The Appearances of Beauty, a Personal Journey:
A Poetics of Sustainability

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

_________________________
Leah Carter
Abstract

In the context of the unsustainable impact made by humans on the earth and its community of beings, there is an urgent need to re-imagine our place. The exteriorizing effects of objective and rational thinking have led us to see ourselves as separate from, rather than part of nature, and through this dislocation our environment is often seen as a material resource rather than as a source of awe and wonder. The potential of the experience of beauty to heal, deepen our sense of belonging, and guide our ways of perceiving is not fully recognized in the West. In this thesis I ask the question: Can a deepened apprehension of beauty assist us to engage with the losses that are occurring in the natural environment and enable us to discover ways of being that may restore our embeddedness within the community of nature?

To explore this question I undertook a year-long commitment to journal the daily happenings at a small lake on our semi-rural property. I visited the lake each day usually at dawn, noting the nuances, rhythms and interactions of the four elements and the animal and vegetal beings there. I witnessed without anticipating what I might find, and later over time I examined and reflected upon my impressions in depth, drawing understandings and insights from my experience. My intention was to listen for and give voice to what wanted to emerge, to find an order through a reflexive approach to self and other. This was to become a labyrinthine journey that revealed elements of the interior landscape of the lake beings, and my own.

The research takes a phenomenological approach and considers my direct experience of the seen and unseen in a poetic way. My approach goes beyond rational, thinking processes to ways of perceiving that are based on the intelligence of the heart. I found that in acknowledging then passing through what is outer and immediate, and opening to mystery and the unknown, new realizations emerged bringing connections to my perception at a profound level. As part of a depth experience, engaging with complexity in a way that allows for ambivalence and doubt is an essential rite of passage as patterns begin to form.
I was changed by my discovery that making a place for the apprehension of the beauty and the sacred in each thing brought about a deepened perception of the relations between the environment, sustainable ways of being, and myself. I offer in this thesis my lived understanding of the capacity of the experience of beauty to heal, its potential to transform perceptions and lead to a renewed affinity, re-cognizing the agency of the planet as our home.
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All photographs are by the author except for the image from the Book of Kells, included by kind permission of the Board of Trinity College Dublin.
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