

## A Metaphor Runs Through It: Agency in John Muir's "Windstorm in the Forest"

John Muir in his "Windstorm in the Forest" chooses as his primary figure of speech a personification of nature and the nonhuman things of nature.

The opening sentence has an unstated agent, possessing both human and superhuman capabilities, capable of measuring and bestowing. This agent has the purpose of giving the forests strength and beauty. And doing all this "with love." Nowhere in this essay is there a mention of God. There is however a continually implied benevolent force behind the many actions described. This force in the second paragraph is identified in the phrase "Nature's forestry" as nature. Nature manages its forest with its implements: the storms and the items of the storm culture—hail, snow, wind, and avalanche.

These implements of Nature are compared to the acts of man, first with a simile, "avalanches mow down thousands [of trees] at a swoop as a gardener trips out a bed of flowers," (WW 182) then with metaphors, "But the winds go to every tree, fingering every leaf and branch and furrowed bole; not one is forgotten." The winds can finger and remember. Then the winds, nature's gardeners, go about their business: "they seek and find them all, caressing them tenderly, bending them in lusty exercise, stimulating their growth, plucking off a leaf or limb as required, or removing an entire tree or grove . . ." (WW 182)

That the wind is an agent is reemphasized in the next paragraph, "The other alpine conifers . . . are never thinned out by this agent to any destructive extent. . . ." (WW 183) And then again in paragraph four, Muir emphasizes the agency of the wind:

Great and small had been uprooted or wrenched off *by sheer force*, making a clean gap, like that made by a snow avalanche. But hurricanes capable of doing this class of work are rare in the Sierra, and when we have explored the forests from one extremity of the range to the other, we are compelled to believe that they are the most beautiful on the face of the earth, however we may regard the *agents* that have made them so. (WW 183)

The effects of the storms are the agents, personified as gardeners, and the forests itself is the patient, the thing worked upon. It too is personified. The trees have *arms*, are *lithe*, swing *compliantly*, are the "retiring tenants of the dell," and "keep their ranks." (WW 182-3) Muir describes the old Sugar Pines as the "grand old patriarchs" and says the Silver Pines were "chanting and bowing low as if in worship." But the most amazing personification comes next as the huge trees show emotion:

The force of the gale was such that the most steadfast monarch of them all rocked down to its roots with a motion plainly perceptible when one leaned

against it. Nature was holding high festival, and every fiber of the most rigid giants thrilled with glad excitement. (WW 185)

He calls this "passionate music" and a "grand anthem." (WW 185) A little later the lithe, brushy tops of a Douglas spruce are "rocking and swirling in wild ecstasy." He tells of climbing a tree to enjoy the "excited forest." The trees he saw "seemed strong and comfortable, as if really enjoying the storm, while responding to its most enthusiastic greetings." (WW 18) As the storm dies away, he sees the trees, "the countless hosts of the forests hushed and tranquil, towering above one another on the slopes of the hills like a devout audience." (WW 190)

John Muir. *The Wilderness World of John Muir*. Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1954.