

Does the Epic Need Art? An IRASnet Dialogue

SUMMARIZED BY URSULA GOODENOUGH



Editor's note: The Institute on Religion in an Age of Science (co-publisher of Zygon journal) conducted its summer 1998 conference on the theme of Interweaving Art, Science, and Spirituality. The conference was co-chaired by Ursula Goodenough and Bob Schaible. Returning home, IRAS participants continued their conversation by way of the IRASnet listserv (open to members only; see their website on how to apply for membership: www.iras.org). At the end of August, Ursula posted this summary on the listserv. You will notice that the Epic is a major focus in this dialogue—which is not surprising, given that the summer 1996 IRAS conference was titled The Epic of Evolution. Italics in this summary are used to distinguish Ursula's writing from the embedded quotations drawn from the dialogue. Permission to publish quotations has been obtained from all the participants.

I've read through the wonderful responses to my initial question, "Does the epic of evolution require art?," and snipped short segments that speak most usefully to me, which I'll quote as I summarize.

Several of you say that the science needs to be translated into artful prose,

and I guess this is in part where Tom Gilbert's and George Fisher's endorsements lie. I agree, but I also agree with Ted Laurensen and Bob Schaible that, if the translation is done well, the translation itself is all you need to get the impact of the story.

Bob Schaible: I do not think that science needs art to evoke a sense of awe, reverence, wonder. I need no poems or paint-

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ings about the smallness and strangeness of the subatomic world, the seemingly infinite stretches of interstellar space, the intricate

complexities of a developing brain in order for me to feel blown away. Just the sheer knowledge, partial though it may be as brought to me by

the various sciences, leaves me stunned and breathless.

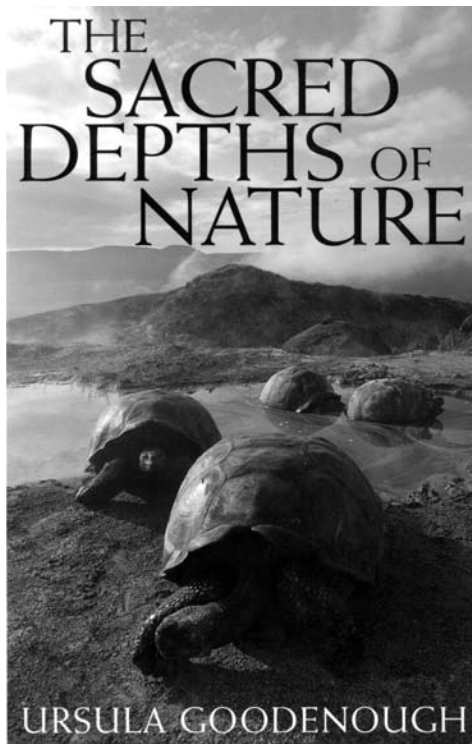
Most of the rest of you then go on to say that, following from there, the MEANING of this story—its impact, its dangers, and so on—absolutely must be rendered in art. Phil Hefner's response is an eloquent example.

Phil Hefner: If the Epic of Evolution is really significant, and if it really means something for the depths of human existence, then its scientific description will find a correlate in the art of our time. This will happen not because the artist set out to produce such a correlate, nor even because the artist recognizes that her/his work is a correlate, but because the artist works at the level of the most deeply real. This means that, sooner or later, the art of a period will intersect with what other persons — nonartists — are articulating about whatever is most deeply real, even as our own generation experiences and discerns it.

As the conversation unfolds, the word myth enters the discussion and stirs things up for a while.

Bob Schaible: I think the problem may in part be a semantic one regarding what one thinks of as myth. I prefer simply to talk about the intersection of the Epic and Meaning. As I tried to say in an earlier message, the Epic, like all science, needs art if its meaning for us as human beings is to be fully and richly explored and rendered.... But being stunned and breathless do not equal a good myth. Good sex can do the same. To be mythic (in the sense of getting at the meanings of these fabulous bits of knowledge) probably requires some sort of art IF we are going to render that meaning in a rich and fully resonating way.

George Fisher: Among the many different kinds of stories that shape our worldviews, myths—stories that point beyond themselves and give meaning, purpose, and direction to life—are especially important.



Those of you who've read drafts of my book, The Sacred Depths of Nature, know that I try to do what George says myths do; I try to suggest meaningful responses to the scientific worldview. What I don't think I do, however, is generate art or myth. I just point out the religious implications of the material—yes, as eloquently as I can—because I want the result to be affective. But art? myth? So we return to Phil's original claim.

Hefner: The Epic of Evolution requires art if it is to attain the position of Myth. There can be no myth that possesses no dimension of art.

Now juxtapose that statement with Ted's response, and then Connie's.

Ted Laurenson: The question, for me, is how easily we can invest our scientific understanding with the meanings that allow it to serve the function of myth—not whether we can force that understanding to fit a more narrowly defined view of what myths and their power are all about. For me, investing those kinds of meaning comes naturally, which is why I think the power is already available to be tapped.

Connie Barlow: I personally have tried to make the distinction between the scientific story of the universe unembellished by art and the mythic story of the universe evoked by art. Only the latter am I willing to honor with the word Epic.

Tom Gilbert then moves us to consider the appropriate media for artful translation of science into meaningful story.

Tom Gilbert: I hope that artists will eventually be able to capture the meaning in media other than just prose. I'm not sure that this is possible using traditional art forms, which are effective for presenting the spatial dimensions, but not the temporal dimension. A spatiotemporal canvas is needed to capture the meaning of the scientific story of creation.

Connie surely would respond to Tom by saying, Yes, ritual is the spatiotemporal

medium that serves this purpose. And she tells us that the Cosmogen listserve has been sharing ritual traditions. True, in my view; but ritual is tricky. Indeed, on another listserve that I frequent, Scientific Pantheism, some have decried this approach, saying that worshipping the universe (as they depict the project) is just as troubling for them as worshipping a deity.

I'll close with the quotation that Lynne Quarmby supplies from a book by J. P. Carse, titled Finite and Infinite Games.

Lynne Quarmby: Myths are like magic trees in the garden of culture. They do not grow on but out of the silent earth of nature. The more we strip these trees of their fruit or prune them back to our favored design, the more imposing and fecund they become.

I think this metaphor gets at the heart of what everyone is saying in different ways. We do in the end strip and prune when we generate myth. As certain reviewers will doubtless point out with lofty contempt, my book (and Connie's Tiamat Ritual, for that matter) focuses on what I want to lift up from Nature. There are all sorts of red-in-tooth-and-claw features that don't make the cut. We strip and prune to generate fecundity and meaning because, in the end, we humans got plunked into a Nature that we have no choice but to work with.

So, thanks everybody. This dialogue has been enormously useful to me. I'm still not going to call a photograph of a sunset art, but I now understand that if that photograph is able to communicate to me some concerto about Sunsets from the photographer; then it IS art. ☺

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—Phil Hefner