

Worldhood, Betweenness, Melancholy, and Ecstasy: an Engagement with Robert Corrington's Ecstatic Naturalism

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Robert Corrington's *Nature's Religion* was the topic of a 2004 seminar of The Highlands Institute for American Religious and Philosophical Thought. I was asked to respond to this work, and preparation for it drew me fully into Corrington's other writings. I was attracted both by the power of his naturalism and by the interpretation of religion he draws from it. In Corrington, I discovered a soul brother who parallels my attempt (in *Events of Grace*¹) to articulate a rigorously naturalistic account of religion.

Such an account, I argue, must be characterized by its austerity, both philosophically and theologically. Three denials mark this austerity: (1) that a naturalistically conceived God cannot be personal, (2) that there can be no cosmic (or otherwise grounding) teleology, and (3) that there is no cosmically available conservation of value. Though Corrington's naturalism is very different, he well understands these principles for naturalistic theological construction. What I find remarkable—and very provocative for my own work—is the power of Corrington's theological views within such austere boundaries. Most naturalisms are religiously tone deaf, and those few that are sympathetic to religion too often nostalgically restore various non-naturalistic elements incompatible with austere naturalistic principles (e.g., teleology with pragmatism and process versions and/or conservation of value with process thought), or just end up with thin interpretations of religion. This cannot be said of Corrington. His naturalism is both fresh and robust, and he consistently touches rich religious and theological themes, all the while preserving the austerity demanded of a genuine naturalism.

In what follows, I want to engage Corrington at two points. I begin by examining his grounding idea, the distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, nature naturing and nature natured.

¹ Charley D. Hardwick, *Events of Grace: Naturalism, Existentialism, and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

Then, I shall ask about the content of his soteriology. In each case, I want to ask the same question: What philosophical (or theological) *work* does *natura naturans* do, first in his conception of naturalism as such, and then in his soteriology? My purpose in pressing Corrington on these issues is to interpret and illumine, not to criticize or reject. Through this engagement, however, I do hope to identify elements of obscurity or puzzlement in his position.

I

Most naturalisms confine nature to the orders of the world given as such, Corrington's nature natured, *natura naturata*. Significantly, however exhaustive such naturalisms are, they do not typically ask the founding theological question about being as such, the question about the contingency of nature or the question why there is something rather than nothing. Instead, they seek a generic categorical and explanatory account of the orders of the world, simply assuming either that nature requires no sufficient reason beyond itself or that nature itself supplies the traditional conditions of sufficiency and necessity.² Corrington's naturalism is distinctive because he denies the sufficiency of the world's orders simply as they are given as such. He claims that nature as ordered requires—or, at least, evidences—an origin or “ground” beyond itself. This origin, however, is itself entirely natural, hence the distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, which for Corrington is ontologically fundamental. This distinction is Corrington's version of the “ontological difference,” which for Heidegger (but not really for Corrington) is the difference between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seinden*). For Corrington, there is an abysmal depth to nature that is forever beyond or other than the infinite multiplicity of orders spawned from this abyss. Nature as natured is an “eject” from a beyond. We thus have his “ecstatic” naturalism.³

² See Rem Edwards's excellent discussion in *Reason and Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1972), 133-141.

³ “Ejection” is a fundamental, but not the only, “ecstatic” dimension of Corrington's naturalism. Since he explicitly distances himself from all versions of classical theism (or supernaturalism), the term “ejection” contrasts with “creation.”

This idea of a “beyond” to the orders of nature has interesting similarities and differences with “creation” in classical theism.⁴ It is similar in rooting the world in an ontological source that is totally “other” than the world that it grounds and infinitely beyond its conceptual grasp. Like classical theism, Corrington’s naturalism involves a *via negativa*. Concerning ultimate sources, it is an apophatic or negative “theology.” *Natura naturans* is, as he says, “under general quarantine” because it is not a semiotic order and is prior to every order of relevance.⁵ We cannot reach it because any speaking of it must use signs, and such signs would locate it within some order of relevance. As we shall see, this position creates enormous problems for Corrington. But, in contrast to classical theism, contingency is not a problem for him, or rather is located in another (and less fundamental) dimension (as a problem of the finitude and fragility of semiotic orders). Thus, as with Heidegger, the notion of an ontological difference does not really address the ultimate and classical mystery of being, of why there is anything at all.⁶ Corrington simply assumes that nature (even in his expansive sense of the ontological difference) has no ground beyond itself that is not itself “natural.” It follows, as Corrington recognizes, that nature itself cannot be defined.⁷ For him, “Nature” is self-transcending⁸ and is, categorically, not an order but an encompassing.⁹ This means that in its widest sense, the category “Nature” serves to deny the classical conceptual apparatus of

⁴ Corrington rejects “creation” because he conceives nature as an encompassing; it has no creative “other” or “source” that is not itself Nature. He rejects neo-classical process theisms for different reasons. This rejection results from his naturalistic austerity, namely, his rejection of panpsychism, teleology, and a cosmic conservation of value.

⁵ Robert S. Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 245.

⁶ Nor does the classical locus of the *natura naturans/natura naturata* distinction in Spinoza address this problem.

⁷ See, for instance, Robert S. Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism: Signs of the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 16-19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁹ Corrington derives the notion of the “encompassing” (*Das Umgreifende*) from Karl Jaspers, and it is a major source of his interpretation of the ontological difference, being, as he says, “a metaphorical corollary to the concept of ‘*natura naturans*’.” Robert S. Corrington, *Nature and Spirit: An Essay in Ecstatic Naturalism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 186. See, *Ibid.*, 186-189. See Robert S. Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters: On the Hermeneutics of Nature and the Bible in the American Philosophical Tradition* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 65 f. See Karl Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit* (München: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1947), 29-499.

supernaturalism (such as necessity as against contingency, teleology, and an ultimate cosmic ground of the conservation of value), but cannot itself be defined beyond the multiplicity of orders that *natura naturans* spawns. The classical features of naturalism arise internal to these latter. (They are, for instance: restriction of teleology and value to limited domains, recognition that all causes are natural causes, denial that mentality is ontologically fundamental.)¹⁰

Corrington's originality may be located in two areas. The first comes from his rendering of classical naturalism in semiotic terms. Relying on the thought of C. S. Pierce and Justus Buchler, he conceives nature natured in terms of orders of relevance (or traits) that have a semiotic structure, which means they can be understood in terms of signs and sign series. Corrington argues that semiotic structures are not restricted to language, intentionality, and/or mentality. All orders of relevance, he wants to say, have a sign structure; the relationship between any two (or more) "entities" has a structure of "aboutness" not limited to intentionality or mentality.¹¹ Taking "orders of relevance" in this sense allows Corrington to appropriate Buchler's notion of "ontological parity": every order of traits (as a "something" capable of "having a meaning" in the sense of semiotic unfolding as a sign series) is equally real in the way that it is.¹² "Ontological parity" now permits Corrington to appropriate the phenomenological method and thereby to conceive metaphysics as an "ordinal phenomenology."¹³ Indeed,

¹⁰ See, Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory . . .*, 10 f.

¹¹ See, Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism*, 32-42. It is, for instance, quite easy to comprehend causality as a semiotic order. This "non-linguistic/non-mentalistic" semiosis gives Corrington leverage for powerful criticisms of the "glottocentric," anthropomorphic, and ultimately narcissistic character of the post-structuralism, deconstructionism, and neo-pragmatism that reign throughout contemporary philosophy. See, *Ibid.*, 1-3 and Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory . . .*, 88.

¹² See, Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory . . .*, 3. The contrast to ontological parity is "ontological priority" which, of course, characterizes almost all traditional metaphysics. Ontological parity permits Corrington to term his position an "ordinal metaphysics."

¹³ See, Corrington, *Nature and Spirit*, 1-16 and Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism*, 13. Semiotic orders of relevance lead Corrington to reject Husserl's "transcendental" phenomenology while retaining the Husserlian equivalent of parity of intentional objects. (The non-reductionistic character of the latter is what gives the phenomenological method its lasting appeal.) This is achieved by replacing intentionality of consciousness with ordinal traits and sign series so that meaning is not restricted to intentionality or consciousness. "Ordinality" thus requires rejecting Husserl's notion of "bracketing" while still retaining the phenomenological method. (See, Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism*, 13.) This makes possible an "ordinal

Corrington is one of the best practicing phenomenologists in contemporary philosophy. Together these notions give Corrington's naturalism (within *natura naturata*) extraordinary metaphysical and phenomenological richness.

The problem arises, however, from the second area of Corrington's originality, for he claims insistently not merely that *natura naturata* is rooted in a source beyond its orders, in *natura naturans*, but also that there are intrinsic and ongoing relations between this source and these orders. The orders of nature natured *are what they are* because of constant enabling, conditioning, participating, and transforming relations to nature naturing, especially when these orders are understood as signs and sign series that *move* or *unfold*. The "apophatic quarantine," upon which Corrington is equally insistent, would seem to block every effort to articulate these relations. Yet, the most interesting, and, certainly most extensive, elements in Corrington's thought come from these efforts. In fact, though his ordinal phenomenology implies a rich metaphysics, he gives little attention to its descriptive details. Of much greater importance, he claims, are the ways in which the two dimensions of Nature interact, and it is to the description of this interaction that he mainly applies his phenomenology. Given the "apophatic quarantine," however, his claims about these relations are ambiguous and always obscure. This is what I mean by asking what work *natura naturata* does for his naturalism.

In order to engage this question, I want to try to refocus Corrington's conceptual categories. I want to question whether he needs the notion of *natura naturans* at all, especially when conceived in terms of such highly metaphoric notions as ejection or spawning. My effort, however, is very tentative, aimed as much at illumination or understanding as at criticism.

Profoundly important for Corrington is the notion of "horizon."¹⁴ "Horizon" analysis is hostile to metaphysics because it is a form of perspectivalism. Corrington is much more impressed with the rich multiplicity of orders of relevance in nature than he is with efforts to establish ontological or explanatory priorities.¹⁵ Consequently and

phenomenology" of great power that, unlike most phenomenology, has real metaphysical reach.

¹⁴ See, Corrington, *Nature and Spirit*, 16-38.

¹⁵ Corrington certainly admits explanatory priorities and he has a strong conception of validity, but only within orders of relevance that are themselves horizon bound.

atypically, ordinality and ontological parity permit him to do metaphysics while remaining sensitive to the horizon boundaries of every sign series. Corrington recognizes, however, that any strong conception of perspective will ultimately lead, philosophically, to an examination of the very nature and limits of "horizon" itself. This was done in different ways by Heidegger and Jaspers. Heidegger's conception of "worldhood" transforms the notion of horizon from epistemology to ontology through an existential analytic. Jaspers's Kantian method of *Weltorientierung* led to his notions of *Existenz*, *Transcendenz*, and, ultimately, *das Umgreifende*, all of which are "boundary" notions.¹⁶ Corrington has been deeply influenced by both Heidegger and Jaspers at these points. So it is not surprising that he would develop his ordinal metaphysics inside a notion of "horizon boundedness," horizons bounded by a "more," a "source" or an enabling "other." When we see this derivation of Corrington's *natura naturans*, his obscurities become at least understandable because these same difficulties afflict Heidegger and Jaspers.¹⁷ Here, at least potentially, Corrington's phenomenology rescues him. He attempts, that is, to describe, through phenomenological "rotation" and "shadowing" (*Abschattungen*),¹⁸ the "traces" or effects left at the interface with nature naturing, traces that can be captured only out of the corner of the eye.¹⁹

¹⁶ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tran. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1962), 114-128. Jaspers' *Weltorientierung* is a type of boundary analysis and led to his notions of *Existenz*, *Transcendenz*, and *das Umgreifende*. *Weltorientierung* is very different from Heidegger's "worldhood," but both function in similar fashion as "openings" upon a beyond. (Jaspers developed the first three notions in *Philosophie*, 3 Vol. (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1932). Though *Das Umgreifende* was hinted at in relation to metaphysics seen as a "*Lesen der Chiffreschrift*" ("reading of ciphers") in volume three of *Philosophie*, the full concept was not developed until *Von der Wahrheit* (1947).)

¹⁷ Jaspers, however, was both extremely self-conscious in trying to identify the sources of these obscurities, the "apophatic realities" of horizon boundedness, and rigorous in articulating their contours.

¹⁸ See, Corrington, *Nature and Spirit*, 6-30, esp. 23 f., and Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory . . .*, 93.

¹⁹ An alternative at the "apophatic boundary" is to make transcendental arguments, and in fact Corrington does cautiously employ transcendental strategies. But such strategies will be inherently weaker and lacking in the metaphysical richness of a phenomenological description, assuming the latter is possible at all at this boundary. See Corrington, *Nature's Religion* (Lanham, Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield

The issue, then, is how we are to understand these “traces” and their phenomenology. It would be a mistake to take the “ejection” of nature natured from nature naturing as a once-for-all event;²⁰ it would even be a mistake to understand it as a once-for-all event at the initiation of any specific order of relevance. Rather, Corrington intends this relation to hold at every moment within the orders of relevance constituting nature natured. The nature naturing/nature natured relation is determinative in multitudinous ways and at all times within semiotic orders as they unfold. It is these “ways” that are “seen” or that “appear” in the phenomenology that makes up most by far of Corrington’s naturalism.

We can begin to refocus Corrington’s categories by recognizing that most of his phenomenology unfolds under two themes. One is his sensitivity to horizon boundaries. The other is his recognition that neither orders of relevance nor the sign series that unfold them should be understood as static. The key to Corrington, I believe, is to see how he insists on dynamic movement, both at horizontal boundaries and in the unfolding of sign series.

Let us start with the latter. The most powerful ideas in Corrington’s semiotic conception of nature are his notions of “object,” which he derives from Pierce’s “dynamic object,” and his notion of “betweenness.” The object is the terminus of a signifying act; it is what a sign is “about.” But no first sign (or “representamen”) can exhaustively capture an object. It will therefore lead to further sign identifications of this “aboutness” and further signs that are “interpretants” of these signs.²¹ It is this “dynamic object” (the object,

Publishers, Inc., 1997), 138-140, and Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory . . .*, 52, 57, 82-83, 248 f.

²⁰ It is also a mistake to understand “creation” in the best of classical theism in this sense. Creation rather should be understood as the ongoing and indeed necessary action that holds finite (and therefore contingent) existence in being at every moment. Without this ongoing creative, sustaining action, finite being would fall into nothingness. This conception of creation is what makes the argument from contingency by far the most important among Aquinas’s five ways. This problem of contingency, and its implication for creation, marks the true depth of classical theism, and it is this ultimate sense of ontological contingency (with its own meaning for the ontological difference) that is missing from process theisms and most naturalisms (including Corrington’s).

²¹ See Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism*, 79-86, and Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory . . .*, 93 f., 170-182.

that is, as a kind of limiting concept) that gives rise to sign series.²² The “dynamic object” is one of several elements in Corrington’s ontology that provides him with an active, dynamic, processive conception of the way that sign series unfold as signs give rise to sign series.

The other deep notion is “betweenness.”²³ Corrington recognizes that signs do not unfold in rigid, mechanical ways (except perhaps in formal, logical, and mathematical systems, and even then, not unreservedly). As a result of the dynamic object, signs have adumbrative, vague, connotative dimensions. Sign series also “collide” with other sign series and thus have a kind of “life,” “death,” and “transfiguration.” In all of these ways, signs, sign series, and indeed orders of relevance manifest elements of “betweenness” that are not themselves signs. Though such betweenness structures are neither signs themselves nor orders of relevance, they are real and indeed account for much of the “momentum” of sign series. Corrington is absolutely obsessed with notions of negativity, absence, breaks, and discontinuity. Indeed, one of the major functions of the *natura naturans/natura naturata* distinction is to point to such breaks and to the power of negativity inhabiting nature (nature as both self-othering and self-transcending).²⁴ These are the elements in nature that leave “traces” within the movement of signs and that “appear” to Corrington’s phenomenology. A very great deal of what Corrington means by nature naturing (its self-othering, self-transcending character) is captured by his description of “betweenness structures.”

²² Note that Corrington’s dynamic object places him squarely within the realist tradition of modern epistemology, which I heartily applaud.

²³ The notion of “betweenness” is most systematically addressed by Corrington in section 3 of *Ecstatic Naturalism*, but the concept is used extensively, and in many different contexts, throughout his work. Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism*, 116-159.

²⁴ In line with Pierce and the pragmatic tradition generally, Corrington does affirm the notion of continuity in nature. But continuity is restricted by ordinality; it obtains, that is, only within specific orders of relevance and sign series (and not always there). Though I am restricting my concern with “betweenness” to its phenomenological uses in Corrington, he places the ideas of negativity and absence in a wider metaphysical context as a way of denying the commitment to the principle of plenitude that has preoccupied most Western metaphysics (even including Hegel). Insisting on the notions of discontinuity and breaks in nature, Corrington carries on a vigorous debate with Leibniz, and it is over this issue that he breaks with process thought (along with its related panpsychism). See Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism*, 7, 90 f., and Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory* . . . , 97.

The second theme that figures prominently in Corrington's phenomenology is his sensitivity to horizon boundedness. As I have mentioned, any philosophical examination of horizons will end with an awareness of the peculiar character of horizon boundaries. Though we can be aware that we inhabit a horizon, we cannot see beyond it or even examine all the elements (at least not all at once) that make it the horizon it is. When we try to do this we end up simply replacing one horizon with another or, more dramatically, suffering a horizon shipwreck. It is at this point that horizon analysis led Heidegger to his notion of "worldhood," one of the deepest ideas in contemporary philosophy, and Corrington sees why it is important. Worldhood is of wider scope than horizons because, though we can speak of various horizons of meaning, we cannot speak of numerous worldhoods. Worldhood cannot be pluralized. It is, if you will, a "beyondness concept" (an *Umgreifende*) that points to the way any horizon (or world) is "held open" for what appears within it. Worldhood is thus a notion of "clearing" or "opening" but cannot itself be identified with any specific order of relevance, sign, or sign series. Within Corrington's naturalism, worldhood is a function of ordinality; it shows in another way, that is, why Nature is undefinable as a "totality" and must ultimately be recognized as an encompassing. It serves to show how nature, in all its plenitude, still points to a beyond (or a source), even if this beyond is itself entirely nature.

These notions of the dynamic object, betweenness, and worldhood, I am claiming, are much more accessible than Corrington's claims about nature naturing, especially his claims about its "ejective" characteristics and about the intermediate but entirely apophatic character of its ejects (what Corrington calls "potencies," "archetypes," and "infinitesimals"). Furthermore, these notions, each in different ways, represents a form of ontological difference, an "other" or boundary to a given specification of a sign or sign series. And each of them provides a kind of "motor" for the movement of signs as they develop into sign series, movements that Corrington refers to with such striking, but perhaps questionable, metaphors as "restlessness," and "hunger."²⁵ It is very difficult, I believe, to comprehend the

²⁵ At one point, Corrington accounts for this "motor" as follows: "The primary fact about sign systems and objects within the world is that they exhibit a kind of restlessness that is not exhaustively a product of efficient causality. There is a momentum to orders of signification in particular that points backward to an ejective

philosophical work that nature naturing does or could do for Corrington. It helps to understand this work if we translate nature naturing into these notions. But then the question arises whether, having made this translation, Corrington needs the concept of nature naturing at all.

II

I now turn to my second topic and ask what “salvation” would look like for Corrington?²⁶ I am referring here to his dialectic between melancholy and ecstasy, and in particular to its religious dimension. *Natura naturans* is central here too, for Corrington sees “ejection” from a primordial abyss as definitive not merely of a naturalistic view of reality, as we have seen, but as constituting the human condition itself as “ontologically wounded.”²⁷ This wound derives from a primordial experience (or fantasy) of ejection from symbiotic unity with the mother (the material maternal of the mother’s body, breast, or womb). Julia Kristeva uses the term *chora* to designate this unity. For Corrington this *chora* not only constitutes the human unconscious, through the experience of ejection and loss, but links the unconscious

source that must itself be self-othering, must be a taciturn self-splitting that propels meaning outward in an infinite variety of ways” (Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory* . . . , 246). Corrington states this argument most clearly in his essay, “Semiosis and the Phenomenon of Worldhood” in *Semiotics 1987*, ed. John Deely (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988), 383-393. These metaphors might be thought unwarranted because, strictly, no sign or sign series is “restless” or “hungry.” Yet, using Buchler’s entirely naturalized concept of “judgment” and “measure,” Corrington exhibits phenomenologically that one can attribute movement and processive development to sign series (as well as breaks, diremptions, and even shipwreck). See Robert S. Corrington, “Naturalism, Measure, and the Ontological Difference” in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, XXIII, No. 1 (1985), 19-32. Corrington explicitly denies the animism these metaphors might suggest, and the grounds for this denial are clear in these two essays. See Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism*, 79.

²⁶ In his early thought, Corrington would have been sympathetic to the language of “salvation” or “soteriology.” Indeed his early work may be seen as an attempt to restate classical liberal Protestant theology naturalistically. But in his later work, he becomes sharply critical of the patriarchal and demonic tendencies in Western monotheism and sees himself developing a kind of global theology. He would, therefore, prefer the language of “transfiguration.” But I am raising the soteriological issue in a broad sense that is entirely compatible with his concerns, early and late.

²⁷ See. Robert S. Corrington, *Nature’s Self: Our Journey from Origin to Spirit* (Lanham, Maryland, 1996), 1, 15 f.

with the chora of *natura naturans*.²⁸ The problematic character of the human condition, therefore, arises from a profound loss that permeates all experience (and that both constitutes and structures the unconscious).²⁹ This conception makes it possible to conceive human existence culturally and in time as a movement either back toward a “whence” or forward toward a “whither.” In either case, the movement will be an attempt to overcome loss or to recover a lost object. Though it appears both in human psychology and in culture (in forms that are both infantile and demonic), attempts to recover loss by a direct return to the lost object are defeated simply by the finitude of time and by normal developmental processes. The movement forward toward a “whither” can, however, be understood as structured by this same lost object, now approaching from a “not yet.” Salvation in Corrington’s thought must, then, appear in this quasi-eschatological structure of the “not yet.” The soteriological question is whether the human ontological wound, in both individuals and communities, can be either overcome or healed in a movement toward a “not yet.”

What is important for my purposes here is that Corrington claims that *natura naturans* plays a constitutive role in whatever salvation (or transfiguration) occurs. “Being in touch” with the abysmal source of nature is somehow healing for Corrington. Again, I want to ask what *work* nature naturing does soteriologically for Corrington. He uses richly suggestive terms such as melancholy, ecstasy, spirit, courage, hope, agape, and *jouissance* to capture the movement toward the “not yet” (or the “post-temporal”), but I believe it to be difficult for most readers to comprehend precisely what Corrington’s conception of salvation is, and it is doubly difficult to understand what role *natura naturans* plays in it.

²⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 26; Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholy*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 43. Kristeva draws the word *chora*, as womb or enclosed opening, from Plato’s *Timeaus*. Kristeva’s psychoanalytic work is another source for Corrington’s “material” or naturalistic conception of negativity (See Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism*, 52-60, 132).

²⁹ Note that this linking of *natura naturans* both to a wider conception of nature and to the human unconscious further supports my arguments (1) that *natura naturans*, the ontological difference, is constant, ongoing, and appears multi-dimensionally and (2) that at least phenomenologically what Corrington means by it is accessible in other ways that might dispense with the monolithic notion of an ejective *natura naturans*.

This issue has been sharpened, however, by Corrington's development. I refer to his important essay, "My Passage from Panentheism to Pantheism," which was published in 2002, thus after the major works that define his position.³⁰ This essay seems to suggest deep revisions in his outlook. More decisively than in his earlier work, he now seems to adopt a "mystical" outcome to the dialectic between melancholy and ecstasy. He now suggests that healing occurs by a recovery of the lost object that becomes identity with it. The "material maternal" of the lost object that so easily gets translated in human experience into displacements, rage, and paranoid projections is quieted and healed by *absorption* into the "great mother." The *condition* of salvation, then, is undifferentiated and entirely non-semiotic.

Many questions are raised by this new position. It seems odd given the semiotic structure of Corrington's entire thought that his conception of a healed, transfigured humanity would be so semiotically opaque. Furthermore, as is typical of mysticisms generally, the concern for justice and community, which figured strongly in Corrington's early work, drops away. The mystical element has perhaps always been present in Corrington's work, especially in the way that he speaks of a transfiguring role nature naturing plays in the ecstatic realization of the "not yet." But many other elements in his work suggest a forward directed healing that gives rise to openness, courage, love, and reconciliation, and that opens the "not yet" toward justice. The question, then, is not just about the work nature naturing does in his soteriology but also whether this work can be realized in a non-mystical yet transfigured, reconciled, and renewed temporality.

Corrington correctly sees the promise of using melancholy to structure the human problem. It is very suggestive to conceive the human condition as an "ontological wound" configured by the experience of loss. It need not be assumed that we ever actually have or had experience of or identity with what is lost. Rather, loss can be seen simply as the psychoanalytically and existentially deep way in which human finitude is configured. Finitude gives rise to powerful fantasies that would negate or overcome the agonies and anxieties of finitude

³⁰ Robert S. Corrington, "My Passage from Panentheism to Pantheism, *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 23, No. 2 (May, 2002). Testifying to the importance Corrington accords this essay, it was re-published as an appendix to his quasi-autobiographical work, *Riding the Windhorse* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2003).

experienced as loss. Our attempts to deal with finitude/loss existentially configure human existence in time, especially in terms of language and culture as attempts to control and dominate time or to recover a lost object. Such attempts are deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, there is the intense longing for a lost identity that forever remains outside our grip. On the other hand, the very necessity to develop toward autonomy (through the vehicles of language and culture) creates an intense fear of the imagined chaos that threatens to lure us back into its abyss.³¹ In this sense, language and culture become defense mechanisms. They are precarious, however, because they lure selves and communities into an illusory sense of control and domination—Corrington's equivalent of idolatry. The abjected realities in fact easily and too often return as projections and transference phenomena that can control entire communities and become as demonic as the feared chaos.

Into this mix, Corrington introduces his ideas of grace and spirit. Grace for Corrington takes two forms. "Natural grace" correlates with Buchler's conception of the encompassing character of Nature simply as the availability of orders. He and Corrington call this availability "providingness." Natural grace is the soft, gentle *awareness* of this "availability." It is similar to Tillich's power of being or Schleiermacher's feeling of absolute dependence. Though natural grace has a quiet presence (so quiet that many persons are never aware of it) and is fundamentally sustaining, it can also be disruptive (a disruption that can bring about both foundering and healing) in so far as it implies awareness that our orders of meaning and security are limited and do not have their sources in ourselves.³² This last point turns out to be important, as we shall see.

The second form of grace is "grace of the spirit." Corrington's notion of spirit is entirely naturalistic. Neither personal nor a reified object, spirit is a kind of field phenomenon. It is a "betweenness structure" operating "between" semiotic orders to promote development

³¹ This may be seen in creation myths in which order arises from primeval chaos (*Genesis* included) and in paranoid projections of the female/mother as the *vagina dentata*. Corrington sees this issue also as the motivating appeal of conceptions of cosmic self-grounding in both philosophy and theology. And he sees it as a fundamental reason for the universal abjection of the unconscious. See Corrington, *Nature's Religion*, 129-131.

³² See *Ibid.*, 10, and Corrington, *Nature's Self*, 133-143. Note that this disruption is still another way in which the ontological difference can appear in Corrington's thought without needing an ejective *natura naturans*.

toward greater richness of meaning. In this sense, "spirit" manifests a unity of power and meaning (as in Tillich). Corrington's "grace of the spirit" designates this action toward enhancement of meaning. Spirit's "reality" is ultimately "post-temporal" because it cannot itself be a semiotic order. Yet, unlike the "pre-temporal" *natura naturans*, which stands under the apophatic quarantine, here, for self-conscious agents, the ontological difference manifest through the work of spirit always has presence directly within some temporal order of relevance.³³

A non-mystical (that is, fully temporal and existential) form of salvation can now be developed in terms of these two kinds of grace. The work of the spirit has both horizontal and vertical dimensions. Horizontally, the spirit operates to break up encrusted semiotic rigidities.³⁴ Soteriological possibilities as Corrington conceives them are well captured here by Freud's slogan, "Where id was, let ego there be."³⁵ Individually, this horizontal dimension of spiritual grace helps reveal the destructive forms of transference in individual relations, thereby opening them to possibilities of loving relation. Socially, it breaks open to hermeneutical transparency the taken for granted semiotic structures of "natural communities" whereby they can be transformed toward the "spiritual community" envisaged by Royce (or "democratic community" envisaged by Dewey).³⁶ As Corrington says, "the spirit . . . is an enabling condition for semiotic expansion just when constriction and decay threaten Without [these processes] interpretive life runs the risk of being trapped in a repetition of origins."³⁷

The vertical dimension of spiritual grace is deeper and might appropriately be called an ontological dimension of salvation. In effect, it is simply an awareness of the ontological difference as such.³⁸ But why should Corrington attribute soteriological significance to this?

³³ See Corrington, *Nature's Self*, 143-153, and Corrington, *Nature's Religion*, 153-155.

³⁴ Corrington, *Nature's Religion*, 163.

³⁵ "If there is a concept of original sin in depth psychology, it is the sin of unconsciousness in the face of the demands of the spirit." Corrington, *Nature and Spirit*, 156.

³⁶ Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 47-60.

³⁷ Corrington, *Nature's Religion*, 161 & 163.

³⁸ "This is not to say that the spirit-interpreter can help sign-users across the abyss so that they can grasp [nature naturing itself]. That door is forever shut to finite selves. What the spirit-interpreter can do is to enable selves to see the ontological difference as the difference that it is." Corrington, *Nature's Religion*, 163 (Corrington's emphasis).

Human existence in time, as Corrington understands it, involves not merely an attempt to recover a lost object but also an abjection of the chaos that the lost object seems to threaten, and both of these processes lead to illusions of control. Spiritual grace involves the granting of courage to see through these illusions, to see human orders of relevance precisely in their fragility and relativity.³⁹ This courage thereby grants the possibility of freedom from our often demonically driven anxieties of domination. This vertical dimension of grace provides courage for a kind of *Gelassenheit* (Heidegger's term), a letting-be. This, I believe, is the meaning of Corrington's claim that spiritual grace, at this ultimate point, involves openness for something like "stillness."⁴⁰ That is, in contrast to the ejective, turbulent upsurge of *natura naturans* as source, here in the forward movement toward the "not yet," its turbulence is quieted and is replaced by stillness. Why should its turbulence be quiet at this moment; why should the "not yet" make it appear any different than it is in its ejective origins?

Corrington's answer, I believe, is that on the far side of human development, the grace of the spirit makes possible a kind of courage that permits the self to rest simply in natural grace, that is, to see Nature simply in terms of its "providingness." Here the frantic attempts to control semiotic orders are quieted by the dual perception of their relativity and their simple availability beyond all human control. Transfigured life becomes, if you will, life in natural grace. In the tradition, this would be understood as that "serenity" gifted by the Holy Spirit. As Corrington says, "providingness, which does not have a power relationship with the orders of the world, has an infinitely quieter presence than any creator."⁴¹

III

My question about the work *natura naturans* does has served to Mengage Corrington's rich ecstatic naturalism. Broadly conceived,

³⁹ Courage for Corrington arises by participation in a "betweenness structure." Note also that the operation of spiritual grace here is Corrington's equivalent to the critique of idolatry. As in the best Christian theological traditions, the very possibility of a critique of idolatry becomes possible as a gift of grace.

⁴⁰ See Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism*, 41, 49-52, 114 f., 201-203; Corrington, *Nature's Religion*, 131 f.

⁴¹ Corrington, *Nature's Religion*, 131. This structure of grace is strikingly similar to the analysis I have given it in *Events of Grace*.

natura naturans identifies the ontological difference for Corrington. It works to define Nature as an encompassing and thereby to ground an ordinal form of naturalism. But I questioned the monolithic and ejective conception of *natura naturans* that plays such a significant role throughout Corrington. I suggested that the work of nature naturing might better be broken up into several different elements: the dynamic object, structures of betweenness (that belong to no semiotic order of relevance but that are effective nonetheless), and an analysis of horizon boundedness that culminates in the notion of worldhood. I hasten to add that this may be exactly what Corrington means anyway. It may be that *natura naturans* is simply an open-ended concept that, by holding open the ontological difference in several different ways, serves to establish an ordinal naturalism. (This contrasts to the more typical metaphysical strategy of reducing nature to a single, fundamental essence or genus, such as matter or prehensional creativity.) But if this is in fact Corrington's aim, then the apparatus of an ejective *natura naturans* (with its intermediate, yet pre-ordinal ejects as "potencies," "archetypes," and "infinitesimals") creates more problems than it solves for him. Better I suggest simply to exhibit how a concept of ontological difference works itself out in different dimensions to ground an ordinal naturalism. In respect to Corrington's soteriology, we have seen that *natura naturans* does real philosophical and theological work. But here again we might better claim that the work is done simply by the ontological difference and not an ejective *natura naturans*.

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