'Imagining Nature and Reading General Revelation'

by

Cory Lowell Grewell, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Literature at
Patrick Henry College

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Most of us are probably plenty familiar with the paean to Nature in Psalm 19:

> The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. (Psalm 19:1-4)

In some cases, however, it may be possible that those in the Judeo-Christian tradition have grown too familiar with this classic passage of scripture, for while a great many of us would attest to the fact that Nature does speak of the glory and existence of God, it is less certain that many of us take much time to contemplate what it is, specifically, that Nature is saying. We study nature in a scientific sense, for all of the practical benefits that applied science gives us, and we study nature apologetically in order to read therein the hand of the maker, the "intelligent design" that tells us there is indeed a creator to whom we are accountable and from whom we have our being. But is that all there is to read in Nature? In the four brief verses quoted above, the Psalmist references the communicative character of nature no less than a dozen times, that is to say, no fewer than twelve words in these four verses refer in some way to the discursiveness of Nature, i.e. that it is telling us something. Are we listening intently enough?

Douglas Christie, Professor of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount and author of *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology,* would seem to think that many of us are not. Christie's book, which advocates for both a return to the contemplative resources of monastic Christian mysticism and a simultaneous incorporation of contemporary spiritual ecology, sees the modern dissociation from nature as ultimately existentially problematic, both for the

environment and for human community writ large. Christie describes the problem facing the contemporary world as one of increasing "fragmentation" of our relationship to the world and each other, of "increasing degradation of both the world and our souls" (39). Christie argues that this fragmentation has resulted from a collective human loss of connection to the natural world as alive and full of potential meaning. We have, Christie would seem to imply, reduced what has historically been articulated in the West as capital-N Nature to nothing more than a material mass of natural resources. The cure to this social and ecological problem, he urges, is to once again *see* Nature intimately, to restore a sense of the sacredness of place, to "pay attention" to the world around us and to consciously "notice everything" therein. Christie calls this approach to consciously and actively participating Nature "contemplative ecology." Drawing on the poetics of Denise Levertov at one point in his book, Christie describes the mindset of a contemplative ecology thusly:

> It is to see and feel the presence of the Other not as an object, but as a living subject. To experience this Other as part of a "larger whole," part of a vibrant and complex ecology, and to seek to immerse oneself in that larger whole, is to open oneself to that larger whole completely and without reservation. It is to risk the kind of vulnerability and merging of identities that mystics sometimes refer to in relation to their experience of God. (8)

The closing analogy to a mystical experience of God notwithstanding, Christie's reference to the Natural "Other" as a "living subject" might at first blush seem a little bit more New-Agey to some of us than we would be comfortable with, but we should perhaps pause to consider seriously whether the view of Nature as a "living subject" capable of communicating meaningfully to us in a sort of conversation—and

"conversation" is a figure that Christie uses frequently to describe the process of participating Nature—is probably more consistent with what the Psalmist tells us than is a more modernist, Enlightenment-derived view of nature as nothing more or less than organic matter. And when asking *that* question, perhaps it would be useful to remember that before Moses, the heavens and the firmament quite possibly sufficed as the surest index of the being and character of God to primitive people. What Protestants, at least, since the Reformation have come to refer to as "the second book of revelation", i.e. general revelation or Nature, was actually the first book chronologically speaking.

This is not to set aside the importance of God's speaking directly to the biblical patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, et. al., but it is to note that before the scriptures, the primary experience of communication from the Godhead for most people was *through Nature.* Job 12:7-10 alludes to the discursive import of Nature when Job, in the midst of responding to a speech of his friend Zophar, says, "But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee: Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee: and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee. Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the Lord hath wrought this?" Paul uses a similar logic in Romans 1 to say that even humans who do not have special revelation are "without excuse" for not knowing God from what they see around them. In each of these cases, Nature is put forth as capable of communicating not just that God is, but information sufficient to teach a great deal about God, who He is and His working.

Of course, the thrust of the passages in Job and Romans are still likely somewhat more apologetic – that is, concerned with testifying to the existence and dominion of God – than is the thrust of Christie's "contemplative ecology." Christie's

plea to return to a communion with nature is less apologetic or soteriological than it is sociologically restorative. There is a heavy sense in Christie of trying to return society to an, in at least some senses, Edenic state where humanity is living in total harmony with each other, in total harmony with nature, and in total harmony with God *in* nature, with the emphasis on nature as a "sacred place" fit as a site for such harmonious communion.

In an early chapter of the book, where he links "contemplative ecology" to ancient monastic practices of retreating into nature, Christie writes,

> The contemplative [monk] was invited to *notice everything* and to experience all things as a part of a sacred whole. The monks believed that this encompassing, penetrating way of seeing, while possible for everyone, must be cultivated, brought into the center of consciousness through disciplined practice. By means of such practice, they were convinced, consciousness could gradually be deepened, or—if viewed within the larger moral-spiritual framework within which they understood their lives—*healed*. One could learn to live in the world as a healing presence, attentive and responsive to the lives of other beings and capable of helping to reknit the torn fabric of existence. (6-7)

One of the things I find very striking about Christie's contemplative ecology, is the similarities it has to the stance taken towards nature by not only ancient and medieval mystics, as Christie notes throughout, but also to Romantic poets and philosophers, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his essay *Nature,* Emerson describes the immersion of the human subject into the "larger whole" of a living nature in terms very similar to those used by Christie in reference to the poetics of Levertov,

> Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,--all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental; to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of the uncontained and immortal beauty. (933)

As in Christie's account, Emerson describes the experience of consciously participating Nature as one in which the egotistical self is lost in communion within a sacred space, and thereby "immersed" in communion both with his fellow humans and with the God who has created and upholds them all. The present tense is important here. Emerson says, "I *am* part or particle of God." Christie notes that contemplation "*is* to see and feel the presence of the Other." In both of these accounts, the conscious and contemplative act of participating—or actively being in, if you prefer—the sacred space of nature is an act of presently and consciously and actively *being* in the presence of God. The significance of the experience is less apologetic or scientifically theological than it is devotional or even worshipful, a sort of eyes-wide-open way of living, moving, and having our being in God (Acts 17:28). As with Christie, there's a "return to Eden" sense that permeates Emerson's *Nature*, wherein the act of conscious being in Nature and paying attention to its sacredness goes a certain distance in repairing the breech caused by the Fall.

One curious thing to notice about Emerson's approach to Being in Nature is the emphasis that he lays on the role of the human Imagination in the process of making meaning out of Nature. "The Imagination," Emerson writes, "may be defined to be the use which the Reason makes of the material world" (948). It is the imagination,

Emerson argues, that molds the inchoate spiritual meaning of Nature into language, and thus into discourse that is capable of communicating the beauty and truth of Nature to other human beings. Emerson reasons backwards from the discursive meaning of words to the inchoate, primal meaning of "Spirit" in a three-fold connection, saying,

1. Words are signs of natural facts.
2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
3. Nature is the symbol of spirit. (939)

Thus, in Emerson's economy, God speaks to us primarily through Nature, participated immediately and spiritually by the active human consciousness *in* Nature itself, but also and secondarily through words set down by those same conscious human spirits who use the Imagination to translate the spiritual meaning of the natural world into discourses saturated with beauty and truth. Emerson does not leave it without saying that this translation is primarily the vocation of the poet, and he cites liberally from the works of Shakespeare to illustrate his point.

C.S. Lewis offers a similar description of the process by which primal, spiritual meaning makes its way into language in his essay, "Bluspells and Flalansferes," where he draws a distinction between "meaning" and "truth." Near the end of the essay, where he, like Emerson, cites the critical importance of the role of poets and the poetic imagination in crafting language and meaning, Lewis writes,

> It must not be supposed that I am in any sense putting forward the imagination as the organ of truth. We are not talking of truth, but of meaning: meaning which is the antecedent condition both of truth and falsehood, whose antithesis is not error but nonsense. I am a rationalist. For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the

> organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying the old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition. (10)

Imagination, for Lewis, is the faculty which takes the inchoate material of Nature, in this case, and turns it to discursive meaning, i.e. the words, metaphors, and other figures of speech that effectively make "meaning." However one is not yet at "truth", as Lewis defines it. For Lewis, "truth" is defined by a sort of discernable rational and analytic quality, whereas "meaning" is more intuitive and synthetic. Such a system, particularly as applied to language is mirrored and given much fuller treatement in Owen Barfield's *Poetic Diction.* (It may not be doing violence to Lewis's text to say that poetry, by turning the raw material of Nature to figurative language, produces meaning, and that criticism, or analysis of poetry, turns that meaning to truth.) The meaning of poetry—metaphor and figures—is still relatively inchoate, and in that sense, the poetic represents a more immediate, possibly even more devotional experience of participating being through nature than does the language of science and rational analysis.

The fourth century monastic writer Evagrius of Pontus emphasizes the relatively inchoate and formless nature of participating the Being of God, going so far as to assert that the rational must more or less be left behind in the approach to the Deity: "The mind," Evagrius says, "when it is in prayer … is in a light without form, which is called the place of God" (qtd in Christie 33). Commenting on this passage, Christie writes,

> Here and elsewhere in Evagrius's writings one encounters what feels like an impossible paradox: the experience of contemplation at its deepest level is utterly imageless; and yet the mind in prayer seems like a space saturated with light the color of sapphire or like a place—"the place of

> God." Still, this is a paradox that Evagrius insists must be accommodated if the monk is to remain open to an experience of prayer that is true and deep. (33)

The paradox between place and no-place, or form and formlessness that Evagrius describes in devotional prayer is mirrored in the paradox of active will and self-effacing submission that takes place in the act of contemplation wherein the human Imagination turns Nature into discursive meaning. We can see this paradox clearly writ in Emerson's *Nature*, which insists both on the poet's being "nothing" in the face of and yet at the same time imposing his imaginative will upon Nature. The will is critically important, necessary for the making of meaning, and yet the self is completely abnegated, become a completely passive recipient of the meaning-saturated Being of God in Nature.

But perhaps the paradox is not as unimaginable as it might seem. In the chapter of *The Problem of Pain* where he discusses the Fall, C.S. Lewis postulates a being he refers to as Paradisal Man, a type of humanity that existed before the fall whose active will was so much more heightened and capable of affecting the world around him than our own that he must appear to us almost as super-human, and yet whose will was at the same time so submitted to his Maker that it, conversely, must appear to us as entirely passive (72-73). "God was to such a man," Lewis writes,

> no slippery, inclined plane. [Unfallen humanity's] consciousness had been made to repose on its Creator, and repose it did. However rich and varied man's experience of his fellows (or fellow) in charity and friendship and sexual love, or of the beasts or of the surrounding world then first recognized as beautiful and awful, God came first in his love and in his thought, and that without painful effort. In perfect cyclic movement,

> being, power and joy descended from God to man in the form of gift and returned from man to God in the form of obedient love and adoration. (73-4)

It is worth noting that this union of wills that Lewis describes as typical of Paradisal Man takes place in the presence of and while actively experiencing, affecting, and participating created Nature. The sort of Union with God that Lewis, and Emerson, and Evagrius and Christie all describe is not dis-placed, but rather firmly fixed in Creation, and the Imaginative will—or willful Imagination—that makes meaning out of Creation is all the while so subsumed by union with God and Nature that the meaning he makes undoubtedly strikes the poet as wholly inspired, or given in a vision.

Western Literature is filled with examples of this kind of "inspired" translation of the inchoate spiritual meaning of nature into discursive truth and beauty. Here, though, I want to return to where Christie started us with monastic mysticism and consider briefly Julian of Norwich's well-known contemplation of that small portion of Nature that is the hazelnut. Julian's account of her vision or "showing" as she calls it reads,

> And in this [vision] he showed a little thing, the quantity of an hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as me seemed, and it was as round as a ball. I looked thereon with the eye of my understanding, and thought: What may this be? And it was answered generally thus: It is all that is made. I marveled how it might last, for me thought it might suddenly have fallen to nought for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasteth and ever shall, for God loveth it; and so hath all thing being by the love of God.

> In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second that God loveth it, the third that God keepeth it. But what beheld I therein? Verily, the maker, the keeper, the lover. For till I am substantially united to him I may never have full rest, ne very bliss; that is to say that I be so fastened to him that there be right nought that is made between my God and me. (416)

In this vision, which is to say in this act of participation of a piece of Nature, the hazelnut becomes, through Julian's imagination, a vehicle wherein she is able to fully participate not only nature, but the very Being of God. Nature is a conduit, and meaning is a synthetic reality where both the poet and the Nature she is contemplating ultimately are subsumed into the Divine Being. The nut, imaginatively contemplated, points meaningfully to the substantial union of Julian and God in eternal Being. Importantly, the power that upholds this union of Being, and that fuels the imaginative meaning of the vision as a whole is love. Love is the ground of Being and Union, and meaning, for that matter. And the idea of love as the synthetic power that both holds the universe in union and grants it meaning if we will only see it brings us back to Christie's assertion that the act of "paying attention" and imaginatively participating Nature in union with God and with each other may well hold at least some of the resources necessary to "healing the wounded fabric of creation."

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