Facing Nature: The Infinite in the Flesh


This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of.
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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research.

Robert Daniel Victorin-Vangerud
Abstract

“Facing Nature: The Infinite in the Flesh”

by

Robert Victorin-Vangerud

This thesis explores the relation between two interpretations of *chôra*, drawn from a reading of Plato’s *Timaeus*. The first I label the elemental *chôra*. The second, I call the social *chôra*. The first chapter addresses the elements in Ionian philosophy, with an eye toward the political and social backdrop of the important cosmological notion of *isonomia*, law of equals. Here social and elemental are continuous. Chapter two looks at the next phase of Presocratic thought, Elea, specifically Parmenides and his influence on later thought, then turns to Heidegger’s reading of Parmenides’ through the key word of *alêtheia*. Finally, I offer a reading of Parmenides through a different key word—trust. The third chapter examines Plato’s cosmology in the *Timaeus*, focusing on the way the beginning of this dialogue inflects the dialogue in a political/social direction, putting the social *chôra* in tension with the elemental *chôra* that the body of the *Timaeus*’ discusses. In the fourth chapter, which examines the *Phaedrus*, this tension is inverted, since this dialogue on writing and justice set in what proves to be the mesmerizing and erotic elemental milieu of the world outside the walls of the *polis*. The second half of the dissertation turns to some modern thinkers within the phenomenological tradition or its wake who write about elementals. Chapter five examines Gaston Bachelard’s reveries on imagination which dream the natural world of fire, air, water, and earth from the standpoint of what he calls material and dynamic imagination, concepts that imply a strong sense of embodiment. Chapter six treats Levinas’ description of the elemental and fixes it in a stark relation to the human. I will suggest some possible points of contact between the elemental and the social in Levinas. Chapter seven turns to John Sallis’ analysis of the imagination as the means of access proper to the elemental in ways that differ from Bachelard. He position the earth as a fundamental other. I will suggest that in the end his position inherits Heidegger’s lack of emphasis on embodied and needy humanity. Alphonso Lingis offers his own unique reading of the elemental in a more Levinasian and Merleau-Pontian vein, speaking of the directives the world, both human and natural, puts to us, and returning to a philosophy of substance that puts the body in the picture. Chapter eight uses his thought to focus the issue of the dissertation.
For Karen
1956-2002

For
Aaron 1991-
and
William 1997-
(The sun shines.)

--Martin Heidegger\(^1\)

Never would it be possible for a stone, no more than for an airplane, to elevate itself toward the sun in jubilation and to move like a lark, which nevertheless does not see the open.

--Heidegger\(^2\)

Words cannot express the joy that the sun brings to all living things.

--Carl Linnaeus\(^3\)

*Sola skinner likt, på fattig folk og rikt.*
The sun shines the same on poor people and rich.

--Norwegian proverb

*Mine, thine.*--‘This dog is mine,’ said those poor children; ‘that is my place in the sun.’ Here is the beginning and the image of the usurpation of all the earth.

--Pascal\(^4\)

Prior to the practical perception that draws out a practicable layout and pursues objectives, there is the appetite for the elements.

--Alphonso Lingis\(^5\)

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\(^2\) Ibid, p. 160.


\(^4\) *Pensees*, 295.

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I dedicate this work to my sister, Karen Hadland, who died too soon, of cancer, some three years past now, and to my sons whose futures remain open. It is my hope that the force of the hyphens on the page of dedication might not be overlooked.

Prospect Park, Minneapolis, Minnesota, U.S.A.