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Fugue for six voices

These essays have been grouped under six headings, assigned according to their primary emphasis. The themes, however, are interrelated, weaving in and out of one another, and to show this is an aim of the book. Thus, many essays could have been assigned to a different section.

To take one example, Theme IV, Making: creating gardens and the evolution of styles, is about creating gardens and designing landscapes. But to make a garden or design a landscape, we express our sense of place (Theme III, Locating: the sense of place); our sense of place is a cultural construct, and that has a two-way, feedback loop to the way in which we read the environment (Theme II, Perceiving: the eyes and the mind). Our location and perception are dependent on our experience of the world and on the distinctive character of our habitat (Theme VI, Sharing and caring: ecological frameworks). Cultural constraints are a way of relating to the environment, and affect our behaviour towards it (Theme V, Analysing: ideologies and attitudes). Finally, we communicate our thinking about all of the above in words (Theme I, Talking: the language of landscape).

The words, moreover, are slippery: at times they carry conflicting meanings (see Chapter 1, The nature of Nature). Some of these conflicts are so basic that we cannot eliminate them, and the best we can do is to be aware of them. There is one such conflict in the example I have just given. 'Landscape' is a way of looking at a terrain: it is a perceptual term, not an objective reality. If you doubt this, try asking a farmer and a city bank manager to describe the same paddock – the 'same' landscape will turn out to be very different. The landscapes of this book are my way of looking, hence the autobiographical flavour, so that you have an idea of who is doing the looking. But if landscapes are a way of looking, then we cannot design landscapes. No one else can design how I see. Yet we cannot avoid such phrases for long. We constantly intervene in the 'natural' environment (that is our nature). The ways in which we do so, and the ways in which we read the outcome are mediated by our cultural context, and this leads us to talk about design intentions and design outcomes as 'landscapes'. Language is messy, but it is the best we've got.

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The essays assembled here have been written over a span of more than thirty years. They are ordered by theme rather than by the time of writing, but the year is given for those interested in chronology. Whether they show a maturing, I can't tell. On the whole, I doubt it, except in a few special cases. They were written wearing different hats, for a variety of different journals, and thus for different audiences. They represent different phases of my working life: I wrote some pieces as a geologist, others as a historian and philosopher of science, then as an environmental scientist, and, at both ends of my career, as a member of an English department. Yet all through these changes, my main interests were in words, in the physical world and the forces that mould it, in caring for it, and in how it looks – a strong visual response has always been a part of my temperament. So the same themes have been resurfacing, although sometimes with different labels. And that, of course, has stimulated an interest in the labels.

Most of the essays have been lightly edited to link the themes and make the format and style more nearly consistent, although not to the point of eliminating the use of 'man' as a gender-neutral term in historically appropriate contexts. Two essays have been restructured and reduced in length (Chapter 9, Dreaming up a rainforest, and Chapter 13, Cuddlepie and other surrogates). Recent material has sometimes been added in the form of postscripts; about a third of the material is newly written for this book.

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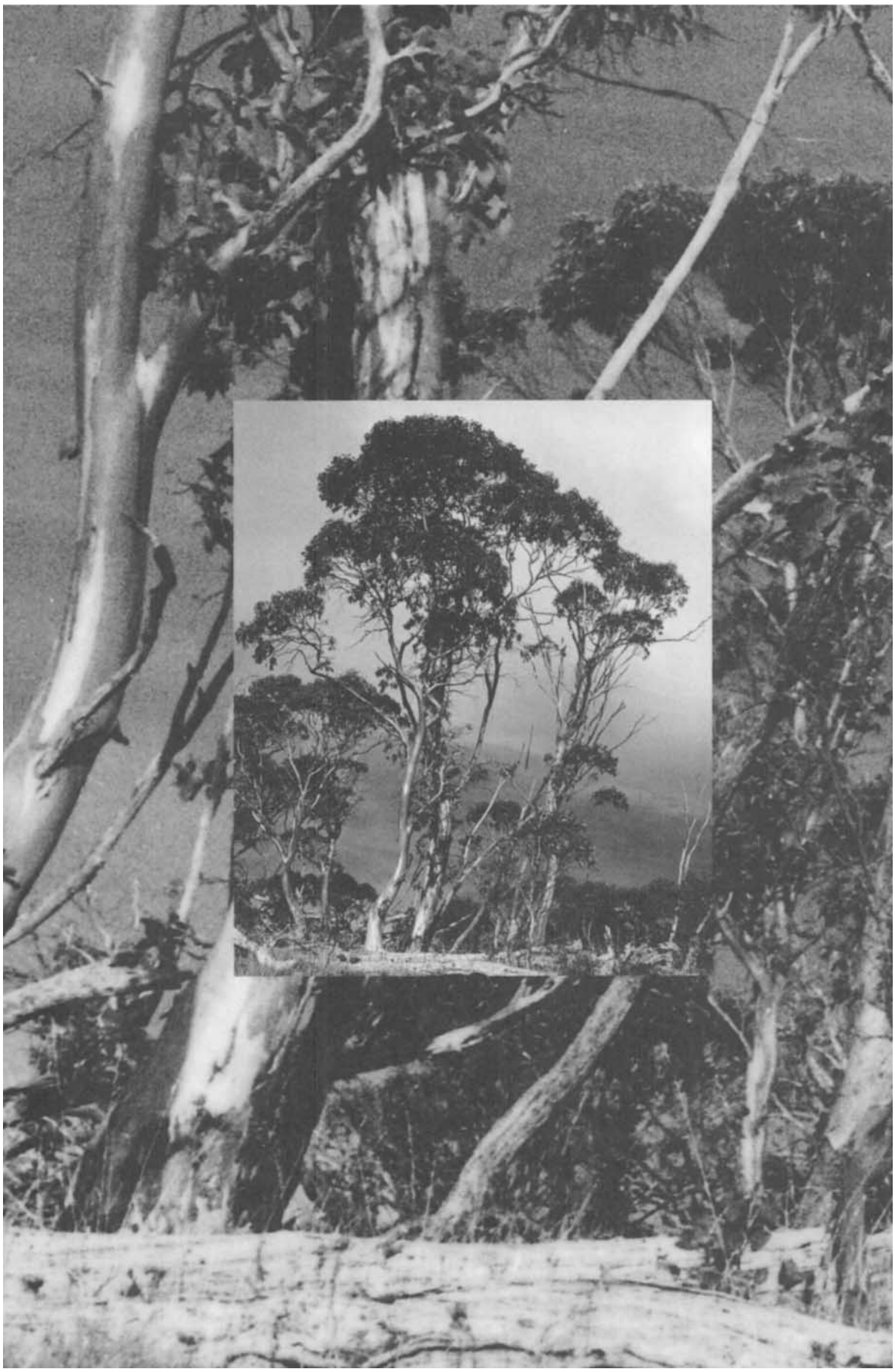

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THEME 1 Talking: the language of landscape

My mother, or your mother or your grandmother, once said: 'Don't put that penny in your mouth, you don't know who's touched it'. Peter Porter began a talk on language with the same phrase: 'Don't touch that word: you don't know where it's been'. Language carries the riches and the burdens of the past, and the language of landscape, like all language, is loaded. Chapter 1, The nature of Nature, struggles with some of the deeper ambiguities of our language, inescapable because the ambiguities are not merely linguistic: they reflect ancient ambiguities in our cultural attitudes to the world. Chapter 2, Words and weeds, addresses the burden directly.

My essay, 'Imaging the Mind' (Seddon, 1993), while not at first sight about landscape at all, extends the theme of these two chapters, and might have been titled 'Landscapes of the Mind'. Nothing gives a more interesting glimpse of our world view than the way we image the workings of our own minds. To describe someone who 'is not quite all there' as 'having kangaroos loose in the top paddock' illustrates the centrality of landscape imagery in our culture, contrasting nicely with the English 'bats in the belfry' which conjures up a very different world. Space forbade its inclusion in this book.

Chapter 3, Journeys through a landscape, allows the opportunity to look at some of the clichés about Australia, which dull rather than sharpen perception; it also looks at visual images rather than words as a means of communicating responses to the landscape – but we still come back to words when we try to compare our responses to the images.

Chapter 4, On *The Road to Botany Bay*, is a review of a dense but rewarding book by Paul Carter. It shows how often our accounts of the past falsify the reality of that experience; for example, the school-book accounts of the exploration of inland Australia by Eyre or Leichhardt, Giles or Warburton, show their routes by dotted lines across the map of the continent. But for them there was no map. Each day pushed into a void.

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Carter's book is relevant to the themes pursued in this book: for example, he contrasts the naming practices of Cook and Banks. He presents Banks' practice of giving a name to a plant as a way of disposing of it – once named, it is 'known to science', ordered and categorised in the Linnaean system, which is, of course, European in origin. The plant is then owned and no longer foreign. He presents Cook's naming, by contrast, as a form of discovery, recognition of the new, of the richness and diversity of experience. I have reservations about the details of the examples, but not about the contrast they illustrate, or Carter's skill in making the two men carry with them on their long journey an echo of one of the great philosophical debates of their century, that between the realists and the idealists. Thus the cultural currents of their Europe are felt beyond the furthest shores of the known world, and moderate their responses to a new world that lay well outside the experience of that culture.

All the essays in Theme I are fairly recent, the oldest being Chapter 5, A Snowy River reader, which describes the structural and linguistic problems I met in trying to write an environmental history of the Snowy. In time, the history was written, and it was published in 1995 as *Searching for the Snowy: An Environmental History*, in which I tried to get at the river from every angle; yet I added a footnote to the invitation to the launching of the book: 'I still haven't found it, and if anyone has seen it, please let me know. A sketch map might help'. Of all the responses to the river, the most expressive I came across was that of the tough canoeists: behind their sparse, dry, laconic speech looms the actual presence of the river. You can almost hear its muted thunder in the gaps between the words.

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1 The nature of Nature*

How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way,
Is an immense World of Delight, clos'd by your senses five?
(William Blake, 1793)

The range of meanings of 'Nature'

The problems in understanding how we ascribe meaning to a key word like 'Nature' are deeply embedded in our cultural history – from which, of course, the word derives its complex meanings, as with all words. We might begin with a warm-up exercise familiar to philosophers. What are the antonyms to Nature and the natural? With what is it in contrast? The major pairs are as follows: the natural and the supernatural (or the Divine); the natural and the unnatural; the natural and the human (as in Man and the Biosphere, or Man and the Environment, so that Nature becomes everything that is Not-Man); and the natural and the artificial. Wool is a natural fibre, nylon is an artificial one, although both are man-mediated. The problem is even more obvious when we think of the advertising campaign claiming that sugar is a natural food, and all those television advertisements showing waving fields of golden sunflowers, or whatever, about to be processed into margarine. Logically, butter and margarine are equally synthetic or equally natural, but the difference in our feelings about the two shows clearly that we are already beyond the bounds of logic.

The first of the 'meaning pairs' (the Natural–the Supernatural) has first place in the history of Western thought and is still very powerful, but it is no longer the primary contrast. The view that Nature was inferior to Super Nature, the Supernatural, the Divine world, co-existed with its opposite, that Nature itself is Divine, through most of the Middle Ages and beyond, while the view that Nature is an expression of Divine creative power has persisted to the present day. Contempt for the natural world – the *contemptus mundi* – was exemplified by the lives of the saints; in its extreme form, it denied value to the natural world, to the self, and to all pleasure, especially sexual pleasure.

*First published as 'The Nature of Nature', *Westerly*, no. 4, 1991, pp. 7–14.

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The Divinity of Nature

However, the *contemptus mundi* was never uncontested. Since God was Creator, and the Perfect Being, then his creation might be seen as perfect, and the natural world, it might be argued, as fit, not for contemptuous dismissal, but for study and delight. These opposites were to an extent reconciled by the concept of the 'Great Chain of Being'. 'Everything, or nearly everything, that existed was thought of as necessarily existing, but as graded in value. The further away from God, the lower the value' (Brewer, 1972, p. 28). Nature constituted an artistic order. Sir Thomas Browne put it splendidly in 1642: '*Natura nihil agit frustra* [Nature does nothing in vain] is the only indisputable axiom in philosophy; there are no grotesques in nature, nor any thing framed to fill up empty cantons and unnecessary spaces' (Browne, 1972, p. 16). His reasons, however, are not ours: Nature does nothing in vain because it fulfils God's purposes, which are wholly focused on Man. God made the ants to teach us industry and thrift, the bees to teach us the principles of social order. That is what they are for.

That Nature partakes of the Divine is a component of many non-Judeo-Christian theologies, especially in Asia, and of the animistic world view of Australian Aborigines and other groups, and to the extent that we see God revealing himself through Nature, it may also be a component of Christian theology.

These are deep waters, but before we strike out for the shore we should note that the romanticisation of Nature as partaking of Divinity is a major component of popular culture today – it is very common. It is expressed in phrases such as 'interfering with Nature' (which is supposed to be a bad thing to do) or 'Design with Nature' (which is supposed to be a good thing to do); and, of course, in the more basic and long-lived phrases such as 'Mother Nature' and 'Nature knows best', beloved of the homoeopaths. The trouble with all these phrases is not that they are wrong, but that they are fuzzy-minded. They all express a grain of wisdom, but a wisdom that is applicable in some situations, and not in others. As with all slogans, they do not carry with them any instructions that indicate when they should be used – criteria of application and misapplication. Consider 'Nature knows best' (presumably because Mother knows best). As a general warning against interventionist medicos who have an inbuilt tendency to overtreat, this is wise. As advice to parents of a child with acute appendicitis, it is dangerous folly. Or consider 'Design with Nature'. As general advice to a society that has so often turned to engineering and technological solutions to biological and social problems, this is again wise advice. But there are just as many circumstances in which Nature is inimical to our purposes, and we therefore design against her (if one cares for this turn of phrase, which I don't).

Another version of Nature as partaking of the Divine was a component of the Romantic Revival. Wordsworth is full of it, although his version of Nature takes meaning largely from his detestation – in most moods – of London, 'The Great Wen', as Cobbett called it, a cancerous growth. For Wordsworth, Nature included agricultural landscapes, country folk and children. He did not draw our current distinction between 'natural' and 'cultural' landscapes: his primary distinction was between the natural and the urban. In the United States, Walt Whitman shared somewhat similar sentiments, but the Divinity of Nature is

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perhaps most fully expressed by the National Parks movement and the language of John Muir and some early members of the Sierra Club. The mood is caught by the superb photographs of J. B. Jackson and, later, Ansell Adams. As David Lowenthal, one of our most subtle cultural-historical geographers has pointed out, Americans were acutely conscious in the nineteenth century that their continent lacked the great cathedrals and other architectural treasures of Europe, so they sanctified their natural monuments instead: the Grand Canyon, Old Faithful, Muir Woods and Yosemite were older and grander expressions of the sublime than anything Europe could show. We have constructed an 'Ayers Rock' cult in the same vein.

Nature as the Enemy

The view that Nature is Divine or Holy co-existed with and was in part reaction to its opposite: the view that Nature is the Enemy. This has always been a part of the popular culture, with good reason, because ordinary people have always been the most vulnerable to the vagaries of natural forces. It has had strong expression in the high culture in periodic mode, like Halley's Comet. The two moods co-exist, but one is now in the ascendant, then the other, depending on a whole range of associated shifts in cultural mood (see Blainey, 1988). Nature as the Enemy is expressed in phrases like 'Taming Nature' (of which we have done a good deal in Australia), or 'harnessing' a natural resource, such as the Snowy River, or the wind, or the tides, which are like a wild horse before we introduce the bit. The popular culture is rich in such phrases, and the gardening columns are full of them: 'untidy' trees for example, or trees that have a 'poor habit', usually said of poor old *Eucalyptus macrocarpa*, and pruning to retain 'a good form' and so on. All of these suggest that Nature at the very least is undisciplined, and much in need of our control.

This view lies deep, and can lead to striking inconsistencies. I discovered one in myself recently. I regard myself as ecologically enlightened, but I still don't like to see dead wood on trees in my garden, and I hate to see my *Eucalyptus erythrocorys* disfigured with lerp, small sucking insects of the family Psyllidae. Yet I love birds. A young ecologist a few weeks ago pointed out that lerp are good: their sugary secretions bring insects and the insects bring the birds. So I am learning to love lerp. After all, it's 'natural'.

The natural and the unnatural

However, the antonym pairs that seem to me to underwrite most current discourse using the word 'Nature' are natural–unnatural and 'the natural' and 'the human', in which Nature is Not-Man. The idea of the 'unnatural' has been around for a long time, and although it grades into the 'Nature knows best' nexus of meanings, it usually carries specifically moral overtones, as in 'Sodomy is an unnatural practice'. That not many people use that expression today does not mean that the concept of the 'unnatural' has disappeared, but rather that its range of application has changed. Some will now say, for example, that celibacy is unnatural, or that it is not natural for a young girl to lock herself away in her room reading books all day, or whatever. The point, of course, is that what we consider to be 'natural' and 'unnatural' changes through time. Our concept of Nature is a cultural product.

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Nature as the non-human world

This leaves me with what is today the most elementary meaning of Nature: the non-human world – it is in this sense that we talk of the conservation of nature, and understanding natural systems (a phrase I have used myself already). We could hardly communicate without some such distinction, since we could not talk about an undifferentiated cosmos, and one of the most basic distinctions is between the Us and the Not-Us. Yet there are some major problems with this distinction.

It may be surprising to learn that this sense of the words 'Nature' and 'the natural world' is of fairly recent origin. Michel Foucault claims that the landmark is the publication in 1657 by Jonston of a *Natural History of Quadrupeds*. He uses this date to mark the birth of natural history. Before that date, there were just histories; for example, a *History of Serpents and Dragons* by Aldrovandi, or *An Admirable History of Plants* by Muret. Up to and including Aldrovandi:

> History was the inextricable and completely unitary fabric of all that was visible of things and of the signs that had been discovered or lodged in them: to write the history of a plant or an animal was as much a matter of describing its elements or organs as of describing the resemblances that could be found in it, the virtues that it was thought to possess, the legends and stories with which it had been involved, its place in heraldry, the medicaments that were concocted from its substance, the foods it provided, what the ancients recorded of it, and what travellers might have said of it. (Foucault, 1970, p. 129)

The distinction that we make so easily between the knowledge derived from direct observation, that from reliable secondary sources, and that from sources that we regard as legendary or fabulous did not exist. Thus the essential difference between Jonston and Aldrovandi is not that Jonston knew more. In a sense he knew less. The difference lies in what he left out.

> The whole of animal semantics has disappeared, like a dead and useless limb. The words that had been interwoven in the very being of the beast have been unravelled and removed: and the living being, in its anatomy, its form, its habits, its birth and death, appears as though stripped naked. (Foucault, 1970, p. 129)

There has been a further change within our own times. Most of us now wish to see ourselves as a part of Nature, and this new sense of the interdependence of all living systems and their further dependence on physical cycles is a significant intellectual advance – but of course it undercuts the dualism of Man and the Biosphere or Man and Nature! Those signs on freeways, fairly common in Australia, that read 'Animals prohibited on this freeway' now seem comic, although we know that 'animals' means 'horses', and excludes ourselves.

Another aspect of this distinction is one of the enduring puzzles of philosophy, usually approached in the philosophy schools through an introduction to Locke, Berkeley and Hume. Locke was a champion of the newly emerging scientific methods, based on observation and measurement. He was called an empiricist and, later, a realist, in that he believed that there is a real world out there, which we can learn about scientifically, while all the learned, wordy, theoretical debates were a waste of time: we should burn the books. But Bishop Berkeley, labelled an 'idealist', asked an unanswerable question: How do we *know* that there is a real world out

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there? All we have are our perceptions. We can never know what corresponds to them 'out there'. There may be no 'out there'. Thus the distinction between Us and Not-Us is fallacious. Dr Johnson asserted the reality of the external world by kicking a table, thus splendidly missing the point, but nevertheless reaffirming the common sense of the ages. William Blake asks the Berkeleian question, in poetic form, with the epigraph with which I began (just as Plato had asked it long before either).

> *How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way,*
> *Is an immense World of Delight, clos'd by your senses five?*

The answer, of course, is that you don't, and can't, although as I watch a willy-wagtail on my lawn, I wonder. To me, he seems to be *playing* and enjoying it immensely. He is also catching insects by setting them up with his rapid movements, and perhaps courting an unseen mate. You can say that I am giving my perception an unwarranted reality in saying that he is 'there' at all, and that I am projecting my own feelings on to his behaviour to say also that he is playing, enjoying himself. But you can't prove that he is not there or not playing, and I can't prove that he is.

The battle between the idealist and the realist philosophers has not been settled, but the commonsense view that there is a world external to ourselves continues to be held by ordinary mortals. Just what that world might be, however, has become increasingly uncertain over the years. We now know, for instance, that very few animals share our binocular colour discriminating vision; many organisms quite literally see a different world.

Even our most basic perceptions, such as the judging of distances and relative size, which we take to be objective responses to the real world, are in fact conditioned by our prior experience. In a new environment, our prior experience may turn out to be irrelevant or even substantially misleading as, for example, experience in England led early settlers in Australia to 'read' tall trees as an indication of fertile soil. Generally, we see what we need to see or want to see. We have to learn to see in an unfamiliar setting; seeing is not like taking photographs. I still remember clearly how I learned to see zebra in tall grass in Africa. I was trekking on foot with Ian Player, the conservation conscience of South Africa, in the Black Umfolozi in northern Natal. I was told, or whispered to (for talking was out; there were lions and black rhino around) that we were near a herd of zebra. At first I couldn't see a thing. Then I saw a little flick, which was a twitch of the tail, and then the zebra came into focus. The South Africans I was with just saw zebra; if there was no consciousness of the two stages in the process of recognition for them, it was because those stages were so speeded up as to seem instantaneous.

Language structures our map of reality

Thus individuals perceive different worlds, and whole cultures do so on a greater scale. Whether or not we are realists, philosophically, we are driven towards relativism by discoveries in science, including physics and psychology, and increasingly also by linguistic theory. The old chestnut about the Eskimos having a dozen different words for 'snow' has been around for years, but there are many other examples. Aborigines from south-western Australia had about eight different words for 'burning-off' – burning the bush – since they did it in different ways, at different

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