

**Nature and Psyche: Radical Environmentalism and the Politics of Subjectivity.**

By David Kidner. Albany: SUNY Press, 2001. Pp. 375. Paper, \$22.95

Reviewed by Dennis Patrick Slattery

Such a heady title that inaugurates a critique of dualism's rise in the thought of the West and its consequent shrinkage of both the natural and cultural worlds. At times more polemical than my own tastes prefer and repetitive of central motifs, nonetheless Kidner's close reading of the scourge of dualism that rests at the heart of the West's colonizing impulse is both forceful and persuasive in its detail.

Divided into two parts, "Nature and Psyche in an Industrialist Landscape" and "Reintegrating Nature and Psyche," his exploration first focuses on "In Search of the 'Natural,'" "Psychology's Betrayal of the Natural World," and "The Colonization of the Psyche." The second section explores "Natural Cultures, Psychic Landscapes," "The Psychodynamics of Self-World Relations," "Resymbolizing Nature," and "Healing the World of Wounds." For anyone seeking a large contextual overview of the prevailing ethos that defines thought in the post-modern Western psyche, search no further: Kidner's book touches on all the hot spots that form a conspiracy of shrinkage both of the individual and the world.

But there is hope. He exerts great effort to reveal how, if analysis, which rests on division, would leave room for resonance, which unifies disparities, then such a colonized world view we find today would allow for what he terms “a holistic ecology” that allows experiential, cultural and spiritual realms to mix freely and imaginably.

The strength of his study, from my perspective, is its illustrating that even areas like ecology and psychology have often capitulated to the force of industrialism, a stepchild of dualism. Indeed, his book offers a sustained meditation on “isms.” Basically, these isms have successfully placed all intelligence exclusively into the human order, leaving the natural world no more than a dumb brute without intellect or wisdom. Industrialism’s mode of perception denies any structure inconsistent with its own and so degrades what could perhaps integrate the two realms. Culture, Kidner defines, as an intermediary structure that is not opposed to nature but at its best, an avenue for human artifice to more fully integrate with the natural order.

What I found most exciting in his critique is that whatever limits or shrinkage we impose on the natural order, by eliminating such presences as symbols, rituals, religious beliefs that really aid us understanding the deeper realms of the natural world, we do at the same time to our own psychic structure. The consequence of this move, for Kidner, is the creation of a

modern self that is free-standing and autonomous, with no adequate or sustaining frame of reference except itself. Behind it, though Kidner does not use the term, is an insidious expression of Narcissism that insists the world reflect and measure only my own image. The negative consequence of such an attitude is not a greater but a more distorted and diminished form of human freedom.

The latter part of his study invites us to consider nature's own ontological status that does not depend on us for its existence. He does not accept the post-modern reductionistic assertion that everything is an artifact of language or that all that exists is socially-constructed. Both of these ideologies reduce the world still further to the human gaze exclusively, in a kind of nihilistic slight-of-hand. Instead, Kidner supports the idea of culture as "essential to maintain continuity between the conscious and unconscious. Symbols form a bridge between these two levels of psyche. The intrinsic value of myth, ritual, intuition, religious belief is that they can express a subjectivity that resonates with rather than opposes natural structures. Indeed, myths themselves have the capacity to regenerate culture and its relation to nature. Psyche and nature comprise a unity that resonate many of the same structures of being. They are ontological partners.

To successfully step out of a psyche colonized by the limits of an ideology that is little more than self-promoting, Kidner ends by asking us to consider that the cult of individualism may be hiding nature's own subjective qualities that could open us to levels of reality we have yet to contemplate.