



NATURE REBORN

Reflections on the paintings of Nicolas Party

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Who can tell of what the sleeping baby dreams? One of the great mysteries of life is that no-one can, although we were all there once. So far, the baby whose diminutive portrait holds the key to this entire exhibition, having only recently opened her eyes to the world for the first time, has witnessed almost nothing of it. Ostensibly, she has no knowledge of mountains, waterfalls, forests or sunsets. In his *Principles of Psychology*, dating from 1890, William James famously speculated that ‘the baby, assailed by eyes, ears, nose, skin and entrails at once, feels it all as one great blooming, buzzing confusion’.¹ It takes time, thought James, for the growing infant to make things out – whether visually, aurally, olfactorily or haptically – from the ocean of light, sound, smell and feeling within which she is primordially immersed. But if that is so, how could her dreams possibly be filled with forms and creatures that we, with more experience, can recognise in the world around us?

The problem is that in our maturity, babyhood is always something to look back on, not something to look forward to. The child looks forward to becoming a grownup, the adult – perhaps with mixed feelings – to advancing old age. But who looks forward to becoming a baby? True, there are peoples, such as the Inuit of Greenland, in whose cosmology the cycle of life spans generations, such that grandfathers can return as new-borns and are addressed accordingly, as both older and wiser than the parents who bore them.² Inuit people would find nothing strange in the idea that the baby’s dreams are filled with glacial mountains, oceans and sea-ice, for these would be but memories of their previous life. But to those of us raised on the assumption that life is a one-way passage from cradle to grave, the idea would appear incredible. For we are convinced that our very capacity to reflect on infancy proves it to be a condition we have already left behind.

In growing up, however, we turn our backs not only on our own infancy. We do the same, also, to that very elemental earth to which we owe our existence. Under the rubric of ‘nature’, we put this world behind us, as an originary condition which it is the destiny of our human selves to subdue. Even as we worry about the mass extinction of species resulting, directly or indirectly, from this subjugation, we think of nature not as a harbinger of the future that awaits us but as an archive from the past, to be saved from destruction and conserved. Thanks to the efforts of geologists and palaeontologists, we know much more about this past than in previous centuries. We know that continents have drifted over the face of the earth, and that their collision has

raised massive mountain ranges. We know that hundreds of millions of years before anything resembling humans appeared on the scene, these landmasses were covered with great flowering trees and inhabited by reptilian dinosaurs. And we know that there were later periods when swathes of its surface were covered in ice.

Taken together, the mountains, the forests, the dinosaurs and the ice paint a fabulous picture of a primeval world-before-humanity which fills the pages of natural history books. Children are encouraged to marvel at these distant epochs, separated from our own by almost inconceivable spans of time. Yet in this picture, what is perhaps the most marvellous thing of all, the human baby, pales into insignificance. It is but the tiniest and most ephemeral speck of living matter in the vastness of the universe. How may this marvel be recovered? It was of course the great achievement of modern science to convert the cosmos – the manifold of heaven and earth that opens from the inside into the very plenitude of sensory experience – into a universe that is objective, exterior and indifferent to our concerns. In this conversion the infinite horizons of conscious awareness are reduced to a vanishing point. Yet in the birth of a baby, an event of infinitesimal significance on the scale of the universe expands to truly cosmic proportions. It is nothing less than the birth of a world.

Restoring the marvel of this event requires us to turn the tables on the scientific worldview. It means folding the universe outside in, so as to regain a vision of the cosmos. This, according to phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is the specific task of the painter. Merleau-Ponty compares the painter's vision to that of the new-born, on first opening her eyes to the world. For the painter, however, every time is a first time: their vision, as he puts it, 'is a continued birth'.³ Yet it was precisely from this power to give birth to a world, in every moment of existence, that 'nature' originally took its name. It comes from the Latin *natus*, 'to be born'. The Roman philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus, in his prose-poem *De Rerum Natura*, dating from around 50 BCE, called nature 'the creatress of all things' (*rerum natura creatrix*).⁴ But nature's creation is ours too. It is not as though we arrive as spectators, peering out through holes in the head, as we might through a telescope, on the scene unfolding before us. From the moment we open our eyes, if not before, we are already in its midst.

What, then, if the new-born world of the baby's dreams were dreaming too? We can no more fathom the depths of nature's dreaming than we can access the dreamworld of the sleeping infant. It is not a world that can be known or studied by any science. But where the baby sees a world, we see its bulbous

head. Apparently unsupported, cradled in swaddling clothes, the head is like a magic orb, invisible to its wearer, but rendering the wearer visible to others. If nature were newly born like the child, what orb would it wear? Could we imagine a landscape with surfaces as smooth and contours as rounded as those of a baby's skin? In the paintings of Nicolas Party, I see the orb of nature's dreaming. They portray nature in its natality, not – as in so many naturalistic portrayals of landscape – in its antiquity. In these portrayals of a new-born world, mountains glisten like marshmallows, forests are aglow and waters thread like ribbons through rocks as yet unworn. Even the dinosaurs, in their birthday suits, emerge cleansed from the moonlit waters of some primordial ocean, ready to play. With the birth of every child, the dream of nature is reborn.

1 William James, 1890, *Principles of Psychology*, volume 1, New York: Henry Holt, page 488.

2 Mark Nuttall, 'The name never dies: Greenland Inuit ideas of the person', in *Amerindian Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief Among North American Indians and Inuit*, edited by Antonia C. Mills and Richard Slobodin, 123-35, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994.

3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and mind', translated by Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception, and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, edited by James M. Edie, 159-90, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964, page 168.

4 Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* [The Nature of Things], *Book 1*, line 628), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0130%3Abook%3D1%3Acard%3D599>, accessed 27th May 2023.

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