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Robert S. Corrington, *Nature's Sublime: An Essay in Aesthetic Naturalism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013). 230 pages.

Theologian Robert S. Corrington in his tenth book, *Nature's Sublime: An Essay in Aesthetic Naturalism*, returns to his roots in aesthetics as informed by two major influences: German romanticism and idealism (through Schopenhauer and to some degree Kant) and “psychosemiotics” (psychoanalysis understood through the lens of semiotic theory). Phenomenology and ordinal metaphysics are both not forgotten either, as they are combined in a new method which Corrington calls “empathic” ordinal phenomenology. In another way, though, this book is new territory. The regions of self, community, religion, and nature—themes predominant in books such as *The Community of Interpreters* or *Nature & Spirit: An Essay in Ecstatic Naturalism*—books hallmarking Corrington’s early career—are present. But each of these themes are radically recast within an aesthetic approach in mind. The aesthetics that Corrington is interpreting here is one which takes the sublime as its key motif. The sublime, we are told, reveals what is most essential about *natura naturans* (“nature naturing”) and its relationship to “the human process,” a Buchlerian term designating a “self” as creative agent in process. The split between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* is then taken up with the sublime in mind, and how the human being (or “human process”) relates psychoanalytically and semiotically to the sublime. This is the culminating theme of the book. Overall, those interested in American philosophy and theology, continental philosophy of religion, German idealism and romanticist aesthetics will appreciate this book because it takes on a very unique approach to thinking about religion through art.

Corrington’s Introduction outlines four basic dimensions at stake in approaching religion through art: the human process; the nature of human communities; the powers of religion; and the nature and power of art. Corrington lays out a four-fold methodological “prism” in the sense that nature is to be explored in a methodical manner which “reveals” rather than “claims” the positive and general metaphysical characteristics of a reality. This reality can be refracted via a number of specified natural orders (such as the religious, the aesthetic, and so on). These in turn are explored in terms of Corrington’s own ecstatic naturalist metaphysics.

Corrington writes that “the term “metaphysics” refers to the study and articulation of the most pervasive traits of the one nature that there is. For Dewey (a key player in his book) metaphysics is the study of the “generic traits of existence,” while for Buchler (another key player) it is the exploration of

“whatever is in whatever way it is.” And for “aesthetic naturalism” metaphysics is the analysis of the potencies of *nature naturing* and of the innumerable orders of *nature natured* (or “creation” in a monotheism).

*Ordinal* phenomenology replaces both hermeneutic and transcendental phenomenology. Ordinal phenomenology, for Corrington, uses psychoanalysis as its conceptual medium within metaphysical philosophy. As nature (and the human process) are both fully natural and semiotic, the method struggles to “describe the generic traits of nature with as much openness to the ‘way’ and ‘how’ of nature.” The mixture of ordinal phenomenology and psychosemiotics (semiotic psychoanalysis) is *ordinal psychoanalysis*. Corrington writes, “Ordinal psychoanalysis will struggle to illuminate the rhythms of the unconscious as they directly impinge on the shaping and unfolding of meanings in the intra-psychic and inter-psychic spheres. One of the most striking aspects of this dual approach will be the phenomenology of the unconscious of nature and of the human unconscious that is rooted in nature’s unconscious.”

The methodological move here is important enough to warrant being called out as the high point of the Introduction. In it phenomenological “description” is repitched as a sort of abductive argument rather than being taken to mean some form of human reportage of appearances—the traditional definition of phenomenology. The goal is to convert phenomenological descriptions as seen *an sich* into natural modes and orders. Following Peirce (and the importance of “musement” in Peirce), abduction is thus a strategic transcendental move. Nature’s “how,” its “unfolding way” of orders is presented in terms of “traits” rather than “essences.” Trait language, states Corrington, proves to be metaphysically more inclusive if phenomenology is used from within an ordinal perspective. From Corrington’s methodological standpoint, there is no such thing as *the* trait of traits or *the* order of orders. There is no “nature”—no “it” to refer to. Rather, we have a nature that is whatever is, in whatever mode it is. Anything that can be in any way contributes to one’s analysis.

Chapter One is titled, “Selving.” Beginning with the orders of nature Corrington focuses first on the process of individuation as it is found within the human order. Doing so pulls psychoanalysis and semiotic analysis closer together within the ordinal perspective. Individuation of psychical life reflects individuation on the level of “externalizations of semiotic life.” As Corrington puts it, “Ordinal psychoanalysis is that branch of psychosemiotics that focuses most directly on the pathology and healthy aspects of selving per se.” Fundamental to this process of individuation is “will,” a concept understood in usage by Schopenhauer (the third key player of the book).

“Shriven” by this Will, the self is “bi-sected” in the process. Using Heidegger’s fundamental “ontological difference,” Corrington asserts a natural difference between the nature naturing and nature natured. The Will is the closest analogue one has to nature naturing. The Will found within this “difference” is a fissuring that opens out within the self, differentiating conscious life from the unconscious. However, there is no greater teleology involved here with the

creation of consciousness; no higher and higher telic consciousness emerges from nature naturing “willing”—propelling and pulling, fissuring and individuating. If one were pressed, so says Corrington, nature’s ‘Will’ would be largely unconscious and indifferent to human needs. Without this primordial structure, on the other hand, nature would not ‘be.’ In essence, this is what distinguishes Corrington from most other process thinkers. Nature is not to be ‘sugar coated.’ Individuation casts the self as a foundling, where its conditions of origin are indifferent to what is created. In terms of an ordinal metaphysics, one can only remain indifferent in return to such an origin. Without a telic whence and whither, the “multi-forms” of semiosis come and go, weaving this way and that, ultimately ‘back’ into the origin from where the self was individuated.

Chapter Two, “Communal Vistas,” is a discussion about trans-individual forms of the selving process or “individuation.” A major component of this chapter is the use of sign and symbol within communities. Here semiotics makes its major appearance in the book, as does the ordinal phenomenological description of semiotic structures. Ordinal psychoanalysis then discloses the forms of pathology present within the semiosis of community. Normative analyses of “positive forms of semiosis” are reserved for the last chapter.

After Corrington presents some of the basics of semiotics and describes that discipline’s relationship to the notion of “community” (done with plenty of Peirce in mind), the question is raised as to whether an Absolute sign “container/creator” is needed in order to explain the “actual infinite of semiosis that envelopes the finite sign user.” Corrington’s novel approach suggests “No,” the self-linkage of signs alone is able to account for the actual/actualizing infinitude of semiotic process. The key is that signs tend to function with a simple kind of isomorphism, “likeness drawn to likeness” so that signs are self-concatenated. At points in Corrington’s discussion about the self-linking nature of signs, based on isomorphic tendencies and relationships, I am reminded of Bergson but also Garbiel Tarde who had similar views about fundamental modes of communication (and symbolic exchange) between living beings, where beings tend to mimic each other with positive likenesses. There is no totality required in order to bring them together. The totality of signings is said to be no sort of exteriority and thus cannot be said to be a “whole.” Rather, semiotic activity is always an actualizing, making a semiotic space for itself against a present horizon of meaning intelligibility. In this way Corrington avoids deifying of the semiotic universe as a “closed” living entity or “totality.”

Chapter Three is called “God-ing and Involution” and mostly covers theology and the philosophy of religion. Involution refers to the way in which there is “a movement seeming to come *into* the world from elsewhere. Something is entering into a state of affairs that was bereft of that content or force before the ingression.” The content of the ingression is “larger than human, divine, or religious.” Put differently a few sentences later, it is explained that involution is of “a true sacred power that opens out the evolutionary matrix to an opening and a clearing that creates a space for a different kind of adaptation for the organism . . . [having] to do with the possibilities of meaning for the attending organism.”

Involution is experienced as a radical break from antecedent and present experience in all of its evolutionary modes. In other words, a fully naturalized form of transcendence is presented in such a way that forms of life—not just the human—are capable of being presented as a contrast between finite and infinite: a more ecological understanding of what transcendence means. In this way involution is part of the way deity enters into and modifies evolution. Deity cannot be construed as a personality or a figure of monotheistic tradition. Rather, it is a *process* that has no teleological plan or cosmic mind of its own. As a process Corrington suggests the term “god-ing” to capture the complex power afforded by the involuting process as well as the infinitizing nature of its actualization. As Corrington puts it: “The energy of involution, experienced as a form of god-ing that intersects with my selving process, helps provide me with a brief free space of non-instrumental semiosis in which I can open up novel prospects for more complex adaptations to my various environments, social and natural.”

God-ing represents a unique turn for Corrington when the concept is compared to what he has done in his earlier books. Before, in “ecstatic naturalism,” spirit had the role of healing and smoothing over the dark and taciturn edges of a nature gone wild—one that is utterly indifferent to human needs and concerns. This was Corrington’s concept of “natural grace.” Here, we are told that spirit may be too idealistic to function within an aesthetic naturalist perspective. God-ing is “the divine somewhat.” Nature’s canvas portrays all images and colors, dark and light alike, painful and joyous. There is no “supernatural” mind aware of a conscious plan to offer telic redemption. Thus God-ing is “not that of some kind of higher mind or some super being that is conscious of itself, entering into the sphere of finitude in order to launch a specific plan for the ‘redemption’ of the world. Rather, it is like a pulsation or microburst of pure expanding energy that cracks encrusted semiotic shells and clears a space for the rapid unfolding of novel semiosis.” The key idea here is to understand how this pulsation “publishes itself” and can be understood within the orders and complexes of *nature natured*. In this Schopenhauer’s Will and aesthetic vision of nature both connect to the romantic fecund sphere of the beautiful and the sublime. Following Schopenhauer, because of how religious transcendences seem to beg aesthetic provocation, Corrington believes that the aesthetic must transcend the religious. The deity (god-ing) that we wish to express (understand) must be reshaped within the whole of nature in terms of an aesthetic understanding. Therefore, art becomes of the object of focus.

In Chapter Four, “Genius, Art, and the Sublime,” Corrington continues to emphasize the god-ing aspect of involution and its role within an “aesthetic naturalism,” but he does so by focusing on art and the sublime specifically. This also briefly involves a discussion of creativity, where creativity and the psychopathology of creativity’s affects upon the individual are brought into play in terms of how the individual comes into touch with *natura naturans* through “radiant” orders of nature.

Corrington begins with Schopenhauer's aesthetics, stating that only the genius, a romantic higher faculty, can wrestle with eternal forms and capture them in an artistic expression which reveals something finally ultimate or extraordinary (what the religious seeks to express). Put succinctly, "The encounter with art requires a special kind of consciousness that transcends our everyday instrumental forms of interacting with the environment." A certain type of perception is under discussion here, one which occurs in a way that elevates subject and object at the same instant. As Corrington explains:

The subject and the object elevate each other at the same instant. The work of art holds forth its Platonic Forms and makes them available to the attending consciousness, which in its place turns its back on the Will and lets the Forms caress it and momentarily lift it outside of the rush of temporality and the crush of space. The encounter with a genuine work of art, that is, one created by a genius, stops time and space however briefly, from consuming their children. In that sense art and its assimilation is anti-entropic. In the "timeless" time of art one is freed from the pain and suffering of the Will to Life. And with the coming-into-presence of the Forms the basic architectonic of nature announces itself.

From here the discussion turns toward the larger question of relating the social role of art to the process of individuation mentioned earlier in the book. "Does art have a quasi-religious role to play in shaping communal values or is it a potential replacement of religion?" asks Corrington. Art is said to "reawaken the sensual," to "desubliminate" tribal longings which potentially may crush meaningful "identity bonds" within the community. On Corrington's view, religions are "innately tribal" where art, on the other hand, "struggles toward the universal through the depth-dimension of the human process. "Altruism easily extends to kinship and to reciprocal forms." Art goes "beyond the interest of the tribe," beyond the god or goddess of the tribe, and toward that which is most encompassing and sustaining.

Corrington at this point seems to be walking a fine line, and acknowledges that Kant, at least in his ethics (but also within the Kantian "religion within the limits of reason alone"), struggled to create a universal logical foundation for ethics that transcended religion. But this sort of universality was grounded in human *reason*, rather than within the internal forces of a nature that is not noumenal (cut off from human access and relegated to an "as-if") but phenomenal, that is, directly evident to the human through non-cognitive (mostly unconscious) semiotic expression. In the end, art is to replace religion. Corrington writes, "I intend to show that religion surpasses itself, and thereby becomes deeply ethical, when it sublates itself into the aesthetic.

From this point Corrington moves forward to *what* exactly points toward the religious in artworks. His answer is the sublime. He develops a new concept which he calls "radiance" (*claritas*) which is to stand in for how one might

ordinarily use the sublime in romanticist aesthetic theory. Rather than simply overpower one in awe and wonder as the sublime is claimed to do, the “radiance” of the aesthetic lifts out of the “normal” or “ordinary” sphere of life the unity of harmonious parts in self-standing (a Form). This “standing-forth” of radiance and clarity calls attention in such a way that our “everyday trafficking” with objects becomes an engagement with the aesthetic object as such (identified as such, as an “artful” object, one which is radiant). If pressed, one might say that “radiance” has a sublime but also religious function.

In Corrington’s work, the role of radiance was had by “sacred folds.” Here we see that it is the “radiance” of sacred folds which calls the attention of human query. Other factors are at work as well. In addition to radiance there must be “a gestalt of grace,” a calling to a “higher order arrangement of the forms of the work of art into a vibrating totality that is a harmony of contrasts.” And thus, “Beauty is what emerges from this rich field of struggle.” It is the beauty which “speaks to all aesthetic agents,” even if there is at first puzzlement or discord over its meaning.

To conclude, the argument of the book is that “the sublime is a reality in itself rather than a mere subjective state that befalls human consciousness.” This reality, cast in terms of “radiance,” can help us think about religion by thinking about art. Religion, being tribal, must give way toward the aesthetic, to art, or at the very least an “aesthetic religion” whose universality derives not from finite human reason but from the processive and aesthetic character of the natural world.

I see this book as an important step in the Corrington’s project of “ecstatic naturalism” that has been in development for well over three decades. At this juncture, Corrington has taken the “ecstatic” character of his naturalism and firmly implanted it within the domain of *aesthetics*, rather than religion. Thus the book’s subtitle, “An Essay in Aesthetic Naturalism.” Art is now the crowning achievement for Corrington’s theological project. It is the domain of a universality common to all beings grounded not in finite human reason but in the aesthetic semiotic expression of a developing nature. I think that those who read Corrington will find this book informative and enjoyable, specifically because it takes themes found in his previous books (ordinal phenomenology, psychoanalysis, but also “sacred folds,” the Encompassing, art, the idea of community, and so on) and elaborates upon them in such a way that one can *practically* transform the role of art as it stands with respect to religion and the community. I highly recommend this book.

*Leon Niemoczynski*