

## Angels, Ecology, & Virtual Reality

*Spirit of place! It is for this we travel, to surprise its subtlety; and where it is a strong and dominant angel, that place, seen once, abides entire in the memory with all its own accidents, its habits, its breath, its name.*<sup>1</sup>

### **Spirit of Place**

In the summer of 1995 in Montana, outside the little town of Chinook, I found myself surprised by another world. Vacation sightseeing tends toward idle gawking at landscape, “natural” or “artificial,” taking it in for pleasure, and moving on. Here, however, the landscape reached out and took *me* in and moved me at a far deeper level. Waist deep in prairie, enveloped by grasses not yet browned by summer, everywhere my turning gaze found only distance and sky. I felt that I ought to have been delighted by the beauty, yet what moved me was an intense and old sadness, a melancholy beyond words. This was the *Chief Joseph Battleground*, witness to the deaths of many: many people, many hopes.<sup>2</sup> At intervals slender metal rods had been hammered into the earth like so many nails and each one bore—in a circular engraving—a name, several names, of those who had fallen and bled in that place. Some rods had become shrines, now marked with

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<sup>1</sup> *Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), s.v. "Alice Meynell (1847-1922), English poet, essayist. Essays, 'The Spirit of Place' (1914)."

<sup>2</sup> "Nez Percé tribespeople in the Northwest are ordered to leave or be removed forcibly after years of passive noncompliance with the treaty they signed in 1863 ... US troops are sent in ... and ... nearly annihilated ... The Nez Percé are weakened after 18 subsequent engagements, Chief Joseph leads 750 tribespeople in a retreat through nearly 1,600 miles of Rocky Mountain wilderness pursued by 600 soldiers, but fresh troops ... surround him October 5. Forced to surrender in Montana Territory less than 40 miles from the safety of the Canadian border, Chief Joseph says, 'I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. ... It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death ... I will fight no more forever.'" *The People's Chronology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), s.v. "Human Rights and Social Justice, 1877," by James Trager.

medicine bags and fragments of stone and feather and flower. Some stood alone, askew, while the wind whispered in the grass. Silence, space, and sadness.

Does a place have a spirit? A *genius loci*, in the old sense; “a strong and dominant angel?” I know I approached that place with a knowledge of its history. Would it have so moved me without? I know the depth and the timbre of the inner motion took me by surprise: I arrived a tourist and left a pilgrim. The land itself seemed to speak with a silent voice at odds with its beauty. Somehow nature and history came together in that place to shape a world of significance that could draw me in, a world between the objective and the subjective, a world where the visible and the invisible met in imaginal existence.<sup>3</sup> Such a world, being a matter of imagination, engages human feeling deeply—we cannot but be affectively inclined towards or away from it. It is a world of significance for us. But is the significance *significant*? Should we let it guide us or should we pass it off as trivial?

There is, I believe, a crucial question here. The modern period has sundered the imagination. The natural and the human have fallen apart and generated an unruly family of feuding dualisms. And, somewhere in the gap that has been opened, the religious imagination has been lost.<sup>4</sup> As a result, it seems difficult to speak of the spirit of a place without reducing that spirit to one pole or the other: objective / subjective; real / unreal; materialist / romantic; *etc.* But if land and place and earth have no spirit, if they cannot speak and move our hearts and touch our minds, what hope do we, or *they*, have for survival? It is the modern blight that we treat “nature” as a

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<sup>3</sup> Sullivan uses this term to underline that imagination is about more than stories or symbols, but takes in the whole of lived life: Lawrence E. Sullivan, *Icanchu's Drum: An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religions* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Alex García-Rivera, "The Cosmic Frontier: Toward a Natural Anthropology," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 3, no 1 (1995).

voiceless commodity and the *post*-modern misfortune that we live under the fear of the consequences.<sup>5</sup> The deadened earth is dying and we are killing ourselves as we kill the land.

But why shouldn't we treat the land this way? What can keep us from ecological destruction? Can enlightened self-interest and deeper scientific insight do the trick? This "light Green"<sup>6</sup> hope seems little else than wishful thinking: even amazingly amplified so as to be motivationally effective it is doubtful that it can delve deep enough to save us. Indeed many would say that self-interest and a productive mentality are at the root of the issue and so more the problem than the solution.<sup>7</sup> One way or another, these "dark Greens" or "deep" ecologists envision a radical transcendence of human interest in the face of a new or rediscovered moral significance of the non-human world. Such visions can be broadly characterized as "spiritual"—they find ultimate and irreducible value outside, independent of, and beyond the human.<sup>8</sup>

We need to rediscover the unique voice of the earth, to reacquaint ourselves with spirit all around us. This project of radical ecology is fascinating but fraught with difficulties—philosophical, theological, and, of course, practical and political. For example, philosophically, it is the very

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<sup>5</sup> For a fine and well-documented description of the post-modern condition and its relationship to ecological destruction, see: Arran E. Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995). His positive proposal for a "new world order" based on a "new grand narrative, a grand narrative formulated in terms of the cosmology based on a philosophy of process," (p. 139) fails, I believe, to answer the criticisms enumerated below.

<sup>6</sup> The terms "Dark Green" and "Light Green" correspond roughly to the distinction between "Deep" ecology and "Shallow," or "Reform," ecology, so named by the Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movements: A Summary," *Inquiry* 16 (1973). 95-100.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Roberto Goizueta argues that *any* liberation theology grounded in a notion of *praxis* that is *instrumental* must degrade fellow subjects to objects. A *praxis*, however, that is based in *intrinsic* worth (*i.e.*, an *aesthetic praxis*) can support genuine intersubjectivity: Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Naess, himself, agrees that deep ecology has an inescapable religious aspect: Stephan Bodian, "Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: Interview with Arne Naess," in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, ed. Michael Zimmerman, et al. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993), 186. For a recent collection of papers dealing explicitly with this issue see, *e.g.*, Fritz Hull, ed., *Earth & Spirit: The Spiritual Dimension of the Ecological Crisis* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

anthropocentric *partiality* of the modern project that permits the notion of value—some things are good *for us* and some bad—but as the *whole* becomes its own source of value it is hard to maintain any moral outrage at the behavior of any *part*. Stephen Clark expresses this in typically trenchant fashion.

Either we think that Nature, or especially the living earth, is perfect as she is, or we do not. If we do, and somehow adjust ourselves to the amoral rapture with which television documentaries now greet the spectacle of wasp grubs eating living caterpillars or wild dogs tearing at a living antelope, then why should we make exceptions for the greatest living predator? Nature maintains herself in the exchange of materials, constantly adjusting to the change of days. She, so to speak, raises no objections to slave-maker ants, ichneumon wasps or chimpanzees who batter in the skulls of young baboons—or chimpanzees. So why should we, who revere her, raise objections to human predation and control?<sup>9</sup>

A Christian theologian cannot help but also be aware of stepping into the well-mined territory of ancient controversies: nature / grace; transcendence / immanence; creation / redemption; apophasis / kataphasis; *etc.* In particular, the project of inspiriting matter usually results in some form of pantheism with its own philosophical and theological problems. Panentheism, the theological flavor of the month,<sup>10</sup> when it moves beyond metaphor, straddles the uncomfortable territory between incoherence and emptiness. Maybe, however, the problem posed by the ecological crisis *is* demanding a move beyond Christian orthodoxy. Maybe the hedges of dogma cannot contain this much bigger beast. The setting aside of tradition, however, seems to be one of

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen R. L. Clark, *How to Think About the Earth: Philosophical and Theological Models for Ecology* (London: Mowbray, 1993), 39. Note Clark's use of feminine terms for 'Nature', a facet of the ecological issue that has been well explored by Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

<sup>10</sup> *E.g.*, Leonardo Boff, *Ecology & Liberation: A New Paradigm*, trans. John Cumming, Ecology and Justice: An Orbis Series on Global Ecology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Albert J. LaChance & John E. Carroll, eds., *Embracing Earth: Catholic Approaches to Ecology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

the hallmarks of the modern project that has got us into this mess<sup>11</sup>—is it likely to provide the solution?

Practically and politically there are problems too. Clark underlines the implicit “inhumanism” in much environmental spirituality whether ecofeminist, bioregionalist, or globalist. Modern humanism, by constructing the earth as utter *other*, won freedom and dignity for human beings.<sup>12</sup> Post-modern radical ecology, as it erodes that otherness, stands to erode that dignity and freedom. “There is no inorganic nature, there is no dead, mechanical earth. The Great Mother has been won back to life,” are words emerging from the one serious attempt in our times to institute public environmental policy: the National Socialism of the Third Reich.<sup>13</sup> Commenting on the biocentric “politics of much ‘Earth Spirituality,’” Paul Gorman writes:

Where’s *human* suffering in this story? Aghast at anthropocentrism, have many turned to efforts on behalf of nature to avoid facing our failure to heed and heal one another? Is there some new self-hatred at work here? Back to the garden only to rediscover the shame.<sup>14</sup>

Luc Ferry too picks up this thread of inhumanism, finding the collapse of the distinction between nature and culture to be the converging place of extreme Left and extreme Right.

Here, it seems to me, is where the true danger lies, a danger to which we would be exposed should radical ecology succeed in winning over public opinion: by considering culture, in the manner of sociobiology, to be a simple prolongation of

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<sup>11</sup> John Deely, *New Beginnings: Early Modern Philosophy and Postmodern Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> At least *some* human beings: it could be argued that such dignity was bought at the expense of women, minority groups, and “primitive” peoples. See, e.g., Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> E Krieck (1936); cited R. A. Pois, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).117.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Gorman, "New Story/Old Story: Citizenship in Earth," in *Earth & Spirit*, ed. Fritz Hull (New York: Continuum, 1993), 197.

nature, the entire world of the mind is endangered. Between barbarism and humanism, it is now up to democratic ecology to decide.<sup>15</sup>

Any candidate for an ecological spirituality needs to respect this problem of otherness, needs to answer the anthropological question “Who are we and how do we fit into creation?” Faced with the modern assumption of our otherness from the earth,<sup>16</sup> radical ecology has either accepted that otherness to subvert it (*e.g.*, asserting that we are a cancer which must be excised from nature’s body) or denied it completely (*e.g.*, placing human flourishing and that of the microbe on an identical footing). Yet, just as is the case with differences among human individuals and among human cultures, the way forward lies neither in extolling difference nor in decrying it but in finding it to be *significant*. How is the earth, the land, *this* place, a significant other to me? How is this place on the prairie of Montana significant in itself? Does this place have a spirit?

The search for this significant spirit, when seen as the finding of spirit in matter, is doomed to failure: how can you create such a dichotomy and then hope to unify the fragments with ease?

But what if we re-conceive the problem in two dimensions rather than one?

*i.e.*, not

<b>Spirit</b>	<b>Matter</b>
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<sup>15</sup> Luc Ferry, *The New Ecological Order*, trans. Carol Volk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 151.

<sup>16</sup> “The basic problem, the essential cause of our present world crisis. Is that we humans do not feel at home. We do not feel that we *belong* with the rest of creation; not the way the trees and the rivers do; not like the birds and the animals. We feel, rather, that we’re somehow different, maybe even introduced into this world from someplace else, souls from another realm who are passing through an alien and unfriendly land.” Daniel Martin, “The Joining of Human, Earth, and Spirit,” in *Earth & Spirit*, ed. Fritz Hull (New York: Continuum, 1993), 43.

but, following a Cappadocian insight,<sup>17</sup>

	<b>Created</b>	<b>Uncreated</b>
<b>Visible</b>	Earth	
<b>Invisible</b>	Heaven	Deity

In such a schema we are not restricted to a polarity (along the leading diagonal) in which matter (“Earth”: the created visible) and spirit (“Deity”: the uncreated invisible) resist unification. Two other possibilities emerge. One (the box I have left empty) corresponds to the possibility of uncreated spirit being visible—maybe the paradoxical possibility of Incarnation.<sup>18</sup> I want, however, to explore the second new possibility, that of the presence of the created invisible realm (“Heaven”). Instead of trying to make the Absolute relative, the Infinite finite, the All-present local, what if the spirit of place were a created spirit? Would that deliver the benefits we so need without the difficulties?<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “It was this distinction between ‘earth’ as the visible creation and ‘heaven’ as the invisible creation, but much more importantly the ontological distinction between both of them and ‘deity,’ that the creed expressed in its opening words: ‘We believe in one God, Father, all-sovereign Maker of heaven and earth, *of all things, whether visible or invisible*’” [emphasis mine]. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993), 259.

<sup>18</sup> For all we have reflected on the concept of Incarnation for nearly two millennia its mystery has not produced a promising ecological theology. Lilburne, however, attempts a swift sketch of such an approach: Geoffrey R. Lilburne, *A Sense of Place: A Christian Theology of the Land* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> The Cappadocians’ insistence that both heaven and earth, though distinguished by visibility, were created by God served several ends. It made the intelligible realities of heaven *contingent* and, thus, not pseudo-Platonic forms. It safeguarded the transcendence of God (already enshrined in their apophatic theology) and ensured that creation could not be seen as emanation. It prevented the collapse of the categories of creation and redemption. See Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*.

## **Created Spirit's Career**

The realm of the created invisible which we must investigate has, in the Christian tradition, been inhabited by two populations: souls and angels. Only the angelic realm will concern us here.<sup>20</sup>

From the first, angels have played a mediating role: among their many and developing activities in the traditions of the Hebrew Bible primary is that of messenger or envoy—*mal'ak* in Hebrew, *aggelos* in Greek—go-between.<sup>21</sup> They are not Deity as such but mediators of Divine presence and activity. Yet even this apparent clarity has to be hedged since in many narratives<sup>22</sup> *mal'ak yhwh* seems to merge into *yhwh*—the envoy into the one who sends—in a literary device that permits angels to mediate both the presence and the absence of God.<sup>23</sup>

The rich and ambiguous biblical tradition was taken up by mystics and theologians (Jewish, Christian and Islamic) through to the middle ages and constantly elaborated and developed.<sup>24</sup> In Pseudo-Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy* (~500 CE) the mediating role of angels is interpreted

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<sup>20</sup> Although the invisible soul, united with a visible body, is the very place where the visible and invisible meet most intimately, and, as such, is the place where the anthropology we seek must eventually be tested, that very intimacy breeds a complexity that is best postponed. The angels provide a clearer view of the created invisible.

<sup>21</sup> *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York & Nashville: Abingdon Press), s.v. "Angel," by T. H. Gaster; David Noel Freedman, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), s.v. "Angels," by Duane F. Watson.

<sup>22</sup> E.g., Genesis 16:7-13; 21:15-21; 22:11-12; 31:11-13; Exodus 3:2-6; Judges: 6:11-24.

<sup>23</sup> On the Biblical texts and their interpretation see: Anchor Bible Dictionary, *Angels*. That angels are mediators places them squarely within the domain of semiotics, the science of signs. Stuart Schneiderman embellishes this connection in his book, *An Angel Passes: How the Sexes Became Undivided* (New York: New York University Press, 1988). His project, though fascinating, is ultimately undermined, however, by his Lacanian understanding that signs are dyadic. A triadic notion of sign, developed from that of Charles S. Peirce, grounds the ability of angels to mediate a real presence, rather than running aground on the shoals of shifting human convention: see, e.g., James Hoopes, ed., *Peirce on Signs: Writing on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), or, Alex García-Rivera, "A Matter of Presence," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* (forthcoming).

<sup>24</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Marion Leathers Kuntz & Paul Grimley Kuntz, eds., *Jacob's Ladder and the Tree of Life: Concepts of Hierarchy and the Great Chain of Being* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987); H. Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, trans. R. Mannheim (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969).



metaphysically in a Neoplatonic synthesis of heaven and earth.<sup>25</sup> The Celestial Hierarchy, itself subdivided and ordered into three ranks of three, lies between the realm of Godhead (an overflowing Trinity) and the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy of earth: both a moment in the emanation of Godhead and a ladder of mystical return. As above so below: the attributes of angels, richly imagined, shed light upon the desired attributes of humanity and lure us home. The mediation of angels is *anagogical*.<sup>26</sup> This angelic ascent becomes of prime importance to the mediæval mystics: Hildegard of Bingen, Alan of Lille, Richard of St. Victor, for example, all describe the nine choirs of angels as an aid to contemplation and an image of generic human interiority.<sup>27</sup> A dramatic shift in focus was, however, underway which would slowly transform the understanding of nature and of angels: a shift literally *embodied* in St. Francis.

For Francis of Assisi and his followers, however, Jesus the human individual became the object of the devotion. . . . [which] granted individual form a definitiveness which it had not possessed before. Thus began a daring cosmic symbolism that endowed each facet of nature with inexhaustible expressiveness.<sup>28</sup>

In Bonaventure, faithful Franciscan, the image of the crucified Christ is superimposed on the Seraph that brings St. Francis his vision of heavenly ascent and the compound image becomes impressed upon his flesh as stigmata.<sup>29</sup> In this dawning era, angels, as mirrors that reflect the

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<sup>25</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid & Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> *i.e.*, a matter of genuine transformation rather than the *analogical* mediation of thought or language.

<sup>27</sup> There was a rough mediæval consensus on the naming of the nine choirs, if not on their exact functions or attributes: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Principalities, Powers, Virtues, Archangels, Angels. The middle hierarchy—Dominions, Principalities, Powers—seems to have given rise to most disagreement. There was also agreement that specific human virtues or offices were the particular concern of each choir, though the details differed among interpreters.

<sup>28</sup> Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 36.

<sup>29</sup> The giving of the stigmata is described in *The Life of St. Francis*, chapter 13 and becomes the basis for Bonaventure's mystical theology in *The Soul's Journey into God*. Bonaventure, *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God; The Tree of Life; The Life of St. Francis*, trans. Ewert Cousins, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

image of the unseen God, reveal first a human face. One aspect of this humanization, only nascent in Bonaventure, is the subordination of angels as mediators to Jesus of Nazareth, Mediator. The human being journeys into God by bearing more and more the image of Jesus. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in the mysticism of Ignatius of Loyola, angels play an essential role in discernment but are never center stage, a place occupied solely by Jesus and those human beings he calls to accompany him in his labors.<sup>30</sup>

The eclipse of angels in the mystical tradition, prepared for by the turn to the individual, is paralleled in “non-mystical” or “rational” angelology by two developments. First, angelic spirit becomes identified with mind. Pannenberg (in a different context) has plotted the diminution of the notion of spirit from the rich, biblical “breath of life” to the problematic, Cartesian “*res cogitans*”: mind being potentially free from the disturbance of the body took on the role of spirit.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Aquinas’ angels are minds without bodies,<sup>32</sup> reflecting the mediæval assumption that the importance of intellect far exceeds that of imagination, let alone embodied, sensual nature. Yet, the dividing line between mind and body was not always so sharply drawn. Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine all believed that angels have bodies, however rarefied.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In the meditation on the “Two Standards,” *e.g.*, the “evil” camp consists of Lucifer and his demons but the parallel figures under the banner of good are not angels but Jesus of Nazareth and the “persons, apostles, disciples, and the like” that he chooses: Ignatius Loyola, *Ignatius Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. George E. Ganss, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 154-156.

<sup>31</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Towards a Theology of Nature: Essays on Science and Truth*, ed. Ted Peters (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 124-126.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q. 50, a. 1. Aquinas’ Treatise on the Angels comprises questions 50-64 of the *Summa*. Mortimer Adler, *Angels and Us* (New York: Macmillan, 1982) offers an introductory digest of Thomas’ thought.

<sup>33</sup> Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 240. The discussion, below, of iconoclasm will also refer to this issue.

Second, apart from their metaphysical importance, angels fulfilled a further purpose in ancient and mediæval thought. As early as Aristotle, angels were considered to keep the heavenly spheres in motion and this office persisted into Christian angelology and operated to repudiate any suggestion of action at a distance. Angels enjoyed the office of maintaining both the motion of the planets through the heavens and the mundane trajectories of human missiles.<sup>34</sup> The birth of modernity and its new sciences, however, worked to eliminate even this last vestige of angelic reality. Angels went underground as inertia: it is a short step from the conception of angels as placeless, mental realities to their complete usurpation by Laws of Nature, similarly invisible, all-pervasive, and strangely effective. Douglas Harding puts it well:

[The mediæval universe was] a great hierarchy of supernatural intelligences directing the great hierarchy of natural process and steering the stars in their courses. The universe was still alive, but its mind and its body had parted company. Medieval man [sic] robs the angels of their bodies; renaissance man robs them of their functions; modern man robs them of their existence—he adds the finishing touch. Every advance in science has thrown an angel out of work, or else compelled him to dress up as Tendency which bodies observe, or a Law of Nature which they obey, or a Force to which they submit.<sup>35</sup>

In this move, an essentially religious phenomenon—the angelic—becomes reduced to the natural.<sup>36</sup> Or, rather, since angels have always been “natural” by virtue of their creation, the

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<sup>34</sup> “All corporeal things are governed by the angels. And this is not only the teaching of the holy doctors, but of all the philosophers.” Aquinas *Summa* 1, 110, 1; quoted in Jean Daniélou, *The Angels and Their Mission: According to the Fathers of the Church*, trans. David Heimann (Westminster, MD: Christian Classic, Inc., 1953, 1987), 4.

<sup>35</sup> D. E. Harding, “Are Angels Superfluous?,” *Theology* (1952), 98. Harding elsewhere describes the “fall” of angels as the progressive loss of the Transcendentals: “angels appear first as the suprahuman which is good, and also beautiful and true; then as the human which is beautiful, and also true; and finally as the infrahuman which is true.” D. E. Harding, *The Hierarchy of Heaven and Earth: A New Diagram of Man in the Universe* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1952), 238. In a similar vein, Stephen Clark can say of angels: “They are the points at which our theories meet the world, the things that are at once modes of thought and modes of being;” or “They are, that is, both what we call natural forces or explanatory models and presences constantly encountered in our dealings with the world.” Stephen R. L. Clark, “Where Have All the Angels Gone?,” *Religious Studies* 28 (1992): 228, 231.

<sup>36</sup> García-Rivera, *Cosmic Frontier*.

concept of nature, so modified by modernity, idealizes them away.<sup>37</sup> To modernity's scientific imagination, nature is a dead mechanism governed by implacable powers whose mystery is systematically ignored.<sup>38</sup> Simultaneously, any vestiges of angelic presence in the human sphere are swept away in the modern, historic or cultural imagination that acknowledges only human convention.<sup>39</sup> The demise of the angelic is only one example of the loss of naturally religious phenomena with the rise of modernity: in the schizophrenic, modern imagination the whole notion of the created invisible has disappeared and the dichotomy between spirit and matter put in its place.<sup>40</sup> Modern philosophy has, thus, oscillated between Idealism and Realism as it bounced from one pole to the other.

One way of characterizing these extremes is by the place they give to the imagination. The mediæval consensus on imagination placed it in a mediating position between sense and intellect and between exterior and interior.<sup>41</sup> In contrast, Realism collapses imagination into the senses, making it a passive mimesis, while Idealism places the imagination in the intellect as an active structuring faculty. Moreover, the narrowly epistemological function of imagination in *both* philosophical options of modernity bleaches the color out of existence, *i.e.*, the emphasis on knowledge ignores the affective texture of experience or considers it epiphenomenal. The

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<sup>37</sup> Pagden traces the complex shifts undergone by the concept of nature in the "Age of Discovery." He sees the question of nature as a question about the human: Who is the "Other" encountered in the New World of the Americas? The Other was first seen as natural slave and then as nature's child, with the concept of nature shifting subtly in the process only to be dropped altogether in the end. The human came to be defined over against the natural, even as the natural became the non-human: Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology*, Cambridge Iberian and Latin American Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

<sup>38</sup> Merchant, *Death of Nature*; Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination: From the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>39</sup> Funkenstein.

<sup>40</sup> García-Rivera, *Cosmic Frontier*.

<sup>41</sup> Eva T. H. Brann, *The World of the Imagination: Sum and Substance* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, Inc., 1991).

mediæval mystical imagining of angels, on the contrary, grasped that the mediating function of the imagination is not reducible to either intellect or sense and is about more than knowledge. As icon of imagination,<sup>42</sup> the Celestial Court, envisioned by mediæval mysticism, reveals the imagination's richness. The upper hierarchy of angels was said to consist of Cherubim, Seraphim, and Thrones. Although the Cherubim *are* characterized by their surpassing, and possibly direct, *knowledge* of the Trinity, the Seraphim, which vie in the imagination for highest rank, burn with love and desire for God, and the Thrones are credited with the intriguing conjunction of Divine presence, just judgment, and spiritual discernment.<sup>43</sup> Intellect, affect, and, I believe most importantly, discernment are affirmed as the highest angelic attributes and, we can add, attributes of the imagination.

Discernment, as the specifically religious aspect of imagination, is what modernity lacks: that sense of God's presence which transcends the categories of nature and culture and reveals what is natural in humanity and what is humane in nature.

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<sup>42</sup> The self-reflexive quality of imagination is discussed by Sullivan: "Myth is the imagination beholding its own reality and plumbing the sources of its own creativity as it relates to creativity in any form ... as significations that reveal the nature of significance, they make effective metastatements about imaginal existence." *Sullivan, Ianchu's Drum*, 22.

<sup>43</sup> *E.g.*, "He who guided me was an Angel belonging to the choir of Thrones, the very ones who are charged with discernment." Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 263; "[T]hose called the "throne of God" are those so filled with the grace of divinity that the Lord sits in them and discerns his justice through them." Gregory the Great *Homilia in Evangelium* 34, 10. (trans. Steven Chase); "[T]hey are utterly available to receive the divine visitation, ... they bear God and are ever open, like servants, to welcome God." Pseudo-Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy*, 205D, p.162; "These are given the name Thrones ... because of their ministry of judging. ... Indeed the Thrones are themselves the seats of discernment. Thrones, in addition, represent the celestial place of assembly for super-celestial discernment in which justice is examined. Thrones are ... that order through whom God ... reveals His Justice." Alan of Lille *Treatise on the Angelic Hierarchy* (trans. Steven Chase).

## ***Discernment of Spirits***

Louis Dupré examines in some detail the process by which modernity's fission of nature and culture came about as the mediæval synthesis slowly collapsed.<sup>44</sup> Discussing the varied religious reactions to early modernity, he singles out that of Ignatius of Loyola for its creative possibilities.

While the Reformation rebuilt the synthesis of nature and grace along the lines of Augustine's later theology, the Christian humanists . . . attempted to recast the synthesis by means of early Augustinian, Neoplatonic principles. Tensions remained present in both, pulling the latter toward a superficial optimistic naturalism and the former toward a pessimistic view of nature. Ignatius' complex spiritual vision succeeded in keeping the centrifugal forces united. With the Reformation Loyola opted uncompromisingly for the primacy of grace. But, contrary to a major strand in Protestant thinking, he insisted on the intrinsic restoration of nature in grace. With early Christian humanism he fully accepted the divine presence in nature, but for him that presence resulted entirely from a divine descent not from a self-directed human ascent.<sup>45</sup>

The central work of the Ignatian corpus, the *Spiritual Exercises*, embeds this focus on a person's self-shaping through grace (which comes from above—*de arriba*) in a *praxis* notable for bringing together imaginative contemplation, affective mysticism, and spiritual discernment in the service of *choice*. These three elements, at first apparently unconnected, are in fact intimately so. Imagination for Ignatius bridges pre-modern mimesis (*beholding*) and modern creativity (forming) in a "composition of place"<sup>46</sup> that unites the beholding and forming aspects of imaginative praxis and transcends them.<sup>47</sup> The exercitant<sup>48</sup> creates a small world almost *ex*

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<sup>44</sup> Dupré, *Passage*.

<sup>45</sup> Dupré, *Passage*, 226-227.

<sup>46</sup> Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises* [47].

<sup>47</sup> On the dual aspects of imagination and on the role of the medium in uniting them see: Alex García-Rivera, "Presence." For his survey of the shape of the ancient, the modern, and the postmodern imaginations, see: Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

<sup>48</sup> *i.e.*, the one making the *Spiritual Exercises*.

*nihilo*<sup>49</sup> and, for a brief while, lives there and enters into its life. By so doing, Ignatius expects two things to happen. We will participate affectively in that world, and the participation will influence our further shaping of imagination. Furthermore, our interior shaping, being a self-formation, has outer effects: we are transformed.<sup>50</sup> To speak of transformation, rather than mere change, presupposes some standard of comparison. One possible norm might be personal desire: the process could be simply a self-creation in our own desired image. Ignatius, however, proposes that the affective response to imagination is *externally* normed: it is process of *seeing the unseen*. Ignatius takes up the patristic tradition of the spiritual senses and interprets them as senses of the imagination.<sup>51</sup> We see (hear, taste, *etc.*) something in the constructs of our imagination that is unseen and we “see” it through affect. We feel in our whole embodied selves an inclination towards or away from the unseen, but sensed, reality. But what is the *unseen*? Ignatius keeps “the centrifugal forces united” by admitting a double-causation: our imaginative worlds are made by our “hands” but are inhabited by “spiritual” realities that we did not create: the created invisible.<sup>52</sup> Spiritual discernment becomes possible because we affectively sense the

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<sup>49</sup> De Nicolas stresses the minimal guidance that Ignatius gives the exercitant. “Ignatius displaces retreatants from any subjective or objective pool of images and vigorously transplants them to an imageless field where the absence of images will force the exercise of creating them”: Antonio T. de Nicolas, *Powers of Imagining: A Philosophical Hermeneutic of Imagining Through the Collected Works of Ignatius de Loyola with a Translation of These Works* (Albany: State University of New York, 1986), 41. I say “almost” for two reasons. First, only God’s imagination is creative enough to confer existence out of nothing. Human imagining composes in response to cultural images, personal memories, conjectures and inspiration. Second, creation *ex nihilo* corresponds to pure invention but human creativity combines elements of both invention and discovery. Something is *formed* which can be *beheld* on its own terms.

<sup>50</sup> De Nicolas speaks of “imagining as dismemberment ... The pure image, the original image, will penetrate the public domain if first it penetrates the material body of the retreatant.” De Nicolas, *Powers*, 41.

<sup>51</sup> Santiago Arzubialde, *Ejercicios Espirituales de S. Ignacio: Historia y Análisis* (Bilbao-Santander: Mensajero/Sal Terrae, 1991), 293-302.

<sup>52</sup> Duns Scotus had similarly achieved a balance between extremes through double-causation: “The intellect and the object together ... form the cause of the knowledge we gain. Two causes which produce a single effect can have various relations”: John Marenbon, *Later Medieval Philosophy (1150-1350)* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1987), 156. Double-causation finds a more ancient echo in the belief that a god might “inhabit its cult image because in some way the image resembles it, or that, at least, an affinity prevails between them”: Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 41.

presence of invisible realities that interact with us. Ignatius explicitly synthesizes the tradition on discernment in terms of the action, experienced in our inclinations, of spirits or angels, good and bad.<sup>53</sup> Given a “knowledge” of the characteristics of such angels it is possible to learn from one’s affective inclinations which shapings of imagination lead one Godward and which lead astray, and, having learned, one can then choose which way to go, both in one’s interior imaginative shaping and in one’s exterior decisions.

What can we learn from Ignatius for our project? The created invisible can be sensed affectively, experienced in inclinations, is intimately involved with imagination, and can provide contingent norms for practical action. Three other factors need note. First, the vision of the invisible is self-involving and can never be “objectified.”<sup>54</sup> It results in a way of life, an imaginal existence, rather than propositional knowledge. Second, seeing the unseen has both “natural” and “artificial” aspects: it has to be learned (the purpose of the *Spiritual Exercises*) yet it is also a matter of grace. Third, imagination, in which the invisible becomes visible, must be understood to be more than merely productive: instead a presence is discovered.<sup>55</sup> The creatures of imagination have the potential of iconicity:<sup>56</sup> they can self-communicate as works of art. In the

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<sup>53</sup> Michael J. Buckley, "Rules for the Discernment of Spirits," *The Way* Supplement 20 (Autumn 1973), 19-37.

<sup>54</sup> Clark develops the view that angels *are* moods made “tangible”: “The luminous phantoms, some of whom are angels, are not such as to be encountered ‘neutrally.’ ... [A] god or demon or angel is identified by the mood it carries with it, and it is that mood forever. ... Gods are moods and modes of personal being, such that they may be re-encountered in one’s own life and in the life of others.” Clark, "Angels," 225-226.

<sup>55</sup> The power of the productive imagination is evident in Elaine Scarry’s extraordinary work, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), yet such an essentially instrumental construct of imagination cannot cope with true and significant human otherness. Goizueta discusses this in connection with human liberation (*Caminemos Con Jesús*) and García-Rivera in terms of a semiotics of presence (García-Rivera, *A Matter of Presence*): both propose the intrinsic worth of imagination and, hence, its aesthetic quality.

<sup>56</sup> In C. S. Peirce’s sense: C. S. Peirce, "On a New List of Categories," in *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).



vision of the invisible, we move beyond ethics into aesthetics, a dimension of imagination which we must now explore.<sup>57</sup>

### ***Iconoclasm***

The relation between art and the holy is nowhere more intimate than in the *icon* and for centuries nowhere more controversial.<sup>58</sup> The roots of the Christian tradition's ambiguity to icons lie in antiquity's attitude to the image idol. But, whether originating in the Hebrew ban on all representation of God, or from Hellenistic doubts about the propriety of rendering a god in common and passing materials, the focus of the problem came to be that of *resemblance*. How can an image fittingly resemble a being without a body?

For Christianity the difficulty of this question is deepened by the Incarnation rather than relieved. The Christian God has definitively appeared as an embodied human being, forever denying theology the luxury of settling exclusively on either apophatic or kataphatic ways to God.<sup>59</sup> So the problem is sharpened: how can an image of Jesus be an image of Christ? The violent history of the battles in the eastern church underlines an importance that we can hardly feel today, but what is at stake *is* of prime importance: how can anything created reveal the uncreated? It is important because it speaks to the crucial question of our times, the question of an ecological spirituality, but, rather than speaking of matter and spirit, follows the Cappadocians and recasts

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<sup>57</sup> Peirce describes three "normative sciences" corresponding to his three categories. Logic provides norms for intellect (the realm of Thirdness), ethics for action (Secondness), and aesthetics for pure value (Firstness): Vincent G. Potter, *Charles S. Peirce: On Norms and Ideals* (Worcester: University of Massachusetts Press, 1967).

<sup>58</sup> The theological issues in the struggle over the propriety of the icon are well documented by Barasch, *Icon*. I follow his exposition here. For a brief historical survey see: Leonid Ouspensky, "Icon and Art," trans. Larissa Pavear, in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn & John Meyendorff, World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest, Vol. 16 (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 382-394.

the issue, as we have done in two dimensions. Interestingly, the iconoclasts posed the question by separating these dimensions into two parallel attacks on icons: the question of the resemblance of created and uncreated and that of the visible resemblance to the invisible. John of Damascus (eighth century CE) provides, in his treatise *On the Divine Images*, three very interesting arguments in defense of icons, each of which involves reuniting the two questions.<sup>60</sup> He first discusses the nature of imaging, broadly conceived, in terms of the participation of an image in its prototype, and explores an unbroken continuity of such participation from a case as sublime as the Son's imaging of the Father, down to the humble way a picture images its subject. As, Moshe Barasch, says of John, "He assigns to the image the great metaphysical task of making a bridge between the worlds."<sup>61</sup> John's second argument concerns the unifying singularity of the Incarnation.

I boldly draw an image of the invisible God not as invisible, but as having become visible for our sakes by partaking of flesh and blood. ... The flesh assumed by him is made divine and endures after its assumption. Fleshly nature was not lost when it became part of the Godhead, but just as the Word made flesh remained the Word, so also flesh became the Word, yet remained flesh, being united to the person of the Word.<sup>62</sup>

Of his three, this second consideration seems to have been most influential in the Church's eventual positive attitude to icons, but, of most interest to us, is John's third argument because it explicitly considers the mediating role of the created invisible. He asks, "What may be depicted by an image, and what may not...?" and answers, "physical things which have shape, bodies

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<sup>59</sup> Robert R. Marsh, "Vestigia Trinitatis: Apophasis, Kataphasis, and the Trinitarian Imagination," *Alma: A Publication of the Academic Work of Master's Degree Students of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1995).

<sup>60</sup> John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images: Three Apologies Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood. NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980).

<sup>61</sup> Barasch, *Icon*, 205.

which are circumscribed, and have color, are suitable subjects for image-making.”<sup>63</sup> This was the standard mimetic doctrine of aesthetics until modernity: what can be seen can be copied. If this holds true, and if spiritual realities are without body and shape, John concludes, it is impossible to depict the realm of the spirit and, thus, icons must be frauds. John, however, has a counter-example to derail this train of thought. There are at least two groups of invisible spiritual beings that the whole early Christian world believed could, under certain circumstances, be seen. Both angels and souls were believed capable of, as it were, borrowing a shape and becoming visible.

As Barasch says,

Some of the fathers seem to have believed that the angels have some kind of body. Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and even Augustine held this view, though they insisted on the subtle nature of this body. Other early Christian thinkers, such as Gregorius of Nyssa, Eusebius, and John Chrysostomus, denied to angels any kind of body. They all seem to have agreed, however, that angels, whether or not they have a body, are visible, at least under certain conditions. ... [O]ne conclusion clearly emerges, namely, that angels are “spiritual” beings yet visible. The link between tangible physical nature and visibility is broken. A being may be bodiless and yet manifest itself to our eyes.<sup>64</sup>

Angels can be seen, John, says, because God “clothed them with forms and shapes, and used images comprehensible to our nature, material forms which could be seen by the spiritual vision of the mind.”<sup>65</sup> John is using the “empirical” fact of the visibility of the invisible to demolish the best argument against icons being real images of God. We, however, can turn the issue around: in an aesthetic, imaginative creation—the icon—there is the possibility of envisioning the invisible.

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<sup>62</sup> John of Damascus, *Apologies* I, §4, p.16.

<sup>63</sup> John of Damascus, *Apologies* III, §24, p.78.

<sup>64</sup> Barasch, *Icon*, 240-241.

<sup>65</sup> John of Damascus, *Apologies* III, §25, p.79.

Just so, in our imaginative vision of place, there is the possibility of the felt presence of created spirit.

*Possibility* has to be stressed here, however, since John must admit that only “those who were worthy saw these images, and beheld a bodiless and intellectual sight made manifest through physical means.”<sup>66</sup> The vision of the invisible, though like ordinary vision, also differs: it is “spiritual vision of the mind.”<sup>67</sup> This is, however, exactly what we should expect if the invisible becomes visible through an aesthetic process: relativity and contingency always emerge where Beauty is concerned. Indeed, we have seen that the Nicene Fathers used the language of the created invisible precisely to defend the contingency of creation. John is fully aware that only certain persons have been granted to see the unseen—the prophet or the saint—but can, nevertheless, say that God “wills that we should not be totally ignorant of bodiless creatures.”<sup>68</sup> As we saw in connection with Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*, seeing the unseen is both a matter of grace and a capacity that can be developed. Indeed, the two aspects are united as the anagogical imagination lifts up lowly human vision into the vision of angels.

### ***Virtual Reality***

The imagination emerges in our study as the place where the invisible becomes visible, the place where mundane vision is transformed into something greater. Yet even ordinary vision has its

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<sup>66</sup> John of Damascus, *Apologies* III, §24, p.78.

<sup>67</sup> John of Damascus, *Apologies* III, §25, p.79.

<sup>68</sup> John of Damascus, *Apologies* III, §25, p.79.

anagogical wonders. The philosophy of symbol developed by Susanne Langer<sup>69</sup> lifts up some of the extraordinary qualities of human perception that modernity has taught us to ignore.<sup>70</sup>

Langer distinguishes two kinds of symbol, both of which articulate meaning: *representational* (or *discursive*) symbol and *presentational* symbol.<sup>71</sup> Representational symbolism is epitomized by language: in particular by mathematical or logical languages. Such symbolism is discursive and conveys its meaning through the concatenation of smaller units of meaning. The very possibility of a dictionary of basic symbols (“words”) indicates a discursive symbolic system. Complex meanings are articulated in such systems of signs by building them up out of fragments. Against her mentor, though, Langer denies Wittgenstein’s dictum, “everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly,” asserting that there exist other modes of articulation of meaning. The articulation of meaning does not stop when language ends. Indeed, we are all familiar with the power of, say, poetry to grasp at what cannot be contained in discourse. Such symbolism—exemplified most clearly in art—is *presentational*: presenting meaning in a whole that cannot be analyzed into parts. The lines of a sketch, for example, in isolation mean nothing, but their composition may do. Music offers another example:

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<sup>69</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, 3d ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1942, 1993); *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953).

<sup>70</sup> “The contrast between an ‘austere’ ontology said to be the Way of Truth and the rich ontology of lived experience, dismissed as the Way of Seeming, is as old as Parmenides. In our time, however, it has come to seem far more convincing because of a second, experiential development. With the expansion of our technology, we have, in effect, translated our concepts into artifacts, radically restructuring not only our conception of nature but the texture of our ordinary experience as well. ... Though the theoretical construct of a mechanically ordered matter in motion may bear little resemblance to the living nature of the field and the forest and so may never have appeared convincing before, it is a faithful reflection of a world of artifacts and as such compelling to a humanity whose experience of nature is restricted to contact with artifacts.” Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 12-13.

<sup>71</sup> Langer, *New Key*.

Music, like language, is an articulate form. Its parts not only fuse together to yield a greater entity, but in doing so they maintain some degree of separate existence, and the sensuous character of each element is affected by its function in the complex whole. ... Why, then, is it not a *language* of feeling, as it has often been called? Because its elements are not words—independent associative symbols with a reference fixed by convention. Only as an articulate form is it found to fit anything; and since there is no meaning assigned to any of its parts, it lacks one of the basic characteristics of language—fixed association, and therewith a single, unequivocal reference.<sup>72</sup>

In both kinds of symbolism we formulate meaning, and, typically, we are led to believe that discursive symbolism has greater importance and trustworthiness, though in several ways the presentational has priority: in vision, for one.

All sensitivity bears the stamp of mentality. “Seeing,” for instance, is not a passive process, by which meaningless impressions are stored up for the use of an organizing mind, which construes form out of these amorphous data to suit its own purposes. “Seeing” is itself a process of formulation; our understanding of the visible world begins in the eye.<sup>73</sup>

We see forms in a process that is both a shaping and a beholding: the external world only becomes present to us through the imagination, only becomes “visible” through the imagination. Furthermore, in Langer’s view, “rationality” extends beyond discursive thought “into processes that are usually deemed pre-rational, and points to the existence of forms, i.e., of *possible symbolic material*, at a level where symbolic activity has certainly never been looked for by any epistemologist.”<sup>74</sup> Perception is one such level—“The eye and the ear make their own abstractions, and consequently dictate their own peculiar forms of conception”<sup>75</sup>—and so is

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<sup>72</sup> Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 31.

<sup>73</sup> Langer, *New Key*, 90.

<sup>74</sup> Langer, *New Key*, 91.

<sup>75</sup> Langer, *New Key*, 91.

affect, which is also capable of formulation and articulation in symbol. Indeed, the dynamic form of our feelings cannot be articulated discursively:

Everybody knows that language is a very poor medium for expressing our emotional nature. It merely names certain crudely conceived states, but fails miserably in any attempts to convey the ever-moving patterns, the ambivalences and intricacies of inner experience, the interplay of feelings with thoughts and impressions, memories and echoes of memories, transient fantasy, or its mere runic traces, all turned into nameless, emotional stuff.<sup>76</sup>

Art, she believes, in all its forms is about the articulation of the living forms of feeling. “The concept of significant form as an articulate expression of feeling, reflecting the verbally ineffable and therefore unknown forms of sentience, offers at least a starting point” for aesthetics.<sup>77</sup>

Following this lead, Langer asks, what is a work of art? What is it that is created? Her answer is worth quoting at length:

An image in this sense, something that exists only for perception, abstracted from the physical and causal order, is the artist’s creation. The image presented on a canvas is not a new “thing” among the things in the studio. The canvas was there, the paints were there; the painter has not added to them. Some excellent critics, and painters too, speak of his “arranging” forms or colors, and regard the resultant work primarily as an “arrangement.” ... But even the forms are not phenomena in the order of actual things, as spots on a tablecloth are; the forms in a design—no matter how abstract—have a *life* that does not belong to mere spots. Something arises from the process of arranging colors on a surface, something that is created, not just gathered and set in a new order: that is the image. It emerges suddenly from the disposition of the pigments, and with its advent the very existence of the canvas and of the paint “arranged” on it seems to be abrogated; those actual objects become difficult to perceive in their own right. ... An image is, indeed, a purely virtual “object.” Its importance lies in the fact that we do not use it to guide us to something tangible and practical, but treat it as a complete entity with only

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<sup>76</sup> Langer, *New Key*, 100.

<sup>77</sup> Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 39.

visual attributes and relations. It has no others; its visible character is its entire being.<sup>78</sup>

Langer's concept of the *virtual* is important. Despite her insistence that the virtual object has only visual (*i.e.*, sensual) attributes, what she means by virtual is closer to what I have termed the *invisible*. Langer's virtual objects are not "actual" but they are visible; they are created but they have an otherness and self-sufficiency.<sup>79</sup> They spring into being with a life of their own. In a work of art (and, by implication, in perception too) the created invisible becomes visible as articulate form. Langer maps out "virtual reality"<sup>80</sup> according to the associated "art-form": virtual *space* in the plastic arts; virtual *time* in music; virtual *power* in dance and gesture; and virtual *life* in poetry and literature. What they have in common is their articulation of forms of feeling. The virtual objects of our experience are thus unavoidably influential: we cannot but be inclined towards or away from them. We can only remain aloof and static observers by denying their reality, *i.e.*, by refusing to see the unseen. The whole world, insofar as it articulates forms of feeling, must move us, must be significant.

### **(In)Conclusion**

The human world is irreducibly imaginative: a significant presence, an imaginal existence. Even the cold world of the modern, scientific imagination is inescapably "virtual": it is imaginative construction; it is artifact. That it is "cold" is revealing: it reveals a discernible spirit. The enlarged, imaginal rationality, described in this paper, restores the fragmented modern

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<sup>78</sup> Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 47-48.

<sup>79</sup> Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 59.



imagination to a wholeness integrated around the religious imagination and its vision of the invisible. Such vision reveals the dark spirit that animates our technological mastery of the so-called “environment” and helps fashion a way of life for creation that is inspired, instead, by angels of light.

Our world, it seems, swims in a sea of spirit. Our world *is* the invisible become visible. A prairie in Montana makes present a spirit that can touch us deeply; can move our hearts. Once moved we cannot but respond—even suppressing the feelings is a response—and to the degree we are aware we are faced with choices. The poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, speaks of *inscape* as that inner coming together that constitutes a virtual object and describes our part as in the process as *instress*. When we encounter inscape we can move *with* our inner inclination and respond appropriately—instress—or we can act otherwise. Apart from instress, Hopkins might say, there is only *disstress*: the process by which we become destroyers of beauty, destroyers of living form.<sup>81</sup>

The invisible spirit all around us is no pantheist indwelling of God: it is only the presence of the *created* invisible that can ground an ecological spirituality. The angels, traditionally, stand in the presence of God. They *are* not God, but they bring word of God to human beings, a word heavy with Presence. They *are* not Beauty but they gaze upon It constantly and they, beauties, reflect Beauty: the divine *kavod* is present in this created world *mediately*, but present nevertheless.

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<sup>80</sup> Note that *virtual reality* is not a phrase used by Langer herself, but one I have borrowed (for its resonance) from the world of computers, where Jaron Lanier coined it in the early 1980's. Virtual reality, in Lanier's sense, is nevertheless a conceptual relative of Langer's virtual space and time.

<sup>81</sup> Walford Davies, introduction to, *The Major Poems*, by Gerard Manley Hopkins (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1979), 27.

Thanks to the created invisible we can honor the finest impulses of our tradition, affirming both transcendence and immanence, both apophasis and kataphasis, in an integrated vision.

Again, in Christian tradition, the created *invisible* is answerable to God just like the created *visible*, since both are contingent. The value of both is relative: neither “heaven” nor “earth” is absolutely good or absolutely bad. The temptation, in an *ethically based*, ecological spirituality, to make the “heavens” into the Platonic form of the Good is tempered by the essentially *aesthetic* realization that both heaven and earth are ambiguous.<sup>82</sup> New Age exponents to the contrary, the angelic realm is not wholly holy. Tradition has it that some angels rebelled against God, grew dark, and became distorted mirrors of Divine Beauty, “like pretentious yet trivial works of art,”<sup>83</sup> mediators of a fascinating but abysmal Absence.

Our real choice is not in the long run between divinities and no divinities, but between reasonable and beneficent ones and their opposites. If official science and religion and philosophy combine to take away our good angels we are terribly apt to turn to bad angels.<sup>84</sup>

Thus, the creation is not simply to be honored or worshipped for its own being, but, always and only, because of its relationship to Being beyond: only in this is grounded the significance of our feelings towards the earth. Some of those feelings (and the thoughts and choices that arise from them) would lead us into ruin, and the earth with us, but others may lead us to life.

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<sup>82</sup> Stephen Clark’s treatment of angels, like that developed herein so many ways, differs sharply on this point. “To think about angels is to begin to unravel a riddle. What is it that can exist in different places ‘without passing through the middle,’ does not prevent the simultaneous presence of others of its kind and is recognized affectively as well as cognitively? What but Plato’s Forms?” Clark, does however, acknowledge the ambiguity of angels: “Their fall is in apostasy, the attempt of each to be the only power, the only way of seeing and being things.” Clark, *Angels*, 228, 232.

<sup>83</sup> Harding, *Hierarchy*, 252.

<sup>84</sup> Harding, *Hierarchy*, 234.

Discernment is the key. To become discerning is our age's most pressing task since it is salvation we seek, the salvation of the whole creation. Salvation cannot be found in a project or a vision set before us to strain after, though such have their place. Liberation is found in a way of life, a companionship with creation, visible and invisible, in which the future is fashioned one discerning footfall at a time. How do I place *my* feet upon *this* prairie? How can we know what to do? How can we have the will to do it? Only by listening slowly to the heart; only by waiting on the whispers of angels; only by standing still and vulnerable, long enough to be touched by the spirit of the place.

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