approaches in the humanities."[11] Although the field is connected through a shared *ecocentric* agenda and an emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches, it is far from a united doctrine, neither in theory nor method. Instead, Environmental Humanities can be described as "taking form through an ongoing, pluralist, experimental ethos."[12] As stated in the first volume of the open-access journal *The Environmental Humanities*:

> Taken together, this work has challenged and unsettled traditional approaches to the humanities, including the questions that we ask and the ways in which we explore them.[13]

The number one question that has shaped the development of the environmental humanities is: *what is the cause of our dominating behavior towards the more-than-human world and how can we change this behavior?* In short: What is our problem with nature?

2.2 The Problem with Nature as a Machine

The dichotomy between humans and nature is often referred to as *Cartesian dualism.* Rene Descartés (1596-1650) employed a philosophy of metaphysical and ontological dualism of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* – the non-material substance of thinking and the extended substance of matter. Knowledge and truth could be attained by a logical deduction of the complex material world into smaller, logical parts. Although dualism existed long before Descartes' time, the mechanized worldview brought on by the scientific revolution further distilled this binary. The critique against Descartes is that he reduced nature to an externalized object devoid of inherent value. Furthermore, human superiority over all other beings and organisms could be attained *res cogitans*. The depletion of natural resources and the disruption of natural habitats could be justified by the end goal: human progress by way of reason. Francis Bacon (1561 – 1626) was one of the first thinkers to link science with technology. Declaring that nature, existing solely for humans' use, should be treated aggressively so it releases its secrets.[14] The internal organs of animals could be taken apart like clockwork through the act

[11] O'Gorman et al., "Teaching the Environmental Humanities", 443.
[12] Ibid., 445.
[13] Rose et al., "Thinking through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities," 4.
[14] Leib, *Human Rights and the Environment* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 17.

of vivisection, a justified means to the end of gaining objective knowledge and truth for human progress.

Ecofeminist Val Plumwood has identified the dualism between nature/culture as the "the old dominant narrative of human mastery and centrality." A "fundamental delusion of the west" affecting the social fabric as well as the relationship to the environment. Plumwood identifies several other dualisms within western society, which are traditionally seen as either being pacified or subdued or superior and dominating. Examples of these being: Civilized/Primitive – Human/Animal – Mind/Body – Male/Female – Reason/Matter, where the latter is perceived as submissive to the former. She sees this oppressive dualism as a form of "fault-line which runs through its [western culture's] entire conceptual system."[15]

2.3 The Problem with God in the Sky (and the Power of Storytelling)

In 1967, the American historian Lynn White Jr. argued in his much debated, but widely influential, article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," that the dominant attitude towards nature is to a large extent of Judeo-Christian heritage.[16] White calls attention to the creation myth, where God creates Adam in His image and gives him the power to name all the animals, thus enforcing his power over them. This causes White Jr. to dub Judeo-Christianity "the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."[17] The Judeo-Christian relationship to nature is juxtaposed with that of the Antiquity:

> In Antiquity, every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit... By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit Nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.[18]

White Jr. also criticizes Judeo-Christianity for inserting the notion of non-repetitive, linear-time, a concept unfamiliar to Antiquities' understanding of time as cyclical. However, White Jr. does not discard Christianity altogether. He emphasizes the ecological implication of the teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi and his humility for all God's creatures. While White Jr. also opens for the possibility of implementing Non-Western views, such as Zen Buddhism brought to America by the Beat Generation, he is doubtful of the impact it can have on the

[15]Hay, *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought*. (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2002), 74.
[16] From the first chapter of the book of Genesis.
[17] White Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis",1203-206.
[18] Ibid.

Western culture at large. The article, therefore, ends with White Jr. proposing Francis of Assisi as the 'patron saints of ecology' in the west.

Although the origin of anthropocentrism and man's subject-object attitude towards nature is arguably more difficult to pin-point than blaming it on Judeo-Christianity alone,[19] the article addresses several central perspectives within Environmental Humanities, such as:

- The nature/culture divide is, to a large extent, a cultural myth, and the urgent need to critically address the validity and ramifications of this belief system.
- The power of *storytelling* and the implicit possibility to shape alternative narratives.
- The possibilities of re-examining our history from an interdisciplinary, ecocentric perspective.

2.4 The Problem with Wilderness

In 1990, a young man named Christopher McCandless left what he saw as a corrupted society, gave away all his money and erased his identity (he took the name Alexander Supertramp). He walked into the wilderness of Alaska, only to find himself seeking shelter in an abandoned bus, where he eventually starved to death because of the misinformed guidebooks he had brought with him on edible plants. McCandless, who was an avid reader of romantic wilderness literature, sincerely believed in the nature/culture divide, and the transcendental possibility of the untouched 'wilderness.' Still, his shelter of choice, an abandoned bus, was the only trace of human society for miles. An underlined passage of Boris Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago*, found in the bus after his death, reads, "an unshared happiness is not happiness."[20] McCandless tragic story represents, in many ways, a western myth, perpetuated by romanticized notions on wilderness. A notion rooted in a reaction to the industrial revolution that alienated man from nature.

[19] Since its publication, the "Historical Roots to our Environmental Crisis" has been criticized and nuanced. Some claim that the Christian concept of *stewardship* or guardianship is a better interpretation of the Book of Genesis. Human beings have moral obligations towards nature because God charged humans with taking care of the non-human world. Anthropocentrism has also been argued to predate Christianity, and White has been criticized for overlooking the anthropocentric orientation of ancient Greek and Roman philosophies or romanticizing ancient civilizations' behavior towards their environment (Leib, *Human Rights and the Environment).*

[20] Full passage reads "And so it turned out that only a life similar to the life of those around us, merging with it without a ripple, is genuine life, and that an unshared happiness is not happiness" From Jon Krakauer's account of McCandless life, the non-fiction book *Into the Wild*, later made into a movie directed by Sean Penn.

Nature has, in Western thought, generally been understood as dualistically opposed to human culture. Nature, in its purest form, is commonly seen as places with the least amount of human activity or interference, i.e., the 'wilderness' untouched by human hands. Interestingly, the concept of 'wilderness' has been especially strong in the United States. The romanticized 'wilderness' writing of Henry David Thoreau (1817-1872) and the early preservationist ethics of John Muir (1838-1914), among others, developed the ideas of nature conservation and national parks. These were places one could get away from the hectic, burdensome life of society and the effects of industrial urbanization. In literature, especially, wilderness has been seen as nature in its 'truest' sense, worth protecting and conserving from human 'hubris.' For the romantic movement that grew out of a rejection of the Age of Reason, the wilderness became a symbol of freedom, a place where emotion and imagination could roam free. Naturally, one might say, William Cronon's 1996 article "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting back to the Wrong Nature" stirred controversy when it first was published. Cronon claims that far from being the one place where humans have not penetrated the earth, the idea of wilderness is, in fact, "a profoundly human creation."[21] Tracing the connotation of the word back 300 years, Cronon writes that the wilderness was associated with 'desolate' 'raw' 'uninhabitable' 'dark' and 'unfriendly' places. As it occurs in the Bible, the wilderness was where Moses wandered lost for forty years, where the Devil tempted Christ and where Adam and Eve were forced out to after their deceitful actions in Paradise. However, this attitude started to change in the 1860s when the not so pleasing effects of industrial societies had crept its way into urban life. The wilderness was now transformed into a divine sanctuary. By the eighteenth century, the wilderness had become sublime, rare places on earth where God would appear in awe-inducing mountaintops, waterfalls and sunsets. Typically the kind of places that now had been preserved as national parks; Yosemite, Yellowstone and Grand Canyon. However, the less 'Godlike' places, like swamps and grassland, did not get environmental protection until much later. Furthermore, Native-Americans were already inhabiting, and had already modified, this environment. The forced relocation of the original settlers for the creation of 'uninhabited wilderness' is, for Cronon, a reminder of "just how invented, just how constructed, the American wilderness really is."[22] Cronon outlines the various other chameleonic shapes that wilderness, over time, has been mythologized. Either an "original garden," outside of time and human destruction or a frontier myth, a "savage

[21] Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness", 7.
[22] Ibid., 15-16.

world at the dawn of civilization." Regardless of the angle, the wilderness offers a possibility to escape the fact that humans *do* inhabit and modify the land, grow food, build cities and make 'home' in nature. By neglecting to address the environment in which we live and engage with, by skewing the 'real nature' to the places where humans are not – we are merely removing our ethical responsibilities to the environment we engage with in our day to day life. Cronon writes:

> The dream of an unworked natural landscape is very much the fantasy of people who have never themselves had to work the land to make a living – urban folk for whom food comes from a supermarket or a restaurant instead of a field, and for whom the wooden houses which they live and work apparently have no meaningful connection to the forests in which trees grow and die. [23]

Cronon claims that our challenge is to move beyond a 'set of bipolar moral scales' in which the unnatural and the natural or human and non-human (and one could add wild/tame, primitive/cultured) narrate our understanding and moral value of the world. Wilderness, as understood in those terms, poses "a serious threat to responsible environmentalism at the end of the twentieth century."[24]

However, Cronon does not discard wilderness altogether. Instead of placing wilderness outside of culture, he proposes that the wild could rather be *invited in*. Quoting the poet and essayist Gary Snyder, one can "experience the wilderness anywhere on earth. It is a quality of one's own consciousness. The planet is a wild place and always will be."[25] For Snyder, it is not about *returning* to the wild, as it is *tuning in* to the wild that can be found everywhere around us if we look for it. There is no contradiction between human habitation and wilderness; the problem lies rather in the pre-conceived distinction of these two realms. For Snyder, wilderness is a complex system hosting multispecies communities. It is "a place where the wild potential is fully expressed, a diversity of living and nonliving beings flourishing according to their own sorts of order."

[23] Ibid., 16-17.
[24] Ibid., 17.
[25] Ibid., 25.

3 The Nature of Ecology and the Ecology of No Nature

3.1 Deep Ecology: Nature as Symbiotic and Holistic

Gary Snyder is one of many activists associated with the Deep Ecology movement. According to philosopher Arne Næss, who coined the concept of the movement[26]; All life has inherent value, and the symbiotic relationship between organisms is crucial. In other words, the Deep Ecology movement is systemically and ethically oriented, meaning that 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts,' and it is only through maintaining and respecting this symbiosis between organisms that ecology can exist[27]. The name *Deep Ecology* stems from distinguishing it from what Næss refers to as *Shallow Ecology*, which is when one responds to the climate challenges with practical or technological solutions or 'quick fixes.' Næss does not disregard the importance of rational solutions within natural science in the climate debate. Instead, he points out the impact hierarchical anthropocentrism has had on the environment and biological systems, and the urgent need for a structural paradigm shift. According to Næss, grass-roots activism and place-specific solutions must propel this shift. The Deep Ecology movement uses the principle of *diversity* and *symbiosis* as a key approach to ecological sustainability. What Næss referred to as "the long range of the Deep Ecology Movement," or rather "Movements," as he named it in his original lecture on the subject in 1972, must be comprised of a *diverse range* of approaches, applied to a diverse range of fields to flourish. To quote Alan Drengson, who co-wrote the book *The Deep Ecology Movement* (1995)

> Respect for diversity leads us to recognize the ecological wisdom that grows specific to place and context. Thus, supporters of the deep ecology movement emphasize place-specific, ecological wisdom, and vernacular technology practices. No one philosophy and technology is applicable to the whole planet. As Naess has said many times, the more diversity, the better.[28]

Broadly speaking, one can say Deep Ecology has turned into a movement that advocates simple living, by replacing materialism with spiritual growth. It devaluates the anthropocentric belief that humans have more value than other living species and perceives

[26] Initially proposed in a lectured Næss held at the 3rd World Future Research Conference in Bucuresti, in 1972.
[27] Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement", 95–100.
[28] Drengson, "Some Thought on the Deep Ecology Movement."

the earth as a living self-regulating organism. A certain skepticism for technological progress and interest in pre-modern indigenous cultures are also evident. Deep Ecologists research various mystical teachings, particularly non-western ones, as potential alternatives to the Christian creational myths and the West's dualism. Deep Ecology aims to use belief systems, such as those found in several strands of Eastern philosophy to dismantle dichotomies such as subject/object, nature/human, civilization/wilderness and spirit/matter.

3.1.1 Critical Objections

Western interpretation of non-western cultures from non-modern times brings with it its own problematic areas, such as romanticizing primitive cultures' presumed innate relationship with the earth or the idealization of the past as a kind of 'paradise state.' Advocates of Deep Ecology have been accused of being overly 'naive' and 'ill-informed' when it comes to inserting eco-friendly attitudes into non-western indigenous cultures.[29] The danger is that one is simply choosing from a grab-bag of world-religions to promote a self-serving ecological agenda. The movement has also been accused of neglecting to address how gender structures or social roots have informed the ecological crises. By claiming that the revolution begins with a spiritual change within yourself, one is neglecting the systemic power structures of society. Furthermore, the Deep Ecology movement has been criticized for its undercurrent of anti-human 'eco-fascism', such as Dave Foreman's provocative claim that starvation should be seen as a natural process with positive long-term effects on population control; or letting nature seek its own balance[30]. However, the extreme views proposed by Foreman and others are largely rejected by the Deep Ecology movement. In Næss' initial lecture, both humans and non-humans have intrinsic value, and acknowledging diversity in all life forms is crucial.

3.2 Dark Ecology: From Bright Green to Dark and Uncanny

In the 1970s, the idea of nature as an original sanctuary, a refuge from the capitalist society, a harmonious place we have somehow gotten away from, was evident in slogans such as 'Back to the Land.' The health food movement, which came to full fruition in the 1970s, has instilled

[29] Clowney and Mosto, *Earthcare: An Anthology in Environmental Ethics*, 195.
[30] Ibid., 198.

the notion of the good nature as local, homegrown and plant colored; 'Don't panic, it's organic.'

The idea of the 'good nature' has certainly been exploited by the 'greenwashing' of market capitalism. The term denotes a form of advertising spin in which 'green values' are used deceptively to persuade the public that a corporation or product is 'environmentally friendly.' The rebranding of the Norwegian Oil company *Statoil* [31](translates to *State Oil*) to *Equinox,* in 2018, is one obvious example of greenwashing.

In his book *The Ecological Thought*, Timothy Morton rejects the idea of nature as symbiotic and holistic. "Nauseated" by the romanticized "bright green" thought modes that permeate the 'green movement', Morton argues that we must embrace what he calls the *ecological thought*, which is several shades darker, less sentimental and distinctly more futuristic. For Morton:

> the ecological world isn't a positive, sunny "Zippity Doo Da" world. The sentimental aesthetics of cute animals is obviously an obstacle to the ecological thought. But so is the sublime aesthetics of the awesome. We need a whole new way of evoking the environment.[32]

Morton claims that we must let go of the idea of *nature* itself and imagine a future that "surpasses what passes for environmentalism."[33] He argues that modern society has not only damaged ecosystems but thinking itself. The ecological thought is not only what you think, but how you think, what Morton refers to as "the thinking of interconnectedness."

So, if the very concept of nature is unsettled, what are we left with? According to Morton, we are co-existing in an entangled and uncanny, interconnected mesh of co-existing strange strangers. By thinking 'big' instead of 'local,' by thinking 'space' instead of 'earth,' one can encounter this 'existence as co-existence,' as strange strangers in the mesh. Morton reacts to the Western assumption that ecology is synonymous with the local:

> .... In my formulation, the best environmental thinking is thinking big – as big as possible, and maybe even bigger than that, bigger than we can conceive.[34]

[31] A notarized company in which the state of Norway is the majority shareholder.
[32] Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), Kindle.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.

Morton refers to the Tibetan culture as a society that has developed the ecological thought outside the scope of Western culture. According to Morton, Tibetan culture and religion is "all about space." In his research, Morton provocatively unsettles several 'tropes' on nature that has been thought of as environmental 'safe spaces.' One of these spaces is precisely the strong emphasis on people's relationship to place; a reaction that arose from the displacement of modernity and modern urban planning, and the dissociation between agriculture and urbanism. Heidegger's critique of the displacement of modern society and the phenomenological significance of dwelling-in-place has greatly influenced the environmental movement. However, there is a problematic historical undercurrent of environmental protection, environmental determinism and racism. An extreme example being Nazi Germany's connection of blood and soil, *Blut und Boden*, where phrase was used to promote a kind of 'racial stock' of Arian 'peasant-bloodline' that could rebuild, purify and expand the nation. To preserve the environment was thus seen in connection with preserving the true German race. This resulted in Nazi Germany's historical first passing of a Reich law in 1935, whose goal was to protect and care for the homeland's natural environment. It does not help the matter that Heidegger himself was, for a period, a member of the Nazi Party. Morton attacks Heidegger for missing the bigger picture when thinking itself is reduced to a locality. Morton provocatively declares that "Heidegger's environmentalism is a sad, fascist, stunted bonsai version, forced to grow in a tiny iron flowerpot by a cottage in the German Black Forest. We can do better."[35]

3.3 Non-Duality and Nature as Process

Can we do better? Perhaps we can, although arguably not by either uncanny space travel or the bonsai version of environmentalism alone. As seen, although united in a common critique of nature/culture dualisms, when it comes to defining what our relationship with nature *should* be, and what nature *is*, the perspectives greatly differ. The two examples above can, in fact, be read as a form of dualism in themselves. On the one end of the spectrum, you have a harmonious ecosystem, perfectly constructed to take care of itself. If we would only let nature *be*, then things will naturally fall into place. On the other side, you have the unsettling vision

[35] Ibid., kindle. – The relationship between nation, nature and place will be further discussed in chapter 5.

of no nature at all, just strange strangers enmeshed in the dark beauty of Morton's ecology. When deep ecologist chants *local local local*, Morton shouts: *Think big! Think space!*

As mentioned in the introduction, the environmental humanities grew out of environmental activism and is intrinsically bound to ethics. Thus, there is often an evolving discourse within the field that both challenges or addresses a certain kind of 'wrong' view of nature, before an alternative 'right' view is proposed. This has caused some conflicts, as most ethically rooted discourses tend to do. However, it has also generated a multi-faceted body of work, an 'ongoing, pluralist ethos' where these different perspectives adapt and respond to one another. When seen together, can the vast body of different natures proposed in the discourse on nature itself function as a sort of collective and ecological thought mode? Perhaps the 'wrong' kind of nature is not any specific view on nature at all. Maybe it is not so much about the 'earth' vs. 'space' or 'dark' vs. 'bright', 'past' vs. 'future'. Rather, can the 'wrong' kind of nature be perceived as any mono-cultured and dominating view that leaves no room for multiple natures to *co-exist*? Not necessarily 'landing' on one perspective on nature that will magically solve all our environmental problems, but allowing diverse multitudes of natures, and no-natures, to take space in the weedy garden of cyborgs and orchids alike. Arguably, devaluating the monopolized anthropocentric, dualistic *either/or* view that has proven to be detrimental for life on earth – and opening for a *both/and* perspective that invites all forms of existential awareness and experiences in, is the most ecologically sound approach one can take. To quote poet and environmental activist, Gary Snyder:

> Whatever it actually is, it will not fulfill our conceptions or assumptions. It will dodge our expectations and theoretical models. The greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it, but to acknowledge that it eludes us and that our own nature is also fluid, open, conditional. [36]

Whatever nature really is, it is far from static, neither in our perception of the term nor in the entangled nature/culture environment. The planet is constantly changing through various cyclical processes, so is our cultural climate. As presented in the next chapter, the Non-Duality of Daoism is the belief that a spontaneous and dynamic process is the foundational principle of cosmos, where perceived opposites are reflections of the same source, the Dao or

[36] Snyder, *No Nature: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 42.

the 'Way'. The final chapter of part I will present the understanding of nature that will be applied to part II of the thesis, when addressing Nikolai Astrup's Jølster project.

4 Approaching Nature – Daoism and Ecocriticism

Daoism is a religion that has continuously developed through China, Japan and Korea over the past two thousand years. As of today, Daoism has spread outside of Asia and is practiced by a diverse group of people with various nationalities and cultural backgrounds. There is no linear progress of Daoism, or a clear founder like Buddha or Jesus; it is characterized by being self-invented within a vast diversity of contexts and influences. Daoist scholar James Miller writes that while the faith in an unchanging deity lies at the center of the Jewish-Christian-Islamic religious system, the chore of the Daoism is to be found in the *experience of change* or transformation, within the body and the world around us:

> Whereas Western religionists seek to place their trust in an unchanging and invisible stability, that somehow transcends the fleeting experience of time, Daoists recognize and celebrate the profound and mysterious creativity within the very fabric of time and space itself. [37]

Karl Jasper noted that around the sixth–fifth century BCE, many of the world's greatest civilizations underwent a change he has termed the Axial Age.[38] During this time religions went from being primarily ritualistic and sacrificial to incorporating directions of ethics and values. Greek philosophers, Hebrew prophets, the Buddha, Confucius and Laozi, all from this period, were decisive in shaping the direction of the world's cultural and philosophical traditions.

During this time in China, land areas were split into various warring states, where patriarchal aristocratic clans feuded for power. A pressing question of 'how to bring harmony to the empire' arose, formulated as "Where is the way?" James Miller notes that it is important to differentiate this question from the questions that shaped the thought mode of Western civilization. In Greek philosophy, the central questions were to ask "What is truth?" and "What is goodness?". This suggest that fundamental abstract categories such as logic, metaphysics, law and science, can be applied to specific situations. In Semitic religions the question was "How may I obey the will of the creator?", which implies that the commandments of a God direct the community of his believers. Daoism is neither shaped by

[37] Miller, *Daoism* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2008). Kindle.
[38] Ibid. Kindle.

logical philosophy or the belief in a monotheistic God. Instead, Daoism is strictly *process-oriented*. The 'way' is understood as the fundamental principle of the cosmos. Everything is constantly transforming itself through cyclical and dynamic motion. Miller writes:

> The universe is dynamic and alive, but it dances to a clearly discernable pulse, a binary pulse or a cosmic heartbeat according to which everything around us is undergoing a process of expansion and contraction. Nothing in the world stays the same. Transformation is constant.[39]

One of the most influential early Daoist texts, *Daode jing*[40] (from c. 4th Century BCE) names this mysterious creative process of change 'Dao', translated to 'way' or 'path'. The 'binary pulse of the universe' is understood as opposing forces that are intrinsically linked and interdependent because they are both a reflection of the process of Dao. Night/Day, Dark/Light, Winter/Summer, Mind/Body, Matter/Spirit, Life/Death, are to be understood in non-dualist terms as *both/and* or 'unity in opposites' – opposite yet one. When we perceive these opposite forces as inherently separate, by naming and isolating them into different categories, or imbuing them with a set of binary hierarchical value, conflict will arise.

If society is structured around a conviction of what is good and evil, right or wrong, valuable and less valuable, one is simply caught in the pre-conceived notion of these binary hierarchies. Verse five of the text, interpreted by Author Ursula K. Le Guin, state:

> Heaven and Earth aren't Humane
>
> To them the ten thousand things are straw dogs[41]

Heaven and earth reflect the Dao. The "ten thousand things" are the myriad of objects and phenomena in the universe that is created by this fundamental principle. Straw dogs were used as ceremonial objects in ancient China, often discarded after their usage. In a sense these objects are neither less or more valuable than a human being. The "inhumanity" of Dao means that nature is neither cruel, nor kind towards the human species. Nature is simply *what is*, an ongoing process of profound creativity and mystery.

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[39] Ibid.
[40] Translates to *Scripture of the Way and its Power*.
[41] Le Guin, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching* (Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 1998).

In one sense, verse five validates Morton's critique of the environmental movement's view of nature as inherently good. At the same time one can question if the different shades of the green movement are not caught up in a binary and dualist thought mode of 'right' and 'wrong'. Morton defines the *Ecological Thought* as "the thinking of interconnectedness." It is not only *what* you think, but *how* you think. Arguably, Daoists reframes this position to say; It is not only about *how* you think, but *how you experience and cultivate* the non-duality of existence.

4.1.1 Ziran and Biospiritual Cultivation

To find the 'way' means to transcend the perceived opposites of dualisms in society and become one with the 'Dao'. The term *ziran*, means *natural* or *spontaneous*, and is the model for the Dao. The 'nature' of the Dao is be in a creative and spontaneous process of self-actualization.

In Daoist painting, the aim is to capture the *ziran*, the inner, dynamic essence of the subject and not simply its external form. In this way the internal reality is the clue to realizing the external form. It is not about projecting one's own moods onto the landscape, but attuning to the material and atmospheric conditions of the physical environment and observing which qualities hold the essence of the scene or subject. This essence should then be brought forth and enhanced in the painting. This aesthetic position is thus shaped by both subject and object, in an ongoing process. The aim is to internally perceive and enhance the already existing material and atmospheric qualities outside of the self. In this non-dualistic approach to aesthetics, where two perceived opposites (subject and object) are internalized and revealed as one through the artwork – a sense of wonder or mystery can permeate the work.

4.1.2 Mystiqual Presence in Material Observation

This approach to aesthetics is further echoed in the Daoist garden. In contrast to the rigid symmetries of traditional Chinese courtyard architecture, Daoists seek to merge the realms between the modified and the wild, by enhancing the self-actualization process of *ziran* and bring forth the character of a place. In the 1930s, the writer John Blofeld traveled to visit Daoist Communities in China. Upon his visit to a remote hermitage he wrote:

> In landscaping, the underlying principle was to avoid artificiality not by refraining from improving natural forms, but by bringing out and highlighting shapes – beautiful, amusing grotesque, already inherent in the objects worked upon. A square

> should not be rounded, but a rough sphere could be made rounder; a shrub should be made to resemble a stork only if the stork already existed potentially in the plant's natural shape: water might be diverted from one pile of rocks to another to heighten the beauty of a cataract, but only if there were nothing inherently unnatural in the resulting flow and fall. Nature could be assisted to achieve masterly effects, but the concept of the improver's mind must in itself be based on intimate knowledge of nature's manifestations. In short, the aim in most cases was to assist nature to do what it might under more favourable circumstances have done for itself. [42]

A popular, yet misguided, line of Western interpretation of Daoism, undoubtedly evident in the Deep Ecology movement, is the notion of *wuwei or wu-wei-wu,* translated by Miller as 'effortless action'. Often *wu-wei-wu* is interpreted as the 'action of non-action,' understood as 'do nothing and everything will be done'. Transferred to Deep Ecology it has come to mean that we should let nature be, and not interfere with the processes of the earth, because 'nature knows best'. Miller's re-orients this perception of the Daoist relationship with nature. Instead, what is promoted is a cultivation and an integration of the processes of nature into cultural form. Miller writes that cultivation is in many ways the essence of the Daoist way:

> Daoists may be viewed as the gardeners of the cosmos, those who slowly shape their life and environment through a process of planting, nourishing, weeding and then letting nature take its course. Given the right conditions, something marvelous will flourish.[43]

The cultivation approach embraces an important paradox where you observe and let things *become*, or self-actualize, while at the same time help cultivate this process of becoming in the material world. Harmony, as well as a sense of wonder and mystique is achieved through this process of reciprocity, a dynamic motion of intervening and then stepping back:

> Often this harmony is symbolized in ways that might seem magical or superstitious to the Western mind, but this appearance stems from our failure to appreciate the radically dynamic and self-transformative nature of the Daoist universe – a universe in which caterpillars 'magically' turn into butterflies, and fish 'magically' evolve into birds. All these things are possible not because of some divine power that exists beyond the limits of human understanding, but because this radical creativity or 'supernatural' power is built into the natural constitution of the universe. Realizing that the world is actually like this leads naturally to a sense of awe and wonder.[44]

[42]Lafargue, "« Nature » as Part of Human Culture in Daoism",47.
[43] Miller, *Daoism* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2008). Kindle.
[44] Ibid.

4.1.3 Correlative Thinking

The sense of mystical wonder is attained through correlative thinking, a mode of thinking that is essentially different from logical, linear cause and effect thinking. Correlative thinking is a spatial way of mapping the analogies or relationships between things in a micro–macro level. Miller writes that ancient China developed correlative thinking to explain the co-functioning of three important dimensions of existence: *the body, the community* and the *cosmos.* These three dimensions of existence are understood as functioning in relation with each other, "the personal body, the communal body, and the heavenly bodies in fact have been the three most important religious concerns for Daoists." Social harmony, mystical realization and biospiritual cultivation stems from applying correlative thinking to perceived opposites of a whole.

Mystique can be understood as "An air of secrecy surrounding a particular activity or subject that makes it impressive or baffling to those without specialized knowledge"[45] In this mystique lies a clue to the first verse of the notoriously mystical text of *Daode jing* "Dao can be spoken of, [but it is] not the constant Dao.[46]" Le Guin has interpreted these lines as "The name you can say isn't the real name"[47]. According to Le Guin, the elusiveness that permeates the text and the profound modesty of the language, offers a "pure apprehension of the mystery of which we are part"[48]. Instead of tempting to intellectually decode the message behind the mystic form, the mystic form is *in itself* a way of being in the world. By being attuned to the presence and experiencing how the material world spontaneously reveals itself in mystic form is key.

The brief introduction to Daoism here is of course very limited in its understanding of the complex Daoist landscape. The intention is rather to show how the Daoist notion of non-duality can be a valid approach when addressing the perceived opposites of nature and culture, mind/ body, subject/object and spirit/matter.

[45] Lexico (Oxford), "Mystique".
[46] Miller, *Daoism* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2008). Kindle.
[47] Le Guin, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching: A Book About the Way and the Power of the Way*.
[48] Ibid.

In terms of applying these perspectives on Nikolai Astrup 's understanding of nature one can ask:

- *How is the identification with self understood in relationship to the environment?*
- *Is spontaneity and cyclical processes a central theme?*
- *how is the aesthetics approached – is there an essence that is brought fourth through cultivation and contemplation – understood as ziran?*
- *Are the mystical qualities in Astrup's art relatable to deep material observations?*
- *What are the dualities or opposites that are understood as interrelated?*
- *Are there evidence of correlative thinking?*

4.2 Ecocriticism

The term Ecocriticism was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert and was further established in 1996 by Cheryll Glotfelty's introductory book on the subject *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology.* The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), was established in 1992, as well as its interdisciplinary literary journal ISLE[49] , has become instrumental to the development of Ecocriticism.

Because the field originated in the United States, many of the earliest works was rooted in a tribute to American nature writing, such as Henry David Thoreau. However, as seen with William Cronon's critique, what began as a tribute to the transcendental wilderness writers, grew into a more nuanced and complex critique of western dualist thought modes. As a consequence, the movement had to question its own cultural prejudices and assumptions on what 'nature' was.[50] As the complex landscape of the nature/culture entanglements grew, literary ecocriticism developed into including a much broader range of literature than the

[49] Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment

[50] Environmental conservationist Rachel Carson's highly influential book *Silent Spring* from 1962 was both praised and critiqued. On the one side, Carson effectively blends literary form with non-fiction to criticize the US national pesticide policy, showing how literary form can directly affect environmental policies. However, it was questioned if the opening of Silent Spring was not romanticizing nature with pastoral tropes.

nature writings of its humble beginnings, including writings on urban environments and digital realms.

Ecocriticism does not take a united stand on *what nature is*, nor does it abide to any universally preset theoretical positions. Ecocriticism, does in fact, to a large degree, lack method and theory. The term *Ecocriticism* has therefore been claimed to be a misguiding term because it suggests a new kind of critical theory. Ecocriticism is united not by a theory, but by a politically and ethically aimed focus: the *environment*[51].

This has been a point of conflict within the field. On the one side, since the aim of the movement is to ultimately reframe our understanding of the environment in which we live, text can easily become secondary to the physical environment. In terms of literary ecocriticism, this can create a hostile or ignorant attitude towards language-centered literary theory[52], devaluating the very field in which these interpretations take place. On the other hand, by being too self-referential, and not being able to engage outside the field, ecocriticism can become an academic niche, where a great many PhD students know a great deal about 'nature' – while the world around them is 'literally' collapsing. In fact, it has been claimed that *less* theory and more experience and engagement with our physical environment is what is needed. Literary scholar Kent Ryder urges the researcher to fully grasp that all human experiences and cultures are placed in an environment. According to Ryder, this demands that we:

> ...listen to the stories that people tell about the land, that we examine how they shape and have shaped the land, that we get out there and get our hands dirty; it demands that we be folklorists, geographers, historians, landscape readers, students of material culture. In embracing an interdisciplinary approach, the ecocritical scholar recontextualizes literature in the physical, grounded circumstances of life and thought and action, circumstances of the sort that generate literature in the first place. [53]

Whatever way one wishes to respond to the non-theoretical approach, ecocriticism is a way of acknowledging the profound relation between human and nature through the study of literature, art or other media. Although Ecocriticism, in neither art history nor literature, abide to a standardized set of methods or theories, one might however attempt to compile a basic

[51] Michael P Branch and Sean O'Grady, "Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice," *The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment* (1994).
[52] Ibid.
[53] ASLE. "Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice".

outline of mutual questions or focal points. Ecocriticism and the less developed Ecocritical Art History can be said to analyze the way the environment is described or visualized by asking:

- *How is nature understood? And what position does the narrator take?*
- *How are humans portrayed in relation to their environment?*
- *How are environmental issues treated?*
- *what are the environmental historical context of the work?*
- *Are there any 'nature tropes' one could address, such as the wilderness?*
- *What is the importance of place?*
- *Can the work be understood as Anthropocentric or Ecocentric?*
- *Can experience have influenced the form?*

For instance, Alan C. Braddock is the first to analyze Thomas Eakins within the context of Philadelphia's environmental history[54]. In the oil painting *William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River*, 1876–77, Eakins depicts the sculptor William Rush at work in his studio. Rush is making the wooden statue *Water Nymph with Bittern*, a statue produced in 1809 and displayed on a fountain at the city's Centre Square pumping station. The waterworks was made as an effort in alleviating urban water shortages and yellow fever epidemics. At the period in which this painting was made, the Schuylkill River was so badly polluted by untreated industrial waste that the human death toll from typhoid for the decade of the 1880s was well over 6000, Eakins own sister being one of the casualties. Braddock questions why Eakins, who has been interpreted as a realist painter, did not portray Philadelphia's worsening environmental conditions, neither in the portrait of William Rush or any of his celebrated outdoor pictures rowing and other outdoor activities in the Schuylkill river. In terms of Philadelphia's environmental history, one sees that Eakins' realism was neither strictly empirical nor overly critical, rather Eakins's realism performs a kind of 'aesthetic filtration', that has previously been overlooked.

[54] Braddock, "Ecocritical art history", 24–28.

Part II: Changing Atmospheres

5 Nikolai Astrup's Jølster Project

Dear caveman and friend!

Are you still sitting beneath your glacier and philosophizing over the mysteries of life and art? And do you get something out of it?

– Painter Axel Revold in a letter to Nikolai Astrup Oslo February 9, 1926

In a letter to Nikolai Astrup, the painter Axel Revold addresses Astrup by the lightly mocking nickname "caveman." By living the partially secluded rural mountain life in Jølster, Astrup was perceived as being out of step with his time, rejecting modernity's technological changes. If Astrup was a caveman, he was a caveman with a camera, a motorboat, a radio and an art degree,[55] who studied abroad and walked the streets of Paris, Alger, and Pisa. Although Astrup continued to travel and seek influences from abroad, from 1902, Jølster becomes Astrup's permanent place of residence and work. Astrup approached the rural mountain village as an open-air studio where he could fully engage in his artistic and botanical endeavors.

Astrup had made a distinct move away from what could have been a successful artistic career in the capital. Although not as cut off from the world as he was perceived by some at the time, Astrup's life and dwelling in Jølster were markedly different than the life of his colleagues in Bergen and Oslo. Astrup himself mocks the simplicity of his dwelling at times, referring to it as a "snail shell"[56], and a "mousehole"[57].

The difficulties of living in a small village and the negative effect the damp climate of Jølster had on his health is repeatedly stressed in his letters. The severity of Astrup's asthmatic condition is often given as a reason for wanting to leave Jølster. In an earlier letter to Astrup,

[55] Attending Harriet Backers art school in Kristiania Oslo Royal College of Art and Design in Kristiania 1899–1901, as well as Academiè Colarossi, where he was taught by Christian Krogh, in 1901–02.
[56] Letter from NA to Magnhild Ødvin Bukdahl, 1927. Letter 709, National Library, Oslo.
[57] Letter from NA to Per Kramer, 28.03.1920. ubb-ms-1808-e3, University Library, Bergen.

Revold reacts to Astrup's complaints of how the bad weather affected his health and artistic production by commanding him to leave Jølster for a time and come to Lillehammer.

> What in the Devil's name are you doing by not making sure you get – healthy? Just because you are stubborn in your connection with Jølster (...) Listen to me - you will take your family, and we will get you a house in or near Lillehammer, where you in a year, will be strong as a giant. [58]

Yet, Astrup never left. On January 31 of 1928, Astrup died of pneumonia, after combatting respiratory illness most of his life. What made him devote his life to the Jølster landscape, even though it possibly worsened his health condition?[59]

Astrup's return home and decision to devote his career to the Jølster landscape has by Øystein Loge, among others, been defined as in alliance with the quest of national cultural identity, in a time of rural disintegration. Faithfully devoted to preserving national traditions, yet creating his own unique, visual expression. In this chapter I argue that a distinction between *nation* and *nature* must be made to accurately pinpoint the ways in which Astrup's earth/art project in Jølster were a reaction to the times he lived in.

5.1 Stepping Back in Time

On the evening of July 10, 1922, the painter Ludvig O. Ravensberg (1871–1958) and Astrup's close friend, author Hans E. Kinck (1865–1926), stepped onto the Bergen railway heading to Western Norway. After a restless night's sleep, the two friends got off at Myrdal and hiked through the landscape made of deep valleys and purple heathered highland. Kinck scoffed at the farmers' replacements of their old sod roofs with corrugated iron, complaining about the declining farming culture in Norway. The conversation led to the ironic remark that while local cultures are slowly disintegrating, the reconstructed folk costume *bunad*, is gaining in popularity. The next day, Ravensberg and Kinck arrive at the fjord village Balestrand, a popular travel destination for the German emperor Wilhelm II. They pass the dragon style

[58] Translated from a letter from Axel Revold to Astrup, 27 february, 1922: *hvad fan mener du med ikke at sörge for at bli - frisk. Bare fordi du er enveis i din forbindelse med Jölster. (...) Altsaa - du skal ta din familie med dig, saa skal vi skaffe dig hus i eller ved Lillehammer hvor du paa et aar er sterk som en kjæmpe*.

[59] Astrup relative Hanna Sitter Randén explained to me during an interview with her in Oslo January 28, 2020, that there is a genetic disposition of respiratory illness in her family line. However, it is evident that the old parsonage that Astrup grew up in, declared uninhabitable by the district doctor in 1902, was likely the main reason that Astrup's three siblings died of diphtheria during the same week in 1887, as well as the reason Astrup developed his severe chronic asthma.

villa of painter Hans Dahl, whose grand landscape paintings are populated by young women in *bunads*, to appeal to the taste of his German benefactor. They soon head for Jølster, to get away from 'all the fakeness.'[60] Steeped in harsh statements, a diary entry by Ravenberg points out that the abstract idea of Norway as a unified nation, combined with industrial development, was replacing regional independence and local identity.

5.2 A Nation's Nature

Since the founding of the Norwegian constitution in 1814, the national agenda was to develop Norway as an independent country with a distinct cultural identity. The primary goals were organizing the state apparatus, build institutions, as well as continue to develop a national identity through cultural promotion. All the different regions, with distinct regionalist cultures, were to be represented under the same umbrella[61]. A highly significant tool to form the national cultural identity was through detecting and promoting the uniquely 'Norwegian' in language, history, music, art and social life. The National Gallery, established in 1836, played an important role in the construction of the national narrative. In landscape art, the specific Norwegian culture was strongly tied to the idea of the Norwegian nature. Expressing a bond to the 'Norwegian nature' became synonymous with expressing a bond to the nation.

5.3 Gaining Progress, Losing Time and Place

As the pictures of traditional country life made their way onto the walls of the national museum, the reality was that this way of life was slowly but steadily dying out. A range of inventions in agriculture during the first half of the 1800s, such as the iron plow and various wheel inventions, increased production quantity and decreased the need for manual labor. In 1907 the first artificial fertilizer was produced which led to the invention of cattle feed pellets, to create modern and specialized agriculture. When the cultivated land was more effectively exploited than before, there was also less need for the rangeland. Increased use of horse labor also meant less need for the human workforce, an important reason for the widespread emigration from Norway to the USA during this time. In Western Norway, the cluster

[60] Gløersen, *Mefisto I Djævelklubben* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1958), 82-90.
[61] Except for the Sami, whose region Finnmark was appropriated by the government in 1848. As of 1902 only Norwegian citizens who spoke the language had the right to buy property: https://www.sametinget.no/Om-Sametinget/Bakgrunn/Historikk

community of farm houses or *Klyngetun* was a typical communal living arrangement, where several families would gather their houses and share the land. From around 1850 old communal farmsteads or *tuns* began to disintegrate, as fewer people farmed bigger areas of land due to mechanized work. The fluctuations of climate were no longer a life and death threat, and people became less affected and concerned with the seasonal changes. In the period between 1860 to 1960, the percentage of Norwegians engaged in primary production fell from 90% to 10% of the population. Farming and fishing went from being a collective project where one generation taught the next, to become marginalized, mechanized and learned professions. Today merely 3% of Norwegian soil is farmed land, and 90% of this soil is dedicated to the meat and dairy industry.[62] In addition, the import of farm products has nearly tripled in Norway since the year 2000.[63] The modern way of agriculture and dwelling that began in Astrup's time is an essential factor in the detrimental climate changes we are experiencing today.

As people lost their physical connection to place, the notion of time also began to change, from a seasonal and cyclical time to autonomous, mechanical clock time. Communication and improved infrastructure between different parts of the country was a significant part of the modernization process, affecting the relationship to time and place.

When Ravensberg and Kinck arrived at their destination on July 12, 1922, they were bewildered at the all-encompassing devotion that Astrup had towards painting, shaping, cultivating and building in the environment. To put it in Ravensberg's words:

> Astrup, this peculiar man, has put spirit into everything in this place, built the houses, fertilized and crossed the plants, shaped the terracing landscape, fought the harsh nature, built stone grottos and ledges. Here he is alternating between being a carpenter, a farmer, a man of nature and a man of culture. Kinck and I are walking around completely bewildered. . . . To think that something so original and strangely personal exists in our collective uniformed time... In all areas, Astrup is at home. In chemistry, [making natural paint] color, plants—Astrup is a philosopher of nature that has observed everything . . . To understand Astrup, one must go to his farm Sandal ...[64]

What Ravensburg is alluding to in his diary is that, for Astrup, the two realms of *nature* and *culture*, are intrinsically connected. Astrup's farmstead is "so original and strangely personal,"

[62] Norwegian Government, "Jordvern."
[63] https://www.landbruk.no/internasjonalt/i-dag-er-norge-helt-avhengig-av-importert-mat/ https://www.bondelaget.no/jordvern/
[64] Gløersen, *Mefisto I Djævelklubben* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1958), 82-90.

that Ravensburg finds it hard to believe it "exists in our collective uniformed time." Astrup's project in Jølster was a broad, interdisciplinary endeavor that bridged the realms between artwork and dwelling, nature and culture. A project where Astrup, according to Ravensberg, had put 'spirit into everything', and was alternating between being 'a man of nature and a man of culture'. Furthermore, Astrup's farmstead was 'original and strangely personal' – rooted in a 'philosophy of nature' from someone who has 'observed everything'.

Astrup's decision to move back to Jølster can be seen as in opposition to the nature-culture dichotomy, which was the result of the industrialized society and the national agenda. While the Norwegian art discourse was pre-occupied with classifying his landscape paintings as national, Astrup was more concerned with tending the ten types of rhubarb he grew in his garden. Although Jølster at times hindered his work process, it never the less inspired his aesthetic language and enabled him to explore his land/art project fully. To move would mean that the 'snail' had to leave its 'snail shell' behind.

5.4 Driven by the Desire to Create a 'National Style'?

As Tove Haugsbø's research shows, the early reception and framing of Astrup's work as 'national' was largely a result of the Norwegian art institutions' efforts towards unifying the diverse regional cultures. By tracing titles from Astrup's exhibition history Haugsbø shows how Astrup's work was framed to fit into a national agenda. During his first separate exhibition[65], a painting of a traditional foodshed or storehouse, *Storehouse in Jølster* (ill.3), in an autumn landscape was exhibited with the title "Somber autumn day". The National Gallery later acquired the painting, and when the title reappeared in a catalog from 1950, it had changed to the title still in use today. Haugsbø argues that *Somber autumn day* refers to an interior experience of a place in time, while *Storehouse in Jølster* is much more visceral and categorical: referring to a traditional building typology in a regional area in Norway. Astrup was decidedly against the capital's centralization and general appropriation of place-specific cultures. He reacted against the approach of the open-air museum in the capital, that uprooted place-specific buildings from their environmental and cultural context and merged them into

[65] at C.W. Blomquist, in April 1905.

one 'national' folk museum. Instead, Astrup helped establish an open-air museum in his own county.

Although Haugsbø has unsettled the notion of Astrup's national agenda, there is an underlying association between Astrup's art and Norwegian national identity. As seen, for instance in the current title of the traveling exhibition *Painting Norway*. The introduction of the exhibitions catalogue states in the book sleeve that "Astrup was driven by the desire to create a 'national style' – quintessentially Norwegian in feeling and subject matter, combining elements of realism with a conscious naïveté". In the first chapter titled "Painting Norway: Nikolai Astrup and the Jølster Project", Astrup's dwelling and garden is further read into a national perspective:

> It is clear that the entire site, gardens and interiors alike, was a considered essay on the parts of the artist to create, with the help of his wife, a homestead as unmistakably Norwegian as his visual language.[66]

At the same time the catalogue fully informs the reader that Astrup's Jølster project, although in many ways in alliance with the intentions of the national agenda, such as moving home to Jølster after a time spent in Paris, and painting landscapes from Western Norway, the 'perceived heartland' of the country – was far more complex. Mary Ann Stevens writes that Astrup "sought a defiantly individual visual language to encapsulate the Jølster landscape, filtered through childhood memory and recollection."[67] Ian A.C. Dejardin refers to the Jølster project as a project where "art, life, myth, landscape and memory are powerfully intertwined, nowhere more so than in the home to which he eventually moved"[68] Dejardin also notes the direct influence of the environment on the aesthetic form of Astrup's work:

> The determined and deliberate variety in his art, within the context of a limited selection of favorite views, is directly linked to the absence of repetition in Nature, as if the ever-changing forms and moods of the same landscape contain a visual imperative. Painting a particular view, the same way twice would be, to Astrup – with all the weight if almost moral conviction – not only boring, but unthinkable... his innovation emerges naturally from his view of the world [69]

[66] Dejardin, "Painting Norway: Nikolai Astrup and the Jølster Project", 23.
[67] Stevens, "Nikolai Astrup: National/International", 26.
[68] Dejardin, "Painting Norway: Nikolai Astrup and the Jølster Project", 22.
[69] Dejardin, "Painting Norway: Nikolai Astrup and the Jølster Project"," 13–14.

I question if these two positions, the 'quintessentially Norwegian' and the notion that Astrup's innovation emerges from his view of the world, can be furthered nuanced by critically distinguishing between *nature* and *nation*.

5.5 Nation versus Nature

Although Astrup obviously was aware and affected by the cultural-political climate at the time, it is important to make a distinction between *nature* and *nation*. Political scientist and historian Benedict Andersson explain the idea of *nation* as an imagined political community, socially constructed and imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group.[70] In this sense, *nation* is an entirely human abstract construct. *Nature*, as seen in the previous chapters, must be understood as an ecosphere hosting an entangled multispecies community. *Nature* is thus not only widely different from *nation,* but a term that needs to be critically analyzed and taken into consideration when addressing Nikolai Astrup's *land/art* project. Nature is not a static resting term or a neutral object, but a fluid concept that ebbs and flows through the human psyche, as well as a symbiotic system of physical phenomena that exists with or without human life. Perhaps Timothy Morton's claim that *we need to let go of nature*, could be echoed by proclaiming we need to let go *of a nature that belongs to a nation*. *Nation* and *nature* are often haphazardly thrown into the same pot, creating a confusing semi-green, semi-nationalist soup. Arguably, from an ecocentric perspective, nature does not belong under the ownership of a nation, and can not be divided by borders or private/public land ownership, an entirely anthropocentric construct. Planting a flag on the surface of the moon does not mean that the moon belongs to America.

As seen in Morton's critique in chapter 3, the connection between environmental movement's emphasis on place-specific culture and nationalism is problematic. However, the emphasis of human's relationship to *place* is arguably not the issue. Instead, I argue that what *is* problematic is the appropriation of place-specific cultures into abstract notions of a *nation's nature*. To untangle these two positions, one must clarify the difference between approaching nature from an *anthropocentric* and an *ecocentric* perspective. The German Romantic movement imbued regional landmarks, such as the Black Forest and the Bavarian Alps, with spiritual and nationalist significance. For Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), the

[70] The Nationalism Project, "Benedict Anderson, the Nation as Imagined Community."

'untouched wilderness' was both a source of divine presence and the German character. Nature is understood in these terms from an *anthropocentric* perspective, where 'nature' is merely a tool for promoting the national character of a people. Contrary to this belief, Deep Ecology emphasize place-specific cultures as a way of devaluating anthropocentrism and aligning and attuning humans with the larger ecosystems. Arguably, the influence of German romanticism and the idea of a national cultural spirit largely colored the reception of Astrup's Jølster project in his own time. The notion that Astrup's Jølster project was 'driven by the desire to create a 'national style', reveals that this idea is still somewhat informing the understanding of his Jølster project.

5.6 Proto–Ecological Awareness?

As established in Part I of the thesis, to reunite the split between nature, culture and religion from an ecocentric perspective is the aim of the Environmental Humanities. Although not defined as an *ecological thought mode* at the time, these ideas were already emerging in Western society in 19th and 20th century.

Linguist scholar and animal researcher Edward P. Evans strongly echoes Lynn White Jr.'s critique of anthropocentrism and Christianity. In 1894, Evans published the article "Ethical Relations between Man and Beast" where he attacks the anthropocentric notion of human's domination over other creatures, rooted in Christianity:

> anthropocentric psychology and ethics, (...) treat man as a being essentially different and inseparably set apart from all other sentient creatures, to which he is bound by no ties of mental affinity or moral obligation. (...) all these notions spring from the same root, having their origin in man's false and overweening conceit of himself as the member of a tribe, the inhabitant of a planet or the Lord of creation. All their (Christian theologist's) reasonings (...) were based upon the theory that the final purpose of every created thing is the promotion of human happiness. Take away this anthropocentric postulate, and the whole logical structure tumbles into a heap of unfounded and irrelevant assertions leading to lame and impotent conclusions.[71]

Furthermore, Evans refers to Schopenhauer's similar critique, and his research into alternative thought modes to anthropocentrism, which he found in Eastern philosophy and religion:

> According to Schopenhauer, anthropocentric egoism is a fundamental and fatal defect in the psychological and ethical teachings of both Judaism and Christianity,

[71] Evans, "Ethical Relations Between Man and Beast", 634.

> and has been the source of untold misery to myriads of sentient and highly sensitive organisms. "These religions," he says, "have unnaturally severed man from the animal world, to which he essentially belongs, and placed him on a pinnacle apart, treating all lower creatures as mere things; whereas Brahmanism and Buddhism insist not only upon his kinship with all forms of animal life, but also upon his vital connection with all animated Nature, binding him up into intimate relationship with them by metempsychosis.[7273]

Founder of the Theosophical Society (1875), Russian esoteric philosopher and occultist Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891) bridged various Eastern and Western mystic and philosophical directions. Theosophy perceives the natural world as the root of religion, and imbues the polyphonic language and form of nature, as in its color, sounds and geometric shapes, with spiritual significance. Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) and Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) were both heavily influenced by theosophical teachings. We know that Astrup had a copy of Kandinsky's book *Über der Geistliche in der Kunst (Concerning the Spiritual in Art)* and Haugsbø's research show that Astrup was influenced by of the artist and his interest in music and color.[74] In Norway, the theosophical society was established in 1890.

The Book of Tea (1906*)* by Kakuza Okakura was also a highly popular book in the West. Artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) was inspired by the aesthetic philosophy formulated in the book. Okakura wrote *The book of Tea* for a Western audience, to show how Japanese culture and aesthetics, such as the tea ceremony, permeates a distinct view on nature that is rooted in Zen Buddhist and Daoist thought. Although it is not known if Astrup was familiar with this book, Inger Alver Gløersen notes in her memoir of the artist that "He could quote the code of Hammurabi or speak about Confucius and Lao Tse."[7576] It is interesting however, to note that Hokusai, which inspired Astrup's woodblock prints, was a Nichiren-Buddhist, deeply interested in the ancient culture in China and the philosophical teachings of Daoist Master Zhuang[77]. An interest that can be traced back to the aesthetics of Hokusai's art.

The first environmental movements and animal rights organizations were also established in Norway during the 19th and 20th centuries. The Norwegian national organization for

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[72] *Metempsychosis*: The supposed transmigration at death of the soul of a human being or animal into a new body of the same or a different species.
[73] Evans, "Ethical Relations Between Man and Beast", 637.
[74] Haugsbø, *Fortida Gjennom Notida*, 283.
[75] Translated from: *Han kunne citere Hammurabis lover eller snakke om Confucius og Lao Tse.*
[76] Gløersen, *Nikolai Astrup* (Oslo: Mittet & co. Forlag, 1954), 40.
[77] Zhuang lived under the warring states period around 4th century BC and is known to have written the seven first chapter of the highly popular Chinese classic *Zhuangzi*.

protecting nature, was established in 1914, as a reaction against hydro-powerplants and the destruction of waterfalls[78]. A separate organization for the protection of the nature of Western Norway was established four years later. The first Norwegian animal rights law came in 1842, and the first official animal rights organization in the Nordic countries was Norwegian, established in 1859.

Descartes' scientific methods 'hyper-separated' reason from emotion and mind from body and claimed that animals were in effect complex machines. Literary scholar Greg Garrard notes that Descartes "encouraged scientific physiologists to discount the distressing sounds made by animals during vivisection as equivalent to the ringing of a mechanical clock."[79] In several of Astrup's letters one can denote his ethics regarding the treatment of animals. Astrup's son, Nikolai (b.1926), revealed during a conversation on Sandalstrand summer of 2018, that he remembered his father lecturing the children on animal welfare[80]. Grass-fed, local meat and food quality was also of importance, and Astrup had several opinions on how to raise and slaughter animals.

The botanist and natural photographer, Hanna Resvoll-Holmsen (1873 –1943), was an early activist for environmental protection and biodiversity. Her autochrome photographic studies where used to study the biodiversity and color in flowers or butterflies. Arthur Tennøe, director of the National Libraries Photography Archive, explains that her photographic studies were a study in the interrelations between plants and organisms. Resvoll-Holmsen questioned why nature has so many varieties in color. In 1918 she published her photographic studies in an article where she states "You must not think that it is because of you that nature is aligned in this manner [the color of the flowers]. No, it is because the butterfly shall not overlook it [the flowers] in its fluttering flight."[8182] Ingeborg Mellgren Mathiesen writes in her garden registrations made on Astrup's farmstead that Astrup's "almost religious attitude to all plants are visible"[83]. Astrup had a particular interest in the preservation of local plants, which he meant was endangered by modern agricultural methods.

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[78] Berntsen, *Grønne Linjer* (Oslo: Unipub, 2011), 61.
[79] Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, (Oxfordshire: Taylor and Francis, 2004). Kindle.
[80] Conversation on Astruptunet, June 26, 2018.
[81] Tennøe, Arthur/National Library, *Brukte fargefoto for å verne om naturen for 100 år siden*.
[82] Translated from: *Du må ikke tro det er på grunn av deg at naturen har innrettet seg på denne måte. Nei det er for at sommerfuglen ikke skal overse den unders sin flagrende flukt*.
[83] Mathiesen, *Astruptunet i Jølster (*ArkadiaLandskap 2016), 181.

Deep ecology scholar and poet Gary Snyder is tied to the international environmental movement known as *bioregionalism*. The movement is oriented through sustainable regional agriculture, such as permaculture, where the garden, farmland and dwelling are structured as an integral system, where all waste is repurposed back into this system. Bioregionalists emphasize regions and communities, including urban communities, over states and nations – and diversity over mono-culture. Cultural historian and bioregionalist Kirkpatrick Sale has tied the historical genealogy of bioregionalism to a 200–year tradition, beginning in Europe, with the of resistance against mechanized agriculture, industrialization and centralization with thinkers such as Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904) and Patrick Geddes (1854–1904)[84]. His study shows two diverging paths between the environmental determinism rooted in nationalist thoughts, and bioregionalism, rooted in ecocentric and environmental awareness.

Although this broad approach to proto-ecological tendencies in Astrup's own time is not evidence that Astrup himself was influenced by these thoughts, it nevertheless shows that from the emerging European nation states in 18th century and onwards, a sprouting counter-culture of ecological awareness had already begun.

[84] McGinnis, *Bioregionalism*, (London/New York: Routledge, 1999), 30.

6 Reading Astrup

> Astrup's letter correspondence! – That could surely be a Chapter in itself.
>
> Einar Lexow (1887-1948)

In a newspaper article in *Dagbladet,* 1955, literary professor Sonja Hagemann refers to the quote made by art historian Einar Lexow[85], to highlight the importance of Astrup's letter collection for future research. Surely she was right. The extensive archive, including his private notes, has proven to be an invaluable resource for research on the artist. The archives have, among other things, aided in the work with the catalogue raisonné, as well as established a timeline for the development of his garden and farmstead in Sandalstrand. The letter archive consists of at least 355 (publicly accessible) letters[86], the recipients being patrons, gallery owners, buyers, colleagues, and friends. Subject wise, one finds there are recurring topics related to his art, travels, farmstead, and his health and life in Jølster. These topics include:

- Debt and money difficulties
- His asthma condition and other ailments such as anxiety and nervousness
- Travels, as well as yearnings to travel
- Commissions and reflections on contemporary art and cultural discourses
- A broad and extensive body of homesteading knowledge such as animal husbandry, plant medicine, gardening, carpentering, as well as food preservation and brewing – including detailed recipes for making his locally renowned rhubarb wine. They also show interests in new technologies that began to make their way into the home, such as telephone and radio
- Real estate speculation and building projects
- Weather and climate reports emphasizing the changing seasons
- Anecdotes from his family and social life, such as a 27-page recollection of his escalating 45th birthday celebration.[87] The stories and tales about the fellow inhabitants of Jølster, as well as his art colleagues and friends, would take a chapter in itself. Ranging from heartwarming and funny to something akin to misanthropic conspiracy theories.

[85] Hagemann, ""Litt Astrupiana.""
[86] ranging from 1-2 pages to 40 + pages per letter.
[87] Letter from NA to Per Kramer, 1925. ubb-ms-1808-j8-1. University Library, Bergen.

A typical characteristic of the letters is the various *moods* in which these topics are communicated. The mood of the content discussed ranges from blissfully content to exhausted, anxious, and distrustful. At times paranoid theories often concerning money, or rumors about the artist, are developed at length. Astrup frequently writes of his illness and ailments, often given as a reason for delays of his financial or artistic obligations. The severity of his conditions, however, might sway from manageable to disastrous. For instance, when Astrup corresponds with one of his financial benefactors, Isabella Høst, it might seem as though Astrup and his family are on the brink of death due to illness and famine[88]. While other recipients, such as Astrup's good friend, the author Hans E. Kinck, might instead get a lengthy reflection on art and literature. Hence, rather than reading the letters as biographical *state-of-facts*, one can perceive them as *state-of-moods*, always in the process of change. The intention of this chapter is not to validate nor discredit the biographical 'truth' in these letters, i.e., how sick, poor, or alcoholic Astrup 'really' was. Instead, by looking beyond the mere facts stated in the letters, one can begin to interpret them through the lens of *ecocriticism*, using style, mood, and associative patterns to access an understanding of nature. For instance, when Astrup is speaking of the ephemeral phenomenon of weather or the changes in seasons, one could regard this information as merely a form of polite letter communication, a culturally encoded way of circling in on the matter at heart. A more *ecocritical* informed way of reading his letters would be to question how the atmospheric conditions are entangled in the cultural or personal subjects, or affecting the mood of the conversation. By critically addressing how environmental and climatic conditions are understood and conveyed in Astrup's letters, the letters can reveal a distinct view on nature and the human-nature relationship.

The letters also show that Astrup, on occasion, changed his motifs to please the clients' wishes, which means that the letters can help to determine whether a client's preferences have skewed the artistic intent. Financial factors also play a role in Astrup's farmstead. In the letter correspondence to his friend Per Kramer, we find several ideas and thoughts about the architectural development that was not implemented due to financial difficulties and delays. There are also changes that have been made on the property after his death, both by the Astrup family, the municipality, and the course of time itself that makes an analysis more difficult. However, when Astrup writes about his landscape modifications or the changing

[88] Letter from NA to Isabella Høst, Jan 13, 1913. Letter 531, National Library, Oslo.

seasons of Jølster, no such ulterior motives or financial obstacles exist. The letters, together with his artworks and farmstead, can thus be used to assemble a coherent understanding of nature.

It is also important to note that Astrup used text as a tool in his artistic process. This is explicitly seen in the three small notebooks entitled *Miscellaneous Motifs I-III*, likely dated 1898-1908, where Astrup wrote down and numbered 325 separate motifs[89]. Arguably, the text functions similarly to his lesser-known and preserved photographic studies, which he often referenced in his notebooks[90]. By analyzing his photographs, Haugsbø shows that Astrup used photography not merely as a documenting tool, but as an exploration into the aesthetic properties of the medium in itself, and whether these properties could be applied onto the canvas[91]. Transferred to text, Astrup's notes can be seen as both a documenting tool for his motifs and used for their properties as a medium. As Astrup was concerned with capturing a fleeting moment, determined by changing atmospheric conditions, both text and photography functions as snapshots in time that quickly address the motif. Text also adds color descriptions, an important use of the medium in his notebooks. In this sense, it is understandable that Astrup used text to record his motifs, aided by his photographic studies. However, the text can also be understood as an exploration of the storytelling and associative properties of the medium itself. Haugsbø shows that photography was used for its ability to address detailed sections and parts of the whole, as well as experimenting with angles. Text, on the other hand, can explicitly instruct, narrate and contextualize. In addition to its documenting abilities, the narrative element of text is arguably an equally important reason for why Astrup showed interest in the medium. In a letter to the writer Ole Singdahlsen, Astrup refers to his note-taking as a way of sketching a motif – "and I made that little study – a mere "notation", – I might more correctly call it, – it became, as when a writer notes something in his little notebook." [92] The several micro-stories accompanying the precise and colorful motif descriptions in his notes create atmospheric snapshots of a larger tapestry of the voice of the valley. A storytelling element that is further expressed in his artwork. As Dejardin writes, one gets a sense "there is a story lurking behind the image somewhere."[93] The notebooks also reveal that Astrup, in fact, was in the process of taking notes for a book on the culture of

[89] Nikolai-Astrup (KODE) "Astrup's notebooks – miscellaneous motifs."
[90] Consisting of a small archive of 33 positive and two negative photos as of 2015 (Haugsbø's Doctoral Thesis).
[91] Haugsbø, *Fortida Gjennom Notida*, 311.
[92] Letter from NA to Ole Singdahlsen. Aug 6, 1921. Letter 299, National Library, Oslo.
[93] Dejardin, "Painting Norway: Nikolai Astrup and the Jølster Project", 20.

Jølster, referred to as the *J-book*. Although the manuscript is yet to be found, Astrup's letter collection can itself be read as a form of *J-book*.

One can not mention Astrup's writing without noting the vast amount of information on different subjects from how to prep a canvas to how to slaughter a lamb, make rhubarb wine or mend a telephone. In a sense, the poetic sensitivity registered in the various moods and atmospheres is equally met in a rich knowledge base of pragmatic life skills and a keen interest in the material world.

The landscape and culture narrated in Astrup's letters are wonderful, colorful, and richly decorated. It is populated by capricious fish, rats, crooks and thieves, dear friends and bitter enemies. Excursions to the mountains and description of the landscapes create a mental map of the valley through the seasons. The letters give a more nuanced description of the ups and downs of valley life than the romanticized and programmatic notion inserted by the 'national agenda.' The inhabitants of Jølster can sometimes resemble more the rural critique of Edgard Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology* than the national romantics.

Yet the desire to at times leave the somewhat claustrophobic valley is matched by the need to stay close to his 'motifs.' and experiencing spring in Jølster. The letters are both exuberantly enjoyable and, at times, tediously tiresome in their details. Still, as author Sivert Nesbø states in his close-reading of young Astrup's letter to a childhood friend, Arne Giverholt: "who could have thought the painter also could write?"[94] Both literary quality, storytelling abilities, as well as the associations between nature and self, are addressed in Nesbø's reading.

Astrup often identifies the self with the landscape. It could be in the form of changing moods and atmospheres or take form as concrete places in the landscape that, in a way, re-awakens his memories of the past. Similar to the way the sky changes its mood over the valley, the atmosphere of letters changes depending on Astrup's mood of the day. Often these moods coincide with the changing weather conditions or vice versa – when Astrup shares an emotion, he often translates his feeling to a description of the landscape. In a letter to the painter Birgit Abrahamsen dated October 16th, 1904, Astrup recalls a period from the past

[94] Nesbø, "Trist Vårdag," 12-15.

and says that his meticulous memory from this time makes him sad. He then continues to relate this feeling to place:

> It is enough sadness here already, I do not need any more; here in Western Norway everything is basically sad, the people, the colors, nature itself – when the people laugh, it is like gallows humor, and when the sun shines, it is like nature itself is hung over. It can appeal to you – this sadness, for a while, before one has lived through it and has it in the veins. I think it is dangerous to stay too long in Western Norway. [95]

It is also interesting to note that Astrup's bad moods are often provoked when the climate or animals disrupt his work, intention or process. Astrup had special animosity towards hares for eating 'all his apple trees'.

Astrup's style of writing is highly associative and relational, making it notoriously difficult to compartmentalize the reading into neatly separated topics. That tells us something about the entangled view on nature/culture, body/environment, mood/climate that permeates the text. As mentioned, in the letter archive one finds there are recurring topics related to his art, finances, farmstead, and his health and climate in Jølster. Rarely are these subjects neatly compartmentalized, so that one subject subsequently follows the next. Rather, both his health and his artistic process was dependent on the climatic conditions. Astrup struggled with severe asthmatic seizures which challenged his work. In addition, the changing atmospheric conditions affected Astrup's artistic process as well, since he often painted and sketched outside. Astrup's economic model has ties to the pre-modern barter economy, where goods were exchanged for goods. Often a woodcut would be exchanged for building materials or equipment for his studio. Through this form of exchange and reliance on the weather conditions, an interdependent bond developed between the climate, farmstead, body, art, and sustenance. In the letters, these different subjects overlap and blend into each other, showing that Astrup's physical environment, bodily conditions and artistic process are understood as one symbiotic process, creating negative or positive spirals.

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[95] Letter from NA to Abrahamsen, Oct 16, 1904. Letter 295. National Library, Oslo.
Translated from: *Og her er tristhed nok, jeg behöver ikke mere; her paa vestlandet er igrùnden alt trist, menneskene, farverne og selve natùren, – naar menneskerne ler, er det som galgenhùmor, og naar solen skinner, föler jeg det som om natùren var fyldesyg. Den kan tiltale èn denne tristhed – til en tid, för man endnù har gjennemlevet den og kjender den tilbùnds, förend den endnù er gaaet èn i blodet. Jeg tror det er farligt at opholde sig længe her paa vestlandet.*

Correlative thinking share similarities with *stream of consciousness*, but differs as the themes in the former are encircling back to each other, creating a micro-macro of interdependent connections and relationships.

The following analysis of two of Astrup's letters will present some of the repeating themes, styles and patterns found in the letter archives as a whole. The two letters can be seen as a microcosm of Astrup's understanding and relationship to nature, where each letter will address different, yet relational aspects of this view. As mentioned, ancient China developed correlative thinking to explain the symbiotic functioning of three important dimensions of existence: *the body, the community* and the *cosmos.* These three dimensions might very well be a good framework for approaching Astrup's earth/art project in Jølster and his understanding of nature.

6.1 Letter I: The Bird Cherry Blossoms

Nikolai Astrup to Per Kramer, spring 1918 – Sandalstrand, Jølster:

> Both Engel and I look immensely forward
> to seeing You dear people,
> who have always been so kind towards
> us for no reason; –
> – I hope the bird cherry will
> remain in bloom until you arrive, but
> it will probably lose its flowers by then, –
> unfortunately; – now it looks like a might-
> y white snow-covered giant, – it
> has never blossomed like this before – it competes
> with the snow patches on the mountains in its white
> brilliance, – but spring advances in leaps and
> bounds; – the snow in the mountains melts,
> and the scent of the bird cherry spreads five kilometres in
> circumference and even "overpowers" the
> smell of cooking from the kitchen, – and the bumblebees
> buzz by the thousands in the bird cherry's voluminous
> crown – they literally live in "white

clouds", – well, it won't be like that for us in
Paradise – the great white flock <etc.> [96]

This letter section is gathered from a six-page letter written to Per Kramer in the spring of 1918. In the letter Astrup has received notice that Kramer and the family will come to visit during Pentecost and responds by acknowledging that the time frame of their arrival will be too late to see the bird cherry blossom. Astrup then proceeds by describing the blooming stage of the bird cherry as of the written date of the letter. The bird cherry resembles a 'mighty white snow-covered giant,' that competes with the 'snow patches on the mountains in its white brilliance.' As spring is rushing in, the snow melts and the scent of the bird cherry spread for miles, even overpowering the cooking fumes from the kitchen. In the large crown, the bumblebees are buzzing 'by the thousands,' living in the 'white clouds' of the crown. Astrup ends the description by exclaiming that Paradise could not be better, 'the great white flock' being a referral to a Danish psalm by pietist Hans Adolph Brorson from 1765[97] . The psalm is based on Saint John's Book of Revelation Chapter 7, verse 9-13; referring to the deceased Christians standing in front of God in heaven, their 'glistening white robes' washed white by the blood of the Lamb.

6.1.1 The Bird Cherry as Cyclical Time

The Bird Cherry is mentioned in several different stages in the blooming process as well as in different moments in time. The first time the bird cherry is mentioned, Astrup writes that "I hope the bird cherry will remain in bloom until you arrive." Two different time levels are here established; both the current moment in time when the bird cherry is, in fact, blossoming, as well as a perceived duration into the future, as in how long the bird cherry will *remain* in bloom. By stating that he hopes the bird cherry will *remain in bloom* upon Kramer's arrival - the bird cherry is already grasped as a being in a constant process of change, perceived in the moment in between the now and the perceived future when Kramer will arrive. The second time the bird cherry is mentioned, it has already in this fictional future, "probably lost its flowers". The third time Astrup mentions the bird cherry, it is through a recollection of all the

[96] Letter from NA to Per Kramer, 1918. ubb-ms-1808-c4, University Library, Bergen
[97] Hans Adolph Brorson "Den store hvite flokk, å se" (1756)

past years this bird cherry has blossomed, exclaiming, "it has never blossomed like this before".

6.1.2 The Infinite Spontaneous Moment

The bird cherry is thus understood in terms of its cyclical process, that brings all levels of time up to the surface, stretching both back in time and into the future brought forward in the present moment. The present blooming is happening now, but also *re-happening* now, and will be *re-happening* again. The past and the future are thus embodied in the present moment, through cyclical processes. At the same time this exact blooming is an ephemeral spontaneous moment, it will never happen again precisely like this. This is an example of the *both/and* perspective of Daoism, where the bird cherry is embodying both infinite time *and* the ephemeral moment. Cyclical time is this way non-dualistic, a way of accessing a sense of the 'binary pulse' between the past and the future, perceiving the unity in opposites.

The notion of infinite time is echoed in the reference to St Johns Revelation in the end of the section. Brorson's psalm highlights the infinity perspective of time and space that is brought forth in verse 9 of the revelation, where "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages", came together and stood before the throne in white robes in eternity. Astrup, being the son of the pietist vicar Christian Astrup, certainly had knowledge of John's Revelation. Chapter 7, verse 9-13 was central to Brorson and the pietist movement. However, in Brorson's psalm, infinite time can only be accessed through a sense of linear time progression; a heavenly afterlife that unites Christians from all times and places will be rewarded only *after* the time spent suffering on earth. In Christianity, the progression of linear time is firmly rooted. The seven-day creation narrative found in the first two chapters of the book of Genesis leads up to the creation of man. How you spend your time on earth will determine if you are welcomed into God's Kingdom for all eternity, or if you are damned to eternal turmoil and suffering in Hell: "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life"[98] Astrup's notion of infinite time, however, is constantly accessed through the present moment in his garden, where cyclical processes are occurring and re-occurring again and again, ad infinitum.

[98] Matthew 25:46

6.1.3 Body Memory and Experience

Psychiatrist and philosopher Thomas Fuchs writes that the concept of time as linear and in continual progress further developed in European modernity. The concept of time in earlier cultures such as that of hunter-gatherers, however, were related to cyclical recurrences in cosmic and earthly processes[99]. Lunar and planetary cycles, seasonal rhythms and day-night cycles determined both societal and cultic practices. Referencing Mirceas Eliade and Lucien Lévy-Brühl, Fuch writes that:

> Myth and rite know no real progress into the future: rather, rituals re-enact a mythical past in which the community participates in a mimetic form, so that the moment of origin can be renewed again and again.[100]

Tracing the notion of linear time to Christianity and Judaism, which inserted the idea of salvation as a process directed into the future, Fuchs writes that the notion of linear time became fully embedded in scientific-technological advances of modernity. Evident in human cultural products such as the mechanical clock in the fourteenth century to the continually accelerated means of transportation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – all of which help create and establish the idea of time as a linear progression. However, cyclical time cannot be abandoned. These cyclical processes are structured in the various life processes on earth, then and now, including our own bodies. These processes include various interconnected cycles synchronized with cosmic rhythms: wake-sleep cycles, circadian rhythms such as the rise and fall of body temperatures or hormone secretion, respiration, heartbeat, as well as recurrent automatic actions and habits of the body. Moreover, instinctual impulses such as thirst and hunger and mating seasons in various female animals are determined by cyclical rhythms. On a neurobiological level, Fuchs claims that the central integration of rhythmic bodily signals, such as breathing, forms the basis of our sense of the duration of time.

Body memory is a term Fuchs uses to explain the habitual structure of the body in relation to the experience of time. The *body memory* differs from linear autobiographical memory. Fuchs writes that in linear time, the past can not be accessed again, in other ways than by a mental re-construction or representation. "[B]ody memory by contrast consists in repetition, the 're-

[99] Fuchs, "The Cyclical Time of the Body and Its Relation to Linear Time", 47-65.
[100] Ibid., 48.

enactment' of the experienced, the learned or habitualized, without the past being still remembered as such."[101] Fuchs traces the distinction between the two kinds of memory to Maine de Biran and Henry Bergson. Bergson used the term *souvenir-image* to separate from what he called *mémoire habitude*. While the *mémoire habitude* re-enacts the past unconsciously in bodily-practical motions, the *souvenir-image* or *image memory* re-experience the past in the present moment. Fuchs writes that this corresponds to Proust's term of *mémoire involontaire;* the taste of the Madeleine cake, immediately opened the door to his childhood: "No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shiver ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me."[102] Fuchs recognized the *body memory* as the "layer of bodily experience that is not organized sequentially, therefore not passing by, but rather constantly growing through new experiences." It is a form of implicit lived time, connected with the experience of cyclical time, already implemented in the circadian processes of our body.

> Implicit lived time is the movement of life itself and we dive into it every time when we are absorbed by a perception or action, such as in 'flow' experiences in which the experience of time is lost in unhindered, fluid actualization.[103]

In this perspective, the cyclical process of the bird cherry is directly incorporated into Astrup's *body memory*. The letter section notes the importance of Astrup's bodily memory with the bird cherry *over time*. Because Astrup has never experienced the bird cherry blossom like this before, it highlights his excitement. But at the same time, the excitement, as with Proust, is induced by the re-awakening of past experiences through the present moment. The excitement is furthermore, a *placed* excitement related to the environment and Astrup's dwelling and garden. In the letter, Astruptunet is not understood as an isolated home, separated from the valley but in in many ways functions as a microcosmos that contains the larger whole. The smell of the bird cherry stretches 5 km away, and the bird cherry's crown, the snowcapped giant is visually communicating with the snow-capped mountains in the distance.

[101] Ibid.,57
[102] Ibid.,55
[103] Ibid.,58.

6.1.4 The Bird Cherry as a Relational Catalyst

The bird cherry is not described as an isolated aesthetic object, but consistently approached through correlative thinking. If it were to be described as an isolated aesthetic object, Astrup could have written something like:

> Outside there is a beautiful bird cherry with white flowers.

Instead, the bird cherry functions as generative, associative and relational catalyst. The bird cherry transforms into a snow-covered giant, competing with the white mountains, the mythologically habitat of giants and trolls. Its aromatic scent overpowers the human-made scents, from the cooking fumes in the kitchen. Astrup is here playing with hierarchical positions between human and non-human, where humans lose their dominant position; unsettling the anthropocentric perspectives. In Astrup's bird cherry the community of bees co-exists with human culture. The play with hierarchical positions between humans and non-humans is further addressed as Astrup narrates the reader through the position of a bumble bee. From a bumble bee's perspective, the white bird cherry flowers must appear as white clouds. Finally, the bumblebees' experience, buzzing in the white clouds of the bird cherry, is paralleled to Brorson's Psalm; "well, it won't be like that for us in Paradise". Can it ever be as good in the white clouds of the eternal afterlife in heaven, as being a bumblebee, alive here and now, buzzing in the white crown of the bird cherry on a spring day in Jølster? Likely not. The " <etc.>" in the final comment of the section can be understood as a further reference to the next strophe in the psalm, a psalm that was highly popular and well known at the time, and perhaps because of that needed no further introduction. The first and second strophe of the psalm that Astrup is referring to is:

> The great, white flock, to see / like thousand hills covered with snow[104]

If so, the Christian simile of mountains filled with snow as a manifestation of God's glory in heaven is reversed by Astrup's white clouds in heaven, as a simile for the bird cherry *itself.* This shows an important *ecocentric turn* in the relationship between divinity, spirituality and matter. Where the psalm reflects God's immanence in nature, Astrup takes on an *ecocentric* perspective where nature itself, i.e. the blooming of the bird cherry, is the immanent source of

[104] Own translation of Brorson: *Den store, hvite flokk, å se/som tusen berge full av sne.*

creation, the source where religion and mythology spurs from - not the other way around. Thus, what in essence is the 'ideal paradise' state - is, in fact, to be alive *here and now*, buzzing in the white crown of the bird cherry. "[I] t won't be like that for us in Paradise", can then be understood as it is not the greatness of God that has trickled down in nature, but the bird cherry *in and of itself* that has created the idea of God. There is no 'purer' version of Paradise than the one that can be found on earth. The reference to the mountains in the beginning and end of the section also creates a full circle of interrelated associations. It is not a stream of consciousness as much as it is an ecological, symbiotic thought pattern that turns back on *to itself*. Finally, the association between the snowcapped mountains, the scent of the bird cherry and the buzzing of the bees emphasize a multi-sensory experience of nature. A multi-sensory experience that is not only accessible by the human body alone, but also available to the co-existing community of the bees. An experience that is, in fact, must be a 'purer' version of Paradise than the one inserted by Christianity.

6.1.5 The Bird Cherry as Essence

As mentioned, in Daoist aesthetics, the aim is to locate and capture the *ziran*, the inner, dynamic essence of the landscape and enhance this quality. By observing and attuning to specific details and characteristics in the landscape, one can capture the mood or feeling of the larger whole. Astrup chooses to describe this precise bird cherry to Kramer to convey a feeling or character of the place which the Kramer family will visit. This is revealed in the beginning section of the letter: "Both Engel and I look immensely forward to seeing You dear people, who have always been so kind towards us for no reason/ I hope the bird cherry will remain in bloom until you arrive, but it will probably lose its flowers by then". The bird cherry is the main character or subject in this description, which can be understood as used to embody the character of Astrup's home, and in a sense, Astrup himself. Because the blooming period will most likely be over when they arrive, Kramer will not get to experience the bird cherry in bloom, which captures the essence of place. Instead, Astrup chooses to describe this experience or feeling in the letter.

So, in what ways does the bird cherry bring forth the essence of Astrup's home? First and foremost, it brings forward the ephemeral character of spring, a cyclical season that transforms the entire landscape of Astrup's farm and garden, in fact, the whole landscape of Jølster. The bird cherry is the first sign of spring in Jølster, and Astrup reveals that the bird

cherry blooms earlier here than at any other place in the village. In a letter to Isabella Høst, Astrup explains:

> Below the cabins on the slope is also a huge bird cherry tree, – I believe it is the biggest I have ever seen, – it blossoms before all the other bird cherries, the wife of the previous owner here said, that what she mourned the most when leaving this place, was the bird cherry, – because it livened things up in the spring with it white splendour.[105]

The bird cherry was also the only existing aesthetic element on the property when Astrup moved there with his family in 1912[106]. It brings forward the character of place *before* Astrup began his landscape modifications, since it was one of the few plants and trees present on Astrup's farmstead when he purchased the property. Placed in the inclining hill north of the main house *Borgen*, it was taken twice by storm in the 1920s and finally cut down in 2015. Today there is a little root shrub that remains.

In Astrup's notebooks, we also find that bird cherries was a motif he had been interested in early on, before moving to Sandalstrand. The bird cherry thus creates this long line to the past and the larger village, brought forth in the present moment. Knowing the history of the bird cherry, and the symbol of the bird cherry as the character of spring and the process of transformation, the bird cherry might also have been a reminder to Astrup of the process and transformation of his farmstead.

In 1918, when the letter was written, Astrup's farmstead and garden was six years in the making. After years of labor and struggle, from this time on Astrup could embark on more aesthetic and experimental projects. Mellgren Mathiesen notes that during the period between 1918-1921 Astrup began expanding the horticultural scope and visual language of his garden by extensive cross-breeding of a varieties of plants, significant vegetable production, and integration of wild and rare plants in his garden[107]. In 1918, Astrup also began the construction of his main dwelling, *Borgen* – which in itself can be understood as an experimental crossing. The architectural registration of *Borgen* notes that elements from old buildings from around the valley was integrated in the new house, which in itself was merged

[105] Letter to Isabella Høst 07.03.1913. Translated from: *Nedenfor hùsene i bakken staar ogsaa en vældig hæg, – jeg tror det er den störste, jeg har seet, – den blomstrer för alle andre hægger, og konen til den forrige eier her sa, at det, som hùn mest sörgede over at forlade her, var hæggen, – thi den livede saa op om vaaren med sin hvide pragt.*
[106] Mathiesen, *Astruptunet i Jølster (*ArkadiaLandskap 2016), 41.
[107] Ibid., 44.

by existing buildings on the property into a personal and unique expression[108]. For instance, in the new house we find the use of sliding doors, or what Astrup referred to as 'Japanese doors', linoleum and cement. Although Astrup and his wife collected antique interiors from the valley, the rooms in the buildings are freely decorated after personal preferences, not adhering to any strict traditions. We also find exotic elements in the interior, like agave plants and a table inspired by a trip to Alger. The documentation states that the combination of these different parts created a "personal and distinct whole"[109]:

> The Astrup Farmstead is thus not a rural museum, showing the traditional building style in Jølster. Nikolai Astrup is not primarily a rural home-bound artist, and Astruptunet represents nothing other than itself. [110] [111]

The bird cherry, representing spring, is also characterized by its ephemeral quality. In another letter to Per Kramer written in 1920, Astrup writes that upon being away for merely two days, great changes in the landscape had occurred:

> you cannot believe how surprised we were upon our return from Förde, – everything had changed in the 2 days: the forest had gained that fresh cold green colour, which it takes on in spring, when the warm weather arrives; the two days have done wonders – the apple trees (the blossoms) were almost completely in flower, and the cherry and plum trees were in full bloom, the rhubarb leaves had nearly doubled in size in the two days; – there were motifs everywhere, so that I didn't know, what I should begin to paint; but it was sweltering hot here, and the familiar spring murmur had arrived in the mountains from all the streams and rivers. The apple trees are now in white and the bird cherry <snows> and the plum and cherry trees have also begun to lose their virginity. –[112][113]

As seen in this ecocritical analysis, Astrup's understanding of nature can be understood in terms of correlative ecological thinking rooted in experience with place over time. The bird

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[108] Leden et al., *Astruptunet I Sandalstrand, Jølster* (Oslo: NIKU, 2016), 190.
[109] Translated from: *En personlig og egenarted helhet.*
[110] Ibid., 190.
[111] Translated from: *Astruptunet er følgelig ikke et bygdemuseum som viser tradisjonell byggeskikk i Jølster. Nikolai Astrup er ikke primært noen hjemstavnskunstner, og Astruptunet representerer ikke annet enn seg selv.*

[112] Letter from NA to Per Kramer, 06.04.1920. ubb-ms-1808-c4, University Library, Bergen
[113] Translated from: *thi dù tror ikke hvor overraskede vi blev ved hjemkomsten fra Förde,– alt var forandret paa de 2 dagene:, skogen havde faaet den koldgrönne friske farve, som den faar om vaaren her, naar varmen kommer; de to dagene havde gjort underværker – æpletrærene (blomsterne) var næsten helt udsprùngne, og kirsebær og plomme stod i fuld blomst,rabarbra-bladene var blevne næsten dobbelt saa store paa de to dagene; – her var motiver overalt, saa jeg vidste ikke, hvad jeg skulde begynde paa at male; men stekende hedt var her, og der var kommen den kjendte vaar-sùs i fjeldene af alle bækkene og elvene. Nù staar æpletrærene hvide og hæggen <sner> og plomme og kirsebær begynder ogsaa at miste jomfrùdommen.*

cherry represents Astruptunet, which embodies the relationship between the self, the community and the cosmos. Astrup's description of the bird cherry shows a contemplative registration of a detail that reflects a whole. By bringing forth this essence we find that the bird cherry, for Astrup, contains a multitude of layers of the entangled experience of place, time and memory. The description of the bird cherry thus encapsulates Dejardin's description of Astrup's earth/art project, where "art, life, myth, landscape and memory are powerfully intertwined, nowhere more so than in the home to which he eventually moved." It is this fundamental non-dualistic observation and understanding of nature, bodily experienced over time, that allows the realms of nature and culture, art and life, individuality and collective, past and future, materiality and spirituality, self and other to merge.

6.2 Letter Analysis II: A Necessary Part of the Mood

Nikolai Astrup to Hans Jacob Meyer, November 28, 1917 – Sandalstrand, Jølster:

Mr. Meyer

Yes, I will indeed remove the cows – after your
request, – however, I will not
refrain from mentioning, that these cows were to a
degree the point of – and a necessary
part of the mood, which made me chose
to paint the motif at precisely that time of day.
It is, in fact, characteristic of the mood
on a mountain grazing farm, – when the creatures return home after sun-
set, – that they most often stay
in a single line on ridges and hilltops.
Why, – you may ask, – well, probably because
they can be easy to spot, – so that their friends –
the other creatures, – can see, that they are
on their way home and can join them. That the creatures

do this, is hence almost for the same reason
that one puts bells on cows; –
I have often seen this and noticed this in particular
at Bakkestöilen this summer.
When one does not see this more often, it is perhaps
because the cows do not always have such easy
access to heights or ridges, that are
spotted from all angles of the valley, – but then,
as mentioned, – the cowbells do the same serv-
ice. – (to gather the cows home at
night). – When I mention this, it is to
explain, that it was not a "contrived"
whim of mine – this thing with the cows – I actually
saw it, when I painted it.[114] [115]

The second letter analysis is a section from a six-page letter to shipbroker Hans Jacob Meyer[116], dated November 1917. Astrup wrote the letter in response to Meyer, who had requested that Astrup remove some cows from a painting he was purchasing from him, acknowledged by Øystein Loge as the painting *Stardalstøylene*.[117] Astrup, being financially burdened, gives in to the request, but finds it necessary to explain to Meyer the function of the cows in the motif. Thus, he replies that the cows were to a degree the point of the motif, and a "necessary part of the mood," which made him choose to paint the motif at "precisely that

[114] Letter from NA to Hans Jacob Meyer, 28 Nov, 1917. Letter 295, National Library.
[115] Translation from: *jeg skal gjerne tage bort kjörne – siden De önsker det, – men jeg vil dog ikke ùndlate at sige, at disse kjörne for en del var pointet i – og de hörte nödvendig med i den stemning, som gjorde, at jeg valgte at male motivet just paa den tid af dagen. Det er nemlig karakteristisk for den stemming paa en sæter, – naar kreaturerne efter solnedgang vender hjem, – at de da oftest holde sig i række og rad paa aaskanter og höidedrag. Hvorfor, – kan man spörge, – jo antagelig fordi de skal være lette at se, – saa at deres kammerater, – de andre kreaturer – skal se, at de er paa hjemvei og slaa fölge. At kreaturerne gjör dette, er altsaa nærmest af samme grund som den, hvorfor man har kobjælle paa kjörene; – jeg har ofte seet dette og lagde særlig mærke til det paa Bakkestöilen i sommer. Naar man ikke oftere ser dette, er det kanske fordi kjörene ikke altid har en slig let tilgjængelig höide eller aasrand, som kan sees fra alle kanter af dalen, – men da gjör, som nævnt, – kobjællen samme tjeneste, (– til at samle dyrene hjemover om kvelden). – Naar jeg nævner dette, er det for at forklare, at det ikke var et "lavet" paafùnd af mig – dette med kjörene, – jeg saa det virkelig, da jeg malte det.*
[116] The father of the sculptor Hans Jacob Meyer (1907-1993)
[117] Loge K126

time of day." He proceeds by explaining that when the cows return to the mountain grazing farm after sunset, they often gather into a single line on ridges and hilltops in order to be visible for the rest of the group. Astrup then writes that this behavior has a similar signaling function as when people put cowbells on the cows. He ends the section by explaining that he had seen this himself when he was outside painting the motif, the cows were not a figment of his imagination; "I actually saw it, when I painted it."

6.2.1 Embodying Cyclical Time and Environmental Landscape

First and foremost, the letter emphasizes that the animals are responsive to the landscape and how cyclical time influences their behavior. Astrup further stresses the importance of the cows in the landscape in a letter Astrup wrote to Isabella Høst a few weeks earlier. Astrup asks her if she thinks he should give in to a request that removes a main 'point of the picture':

> Now he [Meyer] writes
> that he would like me to
> paint over some cows, that walk in
> a row along a ridge in
> the grazing farm picture, – do You think one
> shall give in to people in such matters, when it
> is practically the main point of the picture?[118] [119]

The cows are adapting their formation to the sun's movement across the sky, repeated every night at dusk. Forming a line in an open meadow at another time of the day would make no sense because they are visually signaling to their "friends" that it is time to go "home," informed by the atmospheric changes from daytime to nighttime.

Furthermore, Astrup's defense of the cows in the motif unsettles the hierarchical split between people and animals, by drawing to similarities between the two species; both cows and people use strategic tricks to gather the herd at dusk; while humans use cowbells, the cows themselves form a line on top of ridges and hilltops to draw attention to their wandering

[118] Letter from NA to Isabella Høst, 15-19 Nov, 1917. Letter 531, National Library.
[119] Translation from: *Nù skriver han at han gjerne vil ha mig til at male bort nogle kjör, der gaar i række og rad langs en aasrand paa sæterbilledet, – synes De man skal föie folk i sligt, naar det næsten gjælder pointet i billedet?*

"friends," so they will not get lost in the dark. Also, Astrup uses nouns such as "creatures," "friends," and "home" when speaking of the cows as a way to draw attention to similarities between humans, instead of objectifying them as simple "cattle" that easily could be removed from the motif.

6.2.2 Critically Anthropomorphizing Co-Existing Communities

The association between people and animals in the letter is relevant on two levels: Firstly it establishes a relation between self and other in a non-dualistic way, and secondly, it is used as a symbol for the extended nature-culture bond and the effect that cyclical time and seasons have on the cultural landscape.

Greg Garrard discusses the various ways animal similes are embedded in our language and refers them as a form of *animal trope* that can be approached in much the same manner as the trope of *wilderness* or the trope of *the pastoral*. Among other things, Garrard discusses the ecocritical implications between the terms *anthropomorphism*, that is the to give (non-human) animals human traits, and *zoomorphism* which is to give humans animal traits.[120] Each of them can be perceived in both crude and sophisticated forms. Often zoomorphism is used in a derogatory manner, revealing both racial prejudice (Africans as apes) and *speciesism* at the same time (humans are more worth than animals). *Anthropomorphism*, the notion of perceiving animals as humans, for instance seen in Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man*, a documentary made up by reconstructed footage shot of Timothy Treadwell who was killed by a bear after living several summers in Katmai National Park, Alaska. According to Garrard, both Herzog and Treadwell waver in and out of various forms of anthropomorphism; Treadwell with his romantic view of the animals, and Herzog with his bleak outlook on the bears as nothing but 'murderers.' One could also add to Garrard's findings the social media culture of sharing 'cute', 'adorable' images of animals' similarities to humans, and question if this is rooted in a form of Disneyfication of anthropomorphic animal narratives.

However, Astrup takes on a third position in the letter. Astrup is not so much referring to the cows *as humans*, as he is referring to the cow's response to their environment and the internal relationship and collaboration as a group, their homes and their communities that *co-exist* with the life of humans on a mountain grazing farm. This position is based on what Garrard

[120] Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, (Oxfordshire: Taylor and Francis, 2004). Kindle.

refers to as a *critical anthropomorphism*, found in environmental ethology studies, and not an anthropocentric bias:

> Without minimizing the evident differenced from human cultures, ethologists are content to use the term 'culture' to describe non-genetically transmitted behaviour such as the varied hunting practices of the ocra or regional differences in primate tool-making and social interaction (...) So critical anthropomorphism in ethology means employing the language and behaviour 'carefully, consciously, empathetically and and biocentrically'.[121]

Mountain grazing farming was one of the many agricultural and architectural traditions that were affected by the modernization process in Norway. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were approximately 100 000 mountain grazing farms in active use. A century later, in 2011, there were less than 900.[122] The recollection of the animals' movement on a mountain grazing farm is expressed in a vernacular poem about the old ways of the mountain farm life in Mosdalen, in Ørsta, entitled "Memories from a Mountain grazing farm right after the turn of the century":[123][124]

> The oldest cows felt then
>
> it was time to move towards the mountain grazing farm
>
> when dusk started setting in the first one began striding[125]

The cultural practice of mountain grazing farms is strongly related to cyclical time and the seasons. The movement or walking on a path is also an important characteristic that extends a link to the human culture; the road that leads up to the mountain grazing farm, the journey up and down, the transportation of milk, cheese and hay for the winter. It was also very much a collective project, as many grazing farms were shared between several families.

Astrup is consciously and empathetically employing the human terms 'friends' and 'home' in describing the behavior of the cows. The cows are understood as a collective group, or a co-existing and partially co-mingling culture to the human culture. Astrup's understanding is

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[121] Ibid.
[122] Nibio.no, "Kun ein prosent av norske setrar er framleis i bruk."

[123] Translated from: *Minner frå seterlivet like etter århundreskiftet.*
[124] Moe, *Mosdalen* (Ørsta: Ørsta trykkeri, 1976-1980)
[125] Translated from: *Eldste kyrne kjende då/tida dei mot støl laut gå/når det leid mot kveld dei første byrja skrida*

based on precise observations over time, and the animals are always contextualized to their local environment.

Thus the main point of the motif is to emphasize the cyclical movement of the cows in dusk towards their shared home with humans. Removing the cows from the painting would remove this "mood" of the mountain grazing farm that Astrup experienced himself and was trying to convey.

7 Cultivating Cosmos

> To experiment over and over again with cultivating plants – in particular new species – to cross breed (often inedible) flowering plants with other plants – that is my addiction.
>
> *– Nikolai Astrup to Hans E. Kinck, 1918*

7.1 Jølster – Between Earth and Sky

Jølster's mountains and valleys are shaped by the ice sheet that covered all of Scandinavia during the last Ice Age. Architect and professor Christian Norberg-Schulz writes that it is the characteristic relationship between earth and the sky that forms a space and makes a place *a place*.[126] Furthermore, it is the changing atmosphere in the sky that provides this place its *mood or feeling*. Finally, it is the human interaction with space, made by the relationship between the earth and the sky, and their response to the atmospheric 'mood' that creates the foundations for the site-specific culture and architecture.

The opposite forces between the earth and sky are quite visible in the Jølster landscape. Snow-capped mountains reaching from the fertile ground towards the sky on both sides of the lake, yet having a somewhat more open quality to it than many of the dramatic mountains rising from the narrow fjords of western Norway. On quiet, sunny days, the lake functions as a giant mirror reflecting the sky as well as the surrounding mountains (ill. 4). On rainy and cloudy days, however, the lake transforms into a dark, almost gloomy monochrome canvas, and one can begin to feel a claustrophobic heaviness held up by the surrounding mountains and the closed-off sky, where the passing of time no longer is visible.

Schulz, who was inspired by Heidegger's linguistic approach to dwelling, makes it clear that his own approach is not to be confused with environmental determinism. Schultz' visual place analysis of pre-modern communities was an effort towards making the development of urban landscapes more sustainable and enjoyable. His intention was not to copy old houses and

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Norberg-Schulz, *Mellom Jord Og Himmel* (Oslo: Pax, 1992), 21.

place them in the city, but understand *how* the relationship between earth and sky creates certain atmospheres and characteristics that could be repeated and varied ad infinitum in other forms. Schulz writes that humans are interconnected to a larger whole, and further echoes the Daoist notion of non-duality by saying that this larger whole is characterized by being "eternal – yet ever-changing." [127] These place-specific cultures are in constant change, yet they stay the same.

In the fjords and high mountains of western Norway, we find the evolution of the vernacular building form *Klyngetunet*, a cluster of small farmhouses clinging on to the bottom of the high mountains. Gathered from the forest, the log and timber houses can stand rooted in place for several hundred years, yet their module-based construction is designed to be taken apart and re-assembled. The same way the families of Jølster were weaved together and separated through the generations to form new family constellations, so was their homes moved from one *tun* or farmstead to the next, forming an ever-changing quilt along the Jølster lake. The vernacular building tradition is thus a story of non-dualities, the interlacing of nature and culture, recreation and work, individuality and collective, continuity and disruption, the past and the future. It is the story of a cultured landscape in constant dynamic change without really changing. Its diverse visual expression can, like Astrup's Jølster project, be perceived as variations over the same motif, with additions and subtractions, disruptions yet continuity.

In a book on the artist's life in Jølster, filled with oral history, Jølster native and author Anders O. Klakegg wrote:

> The ones who walk around with horse blinders, and can not see the life that surround one, has a poor life. Astrup taught us how to see, taught how to grow fond of our village, and made life richer. That is perhaps the greatest gift he gave us.[128][129]

Klakegg reveals two important notions: Firstly, that Astrup's view on Jølster was not an ordinary or traditional 'rural' view. Secondly, what Astrup 'saw' and expressed on the canvas changed the inhabitant's relation to a physical place they had known for generations. One can

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[127] Ibid.
[128] Translation from: *Den som gjeng med skylappa for augo, og ikkje ser livet i kring sig, han lever et fattigt liv. Astrup lærde oss å sjå, lærde oss å verte glad i bygdi, og gjorde livet rikare for oss. Det er kanskje den største han hev gjeve oss.*
[129] Klakegg, *Astrup, Kinck Og Jølster*. (Bergen: Norsk Bokreidingslag, 1987), 29.

propose that Astrup was attempting to bring forth the essence of the valley onto the canvas, understood in a Daoist sense as attained through a non-dualistic approach between the subject and the object. By doing so, Astrup conveyed a new way of experiencing not only art but place itself.

7.2 Visual Storytelling

As mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, Astrup's cyclical and color-infused mood variations of the lush landscapes narrates the viewer through a form of visual storytelling of the relationship between humans and place over time, reflecting Dejardin's note that one gets a sense there is 'a story lurking behind the image somewhere.' Seen in the previous letter analysis, Astrup used text as a tool in his artistic process and explored the storytelling and associative properties of the medium. The micro-stories in his notebooks create atmospheric moments in time that are weaved into a larger tapestry of the voice of the valley. My close-reading of his two letters show several essential aspects of how Astrup understands and narrates his relationship to nature in text. Astrup does not approach nature as a static 'object,' but through correlative thinking where nature is understood as a *non-dualistic process* emphasizing the cyclical rhythms and repetitions that are in a constant state of *becoming*.

In the bird cherry analysis, the bird cherry itself is the source of cosmic wonder, experiencing the bird cherry in bloom brings all levels of time and bodily memory into the present moment. The bird cherry functions as an essence to describe the character of a larger whole. The bird cherry is one of many recurring motifs in Astrup's artwork and can be understood as a visual micro-story that contains the essence of an observed quality in the landscape. In this sense, Astrup's aesthetic approach, his constant repetitions and variations over a selection of his favorite motifs, can be understood as a form of continuous cultivation, bringing forth a sense of *self*, the *community* and the *cosmos*.

In this final chapter of the thesis before the summary, I will address two recurring motifs in Astrup's artwork that can be read as a form of visual storytelling of the nature/culture relationship, rooted in place-specific observations and correlative thinking.

7.3 I: The Bowing Figures

In Astrup's landscapes of mountains, birchwood and meadows, one finds the presence of humans engaged in contemplative and habitual activity on the land, such as harvesting, planting or preparing the soil. While the people are presented in a humble position, their heads bowed towards the ground – the arch of their backs often takes on the form of the curved mountains behind them, reaching upward towards the sky. The bowed figures with the mountains behind them thus create a connection between earth and sky. The *bowing beings* are exemplified here in four of Astrup's works. Spanning over two decades, in different media and from different areas of Jølster, these four works are *Spring* (1899) (ill.5), *Spring Night in the Garden* (1909) (ill.6) *Rhubarb* (1911-1921) (ill.7) and *Foxgloves* (1920) (ill.8).

- In *Spring*, a small black and white etching, which Astrup made in 1899 at the Royal School of Drawing, one finds on top of a small hill a cabin or small farm and two women digging in the soil with mattocks, sowing potatoes. Behind the hill, a lake appears with the looming mountains in the background.

- In the oil painting *Spring Night in the Garden*, one of many versions of this motif in both painting and print, we find another version of the bowing being. A woman and a man are digging with their bare hands in the dark soil in a garden under a full moon. Across the lake, the mountains emerge, both green and snowcapped.

- In the oil painting *Rhubarb*, one sees a garden with a woman and a child. The woman is gathering crimson stalks of lush rhubarb. The enlarged broad leaves of the rhubarb are partially covering the soil, which the child is curiously engaged with. The lush foliage of a flowering apple tree and a full blooming bird cherry partially covers the view to the lake and the patchy white mountains.

- In *Foxgloves,* a painted version of a large and popular, but highly complicated woodcut, one sees a forest in springtime. In the foreground, to the left of a stream that flows down in the center of the picture and vanishes in the bottom right corner, one sees a cluster of pink foxgloves placed against white birch trees. The shape of the foxgloves themselves takes on the form of a bow to the ground. In a visible clearing to the right of the stream, two girls are bent over picking blueberries and putting them into woven baskets. In the background, three cows are grazing or drinking from a

stream that flows down the middle of the picture. On the horizon, through the trees, a mountain top appears, likely where the stream springs from. Both the girls the cows are facing the stream.

By looking at Astrup's drawings and sketches from childhood and youth, we also find the repeating motif of bowing people, presented as isolated studies of figures bowing to the ground and filling up their buckets (ill.9).

Seeing these four works together, one finds these people engaging in repetitive, meditative work, in between the state of leisure and labor – all sowing or gathering food. Perhaps apart from *Spring*, where the labor seems slightly more forceful by the thrust of the mattock, the figures are not exhausted by the labor. Rather, they seem to be occupied in a meditative workflow, or what is referred to Daoism as *wu wei*, effortless action.

In *Rhubarb*, the work is shown as enjoyable and relaxing. The delicate white and blue dress of the woman (Astrup's wife Engel, and a dress she herself made) informs us that the activity is not only to gather sustenance but a tranquil affair. As explained, effortless action can be attained when one is engaging and attuning to the processes of nature. Fuchs, as seen in the previous chapter, explains the 'flow state' as 'the movement of life itself' where the experience of time is dissolved into an 'unhindered, fluid actualization.' This workflow is attained by not thinking of the end goal in the sense of linear time progression, but being present in the current moment. In a time of agricultural change and the change from cyclical to linear time, the bowing beings are a visual reminder to cultivate and engage with the land in the present moment. Cyclical time also brings forth all levels of time up to the surface. We understand that these activities are not performed for the very first time, but are a seasonal and cyclical occurrence, passed down from mother or father to child through generations. The repetitive actions of the figures are mirrored in the repetitive re-creations of the motifs by the artist himself. Astrup too, is engaging with this process of repetition and variation, 'behind the scenes', so to speak.

In these figures one also finds the unity in opposites between earth and the sky, spirit and matter, as visualized in the curve of the backs mirroring the shape of the mountains in the background – thus pointing upwards to the sky. Mountains are, particularly in eastern thought, given spiritual significance. In Daoism, the mountain is ascertained masculine qualities, being directed towards the sky, while the earth and the valley are understood as

feminine, receptive and bountiful. Hokusai, who made the print *Red Fuji* (1830-32) (ill.10), and in doing so inspired *A Night in June in Jølster* (1902) (ill.11) was as mentioned a Nichiren-Buddhist. For Nichiren, mountains are the source of enlightenment and immortality. In the interpretation of Astrup's bird cherry letter, I suggested that the snowcapped mountains in the valley were associated with Brorson's reference to the immortal afterlife and infinite time. However, Astrup's notion of infinite time and spirituality is constantly accessed through the present moment in his garden, where cyclical processes are occurring and re-occurring again and again. Considering this, the visual narrative of the bowing beings can be understood as a story of non-dualities. By being attuned to the present moment, in the physical material world, literarily bowing the head towards the earth, a visual and spiritual connection to the mountains and the sky is made. It is this revelation of the unity of opposites, that according to Daoist aesthetics can create a sense of mystique or wonder.

In *Spring Night in the Garden*, the almost ritualistic emphasis on the repetitive bodily motions echoes the mystical character of the motif, where a spiritual bond is formed by the engaging work on the land in nighttime. In Jølster, old folklore held the belief that planting growths under the full moon in the month of May would ensure a rich harvest[130]. The realms of myth and matter are thus entangled in the present moment. Kinck wrote of a version of this motif, among others – that in Astrup's works, the 'moment turns into eternity', and that his landscapes are a 'revelation in the middle of reality.' Furthermore, Kinck writes that Astrup's 'secret treasure' was his ability of "complete doubleness"[131]. Although Kinck's description of Astrup is filled with the *artist-as-genius syndrome*, perhaps it was this union of opposites that Kinck had perceived, where the present moment indeed can access infinite time.

7.4 II: A Cluster of Co-Existing Communities

In the oil painting, *A Night in June and Old Farm Buildings* (1908) (ill.12), one sees the old communal farm dwellings at *Ålhustunet*, 16 buildings clustered together by the mountainsides. Two waterfalls (one of them Kleberfossen) are trickling and gushing down the mountain from the top left corner of the picture. A strangely blue and vibrant midnight sky looms over the mountains. A reflection of the moon might be detected on a single stone roofed house, as well as in a window of a second building. The rest of the houses with their

[130] Nikolai-Astrup (KODE) "A Night in June and Old Farm Buildings."
[131] Translated from: *Fulltonede dobbelbundenhet.*

green turf roofs and timbered construction echoes the deep green field and the forest behind. The moving line of the waterfall is continued in the luminous streaks of blooming marigolds dominating the foreground, running together into great crisscrossing swaths of yellow before disappearing and re-appearing in the deep green grass. Loge notes that this version of the motif was painted in at least 13 variations,[132] as well as made into a series of woodcut prints.

The individual buildings in a *Klyngetun* are not randomly placed, but co-functions with the larger whole. Each position of the individual houses relates to local topography and the climatic condition of wind and sun as well as the relationship to the other buildings. In the picture, the placement of the haybarn to the far left – with its open gable, are positioned against the wind, so that the hay will dry while at the same time protecting the inner areas of the community from the strong winds. Another distinct aspect of the *Klyngetun* is that it is a deeply communal project. Often, a group of four or five families would create these micro-communities or micro-villages and share the land. Today, sustainable urban planning in Norway often uses the root principle of the *Klyngetun* in the design process or proposals, echoing Norberg-Schulz' agenda. From the picture, one can note three barns, which indicates that there were at least three families that lived together in *Ålhustunet* and shared the land[133]. As mentioned earlier, from around 1850 old communal farmsteads or *tuns* began to disintegrate, as fewer people farmed bigger areas of land due to mechanized work.

The yellow marigolds thrived by the old *Klyngetun*, having excellent growing conditions in the marshy ground, enriched by the manure from the barns. Due to modernization, the marsh was drained and the marigolds began disappearing. Astrup was keenly aware of the dynamic between the marigolds and the old farmstead. As he explained in a letter to Hans Jacob Meyer:

> my old marigold motif with the old "farmstead" in the background is totally destroyed by cultivation, - the marsh is thin and drained, and then the large masses of marigolds disappear; - - for they demand that the soil is both exceptionally "rich" and has excessive "seepage"; - that is why one found them in masses of yellow below old "farmsteads", where all the manure from the cowsheds ran down into the marsh.[134]

[132] Loge, *Gartneren under Regnbuen (*Oslo: Dreyers Forlag,1986), 201.
[133] kode
[134] Letter from NA to Hans Jacob Meyer, June 21,1918. Letter 295, National Library, Oslo.

The analysis of Astrup's letter section to Hans Jacob Meyer showed that Astrup was interested in conveying the cow's response to their environment and the internal relationship and collaboration as a group, their homes and their communities co-existing and intermingling with the human culture on a mountain grazing farm. In *The Ecological Thought*, Timothy Morton writes that 'Existence is always co-existence.[135]

In *A Night in June and Old Farm Buildings,* we find a similar form of co-existence expressed. The 'community' of marigolds is directly related to the old communal *Klyngetun*, which again is dependent upon, and shaped by, topographical conditions. The bands of marigolds are co-existing and intermingling with the cluster of farms. In a sense, one can follow this interrelated zig-zag line across the picture where the community of marigolds in the bottom extends a visual line to the row of farms where the people and animals dwell, ending with the waterfall in the mountains and luminous night sky.

We can also find an expression of co-existing communities in *Foxgloves*. As the girls are presented on one side of the river meditatively collecting berries into their baskets, the cows are on the other side of the little river, equally engaged in their own affair of grazing and drinking from the stream. However, these two 'communities' are both facing towards the stream and each other, sharing a passing moment in time.

In the letter to Kinck quoted at the beginning of the chapter, Astrup reveals that he is addicted to experimenting with – and the cross-breeding of plants. The interest in cross-breeding, in an extended sense, is also evident in Astrup's unique woodcutting technique, where he would, according to Kari Greve "apply oil paint to the blocks that were individually superimposed one upon the other to arrive at the final image, then added further colour by brush after he had completed the printing process."[136] In addition, Astrup's main house *Borgen* was also a mix between several different cabins merged into one.

Seen together, Astrup's interest in cross-breeding and his interest in depicting various 'clusters' of co-existing communities, all dependent on their environment, reveal a unique understanding of nature entangled in culture. Astrup's keen sense and observation of the

[135]' Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 63.
[136] Kari Greve, "Nikolai Astrup's Woodcuts," 73.

qualities of place, as shown in his letters, is aesthetically cultivated and enhanced in his visual language.

7.5 The Ecology of Nikolai Astrup

When it comes to placing Nikolai Astrup's understanding of nature into the environmental discourse presented in chapter 3, one could suggest that his place-specific project shows clear ties with Deep Ecology, as well as a bioregionalist perspective, emphasizing region and communities over nations and states. The emphasis of the interrelation between animals, humans and plants furthermore echoes Arne Næss' statement that 'all life has inherent value and the symbiotic relationship between organisms is crucial. However, Astrup does not adhere to those aspects of Deep Ecology that has evolved into the idea that nature 'takes care of itself,' thus we should stop interfering because 'nature knows best'. Rather, what is promoted is a modification and cultivation of qualities that merges the human-made and non-human made. Astrup is constantly intervening and engaging with his environment. There is no pure wilderness or isolated human spheres, because everywhere is, in a sense, a home. A home not made for humans only, but a home that hosts a multitude of different communities of plants, animals and people – friends and foes (and hares) that is constantly co-creating and changing the landscape. An awareness of these interrelationships echoes, in a sense, Morton's claim that 'existence is always co-existence.' In Daoist thought 'nature' is simply one reflection of the fundamental principle of the cosmos, constantly changing. Non-duality and nature as process is strongly evident in Astrup's correlative thinking. To *let go of nature* means also, in this sense, to dissolve the idea of nature as a pure thing out there, a place once beautiful but now destroyed by man – and instead welcome nature the self, the community and the cosmos, where the foreign and unfamiliar meets the local and known, and where place indeed – echoes space.

8 Summary

I began the thesis by questioning if a broader discourse on the nature/culture relationship could help shed light on Nikolai Astrup's understanding of Nature. I began by addressing the problematic anthropocentric split between nature, culture and religion and unsettling the idea of nature as static. I then proposed two different ways of approaching ecological thinking; From the place-specific and symbiotic approach of Deep Ecology, to the dark and uncanny Ecological thought of Timothy Morton, where nature itself is replaced by a mesh of co-existing strange strangers. I furthermore proposed that the ethical right/wrong discourse between these two positions could co-exist through the Daoist notion of nature as a process, where opposite forces can be understood as a reflection of the same. I then came to an understanding of nature which I could apply in my interpretation of Astrup. I explained that Daoist thought is strongly tied to the idea of cultivation and co-creation and rooted in experience. I continued the thesis by contextualization Astrup's emphasis on place and seasonality to the environmental changes in his time, rather than understanding his Jølster project as informed by the national agenda. In my letter analysis, I show that Astrup applied correlative thinking and Daoist notions of nature as a process. I also show that Astrup used text as a tool in his artistic process. I propose that the many recurring motifs of his artwork can be understood as visual micro-stories of certain characteristics or 'essences' that Astrup has observed over time, and brought forth on the canvas. As seen in two recurring motifs in Astrup's work. The first is *the bowing figures*, where the arch of the back is echoed in the curve of the mountain thus telling the story of the relationship between spirit and matter where one can access a sense of infinite time through engaging with the present moment. The second motif was the marigolds, understood as *co-existing communities*, exemplified by the zig-zag line of the marigolds extending a visual line to the row of farms where the people and animals dwell.

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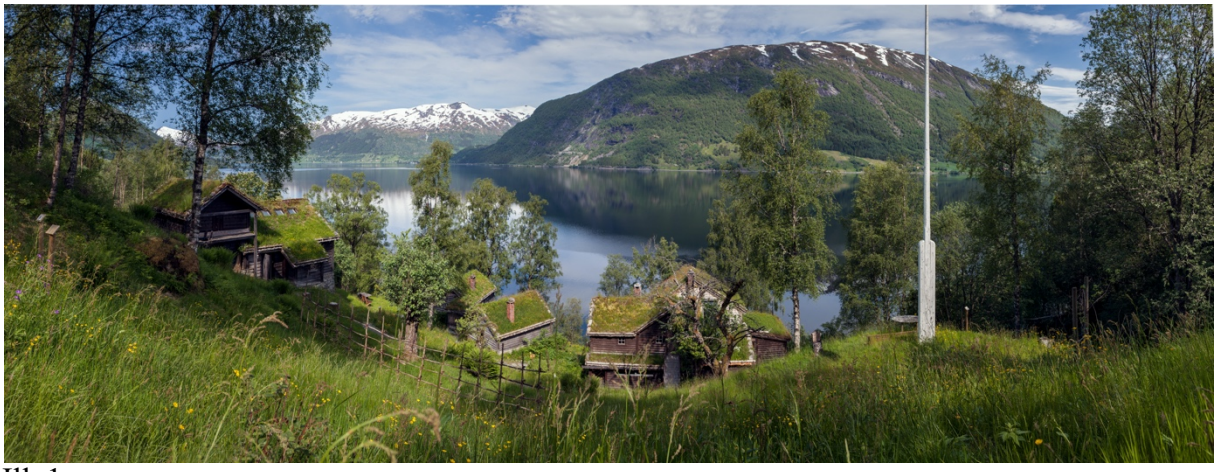
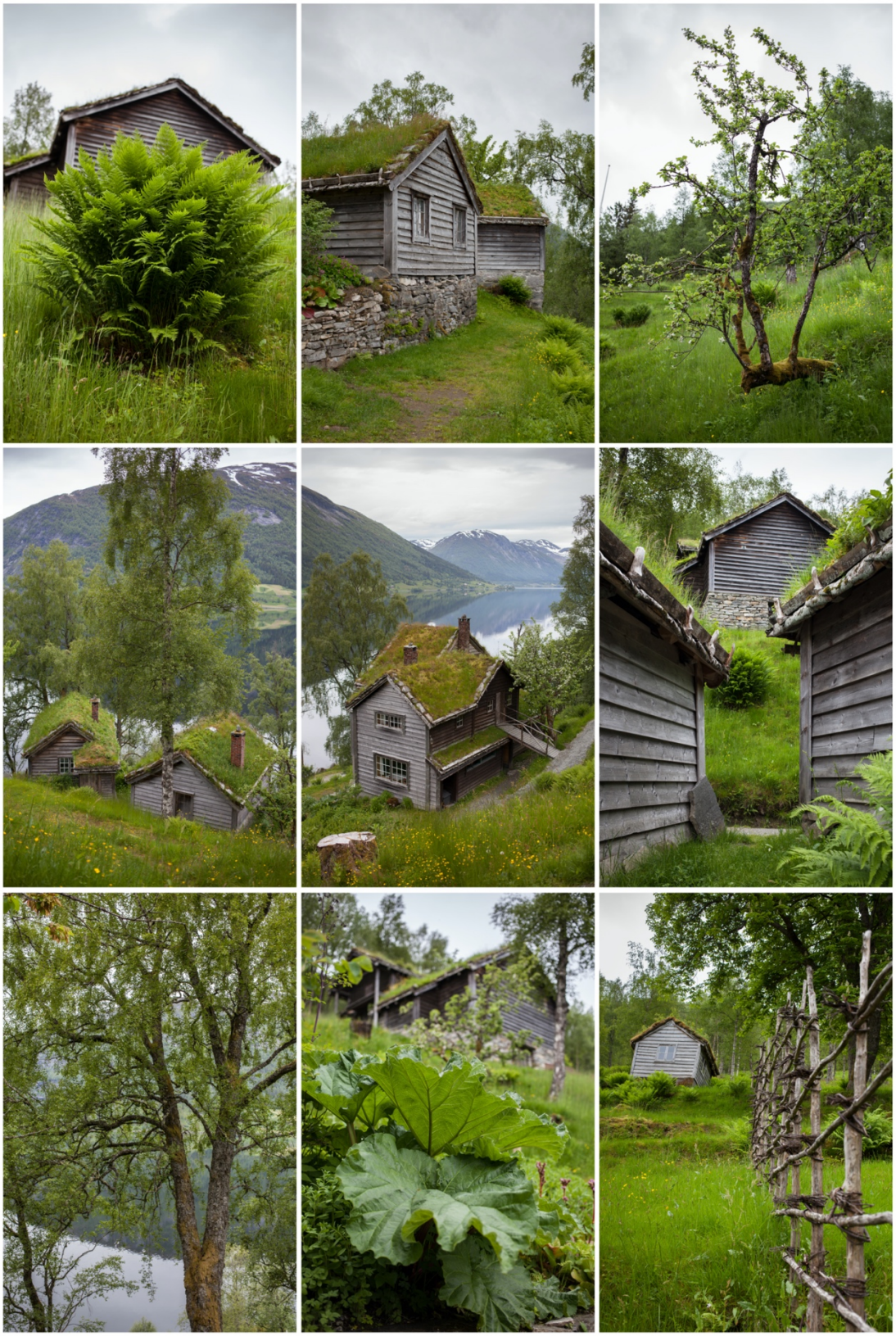
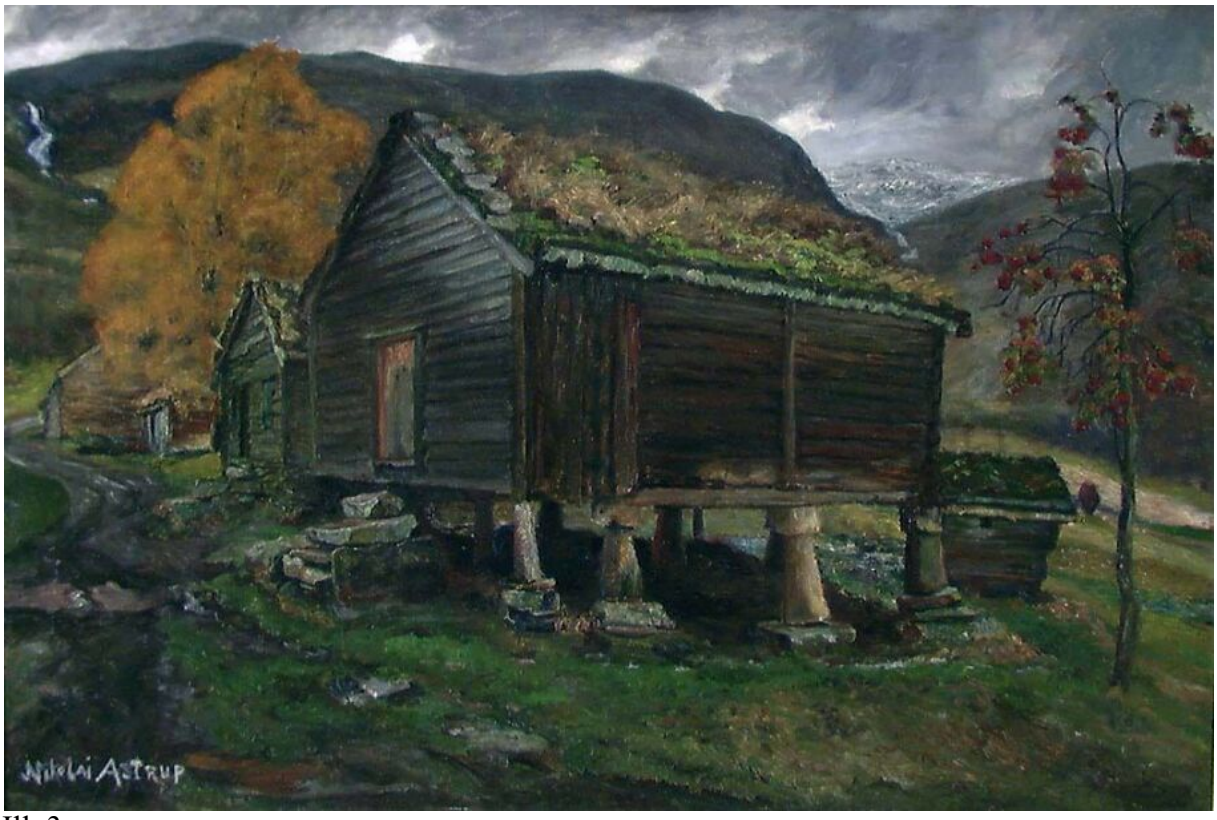
Illustrations



Ill. 1
Astruptunet today, panorama.
Photo: Oddleiv Apneseth.



Ill. 2
Astruptunet, *exterior*.
Photo: Oddleiv Apneseth.



Ill. 3
Nikolai Astrup, *Storehouse in Jølster* (artist's original title: *Sad Autumn Day*), before 1905.
Oil on canvas, 66 x 99 cm

Ill 4

Jølstervannet

Photo by: Espen Faugstad

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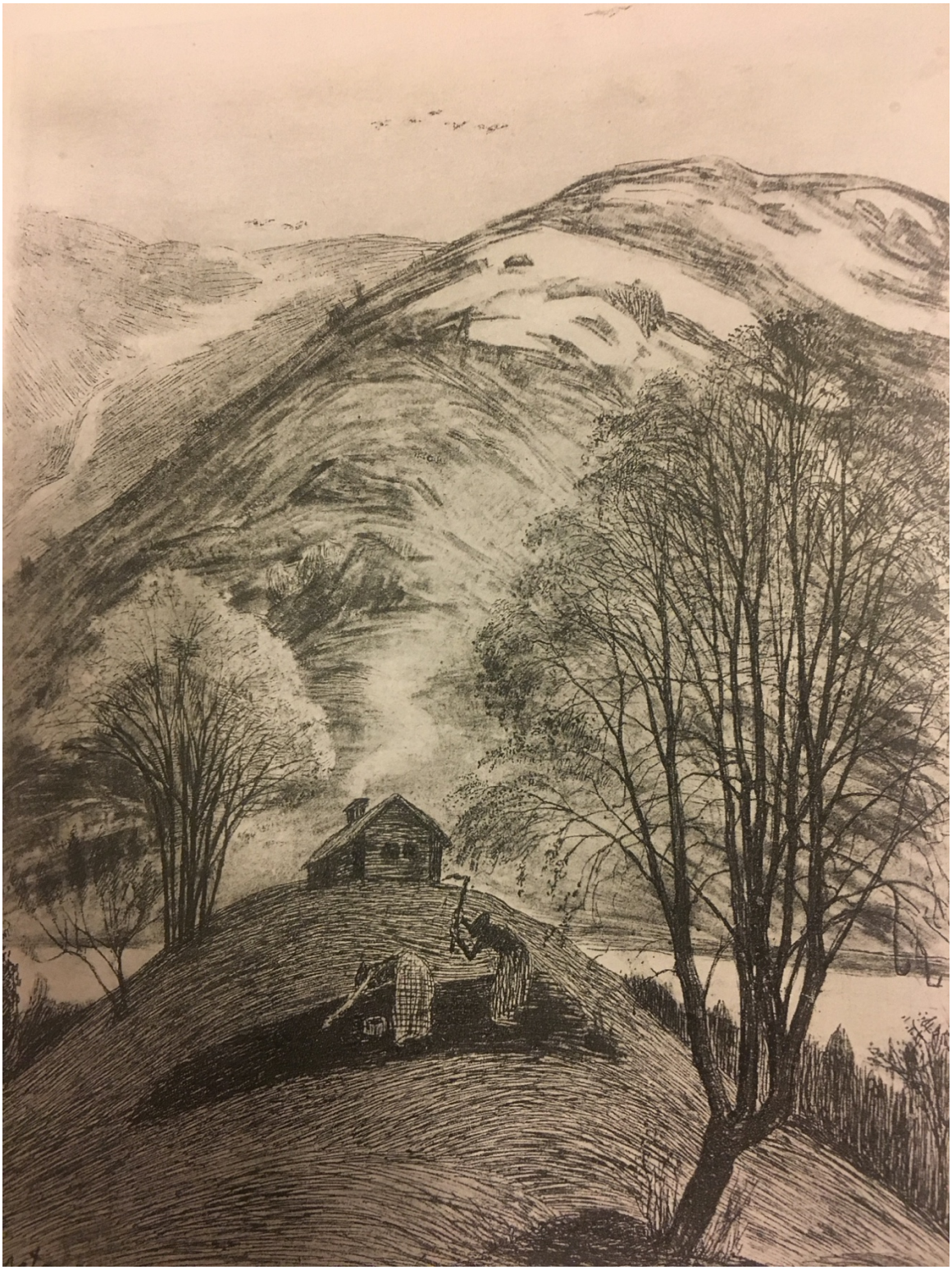
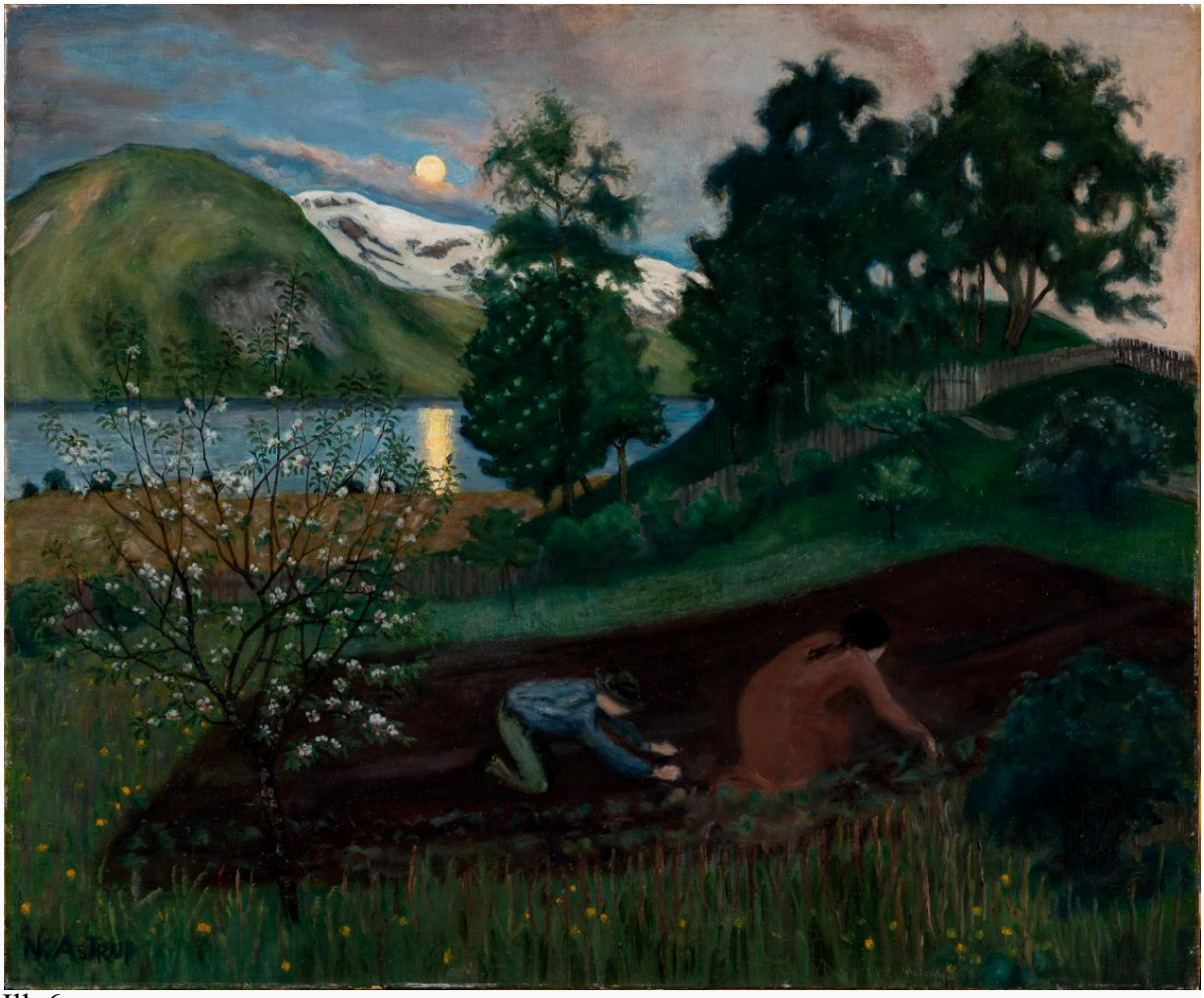


Ill. 5

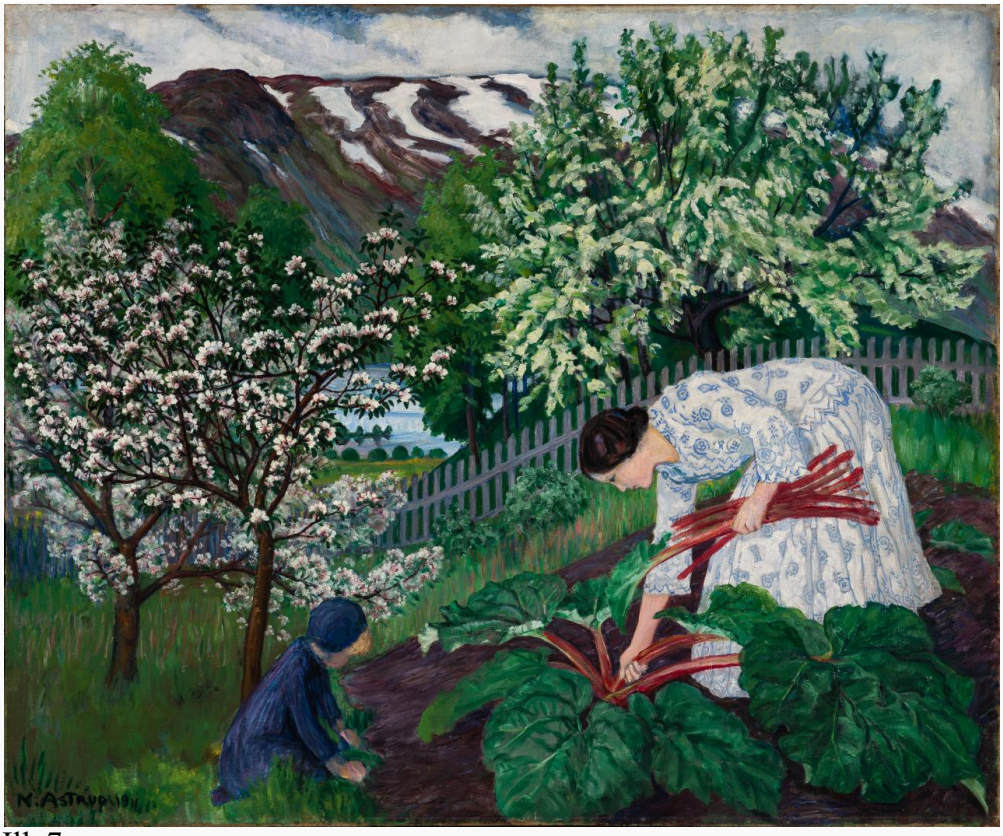
Nikolai Astrup, *Spring*, 1899.

Etching on paper, 17 x 13 cm

Private Collection

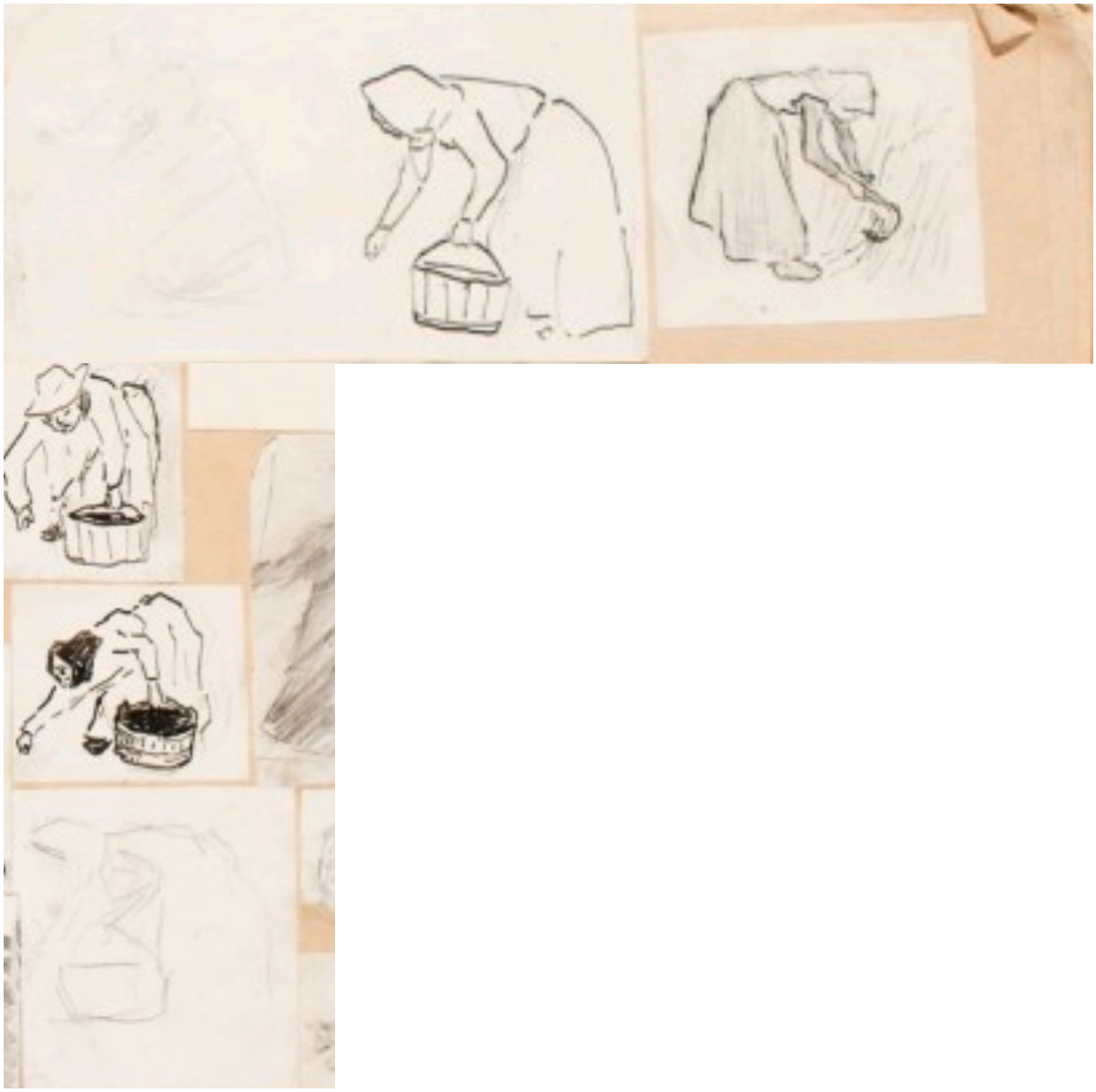


Ill. 6
Nikolai Astrup, *Spring Night in the Garden*, 1909
Oil on canvas, 105 x 86 cm

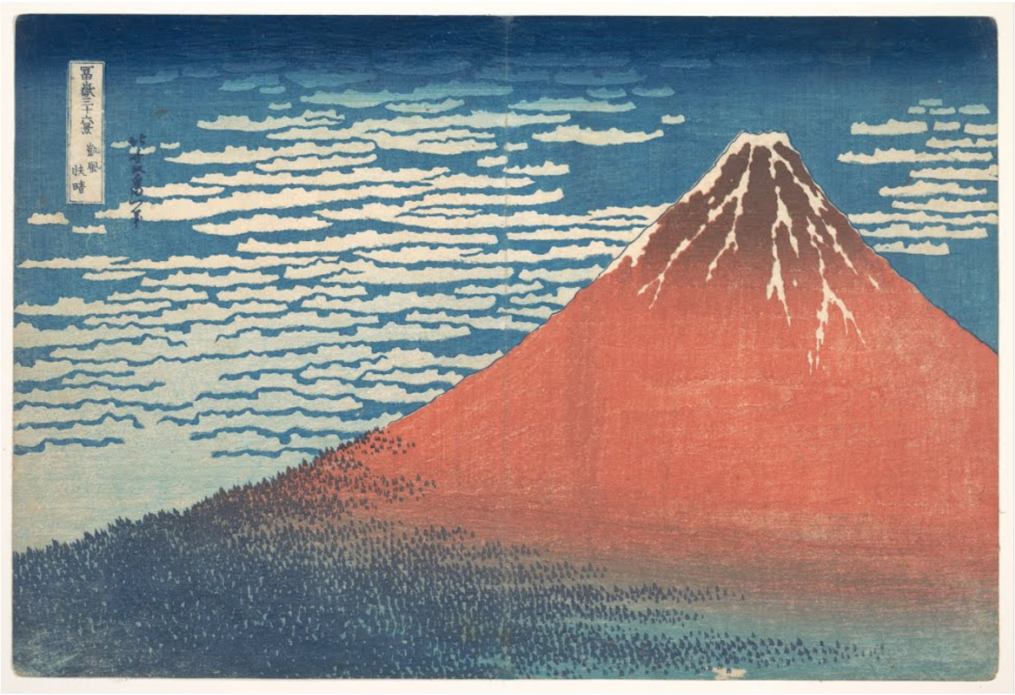


Ill. 7
Nikolai Astrup, *Rhubarb*, 1911-1912.
Oil on canvas, 112 x 93 cm

Ill. 8
Nikolai Astrup, *Foxgloves*, ca. 1920.
Oil on canvass, 99 x 77 cm



Ill. 9
Nikolai Astrup, untitled childhood sketches, date unknown



Ill. 10
Katsuhika Hokusai, *Red Fuji* from *36 views of Mount Fuji*, (1830-1832).
Color woodcut
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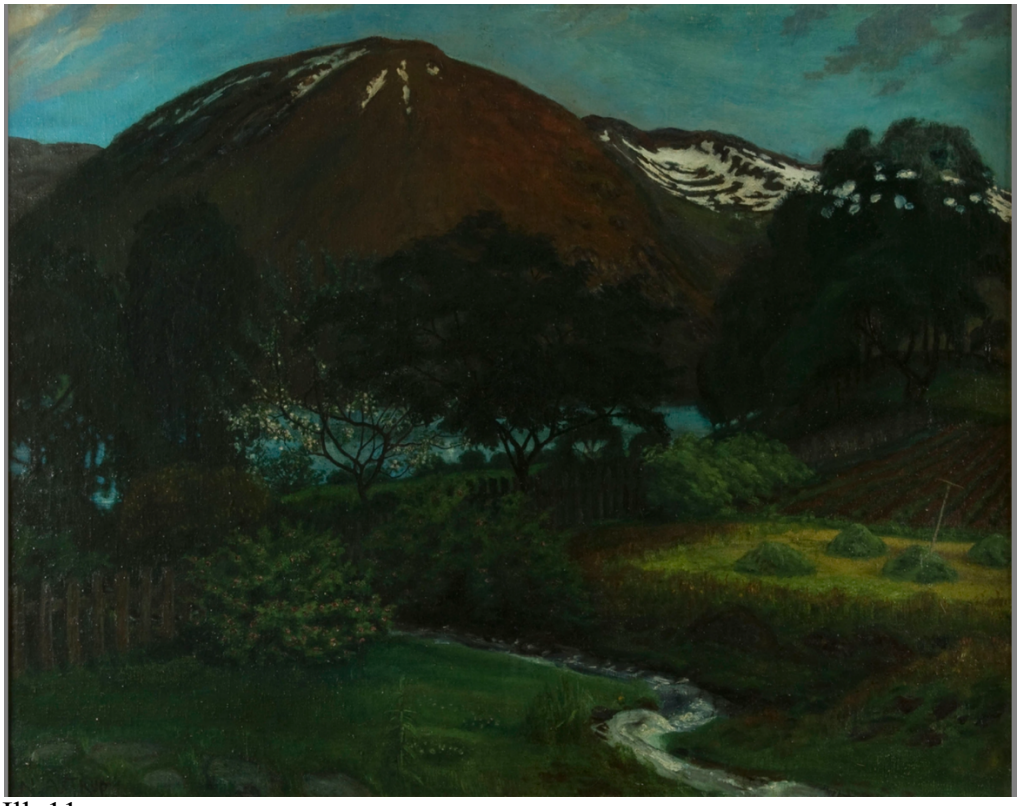

Ill. 11
Nikolai Astrup, *A Night in June in Jølster,* (1902).
Oil on canvas
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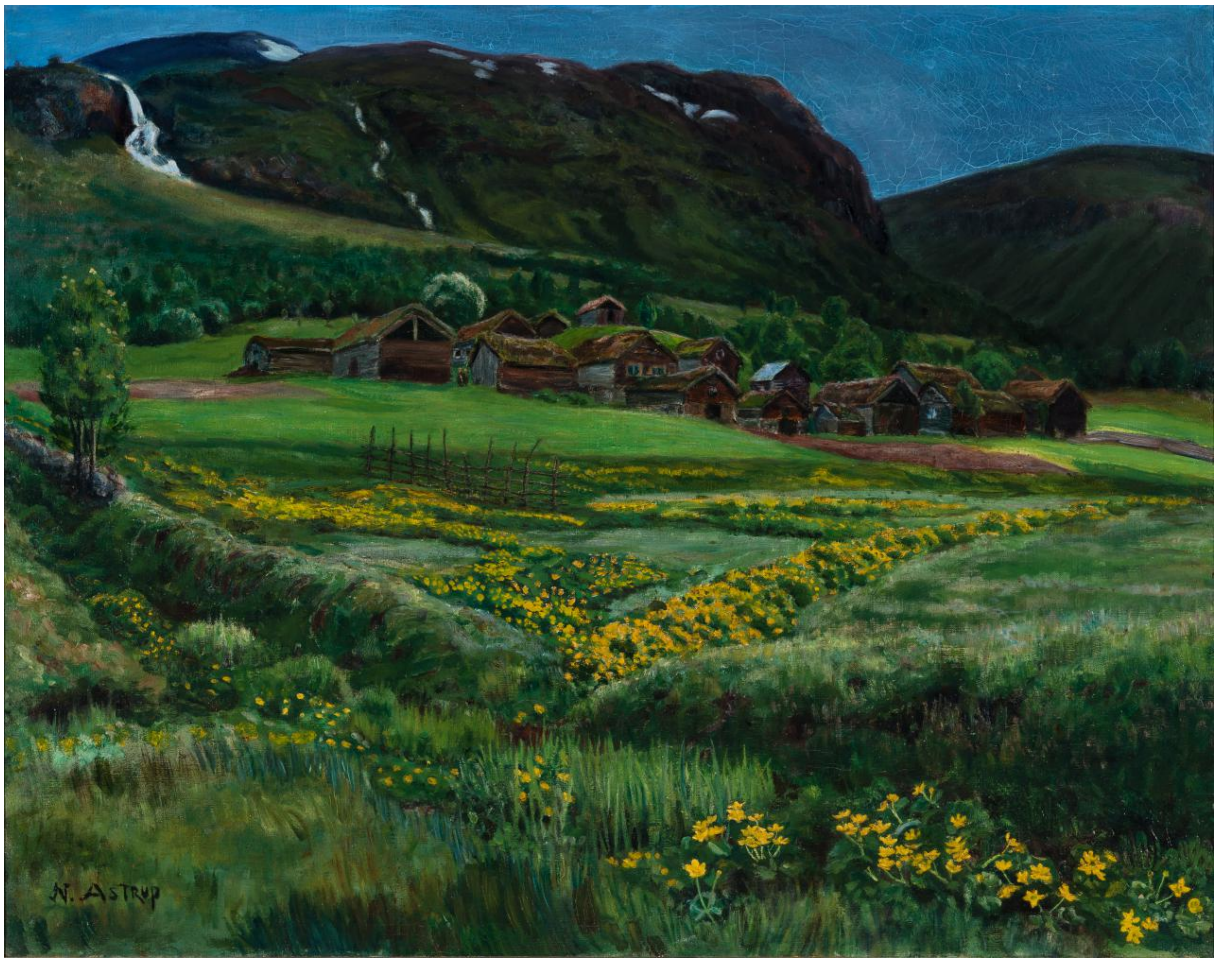

Ill. 12
Nikolai Astrup, *A Night in June and Old Farm Buildings*, 1908.
Oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm