

 Alison Milbank¹

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3777-0693>

UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM

 <https://ror.org/01ee9ar58>

The Trees Shall Clap their Hands: *Natura Naturans* and the Theological Reenchantment of Nature

 <https://doi.org/10.15633/9788363241032.18>

Isaiah 55 envisages the joy of Israel's liberation from captivity in Babylon: "You shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace: the mountains and hills shall break forth before you with singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." All nature will rejoice out of its own free agency. This conference seeks to demonstrate that human flourishing and that of the natural world go together. It is their common status as God's creation that unites tree and person, mountain and beast.

My contribution is to explore the ways that Christian naturalists, poets and philosophers have sought to empower the non-human partners in this *Creatio continua* and to suggest ways to help Christians and others today to re-sacralize their relations with the material world through what I term here

1 Professor of Theology and Literature at the University of Nottingham and priest of the Anglican Church, since 2007 at Holy Trinity Church, Lambley, Nottinghamshire; currently Canon Theologian and Priest Vicar of Southwell Minster. Her research interests include the study of Gothic, religion, creation theology and realism in the English literary tradition (Chesterton and Tolkien) and the theology of creation.

re-enchantment. John Paul II himself reminded us that “the earth is God’s first gift” but increasingly from the scientific revolution this gift was received as dominion, in which humankind gained the lost rule over nature of the prelapsarian era. As W. H. Auden voices his Baconian wise man: “With rack and screw I put Nature through / A thorough inquisition” and Descartes’ reduction of animals to the status of machines made vivisection a common new practice in the service of scientific knowledge. The language of the book of nature still obtains but the contents of that book are increasingly demoted from signifying presences to classified objects in a rationalist encyclopedia, and laid out as specimens in a collector’s cabinet of curiosity. Nor does Kant’s critique of rationalism help matters since he forged an epistemology that only strengthened the gap between humans and the world. Now the objects we see and hear – the phenomena – are wholly within our perceptual control, but of the noumenal we can know nothing through sensation. Here the phenomena of the natural world are our possession and things-in-themselves wholly distant. Even in the case of the huge awe-inspiring mountain or fearful ocean, the capacity of our mind’s operations sublimates them and is the truly sublime operation. Add to this picture the industrial revolution’s turning of natural materials into commodities – always available for use, or *Bestand* in Heidegger’s term and the downgrading of the natural into objectification is complete.

My own research, by contrast, notes from the very beginning of that same scientific revolution there were protests against this instrumentalization of nature, rendering it passive: *natura naturata*. The Hermetic and alchemical thinkers continued an older tradition of God’s *natura naturans* (nature naturing), illustrated by Robert Fludd, who states that God “maketh every natural thing his sanctuary”,² basing this sense of an indwelling wisdom on St Paul’s speech at the Areopagus in Acts 17, when he quotes a Greek poet: “in him we live and move and have our being” (17, 28). The Anglican Cambridge Platonist philosophers also bring divine wisdom into an understanding of natural processes. They seek to challenge Descartes’ elevation of natural laws to the immutable, so that they seem to be self-regulating and the God of mechanical philosophy no more than “an idle spectator of the various results

2 *Mosaicall Philosophy Grounded upon the Essential Truth or Eternal Sapience*, by Robert Fludd, London 1659 (Digitized by the Internet Archive in 2010 with funding from Research Library, Tine Getty Research Institute), <https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/pdf/ach2050b3226660.pdf>.

of the fortuitous and necessary motions of bodies” and his wisdom is “wholly enclosed and shut up within his own breast, and not at all acting abroad on anything without him”.³ Henry More is the first in his *Immortality of the Soul* to suggest the existence of a hylarchic principle or *spiritus naturae*, which he believes will help to explain features and phenomena that the mechanical philosophy cannot, such as magnetic attraction, ratiocination, memory, imagination, spontaneous motion and free will. He describes it as:

“A substance incorporeal, but without Sense and Animadversion, pervading the whole Matter of the Universe, and exercising a Plastical power therein according to the sundry dispositions and occasions in the parts it works upon, raising such phenomena in the World, by directing the parts of the Matter and their Motion, as cannot be resolved into mere Mechanical powers.”⁴

This spirit is a kind of inferior world soul, a familiar Platonic idea from the *Timaeus*, but unlike the *anima mundi* this vital force lacks reason or *nous*, even though it is directed to good and harmonious ends. For More, it is important that it gives a rational basis for spirit in the world. The muteness of the spirit of nature is nonetheless necessary to preserve the radical dualism between matter and spirit on which his system relies.

His Cambridge associate Ralph Cudworth’s Christian atomism makes him similarly desire a vitality and dynamism in natural processes else:

“This being to banish all mental, and consequently divine causality quite out of the world; and to make the whole world to be nothing else but a heap of dust, fortuitously agitated, or a dead a cadaverous thing, that hath no signatures of mind or understanding, counsel and wisdom at all upon it; nor indeed any vitality acting in it”⁵

This quotation reveals that Cudworth seeks to maintain causality and teleology and along with them true vitality in nature. Its divine created status is to be revealed by the signatures, which are marks or stamps of the divine attributes. Cudworth does not want a voluntarist God but one whose goodness and wisdom are everywhere to be seen at work and through plastic nature

3 R. Cudworth, *Intellectual System of the Universe*, 1, 220. Cartesian universe according to Ralph Cudworth: ‘a kind of dead and wooden world, as it were a carved statue, that hath nothing neither vital nor magical at all in it’. *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, 3 vols, intro. G. A. Rogers, Thoemes Press, Bristol 1995 [1687], I, 221.

4 H. More, *The Immortality of the Soul*, ed. A. Jacob, Martinus Nijhoff, Dordrecht 1987, Book 3, Ch. 5, i.

5 R. Cudworth, *True Intellectual System*, op. cit., I, 217.

“as God is inward to every thing, so nature acts immediately upon the matter, as an inward and living soul, or law in it”.⁶

Cudworth hypothesizes a variety of spirits within different substances but also one plastic nature “by which all plants and vegetables, continuous with it, may be differently formed, according to their different seeds, as also minerals and other bodies framed, and whatsoever else is above the power of fortuitous mechanism”.⁷ This is significant because it allows him to argue for the activity of plastic nature in the mineral creation, so that nothing is outside the vitality and wisdom of God. It also allows unity within the creation as “all things thus to conspire everywhere, and agree together into one harmony”, although this harmony overall can incorporate subordinate discord between different parts of creation, comparable to the unity of a dramatic poem.⁸ [an interesting idea in the post-Darwinian world.]

Cudworth’s and More’s ideas greatly influenced the devout natural philosopher John Ray, whose work on plant classification anticipated and even went beyond Linnaeus, and Cudworth inspired his *Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation* of 1691, a work of physico-theology. For Ray, plastic nature allows intelligence to nature: “if art has reason, why not nature which exceeds it”?⁹ A scientist of animals as well as plants, it is important to Ray that this spirit challenges the Cartesian reduction of animals to machines and human use, and he develops the empowerment of natural objects further than More and Cudworth by arguing that “creatures are made to enjoy themselves, as well as serve us”.¹⁰ Furthermore, he predicates of what were then seen as useless insects that their *telos* is purely one of partaking of the manifest wisdom and power of God, quoting Psalm 104. 24 in support: “O Lord how manifold are thy works: in wisdom thou hast made them all; the earth is full of thy riches”.¹¹

Ray offers, however, a less passive plastic spirit than More and Cudworth with less emphasis on the spirit’s irrationality. Furthermore, he does not agree

6 Ibidem, I, 236.

7 Ibidem, I, 271.

8 Ibidem, I, 260 and 230.

9 J. Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation*, Samuel Smith, London 1691, 17.

10 Ibidem, 128.

11 Quoted in J. Ray, *The Wisdom of God*, op. cit, 303.

with Cudworth that God set up the system completely at the beginning, but argues that it maintains itself in a manner close to the medieval idea of *natura naturans*.¹² The vital spirit ‘presides over the whole oeconomy of the plant’, directing its parts to their *telos* and serving ends even beyond its own, as a “kind of fate upon them,” which corresponds to the indwelling of God’s wisdom throughout the created order.¹³ Ray’s employment of the biblical concept of Wisdom allied to this Spirit necessarily renders it implicitly more active and intentional, as in the persona who acts the master worker before God from before the world was made in Proverbs 8.

Much more intentionally conceived is the nature of matter in Henry More’s erstwhile pupil, Anne Conway. Influenced by the Kabbala and the Christian Platonism of Origen, Conway moves decisively away from the dualism of More and Cudworth towards monism, influencing, indeed, Leibniz himself. Like Leibniz she denies that all natural processes are mechanical and claims that nature “is a living body, which has life and perception, which are much more exalted than a mere mechanism”.¹⁴ Her monism proceeds from the belief that God cannot create anything dead, so that matter is in a continuum with spirit, even though as a hardening of spirit it can be seen as a result of the Fall. She criticises Cartesian dualism for a number of reasons, but one key argument is the failure to explain how the soul feels the pain of the body, if it is just dead matter. Even dust and sand, for Conway, are not dead matter and through transmutations over time, will enjoy power, joy and perception, as instruments of the divine wisdom.¹⁵ Instead of a Plastic Nature without reason, Conway predicates a splendid dynamic ladder of ascent, whereby every part of the created order, however humble, is understanding itself through its material instantiation (whether visible or invisible), and seeking the Good. The matter that may have proceeded from a separation from God provides the means through memory and feeling to awaken desire for return.¹⁶ With this active movement and dynamism, Conway parts company with Leibniz, where each

12 J. Ray, *The Wisdom of God*, 32–33. No Spinozan equation of nature and God is intended.

13 *Ibidem*, 96, 35.

14 A. Conway, *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy (1690)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984, 64.

15 *Ibidem*, 66.

16 *Ibidem*, 46–47. See also Mary P. Lascano, ‘Anne Conway: Bodies in a Spiritual World’, *Philosophy Compass* 8, 4 (2013), 327–336.

thing develops into itself. In Conway, every plant, creature or person is in dynamic relation with every other, involved constantly in acts of exchange.

Conway's theology of creation in which all natural forms are involved in contemplation is shared by Christian poets of the same period, especially Henry Vaughan, who writes in his poem, *The Bird*:

All things that be, praise him; and had
 Their lesson taught them, when first made.
 So hills and valleys into singing break,
 And tho' poor stones have neither speech nor tongue,
 While active winds and streams both run and speak,
 Yet stones are deep in admiration.

Like John Ray who uses the psalms to describe the active agency of nature, here Vaughan also imitates scripture. In Psalm 114 "the mountains skip like rams" and in Isaiah 55 I quoted earlier, the mountains also sing. The warrant for stones' participation lies in the words of Christ himself in Luke 19,40. Even the seeming inanimate is actually contemplating the divine plenitude, and understanding itself as stone, in the manner of Ann Conway, for whom all nature including ourselves meditates through its material instantiation.

The wonderful Polish poet, Wislawa Szymborska longs to empower and have a conversation with nature, but this is both "necessary and impossible". In the poem, *A Conversation with a Stone* she writes: "Go away", says the stone, "I'm shut tight. I don't have a door". Sheer unreachability and difference is the only medium of communication and mortality all that we share with stones. A Christian theology of nature, as Vaughan embodies it, finds a double mode of connection between humans and stones, hills and streams. First, they are all made things, with "their lesson taught them when first made". Each has a specific wisdom as part of their creation, or, in the words of More and Cudworth, a spirit of nature. And it is precisely through this createdness that they reveal the divine glory. For Vaughan, all of nature is doxological and that is the second way in which we share with them: we are all created to praise. A later English poet, Christopher Smart, develops a complex cosmological web of praise through the animals and plants. His most famous description is that of his cat:

For I will consider my Cat Jeffry.
For he is the servant of the Living God duly and daily serving him.
For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.
For this is done by wreathing his body seven times round
with elegant quickness".
Jeffrey worships by fleaing himself and sharpening his paws by wood.
He even "counteracts the Devil, who is death, by brisking about the life".
Beasts are like angels whose understanding of God is intuitive,
expressed in creatures by doing what they do: "brisking about the life".¹⁷

Christopher Smart as poet is in the company of generations of Christian and often priestly naturalists, like Gilbert White of Selbourne in England and perhaps Eugeniusz Janota in Poland, for whom, to quote an earlier naturalist, Thomas Browne, "the world was made to be inhabited by beasts but studied and considered by man" through "learned admiration" – which is not so different from the stones. The naturalists praise God by acknowledging the wisdom and worship of creatures. And giving creatures their proper liturgy begins to separate them from our perceptual control. Even without us humans, the world would not lack praise, and orthodox praise, which does not subsume power, knowledge and control to human idolatries and egoism.

St Augustine writes in his *Confessions*: "I said to all these things in the external environment: 'Tell me of my God who you are not. Tell me something about him.' And, with a great voice they cried out: 'He made us'. My question was the attention I gave to them, and their response was their beauty".¹⁸

Augustine too sounds like a naturalist here, giving attention and receiving from nature. The revelation of the beauty of natural forms here is, however, not for the sake of the human observer but for God and the free life of the forms themselves. Trees, streams and stones have their own entelechy. This doxological focus prevents too easy appropriation, while their createdness similarly gives them a kind of equality with us. Their beauty can only be God's gift.

So how can we develop this sense of participation with nature and raise her from her descent into objectification? First, we have to recognise that we share a common spirit. Here again the seventeenth century can assist. Thomas

17 Ch. Smart, *Jubilate Agno*, W. H. Bond (ed.), Praeger 1970, Fragment B, [For I will consider my Cat Jeffry].

18 Augustine St, *Confessions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, Book 10, vi. 9.

Browne writes: “if there be a common nature that unites and ties the scattered and divided individuals into one species, why may there not be one that unites them all? However, I am sure there is a common Spirit that plays within us, yet makes no part of us, and that is the Spirit of God.”¹⁹ To recognise that spirit working through the wisdom of the stone or bird is to raise it to full presence. The Romantic philosopher Novalis spoke of this act as a mode of re-enchantment. He called it magic idealism, by which we are made “aware of the magic, mystery and wonder of the world; it is to educate the senses to see the ordinary as extraordinary, the familiar as strange, the mundane as sacred, the finite as infinite. His most famous example is a dream experienced by a character in his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* of a blue flower: “But what attracted him with great force was a tall, pale blue flower which stood beside the stream and touched him with its broad glistening leaves. Around this flower were countless others of every hue, and the most delicious fragrance filled the air [but] he saw nothing but the blue flower and gazed long upon it with inexpressible tenderness. Finally, when he wanted to approach this flower, it all at once began to move and change; the leaves became more glistening [...] the flower leaned towards him and its petals displayed an expanded blue corolla wherein a delicate face hovered.”²⁰

On awakening he says: “I feel that it reaches into my soul as into a giant wheel, impelling it onward with a mighty swing”.²¹ The flower opens the familiar world to something strange, in which a flower leans of its own accord, ceasing to be an object in his perceptual control. It then reveals a face, opening the encounter to the relational. And this encounter with a world made strange inaugurates a lifetime’s quest for mystery, beauty and truth: for love. The blue flower is an opening to adventure, to desire, to the infinite.

Our blue flower is the eucharist, in which objects – bread and wine – become Christ himself. We take the objects out of our control to restore them to their origin as God’s creation. In this same action we offer praise, for praise is, as I have suggested, the contemplation of our createdness, which reveals the divine signature. We offer in that gesture the whole world, shaped into being by the Word for divinisation. In the words of Irenaeus, “he is his Word,

19 Th. Browne, *The Major Works*, ed. C. A. Patrides, Penguin, London 1977, 99.

20 Novalis, *Henry von Ofterdingen*, transl. Palmer Hilty, Waveland Press, Prospect Heights ILL 1964, p. 17.

21 *Ibidem*, p. 19.

through whom the tree bears fruit, through whom the streams flow, and through whom the earth brings forth first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.” And we receive back the world, reconnected to its divine origin. It is all Christ, he who made himself a victim, an object, for our salvation. As the theologian Michael Bulgakov put it, the world is a giant grail holding our Lord. Here he is in that most iconic of Polish folk images, the pensive Christ. All along the roads, the field edges, we find this figure, one with the natural world in his passion. And he, who told us to consider the lilies is contemplating, full of the most learned admiration, flowers nestling at his feet.

We have been considering the challenges of posthumanism today. I believe that the answer does not so much lie in the reiterating the high status of the human but, like the pensive Christ, to see all nature suffering objectification and to raise all nature to agency and fullness of participation in the divine liturgy. Recent developments in the extended evolutionary synthesis towards a more active exchange between genes and phenotypes, in the acknowledgement of how niches or communal structures by which organisms transform their environment and impact selection pressures in evolution and adaptation add a scientific basis to this agency I have been outlining. We also are learning more about the movement of trees to aid each other, of the importance of fungi activity. The trees have been clapping their hands all along and we have just failed to attend. So let us unite ourselves with the pensive Christ and hear the silent music of creation.

