Owning the Water

JOHN RODWELL *

For many of you, the name Esther Williams will mean nothing. But there she stood, in her well-filled Spandex swimsuit, smiling down her gorgeous smile at me from the studio stills advertising her latest film outside the Alhambra cinema in Barnsley. She was another of those improbably proportioned beauties come to inhabit the feverish bedtime imagination of the 1950s teenage male. And Esther could swim—boy, could she swim!—for she was a champion swimmer turned actress. And I couldn’t swim, you see. So, as I sat miserably on the railway embankment watching my friends plow through the waters of the flooded clay pit, I imagined that Esther would come and rescue me and we would carve the waves together. “A good swimmer,” says Esther Williams in her autobiography, “owns the water.”

Being entirely at home in water—mindful of its power, yet trusting, unafraid, adept, and responsive to its shift and pull, moving this way and that with confidence and grace: this seems to me now to be a lovely picture of how we might all rightly inhabit the whole of nature and feel completely at home there.

I am an ecologist by profession, someone whose work it is to understand the oikos, the household, of nature, hence oikology. And, being a Christian, I acknowledge that nature is creation, something that has sprung from the generous imagination of God, we and all other living creatures, “the gliding gull,” “the glittering shoals”;¹ and

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¹ “The gliding gull” and “the glittering shoals” are from the hymn “Lord of all worlds, we worship and adore you,” by Christopher J. Ellis, Ancient and Modern: Hymns and Songs for Refreshing Worship (Norwich: Canterbury, 2013), 540, sung as the recessional at Evensong March 12, 2017.
the earth, air, and water, the “foaming deep,” “the restless wave,” the fabric of our being here on earth. All of this is “our common home,” as Pope Francis has put it, a home common to us creatures one and all, whom we bid sing in praise of God’s gift in allowing us all to be.

Disrespect for this kinship with creation and our mutual dependence, one creature upon another, has a long history among human-kind though, even in my own fifty years of working life, our negligence and abuse have assumed unnerving, maybe catastrophic, proportions; with consequences for nature itself and for our sister and brother peoples who also, with us, deserve a share of its bounty. A different reading of “owning,” owning the water, owning the whole of nature, has become more and more determinative, as if it all belonged to us, or to some of us at least, belonged to us to do with and trade with as we will. This is to understand the “dominion” that God gave us over all he has made as plunder.

We rightly mourn the human cost of natural disasters—flood, monsoon, tsunami—in the moving of the waters. We rightly praise and support those who rescue the victims. These are not so-called acts of God, some kind of punishment for the misbehavior of those caught in their wake. Yet we may all be judged wanting when we do not acknowledge this immense natural power of creation that moves as it will within the freedom given to it by God.

And we may be judged wanting too when we waste the opportunity to work with such power, harnessing the energy of moving water in tide and torrent without abusing its flow or purity; waste the chance to plan our settlements and enterprise outside the plains where we know that rivers will naturally exert their flood; miss the chance to stretch our imagination and manage the water resource of whole catchments, not just our parish stretch along which it flows.

Water moves. It moves from sky to sea and round again in cloud and rain. And on its way it lends us its capacity to quench and cleanse. Don’t let anyone tell you that water is a commodity. Water is a gift, a grace, a part of God’s creative beneficence. Of course, we rightly

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2 “The foaming deep” and “the restless wave” are from the hymn “Eternal father, strong to save” from William Whiting, Ancient and Modern, 623, sung as the processional.

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pay some utility for holding water on its way, for bringing water to us, constantly and safe. Such service satisfies a basic human need and is itself a cause for thanksgiving. And we rightly pay for our dirtied water to be taken away and made clean again. But has any utility seen the “storehouse of the snow” or “beget the drops of dew”? Can any utility “tilt the waterskins of heaven” or “claim the wisdom to number the clouds” (Job 38:22–38)?

By all means render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and pay your water bill (maybe questioning its size), but remember that no one owns the water. When it arrives in your sink or springs from your shower, give it a blessing, thankful for its presence and purity. Send it on its way as little dirtied as you can, mindful of the marks you yourself leave upon creation. And while the water is with you, remember that you have it on loan.

For we are tenants of the earth and its resources, not mistresses or masters of the estate. This is the model of the divine gifting of land and water that we see in the Old Testament. It is the way in which Jesus speaks of our stewardship of God’s gifts to us. And when the owner comes, we should expect to be held to account for whatever neglect, whatever abuse, whatever appropriation, we have perpetrated here. Maybe you can discern in the unnatural disasters that befall us now—the fouling of rivers with poisonous effluent and loss of their sparkling wildlife; the wastage of water on out-of-season crops to the detriment of native agriculture; the accumulating saltiness and shriveling of vital water-holes—maybe you can discern there some earnest of that reckoning of our greedy behavior weighed against the selfless generosity of God.

The Just Water campaign signals this disparity. For this is a question of justice and doing justice: doing justice to those who also deserve a share in the prodigality of God’s creation but are denied it; doing justice to future generations who rely on us now to ensure that God’s gifts are sustained; doing justice to nature itself, which, though full of noise that may delight and scare us, cannot shape words to protest at our abuse of it.

Water moves, but when it stills, we may behold our own selves mirrored on the film. I saw, at the start, my younger self sitting on the bank, more innocent maybe, certainly unknowing as to what I and the world would become. And also, too, in my present self, I see my future hopes for what I and all of nature might yet become, here and
hereafter. The seventeenth century priest Thomas Traherne shows us just such a scene in his poem “Shadows in the Water”:\(^4\): the child he was, pictured there standing on the brink; the grown man now remembering in the verse; his future self, perchance awaiting unknown joys. Yet this is not some mystical solitude, for, on reflection, he sees others gathered round, yet not “he” and “them” but a blessed society, a shared life glimpsed in the water, for “they seemèd others but are we.” This is our hope today, that we see in Just Water a shared future, with others equally at home there, a company of not “we” and “them” but “us,” and us one and all at home in nature. We pray that the beautiful wisdom of God will smile her smile on us, come to our rescue and that we will plow the waves together to find safe landfall.

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