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CIIS Academic Writing Sample

Every Bush is Burning: The Divine Voice in Nature

Some say the cosmos was spoken into existence, brought into being by a divine decree.¹ Some say the voice of god was first heard in a garden, as the light became golden and day turned to evening.² Some say the divine voice wove its way through history as prophets and oracles declared their visions. These mad men and mystical women dined on honey and locust while walking the Earth and pointing towards Heaven.³ Some say a bush burned without burning and from it came the voice of god revealing the divine name, offering a way, and commencing a journey.⁴ And some say the voice of god is no longer speaking. The revelation is complete, and all that's left is the believing.⁵ Some say all that can be heard of the divine breath and its words is in the mouth of the preacher, the pages of a book, and the church. But what if every bush is burning, and every blade of grass is holy, and to hear the divine speak our names requires only an evening in the garden, walking slowly?

Humans have long desired to hear the voice of god, and there was a time when hearing the divine was thought to be as simple as stepping outside: walking in a garden, tending to sheep, sitting by a stream, or resting at the roots of trees. But the divine revelation has been canonized, and the daily lives of humans, especially in the West, is no longer spent in the fields but in an

¹*King James Version Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1988), Genesis 1

² Genesis 3:8

³ Matthew 3:4

⁴ Exodus 3

⁵ Westminster Confession of Faith (Scotland: 1646)

<https://westminsterstandards.org/westminster-confession-of-faith/>, 1:1 - 1: 5

office, civilized and sanitized. If a bush was to burn and a god was to speak, most modern humans wouldn't notice. There would be no divine discourse, holy ground, or bare feet. Institutions have silenced the voice of god, creating sophisticated systems which require the belief that no being besides an enlightened human has the ability to speak. But the voice of god as presented by Western institutions has begun to sound tired and old. And there are humans who still remember how to hear the cosmic logos.

Multitudes travel to meet them, making pilgrimages to jungles and deserts to drink the elixirs, bathe in the waters, and add their amen to the prayers. Fasting and meditating, seekers give themselves over to the beat of the drum and then wait for god to visit, for the vision to come. And though the divine voice grows stronger, it still exists somewhere beyond them. A bush may be burning, but it is not in their garden.

And yet, there exists a long tradition of the voice of god being close to us. The ancient author of Deuteronomy writes: The word is near you, even in your mouth and in your heart.⁶ Some say the author of these words was Moses, and was it not he who was said to have conversed with god by a bush burning red while tending his family's sheep by Mount Horeb?⁷ To hear the voice of god, one need only to step into their backyard. Martha did and found Jesus, the very Word of God, coming to grieve with her and mourn the dead.⁸ No drum or incantation is needed to hear the divine word or receive the divine communication.

Beginning with Gaia, Greek mythology abounds with gods and goddesses of nature and stories of someone or something being transformed by a deity into a flower or a tree. Chloris was a nymph of the Elysian Fields. Abducted by the god of the west wind, Zephyrus, she was transformed into a goddess and became his wife. The goddess of flowers, she seeded the world

⁶ Deuteronomy 30:14

⁷ Exodus 3:1

⁸ John 11:17-23

with blooms by transforming Adonis, Crocus, Hyacinthus, and Narcissus into flowers.

Overflowing with life, she gave Zephyrus a son, Carpos, the god of fruit. Athena gifted Athens a sacred olive tree. Aphrodite's lover, Adonis, died in her arms. He was the son of Myrrha who had been turned to a myrtle tree before giving birth to him. At his death, as Aphrodite's tears mixed with his blood, it is said anemone flowers came into being as a symbol of their love. This intimate intertwining of flowers and the divine could simply be a way of "encoding plant wisdom".⁹ But could there be more? In this verdant merging, there lies the message that the divine touch is in and on everything, and from flowers the divine voice may begin to sing.

Some say the divine communicates through signs, placing its signature on flowers, leaves, and vines. The Doctrine of Signatures as we know it in the West came into being through the hermetic tradition and alchemy.¹⁰ Paracelsus, known as the father of modern medicine, created three important principles of healing: the doctrine of correspondence, the doctrine of signature, and the law of similars. Influenced by Plato, Paracelsus presented the doctrine of correspondence as "the ancient understanding that an archetypal idea is expressed in many different forms in the phenomenal world . . . Thus, for instance, Venus, women, femininity, copper, birch trees, kidneys, beans, and larch trees would all share a corresponding principle"¹¹ The doctrine of signature is the doctrine of correspondence practically applied. In its application, the shape, color, appearance, taste, smell, and natural environment of a plant presents signs indicating how the plant may be used in medicine. "This is called *signatum*, or signature."¹²

When Julia Graves, renowned author, herbalist, and fluent speaker of the green tongue and language of flowers, shared this idea with a friend, they marveled and exclaimed, "You can

⁹ Graves, Julia. *The Language of Plants: A Guide to the Doctrine of Signatures* (Great Barrington, MA: Steiner Books, 2012), 12

¹⁰ Ibid 15

¹¹ Ibid 17

¹² Wood, Matthew. *Vitalism: The History of Herbalism, Homeopathy, and Flower Essence* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic, 2005), 20

know the underlying rules of the universe!”¹³ And is this not to know god -- to see and touch the Origin? Einstein said there is “a Spirit manifest in the Laws of the Universe”, and someone asked, “If there is a Spirit, do the morning stars sing together inside us, too? And can we sing to the Spirit? Can we communicate with it? Does it communicate with us? . . . Can we pray? Are we heard? Does it answer? Do we hear?”¹⁴ If we are listening, then yes, we do. “Paracelsus saw the innermost essence or essential properties of a substance as something of a secret, hence *arcana*. It was not secret in the sense of something one has not been told, but of something ineffable, beyond words”¹⁵ To read the signs is to know the Mystery -- to lean in as it whispers, to understand and hear.

These signs and divine writings are not assigned only to a chosen few. These ineffable yet whispered secrets are not kept only in select locations. The voice of the divine extends beyond the plants humans designate as sacred such as tobacco, peyote, ayahuasca, cannabis, or the San Pedro cactus. The expression of the divine: its voice, its fingers, and its writing may be found in grandmother’s garden or in the weeds growing through the sidewalk cracks in Harlem. Dandelion’s yellow flowers speak to us of the sun, the solar plexus, and the liver’s power. The red of the rose hip directs us to our blood, to our hearts, to the need for warmth when love is cold and we’ve grown hard in our softest parts. The language is universal.

But the language of signs, if it remains only in the realm of direct perception, is linear, and the Mystery rests beyond analytical reasoning. Speaking with flowers and conversing with god, is not a “spectator sport”, as earth poet and author Stephen Buhner said, “Eventually you have to move from looking and go into feeling, realizing that feeling is a sense too. Not the touch

¹³ Graves 18

¹⁴ Schneider, Pat. *How the Light Gets In: Writing as a Spiritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9

¹⁵ Wood 25

of the fingers, but the touch of the heart.”¹⁶ To fully return to conversing with god in a garden, it is necessary to open to a language beyond words and to perceive a voice in the wind. Moving from seeing with the eyes and hearing with the ears to feeling with the heart, we encounter the “wildness of this world” where everything has its own “pulse of communication”, its own “waveform filled with meaning”.¹⁷ Here we return to the world of miracles and mystics. Here, one does not stand at the doors of an institution. This is not the recitation of a creed. This is gnosis.

“Gnosis is an experience based not in concepts and precepts, but in the sensibility of the heart.”¹⁸ Though our modern world has only begun to recognize the heart as an organ of perception, this idea is not new.¹⁹ Buhner reveals, “The Greeks had a word for the heart’s ability to perceive meaning from the world: *aisthesis*. . . Aisthesis denotes the moment in which a flow of life force, imbued with communications, moves from one living organism to another. The word literally means ‘to breathe in’. It is a taking in of the world, a taking in of the soulful communications that arise from the living phenomena in that world.”²⁰ And there it is: the creative breath of god, the divine decree, the inspiration that made man a living soul -- except it is not set apart for pivotal moments or exclusive sacred places but is available at every moment and at every step if one desires to take in the “soulful communications” offered by this world.²¹ Such a concept, much less an experience, of intimate communion with the natural world would be foreign to most modern humans. Is it surprising? “Once we were convinced that there was no intelligence, no living soulful force, in Nature, once we were convinced that the heart was

¹⁶ Buhner, Stephen Harrod. *The Secret Teachings of Plants: The Intelligence of the Heart in the Direct Perception of Nature* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 2004), 148

¹⁷ Buhner 148

¹⁸ Hoeller, Stephan A. “The Gnostic Worldview: A Brief Summary of Gnosticism”
<http://gnosis.org/gnintro.htm>

¹⁹ Buhner 117

²⁰ Buhner 118

²¹ Genesis 2:7

nothing more than a pump, we began to lose touch with our innate capacity for engaging in aisthesis, for feeling the touch of the living world upon us . . . “²² But we can always return to our heart.

Returning to the heart takes courage. The required paradigm shift can be jolting, but there is beauty when what was once upside down becomes right side up. Thoreau told us, “It is only when we forget our learning that we begin to know. I do not get nearer by a hair’s breadth to any natural object so long as I presume that I have an introduction to it from some learned man . . . If you would make acquaintance with the ferns you must forget your botany. You must get rid of what is commonly called knowledge of them. Not a single scientific term or distinction is the least to the purpose . . . You must be aware that nothing is what you have taken it to be . . . You have got to be in a different state from common. Your greatest success will be simply to perceive things as they are.”²³ This is a prayer that can be prayed: *May I see things as they are.*

Some have prayed this prayer, and with its answer, they have begun to hear the voice of the oak, the rose, the blueberry, and the violet, and the voices are divine. They hear the plants speaking. They see the bushes burning. And they commune with god in the garden. Herbalists, plant spirit practitioners, proponents of plant consciousness and plant communication, gardeners, permaculturists, naturalists, tree huggers, and nature lovers have begun to entrain their hearts to the unheard and the unseen. Where there was once only talk of constituents and actions, there is now the occasional reference to direct revelation from a flower or a tree.²⁴ *The oak said . . .*

Chamomile showed me . . . Acceptance of such assertions is growing. Is there room for a plant to speak here?

²² Buhner 188

²³ Buhner 136

²⁴ Wood, Matthew. *The Book of Herbal Wisdom* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1997) 126-127. Wood writes of Werewolf Root (*Apocynum androsaemifolium*) as saying, “Nature abhors a square,” offering its preferred name, and presenting the phrase: I will never be the same again.

Tulip Poplar says, “We sit together, and you don’t know how or even why, but you know What is, and What is is Us. We must quiet the mind. If the heart chooses to use words, the words will rise up like a mist and take form. The heart will have nothing imposed upon it. It is not meant to be shackled or chained. It is free. The heart is free. The heart knows itself. Men fear such a singular, sovereign knowing. It is too close to god. It is God. You are the I AM. Before you speak, be still. Be still and know that I AM god. In the stillness, in the silence, words will come. The heart isn’t meant to be figured out, dissected, probed. The heart is not a puzzle. The heart is already whole. You are meant simply to sit back, witness, and receive it. The most powerful words are those left unsaid. These contain the knowing.”²⁵

A plant has spoken. How is its voice received? How is the one that hears and shares it perceived? The writer, Pat Schneider confessed, “She has wrestled mystery out to the edges of possibilities a bit more strange than I myself have entertained.”²⁶ When another takes a step we have not yet taken, it is common to ask, But how do you know? In matters of the heart, the divine, and the invisible, perhaps it is best if a poet answers:

Why do people keep asking to see

God's identity papers

when the darkness opening into morning

is more than enough?

Certainly any god might turn away in disgust.

Think of Sheba approaching

the Kingdom of Solomon

²⁵ Poplar, Tulip. “The Language of the Heart” (2023)
<https://amandanicole.substack.com/p/the-language-of-the-heart>

²⁶ Schneider 21

Do you think she has to ask,

"Is this the place?"²⁷

In communicating with plants and experiencing aisthesis, we connect to the heart of the world, and while doing so, Buhner encourages us to look for that "one true thing". "It is not a thinking thing that you have here, this one true thing, it is a feeling thing . . . Always a part of you will know when you are touched by the one true thing. We all know the true when we feel it."²⁸

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²⁷ Oliver, Mary. *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017) 3

²⁸ Buhner 2, 161