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5-23-2013

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Recommended Citation
Vining, Joseph, "Meaning in the Natural World" (2013). *Law & Economics Working Papers.* Paper 75.
http://repository.law.umich.edu/law_econ_current/75

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# MEANING IN THE NATURAL WORLD

Joseph Vining

J. B. White devoted much of his work to the rescue of meaning in language, art, and the human world. The first book he published after his seminal *Legal Imagination* was *When Words Lose Their Meaning. The Edge of Meaning* appeared as he was entering his fourth decade of teaching. Pick up the last of his books on law and life, *Living Speech*, and you find chapters headed 'Living Speech and the Mind Behind It', 'The Desire for Meaning', 'Human Dignity and the Claim of Meaning'. What he did – against the grain of twentieth-century thought – was inspired and inspiring, and is still.

Is there meaning in nature and natural objects that we do not put there? Are they a source of meaning for the modern mind, despite standard teaching that separates the human world from the natural world, or that incorporates the human into a natural world in which there is no meaning?

'The painting', White says in the first paragraph of *The Edge of Meaning*, 'has much of its life and meaning in the world beyond words, in the world of color and form and texture, the world of sensation and vision. Something similar could be said about music as well – it is its own world, not reducible to language – and about the physical world of nature too: What in the end can one say about a foggy morning on a rocky coast; the bright blue flowers on the edge of a midwestern country road; the stone smoothed by the waters of a river into a shape with form and balance?'



Published by University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository, 2013

Life and meaning may dwell in a world beyond words, in experience of visual art and music and also in experience of 'physical nature'. This essay will pick up the last of these, physical nature, and pursue the thought through what I will call the problem of the objet trouvé.

The term 'objet trouvé', the 'found object', is from the modern history of self-conscious art, but what it describes can be seen to extend far beyond. An objet trouvé is distinguished in French from the 'objet d'art' on one side and the artisanal and decorative 'objet de vertu' on the other. Many of us have an objet trouvé tucked away somewhere. I go into a friend's office and see on his desk a stone, pink granite, etched with lines that remind me of a tree. I ask him why he likes it. 'I don't know, I just do', he says. He had picked it up on the lakeshore and kept it ever since. On the corner of my desk is a stone that caught my eye on a beach by the Bay of Fundy, as that 'stone smoothed by the waters of a river into a shape with form and balance' caught White's eye. Mine has an oval shape, when it is wet it is a handsome reddish brown, and there are concentric ellipses or ovals etched on it. When my eye happens to pick it out again on my desk I don't think just of the Bay of Fundy.

Objets trouvés are not all tucked away. You see them on fireplace mantels. You can hardly climb a flight of stairs in a California beach house without looking at a piece of driftwood set at the top. They mimic art, they come so close to art that the line between the found object picked up on the beach and art itself may quiver in our minds. Objets trouvés appear in museums. The 'St Edmund' in Kettle's Yard Museum at Cambridge University is a piece of burnt willow picked up beside the river Cam.[1] The Richard Rosenblum Collection of Chinese

[1] Jim Ede, *A Way of Life: Kettle's Yard* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 167. ('John Catto found this extraordinary bit of a burnt willow tree beside the Cam. He called it "St

Scholars' Rocks toured museums in the United States and Europe in the late 1990s. The descriptions of the rocks in the catalog published by the Harvard University Art Museums are not different from descriptions of works of art, thoughtfully and extensively examining every aspect and detail of the pieces.[2]

At home or in a museum these objects are called 'found' rather than 'presented' or 'given' or 'made', which would imply some one or more of us making, presenting, or giving. They are objects that are chosen and isolated out for special attention from the innumerable objects our attention flickers over in the course of a lifetime.

Many may also have on a stand a chambered nautilus cut in half. This I think is not the same. Art may mimic the chambered nautilus – using for instance the golden section traced in its curves – but the objet trouvé mimics art. There is a pull and a tug in the objet trouvé the eye lights upon. A landscape etched on a rock that you reach down and pick up is an objet trouvé pointing to the painted landscape. The painted landscape will be hung over the mantel, and

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Edmund". Thanks to his perception and generosity in giving it to Kettle's Yard I am able to introduce this formidable presence into this book. I should think it is very seldom that so remarkable a "natural object" has been preserved'.); 'New Light on Kettle's Yard', *Cambridge University Newsletter*, March/April 1995, 3 ('[N]ine of today's leading artists have been invited to make new work in the house in response to Kettle's Yard and its collection. … David Nash has made a sculpture inspired by a charred willow branch which Jim Ede adopted and christened "St Edmund" '.)

[2] Robert D. Mowry *et al.*, *Worlds Within Worlds: The Richard Rosenblum Collection of Chinese Scholars' Rocks* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Art Museums, 1997).

perhaps have a ceiling light directed on it. The etched rock will be on the mantel or a shelf, and the object of nature mimicking nothing will be on a separate shelf. A dog also in the room, I should say, will be on a mat on the floor and would not be mistaken for either a thing of nature or a thing of art.

What then is the problem of the objet trouvé? Briefly stated, it is that the pathetic fallacy may not entirely be a fallacy. The thing of nature is as different from the work of art as nature is from the human mind and heart – nature as we now understand and investigate it; yet in the end, the thing made by us and at least some things made by nature are difficult to distinguish from one another. Each time we pick up and keep a stone there is a prodding to wonder whether deep within we must be thinking of nature more as we think of ourselves.

The problem of the objet trouvé may also encompass much of what judges and lawyers do in law and academic law. While they do not work with objects as artists do, they certainly work with texts framed and put on pedestals, arguing about them and interpreting or translating them. Judges invoke them as reasons and justifications for their most awful actions, ripping a baby from a mother's arms and giving it to someone else, putting someone to death, impoverishing someone, destroying someone's lifework. For any such action they and we must say they have authority, and the authority for it is found ultimately in a reading of such texts. There is no clear line between objects that can be framed or put on pedestals, and texts. If you were walking along the beach and you watched a wave pass over pebbles and move them about and withdraw, and you saw left there the words 'You are loved' traced out in pebbles, you might think of walling off that spot, cutting it out and lifting it gingerly into a box, and bringing it home to contemplate. Word shapes that appear in a piece of legislation and that are the outcome of the

processes of legislation, and judicial or administrative opinions that are the outcome of bureaucratic processes, may not be very different. We return to such texts at the end.

In fact whenever anything, a text, a reified 'idea', a method, an attitude, an arrangement, is viewed at the start not as an expression of mind but as the product of 'socio-cultural forces' and as no more that the product of such forces, it presents something of the problem of the objet trouvé. Across the humanities, including art history and intellectual history, students can face the question of what we might call the 'substantive blankness' of their objects of study. But lawyers facing the same question must resolve it in some way, or try to put it out of mind, as others are not required to do.

How often have you like me lain on your back studying the patterns of the branches of a tree against the sky? Absorbed in these branches, following their tracings and shapes like lines in music, are you reading them, translating them, interpreting them as you might interpret another's painting of them? You can read, translate for yourself, interpret a phrase of Mozart's that is wonderfully reproduced or mimicked by note sequences from the wind chimes on your porch on a summer afternoon; but do you read, translate for yourself, or interpret the note sequences that continue to emerge afterwards, the phrases of the wind chimes themselves?

On the question of trees, in his late-nineteenth century autobiography John Ruskin describes his coming at age twenty-three to his own answer, which was not 'no', but 'yes':

> I found myself lying on the bank of a cart-road in the sand, with no prospect whatever but that small aspen tree against the blue sky. Languidly, but not idly, I began to draw it; and as I drew, the languor passed away: the beautiful lines insisted on being traced, –

> without weariness. More and more beautiful they became, as each rose out of the rest, and took its place in the air. With wonder increasing every instant, I saw that they 'composed' themselves by finer laws than any known of men. At last the tree was there, and everything I had thought about trees, nowhere.[3]

What is taught implicitly or explicitly in most schools today, and becomes the first instinct of many sensitive and sensible people, is that the pattern of a tree's branches, or the driftwood on the stairs, the piece of burnt willow called the St Edmund, my Bay of Fundy stone, the Chinese scholar's rock, White's stone smoothed into a shape with form and balance, cannot any of them be read closely. One aspect of it here cannot be looked at in relation to another there, this telling detail against that telling detail and all against the whole, the question *why* always hovering in the background, why is this done in just this way and why does just this way move me so? In the case of the wholly natural objet trouvé many might think today that there is no question *why* there is a graceful curve or a juxtaposition of detail. There is only the question *how*, how the curve or juxtaposition came to be. The question *how* is a question of process and of history, which does not reach the question *why* that we continue to push and push when we read a work of art or a text for its meaning, or read a person, or read our own lives. And if, when you lie staring up beneath a tree, you do bring your meaning to the shapes, the tracings, the marks, the contrasts of light and shade, and do not take meaning from them because you feel sure you

[3] John Ruskin, *Praeterita: Outlines of Scenes and Thoughts Perhaps Worthy of Memory in My Past Life,* with an Introduction by Kenneth Clark (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1949), pp. 284–85.

know there was no meaning put in them in their making and so there is none there to be taken, then you are not interpreting them in saying what you may go on to say about them to someone or to yourself. You are using them as you might use any other device to say what you are otherwise moved to say.

But does any of us actually know that there was no meaning put in them to take? What we are trying to understand is part of the common experience of meaning in the various situations where we do have the experience. This common teaching depends upon a fundamental difference between meaning coming from within and meaning coming from without. So often the experience of meaning is experience of an intimation, which faint or strong cannot be defined enough to draw lines around it and speak of its being either inside or outside. If the meaning we experience in the presence of a natural object is something new, a discovery, or if it seems not new but richer or deeper than what we had before, why would we have to say that what revealed it to us was only a meaningless trigger, insignificant in itself? How could we be so sure that the meaning we sense, new or richer or deeper, was 'already there' in us, created by us rather than 'half-created', if it is so connected in time, place, sound, and sight to what we are arrested by and drawn to contemplate?

Return to the wind chimes on the porch imitating Mozart, and imagine listening to Arvo Pärt's contemporary *Te Deum* for chorus, orchestra, prepared piano, and wind harp. Pärt uses a wind harp, he says,

> designed and built by a Norwegian master craftsman on principles similar to those of the Greek Aeolian harp. Its strings are set in motion by the breath of the wind. … it's as if the harp is waiting

> for the wind's caress. A wonderful tape was created that I have employed as a pedal point in the *Te Deum*; …[4]

The winds heard through the harp are, in the *Te Deum,* an objet trouvé because the tape of the sounds they made is selected, a 'wonderful tape'. The tape was 'created', but I doubt that Pärt thought of himself as creator. The ultimate source was 'the wind's caress', for which the harp was as if 'waiting'.

Pärt also says of the liturgical text of the *Te Deum*, 'To me, it is like the panorama of a mountain range in its constant stillness. The Swiss painter Martin Ruff once told me that in clear weather he could distinguish more than twenty shades of blue; I immediately began to "hear" these "blue" mountains'.[5] Pärt refers to the 'spirit' of the listener to his music as a 'prism' that can make the colors appear. Some see his music as a 'form of prayer'. Such discourse, using the words 'prayer' and 'spirit', is perhaps intentionally incompatible with acceptance of the understanding of the nature of the natural world now taught to us when we are young. The artist here has no knowledge, is sure that he does not know, that you do not take meaning from an objet trouvé because there was no meaning put into it in its making.

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[4] University Musical Society, 'The Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir *and the* Tallinn Chamber Orchestra Program' (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 5 November 1995), 25; Stuart Greenbaum, 'Arvo Pärt's *Te Deum:* A Compositional Watershed,' Ph. D. thesis (Faculty of Music, University of Melbourne, 1999), 92–93, citing Harlow Robinson, 'Arvo Pärt and Medieval Modernism', *Stagebill* (New York, Lincoln Center, 1995), 20C.

[5] Ibid.

We may wonder whether the way we work to understand visual art or music or written texts, our approach to them or our 'method' as professionals say, is different from our approach to an objet trouvé. Instinct might tell us a painting or a sculpture must have flaws, but that an objet trouvé cannot have flaws, or, perversely, is nothing but flaws. When we look long at the painting or sculpture, we attempt to understand and respond to each part of it, each detail meaningful and related in meaning to every other. The assumption behind looking long is that there is mind, conscious, semi-conscious, and unconscious, behind the whole and all its parts offered to be visually read. But if a detail does not fit what we take from that mind's expression, no matter how hard we work to mold the 'what' to connect the detail, we can treat it as a flaw and read it away. We can even think that the maker would have rued it and wanted it read away. The sculptor of the Venus de Milo, if with us today, might pause before replacing the sculpture's arms that its history took from it to give us the iconic form reproduced throughout the Western world.[6]

Can an unaltered stone focused upon by another and picked up and displayed and preserved – White's stone that had form and balance – be closely read in the same way, with details set aside as insignificant if they do not fit what one finally takes from it? There is mind, White's mind, in the selection of that natural object. There are parts or forms or aspects that struck his conscious or unconscious attention and led him to pick it out from all the other stones that he had seen on the way that brought him to it. You would not be foolish to seek to know what those aspects were, what White found alive to him, meaningful, beautiful. But even with

[6] Alain Pasquier, *La Vénus de Milo et les Aphrodites du Louvre* (Paris, Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1985), pp. 30–41 (drawings of possible placings of the lost arms).

the selector present, the best evidence of what they are is the thing itself, which is before you. One cannot help looking at it for oneself, and White would want you to. You would not be foolish in engaging in the same exercise that you would with a painting or sculpture or piece of writing before you, as if the stone were a painting, sculpture, or writing that its makers had made and remade many times before finally one day selecting what was being presented to them by themselves, as good enough despite its meaningless detail. Not foolish, that is, except for certain knowledge that every object presented by inanimate nature cannot have meaning.

We know too that after working with an objet trouvé other than our own, it does not shatter the world we experience together, and tell each other about, to accept that it can strike individuals in different ways or not at all. The same is true of an objet d'art.

The most common attention to an objet trouvé, I think, is love of a landscape, which is an object though it must remain where it is found. Love is not too strong a word for the connection. It can be seen across times, cultures, and positions in life. Neither the experience itself nor its inspiration to art, that in turn invites dwelling upon and discussion, can be dismissed by invoking the pathetic fallacy. There are the imperatives of one's own experience when one has it, and there is the witness of so many sane and reflective people. There is some current effort to dismiss it through the extension of evolutionary explanations to 'evolutionary aesthetics', the 'beauty' and 'meaning' of a landscape resolved for example into a neural linkage between a particular retinal image and a prehistoric memory of prospective safety or good things to eat. This is

speculative play, playing with the premises of a discipline based, interestingly, on the insights of one who in the end found landscape his only aesthetic experience.[7]

A linkage of a recognizable kind is succinctly put, perhaps too strongly for some, by the painter narrator of Reynolds Price's *The Tongues of Angels* – [8]

> What led me to the long horizontal west range was my growing sense that the line itself was a calligraphed sentence. Those hazy hard peaks on a harder blue sky. It was some coded combination of meanings that, if ever deciphered, would free mankind and forever reward us. I had few illusions of cracking the code. But as late as that summer, I did believe that if I could transfer the line to canvas and set all patient watchers to work on the tasks of translation, what grace might I not set loose in the world?

Landscape presses the problem of the objet trouvé one step further. A landscape does not come framed. The drawing does, the oil, the photograph, but not the landscape itself. The

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[7] Charles Darwin, *Autobiography* (1887) (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959), pp. 138, 139. ('I retain some taste for fine scenery, but it does not cause me the exquisite delight which it formerly did. ... My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive.')

[8] Reynolds Price, *The Tongues of Angels* (New York, Ballantine Books, 1991), p. 42.

composition of the rock, the water, and the light in the leaves comes suddenly as a gift when we are moving, in space and, of course, through time.

We move up a valley, and look back. *There* is what grips us − but *here* it is that we are gripped. We move across a valley, emerge into an opening between two trees, and there it is, the composition. Five hundred yards before it would not have been the same, five hundred yards after it would not have been the same, and this gap in the forest is what allows us to see it.

The blue mountains that a composer hears or the line traced by peaks against a blue sky that a painter sees can be found by any one of us, but only if our paths are like theirs. To the eye of any one of us nature constantly changes as we move through it. Step to the left, step to the right, and it is different. Hence a dynamic element, a dimension of time, is added to the nature of the gift we wonder about when we are enthralled or see another sane and sensitive person enthralled by juxtapositions, lines, curves, foregrounds, lights.

Think of any example of landscape's pull on you or another. Here is a small example, an excerpt from an early attempt to capture it, *Grongar Hill,* interesting because of the steady popularity of these rhymed lines, in anthologies since 1727:

Grongar Hill invites my song,
Draw the landskip bright and strong;

…

Now I gain the mountains's brow;
What a landskip lies below!

…

See on the mountain's southern side,

Where the prospect opens wide,

Where the evening gilds the tide;

How close and small the hedges lie!

What streaks of meadow cross the eye![9]

All this is perspective's gift.

The dangerous question is how much the gift of perspective is 'merely a matter of chance'. The question is of course companion to the question how much the form upon which the eye dwells from its vantage point is itself a matter of chance. How much (can the thought be even entertained?) is there a guiding of the personal and human journey to that point, a setting of that line of sight from that point to that set of forms seen so only from that point in wait for the eye to come to that point? You cannot entertain the thought that something dwells in or speaks from the composition and the form before the eye, and ignore the fact that the form appears as it does because of your place and perspective.

Return now to the 'You are loved' in pebbles left on the beach by a wave and the problems presented by texts, including legal texts, which are not expressions of an individual or joint author. Can texts that are the result of legislative and bureaucratic processes be read

[9] *The Poetical Works of John Dyer* (Edinburgh, Apollo Press, 1779) (unabridged facsimile, Adamant Media Corporation, 2006), pp. 13, 14, 17, lines 13–14, 41, 42, 114–18. For a tribute to it, see William Wordsworth, *To the Poet, John Dyer* in *The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth* (Ware, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994), p. 301 ('Yet pure and powerful minds, hearts meek and still, / A grateful few, shall love thy modest Lay, … / Long as the thrush shall pipe on Grongar Hill.')

closely? Are they like found objects, our objets trouvés, and subject to the same thought that they can be sources of meaning? Or are they like outputs of that category of computer program, not theory-based but heuristically put together by many programmers over many years, which a pioneer of computer programming, Joseph Weizenbaum, early and urgently warned about?

> [Some] programs rest on mathematical control theory and on firmly established physical theories. … [H]uman monitors can detect that their performance does not correspond to the dictates of their theory and can diagnose the reason. … But most existing programs, and especially the largest and most important ones, are not theory-based in this way. … [T]heir construction is based on rules of thumb, stratagems that appear to "work" under most foreseen circumstances, and on other ad-hoc mechanisms that are added to them from time to time. … [D]ecisions are made with the aid of, and sometimes entirely by computers whose programs no one any longer knows explicitly or understands. [A decision-maker] cannot help but base his judgments on "what the computer says," but no human is responsible at all for the computer's output. The enormous computer systems in the Pentagon and their counterparts elsewhere in our culture have, in a very real sense, no

> authors. Thus they do not admit of any questions of right or wrong, of justice, or of any theory with which one can agree or disagree.[10]

Should it ever happen, discovery of wave-traced word shapes on a beach might present the major question that human experience with objets trouvés presents. The anonymous output of such word shapes by systems in which human beings have had a hand cannot present those questions, I think, because of our responsibility for the nature of at least some things in the world. We all are ultimately responsible for these systems and for what they do, and for our subjection to them.

More importantly, outputs that are offered as texts to be read in law would be connected to action. To experience meaning in the presence of an objet trouvé moves us in the opposite direction, toward stasis, wonder, quiet listening, acceptance. Something becomes an objet trouvé all the more clearly when it is kept and protected from change – stone, landscape, or wind. It can be a candidate even for preservation over spans of time as some music and some art is preserved.

As for language itself, we return to the body of White's work. White shows language to us as a marvel like no other. For any of us during our lives, the meaning of language is personal. Meaning is not given to language by any system and there is no one in the world who can say

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[10] Joseph Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason*: *From Judgment to Calculation* (New York, W. H. Freeman, 1976), pp. 232, 236, 239. ('My own program, ELIZA, was of precisely this type', p. 232. ELIZA was Weizenbaum's mock psychotherapist that listened and spoke. It was taken seriously by many both lay and professional, which so startled Weizenbaum that he stopped to write *Computer Power*.)

what the meaning of a word must be, the marks and sounds called a word, or what must be the meaning of a phrase, sentence, paragraph, or book. Yet we are born into language. It is a given for each of us, to work with until we die. Each of us affects it to some degree, in its gradual change and possible progress, but we will have been affected by it much more. It is especially vulnerable to meaninglessness, meaninglessness and worse – the reverse of life and strength, which White presses us to see. Or it can be what White calls 'living speech', which he has so beautifully demonstrated himself. But it is not part of the natural world around us. It is something else to be understood, with its own beauty and music.

What is the problem of the thing of nature brought into the world of art as if it were art? The problem is its unsettling whisper in our ear of what we may in fact believe, that it and that from which it comes, even the movement and shape of our own lives that brought us to it, are not chance or the results of a mindless system, but something breaking through the difference between nature and the human, which we can accept as a gift.

20 May 2013

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