Abstract

In close reading two poems, Wendell Berry's free verse "The Peace of Wild Things" (1968) and Gerard Manley Hopkins's Italian sonnet "God's Grandeur" (1877), the author sees that Spinoza's understanding of human life and *Deus sive natura* is enjoined and at play to show that today, inasmuch as during his time, there is a permeable membrane between the poetic language of literature and the timeless wisdom found in philosophy. This work enjoins the sound of poetry and the timelessness of Spinoza's philosophy alongside the author's own narratological insights on the anthropocene.

Keywords

Spinoza, literature and philosophy, philosophy in literature, poetry, narrative scholarship

"MALIIT NA BAGAY"

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ANNIVERSARIES USED TO be painted in light of a celebration—one that marks not just the passage of time but the life that has happened in yet another year. We welcome it with food, get-togethers, and expressions of love, among others. Yet this new age of pandemics has reshaped not just the number of human species but also the arbitrariness of human understanding through language: an increasing amount of mundane keywords have been defamiliarized within this new era (e.g., meeting, shopping, essential worker, etc.) and along with this, the COVID-19 Anniversary in the Philippines. "*Maliit na bagay ito sa buhay natin*," Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte had said last March 15 (Punzalan 2021). His remark on the global crisis, notwithstanding the ongoing rise of COVID-19 cases and deaths in the country, has fueled even more violent reactions, not just from citizens but also from lawmakers (Deiparine 2021). I look back at the idea and experience of death anniversaries—when family members would gather in melancholy and nostalgia but still be able to grasp a certain comfort. I now look at this coined phrase of a "COVID anniversary" and

feel otherwise—a dis-ease that positions me to see that in this passage of time, so little actionable change has happened to safeguard human lives. But how fickle or important must we be in the grand scheme of things, especially knowing that the planet will definitely survive (or even flourish) when the human species cease to coexist? "Animals and plants flourish. Is this a new Eden? Perhaps," (Wheeler 2019). What then positions us into thinking that we are a far greater living organism than all the rest that exists in this planet? How minute must our existence be compared to the grand scheme of things! What then of our understanding of our world and the world outside of us which greatly shapes our thoughts of the world?

When Spinoza dwelled on his understanding of the world most evidently displayed in two of his great works, *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670) and *Ethics* (1677), he came to understand certain key aspects not just in viewing what human life is but also in formulating a radical perspective of God and nature, especially during his time. First, religion is political. Second, understanding the greatness of nature is revelatory of God (*Deus sive natura*). Third, thought and extension make up humans. Fourth, substance monism, "which claims that all things are ultimately aspects of a single thing, is opposed to 'substance dualism'" which is Descartes's mind and matter (Dorling Kindersley 2011, 127). Fifth, pan(en) theism means that "the world is God, but that God is more than the world" (Dorling Kindersley 2011, 128). Sixth, blessedness or "the highest state of freedom and salvation is possible (Dorling Kindersley 2011, 129). Spinoza's ethics point to an understanding that humans are not greater than any other species and it is God that causes things into being.

In close reading two poems, Wendell Berry's free verse "The Peace of Wild Things" (1968) and Gerard Manley Hopkins's Italian sonnet "God's Grandeur" (1877), we can see that Spinoza's understanding of human life and *Deus sive natura* is at play today inasmuch as during his time—a timeless truth that transcends culture, context, and crisis. As I look toward the further romanticization of a real global crisis on the human species in this day and age—nothing short of pandemic pornography—I return to this knowledge that calls for a wider range of understanding—one that goes beyond valuing the human species, ergo, the anthropocentric frame that is so well-established under the guise of economy, progress, and development. I enjoin the sound of poetry and the timelessness of Spinoza's philosophy alongside my own new insights of an ever-changing world. In my close-reading, juxtaposed are the voices of Berry, followed by Spinoza, then Hopkins, and mine:

When despair for the world grows in me
that its nature can't be conceived except as existing
The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

We begin with time and it seems a perfect fit to use poetry—that which intentionally has a way of slowing down ours—for a timeless understanding. Geological time and Deep time arise from here. Berry begins his free verse poem with the certainty of a moment. "When despair" refers to a human moment—an external force that creates a reaction within the internal substance, or affect—followed by "for the world grows in me" as if it is in these difficult instances that pushes the human mind to think of the world within, or existence in correlation to the external world. This echoes Spinoza's substance monism. The certainty of such moment to any human is emphasized by beginning it with "when" instead of a conditional "if" and that this certain grievous instance provokes the human mind into deep thought, transcendental rethinking of the external world, and putting at play both mind and matter. In Jonathan Bennet's translation of Spinoza's *Ethics*, he begins by defining terms that Spinoza uses. One of these is the "cause of things" and another is that "essence involves existence" (Bennet 2017, 1). The human experience exists and perspective on what brings them to the affect of despair is experienced and is present. On one hand, we begin understanding the external world through the world we conjure up in our mind.

On the other, Hopkins's sonnet also begins with a present moment: "The world is." Similar to Berry's beginning in an anthropocentric world, the world being referred to in his first line is also focused on the human species, specifically by using the word "charged." This can be understood in two ways: first, as an electric, power-filled force; and second, as a responsibility given. This creates two layers of reading: the world is powered by the grandeur of God—that which takes the focus out of the human invention such as electricity, which may fit the time when the sonnet was written. It also fleshes out Spinoza's understanding of God and nature. In addition to this, the line could also be read that the world is under the purpose of God.

and I wake in the night at the least sound
But a body can't be limited by a thought or a thought by a body.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

From the external experience of nature, and God, and therefore, the world, the persona speaks and introduces his own existence in Berry's second line, reacting to the existing despair: "and I wake." The preceding line foreshadows that this waking isn't in good light but rather, a thoughtful provocation of a far greater understanding which contrasts with the end of the line: "at the least sound." This transitions not just from a moment of despair but also of unrest, discomfort, and even anxiety. By what measure can an external event cause the human mind to have this effect? Spinoza refers to this as "finite in its own kind" or more elaborately translated as "every body counts as 'finite in its own kind' because we can always conceive another body that is even bigger" (Bennet 2017, 1). Even when placed in the human context, thoughts are beyond grasping and the process of thinking done by the human mind, too, is infinitesimal. By what measure can the faintest sound that can awaken a disturbed being be? What "maliit na bagay" can stir up despair and bring forth anxiety? Here the juxtaposition of reading Berry's poem alongside Hopkins's presents the polarities of human limitations—that the grandeur is not just in things bigger than what we can think, but is also found in the smallest of things that we could never grasp.

"It will flame out," begins Hopkins's next line, referring to God's grandeur. With the electric image of the previous line, the act of flaming out shows the flow of the current, the movement of power that is found everywhere. Spinoza refers to this as God or nature—not to operate as presenting a choice but rather, as a conjunction that presents God and nature as interchangeable. And yet, this grandiose power can be observed in the small movements of the external world: "like shining from shook foil." This paints the image of visible charged flashes when metal meets metal and when metal reflects light. As in Spinoza's understanding that experiencing the greatness of nature is also experiencing God, this *"maliit na bagay"* brings to the fore the irony of the limitedness of the human notion of grandeur.

in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
what is in itself and is conceived through itself
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Anxiety becomes fear for greater, adverse things happening, not just to a single human life, but also to those connected to it. This is how Berry's poem transitions in the third line. What drives this transition is no longer the ongoing despair but the remote possibility of a tomorrow which is heard

in the phrase "may be." Spinoza speaks of what is the true essence found in those that exist—humans and more-than-humans alike—and he refers to them as substance, or that "whose concept doesn't have to be formed out of the concept of something else" (Bennett 2017, 1). It is that which remains when the form of an object has changed. When lives progress and people change, when the world goes through distress and is reshaped, when day turns into night but is still considered a full day, when children become adults, when time passes but is still referred to in its spatial aspect, when people die and live on through memories, when bodies turn to dust and a planet filled with water and earth is burning away—what remains is substance. It is the substance that exists in every object—including humans—that enables an experience and understanding of nature or God.

This single-word reference of Spinoza as substance becomes charged with greatness. In the third line of Hopkins's sonnet, the persona details the image of the flow of God's grandeur not just in flashes but this time, in the thick conductive image of oozing oil. The movement changes from a simple shaking to a steady pressure—pressing down until it comes out. Through a small image we can find the presence of a greater power.

I go and lie down where the wood drake
what the intellect perceives of a substance as constituting its essence
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

The persona in Berry's poem breaks from the despair, anxiety, and fear in the fourth line: "I go and lie down." Though darkness is an enveloping feeling and image in the preceding lines, the act of leaving to lie down is not necessarily a full stop or death. The phrase "wood drake" or wild duck becomes a metonym for a forest. Here, the persona goes back to nature to find rest. In duality, when humans take an eternal rest, their bodies go back to nature, as well. The duality of substance is what Descartes refers to as mind-or-matter. This duality, Spinoza clarifies, is rather a duality not of substance but of attribute—there is only one substance (i.e., rest) but is perceived by the human mind through two attributes (i.e., physical rest through sleep or a walk to the forest, and rest as a state of peace). Pushed further, this duality of attribute is also found in the human understanding of God and nature.

Hopkins ends his first quatrain by positing a problem that arises from the discomfort of the persona to explain that notwithstanding the existence of God, humans keep disregarding (reck) t/his great authority.

By cutting off the previous thought of pressing down and beginning this line with "Crushed," we find that Spinoza's substance monism and duality attribute are present. God's grandeur may constantly change in form and is experienced both by mind and body differently, yet the idea of God is not destroyed. The quatrain also highlights that this question is still present now as it was then: not just a question of the existence or substance that humans call God, but also of the question why humans do not obey, juxtaposed to how everything else in nature seems to be in order (and at peace) with t/his purpose.

rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
something that exists in and is conceived through something else
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

Berry's persona finds himself reuniting with the harmony of nature in the place where the wild duck rests and where the great heron finds nourishment: in the presence of water. In the presence of water, the persona is reminded of stillness and tranquility—something to be experienced externally, which creates the affect of rest. The water also becomes a meeting point of a simple duck and a great heron: grandeur in both the big and the "maliit na bagay." In the presence of water, the persona is comforted by that which is shelter and nourishment—contrary to the anxieties of tomorrow which the persona had expressed previously. This experience of the external world that builds up an affect in human thought process is what Spinoza refers to as mode, "something that exists in and is conceived through something else" (Bennett 2017, 1).

In contrast to this stillness, Hopkins begins his next quatrain with images of human effort through labor that is passed down from generation to generation. The repetition of "have trod" isn't just to fit the rhyme and (penta)meter of the sonnet but it also points out that the effort seems pointless and is done out of mere routine or blindness—a work in vain. It seems more timely in today's context of the COVID-19 Anniversary where so many lives are put to work and are spent in addressing a real global threat and yet is easily dismissed with a phrase: "maliit na bagay."

if something is *absolutely* infinite its essence—or nature—contains
every positive way in which a thing can exist
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

Continuing on with Hopkins's second quatrain, he adds to the human work in vain the vehemence in "seared with trade" juxtaposed with the connotation of violence in "bleared, smeared with toil." This is a stark description of human work, which is usually portrayed positively in the Anthropocene for the sake of development and progress, against the absolute positive work of God found in nature. Thus, in Spinoza's philosophy, it is not our work to go against nature (especially in the Anthropocene) but rather, our work is to understand the reason why God, or nature, causes things to be.

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

In addition to the image of violence is the stain of humankind in the naturally beautiful landscapes of the planet. In the third line of Hopkins's second quatrain, he adds "man's smudge" and the collective "man's smell." These bring in not just pollution but also of the stench of corruption. The soil upon which we build houses and make shelter become dirt as we eventually, too, become dirt. The soil here is no longer the Earth, the planet we live on along with all other species, but merely soil for humans to till over, to (ab)use, and to distance ourselves further from this absolute spiritual aspect of God and nature.

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

Hopkins closes his octave with this picture of continuous distancing from nature which is still true now: the image of feet not touching the ground. Taken in a literal sense, this portrays human ingenuity through the creation of shoes. Taken on a metaphorical level, this shows human separation and estrangement from the ground—be it our coexistence with other species on this planet, our understanding of our own limitations and the elevation of our ego, or spiritually, our desire for eternal life.

I come into the peace of wild things
A thing is called 'free' if its own nature [. . .] makes it necessary for it to exist
And for all this, nature is never spent;

Berry's persona makes a decision in the middle of his poem—an affect of tranquility from the physical experience of going back to nature: "I come into." The active voice used in this phrase makes it seem as though it

is willed by the persona to find peace and yet the usage of the paradoxical "peace of wild things" connotes otherwise. The common understanding that "wild things"—the untamed, undomesticated non-human creatures—are at peace, is in direct contrast to the human state of disharmony with the universe, as detailed in the first half of the poem. Spinoza differentiates "free" from "compelled" in his counterargument to the human ego: in Spinoza's Catholic upbringing and the Catholic portrait of God, it is painted as though humans are the only creatures gifted with free will, the freedom to choose. However, in Spinoza's understanding of human limitations, he points out the fact that a thing can only be free if its existence is unquestionable—something that brings down the Catholic-Anthropocentric portrait of man, who is ironically compelled to question existence including his own.

To add to this, Hopkins turns the narrative around in the beginning of his sestet with the freedom that nature shows, which is more than all the damage that humans could do to it. Human lives are spent or even wasted away and yet nature or God, remains. Wheeler (2019) adds:

> Could the Earth ever recover? Atmospheric carbon dioxide is absorbed by the vegetation that carpets the land. Global temperatures and sea levels begin to fall. As chemical pollutants break down and sink into the earth, rivers become cleaner. [. . .] The Earth is a breathing organism that has lived with us for a fraction of its life.

who do not tax their lives with forethought
a thing is 'compelled' if something other than itself makes it exist
and causes it to act in this or that specific way
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

The freedom so proudly claimed by the human species is further questioned in the next line of Berry through the word play of "taxes" and "forethought." The anxiety of the future binds humans down, more than portraying them as higher than the other species of the planet. Spinoza uses the concept of "compelled" due to the human gift of choice, thus ironically binds them to moment-by-moment decision-making (including the choice of mindlessness) instead of actually living a life free from worry or thought. Timelessly, we have questioned our own beginnings to a never-ending degree and due to the duality of attributes,

multiplicity of modes, and singularity of substance, Spinoza defines the human species as reactive beings—acting in specific ways based on how they experience nature or God. In Hopkins's tenth line, he shifts from the sensual experience of death and decay common to humans and are caused by the human species in the octave, to the freshness—the eternal—found in the depths of nature, in Deep Time, present now as it has always been and will be, even after the human species go extinct. Most importantly, the beauty—God's grandeur—is always accessible to us should we look for it in the small things as well as in the grand scheme of things: "There lives" suggesting a life that can be found, is accessible, and is present.

of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
By 'eternity' I understand: existence itself when conceived to follow necessarily from the definition of the eternal thing
And though the last lights off the black West went

Cutting the phrase "of grief" from the previous line in Berry's poem emphasizes that what we are most anxious, doubtful, and scared of is the idea and the reality of death. Though there are other animals who also grieve the death of their own kind, humans are the most conscious—and most bound—to death. The persona repeats the phrase "I come into" in this line and this time, it is now a willfulness instead of an affect. The persona decides to connect with the stillness that is found in the mere presence of water—"maliit na bagay." In Hopkins's next line, he shows the inevitable end of day, a certainty of darkness—be it literal or metaphorical. This shift in imagery might also be perceived as a mundane thing but if deeply understood, it is nothing short of eternal: the certainty that a day ends is also a certainty of another sunrise. To add to this:

And I feel above me the day-blind stars
A thing is eternal only if it is absolutely (logically) necessary that the thing exists
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—

On one hand, Berry's next line presents how the persona gazes at the cosmos—the stars that are in order amidst the great chaos of humankind. From looking at the mere proximity of the crises of the human species which are mostly of their own doing as well, the persona shifts to, as in Hopkins's

sonnet, God's grandeur. This counterpoints the beginnings of the poem when the persona is clouded by his own fear of not being in control—not of the past which he can do nothing about, and barely of the present as even his emotions cannot be contained completely, and more so not of the future. By shifting his gaze towards the bigger things, and in so doing recognizing that humans, too, are "maliit na bagay," he finds and feels the calmness of the universe, no matter how temporal the moment may be. It points back to the title of the poem itself—of how things that we so often believe to be wild (and therefore out of control) are ironically at peace even if they may not even be conscious of their own existence. In Spinoza's understanding, *Deus sive natura*—is the eternal, the absolute necessity.

Hopkins, on the other hand, follows through with this infiniteness of nature or God in the image of the sunrise. The preceding line that talks of darkness—the certainty of days ending—is followed by the certainty of morning, of seasons that bring back life, and of eternal beginnings which is nothing short of immortal, eternal, and *Deus sive natura*. Yet our ability to experience God or nature is a gift amidst the certainty of our end. Wheeler (2019) says:

> Our human ingenuity has led to extraordinary changes to the world. The planet would survive, indeed thrive, without us. But it would never be able to forget us. We'd have left our mark.

waiting with their light. For a time
for something to be eternal it isn't merely a matter of its existing *at all times*
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

Both poems began with the element of time. As it draws to a close, Berry's begins with the act of waiting in his final couplet. Though it is the human being who most finds a great unease in the act of waiting, our understanding of waiting—be it for an event, a person, or even our own end—is incomparably limited to the way other species or objects perceive waiting to be. The stars who wait with their light may not be conscious that even they, too, die. And yet, they wait not the way we wait which is banked on discomfort, suffering, or pain; rather, they wait with their light—this being twofold: fulfilling still a purpose that harmoniously resounds with the entire cosmos, and also bearing light lightly without

the weight of fear, anxiety, sickness, corruption, and agony that humans encounter. Berry cuts the next phrase, leaving behind: "For a time"—a moment that may seem specific and accessible to most but of which no one has the certainty. It isn't "the time" which connotes a specific moment but rather the openness to the certainty that this end will come and it will be different for each one.

In Hopkins's final couplet, the persona directly calls to God, the Holy Ghost, as the cause of order or purpose—an immanence of nature and the cosmos. In Spinoza's understanding of the eternal, he clarifies that Nature isn't merely banked on the notion of omnipresence which is contrary to the Catholic idea of God, but rather, that existence of the Eternal is a logical necessity as well.

> [All] things find their explanation in God. [. . .] God is the "immanent" cause of the world. This means that God is in the world, that the world is in God, and that the existence and essence of the world are explained by God's existence and essence. (Dorling Kindersley Limited 2011, 129)

I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.
attain the highest state of freedom and salvation possible
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Berry closes his poem with grace—with a peaceful understanding that rest is found not in being in control but in understanding that the universe itself is the universe itself is in its natural state of order and in this understanding, we are freed from the worries of life even for a short while as a relief in the entire duration of our individual existence. This coming to terms is what Spinoza calls blessedness: "God is in the world, that the world is in God, and that the existence and essence of the world are explained by God's existence and essence" (Dorling Kindersley Limited 2011, 129). In this regard, Hopkins ends his sonnet with the image of life and creation as that which no human can control: the sudden hatching of an egg and the birth of a bird, which is the juxtaposition of very small things, "maliit na bagay," but still totally filled with God's grandeur. This is melodic not just to the ears but to the human mind that perceives the images with wonder—a generative force unlike any human invention.

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