

A detailed painting of a forest scene. Tall, slender trees with dense foliage frame a central path or clearing where sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a hazy, golden glow. In the foreground, large, vibrant green ferns are prominent. The overall mood is serene and majestic, typical of 19th-century landscape art.

2. European Creation Stories and Cosmogonies

ENGL133 Imagining Nature

Classical Greek Creation Stories and Views of Nature

Plato vs. Aristotle

Plato's *Timaeus*

“Demiurge”= the divine craftsman who creates the universe and all life within it according to perfect divine “forms”

- Plato imagines the world as not just animate but as having its own “soul”

- Creation of man by the lesser gods according to a prototype of the Demiurge

 - man has a material ‘house’ created for the immaterial ‘soul’; the 2 are not attached

 - reason in the head and passions in the chest with the liver as the messenger between the two

 - human reproduction

Plato's *Timaeus*: Reproduction

“Wherefore also in men the organ of generation becoming rebellious and masterful, like an animal disobedient to reason, and maddened with the sting of lust, seeks to gain absolute sway ; and the same is the case with the so-called womb or matrix of women ; the animal within them is desirous of procreating children, and when remaining unfruitful long beyond its proper time, gets discontented and angry, and wandering in every direction through the body, closes up the passages of the breath, and, by obstructing respiration, drives them to extremity, causing all varieties of disease, until at length the desire and love of the man and the woman, bringing them together and as it were plucking the fruit from the tree, sow in the womb, as in a field, animals unseen by reason of their smallness.”

Plato's *Timaeus*: The Creation of Animals

-order of creation: man, plants, animals (from man)

-Animals:

1. Birds: "But the race of birds was created out of innocent light-minded men, who, although their minds were directed toward heaven, imagined, in their simplicity, that the clearest demonstration of the things above was to be obtained by sight ; these were remodel
2. ed and transformed into birds, and they grew feathers instead of hair."
2. Quadrupeds: made from humans who "had no philosophy in any of their thoughts, and never considered at all about the nature of the heavens" in consequence their arms became front legs and their heads faced downwards to the earth
3. Legless Creepy crawlies: "And the most foolish of them, who trail their bodies entirely upon the ground and have no longer any need of feet, he made without feet to crawl upon the earth.
4. Aquatic creatures (fishes, oysters, etc): made from "the most entirely senseless and ignorant of all, whom the transformers did not think any longer worthy of pure respiration, because they possessed a soul which was made impure by all sorts of transgression." because of this they don't breathe air but water.

"These are the laws by which animals pass into one another, now, as ever, changing as they lose or gain wisdom and folly."

-Metempsychosis=transmigration of the immortal soul

Platonic View of Natural World

1. 2 realms: phenomenal (what we see) and noumenal (invisible spiritual world-the world of universals and forms)
2. Material phenomenal world is less “real” than the immaterial noumenal world
3. Duality of human nature: body vs soul
4. The Great Chain of Being=the hierarchy of life from divinity down to lower gods then to humans to animals to plants to minerals

Aristotelian View of the Natural World

1. Contra Plato: No Universals, no separate world of forms (“what you see is what you get”)
2. All nature is change (‘physis’). Definition of nature is a principle of rest and motion that inheres within things
 - change is not a sign of corruption (as in Plato) but is the usual course of nature
3. Inextricable link between matter and form
4. Matter provides the potentialities that are actualized by the form
5. Humans are a combination of matter and form, body and soul—this is known as “hylomorphism”

Aristotle on Causation and Teleology

Causation--why? provides an account of natural change (contra Plato)

-4 causes: For example, according to Aristotle, the four causes for a statue are:

Material cause: The substance the statue is made of, such as bronze or marble

Formal cause: The shape, design, or appearance of the statue (i.e. it's a statue of the biblical figure of David)

Efficient cause: The force that sets the change in motion, such as the sculptor chiseling the statue (Michaelangelo at work)

Final cause (in Greek, telos): The purpose or goal of the statue, such as commemorating a hero or decorating a chapel

-Who cares? Because Aristotle imagined natural change by analogy with human artisanal work

-the natural was explained by comparison with the human

-In Aristotle, nature is an active cause vs. Plato's nature as a fallen and a passive copy of a divine original

Teleology (from 'telos'): explains how the acorn becomes the oak

-explains the evolution of matter over time and in regular ways

-The idea of telos is the end to which a natural thing tends

-i.e. stones fall to earth not because of gravity but because of inclination to return to earth

Aristotle on the Unmoved Mover

“Since that which is moved and moves is intermediate, there is a mover which moves without being moved, being eternal, substance, and actuality. ... [that mover] produces motion by being loved [i.e. by the things below it], and it moves the other moving things.”

-Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.7

- Aristotle's Unmoved Mover vs Plato's Demiurge
 - an intellectual idea vs an active creator
 - always at work as the ultimate goal of things vs creates and out



Raphael, The School of Athens (1509-11)



Detail of Plato and Aristotle. Raphael, The School of Athens (1509-11)

Genesis: The Creation and the Fall of Man

- Hexaemeron, literally "six days": the creation of the light (day 1); the sky (day 2); the earth, seas, and vegetation (day 3); the sun and moon (day 4); animals of the air and sea (day 5); and land animals and humans (day 6)

- in Genesis, God is the sole creator; not deputized to lesser gods or supernatural beings

- intentional vs contingent creation

 - cf God implements a clear vision for creation

 - language is the method of creation and it is performative ("let...let ... let")

Genesis 2: "Then God said, "Let Us make mankind in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the livestock and over all the earth, and over every crawling thing that crawls on the earth."

 - is this dominion or stewardship?

The Fall in Genesis-offers a theory of man's competitive place in the natural world

- nostalgia for an Edenic time when the human-nature relationship was frictionless

- creation stories are often about naturalizing gender hierarchies (Genesis, Salinan creation story)

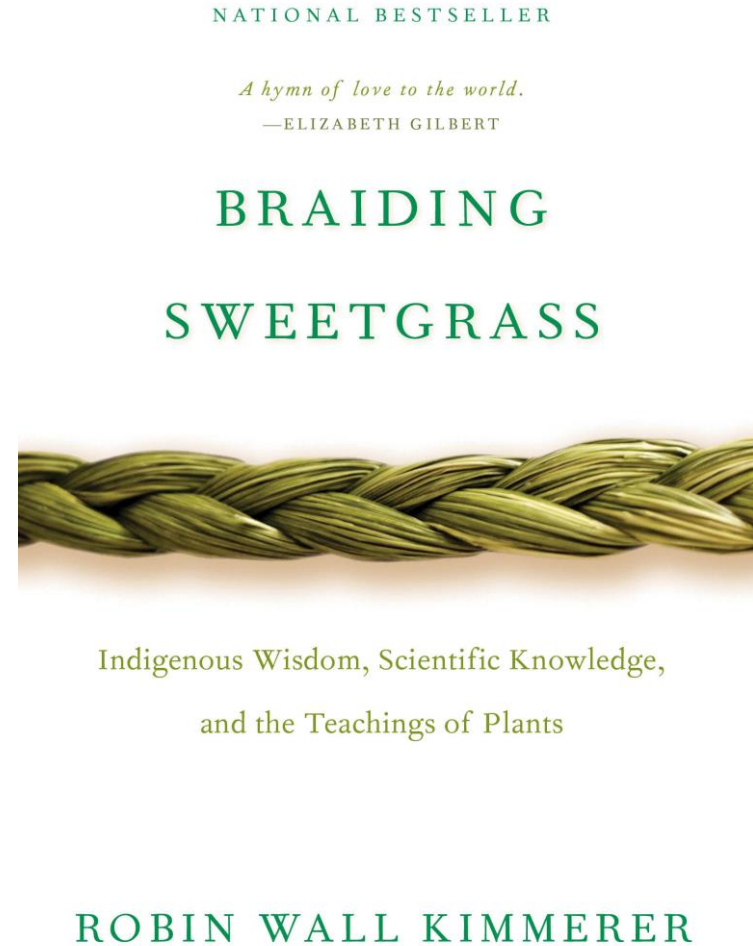
Is the Creation Story as recounted in Genesis an environmental text according to the criteria set forward by Lawrence Buell? Why or why not?

According to Buell, a text can be considered "environmental" if it meets the following four criteria:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a significant presence that suggests human history is implicated in natural history;
2. Human interest is not understood as the only legitimate interest;
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation;
4. There is some sense of the environment as a process, not just a static backdrop.



Robin Wall Kimmerer (1953-), “Skywoman Falling” from *Braiding Sweetgrass*



Skywoman vs. Eve

Like Creation stories every where, cosmologies are a source of identity and orientation to the world. They tell us who we are. We are inevitably shaped by them no matter how distant they may be from our consciousness. One story leads to the generous embrace of the living world, the other to banish-ment. One woman is our ancestral gardener, a cocreator of the good green world that would be the home of her descendants. The other was an exile, just passing through an alien world on a rough road to her real home in heaven (7).

-Robin Wall Kimmerer (1953-), “Skywoman Falling” from *Braiding Sweetgrass*

Medieval Images of Lady Nature

Why Personify?



Nature surrounded by planets and stars;
historiated initial 'Q' from the opening of
Aristotle's *Physics*, Book 3 (ca. 1270).

London, British Library Harley MS
3487, f. 16v

