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VERSIFIED PHYSICO-THEOLOGY OF PAUL-ALEXANDRE DULARD

Paul-Alexandre Dulard (1696–1760) was an 18th century literary figure. He studied with distinction philosophy in the Collège des Pères de l’Oratoire in Marseille, and then medicine; he worked briefly in commerce, but he devoted himself to poetry and was awarded nine times a prize by the Académie des Jeux Floraux, a literary society in Toulouse (O 2.168)¹. In 1726, he was one of the cofounders of the Académie des Sciences, Lettres et Arts in Marseille in which he served as a director for three one-year terms, in 1735, 1743, 1752; three months before his death, he became its perpetual secretary². Largely forgotten today, he was known in his times primarily for his versified work, *The grandeur of God in the marvels of nature* published in 1749 of which seventh edition came out in 1820. Having once rhetorically asked, “What is a greater topic, more solemn, / More abundant with sublime marvels / Than the grandeurs of God, the Master of Heaven?” (O 1.108), Dulard made God the topic of his book-long poem.

SEEING GOD THROUGH NATURE

In *The grandeur of God*, Dulard admitted to have followed the principles of the then-recognized physico-theologians – Pluche, Durham, and Nieuwentijt (G XXVI)

¹ References are made to Dulard’s works:

G – *La grandeur de Dieu dans les merveilles de la nature, poëme*, Paris: Dessaint et Saillant 1758⁴.

O – *Oeuvres diverses*, Amsterdam: Arkstée & Merkus 1758, vols. 1–2.

² [Claude-François Achard], *Dictionnaire de la Provence et du Comté-Venaisin*, Marseille: Jean Mossy 1786, vol. 3, 242–243; L[ouis] T[oussaint] Dassy, *L’Académie de Marseille: ses origines, ses publications, ses archives, ses membres*, [Marseilles]: typ. et lith. Barlatier-Feissat, père et fils 1877, 64–65.

– but presented them in the poetic form to, presumably, make them more appealing and thus more acceptable to the reader. The many editions of the work testify that the poetic ploy worked. He also stated that the spectacle of the universe was not an appealing subject for poets (ix), so, in that respect, he made an implicit claim to some measure of originality.

In the presentation of the beginning of the cosmos, Dulard said that God created the world out of nothing: “God commands. At the voice of this sovereign Master / Both the Earth and the Heaven got their existence”: the light, celestial lamps, the sea, vegetation, the fish, birds, animals, and finely man, the divine masterpiece (G 4). It is interesting that Dulard modified the Biblical order of creation by setting the creation of the sun before the creation of plants. The Biblical sequence has always been a problem for interpreters, and Pluche solved it by having light as an elementary substance independent from light emitting bodies.

Physical mechanisms of the creation of the world are quickly brushed aside: Descartes’ vortices and atomism which explains everything in terms of “the volatile bodies, vagabond seeds”, even if they are moved by God as proposed by Gassendi (G 5); however, “the absurdity of the corpuscular dogma well humiliates philosophical pride” (6). The orderliness of the universe is for Dulard a clear proof of this absurdity. It is enough to turn one’s eyes toward the stars, the innumerable suns with their own planetary systems which very likely are inhabited (33–34, 42): “Marches, returns to prescribed orbs, / By these rolling globes described with order! / No obstacle, no shock, an exact harmony, / An immutable rule! And the impious Atomist, / Struck by the evidence, or rather overwhelmed, / Still dares to maintain that an order so settled / Is the work of chance, of the impact of vile atoms, / In the eyes of reason, ridiculous phantoms?” (44). Insensible matter could not create this order; it’s an absurd idea (45)³. Matter simply does not have a creative power and an animating force has to come from a preexisting animating force, “the only principle of all Beings, whether intelligent or corporeal” (1.207): “This beautiful order, great God, is the work of your power, / You, whose existence proves the entire Universe (45), / You, whose majesty announces the Firmament, / And in whom Nature exalts its Author” (46).

God can be admired in the dazzling variety of inanimate nature, in flora and fauna. Just one example of so very many: melon, to which Dulard directed his praise: “You, rugged fruit, that a vegetable garden encloses, / Which wants to be watered, which rests on the ground, / You, whose heavy body, deprived of this support, / Would pull its stem and break its link: / From your colored flesh an exquisite juice flows, / By which in our bosom, the burning thirst is quenched. / Ah! delicious fruit, must your goodness (bonté) / Betray so often my taste and your beauty (beauté)?” (G 173–174). To be sure, by appreciating a fruit Dulard expressed his appreciation of its Creator. There is such a great variety among flowers, plants, and fruits that even

³ Such jabs against atomism make *The grandeur* an anti-Lucretius work and “a hymn of sorts to the intelligence organizing the universe”, in words of Jean-Noël Pascal, *Le spectacle poétique de la nature: sur Louis Racine et Dulard*, in: Françoise Gevrey, Julie Boch, Jean-Louis Haquette (eds.), *Écrire la nature au XVIII^e siècle: autour de l’abbé Pluche*, Paris: Presses de l’Université Paris–Sorbonne, 2006, 223.

two leaves of the same tree are not alike; in fact, “The face of earth is a vast scene / A rich picture where lovely contrast rules. / Corporeal beings, man, animals, / All of them, have unequal traits in their form, / In all that you do, O Eternal Wisdom, / You cannot exhaust yourself, and have no model. / In your just contempt, you leave to humans / This uniformity in the work of their hands. / For you, whom nothing limits, and whose intelligence / Is equal to your immense power, / In your works, design, operation, variety, / Everything is great, infinite, perfect, unlimited” (207–208).

Waters of seas and oceans are the vast arena pointing at every inch to the wisdom and care of God. At God’s word, seas were filled with the variety of marine animals, “Stable and wandering in the humid plains, / United and divided, dexterous, greedy of prey, / Different in species, in figure, in size, / True to the instinct, their guide and their engine” (G 55). In seas, whales dominate, “superb sovereigns” (56), and on the other side of the scale of magnitude, there are also animals “of which, for the weakness of our eyes, their extreme smallness / Deprives their shape and even existence”, living atoms forming a world more marvelous than that of the fish (81), the presence of animals across this scale testifying about the amazing creative power of God.

The amazing mechanism of instinct is providentially instilled in the entire animal world. For instance, cranes migrate and fly in orderly formations (G 233); how do they know the proper time (234)?, how do they know the proper route? “O supreme Wisdom, / Who does not see that your hand leads them; / To mark the time of the annual departure, / The voice of a natural instinct is your Herald!” (235). The entire avian world “Attests to a Creator wise and almighty. / Into how many attributes he diversifies himself! / The love for their little ones, [for their] foresight, industry, / Cunning, sagacity, suppleness, feeling: / A vast picture, and which only needs to/can be sketched out.” (235).

God’s care reaches even the world of lowly insects. Generally, “For people, an insect is a vile creature, / For a Sage, [it is] a masterpiece in fertile marvels. / In it as much shines the grandeur of the Almighty / As in a Cherub crowned with splendor” (G 250–251).

THEODICY

There are many unpalatable, even outright evil phenomena in nature, which people held grudgingly against the Creator. Consider lightnings, volcanos, earthquake, including the then-famous one that destroyed Lisbon, which “deserves tears and mourning by the universe” (G 141). Winds, which are of unknown origin (145), refresh air, bring salts to soil, moderate heat and cold, but for these rare favors they also bring most saddening horrors, spread destruction and fire (146), bring storms, uproot trees (147). Spinozists saw destructive phenomena as imperfections of nature, which already Augustine had denied (Conf. 7.13). Physical evil, said Dulard, is in the hand of God an instrument of vengeance, but also of goodness (148). “All apparent disorder is a hidden order. / To the effects which it operates, some good is attached. / God sealed it with the seal of his immense wisdom, / And often these

scourges signal his vengeance. / The voice of his thunder is a menacing cry, / Which goes, even under the canopy, to frighten the wicked. / The dreadful disasters, usefully sinister, / Are of his chastisements faithful ministers. / The more his kindness suspends his vengeful arm, / The more terrible the blow, in the day of fury” (149). That is, better to be punished now than on the day of the last judgment.

What of predatory animals? There is a constant battle in the sea; it is “the theater of discord” (G 81). For example, sharks sow death and terror (62). However, God’s wisdom established proportions between large marine animals and the small ones, the former multiplying very slowly, the latter – prodigiously. Also, some of these large marine animals feed on something else than the fish (67). Generally, animals that are used for food and are useful for humans are more fertile than ferocious animals. Each animal has also a specific defense mechanism (284). The presence of disconcerting elements of nature is the result of human sin; the disobedience of the first man is the origin of the reversal of the moral and physical order. God punishes people using animals (263); however, in His goodness, He provided remedies and antidotes to treat harmful elements (264).

THE IMPERFECTION OF KNOWLEDGE

The grandeur of God is a work of poetry and Dulard admitted that sometimes the poetic fervor took the better of him, as exemplified in his speaking about the queen bee and her “throne being surrounded by a superb court” and about her knowledge “how to reward and how to punish” (G 247). When speaking about human anatomy, Dulard provided little detail; the descriptions were made more for a poetic effect; for instance, that is what the reader learns about the eyes: “Three different fluids [the aqueous, the vitreous, and the crystalline] compose their substance. / A thousand threads outside are arming themselves for their defense. / A veil softening the too radiant glow [eyelid], / Repeatedly rises and falls on them. / In a circle [iris] placed a thin membrane [retina] / Is the marvelous organ of vision” (291). However, in spite of the poetic delivery of the content, Dulard did strive for the accuracy of data and for informative account. This he delivered in numerous footnotes the combined text of which exceeds in size the text of all the seven songs of the poetry of *The grandeur*⁴. In these footnotes, he frequently referred to the scholarly authorities of his times, to their publications and to travel books. For example, a brief poetic mention of “a reptile with the quickest [acting] venom” is accompanied with a footnote stat-

⁴ In the words of one reviewer, these notes should be appreciated, and for a good reason, since they clarify the text and convey to the reader the results of research in “speculative and experimental Physics”, *Lettres sur quelques écrits de ce tems* 3 (1752), 133–134; moreover, these notes bring “an infinite honor to Mr. Dulard by their multiplicity which imply his immense readings and by their precision that these readings were conscientiously done”, *L’Année Littéraire* 1759, vol. 2, 280. And thus, he fully deserved the name of a well-read man whereby “his poem can become a repository (Magazin) for a good poet”, [Johan Georg Sulzer, Karl Wilhelm Ramler], *Critische Nachrichten aus dem Reiche der Gelehrsamkeit*, Berlin: Haude und Spener 1750, 173.

ing: “The asp. Of all the venomous reptiles, it is the one whose venom acts most promptly and most forcefully. There are several species of asp. Some are only a foot long, others have up to a fathom. Their color varies: they are ashen, black, yellowish, etc. The asp has sunken, sparkling eyes. Next to each [eye] there is a fleshy excrescence which is the size of a pea. Its neck swells when it wants to dart its venom. Its puncture is almost as small as that of a needle”, and so on for the entire page (255).

In spite of the rise and progress of science, in spite of Dulard’s profound recognition of its accomplishments, he saw limits to what human knowledge can accomplish, the limits to how much details of the mechanism of various natural phenomena can human investigation fathom. For instance, what are the causes of the ebb and flow? People should leave to nature “The veil that hides it” and not trying to reveal all, they should enjoy the benefits of effect of the hidden causes, and what does it matter that the principle, of ebb and flow are unknown? (G 52). It is enough to know that secret instruments are used here that signal the goodness and providence of God and bear a stamp of His omnipotence. People should focus on the usefulness of natural phenomena. “The waves are impregnated with corrosive niters, / With bituminous juices; and these active agents, / By their distinct virtue appropriate to the wave, / Are a fertile source of new benefits”; these benefits include the fertilization of vegetation by the attenuated salt carried to the atmosphere and throughout the world. Salt prevents seas from too much evaporation which would overwhelm the world (53). Salt gives flavor to food, protects it from spoiling (54).

People should simply accept that there are limits to what the human mind can do: “The nature of air, of fire, of water, / The organization of the lowest vermisseau/ worm, / The tissue of a flower, its seed, its substance, / All confuses weak intelligence. / Nature hides from your indiscrete eyes, / You can’t see the play of secret springs. / Over this universe, an admirable work, God / Wisely put an impregnable veil”, because “Man was not made to understand, he is made to enjoy (jouir)” (G 347–348) and to glorify God (O 1.140). People should admire the spectacle of God, leaving to Him the secret of this miracle; they would become too vain if they could know everything whereby they could consider themselves to be equal to God (348). To humiliate human pride, all for man is profundity and mystery (O 1.140).

IMMORTALITY

The enjoyment of this world should be viewed from an eschatological perspective. People always want more, as stated, but they should not succumb to their desires, at least not to purely earthly desires. People want to be happy, but this desire reaches beyond the boundary on this life. In fact, not in vain did God put in human hearts the desire of eternal happiness. This desire itself points to the immortality of the soul; moreover, infinity that the soul probes and tries to know, its ardor toward God as its Maker point to its immortality (G 323).

That the soul exists, there is no doubt, “an active breath, the being that thinks” (G 294), that is, when I think, it is my soul that thinks; my personhood is identical

with the soul. Thus, in the Cartesian spirit, my soul is a thinking substance. In Dulard's view, "Man always searches in vain his essence. / He will only know that he exists and thinks. / Everything else is covert by dark veil" (G 300), but curiously, he seems to have known quite a bit about the soul. Dulard had no doubt that it resided in the head (295). In his view, the soul is always active, also in sleep (300); the body serves the soul through sensory organs (296); the body acts upon the soul and vice versa (298). The soul is able of pure, intellectual perception but, at the same time, God is its first cause since, "the soul is only an agent that operates by his order"; moreover, "Of the attributes of God the unlimited idea / Can only by him alone be born in the soul" (303); would it mean that the idea of God is innate? After all, "the principles of natural Religion are innate in Man" (O 2.15). If so, what role would investigation of nature play in the proof of the existence of God? Dulard did not address this problem avoiding it by the statement that, after all, we see too obscurely the intellectual life to grasp the truth about its nature (G 306) and there are serious doubts about whether ideas are innate or, more likely, produced by senses (xxiv). There is no doubt, however, that the highest idea is about God, His infinite power, unchanging wisdom, about God's immensity, existence, and unity (304).

The soul is thus immortal and should seek happiness befitting its eternal prospects. It should know that the earthly happiness is a feeble trace of the perfect, eternal happiness promised by God in His Word; to reach it, a person should be useful to others and should observe God's law (G 360). As the Biblical account states, this observance was violated at the very beginning of the existence of humankind. "The father of humanity revolted against God / Creating all unhappiness for his posterity" (332). "The day of reason since then has been obscured, / The heart has been corrupted, esprit became smaller", passions emerged, conquered the heart; self-love fathered all of them, the desire to be happy all by oneself (333). People want to be happy, but they seek happiness in the wrong places: in riches, in honors, in things that do not last (353). They always want to have more, their desires do not stop, but these desires should be moderated (358) by exercising virtues. Mortals serve their desires and only religion can defeat them (359). And thus, they are at fault, their passions obscure reason, passions aiming at false goods. In this, man, the most perfect creation of God created in His image (336), faces hell; however, "A God descends: the earth gives birth to its Savior / ... He gave satisfaction for us for the crime of our Fathers. / He dies: it is by his blood that man is redeemed / That he recovers the glory and his happiness. / The Law of CHRIST elevates him [man] above himself. / Passions, he fights your extreme ascendancy. / Rescued by Grace, he breaks his [man's] bond. / The old man is destroyed, and I see the Christian" (337). That is the message Dulard desired to convey in a somewhat roundabout way of the description of nature to point to God as the Creator⁵ and then to Christ as His Son who left heaven for humans and assumed the body in the womb of a Virgin to wash human sins (O 2.47). To that end, Dulard also used poetry in which he formed his message since "religion

⁵ In this, Dulard "started with creatures to reach the Creator", the way suggested by apostle Paul in Rom. 1:20, Gilles Banderier, *Un émule de Du Bartas au siècle des Lumières: Dulard (1696–1760), Cahiers Roucher-André Chénier* 22 (2003), 106.

expressed in verse is the field of true Sublime, either by its own substance or by the auxiliary ideas that Poet can abundantly draw from the Scripture” (2.19).

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Summary

Paul-Alexandre Dulard was an eighteenth-century literary figure keenly interested in the science of his time and theology. He poetically blended together these two interests in his poetic work, *The grandeur of God in the marvels of nature*, where, as presented in this article, he addressed in the spirit of the then popular physico-theology the problem of the existence of God: the harmonious makeup of the universe points directly to its divine Designer. He also addressed the problem of theodicy by using the orderliness of the universe is explaining the existence of what is deemed to be evil. Finally, Dulard discussed the immortality of the soul as indicated by the desire of happiness which cannot be fulfilled in this world.

Key words: Paul-Alexandre Dulard, physico-theology, theodicy

PAUL-ALEXANDRE DULARD I JEGO WERSYFIKACJA FIZYKOTEOLOGII

Streszczenie

Paul-Alexandre Dulard był osiemnastowiecznym poetą żywo zainteresowanym nauką swoich czasów i teologią. Poetycko połączył te dwa zainteresowania w swoim dziele *Wspaniałość Boga w cudach natury*, w którym, jak przedstawiono w niniejszym artykule, podjął w duchu popularnej wówczas fizykoteologii kwestię istnienia Boga: harmonijny porządek wszechświata wskazuje bezpośrednio na jego boskiego Autora. Dyskutował także problem teodycei, odwołując się do porządku wszechświata, by wyjaśnić istnienie tego, co uważa się za zło. Dulard omawiał też nieśmiertelność duszy, na co wskazuje pożądanie szczęścia, którego nie można osiągnąć na tym świecie.

Słowa kluczowe: Paul-Alexandre Dulard, fizykoteologia, teodycea

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