
THE CONTEMPLATIVE MOOD OF NAN SHEPHERD'S *THE LIVING MOUNTAIN* Toward an Embodied Ecocentric Epistemology

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Abstract: *Nan Shepherd (1893–1981) was a Scottish novelist, poet, educator, and mountaineer. Her primary work of nonfiction, The Living Mountain, concerns the Cairngorm mountains of Scotland. More than a work of natural and cultural history, in this book Shepherd also recounts engaging in intentional practices for cultivating attention and sense perception. These practices culminate in states of absorption, changes to her sense of self, and encounters with “the total mountain” as an interconnected living system. Although these practices and goals are uniquely her own, this paper will also consider the potential influence of a Victorian-era publication summarizing Buddhist teachings. In contrast to previous scholarship on Shepherd, this paper contends that we would do well to resist characterizing Shepherd’s experiences in the Cairngorms in Buddhist terms. Concluding reflections suggest how this project contributes to current scholarly definitions of contemplation by taking seriously the challenges of operationalizing contemplation to be more inclusive of sources outside of major religious traditions.*

In the concluding paragraph of *The Living Mountain*, Scottish author and dedicated hill walker Nan Shepherd writes: “I believe that I now understand in some small measure why the Buddhist goes on pilgrimage to a mountain. . . . It is a journey into Being; for as I penetrate more deeply into the mountain’s life, I penetrate also into my own.”¹ Although her familiarity with Buddhist thought was minimal, and there is no evidence suggesting that she approached her own peregrinations through the Cairngorm mountains of Scotland as a mode of Buddhist practice, what Shepherd perhaps shares with Buddhist pilgrims and mountain ascetics is a contemplative orientation to the landscape: a deliberate, intentional approach to perceiving, moving through, and ultimately encountering, in moments of self-transcending absorption, what she calls “the total mountain” or “the living mountain.”

The primary objective of this essay is to articulate what I call the “contemplative mood” of Nan Shepherd’s book, *The Living Mountain*.² Readers of Shepherd’s works have pointed out how her personal, autobiographical presence pervades the characters of her works of fiction.³ So too, some elements of Shepherd’s life and worldview can be gleaned from *The Living Mountain*. This book, her last to be published, neither strictly follows the conventions of travel memoir nor those of nature writing; these genres are integrated among sections that are more historical, poetic, or philosophical in style, and some of the book’s chapters are, I suggest, dominantly contemplative in tone. Considering the contemplative mood of this work develops of a line of thinking put forth



in Louis Komjathy's book *Introducing Contemplative Studies*. In addition to considering contemplative *practices* and contemplative *experiences*, Komjathy suggests that scholars in this field should be studying contemplative *metaphors*, contemplative *orientations*, contemplative *literature*, contemplative *cultures*, and contemplative *embodiment rooted in place*.⁴ In his view, the contemplative dimension that establishes "connective strands" or "family resemblances" through these phenomena is "attentiveness, awareness, interiority, presence, silence, transformation, and a deepened sense of meaning and purpose."⁵ Komjathy continues to suggest that contemplation can be located in "not only religiously committed and tradition-based methods, but also ecumenical, spiritualist, and secular ones."⁶ I suggest that Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain* communicates a contemplative *mood* that shares many "connective strands" with the phenomena that scholars in Contemplative Studies have thus far located primarily within religious traditions. In *The Living Mountain*, Shepherd presents a novel set of practices oriented not toward familiar religious ends, but toward an embodied ecocentric epistemology. Thus, engaging her on her own terms also facilitates a reconsideration of value-based definitions of contemplation that are often overdetermined by how contemplation is understood in the context of Asian religions, especially Buddhism.

Anna "Nan" Shepherd was born in 1893 in a suburb of Aberdeen, Scotland. She lived most of her adult life in the same house that she grew up in. Her main vocation was as a lecturer in English at Aberdeen's Teacher Training Centre for educators. She is primarily renowned in Scotland for her three Modernist novels (*The Quarry Wood*, *The Weatherhouse*, and *A Pass in the Grampians*), which she wrote between the years 1928 and 1933. These were followed by a book of poems, *In the Cairngorms*, in 1934. Shepherd began walking in the Cairngorm mountains of northern Scotland at around age twenty-two. At this time, mountaineering as a sport was still relatively new and almost exclusively an activity for men. With the rise of women's walking groups such as the Ladies Alpine Club in the early twentieth century, women's hiking and mountaineering was slowly increasing in popularity and social acceptance. More unusual in this period was her tendency to enter the mountains alone.⁷

In 1945, after decades of walking in the Cairngorms, Nan Shepherd finished writing *The Living Mountain*. Upon receiving some positive but cautious feedback from a trusted fellow writer about the challenge of publishing the manuscript in its current form, she tucked it away in a drawer where it sat untouched for a few decades until the book was finally published in 1977 by Aberdeen University Press. Although *The Living Mountain* has recently assumed its deserved place in the canon of modern "nature writing," both scholars and reviewers have observed that the book does not adhere to any single genre.⁸ Chapter by chapter, Shepherd engages local history, memoir, travel writing, natural history, and even something akin to phenomenology. A contemplative mood pervades the second and final three chapters in particular. In these sections, Shepherd conveys her intention to ascertain not just the bare descriptive facts of the Cairngorms, but instead their "essential nature"—a comprehensive vision of the mountains as a "living entity."⁹

Although Shepherd engages with the Cairngorms through multiple senses, her comments on "sight" and on learning how "to see" perhaps best illustrate how intentional practices relate to her goal of coming to understand "the total mountain." Shepherd proposes a connection between perception and the sense of self, writing that "our habitual vision of things is not necessarily right: it is only one of an infinite number, and to glimpse an unfamiliar one, even for a moment, unmakes

us, but steadies us again.”¹⁰ Shepherd suggests intentionally changing visual perception in particular as a means of deepening her encounter with the landscape. At the outset of the second chapter, she recounts gazing upon an isolated loch and letting her “eyes travel over the surface, slowly, from shore to shore. . . . This changing of focus in the eye, moving the eye itself when looking at things that do not move, deepens one’s sense of outer reality. Then static things may be caught in the very act of becoming.”¹¹ She then explains that other ways of looking at the landscape, such as with a tilted head or upside down, changes typical habits of seeing so that the world becomes new. “Details are no longer part of a grouping in a picture of which I am the focal point, the focal point is everywhere. Nothing has reference to me, the looker. This is how the earth must see itself.”¹²

Among the various ways the senses can be trained, Shepherd states that “one of the most compelling is quiescence.”¹³ In one memorable passage, Shepherd recounts wading into Loch Avon at midday:

Then I looked down; and at my feet, there opened a gulf of brightness so profound that the mind stopped. We were standing on the edge of a shelf that ran some yards into the loch before plunging down to the pit that is the true bottom. . . . There was nothing that seemed worth saying. My spirit was as naked as my body. It was one of the most defenceless moments of my life.¹⁴

Although her depiction of the mind stopping at Loch Avon is presented as unexpected and spontaneous, Shepherd also alludes to intentionally cultivating quiescence through careful observation of the transition from waking to sleep, and this too is directed toward a novel way of apprehending the environment. In the chapter entitled “Sleep,” she describes how sleeping in the landscape during the daytime allows her “to recapture some pristine amazement not often savoured.”¹⁵ She explains how when sleeping outdoors:

I awake with an empty mind. Consciousness of where I am comes back quite soon, but for one startled moment I have looked at a familiar place as though I had never seen it before. Such sleep may last for only a few minutes, yet even a single minute serves this end of uncoupling the mind. It would be merely fanciful to suppose that some spirit or emanation of the mountain had intention in thus absorbing my consciousness, so as to reveal itself to a naked apprehension difficult otherwise to obtain. I do not ascribe sentience to the mountain, yet at no other moment am I sunk quite so deep into its life. I have let go of my self.¹⁶

The type of seeing that is possible immediately upon waking from sleep she describes here as a “naked apprehension” and elsewhere as the “clear simplicity of the senses.”¹⁷

Walking is another fundamental way of connecting in the mountains, and, not surprisingly, for Shepherd walking also transforms the senses and the way she encounters the mountain through them. She writes that many hours of walking leads to “the senses keyed, one walks the flesh transparent.” As with her practices for changing visual perception, what Shepherd seems to value is how these moments interrupt her typical sense of self such that she can apprehend the mountain anew. Through heightening the senses, “the body may be said to think,” and what the body “thinks

about,” so to speak, what it now apprehends, is the “total mountain”—the mountain as an interconnected living system.¹⁸ By “walking the flesh transparent,”

The body is not made negligible, but paramount. Flesh is not annihilated but fulfilled. One is not bodiless, but essential body. It is therefore when the body is keyed to its highest potential and controlled to a profound harmony deepening into something that resembles trance, that I discover most nearly what it is *to be*. I have walked out of the body and into the mountain. I am a manifestation of its total life, as is the starry saxifrage or the white-winged ptarmigan.¹⁹

It is important to recognize that the contemplative mood of Nan Shepherd’s *The Living Mountain* does not advocate for a dissolution of selfhood for its own sake or to achieve a union with some transcendental absolute.²⁰ Rather, the mood is always one of immanence.

The allusion to Buddhist pilgrimage at the end of the chapter entitled “Being” has inspired investigation of the extent to which Shepherd was aware of, and possibly influenced by, Buddhist thought and practice. Charlotte Peacock’s recent biography of Shepherd has demonstrated that she was to an extent familiar with Victorian-era summaries of Buddhism. In particular, Peacock shows that Shepherd copied passages from *Gleanings in Buddha Fields*, a late nineteenth-century synopsis of Buddhist teachings by Lafcadio Hearn, into her own “Gleanings” notebook. Selections from Hearn’s chapter on nirvana that Shepherd found interesting include references to states of meditative absorption (*jhāna* in Pāli) as well as a summary of Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhism concerning how the myriad features of the natural world are inseparable from mind, and when one’s mind becomes awakened, so too does the natural world.²¹ While these sections of Shepherd’s “Gleanings” notebook suggest that select Buddhist *ideas* were of interest to her in 1917, nearly thirty years before she completed *The Living Mountain*, there is no evidence that she was particularly familiar with Buddhist contemplative *practices* or would have understood the purpose of her peregrinations through the Cairngorms in Buddhist terms.²² Focusing in particular on Shepherd’s depiction of her immersion into Loch Avon, Peacock interprets this “experience” as akin to Zen Buddhist notions of satori that were transmitted to the West in the early twentieth century by D. T. Suzuki, even though Peacock admits that there is no evidence that Shepherd was familiar with Suzuki’s writings.²³ Furthermore, Peacock claims that in Loch Avon, Shepherd saw into the “depths of her own nature” and had a “moment of enlightenment.”²⁴

I think we ought to be careful not to overly interpret Shepherd in terms of Asian mysticism. To emphasize the arguably thin connection she had with Buddhism obscures what is unique in her articulation of a contemplative mood and an embodied ecocentric epistemology. The way Shepherd characterizes the relationship between absorption, the sense of self, and the environment suggests that her concern is finding ways and means to change her relationship with the landscape. She introduces this view early in *The Living Mountain*, when at the end of the first chapter, she writes: “Place and a mind may interpenetrate till the nature of both is altered.”²⁵ Thus, Shepherd portrays a way of relating to the Cairngorms predicated on an intentional engagement with her body, her senses, her attention, her emotions, and her sense of self, directing them in ways that are uniquely hers and that have the aim or result of meeting her own particular goal: an encounter with “the total mountain” as a dynamic entity.

The case of Nan Shepherd raises some broader questions for the field of Contemplative Studies, such as to what extent we should base our understanding of contemplation on the practices, goals, views, and values of major religious traditions—especially the Asian traditions that have thus far dominated the academic discourse of Contemplative Studies.²⁶ Komjathy identifies attentiveness, compassion, concentration, wisdom, and silence as some of the goals and values of contemplation.²⁷ Similarly, Harold Roth has offered a definition of contemplation that is characterized by specific goals and values, including concentration, tranquility, insight, compassion, love, and loving-kindness.²⁸ Some of these qualities identified by Komjathy and Roth are clearly meaningful to Shepherd—she too values silence, attentiveness, presence, and states of absorption. *The Living Mountain* shares enough of the family resemblance criteria to probably be considered a work of “contemplative literature.” However, my concern here is in avoiding the temptation to characterize Shepherd in terms of how she conforms to a set of goals and values derived largely from Asian religions. The kinds of claims made by Peacock about Shepherd’s “moment of enlightenment” are perhaps indicative of how even beyond the field of Contemplative Studies, Buddhist meditation stands in as an ideal type, when contemplation would be better understood as a much broader phenomenon. Scholars have already cautioned against the “Buddhocentrism” of Contemplative Studies, and I would suggest that value-laden definitions of contemplation run the risk of perpetuating Buddhocentrism as well as a kind of “Buddhist exceptionalism” in the field.²⁹ For the project of understanding the contemplative mood of *The Living Mountain*, considering Shepherd primarily in relationship to Buddhism obscures her unique emphasis on visual perception as a key site of self-transformation, as well as her articulation of the vision of the “total mountain” as the goal of visual (and other) techniques.

Already, there are precedents for the investigation of a contemplative dimension to the practices, values, and goals found in the context of nature writing and ecological thinking. Alan Hodder discusses numerous passages from Henry David Thoreau’s journals in which, like Shepherd’s, his observations lead to a changed relationship between the natural environment and his sense of self. Hodder writes that “both extrication from matter and total identification with it resulted in the same coveted objective—an ecstatic loss of self,” an approach Hodder characterizes as a kind of “mindful naturalism.”³⁰ Considering Thoreau along with many others in the twentieth-century canon of nature writing, Scott Slovic contends that in addition to their observations of the natural world, these writers are preoccupied with “the psychological phenomenon of ‘awareness,’” which contributes to a deeper “understanding of consciousness” and “awareness of self and non-self.” He also demonstrates how these objectives are cultivated through specific ways of “seeing” and means of attending such as “watchfulness.”³¹ Connections between an intentional quality of attention and an enriched, ecocentric sense perception are also developed in a seminal essay by the American naturalist John Burroughs entitled “The Art of Seeing Things,” in which he writes:

Power of attention and a mind sensitive to outward objects, in these lies the secret of seeing things. Can you bring all your faculties to the front, like a house with many faces at the doors and windows; or do you live retired within yourself, shut up in your own meditations? The thinker puts all the powers of his mind in reflection: the observer puts all the powers of his mind in perception; every faculty is directed outward; the whole mind sees through the eye and hears through the ear.³²

Finally, in an extensive work drawing upon Christian mystics and contemplatives, nature writers, poets, and his own experiences engaged with all these as living traditions, Douglas Christie made a substantial contribution to identifying the scope and possibilities of a contemplative ecology. He also highlights the importance of many of the above themes, noting for instance that “the practice of attention . . . requires commitment and courage; also a willingness to reckon with oneself, to clarify and deepen one’s own capacity to see and cherish the world.” And with words that I believe Shepherd herself would very much agree with, he observes that “to give one’s conscious attention fully and deeply to a place, an animal, a tree, or a river is already to open oneself to relationship and intimacy with another. It is to see and feel the presence of the Other not as an object, but as a living subject.”³³

Going forward, there may be novel and productive ways of defining contemplative phenomena to be more inclusive of Nan Shepherd’s *The Living Mountain* and the contribution of various naturalists and nature writers more broadly. Ann Taves’s attribution theory and “building block” approach to the study of “experiences deemed religious” when applied to contemplation would call attention to the dynamic relationship among embodied intentional practices, resultant experiences, conceptions of goals, and underlying values that are deemed “contemplative” by individuals and communities, both within and beyond religious traditions.³⁴ In his landmark study of asceticism, Geoffrey Galt Harpham theorizes the category in such a way that it includes but also extends beyond religious practice, considering it rather a “fundamental operating ground” of culture and as “sub-ideological, common to all culture.”³⁵ Perhaps contemplation could be considered analogously. More recently, Peter Sloterdijk argued that contemplative practices (as well as religious ones) are part of a broader constellation of what he calls “anthropotechnics”—methods of human self-(trans)formation.³⁶ What all three of these approaches have in common is that they allow us to think about how contemplation intersects with local (and variable) worldviews and systems of meaning-making. It may be that contemplation is best exemplified in religious traditions by religious virtuosi, but an approach that focuses on the dynamics of contemplation provides a better method for engaging with contemplation beyond religious traditions.³⁷ Locating contemplation beyond traditions benefits from having a more flexible definition of contemplation that does not assume a priori particular views, values, or goals. To this end, I suggest that the following could serve as a more inclusive definition of contemplation that focuses not on specific values but on its dynamics: *Contemplation is the observation and intentional regulation of the cognitive, affective, perceptual, embodied, and/or relational dimensions of human experience with the aim of cultivating particular states or resultant traits that have been ascribed value within the cultural context or lifeworld of the practitioner.* On this view, while the dynamics of contemplation should be recognizable across contexts, the dimensions of human experience to be engaged, the means of engaging them, and the significance ascribed to resultant states and traits will be shaped and informed by worldviews and value systems that are culturally, temporally, and contextually specific.

Some may find the above definition too broad, too shorn of the specific qualities and values identified previously. However, I believe this approach helps us to avoid making unnecessary comparisons with known contemplative phenomena associated with major religious traditions and enrich our ability to discern what is unique in and central to a text like *The Living Mountain*. Komjathy has suggested that scholars of Contemplative Studies should acknowledge a difference

between the “depth” of contemplative practices among dedicated “professional contemplatives,” whose approach is distinct from “meditative diletantism.”³⁸ While we clearly have a lot to learn from the study of contemplative virtuosi in religious traditions, like religion, contemplation is not restricted to the virtuosi, and to locate contemplation solely among so-called professionals is an unnecessary limitation. It rules out some potential insights that can be gleaned from investigating contemplation beyond religious traditions. Rather, I think scholars in this field should be studying contemplative phenomena wherever they appear—whether that is among the contemplative authorities of religious traditions, the occasional practice of a lay contemplative, or even beyond traditions altogether in the contemplative mood of a text like Nan Shepherd’s *The Living Mountain*.

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NOTES

- ¹ Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* (Edinburgh: Canongate, [1977] 2011), 108.
- ² One of the reasons for taking this approach is to acknowledge the considerable hermeneutical challenges in inferring anything directly about experience from a literary text, as Robert Sharf has pointed out. Robert Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," *Numen* 42, no. 3 (1995): 228–283; Robert Sharf, "Experience," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- ³ Roderick Watson, "'To Know Being': Substance and Spirit in the Work of Nan Shepherd," in *History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. Douglas Gilford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 416–427; Charlotte Peacock, *Into the Mountain: A Life of Nan Shepherd* (Cambridge: Galileo Publishers, 2017).
- ⁴ Louis Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 283–288; emphases added.
- ⁵ Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies*, 14.
- ⁶ Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies*, 14.
- ⁷ For more on Nan Shepherd's life and literature, see Charlotte Peacock's excellent biography *Into the Mountain: A Life of Nan Shepherd*.
- ⁸ Eleanor Bell, "Into the Centre of Things: Poetic Travel Narratives in the Work of Kathleen Jamie and Nan Shepherd," in *Kathleen Jamie: Essays and Poems on Her Work*, ed. Rachel Falconer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 126–133; Robert Macfarlane, introduction to *The Living Mountain* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011), ix–xxxvii; Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2015).
- ⁹ Shepherd, *Living Mountain*, 1.
- ¹⁰ Shepherd, *Living Mountain*, 101.
- ¹¹ Shepherd, *Living Mountain*, 10.
- ¹² Shepherd, *Living Mountain*, 11.
- ¹³ Shepherd, *Living Mountain*, 90.
- ¹⁴ Shepherd, *Living Mountain*, 12–13.
- ¹⁵ Shepherd, *Living Mountain*, 91.
- ¹⁶ Shepherd, *Living Mountain*, 91.
- ¹⁷ Shepherd, *Living Mountain*, 91, 93.
- ¹⁸ Shepherd, *Living Mountain*, 105. See also page 48 on "the living mountain."
- ¹⁹ Shepherd, *Living Mountain*, 106; emphasis original.
- ²⁰ David E. Cooper, "Meditation on the Move: Walking, Nature, Mystery, in Coleridge and Contemplation," in *Coleridge and Contemplation*, ed. Peter Cheyne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 35–46; Rachel R. Gilman, "The Ontology of Immanence: Arriving at Being in Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain*" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 2016).
- ²¹ Peacock, *Into the Mountain*, 30–31.
- ²² Peacock quotes a passage from one of Nan Shepherd's letters in support of her view that "Nan tried meditation but it did not work for her." *Into the Mountain*, 32.
- ²³ Peacock, *Into the Mountain*, 27, 30.
- ²⁴ Peacock, *Into the Mountain*, 28, 211.
- ²⁵ Shepherd, *Living Mountain*, 8.
- ²⁶ Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies*; Jacob Holsinger Sherman, "On the Emerging Field of Contemplative Studies and Its Relationship to the Study of Spirituality," *Spiritus* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 208–229.
- ²⁷ Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies*.
- ²⁸ Harold Roth, "A Pedagogy for the New Field of Contemplative Studies," in *Contemplative Learning and Inquiry across Disciplines*, ed. Olen Gunnlaugson et al. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), 98. Specifically, Roth

writes: “‘contemplation’ includes the focusing of the attention in a sustained fashion leading to deepened states of concentration, tranquility, insight, and ‘contextualizing’ orientations. These are the basis of a clear and spontaneous cognition that is able to attend effortlessly to whatever presents itself, and of compassion, love, loving-kindness, and various ‘other-regarding’ ethical orientations.”

²⁹ Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies*, 35 passim; Sherman, “On the Emerging Field”; Evan Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020). Sherman in particular has offered some productive criticisms of the dominant influence of Asian religions on Contemplative Studies: “Contemplative Studies has thus far focused almost exclusively on the study of Eastern contemplative traditions and practices, on the one hand, and Western sciences, on the other, and I argue that this tendency may unintentionally foster precisely the kind of ‘cognitive imperialism’ that Contemplative Studies and Christian Spirituality both have sought to overcome. . . . I have argued that insofar as Contemplative Studies turns to the East for its first-person inquiries and to the West for its third-person accounts, it runs the risk of falling prey to the residue of unresolved cognitive imperialism and of perpetuating a kind of inverted Orientalism” (208, 225).

³⁰ Alan D. Hodder, *Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 66.

³¹ Scott Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 3–4, 12.

³² John Burroughs, “The Art of Seeing Things,” in *The Art of Seeing Things: Essays by John Burroughs*, ed. Charlotte Zoë Walker (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 8.

³³ Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10, 8.

³⁴ Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

³⁵ Gregory Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), xi.

³⁶ Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 3–4.

³⁷ Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies*, 276, 283.

³⁸ Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies*, 128, 276, 283.