

FUNHOUSE GODDESS

by D. Graham Burnett

Nature has a way of showing up unannounced. And I don't just mean those episodic depredations of storm and flood, or even that field mouse you found in the pantry of the beach house this spring—the one that had chewed its way through the top of the olive oil bottle to die in panicked ecstasy, treading the golden elixir into an extra virgin froth. No, I mean sometimes Nature actually *shows up*, as in: Poof! There she is.

Take the story of Alain de Lille, who was wandering along one fine day in the twelfth century muttering to himself about Ovid, when, suddenly, down from the sky sweeps a crazy crystal chariot drawn by celestial doves and bearing a towering, magnificent maiden queen. Around her head whirl the very stars and plan-

ets, and upon her billowing robes an overcome Alain seems to see the medieval equivalent of an IMAX nature documentary: over there, on the scrim of her diaphanous cloak, a montage of the bird kingdom, where falcons wheel and clip herons in midflight, and ostriches roam over desert sands; over here, on her seamless mantle, some Jacques Cousteau-style footage of whales disporting themselves in the deep, escorted by dolphins and a host of finny friends; and finally, on the linen tunic gathered up against her shapely body, a drive-in movie of life upon the terrestrial earth, where lions and tigers stalk their jungle prey, nervous rabbits bound along a hedge, and graceful deer graze upon the dales.

As this cosmological funhouse goddess—*Natura*—drops to his side, Alain swoons in

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queasy terror; but just before he blacks out and face-plants at her feet, he finds himself momentarily fantasizing about the hidden picture show probably playing on her panties. Typical. That's a defrocked monk for you.

Not that it was a totally unreasonable fantasy—after all, who could miss that gaping tear right down the middle of her dress?

Thus begins one of the great phantasmagorical allegories of the Western canon, *De Planctu Naturae*, or *The Complaint of Nature*, a text that put the commandments of God on the lips of nature, whence they'd be heard murmuring

I am against nature. I don't dig nature at all. I think nature is very unnatural. I think the truly natural things are dreams which nature can't touch with decay. —Bob Dylan, 1966

for the better part of the next eight hundred years. Alain de Lille didn't invent the idea that "nature," rightly understood, teaches us how to live and what to do, but he gave dramatic shape and voice to this proposition, which would organize much of the intellectual life of Europe well into the nineteenth century. When nature showed up, it was generally time for a lesson—about politics, about sex, and, above all, about sexual politics.

It's 1690—are you curious about how to arrange your government? Beehives and beaver dams offer plausible models, both stamped with the authority of the Creator—so Early Modern thinkers studied them closely as they reasoned about novel political forms (and they were very worried when they found out the "King Bee" was a Queen). By the 1770s, newly discovered Tahiti seemed like the ideal place to meet a "natural man," who would presumably be able to instruct Enlightenment *philosophes* in something like "natural politics." But then "natural woman" was so distracting! Over the next two decades, fantastical descriptions of the social and sexual practices of the island helped drive nails into

the coffin of the *Ancien Régime*, while the Grub Street pornographers cashed in. Back in the era of *Bleak House*, more than one waistcoated bourgeois gentleman, smoking his pipe before a crackling coal fire, found himself musing about the moral justifications of an increasingly dog-eat-dog economy. Well, there was good news: it turns out dogs *do* eat dogs down on the African savannahs. Darwin's theory of the developmental and progressive effects of deadly competition in the wild very quickly did double duty as a means of extending cosmological sanction to the weed-out abuses of late Victorian capital. Darwin had some things to say about mate selection too.

These ways of reasoning and arguing have never really died, despite a number of excellent arguments against them (Mill comes to mind). From the cataleptic Bible thumpers of our heartland railing against legal sanction for "unnatural" domestic arrangements, to evolutionary psychologists in Cambridge, Massachusetts, lecturing us soberly about game-theoretical models of monogamy, plenty of folks continue to think, explicitly or implicitly, that we learn the way things should be by looking at the way they are—that is, in nature. What's nature trying to tell us? How would we know? Who's in a position to say? These are fundamental questions that haunt the philosophical traditions of Christendom and the secular societies it has spawned. The efforts to answer them amount, in the end, to the history of science, since this is the body of practices, institutions, and instruments that evolved to hear what Alain's psychedelic angel was *saying*.

Alain himself had it relatively easy: no chem lab, no calculus, no tedious hours at the microscope trying to discern the divine order inscribed in natural phenomena. All that would come later and give headaches to other students of the "Book of Nature" (which turned out to be just as hard to decipher as its equally important shelfmate, the Book of Scripture, with which it was supposed to agree). Working in the tradition of Boethius—whose *Consolation of Philosophy* introduced a twenty-foot woman named Philosophia and let her solve some thorny metaphysical problems directly—Alain could

just bring Nature on stage, give her a voice, and then listen.

In fact, he even got to it. Coming to, he finds himself kissing her, and she is kissing him on the cheek. "Why so sad?" he wants to know. "I tore your dress, anyway?" In return, Nature tells her story.

She is, she explains, the daughter of the mighty God, who created the world and is replete with diverse animals and plants, figured in a vast system of balance. The original *creation* is God's, but it's the business of actually running the world, and she is centrally responsible for the continuity of form through the cycles of birth and decay. He made the laws to enforce them, and His is the eternal reign. But here, in the creation, His law and minister. As she says, "He made me the mistress of the world, the stamp on the different classes of beings."

An important post, to be sure, but responsibility—to see to it that the world "breeds true"—seems to head back to the roots of the very word "nature," from the past participle of the verb *gignere*, to be born. This deep etymology connects the processes of birth and the processes of death; nature goes a long way toward explaining the durability and ubiquity of forms in the natural world: we might say that "nature" is a notion that hides its own history.

Unfortunately for all of us, the first (virgin mother) Nature found herself a whole little overwhelming and needed some helpers. And here was where things were to go seriously wrong, since the first helper, Pandora (or Olympian Eve, if you prefer), as her adjutant the love goddess Eros, with that little do-gooding touch, brought the great idea. Pretty soon there was a war going on.

Which brings us to that Weeping Nature has come down to us in all her glory for the expression of crying mankind's monstrous

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She is, she explains, the vice-regent of Al-
mighty God, who created the whole universe,
replete with diverse animals and plants, all con-
figured in a vast system of balance and harmony.
The original *creation* is God's, of course, but the
business of actually running the system is hers,
and she is centrally responsible for ensuring con-
tinuity of form through the cycling generations
of birth and decay. He made the rules, He can
enforce them, and His is the empyrean realm of
eternity. But here, in the created world, she is
His law and minister. As she puts it to Alain,
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roots of the very word "nature," which hails
from the past participle of the Latin verb *nasci*,
to be born. This deep etymological tie between
the processes of birth and the whole concept of
nature goes a long way toward explaining the
durability and ubiquity of feminized figures of
the natural world: we might say that "mother
nature" is a notion that hides in the word itself.

Unfortunately for all of us, however, Alain's
(virgin mother) Nature found the work on the
whole a little overwhelming and decided to enlist
some helpers. And here was where things started
to go seriously wrong, since this Christianized
Pandora (or Olympian Eve, if you prefer) chose
as her adjutant the love goddess Venus, together
with that little do-gooding tyke Desire. Not a
great idea. Pretty soon there was a lot of loving
going on.

Which brings us to that tear in the dress.
Weeping Nature has come down from on high
in all her glory for the express purpose of de-
crying mankind's monstrous assaults on her

person: human beings' assaults on the *nature*
of things. A twenty-first-century reader turns
the page hoping to learn about some sort of
twelfth-century conservation ethic (perhaps
reflecting anxieties that new agricultural tech-
niques and urbanization were transforming the
medieval environment), only to discover that
Nature appears to think the "ecological" crisis of
the universe, circa 1170, is that *everyone is hav-
ing too much sex, especially too much sex for fun,
and also weird, deviant sex—why, men are even
having sex with men, and then sometimes women
are....* Pointing to her shredded tunic, Nature
moans, "Many men arm themselves with vices,
and in their violence they lay cruel hands on me,

*Look you, nature! I don't deny but your clover
is sweet, and your dandelions don't roar; but
whose hailstones smashed my windows?*

—Herman Melville, 1857

tear my clothes to ribbons which they carry off
as trophies, and then they drive me, whom they
should clothe in honor and reverence, stripped
naked like a harlot, into a common brothel."
Human lust was destroying nature.

In Alain de Lille, the grand conflation of "is"
and "ought," of the laws of nature and the laws of
God, turns out to be largely concerned with what
goes on when the lights go off. This particular
slip has recurred with nearly perfect reliability
right down to last semester, when I had a seri-
ous and thoughtful Catholic student in my office
dilatating on "natural law" by means of a kind of
higher hand jive. Why is it that so often when
God is heard to speak through nature, He seems
to be going on about our genitals? It's difficult to
believe He finds the subject so compelling.

Lest any of this seem, well, medieval, a
word about where I picked up my first copy
of *De Planctu Naturae*. Not, as it happens, in
a bookstore. Rather, I plucked it from a box of
trash laid out on a street corner in New Ha-
ven back in the 1990s. I have excellent evi-
dence that this well-thumbed paperback had
been discarded by our neighbor, who was in

the middle of clearing out his apartment for a move. Where? To D.C., where he would be clerking on the U.S. Supreme Court in those middle years in the wilderness between *Bowers v. Hardwick* and *Lawrence v. Texas*.

Had this young Christian thrown it out because he had finished with medieval homophobia? Or because he was taking it to a higher level? There's no way to know for sure, but "natural law" is alive and well among the conservative justices of the court. Several of them, like

OCEAN, n. *A body of water occupying about two-thirds of a world made for man—who has no gills.*
—Ambrose Bierce, 1911

Alain, seem to hear Nature loud and clear, and she is still weeping. Moreover, despite the fact that most of the surface of the globe is rapidly being converted into either a strip mall or a factory to produce the things that sell in strip malls (with what look like catastrophic consequences for the global climate), she would appear, on their account, still to be weeping about men playing footsie in public lavatories.

Historians have done a great deal of work to dig up and string together the shifting iconography of *Natura* out of the Middle Ages, through the Renaissance, and into the Early Modern period. The story is complicated, the stemma of texts demanding, the scholarship rigorous. Moreover, vast historical changes cannot easily be epitomized by a few marginal illustrations. But for our purposes it suffices to say that Alain's figure was on to something: Nature *was* stripped of her royal robes across those years, and her newly exposed body stimulated revolutionary thinking about who she was and what was to be done with her.

The Harvard historian Katherine Park has shown clearly that, by the sixteenth century, regal figurations of Nature had mostly gone the way of plainchant, replaced by pseudoclassical images of buxom nudes whose breasts (some-

times as many as a dozen) frequently drip, ooze, or spray a sustaining milk. Was this an image of power and dignity? Perhaps. Of fertility? It would seem so. And yet, that flaunted nakedness—nature *au naturel*, as it were—was bound to give the lads ideas.

Lads like Francis Bacon. The writings of Bacon, that quasi-upstanding Jacobean prosecutor, incandescent philosophical fantasist, and obligatory Dead White Whale-Male of the Scientific Revolution, have long featured prominently on the syllabi of historians trying to explain modernity. His call for a hands-on "experimental philosophy" gave scholastic mumblers a kick in the pants, and his vision of Adamic man restored to dominance in the worldly garden (by means of science and technology) bound power and knowledge in a newly messianic-*cum*-practical program. That he appears to have died of a cold caught while experimenting on a frozen chicken did not tarnish his legacy, though it made him a less alluring martyr for science than, say, his rough contemporary Galileo.

Back in 1980, in an influential and controversial book entitled *The Death of Nature*, the feminist scholar and environmental historian Carolyn Merchant made Bacon the bogeyman of a polemical story about how nature went from being understood as a soulful, honored earth-mother to being pillaged and exploited as the slave-bitch of Anglo-European capitalism. Gendered imagery lay at the heart of the change. As Merchant would have it, Bacon performed a kind of Nietzschean "transvaluation of all values" upon the traditional image of nature. Forget the mother stuff, forget the queen stuff: she was a woman, after all, and when you go to a woman, you bring your whips. "Nature must be taken by the forelock," Bacon wrote at one point, in an arresting passage that Merchant adduced in slam-dunk support of her argument.

And what was supposed to happen next? Bacon was pretty clear: it was the obligation of the natural philosopher to probe nature's body, to rifle her secrets, and to make her yield him fruit. Here, that lamented assault of Alain's *De Planctu Naturae*—man's transgressive attack on

Nature's flesh—was being reworked into a respectable theory of knowledge. Merchant was born in sin, as the rape of nature was.

Or so Merchant argued. Bacon bought it. After all, Bacon proposed a number of ways, not all female, to improve. He liked to use the goat god Pan as a metaphor, to recommend grabbing him by the horns. In a few places it was Bacon's English that he had used the "she" pronoun. He used the Latin term *natura* when a personified nature would have been more appropriate. It was true that Bacon used *she* when describing how men overcame nature. However, when describing how men overcame nature, it wasn't all caveman conquest. In passages he seemed to suggest that men were to be wooed and persuaded. He eroticized epistemology, to be sure, but he also telegraphed strip mining and nuclear weapons quite like the original. And it gets even more complicated when you realize that Bacon did talk here and there about nature in ways that to us now read like an advocacy for sexual violence. He went on to point out that by the sixteenth century there were a number of ways of thinking about rape. He noted that woodcutters did to milkmaids what men did to women, not to be confused with what

Suburban Warfare

Average number of people in a household

Percent of households that have a car

Number of birds that die each year

Gallons of gasoline spilled each year
refueling lawn-care equipment

Gallons of oil spilled by the military

Gallons of water used by a typical household

Number of Americans who own a gun

Percent of California land used for agriculture

Number of years Diazinon, a pesticide, continued to be sold after it was banned

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Nature’s flesh—was being refigured as a veri- table theory of knowledge. Modern science was born in sin, as the rape of nature.

Or so Merchant argued. Not everyone bought it. After all, Bacon personified nature a number of ways, not all female (for instance, he liked to use the goat god Pan too and did *not* recommend grabbing him by the hair), and in a few places it was Bacon’s English translators who had used the “she” pronouns for the feminine Latin term *natura* when a plain old “it” might have been more appropriate. Moreover, while it was true that Bacon used some racy language when describing how men ought to win Nature over, it wasn’t all caveman courtship: in various passages he seemed to suggest that Nature had to be wooed and persuaded. This remained an eroticized epistemology, to be sure, but it didn’t telegraph strip mining and thermonuclear weapons quite like the original Merchant thesis. And it gets even more complicated: conceding that Bacon did talk here and there about Nature in ways that to us now read distressingly like advocacy for sexual violence, several historians went on to point out that back in the seven- teenth century there were a number of different ways of thinking about rape. What cretinous woodcutters did to milkmaids in the fens was not to be confused with what knights did with

maidens in romances—and, more importantly, neither of these was to be confused with what the Romans did with the Sabine women. *That*, like the rape of Europa by Jupiter, was to be under- stood first and foremost as a heroic tale of nation creation—a foundational moment for a powerful people. It was more a *raptus*—a sort of semiconsensual kidnapping with privileges, undertaken for a “good cause”—than a garden- variety sex crime. Was Bacon invoking this sort of thing when he goaded men to take up nature in their strong arms and create a brave new world? Maybe. After all, this was the man who penned a little heroic treatise entitled *The Masculine Birth of Time*.

Where does this leave the Merchant thesis? If at its most extravagant, *The Death of Nature* represented the unlikely intersection of late- 1970s Take Back the Night activism and old- fashioned intellectual history of the Scientific Revolution, the core claims of the text have nevertheless survived, and changed the way historians talk about science, nature, and gen- der. As Merchant put it in summary, “Sexual politics helped to structure the nature of the empirical method.” Few scholars would now disagree. Moreover, the empirical methods of science have, in return, substantially structured the sexual politics of modernity.

Suburban Warfare

Average number of people injured per year from 1994–2004 using lawn mowers:	75,500
Percent of households that fail to read the instructions before using lawn-care pesticides:	50
Number of birds that die each year due to lawn-care pesticides:	7 million
Gallons of gasoline spilled every summer by Americans refueling lawn-care equipment:	17 million
Gallons of oil spilled by the <i>Exxon Valdez</i> :	11 million
Gallons of water used by a Tampa, Florida golf course every day:	178,800
Number of Americans whose daily needs that amount would fulfill:	2,200
Percent of California landscapers using leaf blowers who wear hearing protection:	10
Number of years Diazinon, a pesticide similar in composition to nerve gas, continued to be sold after the EPA banned it:	2

lot, different century, it would ap-
lature's message to Fourier could
n more remote from that to Alain.
n's demiurge wept that men and
d not contain their desires, into the
ly provincial Frenchman of strait-
the shimmering goddess whispered
correction: she was weeping *because*
men contained their desires.

ng a loving God who's trying to
gh nature, it followed that our de-
s very clearest instructions. And
are bizarre (Fourier briefly touched
shes, dress-up fantasies, and a va-
er unconventional appetites), they
together somehow in that "divine
ie theologians had been ratcheting
ce the age of the Church Fathers.
of understand Fourier to be calling
e bluff: "Loving God? Divine Plan?
orm? Okay, my friends, let's try to
ork, given what we know about life
." In view of his answer, Fourier
satirist of super-Swiftian propor-
of the most devout men ever to live.
t quite decide which is testimony
y literary gifts.

the ancient elements of natural
gether (a project Voltaire, Hume,
ad loudly declared absurd), Fou-
a world that was trying to become
ry different *if we would only get out*
f ourselves and of the operations of
ad, we had created this monstrous
as "civilization," in which everyone
hold hands, chitchat, and go slow-
a whirlpool of spiritual, material,
ustration. By thus refusing to give
satisfaction to our polymorphous
an beings had sinned mightily,
y sinning mightily, *contra naturam*.
continuous transgression against
ature herself was relentlessly pun-
he grandest ways.

ways. It was Fourier's contention
smological harmony pervaded the
that a subtle and powerful force of

"attraction" organized not simply the material
world (that was Newton's theory of gravitation,
which Fourier admired but thought merely the
tip of the iceberg) but the entirety of the organic
and social world as well. The result was count-
less latent correspondences, pervasive action at
a distance, and the propagation of waves of dis-
sonance that expanded outward from mankind
in invisible destructive ripples. For instance, why
was it that beavers—so happy in the wild—
generally refused to breed in captivity? Fou-
rier knew. Clearly, when they got near us, they
could feel our miserable sex lives, and our bad
vibe poisoned their amours. This basic problem
could be extended from zoology right through
to astronomy since planets also had reproductive
cycles, which were a little like those of plants:
they released spermatc pollens that mingled in
outer space and seeded new galaxies. According
to Fourier, our own earth (itself as depressed as
those captive beavers, and for the same reason)
had been for thousands of years unable to jet its
luminous spray at the stars because of the pul-
lulating presence of millions of humans, all gro-
tesquely disregarding the palpable calls of nature.

But there was hope. If "civilization" could be
destroyed; if human beings could learn to act in
accordance with the natural laws of what Fourier
called "passionate attraction"; if they could be con-
figured in the social constellations for which they
were intended (vast monasteries of love and work
and play where everyone's vices, properly nested
among their counter-vices and all given entirely
free rein, would instantly become virtues), then
everything would start to line up. Literally. The
axis of the planet would tilt, shifting the optimal
zones of cultivation into the regions where there
was more good land (after all, why, if God loved
us, would He leave millions of acres of good land
under the ice of Siberia?). Captive beavers would
fecundate, as would the planet itself, flowering a
sunny polar corona that would gently warm the
whole globe to a fertile paradise. Loathsome toil
at the plow would cease, and work would become
casual Edenic berry picking, leaving endless time
for artistic creation, amorous intrigues within the
communes, and periodic love wars between the

nations. No more war-wars, needless to say. But
the youth would still need the pomp and glory
of campaigns, so it seemed likely to Fourier that
adolescents would now and again form up in
vast armies of love, descending on Asia, say, in
a conquering carnival of sexual acrobatics and
great costumes. Imagine a cross between the Red
Army and Cirque de Soleil.

One other thing. Hermaphrodites. Not
timid ones, but big, mean ones. They wouldn't
last forever, but evolution might need to generate
them for a time in order to transform the social
order and enhance our sense of gender equity:

To put an end to the tyranny of men
there would have to be a century of
a third sex, both male and female,
and stronger than the male. This new
sex would prove by the rod that men,
as much as women, are made for its
pleasure.

For Fourier, whose writings are one con-
tinual euphoric spasm of optimism, the "plaint
of nature" was soon to become the "plaint of
misogynists." They visit him suddenly from the
future, their trousers torn, weeping: nature, sex,
politics, and science. Squared.

I suspect Fourier is not getting much air-
time at the Supreme Court these days, but it
might make sense to send the justices a copy. So
far he seems to be right about the global warm-
ing part anyway. Bacon's mistreatment of nature
would seem to be to blame for all that, but it's
nice to think that maybe, just maybe, the cause
lies in an improvement in the global quotient of
sexual satisfaction. Beats the hell out of blam-
ing it—à la Alain de Lille—on homosexuals.
Doubtless there is a Bible thumper out there
right now, in some strip-mall house of worship,
making that very claim.

It has never been easy to decipher what
nature is trying to tell us, but we have never
stopped listening, never stopped looking for
signs, and never stopped figuring masks from
which we can take dictation, or behind which
we can hide as we lecture each other about our
desires. Nature does indeed have a way of show-
ing up unannounced. We do the talking.