

REINVENTING NATURE: THOMAS BERRY'S "NEW STORY" AS UNIVERSAL COMMUNITAS

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Abstract

*This paper will provide an overview of how nature has been constructed as 'Other', and discuss ways of challenging this worldview via Thomas Berry's notion of the "New Story". Elaborating on Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*, I will propose that the "New Story" is an assertion to a universal *communitas*.*

The issue of ecological degradation has been given ample scholarly attention. Prompted by Rachel Carson's controversial book *Silent Spring* (1962), the environment became a centerpiece of necessitating concern due to the profligate character of modernity.¹ Drawing upon Carson's thesis, future ecologists developed various theories of nature. Many works endorsed a transition from an anthropocentric worldview to an ecocentric worldview.

Developing from indigenous cosmologies, the famous ecologist Arne Naess eschewed anthropocentric paradigms in developing his eco-philosophical model. Naess's model initiated a link for co-operating with nature with social justice, peace and non-violence. Naess was one of the first theorists to suggest that ecological degradation was tied to the failure of social systems in ensuring citizens civil rights and social equality. In Naess's view, the 'othering' of nature is symptomatic of societies that have lost their way.

Humanity lauds itself over its mastery of nature. Human fixation for treating nature as 'Other' is prompted by a need for ontological security. Unable to admit our mortality and fragile existence humans efface nature in order to retrieve a sense of existential mastery. However, our dominance

is driven by distorted myths and commercial realities. Our cruelty must be absolute. Animals are tormented in order to fulfill market quotas, lands are denuded of their forests and animals are genetically modified for human consumption. In the words of Mary Jenkins, "the treatment of animals to scientifically increase production for humans becomes more and more grotesque."² Jenkins continues stating that, "Scientific experimentation, vivisection, and the control of individuals and non-human species by humans can be seen as a warring process against those whom we have come to call the "Other"³ The implicit assumption here is in maintaining a mystique of human suzerainty in order to counteract our loss of control through age and death. Human addiction to "a deep cultural pathology"⁴ diminishes any possibility for a rapprochement with nature. Consequently, human fear has effected nature's withdrawal from our lifeworlds. As Thomas Berry has stated, our assault on the earth has emasculated our experiential being. In our denial of nature we abjure the ties which are the source of our archetypal myths. The question remains, how far will human hubris inform our relationship with the earth? Our need for an "empathetic response" must outweigh "inhuman callousness."⁵ Jenkins further notes that, "humans separate themselves from the animism of the Earth and the feelings of the non-human of the world in a myopic quest for human progress."⁶

Human rejection of nature as evinced by predatorial forms of capitalism and globalisation serve to reaffirm nihilism. More importantly, such models give an illusion of the primacy of *homo economicus*. This is unfortunate since our most significant secular and religious rituals and stories are somehow tied to nature. The humble non-human retinue of the Christmas nativity scene, the Buddha receiving enlightenment under a *bodhi* tree, or the 'night journey' of the prophet Muhammad upon the *Buraq* attest to the innate correspondence between the human and non-human worlds. For Eliade (1963) our most sacred rituals move us because they restore our place in the cosmos; they allow us to participate in the universe.⁷

The 'Othering' of Nature: Historic Processes

Constructions of nature as Other came during the Socratic period

(circa 5th century B.C.E.). Unlike the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers (circa 6th century B.C.E.) (i.e. Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus) who were among the first thinkers in natural science, the Socratic philosophers (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Sophist schools) veered towards humanism. This transition is mainly attributed to the seminal Greek philosopher Socrates (470-399 B.C.E.). According to legend, it was Socrates who said that there is nothing to be learned from trees, and encouraged investigation into human nature. Socrates legacy was continued by Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.). Although Aristotle made substantial inquiries into the natural world, he believed that human beings were superior to non-humans. This was based on his belief that human beings were rational animals. Spencer claims that "Aristotle denies the power of thought to animals, maintaining that they are capable only of sensation and appetite, and that they need the rule of humankind in order to survive."⁸

Such a view is in concord with Aristotle's idea of the inequality of beings where "Subordination is right because it corresponds to the way things have been made."⁹ Thereafter, with the exception of the Atomist philosophers,¹⁰ Greek philosophy was anthropocentric with little exploration into the non-human universe.

In contrast, the European medieval world consigned the universe to a sacred order from which humanity derived. The concept of a sacred universe, created and maintained by a Prime Mover (God), informed medieval cosmology. In this worldview (as prescribed by the Abrahamic scriptures), humanity was designated the role of vice regent; its purpose was to protect and preserve nature. Western religious iconography of the medieval period attested to the relationship between humankind and the cosmos. 'Man' was viewed as '*microcosmos*', a theomorphic being composed of matter (earth) and spirit (*pneuma*). Humans embodied an "organistic unity".¹¹

The preservation of nature was crucial, particularly in Islam as the former was a means for contemplating God's natural order. For the 'people of the book' (Abrahamic religions) nature was revelatory, a living testament of Divine design, composed of myriads of signs. Nasr explains that the aim of medieval science was to contemplate the unity of the cosmos as a way of understanding Divine Unity.¹²

The advent of the European renaissance (1450-1550) fostered a

paradigmatic shift. Renaissance science separated nature from the sacred, giving rise to a human centered universe.¹³ Human allegiance to God was increasingly supplanted by humanist self interest.¹⁴ The ecologically orientated space-time model of the medieval world was displaced by a linear scheme which adumbrated human living patterns according to economic imperatives.

The change in worldview was confirmed by various European thinkers. Among those the French philosopher René Descartes' materialistic philosophy had a profound impact on western science Descartes ascribed to the Aristotelian concept of an atomistic universe - a mechanistic cosmos stripped of its sacred substance. Moreover, his mind/body model reaffirmed the intellectual and moral supremacy of humans while constructing non-humans as soul-less machines. Here, Aristotle's concept of the 'Great chain of being' was employed in which "nature made plants for the use of animals, and animals were made for the sake of humans (Politics 1:88)."¹⁵

The assigning of animals to automata, bereft of feeling and emotion, resulted in their brutalization by humans from the 17th century onwards. By this time, scientists indulged in animal vivisection while the latter were still alive. Scientists believed that animals felt no pain.

Accordingly, the historian Lynn White writes how progress in European agricultural technology changed "peasant and farmer attitudes towards nature" in which "Man and Nature are two things, and man is master".¹⁸

Another characteristic of the scientific worldview was a concern with taxonomy "with the aim of manipulation and predictability."¹⁹ For example, in his famous work *The Birth of the Clinic* (1975) Michel Foucault avers that physicians increasing use of vivisection from the 16th century onwards not only revolutionised medical techniques but reinforced the notion of the 'body as machine.' This new medical 'gaze' advanced medical specialisation and its cavalcade of specialists. "It presented [the practical knowledges of medicine] as the restitution of an eternal truth."¹⁹ Bodily disease was no longer viewed as a mystery but arising from pathological causes which could be carefully observed, defined and categorized by the new empirical discourse.

Along with the advent of a mechanistic worldview arose the discovery of the 'New World' by western Europeans. Colonialism spread

western values to the conquered peoples of the 'Orient.' Europeans justified their conquest of the Orient on the pretext that they were a civilizing force. Consequently, the colonized were viewed as being "biologically inferior" and "culturally backward". Edward Said notes that the colonial powers essentialised the non-West as irrational, carnal, and inimical.²⁰ In this schemata, Oriental peoples were considered to be closer to nature. Thus, the 'Othering' of nature was similarly employed to define the Oriental. Nowhere is the imagery of Othering better exemplified than in Orientalist art of the 19th century. Orientalist art invariably portrayed the Oriental male as effeminate "yet dangerous" while the Oriental female was typically exotic and "eager to be dominated."²¹ The concurrent popularity in social Darwinism (circa mid 19th to early 20th centuries) subscribed indigenous peoples as 'irrational primitives' who were incapable of acquiring civilisational status. Like nature, indigenous peoples were to be controlled under the prescriptive of justified force.

The estrangement between the human and non-human Other has been referred by Martin Heidegger as a "night world" and Max Weber as "disenchantment of the world". For Heidegger modernity is consigned to instrumentalism whereby things are viewed technologically. Hence, things are no longer revealed as themselves but rather as resources for human ends. According to this scheme, old growth forests become chipboard, serene valleys become tourist resorts, and wildlife are turned to media attractions.²² Modernity is characterised by a matrix of technological relations which has disconnected human beings from the earth and hurling them into "existential homelessness."²³

Similarly, Weber postulates that the social organising principles of modern human beings are "disenchanted and denuded" and "inwardly genuine plasticity."²⁴ Disenchantment also describes the belief that the universe has become de-mystified and no longer perceived with awe, but succumbing to human calculations.²⁵

Thomas Berry: The "New Story"

The Catholic theologian, Thomas Berry has over several decades developed a new theology which he has termed the "New Story". The

New Story expresses the need for a "mythic consciousness"²⁶ in humans which will ordain a rapprochement between the human and non-human worlds. Berry observes that Western science and religion have colluded in a global pathology which has veiled "the radical discontinuity" between the Western religious traditions and nature. According to Berry et al (Kinsley 1995;²⁷ Angyal 2003), Western religious traditions have also been primarily focussed on "spiritual redemption" and "seriously deficient" in foregrounding the "natural world" as "our primary revelatory experience".

At this point Berry argues that science must be balanced with a "poetic and spiritual appreciation of the Earth" towards a scientific logos.²⁸ Berry's views are synonymous with the eco-philosopher David Abram when he calls for a phenomenology of perception whereby the human 'presences' the non-human world. Here, the senses become increasingly attuned to the animal and organic landscapes, to the "encompassing cosmos".²⁹ Both Berry and Abram argue for a new kind of poietic embodiment emulating the mytho-experiential understandings of creation that are found in shamanic societies.

However, Berry is not calling for modern societies to return to a pre-industrial age, but rather a reinvention in the way in which humans idealize and participate with the earth. Concurrent with the New Story is viewing the earth as the ground of our biological and spiritual being. In Berry's *Dream of the Earth* (1990) he observes the human need, "to go into the earth, as the source whence we came, and ask for its guidance, for the earth carries the psychic structure as well as the physical form of every living being upon the planet".³⁰ As humans are terrestrial creatures, our spirituality is earth bound, "human and earth are totally implicated each in the other."³¹

Such a worldview entails a transformation in regarding the earth from an object to a "primary subject"³² "endowed with a spiritual mode of being."³³

In this view, science becomes a key mode of interpreting the evolution of the universe and life on earth. The story of cosmogenesis begins with the primordial explosion of the Big Bang which is the origin of space/time, the creation of atoms and the first "galactic formations",³⁴ the beginning of our solar system and primeval earth, the advent of proterozoic creatures, the evolution of complex life forms, and the formation of human

consciousness. As Swimme points out, defining "life" in a moral and spiritual sense only undermines "biological life".³⁵ Importantly, Berry's new vision purports the centrality of a "time developmental universe" in which cosmic processes "reveal themselves in an ongoing creativity."³⁶ Berry's vision is laced with metaphors of an "interconnected universe", where star matter is the progenitor of future worlds, and where "life is a principle inherent in the primordial structures of the universe."³⁷

Humanity is central to Berry's vision, as being the consciousness of the universe, a species created for celebration, for in human awareness the universe exalts itself.³⁸ Berry refers to the Chinese pictograph "*hsin*", in explaining the human relationship with the universe.³⁹ *Hsin* denotes the human as the "heart of heaven and earth". In Berry's words: "Here we have a remarkable feeling for the absolute dimensions of the human, the total integration of reality in the human, the total integration of the human within the reality of things."

New Story as Universal *Communitas*

At this point, I would like to introduce Victor Turner's concept of *communitas* in order to unpack some of Berry's views. Central to Turner's theory of religion is the phase during religious rituals which he calls *liminality*. *Liminality* is characterised as an ambiguous state in which ritual participants are "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."⁴⁰

This phase is also characterised by what Turner refers to as *communitas* which denotes a feeling of unity, comradeship, egalitarianism, empathy, and comity between individuals. In other words, *communitas* suggests a temporary dissolution of social structures which privilege social distinctions between people. For example, Turner asserts that religious pilgrims often experience a state of 'flow', 'impregnated by unity ... purified from divisiveness and plurality' (Turner and Turner 1978:255).⁴¹

Turner cites that *communitas* is not restricted to rituals but also encompasses various kinds of ideological movements or transcendental states of awareness where an individual experiences a feeling of unity between human or non-human others. This corresponds with Martin

Buber's "I-Thou" where humans are aware of the human or non-human Other "as having a unity of being."⁴²

The state of a 'universal *communitas*' is expressed in Barbara Meyerhoff's study of the Huichol Indians during their sacred journey to Wirrikuta in the south-west United States of America. During one of their rituals the Huichol attain a transcendental state synonymous with Eliade's *illud tempus* where they unite with the gods and the cosmos.⁴³

Universal *communitas* pervades Berry's cosmology. In Berry's language existence is constituted by interdependent systems, or what he refers to as "allurement" where the cosmos is held together atomically, magnetically and chemically (p.7).⁴⁴ Allurement is the primal dynamism, the blueprint of cosmogenesis. This key principle which "awakens the communities of atoms, galaxies" stars and ecosystems is the same force that creates human nations, communities and families.⁴⁵ Allurement in the human species is characterised by self reflexion or conscious awareness through which the universe discloses itself and is apperceived in our sensibilities. Cognate with the ancient notion of humanity as microcosm, Abram claims that "we are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and that the world is perceiving itself through us."⁴⁶

However, for Berry human consciousness is the integument which "binds us to the world and to one another",⁴⁷ constantly striving towards disclosing the universe. Furthermore, one way in which the universe organises itself is through myths (p.8).⁴⁸ According to Brian Swimme myths inform and direct human consciousness. The realm of the myth is a cavalcade of creativity. Meta-narratives are Epic myths which are universal to human societies. The Epic of the divinisation of the cosmos is kernel to the human species. With the exponentialise rise of technology the Epic of the divinisation of the cosmos has engendered new organising principles. For instance, the advent of the internet and global communication networks have catapulted human consciousness. For the first time in human history human consciousness has been able to venture into space via space rockets and satellites. In the latter, human consciousness has been transformed into a "Noosphere" enveloping the earth in an infinitesimal communication matrix. Here, the symbiosis of silicone based cyber machines and biologically based consciousness are extending ontological boundaries. In Ibn Arabi's thought, the predominating technologies of our time are

none other than the "Self disclosure of Being" in its desire to be known.⁴⁹

Reinventing the Human: New Ways of Universal Communitas

A feature of Thomas Berry's New Story is his call for a global transformation in human belief systems which surmounts to "reinventing the human" (p.19).⁵⁰ Reinvention primarily comes via accommodating the human species into the earth community in a non-intrusionist manner.⁵¹ Secondly, reinvention of the human species must be done in a "time developmental" context which accounts for the cosmological dimension of human evolution. Human evolution should not simply be viewed as a biological phenomenon, but also as an emergent process of transformations which navigate cultural and spiritual modes of human existence.⁵² The key here is "to be able to identify the microphase of our human being with the macrophase mode of our universe being is the quintessence of what needs to be achieved."⁵³

Berry discusses the need for empirical observation as an invaluable resource in our establishing a "viable mode of living".⁵⁴ Such a mode incorporates an understanding of human evolution as the sacred journey of the universe towards self awareness.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the universal journey is a creative process. In human terms the universe's creative potentialities are manifested by the human penchant for mythmaking. Whereas beneficial myths lead towards existential and social development, destructive myths lead towards "enhancement" - i.e. cultural narcissism and "cultural pathology"⁵⁶

Berry's notion of the sacred journey corresponds with Martin Heidegger's concept of being "released toward". To be released toward something is to consign one's attention towards it in a caring way.⁵⁷ "To be released" towards an indoor plant is to appreciate its beauty for what it is, rather than passing it unnoticed in one's daily life. To be released to the earth is to be attentive of its contours, lines and sinews, its unfolding and concealing. Thus, in Heideggerian terms our sacred journey is 'world gathering', "an arena within which" "attending to a thing can illuminate a world" and for disclosing its significance.⁵⁸ James reminds us that to "gather world" is not simply a "frame of mind" but a set of habitual bodily practices.⁵⁹

From an environmental level, negative bodily comportments may include neglecting to switch lights off, leaving rubbish on the ground rather than putting it in a bin, or overuse of private transport.

Releasement also intimates a sensuous disposition with the natural world. Drawing upon Abram, he views releasement as a "returning to the senses". As he observes: "If we ignore or devalue sensory experience, we lose our primary source of alignment with the larger ecology, imperilling both ourselves and the earth in process" (p.1).⁶⁰ For example, Abram states that our experiencing the rising and setting of the sun is caught between our frames of mind which indicate to us that the earth is really moving, and our animal senses which experience the sun as rising from the earth every morning and vanishing into the earth every evening.⁶¹ When we awake our sensory perceptions we experience each entity as a horizon disclosing its secrets. When we privilege our sensuous awareness of the natural world we are drawn in a dynamic *communitas*, the intertwining of our bodies with the "flesh of the world".⁶²

In this vision of *via positiva*, human language as an aspect of human embodiment needs to be reinvented. The metaphors we commonly associate to nature expose our anthropocentric views. With few exceptions, metaphors alluding to animals are often used to describe a litany of uncouth behaviours, and ensure our separation from the non-human world. Our observance with 'metaphors of quantity' is indicative of our present dilemma. Grossman citing Wendell Berry states: "When language is detached from its origins in communal experience, it becomes 'arbitrary and impersonal'" (p.5).⁶³

Metaphors of quantity have become the measuring stick of social systems, which ensure the "system of inequalities".⁶⁴ "In a world of extreme inequities, growth and the language of growth has become a smokescreen" for unchecked human practices.⁶⁵ Grossman's call for the expunging of metaphors of quantity⁶⁶ mirrors Abram's view that human beings need to retrieve the sensuous quality of languages.⁶⁷ According to Abram, language connects us to the world, "touching and penetrating" the sentient landscape. Words which originate from the body's inner domain meld with the body of the world. Language 'presences' our being in the world in ways which modern human beings have forgotten. The need to return language to the senses will ensure that our being in the world re-enchants our connectedness

with the sacred universe.

ENDNOTES

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⁶ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁷ Eliade, Mircea. (1963) *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. Rosemary Sheed (trans.) Cleveland: The World Publishing Company.

⁸ Spencer, Colin. (1995) Extract from *The Heretics Feast: A History of Vegetarianism*: London: University of New England. www.ivu.org/history/greece_rome/aristotle.html. In his *Politica* Aristotle says that "It is the best for all tame animals to be ruled by human beings." *Politica*, ed. Loeb Classical Library, 1254 b 10-14, cited in "Greek Philosophy on the Inferiority of Women". http://www.womenpriests.org/traditio/infe_gre.asp.

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⁵² *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.22.

⁵⁷ James. *Op. cit.*, p.2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.3.

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