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Nature as the "Door to the Temple"

A Phenomenological Defense of Encountering a Numinous Reality in the Natural World

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ABSTRACT: In the human experience of the natural world, there follows an encounter with the *numinous*—an ultimate reality seemingly beyond the rational, but not irrational. It is a mysterious encounter, but one revelatory nonetheless. One finds this encounter expressed in the works of writers such as Mary Oliver, John Muir, and Annie Dillard, who touch upon this transcendent sublimity. This essay aims to unpack the reality of the numinous through a phenomenological inquiry into the experience articulated by these and other alike thinkers.

1. Introduction

"For me the door to the woods is the door to the temple."[1] Here, Mary Oliver is making an assertion rich with significance. Her attending contemplatively to the natural world is a genuinely prayerful experience, an experience of something seemingly transcendent. A door to the temple, after all, is the door on the far side of which obtains the real and impactful presence of the divine. To approach that threshold is to find oneself on the verge of coming, as it were, face to face with the Almighty. Oliver continues this vein of thought, asking, as the title of another work, "where does the temple begin, where does it end?"[2] In fact, Oliver's vision of the spiritual and transcendent is so pronounced that she opines that "it is not hard to understand where God… is," since, as she encounters the natural world, she registers that such "is everywhere… shore and the vast fields of water, the

[1] Mary Oliver 2016: *Upstream: Selected Essays*.

[2] Oliver 2004: "Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does it End" in *Why I Wake Early: New Poems*.

accidental and the intended over here, over there."[3] Something else, something beyond space and time, is made saliently present as she contemplates the natural world.

Here, Oliver harkens back to John Muir: "God's love is manifest in the landscape, as in a face."[4] Concerning his much-beloved Yosemite Valley, Muir pens that it is "full of God's thoughts."[5] Muir writes of such places that "every tree, every flower, every ripple, and eddy of this lovely stream seemed solemnly to sense the presence of the great Creator. I lingered in this sanctuary a long time."[6] For Muir, such profound, impactful, and inspiring encounters with the natural world led him to "gaze awe-stricken as one newly arrived from another world."[7] Muir's prose then becomes almost poetic, stating that the natural world is "an endless Godful play… Creation just beginning, the morning stars 'still singing together and all the children of God shouting for joy.'"[8] Thus, Muir considers his encounters with the natural world to be infused with a recognition of some transcendent reality.

Annie Dillard points us in the same direction. Dillard writes of an intense experience of seeing the fish swim and move about in her beloved Tinker Creek: "[I] saw a new world… Something broke and something opened. I filled up like a new wineskin."[9] Fascinatingly, Dillard does not imagine such to be anomalous or delusional: "When I see this way I see truly. As Thoreau says, I return to my senses."[10] She then ends this chapter on "Seeing" by describing her experience of a cedar tree, which Dillard describes as "a tree with lights". This tree is made present to her so strongly and impactfully, she was "knocked breathless by a powerful glance."[11] Dillard later provides further thoughts on this "tree with lights". "Now that I have experienced the present purely through my senses,… I discover that, although the door to the tree with lights in it was opened *from*

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[3] Oliver 2006: "On They Wondrous Works I Will Meditate (Psalm 145)," *Five Points,* 10, nos. 1& 2.

[4] John Muir 1881: *His Life and Letters and Other Writings,* 746. All quotations of Muir are taken from Bruce Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible*, p.68–69.

[5] Muir 1901: *Our National Parks* in *The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books*, 490.

[6] Muir i.1867–72: *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf,* 30.

[7] Ibid, 69.

[8] Muir 1869: *My First Summer in the Sierra,* 213.

[9] Annie Dillard 1974: *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 32.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid, 33.

eternity, as it were, and shone on that tree eternal lights, it nevertheless opened on that real and present cedar… On the cedar tree shone, however briefly, the steady, inward flames of eternity."[12]

There is, of course, much to unpack with Oliver, Muir, and Dillard. What I wish to focus on is following: how a contemplative gazing into the natural world, such as enacted and described by these three, may involve an encounter with the numinous.[13] All three authors point to how a deep attending to the natural world seemed to involve encountering a transcendent reality. Phrased in terms of phenomenology: the ultimate "object" of their contemplative intentionality[14] is an

[12] Ibid, 80. Emphasis original.

[13] Numinous is a term first coined and employed by Rudolf Otto in his 1917: *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*. Primarily, Otto, in coining and employing this term, wishes deliberately to avoid the term "God", while also approaching the same reality and its manifestation referenced to by "God", albeit from a more "non-rational" perspective and absent the philosophical/theological conceptualization which attaches to "God". In short, "numinous" refers to the ultimate reality, which is simultaneously fascinating and terrifying, inviting and overwhelming, seemingly beyond the rational but not irrational. It is a tremendous mystery, one which strikes us saliently and powerfully, while we cannot conceptually comprehend or encapsulate it. The encounter with the numinous does not fit within a notional framework; instead, it recalibrates that framework fundamentally. The encounter with the numinous involves a distinct and profound feeling of being a creature before an overwhelming and overpowering presence. We know ourselves to be before what cannot be contained according to our finite capacity for control or understanding. The numinous likewise is manifest as absolutely valuable. Yet it's coming to presence may not be always comforting or even positive; there is an always possible "element of awfulness" that accompanies the coming to presence of the numinous. Hence, the manifestation of the numinous may well be awesome as well as awful. A sense of profound and total dread accompanies the encounter with the numinous. Finally, the advantage of such a term is that it brings the mind toward the divine but does so absent the connotations and potential baggage that accompanies the term "God." That is, "numinous" does not connote a particularly religious sense of the divine nor does it involve the use, either implicit or explicit, of particular notions that often surround our understanding of "God." Hence the reason for its use in this essay.

[14] Intentionality, in phenomenology, means fundamentally that consciousness is always consciousness of something. When the mind is active and conscious, there is always an object of which it is conscious. Phrased otherwise, intentionality here refers to the directedness of the mind toward reality outside of and beyond it. The mind, as intentional, aims at and comes to an awareness of what lies outside of it. Finally, when the mind comes to know and directly attend to what it aims at—e.g., when I come to see, in person, something I had previously only studied, read about, discussed, and imagined, say the Rocky Mountains—then the intentionality is, we could say, "fulfilled." Thus, as employed here, "intentionality" refers to how Oliver, Muir, and Dillard, in their conscious experiences, may aim at and have their experience fulfilled in an encounter with the numinous.

ultimate reality as manifest or expressed within the natural world. Oliver referenced this as the "door to the temple", Muir as the "thoughts of God", and Dillard as "the flames of eternity." Each refers to a reality, outside of and not subject to space and time, which is nonetheless still made present in the natural world. The contemplative gaze does not rest in some natural being, some living thing, some ecological system, but rather finds its fulfillment in the numinous. The reality articulated is a transcendent one, in other words. To use the example from Dillard: a tree, as contemplated, may disclose itself as being "more than," as reflecting or perhaps even belonging to the numinous.

To approach this situation from another phenomenological angle: the intentionality involved here is directed at an actual reality. For Oliver, Muir, and Dillard, their experiences (and later descriptions) geared toward some reality, even if such was transcendent. Their consciousness did not go toward the unreal or imagined, in other words, but was reality-directed. Based on their own words, Oliver et al. seem to encounter some numinous reality. Obviously, such an assertion meets immediately with strong criticisms. First, there is the criticism that the descriptions of Oliver, Muir, and Dillard are mere metaphor and hence cannot be said to refer actually to an encounter with any actual reality.[15] Second, there is the criticism that their encountering the numinous is, in the end, a subjective imposition of interior feelings onto an otherwise objective reality.[16] Third, there

[15] See, for example, Jon Mills 2016: *Inventing God: Psychology of Belief and The Rise of Secular Spirituality*, 97-98: "The so-called presence of God is said to be understood by a stupefying… intuition of a supreme personal being animating the cosmos, when [in actuality] this so-called divine sense is the manifestation of a desire, a desire for God… [This] fiction becomes hypostatized rather than reflective of *metaphorical meaning*. (Emphasis added). See also Gregory Gronbacher 2021: "Is There any Value for Spiritual Naturalists in Retaining God as a Metaphor?" *Spiritual Naturalist Society* (online): "God [is] the metaphor for the ongoing creativity in the universe… [even though] metaphor… on one level… is something imaginary and not real… This is God as metaphor, not God as a conscious, willful, interactive personal power that might respond to human beckoning… God is the metaphor and symbol for the creative principles in being."

[16] See, for example, David Hume 1757: *The Natural History of Religion*, 7: "There is an universal tendency amongst mankind to conceive all beings like them- selves, and to transfer to every object those qualities with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious. We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds;...
Hence the frequency and beauty of the *prosopopœia* in poetry, where trees, mountains, and streams are personified, and the inanimate parts of nature acquire sentiment and passion. And though these poetical figures and expressions gain not on the belief, they may serve, at least, to prove a certain tendency in the imagination, without which they could neither be beautiful nor natural."

is the criticism that such encounters are mere illusions, an egregious mistaking of the reality in question.[17]

I think all three are important and worthwhile criticisms. However, I do not think them ultimately able to refute or seriously undermine the notion that Oliver et al. actually encounter reality in the manner just described.

In what follows, I will defend the following thesis: that the encounter with the natural word as described by Oliver, Muir, and Dillard may well involve an encounter with a numinous reality. Such encounters cannot be reduced to mere metaphor (understood pejoratively), or subjective interpretation, or illusion. Rather, we have to accept the possibility that Oliver et al. underwent a real encounter with the numinous in its real manifestation. The three criticisms—A) "they're just talking metaphorically," B) "they're just interpreting from their own subjective lens," and C) "they're suffering an illusion"—cannot explain away the encounter with the transcendent as enacted by Oliver, Muir, and Dillard.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to address the following: why the immediate move to question and analyze the criticisms, rather than the possibly nonsensical presentations which they criticize? The answer is that such criticisms, in passing off as meaningless any even possible transcendent dimension to the encounters of Oliver et al., each contend, in a pre-set and a priori manner, that that such encounters do not really reach that deeply or, oppositely, that high (depending on the value of the spatial metaphor). They all contend that the encounters ultimately must be with the imminent and thus have no connection with or relation to anything transcendent. Thus, an adherent of such criticisms does not take—in an immediate, fully honest, and receptive manner—Oliver et al. at their word in how each describes the intensity and meaning of his or her encounter. His criticisms rest on an unquestioned, un-reflected, but still impermeable boundary condition which, unjustifiably, delimits the possible expanse of how one can encounter the

[17] See, for example, Richard Dawkins in his 2006: *The God Delusion*, and his discussion on how "codes" or programs, operative in the brain, can lead to a "hallucination" concerning the supposed presence of God. See also Jon Mills 2016: *Inventing God: Psychology of Belief and The Rise of Secular Spirituality.* In that "nothing lies beyond the natural world," (219) our 'perception' of the presence of the actual and really existing numinous as manifest in the natural world, is, like other similarly religiously rooted beliefs, a result, at least in part, of "illusions and religious conditioning" (137). Sensing God in nature is thus at least partially based on in our prior "attachment processes," (131) which generate in us a predisposition for thinking we experience the numinous in the natural world. After all, "the numinous… refers to a sensation of consciousness that is wholly independent of a divinity principle or supernatural presence sustaining these events" (211).

natural world. The critic is unable to allow the fuller and more intense meaning and reach of the descriptions of Oliver, et al. Consequently, we have good reasons to question the three criticisms from above and the a priori thinking which undergirds them. But questioning, of course, is not tantamount to refutation. Hence, in order to show that such criticisms are, ultimately, quite weak and limited—and to show, simultaneously, the possible validity of what they criticize—I think it important to analyze each in turn, so as to demonstrate its inability to refute, undermine, or convincingly reinterpret what Oliver, Muir, and Dillard describe.

2. Metaphor and Reality

Let me address first the critique that what Oliver, Muir, and Dillard describe is mere metaphor. According to this vein of thought, there obtains a clear and important distinction between precisely literal statements, on the one hand, and metaphorical statements, on the other. The former type is often taken describe what things are really like, whereas the latter is not. As an instance of the former, i.e., the literal, one might posit that "Steve is a dangerous, sneaky, and untrustworthy person." On the other hand, and as an instance of the latter, i.e., the metaphorical, one might posit, in reference to this same person, "Steve is a snake." Here, we see clearly the difference between the literal and the metaphorical. Even if Steve is snake-like, the metaphorical statement does not map onto or articulate a literal state of affairs. The metaphorical statement helps us to think in a new manner, but it does not refer to what things are really like in the world. After all, Steve is not literally a snake.

Furthermore, according to this vein of thought, poetry (or poetic prose such as with Dillard and Muir) is constituted as being metaphorical. Thus, Oliver et al., in their poetic presentations, are essentially making metaphorical statements. This is especially so when they describe "the door to the temple" or the "Godful" in nature, or "eternal lights shining" on a cedar tree. And, insofar as such metaphor is, by definition, non-literal, then their poetic descriptions, as metaphor, do not refer to nor bring articulation toward the reality of the natural world. In short: Oliver et al. make beautiful poetry or poetic prose, which gives us wonderful metaphor. However, such metaphor is not about reality or nor meant to indicate what things are really like in the natural world. Dillard, for instance is, in the end, just saying that "it is as if there were such eternal lights," not that such light actually obtained in that situation and were seen by her directly. Metaphor is the best means for her to present the intensity and even subjective meaning of the

experience, albeit not because such lights are really shown then and there for her. Thus, we recognize that such descriptions, as opposed to literal descriptions, are mere metaphor, i.e., language which does not disclose or articulate reality.

Such seems a clear and fairly comprehensive critique against the contention that contemplative gazing illuminates the deeper reality of the natural world. Nonetheless, it rests on an unwarranted and unnecessary prejudice against the possible illumination afforded by the metaphorical. As we will see, metaphor may well disclose reality much better and more directly than the completely literal.

To start this response, we can reconsider the statement from above about how Steve is "sneaky." What is interesting about such an assertion is that it does not strike us immediately as metaphorical, and yet it perhaps ought to, at least in part. After all, Steve, unlike a snake, does not actually sneak in the manner that a snake does, i.e., hide in crevasses, avoid being seen, hunt prey unseen, etc. If I were to talk of Steve in the mode of the hard sciences, I could not use terms such as "sneaky," at the risk of "sneaking-in" foreign and inappropriate terminology (pardon the pun). No chemist's or biologist's analysis of Steve would permit the inclusion of "sneaky" as a descriptor of him. Thus, if we take the use of language in science as exemplary of the literal—which there is good reason to do, since the sciences are committed to precise and clear objectivity in their understanding and their language— then "Steve is sneaky" will not be a literal statement.

Nonetheless, it is not the case that only scientific statements are literal. There are, of course, a wide variety of statements in our everyday discourse, other than the scientific, which are literal and not metaphorical, or at least more literal than metaphorical. "It's raining hard" or "it's raining worse than I am used to" are both literal but neither seems apt for an exact scientific analysis. "Thus, the question arises: from a perspective broader than the scientific, does "sneaky" still seem metaphorical or at least more metaphorical than literal? One item to note immediately is that "sneaky" is not of a type with other descriptors we could use concerning Steve: "brown haired," "six feet tall," "wearing blue jeans," etc. These terms of everyday discourse, which are used in reference to Steve, are used in reference to qualities or quantities of Steve that are, in principle, easily observable and measurable by others, perhaps by all such others. In fact, the failure to note such about Steve—e.g., if someone were to think of and describe him as "five feet tall"—is immediately deemed a mistake, an incorrect understanding of Steve. Hence, with such terms, there is an at least implicit sense that they refer objectively—in a manner that is uncontroversial and generally and easily

experienceable—to a particular being in its reality. "Sneaky", however, is not so measurable or universally recognizable. Steve's "sneakiness" may be readily apparent to me and hence an obvious and real feature of him in my experience, but someone else may not attend to and take note of Steve in the same manner. And likewise, that person's quite distinct attending and grasping of Steve is not, merely for reasons of its distinction from my own, thus deemed a mistake—unlike, as just noted, is the case with saying that "Steve is five feet tall." If nothing else, then, "sneaky", unlike "six feet tall" could be meaningfully thought of as metaphorical or at least less apparently literal.

Nevertheless, I would not describe this sense and articulation of Steve as "sneaky" as being "mere metaphor", if metaphor implies "unreal." Steve is someone I believe to be really a certain type of person, with a certain type of character, all which is illustrated well with the term "sneaky." Hence, terms that may perhaps fit within the category of metaphor or that might be understood as less literal than others, according to the paradigms of science or even everyday discourse, are nonetheless still directed toward and illuminative of reality. The non-literal can still apply sensibly and articulately, without it being positioned as the "merely metaphorical," understood pejoratively and as directed away from reality.

To flesh out this situation, we can look at Martin Buber's presentation of the "I-Thou" relation. Buber begins this analysis by describing various ways he can encounter a tree. First, Buber could "look at it as a picture."[18] Buber likewise mentions that the tree can become an object of scientific study, and he "can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life."[19] This biological approach, unlike the pictorial approach, treats the tree qua organism, a living thing. Nonetheless, this approach still reduces the tree to a certain category, still renders it a token of a certain type.[20]

Nonetheless, Buber posits that "it can… also come about… that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer It**.**"[21] Somehow, the tree becomes a real other for me, not just an object I can regard. "Everything belonging to the tree is in this… all present in a single whole."[22] This

[18] Martin Buber 1923: *I and Thou*, 7.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid. "In all this the tree remains my object."

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid, 6-7.

term, "single whole," is key. In a manner quite "different" from the scientific experiences of the tree, the tree now exists "over against me and has to do with me."[23] The tree, in the depth, fullness, and wholeness of its own being, is in "relation" with me, as I with it."[24] In this manner, I encounter and relate to the tree in the depth, fullness, and wholeness of my own being. Hence—and by refusing to treat the tree as merely an object and by letting the tree present itself as such to me— "I encounter… the tree itself."[25]

Thus, a personal and contemplative gaze makes present in one's consciousness organic beings that seem to possess holistic non-reducibility as well as genuine interiority. The tree stands before Buber in manner similar to how another human being may be present to him, i.e., a "Thou" rather than merely an "It", a being existing as such in its own holistic and non-reducible manner.

In which case, then, Buber's descriptions of his encounter with the tree are not strictly objective or scientific or even literal in the manner of everyday discourse (as were "six feet tall" or "wearing blue jeans"). This is so, because Buber describes encountering a tree as more than a mere object—similar to how we describe Steve in his being another subject, just like us. Just as Buber's description will rest on non-literal and seemingly metaphorical claims, then so, too does the description of Steve. However—and this is key—this non-literalness is not a mark against the accuracy or insightfulness of the description. It does not imply that such are unreal. Rather, we see here articulated the fact that in describing subjects (or subject-like beings such as trees) our language may A) be non-literal, objectively speaking, and hence metaphorical, but B) still be reality-directed.

Such a motion away from the literal and toward the metaphorical in describing reality becomes even more pronounced the more we look at cases involving profound meaning and value. Consider the following. Seeing a newborn child—in her infancy, her utter neediness, her supreme innocence—will lead automatically to the simultaneous recognition that the child demands instant and comprehensive care. The proper encounter with the child, therefore, is always more than merely seeing a physical thing or human flesh. Her father is not seeing and responding to his child as a collection of molecules, cells, organs, etc. He is not seeing her in terms of her height or eye color, even. Rather, his seeing of her involves, at its core,

[23] Ibid, 7.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

a moral and personal recognition, a direct and heartfelt sensing of the innate and always-demanding value of another human person. It also involves a recognition of beauty, a deep and meaningful experience of the utter loveliness of his child. Thus, the parent sees his child most deeply and meaningfully beyond the more objective features that obtain in her. He sees and knows her in a manner different from and not reducible to such literal facts about her.

This plays out, moreover, in the manner in which the father would try to describe his as thus experienced. He might say, for example, "you are the most precious thing in the world." Or he might pronounce, concerning his daughter, "you are more beautiful than I could ever imagine." Or he might say of himself in relation to her, "there is nothing I wouldn't do for you." Now, such statements are A) quite meaningful, B) seemingly reality-directed, but C) non-literal. Is the daughter, in fact, more precious than the Mona Lisa (if such a comparative evaluation could, in fact, be made)? Why is a bald, fat, and toothless creature more beautiful than could be imagined? Would the father really steal from Fort Knox, or employ nuclear missiles, or travel to Jupiter just for his daughter? In short, the statements made by the father concerning his daughter refer to her in her reality—as a newborn human person, as his daughter—but they are not exactly literal and in fact, according to the analysis from above, seem much more metaphorical. To describe the reality of one's child is to employ seemingly metaphorical yet still reality-directed terms. In fact, in order to approach that reality—of deep beauty, of inestimable worth—what is called for is language other than the strictly literal, which would reduce the reality in question to categories ill-suited for it. Talking of the size of the baby's head, the hue of pink in her skin color, the number of cells in her toes, etc., all as a means of accounting for the reality of the valuable and beautiful baby, fails miserably to do any justice to the being thus considered.

However, such non-literalness does not equate with "mere metaphor," used pejoratively. It is not the case that we would think of the father as experiencing a "mere metaphor" when he senses, is profoundly moved by, and commits himself to the unconditioned value of his daughter. His description of his encounter with her in her total worthiness of being loved, though it would exceed the purely literal, does not, for that reason, move away from reality. Being unable to describe an experience in and according to purely literal terms, does not necessarily, if even frequently, fold into "mere metaphor", ungermane or in opposition to the real. It is not a move away from describing the real but rather an attempt to articulate the depths of the real which the literal is ill-equipped to describe. The more significant

and profound the reality at question, the less can the purely literal be employed adequately to offer an apt and illuminating description of the phenomenon.

Thus, the metaphorical is not, in the end, a limiting term. Instead, it may well be the only means by which some sort of linguistic articulation could be presented which sheds light on the maximally important and valuable realities of our experience. To say of Oliver et al. that their presentations are metaphorical, is not, for that reason, a contention concerning the reality to which they point. Since they are trying to describe the numinous, the divine, and the spiritual, then their terms will, necessarily, be more than the purely literal, just as is the case in describing a human person, either as he is "sneaky" or as she is "the most beautiful thing in the world." And recall with the father/newborn example: the objective facts of a child are not the salient or essential reality to which her father responds. Nor are they what he references when he tries to describe the reality of who she is as made present to him at her birth. The nearly ineffable reality is not, on account of its possible ineffability, rendered unreal; nor is it rendered such because of the non-literal or metaphorical terms used in reference to it. Thus, Oliver, et al., merely because they employ metaphor, should not thus be thought of as failing to refer to something real. In fact, their poetic, metaphorical language seems the most apt tool by which the reality in question could be brought to light.

In short, their metaphorical language is not a deterrent to the possibility that the intentionality involved in the experiences Oliver et al. describe may well aim at and make contact with a reality beyond space and time. What they describe metaphorically may likewise be real. Hence, and in sum to this section: the attentive gazing upon the natural world, as enacted and described by Oliver, Muir, and Dillard, may well involve a reality-directed intentionality toward the transcendent, even though the descriptive language employed is metaphorical.

3. Subjective Imposition and Reality

Let me now address the "subjective imposition" critique. To see what this critique really says we can turn to a discussion from CS Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*. Lewis brings up—and will subsequently address in detail—the following quotation from a book of linguistic analysis: "'When the man [i.e., Samuel Taylor Coleridge] said [of a waterfall] *This is sublime* he appeared to be making a remark about the waterfall… Actually… he was not making a remark about the waterfall, but a remark about his own feelings. What he was saying was really 'I have feelings associated in my mind with the word 'Sublime,'' or shortly, 'I have sublime

feelings.""[26] This quotation provides a good articulation of the sort of critique we have in mind, namely that Oliver et al. are, in their writings, describing their own subjective feelings, not the natural world they encounter. Hence, for instance, "Godful" is merely the feeling Muir experiences within himself, which then colors or informs how the natural world is made present to him. Hence, he subjectively imposes that sense of "Godful" on a purely natural phenomenon.

Yet how convincing is this criticism? To start our response, we should note the contemplative nature of the afore-detailed encounters with the natural world. After all, the approach to the natural world discussed here is decidedly receptive: one's mindset is to allow it to present itself to him as such. Buber, for instance, wants to avoid any disintegrating analysis of and perspective on the tree. But we also should note that no amount of meditative attention toward inanimate objects leads to intuitions of the numinous similar to those experienced regarding the natural world. The being of a desk may lead one to reflect on its beauty, its mode of production, and the story of its being made, but the desk, as such, does not open up numinous depths for our consideration. Such depth, rather, lies in the persons germane to it and its possible usage (e.g., its potential use as a tabernacle) but not into the possible numinosity of the desk per se. In short, then, we see that corelative to the contemplative gaze, certain realities seem to point to the numinous in a manner that other beings, even attended to contemplatively, may not. Hence the distinction between a numinously infused tree and an imminent table. It seems as if there is something about the reality in question itself which elicits certain sorts of responses. Phrased otherwise: we must confront the question as to why the natural world is the sort of reality so connected with these responses (thoughts, feelings, etc.), even if they are imposed.

I think the critic could posit a ready response: i.e., he could say that, due to our religious and cultural influences, we have been led in this direction to transfer, in an unconscious manner, certain inner feelings upon that which we encounter. Trees, having been deemed sacred in a manner that tables have not, thus elicit and have placed upon them feelings associated with the numinous. Hence, it is our prior religious prejudice being carried out, not an encounter with a tree or anything else of the natural world itself, which leads us to consider ourselves as experiencing the numinous.

[26] C.S. Lewis 1943: *The Abolition of Man*, 2.

There is, however, a deep problem with this position. To start, we see that it only sidesteps rather than answers the aforesaid issue of why trees (and the natural world in general) are taken as connected to the numinous. Merely to say that they have always been thus associated does not tell us *why* they have been and for what reason, merely for how long. It explains, perhaps, a current such sensing of the numinous, but does not explain it in principle. Consequently, we are left with the lingering and salient question: what is it about nature (e.g., trees) that brings us to consider the numinous therein? Might it be that such indeed does make present that numinous and that our religious response is supremely apt for what has been revealed?

In fact, this issue runs much deeper. Namely, we are left with trying to account for the origin of encounters with numinosity, which, by their nature and definition, do not obtain within the framework of space and time, as commonly understood. And it seems as if there are only a quite limited number of options of how to give such an account[27]. (1) The numinous is real, is made present in the natural world, and

[27] The three options discussed below are based on but also expand upon what Mikael Stenmark talks about in his 2013: "Religious naturalism and its rivals." *Religious Studies* 49: 529–550. In this work, Stenmark discusses (1) the Theistic position which posits a belief in a transcendent God who can nonetheless manifest in the natural world, (2) Religious Naturalism which eschews talk of "god", "transcendence", "the supernatural," etc., but which says that there is still a justifiable religious impulse worth following, (3) Regular naturalism, or atheism, which posits the non-existence of God, the misguidedness of religion, and the absolute sufficiency of purely natural explanations to account for the world and everything that occurs within it. As representative of (1) Stenmark discusses thinkers such as Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Pres, 2000) and Nicholas Rescher, *Issues in the Philosophy of Religion* (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2007). In addition the following thinkers are also representative of position (1): St. Paul's *Letter to the Romans*, especially chapter 1; Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, Complete English Edition in 5 Volumes Volume Translated by Fathers of English Dominican Province With Synoptic Charts (Christian Classics: Westminster MD, 1948); St. Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, trans. Philotheus Boehner, OFM, ed. with Introduction and Notes by Stephen Brown (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993); Thomas Traherne, *Centuries*, Introduction by Michael Martin, (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2020); Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London, UK: Pantianos Classics, 1923); Bruce Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible*, (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014); Erazim Kohak, *The Embers and the Stars: a philosophical inquiry into the moral sense of nature*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Stenmark takes as representative of (2) thinkers such as Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998); Donald A. Crosby, "Religious naturalism" in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Chad Meister & Paul Copan (London: Routledge, 2007).We might also include Thomas H. Huxley, "Agnosticism and Christianity" in *Science and Christian Tradition, Essays by Thomas H. Huxley* (London: Macmillan, 1903); Piers Benn, "Some

hence the aforesaid aptness of response. This is, we could say, a Theistic position. (2) The numinous may or may not exist, but it seems unlikely, if not impossible, for it do manifest, at least to us, in the natural world. This would be a position of Agnosticism. The response of/toward the numinous is misplaced, a transference onto an experience of nature qualities which do not fit it. (3) The numinous does not exist, and hence any ostensible manifestation of it in the natural world is a mere illusion; for instance, feelings of awe before it rest on delusion. This is, we could say, an Atheistic position. Moreover, with the third, the interpretation really rests on an illusion. Because of the salience and intensity of what we think we encounter, we are led to the aforesaid feelings and thoughts. Hence, it involves the criticism of illusion, which we will address shortly. Moreover, the first position would undercut the notion of misplaced feeling and unjustified imposition. Hence the second option alone remains for the imposition critic. If he wishes to stay with the notion that Oliver et al. are fundamentally imposing their own subjective emotion and sense about their encounters with the natural world, then the Agnostic position is the only available horn of the trilemma.

But by adopting this second option, the critic runs into a profound problem. Primarily, he has to allow that the non or rarely manifesting numinous is still sufficiently graspable as to inform and structure a mode of affective response which is then subsequently, and improperly, transferred onto a reality which does not warrant it. This is so because the numinous and the seeming encounter with it cannot, by definition, be fully contained within a purely horizontal, space/time context. Now unless the imposition critic is willing to admit the ultimately illusory nature of the numinous and encounters with it and thus accept the Atheistic position—which idea is a different notion that will be addressed in turn—or unless he is willing accept the Theistic position and thus undercut his entire criticism, then the remaining alternative is to suppose that Dillard, Oliver, etc. had somehow, though not in nature, encountered the numinous and then later used the meaning of that experience to inform their subsequent experience of the natural world. They had transcended somehow to the numinous, gained there a sufficient and robust sense of it, and then later used that sense, albeit inappropriately, to inform their seeing of the natural world. Such spiritual gymnastics are, said lightly, somewhat

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Uncertainties about Agnosticism", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 46:3 (1999): 171-188. Representative of (3) would be Bertrand Russell, *Why I am Not a Christian* (London: Unwin paperbacks, 1957), Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion,* Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York, NY: Hachette Book Group, 2007); Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon,* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 2006); John Mils *Inventing God - Psychology of Belief and The Rise of Secular Spirituality.*

incredible (if not incomprehensible), but they also seem the remaining option for the imposition critic, if he sticks to the exact same vein of thought.

However, this critic could alter this vein of thought and hence maintain an additional maneuver. He could modify his assertion and state that encountering the numinous is just an intensification of encountering what someone loves. And insofar as love is prone to mislead, then the numinous encountered in the natural world is no more real than the "love" encountered when an infatuated young person beholds her beloved and "senses" in him signs of returned affection. Such a person may well interpret some action on the part of the longed for other—his wearing certain clothes, saying hello, not saying hello, sitting in a certain seat, etc.—as indicating his reciprocal affection. She wears proverbial "love glasses," which greatly color her experience, such that she interprets what she experiences according to the "lens of love." Being so caught up in infatuation, she is unable to see clearly what is actually happening. Likewise, one could argue that seeing the natural world as reflecting or iterating the numinous is merely an interpretation based on a certain set of "glasses," e.g., the lens of love for the divine or even for the natural world. In both cases, the coloring of experiencing—i.e., the sensing of it as having a certain meaning—results from a prior and deeply felt love, which informs profoundly the significance of what is experienced for the one experiencing it. Absent the coloration stemming from internally felt love, and the object in question—the young man in class or the tree near Tinker Creek—would show up in a more objective fashion. Hence, one could posit that the experience of the numinous is of a type with the experience of "signs of love" for a love-struck person. If so, then we have good reasons to discard or at least not take it seriously, since it seems to be a merely subjective interpretation, rather than an objective experience.

Two brief words of response, however, will show that such a critique is not meritorious. First, in the former case, but not in the latter, the subject of experience can readily be informed concerning the object in question and his intentions. For instance, the object of infatuation's daily apparel signifies nothing other than his failure to do laundry; or his seating arrangement just follows the pre-set seating chart; or, more importantly, he has expressed, publicly and clearly, the fact that he has no interest in the person in question. All of which is to say: within the community of inter-subjectivity, a fairly clear and accurate presentation can be obtained which demonstrates the error in interpretation enacted by the love-struck subject. Nonetheless, no such intersubjective presentation can be obtained regarding the encounter with the natural world as numinous. Who, for instance, could interrogate a tree to ascertain its "intentions"? Who could analyze the tree

sufficiently to state, "the tree, like the young man, is just 'doing its own thing;' there is nothing special going on here?" The interpretation of numinosity may be errant, but the fact of such errancy cannot be established in any manner commensurate with or even similar to how such was established in the previous example.

The second reason to assert the non-meritoriousness of this critique is that it presupposes the notion that "love is blind." As noted above, infatuation may well be blinding, such as to obscure obvious and integral facts, but love seems of different type. Consider the following from Norris Clarke (borrowing from Bernard Lonergan): "'nothing is truly known unless it is first loved.'"[28] Love—genuine, profound, self-transcending, and unconditional—may, in fact, be the only state of consciousness which enables a true revelation of the other, as such. Hans urs Von Balthasar has posited that such abiding and total love is a "methodological commitment for obtaining [truth] itself."[29] Or, as Annie Dillard says, "the lover can see."[30] In any case, love, especially as differentiated from infatuation, cannot be summarily discarded as unduly coloring of experience and blinding to the facts. One's love for the natural world, by means of which he approaches and has revealed to him the numinous depths therein, is thus not a mark against the possibility of there actually being such a manifestation of numinosity.

In short, the subjective interpretation critique cannot explain away the possibility that Oliver, Muir, and Dillard encountered the numinous in the natural world. Such does not prove, of course, the presence of the numinous in the natural world nor the fact that Oliver et al. encountered it. What it *does* do, though, is undermine the notion that this sort of encounter is just a subjective interpretation based on interior affections and emotions.

4. Illusion and Reality

What, though, of the illusion critique? This criticism says that there is no numinous or transcendent reality which is made manifest to Oliver et al. Their sense of having experienced such is ultimately rooted in illusion. The "eternal

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[28] Bernard Lonergan, 1975: "Christology Today: Methodological Reflections," in *A Third Collection*, 77. Quoted in W. Norris Clarke, S.J., 1993: *Person and Being: The Aquinas Lecture*, 102.

[29] Hans Urs von Balthasar 1946: *Von den Aufgaben der katholischen Philosophie in der Zeit* reference to the English translation by Brian McNeil, CRV, "Retrieving the Tradition: On the task of Catholic philosophy in our time," *Communio* 20 (1993): 152.

[30] Annie Dillard 1974: *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 18.

flames on a cedar tree" are no more real that Santa Claus nor more revelatory than elephants in my backyard (per Credence Clearwater Revival).[31]

It is, of course, impossible to refute such a criticism, because to assert the reality of the numinous and its presence in the natural world—which reality would thus demonstrate the fact, not illusion, of the numinous and its coming to presence—is to assert precisely what the criticism denies. Rather, the better question to ask is whether or not the actual way of attending to a being, such as a tree, is of a sort as to fall readily into illusion, so much that we do not even recognize that fall. That is, do we have good reasons to suspect that, in contemplating the natural world in its seeming numinosity, we may be subject to an illusion (and a serious one at that)?

First, as way of response, we note that in such cases as described by Oliver et al., there is an attitude which the Buddhists describe as "sitting quietly, doing nothing." This receptive, still, and silent mode of attending, this manner of experiencing contemplatively, is, obviously, much different from, for instance, the deliberate ingesting of hallucinogenic substances. There is nothing about the *form* of experience—what preceded it, how it is done, where it is done, etc.—which gives us reason to call into question the reality of what is thus experienced and to think of it as an illusion. In fact, a slowed down and receptive awareness seems paradigmatic of how we should attend to the world, rather than odd or exceptional. And unless one is willing to admit that other normal experiences which precede and follow contemplation of the natural world—e.g., driving to a forest, eating a meal subsequent to the contemplation of that forest, watching TV before retiring for the night, etc.—are likewise subject to illusion, he has no reason, based merely on a consideration of the genesis and form of the contemplation (e.g., coming back to and sitting quietly in front of a tree found to be wonderous, in the same vein as Dillard), to think of it as illusion.

What though of the *content*, i.e., the experience of the natural world, e.g., a tree, in its possible numinosity? Ought that give me pause, sufficient to think I may be suffering an illusion? Perhaps, and to see why, we can consider the following. Our prior knowledge regarding a natural being such as a tree—its species, its location, the fact that it appears differently in December than in June, etc.—though likely an implicit form of knowledge enacted when we directly experience it, is

[31] AJ Ayer "disbelieved as strongly in the existence of God as he disbelieved in the existence of a zebra in his living room." Piers Benn 1999: "Some Uncertainties about Agnosticism", in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 46:3, n.8.

nonetheless robust enough to preclude the possibility of illusion. For instance, the absence of leaves on a maple tree in January does not give me pause nor cause me to question the object permanence of the tree being one and the same with the green and fully leafed tree I saw here last August. Operative in the background of my experience is a strong certainty that there is a continuity of the reality of that one and same tree. Absent such certainty, however—e.g., a state of pondering whether or not we are in a Matrix type reality—and the prospect of illusoriness looms. And since we have no certainty about the numinous, and because, in fact, the more certainty we obtain in science, the more so does even the possibility of the numinous seem absurd, it follows that the aforesaid content of the contemplation is sufficient to call it into question as potentially or even likely an illusion and thus not real.

Such seems to be a normal and ready conclusion. However, it fails to take into account the following and quite significant fact: the absence of certainty concerning the numinous and its presence in a tree is not of a type with the kind enacted concerning a Matrix "reality." The latter involves a questioning of what we have always already taken to be certainly the case (our shared everyday reality, in other words). The former involves an uncertainty regarding what we perhaps cannot ever or in principle know with certainty (hence the centrality of faith in matters numinous). Just because I do not have much if any certainty concerning the reality of the numinous and its arboreal iterations, does not, for that very reason, indicate sufficient reason for me to doubt what is given in my experience. If it has been convincingly established that the numinous does not, exist, then if I "experience" it, I (and others) have good reason to consider such as illusory. But the non-existence of the numinous has not been established. Rather, as Hume would say, we are left in state of suspended judgment concerning the reality or non-reality of the numinous and its manifestation in the natural world.

If, moreover, someone asserts that A) we do not have sufficient evidence concerning the numinous to think of it as existing (and iterating arboreally) and B) we should therefore suppose any experience of it as illusory, then she delegitimizes the approach by means of which connection with and a sense of the numinous could occur, such that could demonstrate the illusoriness of its ostensive manifestation in the natural world. To deny the possibility of the encounter with the numinous and to assert that any such encounter is illusory because it cannot accord with our current understanding of the world, is to posit a metaphysical notion— "this is what reality is ultimately like and there is no numinous therein"—while likewise denying the possibility of a metaphysics beyond science— "such a reality,

obtaining beyond the reach of a scientific worldview, must be an illusion." It is to speak authoritatively and seemingly with sufficient understanding about the transcendent, while simultaneously holding that such a transcendent cannot be actually experienced and thus made subject to our understanding. It is to engage in a decidedly circular and therefore illicit form of reasoning.

What, though, of a more modified claim, namely that, all things being equal, it seems *unlikely* that someone could encounter the similarly unlikely numinous in the natural world? After all, a cedar tree is just that: a particular plant organism, whose being can be sufficiently analyzed and explained, which analysis and explanation makes no reference at all to the numinous. We thus have good reason to suspect that when someone claims "to see the numinous in the cedar tree" he is suffering from an illusion, though we cannot definitively prove so. Such is a modified, and seemingly stronger, claim regarding the illusoriness of the encounter with numinous in the natural world.

The first point to note is that "seeing the numinous in the cedar tree" is apt to be misunderstood badly. To see why, consider Anselm of Canterbury, who, in his *Proslogion*, penned concerning God, "if You are everywhere, why then, since You are present, do I not see You? … Never have I seen You, Lord my God; I do not know Your face."[32] St. Anselm, strangely enough, seems to prefigure Yuri Gagarin, the first astronaut in space. Gagarin, as he went into space, exclaimed, "I see no God here." Yet, there is a very important distinction to be drawn between the Benedictine monk and Soviet cosmonaut. As Robert Sokolowski makes clear, St. Anselm describes a God, whose being and encounterability are not at all of a type with other forms of being and encounterability: "the presence and absence" of God articulated by Anselm falls far beyond our ordinary grasp of such terms, e.g., the presence and absence involved "when we look for a lost object, [or] try to remember a name."[33] Put bluntly: God is not a thing among things whose presence can be registered and articulated as such and in accordance with our normal experience. Gagarin, however, regarded God as such a thing among things and thus thought of his apparent absence from space as further prove of his non-existence, which non-existence had been previously surmised because of His similarly apparent absence on earth. Since the "here in which God is is not the here of ordinary location,"

[32] Anselm of Canterbury, i.1077-78: *The Prosologion*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, 85.

[33] Robert Sokolowski 1995:, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology,* 2.

then the issue is not about finding a God often outside our visual field; contra Gagarin, it is not about going to space to encounter God there.[34]

To revisit the likely controversial claim of seeing the numinous in the tree: we now are clear that such seeing is not of ordinary objects. It is not realized by the mere expansion of the visual field. There are no corrective surgeries which could enable this seeing. If so, then what mode of seeing might be at play here? To address that question, we return to a point noted earlier: a parent seeing his child. The infant is given to him in his experience as irreducible to flesh, bones, cells, molecules, etc. In fact, such physical matter does not really pertain to his experience. The parent encounters a Thou—for him in fact *the* Thou—a person of unconditional and total value. In short: he sees his daughter (with all the connotations of both seeing and daughter), not some specimen of humanity, not some collection of material parts. And it is important to add that such a seeing, though not primarily or even secondarily of "objective" features, is not regarded—and rightly so—as an illusion. In which case—and bringing the analogy back to the main thrust of this paper—the non-objectivity of the numinous as made present in the natural world means that the failure to note its presence is not of a type with other such failures. More importantly, it likewise means that the seeing of it cannot be critiqued only or mainly according to an analysis of objectivity. The non-objectivity of the being beheld or revealed in the contemplative gaze, like in the case of the parent's loving gaze, can certainly be real and need not be labeled an illusion on account of its non-objectivity.

A few more words on "objectivity" are called for. When someone asserts, "I saw and heard a pig in my college cafeteria",[35] he refers to "a thing among things," to use terminology from above. He likewise makes his experience subject to the following: those around him can investigate this situation and ask these and other related questions. "Has anyone else seen or heard a pig here? Has there ever been a pig heard or seen in this cafeteria? What are the odds of a pig making it here totally undiscovered? How could it even do so?" They can test what he claims to have experienced against fairly objective knowledge. And, pursuant to such a test, it makes good sense to posit that the experience was likely an illusion: there was in fact no such pig walking around and squealing in the cafeteria. The pig, as a thing among other things, can be reasoned about in comparison to those same "other

[34] Ibid.

[35] While an undergrad at St. Anselm College, I had a very odd experience of thinking that I heard, while eating lunch, a pig squeal in the corner of the cafeteria.

things," seeing how, if at all, it could indeed obtain in the manner alleged. A pig, as a thing among things, can thus be addressed in this more "objective" manner: i.e., an analysis making use of what we know about it and other related items and their possible connection. We are thus left with the recognition that A) there was no such pig and B) the person experienced an illusion. We see here a healthy inductive process that culminates in the quite rational position that the person who saw/heard a pig suffered an illusion.

Most important for our discussion is the fact that the reasoned assertion of illusion follows from the alleged experience of a thing among things, i.e., an item subject to an objective analysis. However, when the reality in question—i.e., the numinous in the natural world—is not such a thing among things—i.e., is not an item subject to such an objective analysis—it does not lend itself readily to being labeled as a mere illusion. Phrased otherwise: the content of the encounter, being non-objective in this way, is not the sort easily (or in principle) subject to the illusion-asserting analysis just discussed. The content—e.g., the numinous incarnate in a tree—cannot be labeled an illusion, because, and unlike the aforesaid pig, it is not thing among things. The pig could in principle be seen by someone else as it wanders around the cafeteria. In fact, the marked failure of any such confirmation regarding such an extraordinary occurrence is, in turn, a disconfirmation of the reality of the original experience. However, there can be no such confirmation or disconfirmation occasioned by the numinous and its iteration in the natural world. What occurs relative to this numinous iteration has, in fact, no bearing on the reality of that iteration. For instance, merely because a neighboring tree appears "normally" to someone else, tells us nothing of the original encounter with the numinous. Just as the fact that a neighbor does not see someone's daughter as her father does not indicate that the father is suffering an illusion, so, too, with the fact of the neighboring tree's way of appearing to a fellow nature-lover.

In sum, then, the illusion critique, like the merely metaphorical critique and the imposition critique, does not ultimately prove tenable in explaining away the encounter with the numinous in the natural world. We are left with the same conclusion as in sections 2 and 3 above: the natural world and its members, as contemplated, may be disclosed as reflecting or perhaps even belonging to the numinous. The consciousness of Oliver et al. may well be directed toward a reality beyond space and time and perhaps even beyond words. We are thus led to conclude that what is given to the contemplative gaze of Oliver, Muir, and Dillard may in fact be not an illusion but reality, albeit mysterious.

5. Conclusion

To close out this essay I offer a few additional words reflecting on the possible relationship between the numinous and the natural. There are, I think, several different ways of trying to articulate this possible connection. We can attend to a few key terms, each of which highlights a distinct mode of thought concerning this relationship.

The first such term is "theophanic:" in a manner analogous to the unconsumed burning bush in Exodus, the natural world, when gazed upon with deep, abiding, and wonder-filled contemplation, reveals within itself the always ongoing and never to be diminished real presence of the Almighty. What becomes manifest in this contemplation, is the beauty, truth, and goodness of the divine, as such and really there. The numinous is here and now present, really, robustly, meaningfully, profoundly, encounterably. The distinction between the natural world as thus encountered and the burning bush is one of degree, not kind.

Another term is what I would call "logo-phanic." This means that the natural world "declares the glory of God [and] the firmament proclaims the works of His hands" to quote from Psalm 19.[36] And as that same Psalm tells us, this "report goes forth through all the earth," although "there is no speech."[37] God's word (broadly understood in the ambiguity which attends that phrase) is therefore present and encounterable, always and everywhere in the natural world, since that same word gives order, structure, intelligibility, beauty, and wonder to that same world. As do all words, this always obtaining word refers and points, in this case back to the God who "speaks" it and makes it present throughout all his creation. The numinous becomes present through and by means of this word as it abides in, gives foundation to, and upholds perpetually the natural world.

The third and final term to discuss is "iconic." To quote Bruce Foltz: "Icon… names… a window and bridge to the transcendent."[38] The beauty of an icon painting, for example, is not something intrinsic to it but rather is a manifestation of the divine beauty which inspired and moved the iconographer in the first place. In any event, nature, as iconic, possess what I might call a "salient transparency," much the same as a window—Foltz's term for icon, after all— is "saliently

[36] Psalm 19, *The Catholic Study Bible*.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Bruce Foltz 2014: *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible*, 126.

transparent" and is that through and by means of which there comes to presence what obtains on its far side. To push this window analogy even further: nature becomes iconic perhaps similar to how someone realizes that the object of his consciousness is not panes of glass with cross pieces located halfway up a wall but is rather a conduit though and by means of which the outside world can be made manifest to him. This sort of gestalt shift of consciousness means that the window itself can no longer be taken merely per se but always corelative to that whose presence it enables. The meaning of the glass alters radically and inexorably as it is recognized in being a window. Similarly, then, we might say that the natural world, recognized in contemplation and related to as a "window to the transcendent," can never be taken fully "as such" or being "merely" itself, but always is encountered in its correlativity, i.e., its innate connection to the numinous which it makes present as would a window.

Hence, there may be different means of articulating the presence of the transcendent reality in the natural world, which was encountered and described by Oliver, Muir, and Dillard. I leave open which of these three, if any, is most apt to thus articulate. However, I think some such articulation helpful, because it reinforces and reiterates the fact, as we have observed in this essay, that the attending to the natural world enacted and described by Oliver et al. is not mere metaphor (understood pejoratively), the imposition of subjective feeling, nor illusion but may well be, in the end, directed toward reality, even if that reality is ambiguous and not readily subject to clear terminology.

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