Beautiful interrelation with nature

BEAUTIFUL INTERRELATION WITH NATURE: DIVINE HARMONIES AND CREATION'S FULFILLMENT

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A powerful connection exists between natural beauty and the way in which human beings interact with the natural environment. For as we interact with nature, we not only perceive her beauty, but we must live our lives in and amongst it. Such interaction, says environmental philosopher, Holmes Rolston, is the substance of environmental aesthetics: "the beauty of life in dialectic with its environment, the landscape as a place of . . . satisfying adapted fit."[1] Rolston emphasizes ecological science, but ecology[2] intertwines with the arts because art also fits humanity into an environment, such as through architecture and landscape painting. An ecological-artistic approach to environment relates to Paul Tillich's theological approach: for him a human worldview expresses itself symbolically in relation to an environment, revealing something about both the world and humankind in their encounter. As a result of this encounter, the environment achieves a theological significance.[3] In line with Tillich's claim, Muslims, the Chinese, and Christian monastics all find paradise in their gardens, while aborigines find sacred space in their tribal homelands.[4] Thus if natural beauty requires harmony with an environment, and encounter with environment indeed reveals something about the world and humankind symbolically, then beauty or ugliness in that encounter redoubles its theological significance and must be explored. A symbolic natural beauty, as natural revelation, could speak artistically amid nature's vicissitudes and our disharmonious relations with nature, along the lines of Tillich's revelatory styles in art. This "divine art," to use Augustine's term,[5] would allow the religious percipient to "read" beauty as a leitmotiv within Creation's ambivalent "text."[6] Within this

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[1] Holmes Rolston, III, 'Does Aesthetic Appreciation of Landscapes Need to be Science Based?' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35 (1995): 374–86.

[2] I use *ecology* broadly speaking to describe all interactions between organisms and their environment—that is, interactions in addition to aesthetic appreciation. I do not use the term in the narrower sense focusing on environmental conservation; however, ecology broadly speaking does encompass issues of environmental conservation.

[3] See Paul Tillich, 'Environment and the Individual,' in *On Art and Architecture* (ed. John Dillenberger; New York: Crossroad, 1987), 200.

[4] See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (trans. Willard R. Trask; New York: Harvest, 1959), 33–34, 116, 153–54. *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Reality* (trans. Philip Mairet; London: Collins, 1968), 66.

[5] Augustine, *On the Trinity* (De Trinitate) 6.12 (vol. I/5 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*; ed. John E. Rotelle; trans. Edmund Hill; Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1991), 213.

[6] I use *text* as literary metaphor related to the theological concept of Creation's 'book.' By text I mean a significant (but not necessarily verbal) reality in need of interpretation. For Paul Ricoeur, a text can be 'any set of signs that may be taken as a text to decipher, hence a dream or neurotic symptom, as well as a ritual, myth, a work of art, or a belief.' This understanding of text involves 'an enlarged concept of exegesis.' *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (trans. Denis Savage; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), 26.

text, a beautiful harmony between nature and humanity takes on the character of an artistic image, evoking fulfillments of divine intention for both nature and humanity.

In the human relationship with nature, a dialectic arises between human and non-human order and between human and non-human life, as highlighted in the book of Job (Job 38–39). The non-human holds a special connection with beauty, because the lack of human interference in nature (the lack of human conceptions of order), often contributes to natural beauty. The beauty of wilderness often surpasses that of the most lavish gardens, and it is a beauty that is easily marred by fences and power lines. Natural beauty is especially susceptible to human destruction when it depends upon untouched landscapes or delicate ecosystems. Even so, human beings are stilled called to be stewards of Creation, and destruction of natural beauty is essential to human life: we must at least destroy plants and animals to eat and build shelter. Nature and humankind seem, at least to this extent, out of joint. Thus the Maasai bushman apologizes to the antelope before killing it. Furthermore, as much as our architecture may mimic nature, nature eschews right angles, and we never quite fit with natural beauty despite our best efforts. In contrast to artificial forms of construction, John Ruskin observes that "the universal forces of nature, and the individual energies of the matter submitted to them, are so appointed and balanced, that they are continually bringing out curves . . . in all visible forms."[7]

Nonetheless, I do not hold up nature as a perfect ideal, since it can display its own ugliness. And I do not imply that because God is the superior artist, human art can do nothing but mar a natural ideal. The most ornate human art is not completely alien to natural order, although it always lacks something of nature's inimitable givenness and mystique. Annie Dillard says as much when she remarks that if there were but one tree in the world, all living creatures would make a pilgrimage to see and touch it.[8] And Ruskin goes so far as to claim that whatever does not imitate nature is ugly.[9] But it would be better to say that whatever is beautiful is in accord with the created order. That which does accord with nature is, in Ruskin's words, an "image of God's daily work, and an arrested ray of some star of creation."[10] Creation is beauty's natal home even if most natural beauties are but "a solemn moderation" compared to the masterpieces of human art.[11]

This created order, which also pervades human art, produces the raw and uncanny beauty of many natural landscapes, where elements seem thrown together almost, but not quite, by chance. In the case of mountains in particular, the lines and masses most jarring to strict mathematical order often appear most beautiful. Yet we still detect an objective natural order contributing to beauty that prevents us from locating beauty solely in subjective responses to nature. This uncanny, inhuman sort of order matches Tillich's description of "numinous realism." Tillich uses this label to describe an artistic style that distorts our sense of order and perspective. This style can be discerned in the divine art of wilderness by the religious percipient, insofar as the landscape presents itself strangely, "laden with . . .

[7] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (5 vols.; vols. 3–7 of *The Works of John Ruskin*; ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn; London: George Allen, 1903), 2:106.

[8] Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, by Annie Dillard (London: Picador, 1980), 85.

[9] John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (London: George Allen, 1900), 190.

[10] Ibid., 268.

[11] Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 2:140.

ambiguous power," and we receive a sense of ultimate reality shining mysteriously though the landscape.[12] One thinks especially of stark tundra, undulating prairies, precipitous glaciers, and bleeding lava fields—the alien architecture of wind-carved mesas and arches—Hebridean bens or Saharan dunes. These are strange and mysterious landscapes in contrast to human ways of designing, building, and landscaping.

If beauty arises from a numinous natural order, then the beauty of human life with nature also depends upon harmony with this order. But herein is the problem of integrating the human with the divine. Animal life integrates with, or adapts to, nature with a beauty somewhat diminished in domesticated animals and humans. But humans are also more or less adapted to the natural environment (which includes other humans), and the better our habitation "fits," the more likely it is to be beautiful. In fact, fittingness or compatibility of landscape elements is the property most correlated with judgments of beautiful landscape in psychological studies.[13] And our desire to fit with landscape is reflected in the demand for property with waterfront access or mountain views. But the problem is that this sort of development does not "fit" quite as well as it might, and usually ends up marring natural beauty. This is partly because our individual values, such as the desire for beautiful views, however good and even revelatory they might be, are not compatible with global values related either to our neighbors or the environment.[14]

But in addition to the less fitting ski lodges or beachfront hotels, there is also the Romantic ideal of the stone cottage or log cabin that blends almost seamlessly with the surrounding landscape. Still, when we attempt to live out this ideal in practice, the harsher realities of nature forbid any true and abiding harmony. Consequently, the people who are forced to live closest to nature often rebel against an indifferent natural beauty by destroying it as necessary to obtain a better life. These realities defy the modern wilderness cult, which, like Romanticism, sees wilderness "as an earthly version of sacred order and perfection."[15] But it is instructive that the Athabascan natives of Alaska, who live much closer to the land than Native Americans in more developed regions, welcome any and all technological advances that might help them acquire food or shelter in their brutal environment. They still remember their grandparents' stories, full of the suffering inherent to a nomadic lifestyle before modern conveniences reached their villages. So the situation seems to be that if the human does not obliterate the natural through roads, power lines, and condominiums, the natural often obliterates the human through thirst, hunger, disease, and exposure. And so an ideological divide remains between wilderness purists and those who actually make a living from the wilderness.[16]

It is also interesting to note a similar ideological divide even among different age groups. Researchers find that in adolescent through middle-aged people, beauty-judgments correlate

[12] Paul Tillich, 'Art and Ultimate Reality,' in *On Art and Architecture* (ed. John Dillenberger; New York: Crossroad, 1987), 143.

[13] See J. Douglas Porteous, *Environmental Aesthetics: Ideas, Politics and Planning* (London: Routledge, 1996), 120.

[14] Rolston notes this clash of individual with communal and environmental values. 'Environmental Ethics and Religion/Science,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* (ed. Philip Clayton and Zachary Simpson; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 918.

[15] Porteous, 78.

[16] Porteous notes this ideological divide. Ibid., 77.

with lack of human influence on landscape. But children and the elderly make no such connection: they are just as likely to call a landscape with buildings beautiful as one without.[17] This finding could be the result of socialized preferences, but perhaps adolescents and the middle-aged are more sensitive to the effects of the human blight upon nature, while children still focus on the inherent goodness of human existence. And perhaps the elderly have developed a greater appreciation for the benefits of human intervention (including medical intervention) in nature.

These less-than-ideal aesthetic and ecological realities reflect a created order where beauty is often quite at home amid natural evil and the harsher realities of nature. And given these realities, human disharmony with nature is not entirely different from the disharmony already within nature. This disharmony even surfaces in the human practice of harvesting animals. The human hunter finds a beauty in her quarry, whose body she will soon destroy and render ugly, albeit useful. The hunter takes an aesthetic pleasure in the live animal and a practical pleasure in the carcass. Ideally, she takes no pleasure in the act of destroying life and beauty but takes a practical pleasure in the act of harvesting an animal. The hunter does not ignore as irrelevant the aesthetic concern by killing—this is evidenced by the frequent attempt to restore the carcass as close as possible to living beauty through taxidermy. Both the aesthetic and the practical concerns are always present, but they are in irreconcilable conflict. In the created order, beauty and ugliness, natural good and evil, are interwoven inextricably, and in such a tapestry there is as much cause for grieving toward Creation as there is rejoicing in its beauty. Indeed, natural beauty amid evil manifests an artistic style that, according to Tillich, 'shows ultimate reality by judging existing reality.'[18]

In addition, nature's hazards and difficulties, such as produced by mountains and other forbidding terrain, prevent us from construing earth as paradise. But even within such a world, Jesus comments on the divine provision for lilies and ravens, implying that these creatures enjoy more harmony with their environment than do humans, and affirming such harmony as an ideal (Luke 12:24–27). The ideal of harmony reflects God's ordering activity in the Genesis Creation account as contrasted with a postlapsarian disharmony. The biblical description of the antediluvian world as 'full of violence' connotes a structural collapse, whereas the law and tabernacle begin to restore the created order in terms of divine-human and human-human relationships. Likewise, the new Creation is also a temple that fully re-establishes the created order. In this light, although natural beauty mysteriously integrates with natural evil, beauty is still a created and ordered reality that is profoundly 'right' in the world, and can therefore oppose evil artistically. Thus, by an artistic modality, beautiful harmony with nature begins to speak of a triune God who is harmony, and in whose harmony we can hope for an ultimate repose not yet possible in nature.

But to apply this Trinitarian harmonic to nature is not, as Austin Farrer fears, to sap nature of her procreative vitality or to impose engineering upon Creation's art.[19] Creation's vitality, at its heart, does not necessitate the destructive competition of life-forces, such as lambs and crocodiles, nor are we obliged to honour the procreative vitality of cancer or

[17] See Ibid., 126.

[18] Tillich gives Daumier's, *The Butcher*, as an example of this artistic style. 'Art and Ultimate Reality,' 147. The painting focuses on a butcher's expression of dissatisfaction while going about his work.

[19] See Austin Farrer, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* (London: Collins, 1962), 53, 58.

viruses. Rather, natural beauty as an image of divine harmony envisages an imaginative transformation of nature's vitality toward mutually compatible ends, as in the ideal society, which requires no law because of each person's concern for the other. Natural beauty can image such a transformation despite nature's competition; for nature is not all competition but is also symbiosis. Therefore, no created life-force, no leviathan or behemoth, however sublime, can ultimately be allowed to play God. Perhaps these combative life-forces could not have been prevented given God's aims for Creation, but we might imagine that they could yet be reshaped—reshaped perhaps even by the creative rule of redeemed humanity, much as Jesus commanded the wind and the waves. In this way, Creation as art opens up these new possibilities unavailable to Creation as machine; for one misplaced part halts a machine, whereas art secures an infinite space for creative re-placements. Redemption, then, might be less like repairing Creation's broken mechanisms, and more like repainting a brighter, more integrated landscape of the human with the natural. It would be less like surgery on the broken body of the world and more like a resurrection—a resurrected world where potentialities in both nature and humanity find beautiful realization.

A repainted, 'resurrected' world finds expression in landscape painting, such as Sir Peter Paul Rubens' painting of his house as integrated into the landscape, and Samuel Palmer's *Coming from an Evening Service*, where trees frame a church and suggest the integration of God, nature, and humanity. Claude Lorraine in many of his paintings achieves a beautiful integration of past and present, human and divine works, classical grandeur and natural scenery.[20] In a more contemporary expression, even outdoor sports photography integrates nature and humanity, through a climber poised on a cliff or a tent situated in a landscape. These expressions of the nature-human interface match Tillich's understanding of idealistic art, or the expression of future reality through images of present perfections. And so Wordsworth suggests that 'a willing mind . . .

> might almost think, That Paradise, the lost abode of man, Was raised again; and to a happy Few, In its original beauty, here restored.[21]

Thus a beautiful harmony with nature becomes a category of images within Creation's art, evoking not only anamnesis of paradise, but, through Christ, evoking the realized, resurrected potential of Creation itself:[22] 'Behold,' says Christ, 'I make all things new' (Rev 21:5, RSV).

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[20] See, for example, his *Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba* in the National Gallery, London.

[21] William Wordsworth, *The Excursion* 9.712–16 (eds. Sally Bushnell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007).

[22] Cf. Tillich on idealistic art as anticipating paradise and evoking the potential of existence. 'Art and Ultimate Reality,' 148–49. But he also notes that even ordinary objects can mediate a reality that transcends them, such as 'a world in a grain of sand / And a Heaven in a wildflower.' William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence,' in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (ed. David V. Eerdmans; Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1965), 481. See the excerpt from Tillich's own draft of *Systematic Theology* vol. 3 in the Tillich Archives, Andover-Harvard Library, the Divinity School, Harvard University, ed. Robert Scharlemann, in *On Art and Architecture*, 159. Such mediation seems to be the common currency of religious phenomena: 'In each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act—the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural "profane" world.' Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 11.