

Bee fables: imagining more than human communities

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"That buzzing-noise means something. You don't get a buzzing-noise like that, just buzzing and buzzing, without its meaning something. If there's a buzzing-noise, somebody's making a buzzing-noise, and the only reason for making a buzzing-noise that I know of is because you're a bee." Then he thought another long time, and said: "And the only reason for being a bee that I know of is making honey." And then he got up, and said: "And the only reason for making honey is so as I can eat it." (A.A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, Ch. 1)

One of my favorite books as a child was *Erik of het klein insectenboek* (*Eric or the small book of insects*, 1941), by the Dutch writer Godfried Bomans. It is the story of Erik, who lies awake in bed one night, nervous for a school exam the next day on the life of the insects. In the middle of the night all the paintings in his bedroom come to life: portraits of his ancestors, but also a painting of a meadow, with a shepherd and sheep in it and, in the grass, many insects. Erik climbs into the painting and enters the world of the insects. It is, of course, an allegory of the human world, and when Erik returns to the human world he sees the similarities of it with the world of the insects and understands it a little bit better. While he is in the painting, he learns a lot about the life in the meadow. He amazes the insects with his knowledge of their world, all of which he learned of course from his school textbook. But the insects are paralyzed by Erik's knowledge. They become unwilling to do anything before Erik has told them that it is alright to do it because the textbook says so. It all becomes a big mess and he ends up crying out 'stop asking me, you know what to do, you have instinct' ("a word he had learned in school"). The next day Erik has to sit his exam. He bases all his answers on his experiences in the meadow rather than on the textbook. The result is that he fails his test and gets a detention. So much for school!

The ending of the book indicates what is the real issue here – the difference between actual experience, in which imagination plays such a constitutive role, and bookish knowledge. The book is a fable about the reality of imagination versus life lost in abstraction and identity. It is also a story about the experience of closeness to nature that is typical of childhood, an experience that can remain a source of renewal throughout life. The Dr Dolittle fantasy, of walking and talking with the animals, is more than the free play of the imagination, as every child knows. The dog, the cat, the birds and the horses, the buttercups in the grass, even the rocks, the sky and the sun: we are in an uncanny way at home with them. We can experience nature as in some sense having waited for us, as needing us and our speech, and vice versa we seem to be always waiting for the natural in us to open its mouth. A promise pervades the world that a reconciliation and liberation of the human by nature and of nature by the human is outstanding and somehow prefigured in things, a work to be completed.

This idea is very old and entwined with the idea of peace. "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling

together; and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6). We also find it, in contemporary philosophy, in Heidegger and Derrida (see Derrida's *The animal that therefore I am*). Heidegger says the animal is world poor, does not live in the open that humans, as *Dasein*, dwell in because they stand in language. The dimension of *Dasein* is not so much that of a particular human nature that singles us out among the species (hence the misguided nature of much of the discourse of posthumanism, itself the mirror image of what it tries to criticize), but the ontological dimension of openness in which the world of beings can appear. Insofar and as long as we dwell in language, which means something else than availing ourselves of a means of communication, we heed the place where the world, and the animal, can appear, can stand in the light of its truth.

Heidegger is clear about the fact that there is nothing necessary about the human as the place of *Dasein*. It may disappear. But with it, he thinks, *Dasein* would also disappear, perhaps to reemerge somewhere else, on another planet perhaps. This is so because the animal is world poor. It moves within the horizons set out for it and therefore has a limited experience of the open, not of the open as such (the animal has no ability of a *Formalanzeige*). I think Heidegger is wrong here and in that sense there is an important truth in the reminder that the world does not need us. "Every flower/ enjoys the air it breaths" (William Blake). But insofar as we revel in imaginations of a natural world without humans, yet secretly observed by us as the animals go about their business and the sun rises and sets, we remain tied to the vision of control of nature, in a sense similar to that of imagining who will be there at our funeral. That is precisely what we should be breaking free of.

The vision of the human bringing speech to the natural world is always under threat of being compromised by the control of nature (outer and inner). But it is not the same and the threat may be averted. At the same time it is still necessary that we try to bring speech to the natural world. It, just as much as the sphere of the human, is not finished, wants to come into its own. We can begin to understand this idea and see it has nothing to do with occultism or new age thought precisely once we start to deconstruct the idea of control. The human is more a part of nature than we might think, because the existential dimension that Heidegger called *Dasein* is not exclusive to humans, does not stand over against the natural. This means then also that the natural is not restricted within its limitations; the animal (at least) stands out into the open as well. As Schelling said: in the human, nature opens its eyes and looks at itself. Far from talking about post-humanism, we need to understand what the human really is, and that it is a function, if you will, that is much more general than the species of human beings. Ernst Bloch used the word 'humanum' ('the humane') to indicate this function. It applies as much to the human world as to what he called 'natural subjectivity' or even 'the subject of nature'.

These ideas call out for a materialist philosophy of consciousness and nature. In his 1933 essay *Materialism and Metaphysics* Horkheimer writes that materialism develops not as a metaphysical system from first principles, but that it changes with the concrete historical situatedness in which it is operative as the theory and praxis of enlightened liberation. 18th century materialism aligned itself with mechanistic natural science. 19th and 20th century materialism aligned itself with historical, sociological and psychological knowledge. I think we can say that in our epoch materialism has to transform itself once more and install itself at the interface of the human and the natural, for that is where the crunch is of the challenges that face us today. A changed natural science and a changed situation in the theoretical humanities, aligned by the commonality of the disappearance of the discourse of control, present a new opportunity for materialism in which many of its latent ideas can come to fruition: futurity and

the new, natural freedom (ecological consciousness with the Heideggerian 'open' as an intrinsic feature of nature), an alliance between the human, nature and technology, the radical transformation of society.

There are five moments in cultural history that concern bees which I want to discuss in the light of this situation.

The first is the role played by bees in the bible. The utopia that this text deals with is 'the land of milk and honey'. The second is Virgil's poem about country life, *Georgica*, book IV of which is devoted to bee-keeping. The *Georgica* is a text from the first century BC. Next, there is Mandeville's *Fable of the bees, or: Private Vices, Public Benefits*, from the 18th century. Then there is the book I began with, *Eric or the small book of insects*. Finally there is a poem by Martinus Nijhoff (a 20th century Dutch poet) 'Het lied der dwaze bijen', 'The song of the stupefied bees' (1934), in which a swarm of bees is mesmerized by a transcendent scent of 'higher honey' and by the 'not-naming' of its own buzzing. The bees fly higher and higher, away from their dwelling place, until the bees die and swirl down like snowflakes among the hives.

"And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey" (Matthew 3:4). "But I would feed you with the finest of wheat. And with honey from the rock I would satisfy you" (Psalm 81:16). The biblical meaning of bees, and their product, honey, seems to be that of a gift of god. The bees have the ability to extract from nature a substance in which the kingdom of god is, as it were, materialized. Honey is golden and sweet, it does not merely nourish (there are many references to honey being healthy in the bible), but it also expresses and satisfies our desire for a world in which we are at home, in which we live in the presence of god. Honey bears the scent of paradise: "Then said Jonathan, My father hath troubled the land: see, I pray you, how mine eyes have been enlightened, because I tasted a little of this honey." (1 Samuel 14:29). John, living the life of a hermit, is looked after by god with wild honey. He has a taste of paradise as it lies hidden in the very nature of the wild itself. But god promises us an entire land of milk and honey, and Jonathan tastes it. The bees work the presence of the divine in the human world, as a promise of a redemption that is yet to come.

In Virgil's *Georgica* bees also play a role that is closely linked to the divine: "Of air-born honey, gift of heaven, I now / take up the tale" (Bk. IV, 1-2). The life of the bees is presented as exemplary by the poet, as the natural incarnation of the virtues that made Rome great. The state of the bees is the natural counterpart of the state of Rome. Again we see the connection between the bees as the workers of the divine and the idea of a utopia, a land in which humans can live. Here it is no longer the transcendent vision of a new earth but a vision of empire, looked upon favorably by the gods. Yet while the bees remain as it were in the background in the bible and are merely the instruments of the divine, those who bring honey, the purified substance of matter, to the humans, in the *Georgica* they occupy the centre of the stage, as it is their own work, their communal efforts, that allows them to extract the divinely perfect from raw nature. While in the bible the idea that god will provide for his creatures is dominant, in the *Georgica*, as the title itself suggests, the working of the land so that it yields its fruits is celebrated as natural and as the source of happiness.

We begin to see a dawning parallel between the product of the bees, honey, and the product of human association, culture and language. The relation in each case is reciprocal in the early

imagination: language allows human association, Cicero had said, as much as it is the product of it. The same can be said about the role of honey in the life of the bees. I think the golden substance of honey, reflected in the appearance of the bees themselves, who are also golden, suggests the idea of a kind of refinement of the natural into the humane, which in these texts is always at the same time also the divine. The bees are the inventors of civilization. The parallel between honey and language is clear in the bible: "Pleasant words are as a honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones" (Proverbs 16:24). But also for Virgil honey symbolizes language. At the end of the book on bee-keeping, Virgil tells the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Aristaeus, the god who invented bee-keeping, one day lost his bees. His mother told him that he upset the gods because he was responsible for the death of Eurydice which led to so much tragedy, and ultimately to the death of her lover, Orpheus, the poet of poets; it led in other words to the death of poetry itself. Aristaeus was told to perform a *bugonia*, a sacrifice of four bulls, after which the bees are restored to life by emerging from the carcasses. This motif, the spontaneous generation of bees in a carcass, is also hinted at in the bible (Judges 14:8; with a lion's carcass rather than a bull's) and is a part of ancient Mediterranean beliefs. Poetic language, the language that discloses nature to itself, arises from a confrontation with death, and is like the bees procuring honey from wild flowers; they perform a service to nature without knowing it, and it is that service that ensures also the future of the bees themselves. So it is, or should be, with human language, and human society. The poem ends with a parallel drawn by Virgil between the poem and the political peace installed and safeguarded by the roman military: poetic language creates the thriving human community; it is inspired by the gods, but remains the work of humans.

In modernity, the society of the bees starts to appear in a less idealizing light, but it continues to function as a metaphor for human society. Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees, or: Private Vices, Public Benefits* (1714) is a commentary on Mandeville's own poem, from 1705, *The Grumbling Hive: Or, Knaves turn'd Honest*. In the poem, a thriving beehive is brought to the point of extinction because the bees give up their life of luxury and selfish motivation for a life of virtue, saving and honesty. Soon the whole social fabric collapses. In his commentary Mandeville says private 'vice', desiring luxury, spending, personal advantage, ease and convenience ensure society as a whole remains prosperous, industrious, and harmonious. The bees are not celebrated by Mandeville for their virtues, as Virgil had done, or for their status as workers in the vineyard of the Lord, but for their vices, their selfishness, which, nevertheless, leads to the best possible social order. Here, too, the bees teach us what it is with the human world. Not by coincidence, Mandeville presents his ideas in the form of a commentary to a poem. The truth is told poetically, here as much as by Virgil and in the bible. For Mandeville no natural order can ever be perfect, but the supernatural order is no longer reachable from within our historical situatedness. It has been pointed out that Mandeville's fable is, in a way, a deconstruction of the commonplace analogy between the bee hive and human society: "Mandeville does not want to invoke the analogy of the bees, he wants to exorcise it"; he wants to "convince us that the human city has nothing in common with the hive" (Farrell 1985, 511). This is true enough, when we compare it to the classical use of the bee analogy.

It is not too difficult to see a parallel between *Erik or the small book of insects* and the *Fable of the bees*. In *Erik* the life in the meadow is far from perfect, but things start to go really wrong when the insects stop following their "instincts". However, the bees also play a special role in the novel. The first insects Erik meets after stepping into the painting are a family of wasps. Erik

mistakes them for bees, much to their dismay, as they look down on the bees with great disdain. The wasps consider themselves to be the aristocracy in the meadow. The bees are the degenerate branch of the family, best kept silent about in polite company, because they have debased themselves by agreeing to work for humans. The wasp family is quite intolerable, with the stuck-up, self-satisfied and fake airs they give themselves, but the sentiment expressed regarding the place the bees occupy in the book is an important one. What is the togetherness, the community, of humans and bees, when it is merely a mutually beneficial symbiosis or cohabitation? To what extent does the relation we have to bees manifest an exploitative dimension, and what is it in nature that allows for this exploitation to take place? Is another relation to nature possible, and what would it look like? The book does not go into any of this, also not symbolically, but the wasp's perspective on the bees expresses the inaccessibility or incommensurability of nature as something that is not to be forgotten about. And it also is there within the human itself, and within imagination as a human ability, of which Marx said it is that which distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees because it is the ability to consciously think through and envisage a future possibility before acting to realize it. That statement has more than one implication. It is also something we can learn from the bees.

Without the transcendent or transcending guarantee of a promised, if not present, connection between the natural and the human, the idea of honey as materialized spirit becomes itself inaccessible. Nature and the human are then both in the same way, but in isolation from each other, rendered up to an empty sounding out into nothingness. This situation of despair finds expression in Nijhoff's poem, the 'song of the stupefied bees'. The bees are foolish and mesmerized at the same time, goaded on by their passion, longing for a honey, higher than the one they have, beyond the death which 'no one can bear in his body', unnamable by their buzzing. We are reminded of honey as a symbol for the sun or the rays of the sun. They fly up and up, away from their hive, out into a translucent blue in which they themselves become transparent, disappearing like a glimmer in the azure sky, until they have to die anyway and drop down to the ground.

The reality of longing for what is unnamable and what no buzzing or poetic language can reach, and which, when we go for it as we must (as the bee in our bonnet), leads to a fall back into the known, circumscribed world in which we can then, however, no longer live, to which we are dead, is in many ways an allegory for poetry in the 20th century. It is not so much a cancellation of the constellation of human language, utopia and nature that we find in the biblical allegories of bees and honey and in the ones from antiquity, as an intensification of it. The mystery of existence itself, the blind spot or gap that is constitutive of subjectivity and that we can also assume in nature, is part of the exodus of the real, the journey to the land of milk and honey; is part of the golden glimmer caught in mellifluous language, as Virgil might have said, as it is caught in the material substance itself for those who want to see it.

In our recent cultural imagination the bees still have the function of the messengers and bringers of what really matters. We are now representing them as tolling the death-knell of the world's ecosystem. The bees are disappearing, and when the bees disappear, the natural cycle we all depend on is irreparably broken. Again the poetic dimension is clearly present, now in the form of the urban myth that it was Einstein who said "if the bee disappears from the surface of the earth, man would have no more than four years to live. No more bees, no more pollination ... no more men!"

Who is more strongly an incarnation of what culture today holds to be divine wisdom; who more strongly represents the longing for the unity of the human and the natural, with scientific certification, than Einstein? All the more so because of what we have done with his discovery of the mystery of nature, the energy harbored by the atom, the infinite lodged within the finitely small; all the more so because he is by now *démodé*, a feature which only adds to his iconic status as 'the one who knows'. Einstein is an unobtrusive non-authoritarian big other, a wise man speaking to us after the death of authority, with the wisdom of the tongue stuck-out, a gesture that would not have been misplaced in the repertoire of one of the old testament prophets. Einstein is a complex myth, someone who stands in direct lineage to Dr Dolittle, Orpheus and John the Baptist, feeding on wild honey in the desert.

When we look at the history of the bee in our consciousness we can see how, from the now obsolete religious disclosure of the world via the imperial monarchic imagination, bourgeois liberalism and the erasure of the unified horizon of signification in the 20th century, to the new striving for a human society without alienation that is not in conflict with nature but also does not give up its humanity, bees have accompanied us as the natural manifestation of the song we sing or buzz to ourselves, as a canvas for our hopes and our fears. We have lived with the bees and the bees have lived with us, from before we knew what that might one day mean.

Bees die when they sting and bees have an appetite for monarchy. Every allegory can be pushed beyond its limits, where it has to collapse. There is significance in the fact that an allegory carries its collapse within itself; it is the not-naming of the buzz that makes an allegory what it is. It is out of its very nature liable to distortion. But transgression is the essence of the 'humanum', in us as much as in nature; no allegory can remain stable. No cultural history alone can tell us what the more than human community means or might mean, or even how to find out. We live into an unknown future. In the name of the transgression that is the essence of the materially real and therefore also of thought, thought is referred to its own outside, to the world and to praxis. But we can only change the world, once we have interpreted it. Today, this means more than ever to chart the ways along which we can start to attempt the humanization of nature and the naturalization of humanity. The promissory name for this attempt, in theory and in practice, today is communism: "communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between human and nature and between human and human – the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution" (Marx 1968, 536; Mulligan translation, Moscow 1959; amended). In the secularizing trajectory from the land of milk and honey to the naturalization of humanity and the humanization of nature, we have come to think differently about both nature and the human but the depth of longing that is expressed in that trajectory has remained the same.

As our relation with bees continues to develop in this light, new fables may be found to be told. We may learn from them and from our relation to them that community relies on sharing the open, in which what is unrealized and unknown in nature as much as in the human, is the ground and life of community itself. We may learn that it is the open that speaks in language as much as in nature. Every living thing is an abyss. A community that does not understand itself on the basis of that awareness is none.

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