Horizons, Political and Theological

Sarah Stewart-Kroeker

Abstract

This article asserts that Jedediah Purdy offers a "political ecology" with a commonwealth as an imaginative horizon, and uncovers resonances between his view and the author's own proposal based on wounded bodies/ecologies and an image of the resurrection. The author links arguments that she and Purdy make about horizons and practices, whether for a commonwealth or an eschatology.

In Jedediah Purdy's rendering in *This Land Is Our Land*, world-making and world-breaking intersect with a politics that is material in how it structures human lives in a built environment. For Purdy, this built environment is both infrastructural and technospheric. He defines the technosphere as "the material habitat that humans have created for themselves in the form of roads, cities, rural housing, the active soil in cropland, and so forth."[1] For Purdy, "only politics can deliberately change the architecture of shared life, change the rules and the built world that humans live in and live by."[2] The architecture of our current political world tears down mountaintops and poisons streams, just as it connects us to each other via technologies that spread globally on an invisible network which consumes massive amounts of energy and depends on extractions from the earth as damaging as the mineshafts that serve a dying coal economy.

I

I want to suggest that, although Purdy does not use this term, what he offers us can be understood as a "political ecology": a linking of politics and ecology that hinges on the political-ecological implications of how humans inhabit the land in a deeply material sense, an inhabiting deeply involved in

[1] Jedediah Purdy, *This Land Is Our Land: The Struggle for a New Commonwealth* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2019), 21-22.
[2] Ibid., 20.

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an imagined homeland. Purdy's political ecology accounts for the ways many bodies, different kinds of bodies—water and rock and flesh and bone—are reciprocally embedded in ecological relationships. These relationships both construct a politics and are constituted by a politics; the ecological is the political and vice versa. I take Purdy's political vocabulary to be broad: that is, he does not restrict "politics" to civic and governmental institutions and procedures but applies it to the quality of the relationships between people who are necessarily joined in certain ways by shared dwelling places.

Purdy's book tracks between two registers: between landscapes and dreams, the material and the ideal, physical bodies and political bodies. He announces this intersection at the outset: "No story or picture of the world matters much if it floats too far from what people do with one another's bodies and with soil and weapons and other tools; but also and by the same token, no material change in power will go forward without ideas and images that give it shape and a horizon to aim for."[3] For Purdy, the idea or image of a commonwealth functions as just such a horizon. Another way of putting this is to say that practices and pictures, images, plays and dramas, shape our moral, political, and ecological imaginations.

Imagination plays an important role in any kind of intentional moral or political transformation: one can only move toward an unrealized aim or state of affairs if one can envision it in some way, even if only partially and incompletely. Images (photographs, dreams, visions, metaphors) and narratives (stories, dramas, myths) shape such visions. Purdy understands his recurring dreams of landscapes as expressing "a way to get above a terrain without leaving it, to merge many small horizons into one image. These dreams sketch a geography of thinking, a way of seeing a place whole without being overcome by it."[4]

As my own work focuses on "moral aesthetics" in a theological key, this point about the interaction between practices ("what people do with one another's bodies and with soil and weapons and other tools") and images/ideas/horizons particularly interests me. As Purdy shows, these bodies—animal, vegetal, mineral—interact, and by those interactions they may flourish or sicken and die. And the ways human actors in these ecologies

[3] Ibid., 3.
[4] Ibid., 68.

specifically devise images and structures to represent and govern this shared life are frameworks that significantly constitute whether those interactions lead to flourishing or malady. Indeed, the ways we *picture* and *dramatize* the ecological relations in which we are embedded are politically as well as ethically and aesthetically significant. Purdy writes, "Democratic politics can survive not as a morality play, but only as a project."[5] Certainly, naïve moralism, which often deploys its logic in the form of good-versus-evil dramas, will not serve a democratic politics capacious enough to account for the complex encounters and interrelations that characterize "the architecture of shared life."[6] The change to "the rules and the built world" that is needed in this landscape of bodies and identities requires attention to the terms of coexistence rather than simplistic contrasts between conflicting interests.[7] If we set aside morality plays for what I call "moral aesthetics," however, then this might open up resonances between Purdy's structure ("what people do with one another's bodies and with soil and weapons and other tools" and images/ideas like a commonwealth) and the one I will propose between how we regard wounded bodies/ecologies and an image of the resurrection. That is, it might open up the resonances between the links Purdy and I respectively make between practices ("what people do") and the imaginative horizons that orient them (whether the idea of a commonwealth or an eschatology).

II

In Christian theology, eschatology is an important site of transformed imagination that can perform a "merging" function (to pick up on Purdy's account of his dreams as "a way to get above a terrain without leaving it, to merge many small horizons into one image"[8]). It can perform this function to the extent it gathers up all created temporal things into an integral image beyond time. One of the more obvious paths to connect eschatology to ecological imagination is Revelation's restored creation, the "new heaven and new earth" (Rev. 21:1). This is an attractive vision, and I don't intend to displace its significance in the panoply of eschatological images (I note that

[5] Ibid., 20.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., 68.

what this newness indicates is open to interpretation). At the same time, I think it needs to take its place among other images, to hold the risks of escapism at bay. The aim of our moral and eschatological imagination cannot be, as Purdy writes at one point, to offer an "escape from history and social life into a greenwood idyll" but to see "in a landscape the nonhuman body of the species, in which the history of economic and political life is written as vividly as in laws."[9] Our landscapes are not whole, they are polluted and stripped. They are wounded by this history of human habitation. One way of seeing this history written on a landscape is to attend to the wounds inscribed on it by the ways it has been inhabited. In this line, then, I want to consider the Christological body: a wounded body and one which, if we consider in its cosmological dimensions, merges human and nonhuman creatureliness and refuses to efface the history of injury even in resurrected, eschatological form.[10]

Recently, a number of theologians have taken up a line of Christological inquiry that can be loosely gathered under the term "deep incarnation."[11] While the term is new, the roots of this line of thinking may be traced back to early Christian writers. Deep incarnation names the idea that in entering the created world, the Word (through which the world is spoken into its created form) then becomes flesh, takes on created form. As John 1 affirms, Christ's incarnation is not just an assumption of humanity but of materiality in the broadest possible sense. Elizabeth Johnson puts it this way: "While *sarx* [flesh] in a strict biological sense may point to soft animal tissue of muscle and fat interlaced with blood vessels and nerves, that flesh itself evolved from and exists in continuing interrelationship with other nonmuscular, nonbloody living beings and the physical world itself. In a deeply real sense, the meaning of flesh/*sarx* encompasses all matter."[12] The incarnate flesh of Christ was "a complex unit of minerals and fluids, an item in the carbon,

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[9] Ibid., 65-66.

[10] This is the central argument of my current book project, *La terre martyre*, which I also sketch in "Penser le beau dans un monde bouleversé," *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 150 (2018): 33-47.

[11] See Niels Henrik Gregersen, ed., *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

[12] Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Jesus and the Cosmos: Soundings in Deep Christology," in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, 133-56, 137-38.

oxygen, and nitrogen cycles, a moment in the biological evolution of this planet. The atoms comprising his body were once part of other creatures."[13] As a result, "The *sarx* of John 1:14 thus reaches beyond the person of Jesus and beyond all other human beings to encompass the whole biological world of living creatures and the cosmic dust of which they are composed. In this perspective, the flesh that the Word/Wisdom of God became is part of the vast body of the cosmos."[14]

This incarnational point is important for the eschatological one, for the body incarnate is the body resurrected, so what is assumed in the incarnation is raised as well. If all of creaturely existence is touched by the incarnation, bound up in this web of interdependent materiality, then the "merging" of many bodies into a single, imagined horizon can be encapsulated in this movement from creation to incarnation to resurrection.

Christ's resurrected body retains the marks of the wounds suffered in his earthly life. The theological symbolics of these wounds merge life and death, injury and healing. Christ dies with his feet and hands punctured by the nails holding his body to the wooden cross, but also with his side pierced by a spear. The wound in his side from which the blood and water rushes has been read as a vaginal image[15]—both menstrual and natal, fatal but not final, for this punctured body rises with its wounds. The wounds on Christ's resurrected body are visible and penetrable to doubting fingers. They are a rent in a body open to sight and touch, a mark as well as an aperture into a new form of life.

In a deep incarnational perspective, we may already see Christ's wounded body in continuity and solidarity with all of the wounded bodies of the world. But what of these many bodies? What place is there for their wounds in an eschatological imaginary? One way of assigning a coalescing significance to Christ's wounds would be to see them as representative of all wounded bodies, such that no wounds but his would be preserved in the eschaton. But I want to suggest that Christ's wounds do not replace other wounds.

[13] Ibid., 138.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Janet Martin Soskice, "Blood and Defilement," in *Feminism & Theology*, ed. Janet Martin Soskice and Diana Lipton (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), 333-43.

I want to use a suggestive passage from Augustine's *City of God* to extend the claim from Christ's wounded resurrected body to all such bodies, human and nonhuman alike. In the final book of *City of God*, a long reflection on the resurrection, Augustine writes that although in the resurrection all deformity will be removed,

> [W]e feel such extraordinary affection for the blessed martyrs that in the kingdom of God we want to see on their bodies the scars of the wounds which they suffered for Christ's name; and see them perhaps we shall. For in those wounds there will be no deformity, but only dignity, and the beauty of their valour will shine out, a beauty in the body and yet not of the body.[16]

This passage invites a range of possible reflections about the nature of deformity, dignity, and beauty, but my focus here is that Augustine extends the signifying function of wounds from Christ to the martyrs.[17] In so doing, he (inadvertently, perhaps) opens up a radical line of theological possibility. If in some sense all material bodies suffer in Christ—as I think one can claim if one traces the line of continuity between the Word that speaks in acts of creative formation, the Word become flesh that suffers and dies and rises again—then all wounds and injuries to these bodies share in the significance involved in retaining them in the resurrection.

For eschatology not to be an escape, a way of fleeing or denying the injuries of this world to an untouched idyll, it must not efface earthly wounds. An eschatological image of wounded resurrected material bodies of all kinds prohibits a dream of eternal flight from the ecological damage wreaked on the earth in time. Eschatological images may force a reckoning with the theological significance of the injuries we inflict on our own bodies and on other bodies now: just as Christ's resurrected body bears the memory of the violence done to his body, so too the histories of human violence on bodies of rock and soil and water and all the creatures whose lives depend on those bodies.

This is a theological path toward "new kinds of solidarity, new ways to

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[16] Augustine, *City of God* XXII.19, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 1061-62.

[17] I elaborate on this point in "Love of and for the Martyrs: Resurrected Wounds and the 'Order' of Restoration," *Studia Patristica*, forthcoming.

feel that your good life is part of my good life, and an injury to you is an injury to me."[18] It is a path that takes seriously the kinds of images and ideas that shape imaginative horizons without floating too far from questions about what "people do with one another's bodies and with soil and weapons and other tools."[19] Such imaginative horizons must value the integral ecosystems on which our earthly lives depend in order to inflect moral ecologies that conduce to flourishing.

All too often we understand harm and responsibility in dyadic terms: victim and wrongdoer. Even relative to environmental harms, difficulties accrue to attributing responsibility for "corporate wrongs" in both senses (harms done by corporations and harms done by a group of people). Corporate harms trouble conventional ethical and legal structures for attributing responsibility that tend to function more easily when they apply individually (and thus dyadically) than corporately (and thus ecologically). There are cases in which corporations have been held responsible for environmental damage (BP in the case of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill is a major recent example). But such examples are too few, given the scale of ecological damage at issue, and these examples depend on clear, attributable violations of established safety procedures or environmental regulations (which, such as they are, are being gutted under the current Trump administration). How does one attribute responsibility, even for discrete actors and actions, in the vast interlocking systems of production and consumption wreaking ecological and climatic harm in myriad ways and on multiple scales (from local to global), which do not in themselves contravene any existing regulation or international legal convention? This is part of the difficulty Purdy points to in facing planetary problems without any kind of global international structure to do so—hence the proposal to think in terms of commonwealths (plural).

III

Purdy's proposal to think plurally on this point is a good one, but between his descriptions of material harms that ripple out along interlocking threads of ecological relationships and the aspirational ideal of political

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[18] Purdy, *This Land Is Our Land*, 26.
[19] Ibid., 3.

commonwealths capable of building new forms of solidarity there is a missing or underdeveloped piece: one that I identify in terms of political *formation*. It would have been helpful if Purdy had spelled out more concretely how we should go about creating such commonwealths and actively forming political movements that accomplish the solidarities to which we should aspire. He offers effective descriptions of damaged landscapes and the people and other creatures who inhabit them, and a vision of a commonwealth that is rather a hazy horizon. What are the practical mechanisms and processes of political organizing?

This is a question I ask without having an easy or developed answer myself. In a sense, I am proposing that the eschatological horizon I have evoked relates to a Christian moral-aesthetic ecology in a similar way that Purdy's commonwealth relates to his political ecology. In both cases, a central question is how the vision is or might be formatively linked to the kinds of people and practices it shapes. The (eschatological) horizon I have been evoking is a different order, so too the kinds of formation it effects, and the elaboration of how it functions formatively exceeds the scope of this essay.[20] But certainly one aspect of forming ecological movements that act out of a sense of solidarity that is present in Purdy's book, and that interests me with regard to an eco-theological horizon, involves habits of ecological perceptiveness: being able to perceive the kinds of harms that attend ecosystems at various scales requires practices that habituate us to see and attend to the ways in which "your good life is part of my good life, and an injury to you is an injury to me."[21] To see how our flourishing and our suffering are bound up in such ecosystems, and in which the "your" and "my" addresses not just other humans but the whole range of material bodies involved, requires us to practice such forms of attention.

Purdy himself offers a range of such examples in his illustrative descriptions, but expanding perceptiveness requires a broad diet. To name

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[20] I offer an account of moral and aesthetic formation in an Augustinian framework oriented to an eschatological vision of the homeland, one that requires becoming a pilgrim, in Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, *Pilgrimage as Moral and Aesthetic Formation in Augustine's Thought* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017). The project of describing the morally formative aesthetics of another eschatological image, wounded resurrected bodies that include the wounded nonhuman bodies, is the object of *La terre martyre*.

[21] Purdy, *This Land Is Our Land*, 26.

only two: Dorceta Taylor's *Toxic Communities* reveals in excruciating detail how environmental damage is inscribed into racially discriminatory zoning laws,[22] while Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence* describes the ecologically damaging legacy of weapons deployed in the Iraq war (among other examples).[23] To think about goods and harms in moral-political ecological terms requires seeing the ecologies at play and ourselves as embedded participants in them. Such perceptiveness is both material and imaginative: we need to perceive the material ecological relations on which we depend and within which we act, and to picture them and to imagine how we might desire to see them. Do we desire to see ourselves in flourishing webs of interdependent ecosystemic and ecological relations? That in and of itself may take some habituation. At this point, at least in North America and Europe, a vision of these goods is not sufficiently material or sufficiently inculcated in our habits of perceptiveness. But, further, if we do want to be able to see and imagine ourselves in flourishing ecosystems, we must also be able to perceive the ways we are implicated in suffering webs of ecosystemic relations, in which the political, moral, and biological ecologies are disrupted and faltering. There is no perceiving the mutually imbricated "good life" without perceiving the mutually imbricated injuries to which such mutual interdependence makes us vulnerable.

Similarly, there is no vision of resurrection without a vision of the wounded (crucified) body, but significantly, these *merge* in the image of the wounded resurrected body. Resurrection is not just a passage from mutilation and death to spotless glory. It speaks to a longing for healing, wholeness, and restoration. And at the same time, the wounded resurrected body reveals that the "good life" Christ promises will not allow us to forget, pass by, or flee from the violence and suffering of the world. Such an image incites us to work for healing and wholeness in the present, to attend to suffering and harm, and not to dream of an afterlife unmarked by what we do or fail to do in this life.

For Augustine, the desire to see the martyrs' wounds responds to a

[22] Dorceta E. Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2014).
[23] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2013).

beauty he attributes to their willingness to suffer loss for love of Christ. While there are environmental martyrs who require our attention if one is going to evoke sacrificial injury in the struggle for justice, Purdy rightly discards "sainthood" as a general standard for civic life.[24] My point here, though, is not about martyrdom as such but about the possibility of imaging wounded bodies in their mutual imbrication. Not only martyrological wounding in the strict sense but all wounding may be understood as continuous with Christ's wounding and thus takes its place in an eschatological vision of resurrected wounded bodies. An eschatological imagination shaped by the enduring marks of earthly injuries forbids fantasies of rapture, flight to idylls untouched by what we do here and now, even as it also pictures the healing of those injuries.

IV

Purdy's primary image for fostering corporate habits of perceptiveness and action is the commonwealth. Mine is a body made up of many bodies, human bodies and nonhuman bodies. In theological terms, one might call it a *totus Christus* image. One may long and hope for healing without denying the wounds and injuries we inflict and suffer. Such a horizon, I suggest, is a small imaginative step towards a Christian moral aesthetics that may shape political and environmental solidarity in the face of destruction.

Sarah Stewart-Kroeker is the Jacques de Senarclens Assistant Professor of Theological Ethics at the University of Geneva, Switzerland.

[24] A point I elaborate in "Sacrifice in Environmental Ethics and Theology," *Journal of Religion* (forthcoming). I would suggest, however, that martyrs, saints, or exemplars may play a role in shaping the horizon of a shared life—political, moral, or religious. Such figures may play a significant part in forming communities and the hopes and aims and values that guide them, even as they do not form a generalizable standard for what participation in such communities requires.