

ECOLOGY, ANGELS AND VIRTUAL REALITY

A Triptych

Robert R. Marsh

A TRIPTYCH IS A PAINTING made up of three panels, side by side, each a picture in its own right, yet each maybe a fragment of a larger whole. I say 'maybe' because it is the viewer, the one standing and looking, who has to make it a whole. There is work there; it is the work of the imagination; and imagination is, perhaps, the medium of connection for the three panels: ecology, angels and virtual reality. Though, I must add, they may not necessarily be in that order and, anyway, as in a triptych, our imaginative eye will be roving back and forth *between* the panels, always asking the question: is there a whole here, is there a way of making a whole? Let us begin.

Spirit of Place

In the summer of 1995, outside the little town of Chinook in Montana, I found myself surprised by another world. You know how vacation sightseeing tends to become idle gawking at landscape, whether it is natural or artificial, taking it in for pleasure and moving on to the next thing. Here, however, the landscape itself reached out and took *me* in and moved me at a far deeper level than I expected. There I was, waist deep in prairie, enveloped by grasses not yet browned by summer, and 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 Bear's Paw Battleground of Chief Joseph, witness to the deaths of many: many people, many hopes. Here, a hundred and thirty years ago, the fleeing Nez Percé tribe were at last cornered and humiliated at the end of a 1,600-mile flight through the Rocky Mountains, only forty miles from the safety of the Canadian border. Here, Chief Joseph spoke with strange eloquence: 'I will fight no more forever'. At the time I knew none of that.

The Way, 54/4 (October 2015), 39–50

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The Bear's Paw Battleground of Chief Joseph, Montana

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 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? I *know* I approached that place knowing a *little* of its history. Would it have so moved me without? I *know* the depth and character of the inner motion took me by surprise so that I arrived a tourist and left a pilgrim. The land itself seemed to speak with a silent voice quite at odds with its beauty. Somehow nature and human history came together in that place to shape a world of significance that could draw me in, a world neither objective nor subjective but both, a world where the visible and the invisible met in imagination. Now such a world, because it is a matter of imagination, engages the feelings deeply—we cannot help being affectively inclined towards or away from it. It is always 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, from the sixteenth century till now, has sundered the imagination. The *natural* and the *human* have fallen apart, generating an unruly family of feuding dualisms and, somewhere in the gap that has been opened, the genuinely religious imagination has been lost. As a result, we find it difficult to speak

of the spirit of a place without forgetting what is religious about spirit, reducing that spirit to one pole or the other of our favourite dichotomy: it is either objective or subjective, real or unreal, fact or fantasy. 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 on this troubled planet? We have treated 'nature' as a voiceless commodity to be consumed on demand and we are now beginning to live under the fear of the consequences. We have told ourselves that the earth is dead and now it is dying. We are killing ourselves as we kill the land.

But why should we not treat the land this way? What can keep us from ecological destruction? Can enlightened self-interest and deeper scientific insight do the trick? There is little sign of this happening. Expediency, political necessity, economic reality seem to favour the quick fix and the short-sighted response. Indeed some would say that self-interest and a 'productive' mentality are at the root of the issue, and so belong to the problem rather than the solution. One way or another, these voices of deep or radical ecology envision the earth's salvation only in a total transcendence of human interest in the face of the rediscovered moral significance of the non-human world. These are spiritual visions—they see ultimate and irreducible value outside, independent of and beyond the human.

They tell us that we need to rediscover the unique voice of the earth, to reacquaint ourselves with spirit all around us. I agree; but the project of radical ecology, though fascinating, is fraught with difficulties—philosophical, practical and theological. An example of the philosophical problem concerns value. One way to find spiritual or moral value beyond the human honours the holistic impulse of ecology by looking on nature as a whole, with reverence, and submitting human concerns to the good of the whole. The problem is that Nature, as all watchers of television documentaries know, is profoundly amoral by traditional standards. The lion lies down with the lamb only to eat it. Wasps lay their eggs to hatch in other creatures, ants make slaves, and chimpanzees, so genetically close to humans, can be brutal killers. If Nature makes no objection to such behaviour why should we, who revere Nature, object to our own predation and abuse?

There are practical consequences, too. The respect for human life is a product of the same modern period as the ideas that ecological movements are rightly trying to unravel. Modernity won freedom and dignity for human beings precisely by constructing the earth as utterly *other* and glorifying the human subject's transcendence over nature. Post-modern

radical ecology, as it erodes otherness, risks also eroding dignity and freedom. For example, take this claim: 'There is no inorganic nature, there is no dead, mechanical earth. The Great Mother has been won back to life.'¹ It is no coincidence that this slogan emerges from the one serious attempt in our times to institute public environmental policy: the National Socialism of the Third Reich.

***How are the
natural and
the cultural to
fit together?***

How do we affirm that the earth is alive and that human beings are one species among others without losing the best in human values? How are the natural and the cultural to fit together? 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, radical ecology has either accepted that otherness to subvert it (for example by asserting that we are a cancer which must be excised from nature's body) or denied it completely (for example by 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, I believe, lies neither in extolling difference nor in decrying it but in finding it to be *significant*. How is the earth, the land, *this* place, significant and other to me? How is this place on the prairie of Montana significant in itself? How is this a place of spirit?

Spirit! A Christian theologian cannot help but also be aware that such questions involve stepping into the well-mined territory of ancient controversies: nature–grace, transcendence–immanence, creation–redemption, the apophatic and the kataphatic, to name just the most tractable. In particular, the project of inspiriting matter usually results in some form of pantheism, with its own philosophical and theological problems—not the least being heresy. Maybe, though, the problem posed by the ecological crisis is demanding a move beyond Christian orthodoxy. Maybe survival is more important than tradition. Maybe, but I am suspicious, since the setting aside of tradition seems to be one of the hallmarks of the modern project that has got us into this mess. Are there no other resources within the tradition before this last resort?

The search for significant spirit, when seen as the quest for spirit in matter, is doomed: you cannot create such a dichotomy and then hope

¹ Ernst Kriek, quoted in Robert A. Pois, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 117.

to put the two halves back together so easily. But I think there are alternatives, other strands in the theology of Creation that evade this dichotomy. The one I want to follow here is an ancient insight embodied in the Nicene Creed—one so familiar that we regularly skip over it. ‘We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.’ Instead of the single polarity of matter versus spirit, we have here two dimensions with which to work. We have the made and the maker, the created and the uncreated; and we have the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible. The Cappadocian theologians, in an anti-Platonic move, emphasized that what is seen—the physical creation—and what is unseen—the realm of spirit—are both created. This opens a new possibility: that the much-needed ecological spirit is in the realm of the created invisible—what our ancestors called ‘Heaven’, in distinction from both ‘Earth’ and ‘God’, the Creator of both. So, 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? That is the second panel of our triptych.

The Career of Created Spirit

In the Christian tradition, if you want to talk about the created invisible you have to talk about angels. Angels, though academically unsavoury, have become quite popular in some circles. They power several highly rated television shows and they fill the shelves of bookshops. I would be intrigued to know how many of my readers believe in angels.

I myself want to prescind from that question for a while. First, I want to ask another question: how has the tradition used angels, and why?

From the first, it seems, angels have played a mediating role: among their many and developing activities in the traditions of the Hebrew Bible the primary one is as messenger or envoy—a go-between. They are not Deity as such, but mediators of Divine activity and presence. Yet even such an apparent clarity has to be hedged, since in many narratives there seems to be deliberate ambiguity such that it is hard to say where the angel ends and the Lord begins. The envoy merges into the one who sends, in a literary device that permits angels to mediate both the presence and the absence of God.

The richness and ambiguity of biblical tradition proved popular with mystics and theologians up to the middle ages and was constantly elaborated and developed. In Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Celestial Hierarchy* the mediating role of angels is interpreted ontologically in a Neoplatonic

synthesis of heaven and earth. The hierarchy of angels, itself subdivided and ordered into three ranks of three, lies between the realm of Triune Godhead and the ecclesiastical hierarchy of earth. The one is a symbol of the other, so that the attributes of angels, richly imagined, provide a picture that humanity should imitate. Angels both bring God to us and lure us home. Their mediation is, therefore, *anagogical*—a matter of genuine transformation—rather than the *analogical* mediation of thought or language. This angelic ascent becomes of prime importance to the medieval mystics: Hildegard of Bingen, Alan of Lille and 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.

A dramatic shift in focus was, however, under way which would slowly transform the understanding of nature and of angels: a shift literally *embodied* in St Francis, who receives the stigmata (the wounds of Christ) through the mediation of an angel—a seraph who, in turn, bears the image of Jesus. In this dawning era, angels, as mirrors that reflect the image of the unseen God, reveal first a human face—the face of Jesus of Nazareth. As the human person of Jesus becomes the sole mediator between God and humans, angels are on the way out. But before they are completely transformed into chocolate-box cherubs they discover a new kind of mediating role in the mysticism of Ignatius Loyola. We shall speak more of that role later.

The eclipse of angels in the mystical tradition is paralleled in theological angelology by two developments. The first is a matter of embodiment. Angels used to have bodies, however subtle. What is a spirit? The Hebrews had a rich notion of spirit as breath of life, as dynamic presence and power. The early Christian teachers—Justin, Clement, Origen, even Augustine—also thought of a spirit as somehow *tangible*. But by the time of Aquinas the angels had become identified with that most intangible entity: mind. Angels, Aquinas says, are minds without bodies. And as his rich notion of mind is replaced by the Cartesian *res cogitans*, angels evaporate entirely.

The second development concerns another role played by angels in ancient and medieval thought. As early as Aristotle, angels were considered to keep the heavenly spheres in motion, and this office persisted into Christian angelology. Angels enjoyed the charge of maintaining not only the motion of the planets through the heavens but also the mundane trajectories of human missiles. Angels mediated divine activity not only as intervention but also in the day-to-day, predictable running of the universe. The birth of modernity and its new sciences, however, worked to eliminate even this last vestige of angelic reality. Angels went underground as Inertia, as Force, as Gravity.



Three Angels, from the Bamberg Apocalypse, 1000–1020

It is a short step from the conception of angels as placeless, mental realities to their complete usurpation by laws of Nature which are similarly invisible, all-pervasive and strangely effective. In this move, an essentially religious phenomenon—the angelic—becomes merely natural. Or, rather, since angels have always been ‘natural’ by virtue of their creation, the concept of nature, modified by modernity, absorbs them. To modernity’s scientific imagination, nature is a mere mechanism governed by implacable powers whose mystery is systematically ignored. Simultaneously, any vestiges of angelic presence in the human sphere were swept away in the modern cultural imagination which acknowledges only human conventions. 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 has been put in its place.

Angels have always been religion’s way of handling mediation, of asserting the in-betweenness of reality in their being, as the real but invisible relations between visible creatures, and between creatures and their Creator. Angels are literally neither here nor there but both and neither. Where are they to be found? In the real relations *in-between*. When angels died so did the in-betweenness of reality. So did our link to each other and to the earth.

There is a connection here to the human imagination. The imagination was once also envisaged as mediating, relating, connecting extremes and

making it possible to act in the world—above all to care for it. Angels and imagination mirror each other. For example, as an icon of imagination, the Celestial Court, envisioned by medieval mysticism, reveals the imagination to itself. Just to take the upper hierarchy of angels, for example—the cherubim, the seraphim and the thrones—is revealing. Who are they? They are known by their qualities. Cherubim overflow with *knowledge* of the Trinity. Seraphim burn with love and desire for God while the less familiar thrones are credited with the intriguing conjunction three qualities: they are places of Divine presence, occasions of just judgment and the means of all spiritual discernment.

There is an interesting anthropology here. Intellect, affect and, I believe, most importantly, discernment are affirmed as the highest angelic attributes and, thus, attributes of the imagination and attributes of the human. But look at what we have lost. We find it easy to think of cognition as characteristically human. We can make sense of feeling and affect. But what the thrones model for us is precisely what we have come to lack: presence, justice and discernment as one reality. What is more, the discernment corresponds to the specifically religious aspect of imagination that modernity exorcised: that sense of God's presence which transcends the categories of nature and culture to reveal what is natural in humanity and what is humane in nature and makes possible justice.

Discernment of Spirits

Now where is a Jesuit going to go to ponder the nature of discernment but to Ignatius Loyola? But there is more to this than filial loyalty. Ignatian mysticism shares the same orientations as the angels known as thrones. The Spiritual Exercises bring together imaginative contemplation, affective mysticism and spiritual discernment in what we have come to call 'the service of faith and the promotion of justice'.² The connection between these elements is rarely noticed. For Ignatius the active use of the imagination in prayer puts one in touch with deep currents of feeling and influence which can be used to reveal the particular way that individuals can ally themselves with God's own activity in redeeming and liberating the world.

Ignatius sees the imagination as both active and passive. As active, it is a praxis of shaping and making that creates a bridge to God's own activity of ongoing creation. The one making the Spiritual Exercises

² General Congregation 32, decree 4, in *Jesuit Life and Mission Today*.

creates a small world almost *ex nihilo* and, at least briefly, enters into its life. Here is the passive aspect of imagination. What we have made moves us, affects us. Our participation in imagined reality influences who we are and how we choose to create and choose to act. We shape a world and we encounter it and, in the process, we are transformed: transformed, not merely changed. To speak of transformation presupposes some standard, some direction, some norm, so that we become not merely different but better ... or worse.

Ignatius locates this norm in God's desire for us, in God's work of creation and redemption, in God's project for the world. But, importantly for our purposes, Ignatius considers this sense of direction to be *mediated* rather than directly given. Although he acknowledges that the Creator can deal directly with the creature, he believes that the usual influence is through created spirits, through angels, constantly moving us in the depths of our affectivity. Our imaginal worlds are made by our hands but are inhabited by invisible spiritual realities we did not create. In the imagination we see the unseen through affect, and what we see has a direction to it. Ignatius is firmly confident that we can discern the spirits that influence us, we can tell whether they are good or bad, whether they lead one Godward or lead one astray. Only here can we choose the way God would choose, to act creatively the way God acts.

So, to summarise, the created invisible can be sensed affectively and experienced in inclinations, is intimately involved with imagination, and can provide contingent norms for practical action. Three other things can also be said. First, the vision of the invisible defies the categories of objectivity and subjectivity. It places itself with the angels in the in-between. Second, the seeing of the unseen lies in between the 'natural' and the 'artificial': it has to be learnt (which is what the Spiritual Exercises are all about) and yet it is also a matter of grace. Finally, the imagination has to be understood as a place of meeting, a place of presence. When the invisible becomes visible, something is encountered, something of value. The creatures of imagination are icons. They are works of art. Here we move beyond ethics into aesthetics, that domain, I propose, where reality becomes virtual. And this brings us to our third panel—virtual reality.

Virtual Reality

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

The philosophy of symbol developed by Susanne Langer lifts up some of the extraordinary qualities of human perception that modernity has taught us assiduously to ignore.

Langer distinguishes two kinds of symbol, both of which articulate meaning: *representational* and *presentational*. Representational symbolism is epitomized by language—in particular by mathematical or logical languages. It is discursive and conveys its meaning through the stringing together of smaller units of meaning. For example, the very possibility of a dictionary of basic symbols—words—indicates a discursive symbol system. All that can be said can be said in words. Now Langer's mentor, Wittgenstein, believed that everything that could be thought at all could be thought clearly. Beyond language there is only silence. But Langer, in contrast, asserts that there are other modes of articulation of meaning which do not stop where language ends. For example, we are all familiar with the power of poetry to grasp what cannot be contained in discourse. Such symbolism—seen most clearly in art—is *presentational*. It presents 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. Separate notes of music mean nothing but as a complex whole they articulate ... something. Something, above all, that is affective. Presentational symbol moves us.

Both kinds of symbolism give form to meaning and, typically, we are led to believe that discursive symbols have greater importance and are more trustworthy, though in several ways the presentational has priority: in ordinary vision, for one. Perception is not just a passive process. It is a matter of imagination—of *formulation*.

We see forms in a process that is both active and passive: the external world only becomes present to us, only becomes 'visible', through the imagination. Langer sees rationality extending far beyond discursive thought into processes that are usually deemed pre-rational, such as perception. Moreover, the dynamic form of our feelings *cannot* be articulated discursively, but only in art. Art in all its forms is about the articulation of the living forms of feeling. So, she wonders, 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 this 'arranging' forms or colours, 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 colours 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'.³

Langer's concept of the *virtual* is important. In it the invisible becomes visible. Virtual objects, though created by human hands, also have an otherness and self-sufficiency. They spring into being with a life of their own. In a work of art—and in perception too—the created invisible becomes visible as articulate form. Langer maps out this 'virtual reality' according to the associated 'art-form': virtual *space* in the plastic arts; virtual *time* in music; virtual *power* in dance and gesture; virtual *life* in poetry and literature, and so on. 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 moved by them. We can only remain aloof by denying their reality, by refusing to see the unseen. The whole world is therefore significant since all reality is virtual.

(In)conclusion

So we have three panels: an ecological problem born from the loss of significant spirit; an approach to spirit through the notion of the created invisible world of angels—a world of the in-between; and a glimpse of a virtual reality.

The human world is irreducibly imaginative: it holds a significance. Even the cold world of the modern, scientific imagination is inescapably 'virtual': it is imaginative construction; it is artefact. But that it is 'cold' is revealing: it reveals the dark spirit that animates our technological mastery of the so-called 'environment'. We need, instead, to fashion a way of life for creation that is inspired 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—

³ Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key* (London: Routledge, 1979), 47–48.

even suppressing our feelings is a response—and to the degree we are aware we are faced with choices. We can praise and love or we can ignore and use. We can create or we can destroy.

Seeing created spirit all around us avoids pantheism. 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 glory is present in this created world *mediately*, but present nevertheless.

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: both are ambiguous. *Pace* New Age exponents, the angelic realm is not completely benevolent. Tradition has it that some angels rebelled against God, grew dark, and became distorted mirrors of Divine Beauty, mediators of a fascinating but abysmal Absence.

This is why the creation is not simply to be honoured or worshipped for its own being but, always and only, because of its relationship to Being beyond: only this can ground 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. Discernment is the key—discernment of spirits. 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. Liberation can only be found in a way of life, a familiarity, 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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