

The Meaning of Nature: A Survey of the Western Approach



UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

AGASSIZ CENTRE FOR WATER STUDIES

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THE MEANING OF NATURE:
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by

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THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

1976

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PREFACE

Early in Western writing one finds the notion of a balance in the physical world that may be upset by human activity. But in the last few years, as human activity has become more patently disruptive, "ecology" has moved from the intellectual periphery to the centre of discussion. There are few people now unaware of pollution, of the depletion of resources, of the threat to whole animal species—of an ecological crisis.

As ecology settles in as a tradition of reflection and analysis and as the problems reveal themselves to have more and more facets, the relevant specialists begin to take their readings and suggest new directions. Scientists look for ways to mop spilled oil and reduce the emissions from motor-cars; politicians try to penalize polluting industries without creating unemployment; educators and writers try to heighten and maintain public awareness of the facts and issues.

In their turn philosophers and historians have begun to relate forms of behavior to values and ideas—to our moral, aesthetic, and metaphysical assumptions about the nonhuman world. Historian Lynn White, Jr. traces the ecological crisis to a persisting Christian arrogance to nature. More commonly arraigned is the mechanistic world-view that has prevailed since Newton, the "desacralizing of nature" described by Theodore Roszak. Francis Bacon is arraigned as the father

of technology and the first "human chauvinist." Descartes receives his share of criticism for "creating" a schism between mind and body that blossomed into a schism between man and nature. The period when Western man and nature fell apart is seen anywhere from the advent of the ploughshare to the population explosion of recent times. And of course the purpose of all this is to discern the way to a better future. New attitudes to nature—or more likely old ones—are described and put forward as alternatives to those found to be the current dangerous ones.

This kind of analysis is important, perhaps crucial, in principle. But it is plagued by oversimplification. Characteristically ignored are some tough but essential questions.

Can one talk about unanimous or consistent attitudes to nature within a culture? Or can there be many attitudes, perhaps even with a single mind?

Have attitudes to nature shifted once, radically and irreversibly? Have they passed over a few main watersheds? Or are they continuously shifting, evolving, even reverting?

Can views of nature be consciously altered? Or are they rooted in ways of living and working such that they only change as social and economic worlds displace one another?

Is it certain that the ecological crisis is related to modern attitudes to nature at all? It may be related more to the runaway character of our half-understood technology.

There is a good deal of spadework to be done before valid

or useful assertions can be made about the role of mentality in the ecological crisis. The following essay attempts to perform a portion of this task. It is a survey of the ways in which the term "nature" has been manipulated in Western writing, with emphasis on the last 250 years.

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INTRODUCTION

A "natural disaster" was traditionally a calamity like a flood or an earthquake that had its origin outside the course of human history and for which people were neither individually nor collectively responsible. But one of the subtle changes brought about by modern technology is that the natural environment has to a larger extent than ever before been absorbed into the realm of human history. And with this a natural disaster of a very different kind has gradually become conceivable: one that would emerge directly out of human affairs and for which people, collectively if not individually, would be responsible. The experience of our ancestors, which is the basis of our language and hence of a large portion of our understanding, is not likely to serve us adequately as this new era unfolds - especially that part of it that relates to our interactions with our environment. An attempt must now be made to assimilate some, but not (at least not yet) all, of the operations and malfunctions of nature into the context of human history. The currently emerging literature of ecology, in trying to show that pollution or depletion actually or potentially constitutes a series of large-scale disasters originating in human history, can be seen as a continuous attempt to persuade people to make such a mental adjustment.

To contribute to this ongoing process of assimilation I have tried to achieve an understanding of that aspect of the natural environment that has always had a place in human history: human conceptions of nature. This study deals with a realm of experience rather than with the world as such. And yet it does not stray very far from concrete or worldly concerns: since we insist on impounding earth, air, fire, and water under the heading "nature," it is important for us to know what sort of conceptual instrument we are using to bring these things into our minds and, once there, to deploy and maneuver their images; to see what sort of task it has done well, and not so well, and to see roughly what it commits us to.

What is nature? Varying definitions and assessments have seemed self-evident to different groups and individuals in different times and places. Nature is everything that is not man; nature includes man as an individual, but not human society; nature is simply everything—reality. Civilization is a part of nature; civilization is a blight upon nature; civilization contains nature. Nature and civilization are locked in deadly struggle; nature and civilization are the complementing dimensions providing the tension and counterpoint that energize all life and endeavor. Nature is God; nature is God's creation, but is not God; nature has been abandoned by God and has become Satan's province. Nature is the aesthetically neutral raw material of art; nature is the supreme paradigm to which music and painting should aspire. Nature is the state that society is designed to counter; nature is the ideal state that

society should imitate as much as possible. Nature is a moral vacuum; nature embodies the moral principles that men attempt to discover. In the history of Western thought all these ideas of nature, and many more, have crystallized as discernible units. Is nature complex enough to embrace all these functions? Is it vague enough to invite all these interpretations? Perhaps nature is a mirror, throwing back the shifting image of man. In any case, there is no returning to the Eden of everyday discourse, where the word "nature" is used uncritically and in innocence.

It is particularly when ideas of nature are viewed chronologically that illusions of clarity and simplicity vanish. The nominal continuity of the word "nature" over several centuries obscures the fact of numerous contradicting formulations. Throughout recorded history, ideas of nature rise, contend, and fall; they travel silently underground; they may be born again in distant places, often in ostensibly hostile climates; few if any are successfully uprooted or driven from the field of action. It is not only the inscrutable nomads of remote ages that defined or assumed a nature different from that (or those) presently regarded as real: the "natures" of the nearby nineteenth century are already comically antiquated. And although we seem to know this, precisely how we know it is a mystery since our own ideas of nature are far from clear, settled, or unanimously held.

There is a timeless metaphysic built into much that is being written on the subject of our relation to the environment. Admittedly many of these writings are scientific in character; and since the scientist and technician deal with the physical facts of time and space, facts unaffected by human history, they do not often pause to consider their work in historical terms. However, standing between the most objective observer and his object is the inevitable *assumption*—in this case, an idea of nature—originating more in human history than in observation. It might be possible to handle our environmental problems without taking this dimension into consideration; in other words, within the context of the ideas of nature of the present. By focusing attention on specific or *ad hoc* objectives, it will probably be possible to stretch resources out longer, to recycle more kinds and quantities of effluent, and so on. It all depends on the urgency and depth of the problems themselves, presumably a matter yet to be decided. If these problems are fundamental, it will probably be necessary to consider the role being played by our underlying, historically conditioned assumptions about the world beyond man—by our ideas of nature.

If it becomes necessary or desirable to amend our current ideas of nature, as many presently believe, then historical analysis of the type attempted here may be practically useful. We will see that in many ways our ideas of nature have been amenable to process and change, while in many ways they have not. We shall become aware of the malleability of these ideas,

and hence of the possibility of moulding new ones and abandoning the problems attending those we have inherited. On the other hand, we will note those tendencies that have not changed, or which have only changed at glacial rates, or which only change as social and economic worlds displace one another—and hence how significant a part of the past is likely to find its way into the future despite our wishing otherwise.

A word about method may be in order. Throughout the ages the poet, philosopher, painter, and writer of sermons have scattered through their work the forms and colors of their particular idea of nature; and it is upon wide reading and observation that propositions about trends and directions are raised in the study. I have asked the following questions of my material: What term does this writer place in opposition to the term "nature"? Is his idea of nature consistent? What is the source of any ambiguity? What relation is implied between nature and human art? Between nature and Society? If he is also bringing some notion of divinity, what relation is implied between deity and creation? What relation is there between his "nature" and the more comprehensive idea "reality"?

And of course there has been a great deal written in the last thirty years about nature as an idea—secondary works, and often works which are not specifically concerned with nature, but which incorporate an analysis of ideas of nature into a discussion of painting, politics, or poetry. While such works have been immensely useful in providing directions—and there are more debts to them than the footnotes acknowledge—

it has often been fruitful to ask the very same questions of secondary as of primary works. It is difficult for any writer to talk about ideas of nature from the outside—to deliberately suspend the almost instinctive habit of looking at the world from within some idea of nature. Westerners generally are accustomed to thinking *with* the concept, in one or another of its supposed antitheses, and find it extremely difficult to think *about* it. There is very little written about nature—fact or idea—that is not (allowed a standing period) patently primary material (this study included).

Looking at history from the standpoint of one idea, however large, is artificial in the extreme; it must never be forgotten that ideas of nature are segments of larger ideologies and philosophies which are not being explored. By the end of the study the reader may wonder if men have contemplated anything, in the last twenty-five centuries, besides their position with regard to nature, whereas the opposite is true: men have rarely thought about nature in itself, but their more characteristic concerns have always implied a definition and assessment of nature.

The study is obviously an attempt to initiate, rather than conclude, a broader understanding of our relation to the nonhuman world that environs us. I hope that readers will be provoked to amplify inadequacies and correct errors.

EARLY MAN: NATURE AS REALITY

With the urbanizing and industrializing of western Europe came the feeling, for many, that civilization had reached a condition of overripeness. This feeling found expression in a flowering of romantic naturalism, not the least characteristic facet of which was primitivism. In the early nineteenth century it seemed possible to talk about a better world, a world closer to its beginning, to its birth—its *natus*. A literature devoted to the creation of invidious comparisons between sophisticated London or New York and the simple folk of prehistory was produced in bulk and digested with satisfaction. The primitive man, hundreds of books affirmed, had enjoyed an intimate relation with the natural world, a relation that people who lived in cities and toiled in factories could no longer experience.

Truth and error contend within this conception of primitive life. While knowledge about preliterate people is largely inferential and tentative, it does not take a great deal of knowledge to deflate the romantic primitivism of the nineteenth century. But what is required is not so much a deflation as an adjustment of emphasis because it is true that men were once involved with the natural world in a way they never would be again.

The purpose of discussing the mentality of primitive men (specifically, for convenience, the early Greeks) is to attempt

to catch the characteristic Western concern about nature as close to its origin as possible. We are actually beginning before that "point" or origin, because these people did not have what could be called a conscious idea of nature. Nor did they have a specific god of nature, as most people suppose, until well into relatively recent times. Pan, who finally adopted this function, was for centuries an ordinary local deity in remote Arcadia, and it was only in 490 B.C. after the Battle of Marathon that the Athenians raised the first temple to Pan, the God of Nature. This was practically yesterday; and by this time Athenians were almost as ambivalent about nature as we are. For the authentic primitives, as D. H. Lawrence noted, Pan was an impossibility: "When Pan was greatest, he was not even Pan. He was nameless and unconceived, mentally."¹ Pan was impossible because nature itself seems to be necessary to have a corresponding idea of not-nature, and this is precisely what primitive men did not have.

Ernst Cassirer defined the character of primitive mentality as "polysynthetic," because in that mentality there is "no separation of a total complex into its elements...a single undivided totality is represented--a totality in which there has been no 'dissociation' of the separate factors of objective perception and subjective feeling."² Freud said the same thing in a slightly different way in *Totem and Taboo*: primitives "characteristically mistake the order of their own ideas for the order of nature."³ The primitive world was, as R. G. Collingwood put it, "permeated with mind":⁴ and of course

the mental aspect of nature, although contributed by the primitive himself, was regarded by him as independently real. The feeling he had, say, about sunrise, he assumed to be inherent in the sunrise itself.

This infusion of supposedly nonhuman mentality into the world became the spirits and gods of ancient religion. Cassirer describes the religious implication of the primitives' epistemology in his discussion of "momentary deification": "Water found by a thirsty person, a termite mound that hides and saves someone, any new object that inspires a man with terror—all these are transformed directly into gods."⁵ Spontaneous, momentary deifications gradually gave way to a more stable systemization of resident spirits, in which every hill, stream, rock, sea, grove, and region had its own *genius locus*. A useful name for this religion is that which Michael Bell devised in his book *Primitivism*: "cosmic piety."⁶

While cosmic piety must certainly be called "a religion," it was no religion in the sense implied in almost all Western theological discussion. To this word we unconsciously attach the epithet "transcendent," so totally have religion and transcendence become fused after fifteen centuries of Christian influence. But for the Greeks, divinity resided *in* nature, not above it. And unlike the benign transcendent Christian deity, their gods were as changeable, as inscrutable, as powerful, and as paradoxical as nature itself must have seemed. The gods were associated as much with sudden catastrophe as with occasional assistance; and most forms of divine activity were un-

related to the deserts or virtues of the men and women who happened to be affected. One could appease or appeal to the gods, but they were finally obdurate. Michael Bell summed up the difference between Christianity and cosmic piety: "The powers of nature, just as they do not correspond to the Christian supernatural, are not to be seen as morally 'good' or beneficent in anything like a Christian sense. The primitive awe is as closely allied to terror as to worship, and the natural deities to which it gives rise are as little amenable to moral pressure almost as nature itself."⁷ The relation between the Greeks and their gods appears to have been similar to anyone's relation with the weather.

Since these people were perceptive enough to see in nature resistance, and harm, as well as splendor, they were by extension perceptive enough to see in nature more deities than one. Counterpoised with wise Apollo and gentle Aurora were the orgies, cruelties, rapes, and incests of some of the other Olympians. The gods did not have a singular moral character because nature did not have a singular moral character (which of course is to say the same thing twice); in fact nature did not have a single character at all. While every ancient religion contained a host of gods and goddesses, none ever produced a goddess called Natura,⁸ and no ancient language ever generated a singular generic term comparable to "nature." Cosmic piety consisted in a feeling that men should submit to the powers immanent (or indwelling) in the natural world in the natural world in every possible way. For instance, if any

environmental modification was to be effected it was first necessary to placate the spirit resident in, say, the ground one wished to dig or the stream one wished to dam. The world "as it is" was taken as the divine intention, and the maker of change was liable to pay for his actions regardless of his placation. Such an attitude implied a great deal more than just grinding through an occasional ritual; it meant that everything human, from history and society to poetry, inevitably did, and ought to, follow a natural course. In order to discuss just what this involved we must turn to the matter of the Pagan Cycle.

The simultaneous regularity and changeability, beauty and terror, of nature—something that still haunts a few people—found form in the image of the circle. That nature was not a single thing was affirmed everywhere for the primitive: nature was obviously an ebb as well as a flow, decay as well as growth, winter as well as summer; and yet night yielded to renewed day as surely as day to renewed night, and decay to growth as surely as growth to decay. The rhythm of nature was cyclic; the cycle was the reality of the day, the month, the seasons, of birth and death, and finally of history, civilizations, and time itself. The year was a perfect circle consisting in thirteen equal lunar months; and time was just the same year endlessly turning. Historians like Herodotus and Thucydides envisioned their task as one of discerning and interpreting the ebb and flow, birth and decay, of civilization. The future could be read in the cycles of the astral bodies.

Human life was not different from natural life; both swayed to the same dominant rhythm.

The vision of the natural cycle was intricately bound up with cosmic piety. Most of the gods and goddesses had functions related to the daily, lunar, or yearly rounds: Aurora came with the dawn, wise Minerva with the evening; the lunar cycle expressed the recurrent evolution of the Moon-goddess from maiden to nymph to crone—Selene to Aphrodite to Hecate: Demeter came with the first young shoots of green corn, and Saturnus with harvest and plenty. The thirteenth month witnessed the death of the sun-god, and the number "thirteen" was for that reason almost universally feared throughout ancient Greece. Late autumn coincided with the death of the young god of vegetation, Tammuz or Adonis, and spring with his rebirth. In some of the Greek cultures Dionysian or Eleusinian festivals were held in spring to celebrate the resurgence of the god, of life, and of time itself—to celebrate the eternal return to *in illo tempore*, to that first morning of creation. And of course most of the religious rites of these ancient communities, as well as the private devotions of the individual, had their appropriate moments on the daily, lunar, or yearly cycle.

Frazer is still the best guide to this world, and the curious reader can find in his *Golden Bough* the fuller portrait of a society embedded deep in its physical environment. And it is Frazer himself who reminds us that primitive life is mainly attractive from a distance. In his first chapter he describes the ancient myths and fables as containing "a [deep]

philosophy of the relation of the life of man to the life of nature": but then goes on to call this "a sad philosophy."⁹

Within a history endlessly repeated, few real changes could be expected in any area, and human initiative was in the long run illusory. Although tomorrow would be different from today, the future could never be significantly different from the past. Thus predisposed against change, this earth-rooted civilization might have lasted forever; even now it survives in more than faint reverberations. However, it was challenged and to some extent supplanted by a view of time and human history antithetical to the cyclic vision and the submission to the physical world that it implied.

Before considering that important juncture, it is necessary to prepare some of the intermediate ground for travel.

It must first be seen how conscious naturalism gradually gave way; how the polysynthesis of man, mind and matter gradually broke up, and "nature" became a conscious idea referring to a particular realm within reality.

TOWARD THE CHARACTERISTIC WESTERN IDEA OF NATURE

Primitive people did not employ the word "nature," but by 250 B.C. it was as common in Greece and Rome, at least among the educated, as it is in London today. This word's emergence is the visible surface of a complicated intellectual process, which is viewed here from three related angles: first, in a consideration of the linguistic development of the word "nature"; second, in an attempt to draw connections between the rise of this word and the life and work of the same period; and third, by considering some characteristic uses of the word in classical writing. A fourth section follows these developments into Rome.

1.

The word "nature" appears relatively late in even the literate ancient world. Its first usage was in the sense of the construction "nature of." The idea of any thing having a *nature* first developed when polysynthetic thinking began to yield to analytic—when thinkers began to see that the concrete, complex whole of their lives and environments could be divided usefully into abstract component parts and principles. It was gradually seen to be possible to differentiate between the essential and superficial aspects of things. And as the notion of essential aspects found a place in primitive thinking, the ancient word meaning "birth," *natus*, modified to *natura*, which meant "state at birth," rose up to meet it; a thing's

essence was its "nature." Behind this linguistic innovation lay the assumption that the essence of a thing was that which it possessed at *natus*, nativity, while superficial features would generally be those appended, from without, at a later time. A thing's nature was that which was truly within it, in other words that identity which it possessed before and after contact with outside influences.

This is always the sense of "nature" in early Greek writing; and in early Latin writing the term never appears alone, but as part of the phrase *natura rerum*—the "nature of a thing." But in the era of refined pagan thinking, as expressed in later Greek and Latin literature, one notes a further development. The Greek φύσις (*physis*) has gradually come to have two senses: in addition to that discussed above, it now occasionally refers to something like a "world of nature." In Greek writing the earlier sense is always predominant; but the *natura rerum* of Latin largely gives way to the newer *natura*.¹ While the original sense of "nature" was—of course still is—retained, there now existed in addition the larger and more general conception of a world of nature. The new concept remained dependent for its meaning on its forbear: *natura* is the sum of all those things which have "natures"—which operate in accord with their internal characters.

However, since there were various terms already in use, in both Greece and Rome, to denote man's environment—such as "world," "universe," and finally the popular "cosmos" devised by Pythagoras circa 500 B.C.—and since these terms were not

abandoned with the emergence of *natura*, not supplanted by *natura*, we may wonder whether the new word was not redundant. But a word rarely crystallizes, and almost never survives, unless it administers to some authentic psychic need; and it appears that *natura* was quickly incorporated into the communications of late Antiquity. For some reason this large and general conception, referring to "the world" and yet apparently not so embracing as "universe" or "cosmos," was devised. The assumption that must have been held, in order for this development to be a logical one, is this: there is a space, or gap, between *cosmos* and *natura*—in other words, *cosmos* contains two distinct parts, nature and not-nature.

The origin of *natura rerum* is lost forever in the darkness of prehistory. But there are good reasons for believing that the discovery of things which do not appear to operate entirely or at all according to their "natures," and hence which are not members of the world of *natura*, is a legacy of the Greeks of the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. The Greek philosophers were the first penetrating students of politics, of institutions, and of the relation between social and individual life. One of the first fruits of their study was the insight that man in society exists at the centre of a web of forces external to his "nature;" that life in society carries him far away from his state at *natus*, on a course that could hardly be described as a straightforward unfolding of tendencies inherent in his original nature. Because the Greek philosophers discovered the meaning of society, they discovered

what could be called a world of not-nature. And once they had achieved this insight, they discovered *natura*. D. H. Lawrence precipitates this point: "Humanity, in the womb of Pan, said nought. But when humanity was born into a separate idea of itself, it said Pan."²

2.

The sense of a difference between the human and natural worlds was expressed, not created, by the philosophers. The actual seeds of this disparity were silently planted in the minds of people by certain changes in modes of working and living. The Greek world, especially Athens, was the setting for several of the changes that mark the transition between ancient and modern life. These changes centre in two related developments: more complicated economic activity and more complicated social organization. The large city became dominant for the first time, as subsistence herding and agriculture gave way to commercial production and large-scale trade. Both of these developments acted as a solvent on the old ways of thinking, on the old assumption of a monolithic world ruled by natural-divine rhythms.

For one thing, the widening through trade of the Greek horizon made possible the beginnings of cultural contrast—comparative anthropology. As differing social forms came before the roving Greek eye, the assumption of a "natural society" at home was weakened. Herodotus declared that "one ought not to laugh at other peoples' laws [and social customs]."³ Societies

were clearly different to one another; and from there it was a short step to the observation that they are collectively different to the physical world of nature.

The availability of this contrast merely illuminated a fact visible enough in Athens itself. The rapid growth of economic and social complexity was accompanied by the introduction of a multitude of laws designed to cope with the new situation. E. R. Dodd, in his book *The Ancient Concept of Progress* notes that these new laws "had no sanction in Antiquity ... and were continually being changed:"⁴ and he sees in this a reason for the intense examination of the character of society that marks mature Greek thinking. When legislators were daily altering the face of society, and the time-honored rituals of the natural cycle were being cynically revised to conform with each new social or economic venture, it was clear that one was dealing with a human rather than a divine or natural product.

But the main solvent acting on the old ways of thinking was probably the rhythm of Athenian life itself, as it was experienced by ordinary people day by day. For instance, the harvest festival of the autumn had little meaning to a man who had finished farming to take a winter job on the trading ships, whose idea of value consisted not in seeing a full granary in the autumn but in a heavy purse accumulating equally in all seasons. Bertrand Russell described the gradual ascendance of a new value in Athenian society, a value commensurate with the new condition of social and economic complexity: forethought.⁵ What would have been rare in the old religious

tribal world, anticipating a long-term future and planning for it, became an ideal.

The Greeks did not suddenly decide to abandon the old world, but by broadening their horizons, improving their organization, increasing their population, refining their skills, and dividing their labor they created a situation wherein they gradually discovered that to some extent they had already left that world. Their new situation demanded a new, corresponding set of concepts, ideas and metaphors.

3.

The Greek legend most relevant to the period under discussion is the legend of Prometheus (which translates as "forethought"). The story is familiar; Zeus is punishing the insurgent Prometheus for giving to mankind the gifts of fire and certain mechanical arts. These gifts can be seen to represent the idea of art itself, that man's work begins where the natural world ends. And Prometheus's punishment can be seen to come from Zeus's anger at seeing men in possession of tools that will undermine their belief in the old nature-religion. With fire in their command men are not nearly so dependent on the cycles of nature—daily or seasonal. They can make their own summer afternoon on the dreariest winter night; in which case the death and resurgence of the sun is not nearly so awesome. And when the half-forgotten gods become harrassing devils, as is their wont, fire is the surest protection against them.

The human command of fire implies a new freedom from the rigors of the natural cycle with its ethic of submission. For having helped men to escape from nature, Prometheus will be imprisoned there forever. Chained to a rock in the wilderness, he will suffer a cyclic ordeal: his liver will be devoured each day by an eagle and grow back each night to be devoured anew.

In circa 450 B.C. Sophocles included the following as part of a choral ode in his play *Antigone*:

Creation is a marvel
 And man its masterpiece:
 He scuds before the southern wind
 Between the loud white-piling swell.
 He drives his thoroughbreds
 Through Earth (perpetual
 Great goddess inexhaustible)
 Exhausting her each year.

The light-balanced light-headed birds
 He snares; wild beasts according to their kind.
 In his nets the deep sea fish are caught—
 O master mind of Man!
 The free forest animal he herds,
 The roaming upland deer.
 The shaggy horse he breaks to yoke
 The mountain-powered bull.

He's trained his agile thoughts
 (Volatile as air)
 To civilizing words.
 He's roofed against the sky
 The javelin crystal frosts
 The arrow-lancing rains . . . 6

The sense here is almost one of startled discovery at the human character of the world. Sophocles is employing the notion of cycles, or renewal, but now man is driving these cycles himself. That part of nature which can be dominated, he has dominated; that which cannot, he has learned to protect

himself from. There is none of the old resignation here, and the sense of human potentiality is exuberant.

But with Sophocles we are still in the realm of suggestion, and one wants to ask for something more explicit. Socrates affirms a commitment to human society, and a rejection of myth and nature, as explicitly as anyone could ask. F. M. Cornford, goes so far as to say that Socrates "converted philosophy from the study of nature to the study of human life."⁷ Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, tells of Socrates in the following situation: Having been led by some religious person to a spot of great natural beauty in the country, Socrates replies: "I am a lover of knowledge, and the men who dwell in cities are my teachers, and not the trees, or the country."⁸ Here is one of the scenes or situations in the history of ideas that rises to the status of symbol. The key term here is "city": Socrates steered the course of Western philosophy in the direction of social and moral analysis, literally making his life (and death) a study of the relation between society and its individuals. What is important about Socrates, from our point of view, is not the details of his social thinking, but the fact that by distinguishing society—city, *civitas*—from nature so sharply, he cleared the way for a Plato and an Aristotle: for a vision of society, on the one hand, and an extremely conscious vision of nature on the other.

Plato (427?-347 B.C.) was a student of Socrates, and his achievement was to give form to his master's largely unpublished

views, and at the same time bring them forward to a conclusion. He gave the title "appearance" to matter as perceived through the senses and the title "reality" to Idea and Form. Things as they existed in their natural state were merely imperfect imitations of corresponding Ideas. Every possible instance of "red" in nature, for instance, was an imitation of the more real "Redness." These Forms and Ideas resided within a divine mind; and this divinity, of course, transcended the physical world altogether.

This matter of "transcendence" is crucial to the subsequent fate of nature in the Western world. The best way to discuss Plato's understanding of transcendence is to consider one of the main influences of his youth, the mathematician Pythagoras. Pythagoras discovered a peculiar fact about numbers that had escaped men's attention, although numbers had been in service as organizational aids for some time. The fact is that "number" transcends "things numbered." Between seven fishes and seven days, for instance, there is an abstract relation of "seven-ness" that is on a higher level of generality, and hence transcends, both fishes and days. The mystical Pythagorean Brotherhood worshipped numbers and mathematical relations because they seemed more real, because eternal and unchanging, than the world of time and space—of "things numbered," of generation, decay, cycle, and nature. From there is was a short step to the general idea of a perfect, transcending realm. With this Pythagorean notion of an "upper" part of the universe in hand Plato went forward to envision and

describe a vertical world of infinite gradations from the dim nether world of appearances at the bottom to the perfect Ideas, Numbers, and Archetypes at the apex. He gave early and classical form to a view of the world that would come to be known as a "chain of being."

While this imagery of verticality seems recondite, it had actually had a prelude in the developments of late pagan religion. The gods were originally immanent in nature, but the chief god was significantly immanent in a particular region of nature: the sky. Zeus's manifestations were usually airborne—birds, thunder, lightening. But in the later days of the pagan world, most of the principle gods had left the earth for the sky as well. In his *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*, Jean Seznec suggests a general upward evolution. He writes: "This identification of the gods with the astral bodies, which had been fully accomplished by the end of the pagan era, was the end product of a complex and steady development."⁹ In other words, nature-religion had been compromised to some extent even before it was challenged. It is probably safe to say that the gods evacuated terrestrial nature in exact proportion as men were able to piece together scientific explanations of natural events. At any rate, Plato's notion of transcendence brought this development to a conclusion.

The following reflection from *The Symposium* is a good example of Plato's understanding of upper and lower: "The true order of ascent is to use the beauties of earth as steps along which to mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty ...

until at last [you] arrive at the end of all learning, the Idea of Beauty itself, and know what the essence of Beauty really is."¹⁰ Needless to say this world view implied a morality: "ascent" involved a departure from matter and its allies, the flesh and the senses. Upon dying the good man would rise to become a purified, disembodied soul or Idea, while the evil man would experience metempsychosis into animality—becoming a beast literally, as in life he had been metaphorically.

This potent morality of transcendence energized Plato's whole theory of society and its antithesis to nature. In the following passage from *The Laws* Plato satirizes the philosophy which assumes that the best things occur by "chance" and "nature" rather than by art. This misguided philosophy believes that the only arts "which have a serious purpose . . . cooperate with nature, such, for example, as medicine, and husbandry, and gymnastic. And they say that politics cooperate with nature, but in a less degree, and have more of art; also that legislation is entirely a work of art, and is based on assumptions which are not true."¹¹ For Plato these are precisely the assumptions that are most true; truth becomes more, not less, predominant as one moves in the direction of less nature and more art. And this movement reaches a kind of climax in "legislation," in the effort to establish civil society.

With the prying apart of the human and natural worlds in Socrates and Plato, the analysis of human society and art begins. And so, ironically, does genuine analysis of nature. Nature

no less than humanity could now become an object of specific and conscious examination in a way it never could so long as matter, man, and idea were all wound together in a preconscious polysynthesis. Such a development awaited only a single, gifted student who, while being imbued with the sophisticated distinctions of the Academy, would argue with Plato's particular emphasis. Such a student emerged almost immediately.

Aristotle wrote the following in his *On the Parts of Animals*: "It remains to treat of the nature of [*natura rerum*] living creatures, omitting nothing, whether of higher or lower dignity. For even in the case of creatures, the complexion of which is disagreeable to the senses, nature [*natura*], who fashioned them, nevertheless affords an extraordinary pleasure to anyone with a philosophic disposition . . ." ¹² Two features are especially prominent here. First, here are *natura rerum* and *natura* together, an example of the linguistic development discussed above. And second, one notes that while Aristotle is familiar with terms like "low" and "high," his interest is explicitly directed in this case to the "low"—the animal world. And it is interesting that intelligence ("philosophic disposition") plays an opposite role to what it plays in Plato: instead of leading away from nature, it leads to an awareness of the beauty inherent even in the "low"—in creatures of "disagreeable complexions." The things of nature are worthy in themselves, not merely as signposts to something higher. Nature is not even the path to its creator.

While Aristotle does employ a concept of divinity, his vision of nature does not depend upon it. He conceives of a world self-generated and infused with innate potentialities: it is a stone's "nature" to fall, a fire's to rise. This self-sufficiency attributed to nature, especially the notion of an eternal world, has led many to see in Aristotle a form of the old nature-religion of his forebears. This interpretation is doubtful; when Aristotle uses the word "God," he does not mean just the inherent tendencies in nature, but something more akin to Plato's transcendent deity. For Aristotle, no less than Plato, "nature could no longer contain God."¹³ Nor could it contain human morality, as Aristotle points out in this passage from the *Ethics*: "This is the relation between natural and true virtue; that is to say, between the good qualities we share with the lower animals and those which belong only to man."¹⁴ However, the absence of God or true virtue in nature did not mean for Aristotle, as it had for Plato, that philosophy should soar toward the empyrean. Nature alone, although it lacked these important attributes, was nonetheless a sufficient and legitimate object for study and enthusiasm.

The modern reader feels comfortable in the presence of Aristotle's "nature," and this feeling has a certain validity. As *The Republic* in the realm of social analysis, in the realm of nature study Aristotle's focus on the physical world embodies a clarity different from anything that had gone before. His "nature" is remarkably free of associations which have

since come to be regarded as incongruous. This clarity extends to a careful enumeration of distinct senses of the term: four are explored in the *Physics* and seven in the *Metaphysics*. Nature is contrasted with man, with society, with God, and so on, providing the basic distinctions concerning "nature" as would still appear in Boas and Lovejoy's recent compilation of a full sixty-seven senses of the term.¹⁵ But it is not only Aristotle's abstract speculation on the word "nature" that renders him significant here, but his specific approach to the world he impounded within the category "natural." He is essentially a biologist and physicist employing the tools of observation and logic to draw out the character of natural phenomena and processes. His encyclopedia of the nonhuman world endured literally for centuries.

Plato and Aristotle were not the only thinkers to describe this sense of a disparity between the human and natural worlds. Roughly coeval with the Academy, yet apparently not influenced by it, were the Sophists; and in their *Antiphon* they drew what Cornford calls "The first distinction between the laws of the state and the laws of nature."¹⁶ The historian of ideas Karl Popper supports this view, making it more specific in that he sees the Sophist Protagoras as the first to utilize the contrast. But with Protagoras the moral weight falls wholly in favor of nature: social law is merely convention, the individual should discern and follow the law of nature.

Plato, Aristotle, and Protagoras thus differed widely in their view of the world, society, and morality; but they

held in common the belief that man and nature are distinct. By agreeing and disagreeing in this way, theirs was the prototype of many discussions to come.

The seeds of a major debate were present in Greece. But these seeds never matured, because Greece never broke decisively with its pagan roots. Greek society had been, after all, a somewhat artificial unit thrown together to deal with Persian invasion, and the possibility of reversion to tribalism was constant. The ancient world of nature gods and cyclic time was only thinly covered by alternative interpretations—ideas of a transcending religion, society, or morality. The character of Greek culture is ambiguous; classical Greece is greatly admired in this century, and yet it is unclear whether we respond so warmly to lofty cultivation or to pagan vitality.

4.

There is no corresponding ambiguity about the Roman achievement. Either one admires massive social organization, or one admires nothing. Human society was ubiquitous, it seeped into the most hidden places and embraced a world. Nature was given an indelibly human stamp as modifications transformed the environment. For thousands of square miles north and south of the Mediterranean the conquered land (both meanings apply) underwent "centuriation"—division into plots 776 yards square. Long, straight roads sped over the landscape with little regard for hill, stream, or forest. And in the human sphere, the outlying nature-worshipping tribes underwent

an analagous transformation. Social and economic historian Michael Rostovtzeff writes that "The Romans introduced urban life and urban mentality of Greco-Italian type into areas of almost purely tribal and village life."¹⁷ In this voraciously human world, nature was a major concern.

The Romans inherited the man-nature contrast in nascent form from Greek thinkers. They brought it into the main Western tradition of ideas where it quickly made its way to the status of a master concept. The rough distinction between nature and city (*civitas*) became in Rome the well-known nature versus civilization. The Augustan era produced a great body of writing in which it played an informing role.

The moral weight could be fastened to either side—to nature or to civilization. Ovid (43 B.C.-17 A.D.), for instance, employed the conception of a Golden Age, contrasting corrupt and "artificial" Rome with the simpler world of the past when men had lived in harmony with both nature and their own natures. Such ideas find classic utterance in the poetry of Virgil (70-19 B.C.). The tension between life in Rome and life in the country is central to the *Eclogues*. The following passage is from the first *Eclogue*, sometimes entitled "The Dispossessed" because a political maneuver in the capital has just displaced a number of small landholders and the soldiers from some successful military campaign are to be awarded the expropriated estates. The theme throughout concerns the ways in which the city can alienate men from nature. The passage is a dialogue between Tityrus, who remains on his land, and

Meliboeus, who has been evicted. Meliboeus begins:

Tityrus, while you lie there at ease under the awning of a spreading beech and practise country songs on a light shepherd's pipe, I have to bid good-bye to the fields and plough-lands that I love. Exile for me. Tityrus—and you lie sprawling in the shade, teaching the woods to echo back the charms of Amaryllis. . . . Here, amid familiar streams and holy springs you will woo the coolness of the shade; here the hedge that ever keeps your neighbour's boundary, where bees of Hybla feed on the willow blossoms, shall often with light murmuring lull you into sleep; here under the lofty rock shall rise the leaf-gatherer's song; nor all the while shall the hoarse wood-pigeons, your delight,¹⁸ or the turtle on the elm's aery top cease to moan.

The image of the "echo" is important here, as it is one of the first in a long tradition of images for expressing intimacy, reciprocity, between man and nature. Another thing worth noting is that while Meliboeus is expelled by society from his intimacy with nature Tityrus is in a situation where nature itself holds off human society, "the hedge keeps your neighbour's boundary." It is the sum of small things such as this that creates the overall effect of an irreducible tension between society and nature. But the most interesting aspect of the passage is that the exciting rhapsody comes from the man who is expelled from nature. Tityrus's replies, although he remains in this intimacy, have little lyric intensity. This conforms to a general pattern: In order to appreciate the wonders of nature it is necessary to observe from a distance. This is the context of Virgil's pastoral as a whole; from the vantage point of an incredibly complex social environment it was possible to describe nature with a loving, almost maudlin, attention that would have seemed incongruous to

the pagan.

Ovid and Virgil are generally reckoned to stand in the tradition of "soft" primitivism or naturalism,¹⁹ since their commitment is not really to nature itself, but rather to a different arrangement between society and nature, or a partial "return to nature" wherein the amenities of social life and art would not be abandoned. This is evident in the passage cited above from the first *Eclogue*: Virgil's ideal is not nature alone, but nature mixed in some ideal proportion with art. One plays a pipe, gathers the leaves, and so on. Ovid and Virgil draw up before full naturalism. "Nature versus civilization" was for them more a literary device than a philosophical commitment—it was a conceptual instrument useful for locating and communicating social ills. Nature was a stick used to beat society.

But this could not be said of every Augustan writer who referred to nature or primitive life. For instance, at the height of Imperial Rome Tacitus wrote his *Germania*, a study of the "natural men" lurking beyond the northern periphery of the Empire. Tacitus held up to Rome the example of the more virile and virtuous barbarians who would shortly be its downfall. H. N. Fairchild saw this book as seminal to his study of the idea of the "noble savage;" he described it as "more than a bald description of Teutonic life; it is a contrast drawn with didactic intent."²⁰

It was probably more characteristic of the age for the moral weight to fall on the other side. Seneca (born c. 55 B.C.)

displayed a Platonic commitment to society and cultivation when he said that "It is an art to be made good; nature giveth not vertue [sic]." The following passage from Plutarch's *Lives* shows a definite moral weighting in favor of society, but perhaps more important it shows how an idea of nature could be subtly worked into a political or psychological analysis. Plutarch delineates the character of Martius Coriolanus: "But Martius took it in far worse part than the Senate, and was out of all patience. For he was a man too full of passion and choler and too much given to self-will and opinion, as one of a high mind and great courage, that lacked the gravity and affability that is gotten with learning and reason. . . . For a man that lives in [society] must have patience, which lusty bloods but make mock at. So Martius, being a stout man of nature, that never yielded in any respect. . . ."21 The values of society and Senate (reason, affability, forethought) are contrasted sharply against the ways of the unsocial individual (passion, choler, unsocialised intelligence), which Plutarch identifies as "natural" characteristics.

Thus did nature become a rhetorical and literary tool; and in oratory or on the page it was capable of almost endless manipulation and complication.

III.

HEBREWS AND EARLY CHRISTIANS: LIFTING MAN OUT OF NATURE

The medieval view of nature is a difficult subject. In his massive study of nature and culture, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, Clarence Glacken called it "intractable." However, the Christian era is seminal to the accumulating Western vision of nature, and there is no way around it. The basic difficulty is that contradictions rise up on all sides. But if the Middle Ages can be seen as a series of ages, as most medieval historians do at present, rather than as one monolithic age, many of the contradicting views of nature fall instead into a pattern of development. Early views of nature tend to be consistent with one another, as do later views—although there are exceptions to be noted in either case. Later medieval attitudes to nature are the subject of the following chapter.

When Christian ideas were being formulated, a concrete dramatization of the old nature versus civilization debate was being enacted in and around Rome. This abstraction, merely speculated upon hitherto, seemed to have materialized as "natural men"—Hun and Germanic invaders—plundered and raped their way through the old empire. Christian Rome, heir to a centuries-old urban and social tradition, was confronted by wild and lawless tribal people who worshipped nature gods. Nature versus civilization became less a conceptual instrument and more a tangible conflict. Christian scholars devoted

much of their time to an evaluation of nature. Tacitus may have written earlier of the virtuous natural men, but by the sixth century, when Pope Gregory was actually defending Rome against them, little was being written in a primitivist or naturalist vein.

The Christians sought a vocabulary through which to conduct their struggle against the pagans, a struggle at least as intellectual as it was military. There were people to be proselytized and new visions of life to be formulated and set down. They found their intellectual bearings in Plato and in Judaism. The relevance of Plato's thinking is obvious. The Hebrews in an analagous conflict with their own pagan neighbors had generated an impressive vocabulary and imagery that could easily be brought into harmony with notions of transcendence.

The Hebrews struggled perennially to extirpate their culture from the earth-bound ancient world. The Paleo-Semitic tribes surrounding Israel were primitive people who based their religion and ideas on the rhythms of the natural cycle. But in Israel antithetical views of religion, society, and time itself had begun to develop—"begun" inasmuch as the Hebrews themselves straddled the ground between old and new. For instance, Moses came down from Sinai to find his nation reverted to the worship of Baal; later groups of Jews in outlying Diaspora, such as those of the Elephantine, retained Bethel or Anath alongside Jahweh. Like the Greeks, the sur-

rounding tribes believed that human events embodied cyclic rhythms identical to those of the natural world. Nothing was unique, and no improvement would be lasting; one should submit to nature and fate. And yet, out of this grim philosophy the Hebrews gradually fashioned the concept of a redeemer or savior. The very idea of salvation was at odds with pagan fatalism—the idea that release from the pattern of recurrence was possible. Yet the introduction of the redeemer figure involved an even more radical departure from pagan thinking than that: the arrival of the redeemer would break time irrevocably into two parts, a period before his coming and a period after, between which there would be little similarity. In other words, the belief in a redeemer implied defining time as a past and a future, rather than as an endless pattern of recurrences.

The Hebrew myth of Eden is continuous, in this regard, with the concept of a redeemer. Besides the obvious realization embodied in the myth that man has at one point made an abrupt and final departure from natural innocence and easy harmony with the natural world, there is the important fact that the precipitous Fall is a unique, once-only event. It is a point on a line rather than on a circle. Eden marks a beginning, the arrival of the Messiah will mark a middle or pivot, and the Last Judgment a conclusion. Moses receives the Law from God once; Genesis begins with God creating the earth "in the beginning." Mircea Eliade, in his *Cosmos and History*, discusses the acceptance of linear time: "Thus, for the first

time, the Prophets placed a value on history, succeeded in transcending the traditional vision of the cycle . . . and discovered a one-way time."¹

Augustine and Paul figure prominently in this adaptation of Hebrew thinking. The old conception of the year as the perfect circle of thirteen equal months had already been weakened when Julius and Augustus contended for larger personal months, until July and August each contained thirty-one days and the symmetry of the circle was substantially undermined. In the early days of Christianity it was further compromised by reducing the number of months from thirteen to twelve. Paul launched a campaign against the adherence to seasonal and cyclic rhythms in the rural areas; he reproached the Galatians for continuing to "observe days and months and times and years."² The Christians devised a schema for conceptualizing time as an accumulative linear advance mounting steadily from a fixed beginning to the Apocalypse and Last Judgment: they dated years by ones from Christ's birth, such as is still manifested in the configuration "A.D. 1974." An attempt was made to root out the old mythological names for the days of the week and the months of the year; Friday, for instance, was for a time stolen from Frey, the Norse god of good weather and bountiful crops, and renamed "Day of the Mother of God."³ Astrology, reading the meaning or future of human events in the cycles of the heavenly bodies, was outlawed.

Augustine's typical imagery centres around the tension between cycle and line. In *The City of God Against the Pagans* he refers to "the everlasting renewal and repetition of the same events in Nature," and to the pagan misconception that "there will likewise be hereafter an uninterrupted series of revolving [historical] ages that come and go by." He describes the Christian alternative: "But if the soul passes to happiness from unhappiness to which it is nevermore to return, then there takes place in time something new that is without end in time. . . . In this way, by following the straight path of sound doctrine, we may avoid these circuitous routes. . . ."4

Man's life should be a journey (*peregrinatio vitae*) from *homo naturalis* to *homo spiritualis*, rather than a cycle of rebirths and relapses. One is born "natural," and permanent spiritual regeneration is the precondition to entering the City of God; consonant with this is the emphasis on baptism, symbolizing spiritual or supernatural rebirth.

The linear vision was easily brought into harmony with Platonic conceptions of transcendence. Every point on the Judaic linear system could be extended vertically—this is most evident in the story or image of the Ascension of Christ into heaven. This telling of an old myth, the killing of the young god, although depending on its antecedents for its full meaning, marked a departure. Osiris, for instance, is killed by his people and ploughed into the land, and is resurgent with the renewal of life in the spring. Christ, on the other hand, rises in the spring but then ascends into heaven, there

to remain for the duration of history. The Christian God belongs not in the earth, but above it.

Platonic and Judaic conceptions were welded into a powerful philosophy, the triumph of which is a well-known story, and which has been called by Lynn White, Jr. "the greatest psychic revolution in the history of our culture."⁵ And although the anti-Manicheanism of Augustine and others prevented theorists from setting man in nature in total opposition, nature became the focus of a good deal of hostility. The tone of this hostility is recorded in the following extract from *The City of God Against the Pagans* on the topic of "the miseries and evils to which the human race is subject": "What fear there is of the countless accidents that threaten the body from without—of heat and cold, storms, rain, floods, lightening and thunder, hail, the bolt that strikes, earthquakes and chasms in the earth . . . of the numerous poisons in shrubs, bodies of water, currents of air. . . ." ⁶ This sour attitude never totally dominated medieval thinking (an alternate passage describes "the good things with which the Creator has filled even this condemned life") but it was nevertheless strong while the threat of paganism was felt to persist. Elaborating on the Judaic myth of Eden, already the story of man's alienation from nature, the Christians took pains to emphasize God's telling Adam "Cursed is the ground because of you." (*Genesis* 3:17.) The whole of nature participates in the fall and malediction; and nature, unlike man, can neither regenerate itself in the old pagan cyclic sense, nor

in the new sense of Christian baptism. And ruling over this fallen realm is the fallen angel Satan. With the birth of Christ the spirits around the Mediterranean are said to have moaned "Great Pan is Dead!" But the lord of nature was still very much alive, because Satan is none other than Pan set in a different light. As D. H. Lawrence wrote: "The old god Pan became the Christian devil, with the cloven hoofs and the horns, the tail, and the laugh of derision."⁷ The physical similarities between Pan and Satan are indeed many; in the same vein Satan was commonly called "the Prince of Matter." And of course the rest of the old gods became Satan's henchmen. Lawrence wrote: "The nymphs turned into the nasty-smelling witches of a Walpurgis night, and the fauns that danced became sorcerers riding the air." Professional exorcists went from place to place in the rural areas, where the hold of paganism was still tenacious, expelling the gods (now devils) from their old habitations. The groves and mountaintops, haunts of Artemis and Diana, were sterilized by fire, incense, and incantation. An occasional "natural man" required the assistance of the exorcist as well. The eighteenth-century historian Gibbon described a typical early Christian exorcism: "the patient was relieved by the power and skill of the exorcist; and the vanquished demon was heard to confess that he was one of the fabled gods of Antiquity."⁸

To be in the countryside alone, especially at night, was to take an unreasonable risk since Satan, in the guise of a seducing succubus or incubus, wandered in the darkness. Witches

gathered in covens to celebrate the black mass and perform revolting fornication with Pan-Satan. The walled towns of the Middle Ages kept out more than human enemies; the walls were a vital barrier between town and country. The greater number of medieval horror objects were residents of the night-time world beyond the wall: the bat, the owl, and most notably the wolf and its mythic extension the wolf-man. Thousands of square miles of European forest were razed in the Middle Ages, largely to eradicate the wolf and wolf-man. The wolf-man figure itself is telling; it suggests the horror people felt at the prospect of the natural aspect of man. Every person was still to some extent *homo naturalis* while remaining corporeal and on the earth, and Satan held court in nature within man as well as without. There were several aspects of human behavior susceptible to a return to nature, notably sexuality. Those who allowed their libido free rein might well have the talents of an exorcist directed at their genitals, a part of the anatomy, especially for females, dangerously open to satanic influence. The lure of the female was a definite drag on the aspiring soul; the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the female pudendum was known as the "female nature" in England during the Middle Ages.⁹ It was held to be necessary to repress the promptings of nature and to cleanse without delay, through ritual purifications, what could not be repressed in the interests of the survival of the species. The infant (the inevitable victim of every idea of nature) had to be cleansed from his dire origin, baptized

and snatched from Satan's grasp. The bastard, the child unlucky enough to emerge from a sexual union whose virulence had not been even partially mitigated by the sanction of marriage, was the object of universal scorn and fear; as late as Shakespeare's *King Lear* "bastard" and "natural" were interchangeable terms. As for the woman, even committed to a spartan existence and eternal vows of chastity she was little better than a seducing witch.

Nature within and without man was taken to be a single problem. For instance, with regard to aesthetics the Church was equally critical toward the "apparent" beauties of nature without, and the possibility of a sensual, "natural" reaction to this beauty within. That aspects of nature seemed beautiful, and in a carefully qualified way were beautiful, no one disputed. But natural beauty had to be understood as a dim shade of divine beauty, on the one hand, and a symbol pointing upward to God on the other. It was the duty of artists to make their natural objects represent some divine attribute; it was taboo for them—say—to paint a flower in such a way that it could lead the beholder to reflect on the wonder and beauty of flowers. A supernatural counterpart for the natural image must always be obvious. Indeed, from the visual art of the early Middle Ages one might believe that only fishes, doves, lambs, and lilies were present on the earth. If a thing could not be made symbolic it was not included.

Clearly this could not be an era of great poetry. Poets were forced to work largely without any reference to poetic

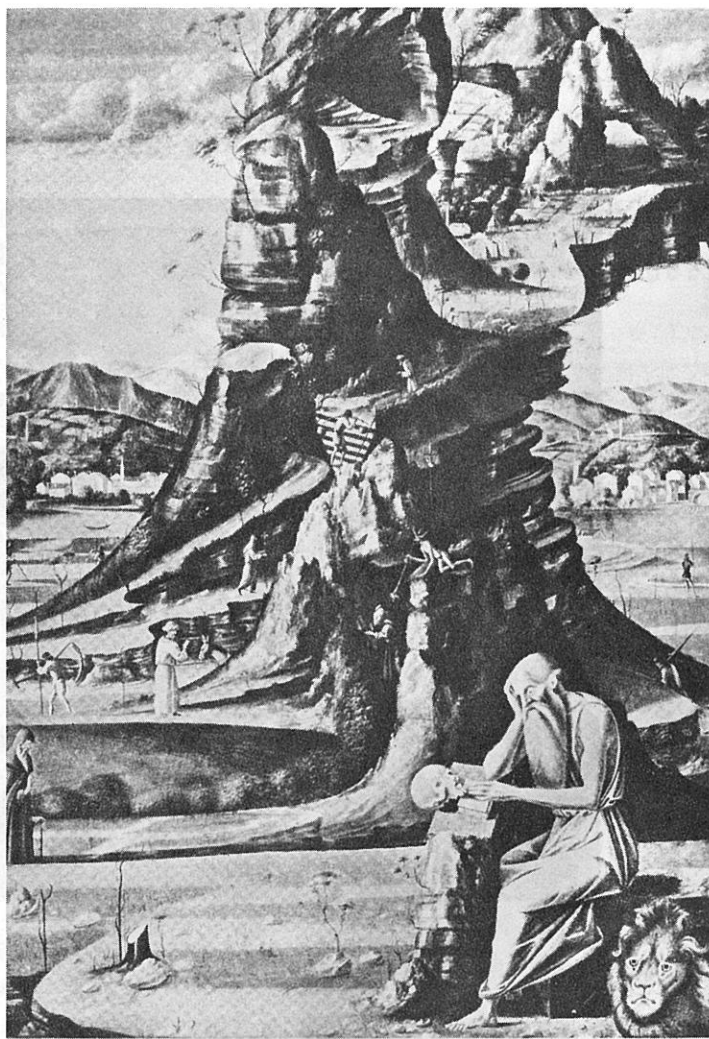
tradition, since classical verse was either unknown or regarded dimly by the Church—although St. Ambrose did manage to bring Virgil into the service of God by transliterating hosts of his nature images into Christian symbols. The constant straining after symbol meant that poems tended to degenerate into stark allegory, with a kind of equation sheet—object and idea—provided before the first line. The great literary genre of the Middle Ages was the theological treatise, which moved through realms of high abstraction and depended little on concrete images, from nature or elsewhere, to convey its meaning. All the best medieval poetry is that which leans away from characteristic medieval thinking in one direction or the other: Chaucer leans toward the poetry of the Renaissance, while *Beowulf* and certain of the Irish poems are thinly Christianized pagan verses.

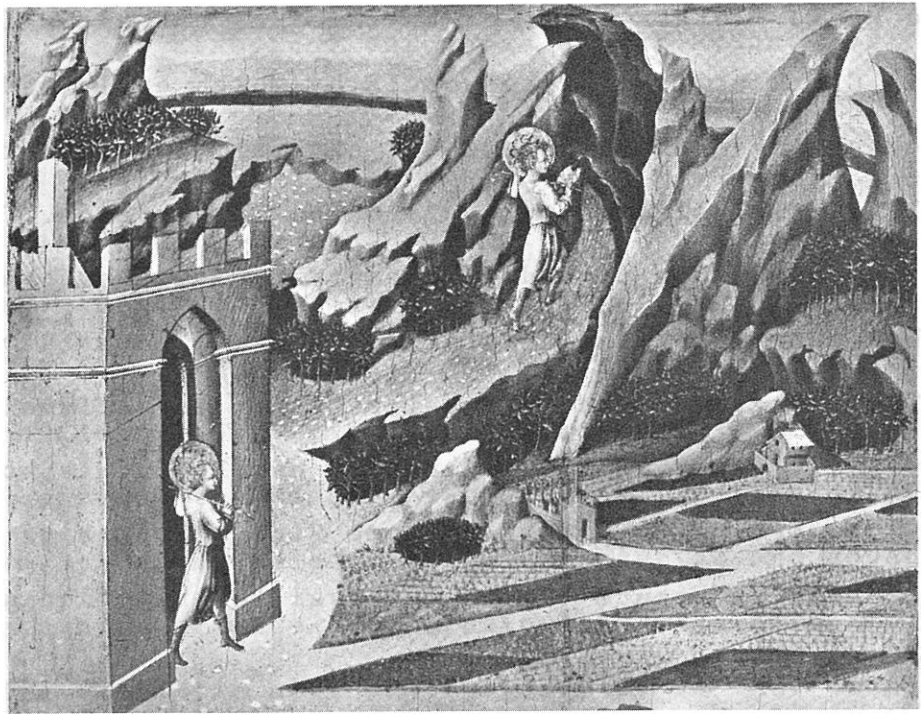
The characteristic artforms of the Middle Ages were plastic: painting and sculpture. These were the best media for the expression of the aspiring soul. The human face was the great medieval subject: the pious, heaven-seeking human face. Further, the plastic artist had a freer hand than the poet to represent nature, because he was in a better position to emblemize objects. The poet could only write "flower"; but the painter or sculptor could endow his flower with an immateriality that left the censor in no doubt about its function as symbol. The painter could create his own flower, or put it out of proportion or perspective; the sculptor could decorate the columns of a cathedral with leaves so still that

no one could mistake them for anything he had actually seen. Kenneth Clark writes: "The symbols by which early medieval art acknowledged the existence of natural objects bore unusually little relation to their actual appearance."¹⁰ It would be unfair not to add that early medieval art has remarkable energy nonetheless, a haunting and unearthly charm.

The background, the natural setting, to medieval painting is obviously the prime consideration here. In his book *Landscape Into Art* Clark offers us some fine examples of the characteristic "nature" which medieval men regarded as the setting for their activities.

JACOPO DA VALENCIA:
St. Jerome





GIOVANNI DI PAOLO:
The Young St. John going out into the Wilderness

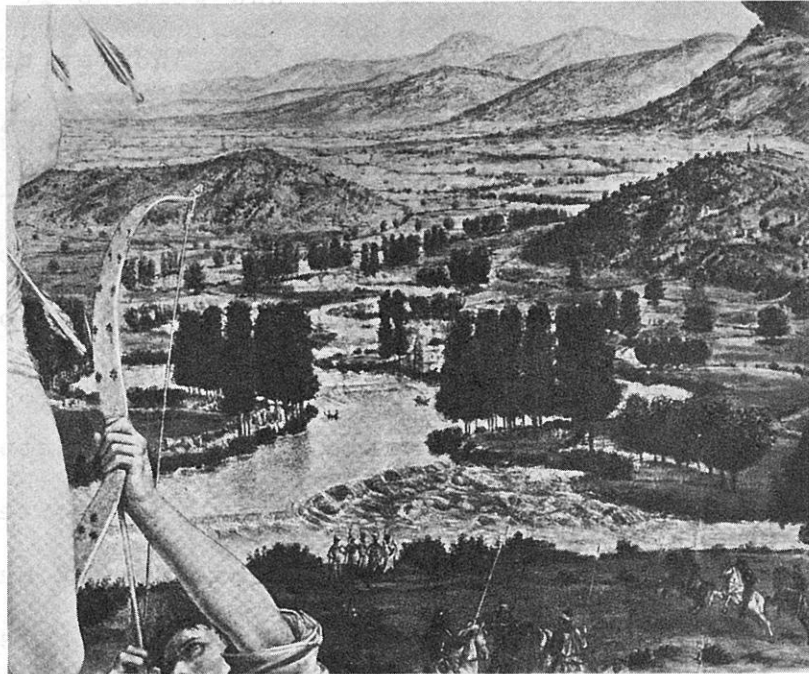


BENOZZO GOZZOLI:
The Journey of the Magi

It was clearly not desirable, and perhaps it was not possible to portray landscape accurately. And yet the human face could be portrayed accurately. Can these painters have experienced a perceptual disparity? Toward the later Middle Ages one finds evidence to suggest that a perceptual problem was the likelihood, rather than, say a commitment to Church notions of symbolism and unearthliness. Over the course of the Middle Ages artists began once more to portray accurately natural objects and scenes. And at the same time, background often came to be compositionally significant in paintings, as it has not been in some earlier works. And yet for a long time artists could not overcome what critics call the problem of the "middle distance." This problem amounted to an inability to bring together foreground and background—human foreground and natural background—although each was being portrayed realistically in itself. For instance, in certain of Pollaiuolo's paintings, wherein nature is accurately and even lovingly portrayed, there is an unbridged gap between man and nature.



POLLAIULO:
*The Rape of
Dejanira*



POLLAIUOLO:

Martyrdom of St. Sebastian (detail of landscape)

The middle distance in these paintings is a sheer void. Some painters did manage to embed their human representatives within an accurately portrayed landscape, but with an eerie lack of spatial relation between the two.

The perceptual difficulties manifested in these and in many other paintings tell us more than all the pronouncements of the Church about the position of nature in the medieval mind. They suggest that estrangement from nature was something deeper than party line, that it was something experienced by people, by different people in different ways. The fear of dark forests in the village had its counterpart in the problem of fore- and background in the studio

IV

THE MEDIEVAL MILLENIUM: THE URBAN MIND POSTPONED

1.

As men moved from tribe to city, to Athens and Rome, they calculated their new positions in terms of distance from nature; they made distinctions in which nature was contrasted with purely human creations such as education, art, and society. But by the late Middle Ages, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the crucible in which the contrast had taken form no longer existed. There were no longer "natural men" at the gates of Rome; Franks and Goths had long been among the keenest of Christians. But more important than that, while the Christians had inherited an urban mode of thought, the great bulk of medieval life was not urban at all, but rural.

Imperial Rome had already begun deurbanizing its territories before its demise, and in the Middle Ages the process was taken to a conclusion. The characteristically urban vices of Rome's bread-and-circus days were acutely detested by Christian leaders, but this was only one among a host of factors contributing to the renewal of rural Europe—factors which have been abundantly documented elsewhere. And as Europe settled in for centuries of rural life, it came in many ways to resemble the former pagan world. There was an unconscious logic in the selection of the new word "peasant" to

denote medieval country dwellers, because "peasant" like "pagan" stems from the old root *pagus* (countryside).

In many ways life gradually came to be ruled again by the old, mythic natural cycle. Despite official efforts, the old thirteen-month year survived throughout rural Europe, and positioned on this cyclic year were an endless recurrence of holy days—in England: Candlemas, Lady Day, May Day, Midsummer Day, Lammas, Michaelmas, All Hallows Eve, and Christmas—which were intimately connected with key events in crop production, with the rhythms of the seasons. Of course, Church scholars had originally attempted to smooth the transition from paganism to Christianity by setting the new holy days at dates similar or identical to those of the old pagan festivals; in the fourth century Rome fixed December 25 as the date of Christ's nativity, precisely the day that had marked the birth of the new sun in the pagan religions. The passion of Christ was fixed at the date of the ancient festival of the spring equinox, and his resurrection at the date of the old resurrection of Attis. Fraser offers a complete list: "The festival of St. George in April has replaced the ancient pagan festival of the Parilia; the festival of St. John the Baptist in June has succeeded to a heathen Midsummer festival of water; the festival of the Assumption of the Virgin in August has ousted the festival of Diana; the feast of All Souls in November is a continuation of an old heathen feast of the dead. . . ." ¹ Although there had been changes in name, these festivals still performed their old functions in the crop cycle.

Peasants and their families gathered at church at the crucial stages of every crop year to pray for the assistance of the appropriate divinity. One thinks of Chartres cathedral with its depictions on the portal of the labors of the four seasons, mixed in with scenes from the lives of the saints, and its great interior designed to contain the peasants of the Beauce who had come to pray or give thanks for rain or shine. Astrology was once again a popular way of explaining events, and it was so little frowned upon that church decor often incorporated a motif from the astral cycle. God was involved with the old natural cycle in a most untranscendent way.

Perhaps "God" is the wrong word. For God had indeed soared up to transcendent heights of being, the conceiving of which few were capable. But saints had risen up to bridge the vast space between man and God, and saints, who often verged on full divine status, were fairly easy to conceive in a tangible relation with the earth. One prayed to the saint involved with the crop one wished to grow, or with the area in which one lived, or with the sort of work required to make one's land productive. After centuries of canonizations, the saints began to compose an elaborate mythology resembling the old polytheism in every respect except name. In fact, many of the saints were literally only renamed pagan gods: Odin, for instance, became St. Swithold. St. Peter was expected, as were the older gods, to provide rain; the villagers in certain French districts used to enforce these prayers in the old pagan fashion, by carrying the image of the saint in procession

to the river, "where they thrice invited him . . . to grant their prayers; then, if he was still obstinate, they plunged him in the water, despite the remonstrances of the clergy. . . . And with the abrupt emergence of the cult of the Virgin, we have something like one of the nature religions of the very ancient world, centred around the great goddess—Artemis—herself.

There is evidence to suggest that peasants in outlying areas of eastern Europe, although nominally removed from the pagan temple to the Christian church, never experienced any substantial transition at all. In his book *Cosmos and History*, Mircea Eliade demonstrates the ways in which some eastern communities have retained mythic-cyclic modes of perception and life to within memory of living men. Robert Graves noted that in the Balkans, until recent times, a maiden would be raped three times in the furrows every spring, to ensure the fertility of the field just as Demeter, goddess of the young crops, had once been. But whether certain areas had ever been effectively depaganized or not, it seems clear that by the time men had again been agriculturally rooted to the land in small communities for almost a thousand years, the old pagan integration with nature had been largely re-achieved. And like their pagan forebears, the peasants had no conscious idea of nature. They were not sufficiently distant from land, forest, stream, and season to set these things up as "nature," themselves as "humanity," and then to ponder the relation between the two.

2.

To some extent this was true on an official level as well. One encounters the word "nature" infrequently in the treatises of the high Middle Ages, an impression supported by E. W. Tayler in his *Nature and Art in Renaissance Literature*: "During medieval times the habitual tendency to pair Nature and Art was held in suspension—present but not tangent to the immediate problems of the age."³ However, while peasants retained or drifted back to pagan ways of living and thinking, scholars throughout the Middle Ages were well aware of Paul and Augustine and their attempt to differentiate between man and nature. Tayler is satisfied to let the contradiction stand: "The Middle Ages managed to assimilate two (contradictory) views of nature, the one Pauline, the other Pagan, and entertain both simultaneously."⁴ To a certain extent this is irrefutable, and explains why at present lovers of "high civilization" and paganism alike find solace in the Middle Ages. And yet, the two views are not entirely simultaneous, as has been suggested above, inasmuch as they are separated by time and different conditions. Further, at any given moment "medieval civilization" was not a single thing for all its members. There was a wide breach between official ideas and popular feeling or customs; a breach maintained partly by the reliance upon symbolism rather than discourse for the communication of religious meaning. The same archaic symbols could serve in the world views of both paganism and Christianity. The Church had allowed the older symbolism to

stand in the rural areas, insisting that the belief in the cyclic recurrence of symbolic events be replaced by an understanding that the events had happened once long ago and were merely being *celebrated* anew each year; but this was a subtle distinction, equally impossible for peasants to comprehend and Church to enforce. If the Balkan peasants (and often peasants a good deal closer to Rome than that) preferred to believe that the young god—Tammuz, Adonis, Christ—was literally reborn now, this spring, as the green shoots came through the ground, there was little that Rome could do about it. Symbolism is a vague mode of communication, however ultimately necessary, and by relying upon it the Church invited broad interpretation. And of course pagan interpretation of Christian symbolism was often aided by a local priesthood both sympathetic and inadequately trained.

The contradictory "natures" of the Middle Ages lived together, separated somewhat horizontally through time, and vertically by the Christian symbols that could be interpreted differently by intelligentsia above and peasants below. Thus buffered from one another they entered many periods of comfortable co-existence, although the old antagonism was never far from the surface, and an occasional Giordano Bruno could still find himself at the stake for his views on nature. St. Francis, Dante, and Thomas Aquinas allowed nature a place in a vision of the world very different from the old abrasive Pauline vision of darkness against light. Christian heaven and pagan earth merge in a cosmic orchestration, and each seems better for it.

There is an intangible freshness in the poetry of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, especially in the songs of the troubadours and in lyrics like the following. The renewal of spring is enjoyed for its own sake:

The earth lies open breasted
 In gentleness of spring,
 Who lay so close and frozen
 In winter's blustering,
 The northern winds are quiet,
 The west wind winnowing,
 In all this sweet renewing,
 How shall a man not sing?⁴

The feeling is that nature is reborn, that the spring is historical as well as seasonal. One thing to be noted here is that relation between man and nature: nature is causing man to be happy, but is not merely a symbol of that happiness. Emile Mâle extends this observation to a statement about late-medieval imagery generally: "Left to himself the medieval [artist] did not trouble about symbols. . . . He does not try to read the mystery of the Fall or the Redemption into the budding flowers of April."⁵

Dante (1265-1321) provided posterity with a great catalogue of late medieval thinking; and in his *Divine Comedy* one sees nature coming back to life in a number of subtle ways. Dante's images from nature are indeed kept to their symbolic duties, but they are also given a definite life of their own. They often verge upon the tactile. For instance, at the beginning of Dante's journey in the *Commedia* he falters, but then experiences a spiritual recovery which he describes thus:

Through that celestial forest, whose thick shade
 With lively greeness the new-springing day
 Attemper'd, eager now to roam, and search
 Its limit round, forthwith I left the bank;
 Along the champaign leisurely my way
 Pursuing, o'er the ground, that on all sides
 Delicious odour breathed. . . .

the feathered choristers
 Applied their wanted art, and with full joy
 Welcomed those hours of prime, and warbled shrill
 Amid the leaves, that to their jocund lays
 Kept tenor. . . .

my wondering eyes
 Pass's onward, o'er the streamlet, to survey
 The tender may-bloom, flush'd through many a hue,
 In prodigal variety: and there,
 As object, rising suddenly to view. . . I beheld
 A lady all alone, who, singing went,
 And culling flower from flower, wherewith
 Was all o'er painted.¹¹ her way

The distance between these views of nature is the distance
 between the early and late Middle Ages.

The new assessment of nature also functions on the level
 of ideas. Dante's quest is for Faith, given person in Bea-
 trice, but none other than Virgil is necessary to raise him to
 the point where faith will become possible (in the poem, visi-
 ble). Virgil, of course, is one of the "good pagans," associated
 with natural human reason untempered by faith, on the one hand,
 and with knowledge of nature on the other. Although Virgil is
 presented as one who wishes he had in life known of Christ
 and salvation through faith, Dante clearly portrays his func-
 tion as guide as continuous with his not having known these
 things. Like all simple believers, Dante has never actually
 opened his eyes; he has never developed his full natural poten-
 tial. But in order to reach out for higher Faith, the kind in

which God is really interested, Dante must go through the stages of natural wisdom. Only one such as Virgil is capable of aiding Dante's journey from the gloomy forest to the flowered paradise where he meets Beatrice.

While paganism and Christianity thus go together, the poem as a whole is Christian. Virgil, for instance, is denied ultimate insights. But more than that, the structure of the poem itself is an archetype of linear thinking—a quest, a one-way journey toward a destination. The harmony nevertheless predominates.

Having met Beatrice, Dante proceeds to heaven where he meets among others Thomas Aquinas; and this is apposite, because Aquinas had expressed conceptually the world Dante expresses poetically. Dante chose Aquinas in his *Paradise* to sing the glories of a truth that stretches from God in heaven down to the abyss; and in this he suggested something of the range of the Angelic Doctor's concerns. In his monumental writings Aquinas (1225-1274) gathered up the whole of Judaic, Greek, and Roman philosophy (such as was available), the whole of Aristotle as well as Genesis, the whole of man, nature, and heaven, and in a prodigious feat of synthesis constructed a vast church intellectual to match the church architectural taking form in the great cathedrals of Salisbury and Chartres.

The first thing to note about Aquinas's view of creation is his constant nonpolemic use of the words "nature" and "natural." The following passage may be taken to express a typical Aquinian reflection "Everything that is compelled

or unnatural has a natural aptitude to be moved by another; because that which is done by compulsion has an external principle. . . . Now God is altogether immovable. . . . Therefore nothing in Him can be violent or unnatural."¹² He envisions a harmony between natural reason and Christian faith. Responding to the query "Whether it is necessary for Salvation to believe anything above Natural Reason," his reasoning runs: "Since man's nature is dependent on a higher nature, natural knowledge does not suffice for its perfection, and some supernatural knowledge is necessary. . . ." ¹³ (Emphasis added.) But both these things are only a preamble to the Angelic Doctor's idea of creation—nature—itself.

In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* Aquinas expressed his admiration for the fullness of creation in the following terms: "The perfection of the universe therefore requires not only a multitude of individuals, but also diverse kinds, and therefore diverse grades of things."¹⁴ Again: "If there were a dead level of equality in things, only one kind of created good would exist, which would be a manifest derogation from the perfection of the universe."¹⁵ In other words, like Aristotle in *De Anima*, Aquinas admires high and low alike. He goes so far as to give them equal places in creation, inasmuch as their being unequal contributes to the greatest possible good of the universe as a whole. The slugs are as essential as the stars in God's plan.

This is the nature of St. Francis's lovely *Canticle of the Sun*—nature still subordinate to God, but with an intense

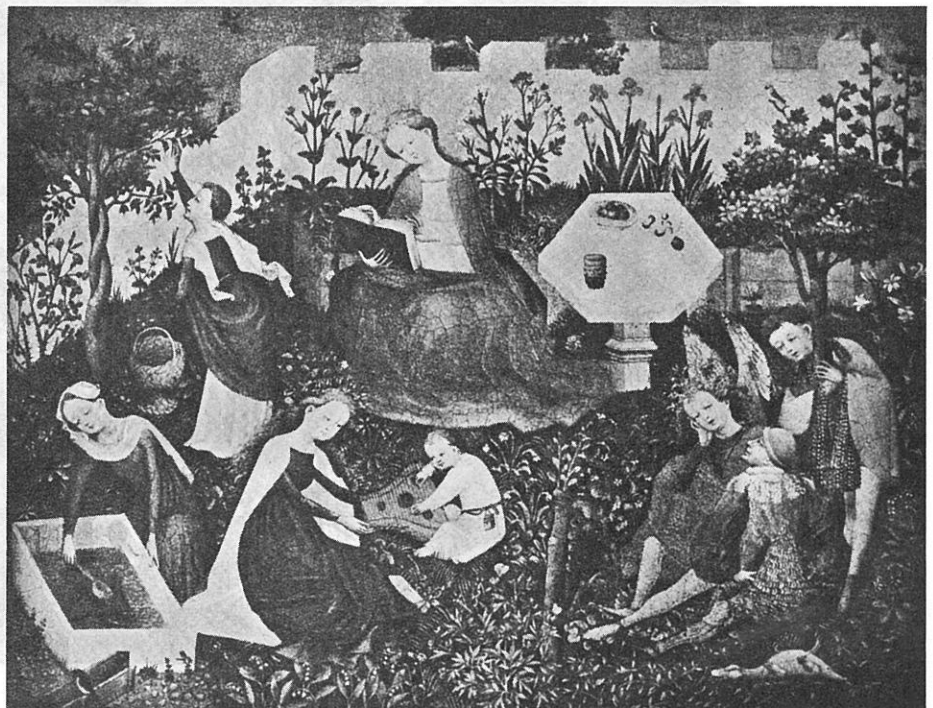
life and independence of its own. The new whole is a consort dancing together, with little to suggest that there may be an ongoing war between Christ and Satan. It is no coincidence that the doctrine of Original Sin, especially as applied to nature, came under attack in this period. Some, such as John the Scot in his *De Divisione Naturae*, ventured close to pantheism itself. The passage in the Bible traditionally employed to balance an excessive *contemptus mundi*, Romans 1:20, reverberates through the treatises of the thirteenth century: "Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made." But in counterpoint with this definite trend, Etienne Tempier, the Bishop of Paris, unleashed his encyclopedic "Condemnations of 1277" against Aquinas, John the Scot, sex, nature, and a host of related items. Nevertheless, Tempier's shrillness is probably an index to the strength of the new orientation.

Once again it is the painters who express a new idea of nature most vividly (and with the greatest economy). In late medieval paintings the distance between man and nature gradually disappeared. Artists moved slowly toward a greater harmony through the use of a transitional image—*hortus conclusus*, the walled garden. This image provided a bridge between the purely human background and the purely natural, a way of putting human representatives into nature without having to deal with a total wilderness. Once again Kenneth Clark is our guide, and of *hortus conclusus* he writes: "Nature as a whole [in the late Middle

Ages] is still disturbing, vast, and fearful, and lays open the mind to many dangerous thoughts. But in this wild country man may enclose a garden."¹⁶ He offers these examples:



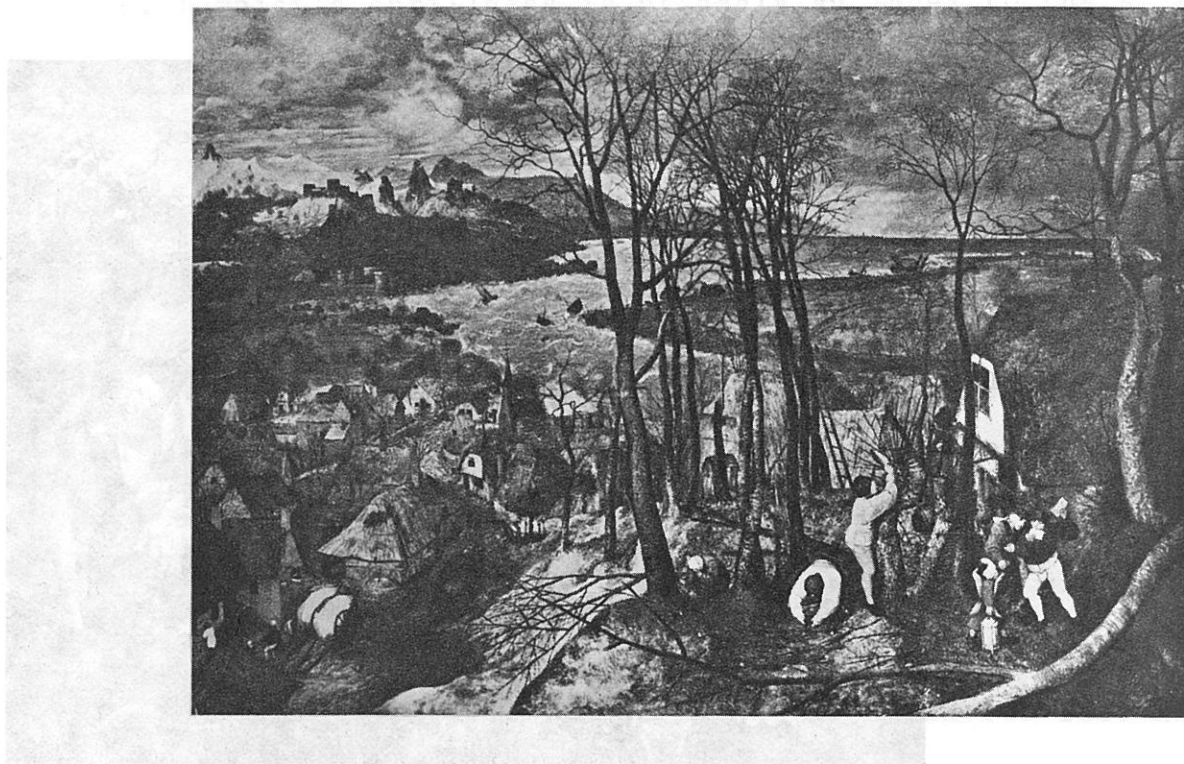
LIVRE DE CHASSE DE
GASTON PHÉBUS (c.1400):
Rabbits



COLOGNE SCHOOL
(c. 1410):
Paradise Garden

But of course the wall gradually disappeared; first it was reduced to a wall of hedge or perhaps a wall of trees, and finally it was omitted altogether. Clark describes the van Eyck painting *Adoration of the Lamb* (1425): "Round the garden are still the remains of the Gothic forest, dense thickets of trees, with their trunks very close together. But the garden is not shut off with trees, nor even with a hedge of roses. Our eye floats over the flowery lawns into a distance of golden light."¹⁷ *Hortus conclusus* was no longer necessary, and it is remarkable how suddenly the convention passed out of fifteenth-century painting.

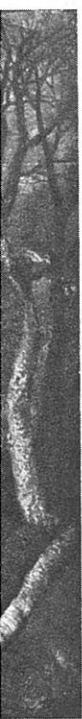
Along with the wall went the problem of middle distance. What had been a problem for the ablest painters soon became no problem for the poorest. Consider Pieter Breughel's *Winter, the Dark Day*, wherein men are nestled into the natural setting almost intimately.



PIETER BREUGHEL: *Winter, the Dark Day*

It will have been noticed that these painters are not medieval at all by conventional categorization, but are renaissance. But visions of the world require time before they can precipitate a corresponding art; and the Renaissance reaped to some extent the harvest of late medieval thinking. Nevertheless, as an age the Renaissance is very different in social and economic character from the late Middle Ages, and this suggests that we shall soon have new "natures" to contend with.

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THE RENEWAL OF DEBATE

The predominance of rural life began to come to an end in the Renaissance. People gradually shed their feudal ties and left the country to become burghers and bourgeois, merchants and tradesmen, artisans and laborers, and finally factory hands, in the towns growing up along the great rivers of Europe. And with that, the urban mind which had begun to take form in late antiquity, which had been postponed by the rural Middle Ages, began to take form again. This meant, among other things, that "nature" became once again a major concern. Frank Kermode introduces the topic: "The Renaissance, which saw the beginning of a change to something like a modern town-life, had . . . deep though ambiguous feelings about the countryside and its inhabitants. . . ." ¹ In fact, "nature" in sixteenth-century England occupied a similar position in men's minds to the one it had occupied in the minds of Athenians and Romans.

But whereas the ancient city dwellers had spent decades finding ways to express their sense of their new situation, the men of the Renaissance found modes of expression waiting for them. After all, "renaissance" means "rebirth," and what had been reborn—or rather rediscovered—was classical literature. This chapter will consider the renaissance adaptation of classical ideas of nature; a separate chapter will consider the ways in which these ideas were allowed to develop their inner logic in this second and more thorough era of urbanization

as they had not been in the first.

England will be the main focus of these two chapters, not only because of the accessibility of English literature, but also for reasons integral to the fate of nature in all modern thinking. In his study *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams chose England as his focus because "decisive transformations in the relations between country and city occurred there very early and with a thoroughness that is in some ways still unapproached."² English experience of nature is the prototype of modern urban experience of nature generally.

In a very short time after its emergence, classical literature had become almost as important to Elizabethan Englishmen as scripture. Renaissance writing consistently incorporated classical ideas and expression. Shakespeare, for instance, brought Plutarch almost verbatim into long stretches of *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and other plays. And the contemporary translation of Plutarch's *Lives* was popular among reading Englishmen. George Chapman published his great translation of Homer; Neoplatonism became an intellectual fashion; Sir Philip Sidney constructed his massive *Arcadia*, a pastoral in the classical style; and of course, pastoral became a main literary mode, inspiring virtually every poet of the Renaissance, taking as its model the country poems of Ovid and Virgil. It was not simply that Elizabethans enjoyed classical thought and expression: these writings performed a vital service for the Elizabethan psyche. They provided a vocabulary for handling

some of the situations and concerns developing in the period— not least of which was the growing problem of man's relation to the natural world. The old ambivalences about nature were growing again, and the debating forms developed by the Augustans to handle similar ambivalences seemed eminently capable. There were some adaptations necessary: for instance, the crucial place filled in the earlier dramatizations by the "natural men" the Greeks had themselves barely ceased to be, or by the "natural men" hovering around crumbling Rome, was filled now by the newly discovered Indians of America.

A notable exponent of nature was Montaigne, a Frenchman widely read in sixteenth-century England. Montaigne envisioned a New World in natural America, a land pure and uncorrupted by the accretions of artifice and civilization. The following is from Montaigne's essay "Of Cannibals":

[The Indians] are even savage, as we call those fruits wilde, which nature of herselfe, and of her ordinairie progresse hath produced: whereas they are indeed those which ourselves have altered by our artificiall devices, and diverted from their common order, we should rather term savage. In those are the true and most profitable vertues, and naturall properties most lively and vigorous, which in these we have bastardised, applying them to the pleasure of our corrupted taste. And if notwithstanding, in diverse fruits of those [American] countries that were never tilled, we shall find, that in respect of ours they are most excellent, and as delicate unto our taste; there is no reason, arte should gain the point of honour of our great and puissant mother Nature. We have so much by our inventions surcharged the beauties and riches of her workes, that we have altogether overchoaked her; yet where ever her puritie shineth, she makes our vain and frivolous enterprises wonderfully ashamed.³

Montaigne concludes the piece with the inevitable nod in the direction of classical naturalism, citing three lines from Propertius:

Ivies spring better of their own accord,
 Unhanted plots much fairer trees afford.
 Birds by no art much sweeter notes record.

Many literary men took up Montaigne's position. Michael Drayton, for instance, wrote of "sun-burnt Indians/ That know no other wealth but Peace and Pleasure."⁴ The Golden Age was once again a popular poetic theme; and in the Renaissance Greek shepherd and American Indian lived in serene tranquillity on Arcadian slopes.

And of course this vision was counterpointed step by step along the way by antinaturalism. George Sandys, an eminent man of the Renaissance, compared the Indians of America with the Greek Cyclops, emphasizing the crucial civilizing role played by art in either case:

The Cyclops were a salvage people . . . unsociable amongst themselves, and inhumane to strangers: And no marvaile, when lawlesse, and subject to no government, the bond of society: which gives to every man his owne, supressing vice, and advancing vertue, the two maine columnes of a Common-wealth. . . . Man is a politicall and sociable creature: they therefore are to be numbered among the beasts who renounce society, whereby they are destitute of lawes, the ordination of civility. Such Polyphemus: . . . more salvage . . . are the West-Indians at this day.⁵

It is curious how "the evidence" managed to support such different images of "natural life." Because evidence there was in abundance; reports streamed steadily from America to Europe in the sixteenth century. Of course, these people did not commonly look at evidence when they wished to generalize an idea of nature. The generalization was invariably well in hand before the sight of the first Indian. E. W. Taylor

writes: "One might imagine that actual encounters with savage men would instantly settle all the perennial debates about the relative merits of Nature and Art. In fact, the voyagers found what they wanted to find. . . ."6 They found either a howling jungle or Arcadian felicity; what they did not find was what was actually there—a form of civilization different from their own. But no matter which side of the debate one joined, he invariably agreed with his opponent on one fundamental point: the Indians were "natural." But there were writers capable of standing back and thinking about, rather than with, the concept "nature." What was a cliché for mediocre poets was an incitement to analysis for Spenser and Shakespeare. Nature receives a full and complex analysis in the *Faerie Queene* as well as in some of Shakespeare's later plays. Since English responses to Nature-America have already been mentioned, the most economical example here will be Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

The play consists of a series of ostensible confrontations between the civilized and the natural. Various representatives of European civilization stumble upon an island in the Atlantic to confront Caliban, described by one of them as "a born devil upon whose nature/ Nurture can never stick. . . ." And yet Shakespeare counterpoints two views of Caliban (nature) at every turn: Caliban is at once a natural man more pure than some of the conniving and corrupt Europeans, and a natural man in definite need of the civilizing influences of education and art. This contrapuntal theme pervades the play. For instat

Which you say adds to Nature, is an art
 That Nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we marry
 A gentler scion to the wildest stock,
 And make conceive a bark of baser kind
 By bud of nobler race. This is an art
 Which does mend Nature, change it rather, but
 The art itself is Nature.

(Act IV , Scene 4.)

Needless to say, this complicated view never entered the main drift of Western thinking.

But certain renaissance ideas of nature do transcend their sixteenth-century roots, in the sense that they found permanent, or at least extremely long-leased, residence in the Western imagination. Francis Bacon, for instance, envisioned a world in which nature and civilization would stand in an interesting relation: nature would not be eschewed, but rather watched closely by men, for the purpose of their gaining control over it. In his *New Atlantis* he described a dedication "to the finding out of the true nature of things . . . and the enlarging of the bounds of the *human empire*. . . ." (Emphasis added.) In his introduction to this book, Rawley expressed the same sentiment slightly differently: the "interpretation of nature" would lead to "great and marvellous works for the benefit of men. . . ." ⁷ The originality of this vision of nature and humanity can hardly be exaggerated. Bacon is not rejecting nature in favor of civilization. (In fact, he speaks quite highly of nature on the whole: "The subtlety of nature is greater many times over than the subtlety of the senses and understanding. . . ." ⁸) But on the other hand, neither is he putting forward any scheme for rejecting civilization to join

nature. His vision embraces a simultaneous closeness to and distance from nature; one is engaged with the natural world in order that it may be absorbed into the "human empire."

Thus although Bacon's theory is complex, in it the old nature-humanity dualism still survives. And yet Bacon was a deep thinker, and his mind does not always rest easy with dualism. For instance, in the following passage from *Novum Organum* (or *True Directions Concerning the Interpretation of Nature*) in which he laid the foundations of "scientific method," Bacon opened with an almost Shakespearean complexity: "Man, being the servant and interpreter of nature, can do and understand so much and so much only as he has observed in fact or in thought of the course of nature; beyond this he neither knows nor can do anything." Again: "Nature to be commanded must be obeyed. . . ." In the same vein, Bacon ends the *Organum* suggesting that this "interpretation of nature" (for the purpose of enlarging the bounds of the human empire) is the "natural work of the [human] mind."⁹ By *reductio ad absurdum*, by being absorbed into the human empire, nature is merely being absorbed into nature. One suspects that this is not so much complexity as confusion.

It is not necessarily so much Bacon's confusion as a growing confusion in ideas of nature—ideas received from an ever-increasing number of intellectual inheritances. However, men selected from Bacon not ambiguities about nature, nor hints and suggestions of complexity, but clear ideas commensurate with their intentions. They found in Bacon a theory joining close

observations of nature to a justification of human dominion, and accordingly made Bacon the "father" of modern technology. And yet the ambiguities at the heart of the theory were indeed of some later use: they made the whole theory extremely resilient and difficult to attack. The technologist could lean toward religion, he could be an upholder of civilization against nature, or he could be a true lover of nature and natural processes; in fact, he could be all of these at once and still participate in the main effort to Western technology. And conversely, the critic could attack any of these tendencies without actually attacking the main effort of Western technology.

The poems of Andrew Marvell come to mind at this point, because some of them contain a negative response to the new technological view. They are worth quoting in themselves, and also because they suggest, by their tone of retrospect and loss, the strength of the new view in renaissance England. Two of the poems in particular have an eerie contemporary ring. Employing the *persona* of a rural mower, Marvell compares the old nature with the new in "The Mower Against Gardens":

Luxurious man, to bring his vice in use,
 Did after him the world seduce,
 And from the fields the flowers and plants allure,
 Where Nature was most plain and pure.
 He first enclosed within the gardens square
 A dead and standing pool of air,
 And a more luscious earth for them did knead,
 Which stupefied them while it fed.
 The pink grew then as double as his mind;
 The nutriment did change the kind.
 With strange perfumes he did the roses taint;
 And flowers themselves were taught to paint. . . .

And yet these rarities might be allowed
 To man, that sovereign thing and proud,
 Had he not dealt between the bark and tree,
 Forbidden mixtures there to see.
 No plant knew the stock from which it came;
 He grafts upon the wild the tame,
 That the uncertain and adulterate fruit
 Might put the palate in dispute.
 His green seraglio [harem] has its eunuchs too,
 Lest any tyrant him outdo;
 And in the cherry he does Nature vex,
 To procreate without a sex.
 'Tis all enforced, the fountain and the grot,
 While the sweet fields do lie forgot,
 Where willing Nature does to all dispense
 A wild and fragrant innocence;
 And fauns and fairies do the meadow till
 More by their presence than their skill.
 Their statues polished by some ancient hand,
 May to adorn the garden stand;
 But, howsoe'er the figures do excel,
 The Gods themselves with us do dwell.

In a later poem, "The Mower's Song," Marvell adds to the mower
 another figure, Juliana, who may be taken to represent the
 growing technological urge. And yet now the mower himself is
 subject to this urge, while in the previous poem he was viewing
 the garden from the standpoint of the fields.

My mind was once the true survey
 Of all these meadows fresh and gay,
 And in the greenness of the grass
 Did see its hopes as in a glass;
 When Juliana came, and she,
 What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me.

But these, while I with sorrow pine,
 Grew more luxuriant and fine,
 That not one blade of grass you spied,
 But had a flower on either side;
 When Juliana came, and she,
 What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me.

Unthankful meadows, could you so
 A fellowship so true forgo,
 And in your gaudy May-games meet,
 While I lay trodden under feet?
 When Juliana came, and she,
 What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me.

But what you in compassion ought,
 Shall now by my revenge be wrought;
 And flowers, and grass, and I, and all
 Will in one common ruin fall;
 For Juliana comes, and she,
 What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me.

And thus, ye meadows, which have been
 Companions of my thoughts more green,
 Shall now the heraldry become
 With which I shall adorn my tomb;
 For Juliana comes, and she,
 What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me.¹⁰

The regrettable loss of a harmony between nature and the human mind, presumably referring to rural medieval society, could hardly be expressed more beautifully.

And yet, keeping to the theme of debate, the whole matter was so vague that around the same time Marvell was writing, Milton wrote poems designed precisely to remind men of their distance from nature. It is in the masque *Comus* (1634) that Milton's vision of nature can be seen most clearly and economically, although the same vision is central to the longer more complicated works as well. *Comus*, pagan son of Circe and Bacchus is attempting through naturalist arguments to seduce a Christian virgin who has wandered into his dark forest—the *Sylva oscura* from which one had hoped to have emerged with Dante many years ago. *Comus* begins with an "attendant spirit" descending from heaven in anticipation of the virgin's plight. At the outset the realms of heaven and nature are distinguished: the spirit leaves

[the] regions mild of calm and serene air,
 Above the smoke and stir of this dim spot
 Which men call Earth. . . .¹¹

On his descent, the spirit describes the virgin and her two brothers, by now lost in Comus's grim forest:

But their way
Lies through the perplexed paths of this drear
wood,
The nodding horror of whose shady brows
Threats the forlorn and wandering passenger. . . .

Comus's background and parentage are outlined:

. . . ripe and frolic of his full-grown age,
Roving the Celtic and Iberian fields,
At last betakes him to this ominous wood,
And, in thick shelter of black shades embowered,
Excels his mother in her mighty art; . . .

That art, of course, is to change people into beasts, and thus to drag them down into nature:

. . . their human countenance,
Th'express resemblance of the gods, is changed
Into some brutish form of wolf or bear. . . .

And when Comus and his band of monsters enter, singing in anticipation of impending nightfall, Comus sights the lost virgin. She has already heard their sounds:

Of riot and ill-managed merriment,
Such as the jocund flute or gamesome pipe
Stirs up among the loose unlettered hinds,
When for their teeming flocks and granges full,
In wanton dance they praise the bounteous Pan,
And thank the gods amiss.

The virgin and Comus meet, and Comus begins to ply her with arguments against virginity:

Wherefore did Nature pour her bounties forth
With such a full and unwithdrawing hand,
Covering the earth with odours, fruits, and flocks,
Thronging the seas with spawn innumerable,
But all to please the curious taste?

The argument runs on in this vein; the virgin's replies are predictable. Finally the guardian spirit and the brothers

rescue her, and they all withdraw to safer territory. "The scene changes, presenting Ludlow Town . . ."—the town is seen as protection against nature, as it had been in the early Middle Ages, and as it would be in the Puritan colonies of North America. The spirit prepares to leave for the realm wherein nature is not merely countervailed by town walls (and poems like *Comus*), but where the natural cycle is unknown—"where eternal Summer dwells":

To the ocean now I fly,
And to those happy climes that lie
Where day never shuts his eye,
Up in the broad fields of the sky.

The poem is Milton's, but the ideas we have seen before, in Augustine.

And of course mention of Milton brings into the study the larger matter of Puritanism—a widespread and popular campaign against the Catholic Church, as it was believed to have degenerated into paganism, and against nature. While Puritanism proper is a subject for the next chapter it is interesting to note at this point that the breaking up of the holistic medieval world view corresponds in its basic pattern to the earlier breaking up of the pagan world view. In either case unconscious naturalism yielded first to a consciousness of nature, then to concern about the relation between nature and humanity, and finally to a rejection of pagan naturalism by the Catholics, on the one hand, and a rejection of Catholic naturalism by the Puritans on the other. In this way the history of human ideas of nature appears to follow the pattern of a natural cycle. Thi

would be superb irony if it were true. However, in the early modern era the cycle was decisively broken: there was no subsequent return to pagan or rural life or anything like it. Urban life became predominant, and urban ambivalences about nature were at last allowed sufficient time to ripen and blossom. The tradition of debate yielded to a lineally mounting tradition of confusion.

Industrialized life...
 Athenians or Romans...
 nature, especially...
 experience...
 relation to the...
 trial...
 men from...
 the...
 the...
 been largely...
 tend on...
 the...
 conflicting...
 a...
 the...
 and...
 several...
 Gordon...
 what...
 beyond...
 or...
 obtain...

VI

THE PROLIFERATION OF NATURES

Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries western Europe greatly increased its population, reversed the traditional dominance of the country over the city, and, moreover, industrialized with tremendous speed and thoroughness. If Athenians or Romans had experienced ambivalence concerning nature, eighteenth-century Londoners living amid the millions experienced more. And if urban men as a species felt little relation to the rhythms of nature, urban men who were industrial as well felt still less. Promethean fire had distanced men from nature somewhat, and now industrial fire would finish the job.

In Greece or Rome the problem of "nature's nature" had been largely confined to the Academy, where it had little effect on practical affairs. But in the fractious centuries of the modern era there is hardly a major confrontation in which conflicting ideas of nature do not play at least a minor, often a major part.

To attempt to arrange the ensuing complexity of "natures" and their functions in practical affairs into a record of their actual order, in a few pages, would be a crude chopping of the Gordian knot. The attempt here is to convey only a sense of what happened and is happening. No claim for order is made, beyond the level of composition itself.

To begin with, many in England in the seventeenth century were Christians of a traditional sort, concerned to keep God in heaven and man away from nature worship. The necessity for a clear distinction between God and nature is expressed in the following stanza from George Herbert's poem "The Pulley":

For if I should, said He
Bestow this jewel [rest] also on my creature
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in nature, not the God of nature:
So both should losers be.

In the same vein, Robert Fludd in 1622 wrote a heavy *Rejection of the Proposition that the Soul of Man is a Part of Nature*. Stillingfleet, in his *Origines Sacrae* (1662) argued against the notion of an independent spirit of nature. Matthew Hale, in *Primitive Origination of Mankind* (1667), arraigned the ancients for postulating a world-soul, *anima mundi*, as well as a single God, thus creating a confusion capable of lasting through all history. Fulke Greville, in his *Treatise of Religion* (1670), made one main point about God: "Nature contains him not." In 1686 Robert Boyle wrote his *Free Inquiry into the Vulgar Notion of Nature*, taking issue with those who "ascribe things to nature" in such a way that "the agency of God is little in their thoughts." The extent of the other side of the picture, nature worship, is implied by the volume of writing refuting it.

What was a gentle reminder from moderate Anglicans was a crusade for the Puritans, who were incensed by what they regarded as a recrudescence of paganism in the Catholic Middle

Ages. The Church had lent itself to sensualism, naturalism and a pagan dependence on ritual and icon. Augustine had apparently been hacking only at the branches of this great evil, and the Puritans understood as their mission the need to root it up for once and for all. They would make the world Christian at last.

Puritan thinkers took as their masters the Hebrew prophets, Paul, and Augustine—the original combatants against paganism. They went so far as to introduce old Hebrew names into England on a large scale: Issac, Joshua, Abraham, and so on. They interpreted contemporary history through supposed analogies with events in the Old Testament, wherein the Hebrews had struggled against their pagan bretheren; Milton saw the restoration of Charles II after the Civil War as a cowardly submission by the people of "Israel" (England) to a "captain back from Egypt."

One of the chief attractions of Hebrew thinking was its iconoclastic bent—the old Mosaic hatred of idols, icons, images. The admission of imagery and ritual into Catholic ceremony had dragged Christianity back into the pagan world. With the remarkable popularity of Puritan ideas, northern Europe was swept by wave upon wave of active iconoclasm; come of the finest art in the world was destroyed in the interests of purity. The Puritan chapel, devoid of natural imagery (carving, ornament, or painting) would replace the old pagan-Catholic cathedral. As for the communication of religious impulse, traditionally effected through recourse to natural imagery of one sort or

another, that could be done effectively enough by words— words from the Bible. The imagery contained in the Bible itself was unavoidable.

As for the polytheism of saints that had grown up within the Catholic Church, the Puritans damned them to Hell along with Zeus, Artemis, and Pan. Pan was once again Satan, and the world once again a cosmic struggle between the Children of Darkness and the Children of Light. History moved inexorably toward full Armageddon.

On the level of practical English affairs, this hostility was loosed against the old Satan-worshipping witch covens that still gathered in remote areas, against the people of Ireland, and against King Charles I—the unholy papist presiding over a thoroughly pagan English peasantry. The Civil War, seen from this angle, was a conflict between urban Puritans and ancient countryside. The peasants, by and large tremendously loyal to the crown, were defeated in battle by the Puritans—aided by the City of London's purse. The execution of Charles in 1649 symbolized the conquest of England by the mainly Puritan urban middle class; and this, of course, involved wrenching the economy out of the feudal past. The later restoration of the monarchy was merely nominal.

One of the major desires of the middle class, and of the many who were business-minded among the aristocracy, had been to lay claim to traditional peasant lands. Of course, the peasants had actually owned little land, but rather had used it (especially the "commons") by arrangement with their lord. Over

the course of the Civil War ancient feudal rights and dues fell aside, even those pertaining to the common lands; the lords could sell whatever land they pleased, and Parliament could enclose whatever common lands it pleased, without regard to ancient rights or customs. An Act of Parliament in 1688 virtually threw all land on an open market; Lawrence Stone refers to that year as the "*annus mirabilis* of the rights of [private] property."²

Commercially minded Englishmen wanted land at this time for two main reasons: First, the European wool trade was booming, and land was needed to graze unprecedented numbers of sheep. Second, if peasant lands could be obtained for this purpose, then the same area that had been farmed by many could be managed by one or two herdsmen, and the unemployed peasants would be free to move north and work in the new woolen mills. In fact, by arranging to have large numbers of peasants expelled from the land over short periods of time, factory owners could be assured of keen competition for jobs and of correspondingly low wages.

This could all be justified by religion. If the peasantry could be destroyed and moved into the city, and if the solid Puritan middle class could get control of the nation and destroy the old relations between peasants, land and agriculture then further outbreaks of paganism would be unlikely. The peasants flooded into Manchester and Leeds; by 1750 it may be supposed that there were very few in England whose lives were ruled by the rhythms of the natural cycle, or who celebrated

the spring planting around the maypole.

From the vantage point of 1821 William Cobbett was able to discern an almost total displacement of the old ties between owners, workers, and land. In the following passage from his *Rural Rides* he discriminated between the old and new ways, between "a resident native gentry, attached to the soil, known to every farmer and labourer from his childhood, frequently mixing with them in those pursuits where all artificial distinctions are lost, practising hospitality without ceremony, from habit and not on calculation; and a gentry, only now-and-then residing at all, *having no relish for country delights*, . . . distant and haughty in their behaviour, looking to the soil only for its rents, viewing it as a mere object of speculation. . . ." ³ (Emphasis added.)

3

Cobbett sold the "new gentry" a little short in his remark about their having no relish for country delights. It may be true that they had no desire to enter into the old relations with labor and production, but a relish for country delights (of a sort) they had—in abundance.

Ironically, once the countryside had been disinfected of witches, paganism, and agricultural ritual, the middle class started to move out onto the land. Those who were successful in London turned their thoughts to "a place in the country"; the cities, of course, had become unbearable with their stinking factories and hordes of uncouth workers. Lawrence Stone writes: "As soon as the opportunity afforded all [the newly successful]

hastened to turn their wealth into a landed estate."⁴ And of course a literature grew up to administer to the needs of rich, unhappy urbanites, a literature of country life, country scenery, and nature. This, of course, is the other side of the urban man's potential response to nature: unlike the pagan or the peasant, he is liable to offer to nature his love. Nathaniel Culverwell was a great favorite; the following passage was written in 1652: "Everything that is natural is pleasant. . . . Every entity is sugared with some delight; every hill is rolled up in some pleasure. . . . Look but upon the beauty and pleasure of a flower. Behold the lillies of the valleys, or the rose of Sharon. . . ."5

This was neither the powerhouse nature of the peasants, nor the virulent nature of Puritan imagining. Rather it was nature filigreed for a delicate sensibility, nature as seen by young ladies from the bow window of a great manor house. In his discussion of "pleasing prospects" in *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams delineated "nature" as seen from this position: a park, a "scene," a conscious landscape created in every sense, complete with full employment of light and shade effects; with water-pumping apparatus for elevated waterfalls and fountains; with viewing posts capable of capturing various aspects or times of day at greatest advantage; and finally as seen through the Claude glass, which, when held before the eyes, would actually provide a frame and mild tinting. Most telling of all, the overall effect was a rural landscape "emptied of rural labour and labourers; a sylvan and watery prospect . . ."

from which the facts of production had been banished: the roads and approaches artfully concealed by trees. . . inconvenient mills and barns cleared away out of sight. . . avenues opening to the distant hills, where no details disturbed the general view. . . ."⁶ And the phrase attached most often to such prospects was "unspoilt nature." Here was an enduring idea of nature—scenery—that found a special home in the eighteenth century.

4.

This scenic, devitalized "nature" gradually came to be regarded as the universe itself, an extension aided by the scientific thinking of the eighteenth century. In his *Principia* (1687) Sir Isaac Newton described a universe of intricately related parts and inherent order and calculability, a mechanical, one might say clockwork, universe. This universe operated on strict principles of cause and effect and appeared to contain no mysteries, nothing untidy or unaccountable. Without wanting to summarize what is described abundantly elsewhere, or to evaluate Newton on scientific grounds, it seems reasonable to say that the Newtonian universe as an idea found ready reception among wealthy Englishmen: they had enjoyed a similar vision of nature for some time, right outside their windows.

Alexander Pope, poet for the Newtonian scheme, spoke for the reading public (the middle class) when he expostulated:

Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night:
God said, Let Newton be! and all was light!

Polite society rallied to these words, unheeding of the peril that might be involved in becoming attached to the shifting word "nature." A mere few decades after the witches had been run out of the bushes, the middle class was prepared to take the formal garden of their own creation as "eternal Nature" itself. Moreover, they were prepared to make this nature the standard upon which everything decent was to be founded, everything from gardens to poetry to politics.

By a process of reasoning too unusual to be treated briefly, a perfect nature was taken to imply a perfect society. Nature was balanced and self-regulating in every way; and this implied that there was no need to create artificial laws to offset the "natural laws" of the economy. These laws were primarily the law of individual interest and the law of the free market, laws given admirable expression by John Locke, and received by a grateful middle class. These great laws kept nature in grand harmony, and, if allowed to operate unhindered, they would bring harmony to the social sphere as well. By following one's own interest, accumulating material and possessions of one's own, one was miraculously contributing to the welfare of the whole: nature was at work effecting this harmony by day and night.

In this perfect society, founded on the eternal laws of Nature, one was bound to accept his position in the cosmic dance; and if one's position was miserable it was nevertheless comforting to know that one partook of the harmonious nature of things. The old doctrine of Original Sin and a fallen world

was, ironically, cheery compared with the hopelessness that descended upon the low in the new universe of light and perfection. If there are no real improvements to be realized, because there are no real evils to be resisted or fought, no one need attempt to amend himself. And social amendment was even more impossible; it was in fact, blasphemous. Here was the gloom of optimism delineated by Voltaire in *Candide*.⁷

The uninitiate need not attempt to recreate this peculiar frame of mind, when Alexander Pope has left such lengthy first-hand descriptions. Consider this piece from the *Essay on Man*, which was advertised as an inquiry into the state of man "with respect to the [Newtonian] universe":

Cease then, nor order imperfection name:
 Our proper bliss depends on what we blame.
 Know thy own point: this kind, this due degree
 Of blindness, weakness, Heaven bestows on thee.
 Submit, in this or any other sphere,
 Secure to be as blest as thou canst bear:
 Safe in the hand of one Disposing Power,
 Or in the natal, or the mortal hour.
 All Nature is but art, unknown to thee
 All chance, direction, which thou canst not see;
 All discord, harmony not understood;
 All partial evil, universal good:
 And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
 One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.⁸

It is interesting that one need not actually see very much evidence of this perfect order that informs natural and social spheres; it is a matter of faith rather than observation, as are most ideas of nature.

The poetry itself is interesting. The exact metrical balances, the persistent rhymed couplets, and so on make it hard to conceive of Pope as the author of the statement that "Nature

is at once the source, the end, and test of art." Like the formal garden, his verse is art (perhaps more accurately "artifice") parading as nature. Of course, Pope suggests as much in the verse cited above, where he defines nature as a form of unseen art (presumably God's). It is one of the great curiosities of the history of ideas how this totally human-created eighteenth-century world ever entered partnership with the word "nature"; how men plumed in periwigs could have avoided smirking as they discussed the natural laws maintaining the social order atop which they were perched. However, one has no choice but to take these Newtonian naturalists or "physico-theologists" at their word, and assume that they were unconscious of the mixture of *given* and *made* in their idea of nature. One wants to ask what the response of such men would be if they were confronted with a truly wild, rugged, uncultivated piece of wilderness: Would this be nature as well? Samuel Johnson, on a walking tour of the Scottish Highlands, found himself thus confronted, and recorded this reflection: "The appearance is that of matter, incapable of form or usefulness, dismissed by nature from her care and left in its original elemental state."⁹ In other words, the identification of nature with nurture, its old antithesis, was complete.

And yet the term "nature" carried potentialities accumulated over a long and varied history that were opposite to the ideals of order and placidity. The hybrid "nature" of the early eighteenth century gradually gave way to something more in keeping with previous ideas of nature—to a nature more dynamic and

less static. The insistence upon nature persists throughout the century, but mainly nominally; because a new generation of thinkers inherited from their fathers a fondness for the word without inheriting the taste for formal gardens.

5.

It gradually became apparent that the self-sufficiency of Newton's "nature" was not merely natural, but owed its remarkable talents to the fact that God himself was immanent in the operations of the universe. Consider this passage from the *Principia*: "[God] is not duration or space, but he endures and is present. He endures everywhere and is everywhere present; and by existing always and everywhere he constitutes duration and space."¹⁰ This conception became popular in a short time; the French scientist Maupertius wrote a few years later of "the host of natural scientists since Newton [that] have found God in stars, in insects, in plants, and in water."¹¹ And as God became identified with nature in more and more explicit formulations, the taste in nature itself began to change. While the Newtonian model survived in the observatory and laboratory, in the popular taste of the later eighteenth century nature began to be conceived as something wild, dynamic, creative, and of course inherently holy. Because if God is in nature, then the holiest of places are those where art has intruded least. As early as 1739 Thomas Gray had suggested that there is "not a precipice, not a torrent, not a cliff but is pregnant with religion. . . ."¹² Precipices, torrents, and cliffs

are not found in formal gardens, and, with the new idea of nature, neither was God.

The implications of envisioning nature as the dwelling place of divinity are not overwhelming *per se*; but to envision nature as the dwelling place of the Christian God is a remarkable development. God had enjoyed approximately two thousand years of noninvolvement with the earth; his transcendent state had allowed him to achieve an absolute perfection that no other deity had ever approached. Any god responsible for all earthly affairs would have been of mixed character; gods with consistent habits and characters were always limited to small spheres of influence. A major deity like Zeus, and to some extent Jehovah, was inscrutable, changeable; a minor god, such as a household spirit, might be steadily favorable and yet subject to being overruled by other gods. But only a major god responsible for literally nothing on earth could achieve absolute perfection; and the one God of Christianity, who aside from the initial act of creation had withdrawn from history and nature, had achieved this condition.

And now this God was to be sought in nature! William Wordsworth imagined he was a latter-day pagan:

I'd rather be
A pagan, suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;¹³
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathéd horn.

But Wordsworth knew very little about pagan, nature religion. If he found his God in nature, it was certain to be the God he

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But Wordsworth knew very little about pagan, nature religion. If he found his God in nature, it was certain to be the God he

he had inherited from his language and culture, the Christian God. No pagan would ever have imagined that:

One impulse from a vernal wood
Can teach you more of man,
Or moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.¹⁷

Here is wild nature, God, the human mind—but not human civilization—wound into a romantic hymn, "Tintern Abbey":

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur. —Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door: and wreathes of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees! . . .

These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart; . . .

And so I dare to hope,
Though changed, no doubt, from what I was when first
I came among these hills; when like a roe
I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
Wherever nature led. . . .

The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite; a feeling and a love,

That had no need of a remoter charm,
 By thought supplied, nor any interest
 Unborrowed from the eye. . . .

[But] I have learned
 To look on nature, not as in the hour
 Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
 The still, sad music of humanity,
 Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
 To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean and the living air,
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
 A motion and a spirit, that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
 And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
 A lover of the meadows and the woods,
 And mountains; and of all that we behold
 From this green earth. . . well pleased to recognize
 In nature and the language of the sense
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
 Of all my moral being. . . .¹⁵

In a thousand poems, novels, plays and essays nature was exalted over society, and the natural man over the artificial or sophisticated. The Lake District became a Holy Land, and hiking in the mountains a spiritual exercise. Jean Jacques Rousseau postulated a whole new school of education: Wisdom and character do not come from society into the individual. They are innate in the child, and society should never interfere with their natural unfolding. Children became an obsession; Rousseau's little Emile, Wordsworth's childhood self ("born trailing clouds of glory"), and all their little brothers and sisters struggled through the literature of the romantic era to keep their divine "natures" pure against society and sophistication. (Once again, the infant is the inevitable victim of a new idea of nature.)

But even in the heady atmosphere of this nature-lovers high-day, the tradition of debate was not entirely silenced. Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in many ways the spearhead of English romantic naturalism, argued over the relation of nature to divinity. Specifically, Coleridge was critical of Wordsworth's lean toward pantheism. Although Coleridge's early verse could receive the same charge, by middle years he took deliberate steps to stay clear of nature worship. In *Aids to Reflection* he wrote: "I have attempted to fix the meaning of the words, Nature and Spirit, the one being the antithesis of the other: so that the most general and negative definition of Nature is Whatever is not Spirit; and vice versa of Spirit, that which is not comprehended in Nature; or, in the language of our elder divines, that which *transcends* nature."¹⁶

But such metaphysical scruples never troubled the hungry thousands all over Europe who devoured the words of Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Keats, as they came off the press. Even the court of Louis XVI in France took to drinking milk under the influence of Wordsworth and Rousseau; and Marie Antoinette's hankering after the natural life materialized in Petit Trianon, a mock shepherd's village on the grounds at Versailles. The turning of the French court to nature was to prove ironical, because "romantic nature" of a more virile kind would soon sweep them all toward revolution and the guillotine.

The French Revolution was accompanied by, and to some extent conducted through, the rhetoric of romantic naturalism. Frenchmen, whatever their specific complaints, attacked ancient French institutions assured that they were striking a blow at artificiality in the name of nature. Wordsworth and Blake revelled in the news of 14 July, 1789. Wordsworth saw "Europe. . .thrilled with joy,/ France standing on the top of golden hours,/ And human nature seeming born again." One of the first things the revolutionary government tried to do after seizing power was to devise a more natural system of dating, a way of putting France back on the natural cycle. The year was remade into months named according to the moods of nature: Ventose, windy; Thermidore, warm; Brumaire, misty, and so on. Nature appeared in almost every literary fragment that emanated from the revolutionary era. For instance, here is a hymn composed by Marie-Joseph Chénier for one of the first of the great civic *fêtes* staged to celebrate the fall of the *ancien regime*:

Descend, O Liberty, daughter of Nature;
The people, recovering thy immortal power,
Upon the stately ruins of the old imposture,
Raise again thy altar!

Come, conqueror of kings, Europe's example;
Come, over false Gods complete thy success!
Thou, Saint Liberty, inhabit this temple,
Be of our nation the Goddess!¹⁷

Nature was also an important idea in analyses of the Revolution which emanated from the years immediately following. In his classic *History of the French Revolution*, Jules Michelet

worked nature into his theme at every opportunity. For instance, he envisions the exhaustion of men under the last years of the *ancien regime* matched by a corresponding, sympathetic exhaustion of the land—nature—*itself*: "As we approach 1789, Nature yields less and less."¹⁸ When he turns to a discussion of liberty, he describes it as a property of man and nature alike: "Liberty is not only the life of man, but also that of nature."¹⁹ The following passage may be taken as typical of Michelet's analysis: "The day when liberty emerges from arguments, and descends into nature, into the heart . . . all is over. Everything *artificial* is destroyed. —O Rousseau, now we understand thee; thou wast truly right in saying 'Return to Nature!'"²⁰

After the failure of 1848 and the Paris Commune in 1871, Michelet, discouraged, abandoned all interest in human society and retreated to studies of nature proper. Nevertheless, "nature" remained a potent term in political affairs long after Michelet was dead. In the unstable Russia of the late nineteenth century, the phrase "forces of nature" was banned from all writing by the censor committee of Nicholas I.²¹

7.

This response was not confined to reactionary hinterlands like tsarist Russia. With the horrors of the Terror many in England reconsidered their revolutionary enthusiasm. Since the Revolution had been regarded as a liberation of nature, the Terror was interpreted as the horror of nature unchained rather than the inevitable backlash from centuries of stern

repression. By 1822 Wordsworth, for instance, had negotiated a *volte-face*. This is expressed in such passages as the following, wherein as usual the infant is mobilized to demonstrate a doctrine of nature:

Dear be the Church that, watching o'er the needs
Of Infancy, provides a timely shower
Whose virtue changes to a Christian flower
A Growth from Sinful Nature's bed of weeds.²²

Besides the obvious "message" here, it is interesting that Wordsworth has reverted to a more traditional scheme of poetic imagery. Whereas in such poems as "Tintern Abbey" natural objects were generally presented as the aesthetic objects themselves, rather than as symbols for spiritual states in any definite scheme of equations, now natural objects are serving symbolically once again: "shower" is Christian baptism; the difference between a "weed" and a "flower" is the difference between sin and grace.

Coleridge was no doubt glad of the change. However, as had been the case with Coleridge before, once nature was rejected most of the energy departed from Wordsworth's verse. His poems henceforth were pretty flat; and his age by that time deprived him of the long period of dejection that inspired Coleridge's poetry after he gave up nature. Nineteenth-century poetry without its suffusion of romantic naturalism was greatly impoverished. But nature had become important to people generally, to people seeking to live as well as poets seeking to write. To expel romantic nature from the popular imagination, where it had largely achieved the status of an ordering principle,

would involve no slight anxiety. There was surely some way to reject the excesses of revolution without rejecting romantic nature as well.

There were three possible futures for the romantic idea of nature in nineteenth-century England: It could be banned, as it had been in Russia and elsewhere (hardly a likely prospect). It could remain as it was; having attached its aspirations to the word "nature," English society could close its collective eyes and ride that speeding vehicle no one knew where, through revolution and guillotine if need be. Given the strength and conservatism of the middle class, this was unlikely. But it might be possible to redefine nature in some way, to make it useful yet safe. This was precisely the service Edmund Burke was able to render his country.

In 1790, when most Englishmen were still enthusiastic about events in France, Burke had already published his *Reflexions on the Revolution in France*, and George III had already declared it "a good book, a very good book." The main theme of the *Reflexions* was that the Jacobins were "at war with nature." Here was a complex development. Burke shared the traditional naturalist's preference for what is grown over what is made, for what is spontaneous over what is calculated, for nature over art. He accused the Jacobins of attempting to reject the society that had grown up in France since the beginning of time; of attempting to effect calculated, artificial innovation. Society is a part of nature: this was Burke's message, and "like a great forest tree, has grown with the ma-

jestic slowness of Nature herself, and its present shape, as a result of natural adaptation to the environment, is more natural than it could be after any lopping and pruning that men could inflict upon it."²³ Men are thus in a way unnatural, while society itself is natural—a total reversal of the older idea that the individual is natural and society unnatural. Burke delineates the glories of the English Constitution, which are

the happy effect of following nature, which is wisdom without reflection. . . . By a constitutional policy, working after the pattern of nature, we receive, we hold, and we transmit our government and our priveleges. . . . Our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world. . . . Thus, by preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state, in what we improve, we are never wholly new; in what we retain, we are never wholly obsolete. . . .²⁴

And just as God had been immanent in nature for Newton or Wordsworth, so now was God immanent in society and its glacial advances. "The awful Author of our being is the Author of our place in the order of existence. . . ."²⁵ It was a sin to interfere with the "mysterious march of God in the world."

There is no question whether the educated public rallied to this new vision of man and nature: it was obviously just the thing to reconcile nature worship with a distaste for revolution. Walter Scott created a fictional form around Burke's formula, the "Waverley novels," which achieved a popularity beyond anything in the preceeding history of secular literature. Scott portrayed ancient Scottish society, rooted deep in the wild and moody nature of the Highlands, hallowed

by the centuries, making its last stand against the modern world through a hundred situations. Here was the true epic of nineteenth-century British Toryism.

Britain discovered its past. The characteristic anti-traditionalism of Enlightenment ideas, the anticlericalism of Gibbon, the anti-Gothicism of Wren's buildings were all supplanted by a fondness for the old. A hundred new railway stations and thousands of Victorian homes testified to the new thirst for revived Gothic architecture. The Oxford Movement revived Catholicism. In the Middle Ages Britain had been truly natural, and the middle class discovered old roots and ties they had been glad to forget a few years ago when following nature had meant rejecting the artificial institutions of society.

8.

Just to show that nature worship had not thus exhausted all the possible forms it could assume, as one might imagine it had with Burke, here is a portrait of the nature worshipped by the German Goethe (1749-1832) in one of his phases:

Nature: we are surrounded and wrapped about by her—unable to break loose from her, and unable to penetrate any deeper into her. . . .

She has thought and she reflects continually—not only like man but like nature. She has kept to herself her own comprehensive meaning, which no-one can make out in her.

Men are all within her, and she within all. With all she plays a friendly game; and the more you win from her, the better she likes it. . . .

Even that which is most unnatural is still nature. Whoso sees her not everywhere, sees her nowhere aright.

She loves herself and cleaves perpetually to herself with eyes and hearts innumerable. She has divided herself up in order to take pleasure in herself.

Forever she lets new creatures grow up to take pleasure in her, craving insatiably to impart herself.

She spouts forth her creatures out of nothingness, and tells them not whence they come nor whither they go. They have simply to run. The way . . . she knows.

Her spectacle is ever new because she is forever creating new spectators. Life is her fairest invention, and death is her artist's device for having more life.

You obey her laws even when you strive against them; you work with her even when you mean to work against her.

She has no speech nor language; but she creates tongues and hearts, by means of which she feels and talks.

She is everything. She rewards herself and punishes herself, delights and tortures herself. She is rude and gentle, lovely and frightful, impotent and all-powerful. Every thing is perpetually present in her. Past and future she knows not. The present is to her eternity. Kind she is. I praise her and all her works. She is wise and silent. You will force no explanation from her, nor bully her into granting any favour that she gives not freely. Sly she is, but for a good end; and it is best not to take notice of her cunning.

She has set me here, and she will lead me forth. To her I trust myself. She may deal with me [as she likes]. She will not hate her own handiwork. . . . For everything she is to blame, and to her must credit be given for everything.²⁶

Burke had drawn up just short of including "everything" in nature; expansive as it was, including the universe, society, and all human history, his conception left a place for the Jacobins to be "against nature." Goethe has left no such space in his: "You obey her laws even when you strive against them." The Jacobin is just as natural as the hoariest king of ancient Britain, and each is precisely as natural as the majestic oak or the weatherbeaten rock on the heath. Nature is simply reality—full, concrete, rich with paradox and inconsistency. The one thing Goethe's nature is not is a transcendent God; God is immanent in reality. One might call the "Fragment Uber Die Natur"

a paean to reality. The religious mood is unmistakeable; Goethe is pausing to revel in the wonder of what is.

This would appear to bring nature to some kind of culmination in the human imagination. However, Goethe's nature never found a place in the general imagination of Western man—as do few authentically complex formulations. Because what was the good of this idea of nature? It was no conceptual instrument at all and could do no mental work since it had no antithesis; it could hardly be something to believe in, since it did not imply disbelieving in anything else; it could hardly stand as a principle for evaluating action, when it made every act as natural as every other. In short, Goethe's nature could do none of the things men had created "nature" precisely to do.

The "Fragment" was never a widely read piece. Even today it is nearly impossible to find in translation; and there is only one major thinker known to have been influenced by it, Freud, and there the character of the influence is not certain. Goethe had beaten all the meaning out of nature by making it include too much. Europe would press on with the nature it had already found serviceable—nature singular and consistent, hence partial and abstract, hence amenable to wild fluctuation.

9.

A nineteenth-century idea of nature that did find its way into the popular imagination was that devised by Charles Darwin. And just as Goethe offers one of the possible culminations to Western contemplation of nature, Darwin offers another. Darwin

brought to a conclusion the trend, followed in this study off and on, from cycle to line. Augustine and the Hebrews had waged war on the natural cycle of the pagans; the Puritans had renewed the struggle; and now Darwin arrived to suggest that the whole issue is founded on an incorrect understanding of nature. It is not merely human history that is linear, one-way, irreversible, directional, but in fact nature as well! The daily, seasonal, lunar, annual cycle is peripheral to nature's main operation, which is evolution, a one-way process of development.

The basic principles of evolutionism are well known. The key concept, put forward in *The Origin of Species* (1859), is "natural selection." All biological forms evolve through a process of random variation (or mutation) and subsequent selection; a form can vary in some way, totally by chance, and that variation can put the organism into either a better or worse relation to its environment. A fish might develop spines along his back, making him difficult to swallow; or a wolf might be born without tearing teeth and quickly starve to death. A mutation for the worse would mean that the mutant would be eradicated, while one for the better might lead to its supplanting the parent form. The phrases "struggle for existence" and "survival of the fittest" refer to the ensuing competition.

The process was only superficially cruel, because it was actually promoting the development of organisms in ever more successful relationships with their environments. Nature nevertheless came to seem heartless to some: nature red in tooth and claw, nature thundering down on maladapted species, nature

obliterating thousands at a blow. There is little of the peace and serenity of Wordsworth's brooding hills and vernal wood in Darwin's fierce jungle, and yet the two natures are not unrelated. In that he postulated an inherently integrated, internally ordered and directed, self-regulating nature, drawing no support from a transcending deity, and yet having specific moral qualities, Darwin stands in the tradition of Newton and Wordsworth. Let Darwin speak for himself:

It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in such a complex manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with Reproduction; Inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed laws of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful have been, and are being evolved.²⁷

Many among the religious were critical of Darwin for seeming to contradict Genesis, wherein it had been postulated that all nature was created at a single moment. Although the "Creator" is allowed an initial function, a kind of firing of the starting gun, thereafter nature had literally created itself. Darwin

was also criticised for making nature itself a divinity. To these critics Darwin replied that it was "difficult to avoid personifying the word Nature." Again: "It has been said that I speak of natural selection as an active power or deity; but who objects to an author speaking of the attraction of gravity as ruling the movements of the planets? Everyone knows what is meant and implied by such metaphorical expressions; they are almost necessary for brevity. . . ." ²⁸ But notice that Darwin has not met the criticism, but stepped out of its path. While the question of the religious character of Darwin's nature remains unanswered, a good positive case can be made. When one puts together Darwin's consistent habit of personifying nature, his vision of evolution as a moral process (improvement, selecting the "good," rejecting the "bad"), and his generous deployment of terms like "exalted objects" and "grandeur," there is good reason to suppose a mysticism of some sort.

10.

It was a tremendous possibility to contemplate, that God was unfolding himself in the evolution of nature and, by the logic of the nineteenth century, that he was also unfolding himself in the evolution of human society. Darwin himself, a careful thinker in most ways, declined to venture into this thorny territory, the supposed analogy between nature and society, but there were many who did not. "Darwinism," as interpreted and applied to social processes by Herbert Spencer,

was a doctrine congenial to the mighty of the nineteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic. Social Darwinism achieved a popularity as a system of ideas and imagery comparable only to that achieved hitherto by the great religions, or perhaps by Newton and Rousseau.

A society based on Darwinian principles had great advantages besides the obvious one, that jungle imagery was applicable to English or American society as it had existed for some time already, and this discovery was a boon to social description. It also implied that society was in line with the latest scientific discoveries. But most important of all, it meant, as Burke had said eighty years previous, that what had "grown" slowly and "organically" over the long centuries was good and, continuous with that, that attempts to speed up or alter society's natural rates of development were evil and monstrous. The fittest were surviving, as anyone could see, and the unfit were being handled by nature. In fact, the poor were actually unnatural in their clamouring for assistance of every description; unless, that is, they managed to get it, which proved that they were fit and hence deserving of survival. (As a general rule, any society that claims to be based on "natural principles" will have this element of "What is, is right.")

Herbert Spencer can speak for himself: "Instead of civilization being artificial, it is part of nature; all of a piece with the development of the embryo or the unfolding of a flower."²⁹ Again: "If [organisms are] sufficiently complete to live,

they do live. If they are not sufficiently complete to live, they die, and it is best they should die."³⁰ (Spencer is talking about *people!*) And as for those neo-Jacobins who would attempt to plan, to govern, to legislate positively, to shape rationally, to engage in the old Promethean venture, forethought, and thus to put society off its natural course: they were perverse and despicable. Spencer: "There cannot be more good done, than that of letting social progress go unhindered; yet an immensity of mischief may be done in the way of disturbing, and distorting and repressing. . . ." ³¹ It was essential not to promote the "artificial preservation of those least able to take care of themselves."³²

Such notions nearly paralyzed reform efforts in Britain and America for many years. The human misery they promoted and justified is scarcely imaginable; and yet the progress toward human perfection was apparently no greater during these years than it generally is. It was certainly no greater than in those Cimmerian eras before and after when men blindly put their hands to the sacred natural processes of society. However, although an idea of nature may become entrenched, the tradition of debate between ideas of nature will always be still more entrenched; and responses to Spencer's nature were not long taking shape.

11.

In America, where Spencer's ideas seem to have taken deeper root than in Britain, some interesting replies developed. Cer-

tain young thinkers, disaffected with the status quo and its supporting ideology, but still confirmed Darwinists in a general way, found the possibilities for a rhetoric of reform within the tenets of evolutionism itself. It was only necessary to revise the Spencerists' idea of nature slightly, in fact, to correct it from a true Darwinian standpoint. The American historian Eric Goldman dramatized the reform Darwinists' insight thus: "Conservative Darwinians had recognized evolution up to the present, and then, for all practical purposes, they had called a halt. Why not insist on thoroughgoing evolution and argue that contemporary institutions could and should change rapidly?"³³ In other words, the conservatives had founded their ideas on a misconception of nature. Society indeed functioned on natural laws, about that there was no argument; but nature was fast moving, in perpetual flux, and society should be as well. It was Spencer and his followers who were unnatural for wanting to slow down evolution and revel in the present. Nature supported no established wealth, established ideas, established economic systems—no permanence of any kind. Consonant with this dynamic idea of nature were experimentation, scathing criticism, and a need for constant re-evaluation and reformulation; and the reformers and "progressives" committed themselves and their books to this function.

But there was another branch of criticism, one which questioned the monistic assumption of both schools of social Darwinism, conservative and reform. Why assume that society is or should be "natural"? In the 1890's Lester Ward, an Ameri-

can, hit Spencerism hard at its soft centre—the "organic analogy." Society and nature, for Ward as for most thinkers in the Western tradition, were different things. He defined nature as "genetic": purposeless, haphazard, and wasteful; and society as "telic": manifesting direction, working toward ends, and generally exhibiting human forethought. He concluded that men were not only not responsible for submitting their affairs to nature, but that indeed they were responsible for discovering and controlling nature's laws in the interests of humanity.

If the law of nature, for instance, was fierce competition, unless this was good for some human reason then there was no reason for human society to attempt imitation. Ward argued that competition was not a human good, that it led to tremendous waste and few tangible benefits, and concluded that men should endeavor to make their world unnatural. The following is characteristic of his general position: "The fact is that man and society are not, except in a very limited sense, under the influence of the great dynamic laws that control the rest of the animal world. . . . If we call biological processes natural, we must call social processes artificial. The fundamental principle of biology is natural selection, that of sociology is artificial selection. The survival of the fittest is merely the survival of the strong, which implies and would be better called the destruction of the weak. If nature progresses through the destruction of the weak, man progresses through the protection of the weak."³⁴

But even in Ward there was a little of the naturalist.

to find fault with any new exertion of human forethought and contrivance. No-one, indeed, asserts it to be the will of the Creator that the spontaneous order of the creation should not be altered in any new way. But there still exists a vague notion that though it is very proper to control this or the other natural phenomenon, the general scheme of nature is a model for us to imitate. . . .

For however offensive the proposition may appear to many religious persons, they should be willing to look in the face the undeniable fact, that the order of nature, insofar as unmodified by man, is such as no being, whose attributes are justice and benevolence, would have made with the intention that his rational creatures should follow it as an example.

In sober truth, nearly all the things which men are imprisoned or hanged for doing to one another, are nature's everyday performances.

But, it is said, all these [natural operations] are for wise and good ends. On this I must first remark that whether they are so or not, is altogether beside the point. Supposing it true that contrary to appearances these horrors when perpetrated by Nature, promote good ends, still as no-one believes that good ends would be promoted by our following the example, the course of Nature cannot be a proper model for us to imitate. Either it is right that we should kill because nature kills; torture because nature tortures; ruin and devastate because nature does the like; or we ought not to consider at all what nature does, but what it is good to do.

[But in reality] no-one, either religious or irreligious, believes that the hurtful agencies of nature, considered as a whole, promote good purposes, in any other way than by inciting human rational creatures to rise up and struggle against them. If we believe that those agencies were appointed by a benevolent Providence as the means of accomplishing wise purposes which could not be compassed if they did not exist, then everything done by mankind which tends to chain up these natural agencies or to restrict their mischievous operation, from draining a pestilential marsh to curing the toothache, or putting up an umbrella, ought to be accounted impious; which assuredly nobody does account them, notwithstanding an undercurrent of sentiment setting in that direction which is occasionally perceptible. On the contrary, the improvements on which the civilized part of mankind most pride themselves, consist in more successfully

warding off those natural calamities which if we really believe what most people profess to believe, we should cherish as medicines provided for our earthly state by infinite wisdom.³⁶

And yet even Mill, with this strong commitment to human society, was susceptible to a kind of "conversion" to Wordsworth at one point, described in Book 5 of his *Autobiography*, "A Crisis in My Mental History." But it was not likely that any more Wordsworths would emanate from post-Darwinian England. Darwinism had largely ruined nature for the poets, and, like Mill, they began once again to regard the human sphere as the proper arena for their activities.

12.

The demise of romantic nature is recorded in some of Alfred Tennyson's poems. Some critics have gone so far as to name him "England's great poet of evolution":³⁷ the sense in Tennyson's nature poems is one of betrayal and disappointment. Nature for Tennyson is precisely what it was for Darwin, but without the implication of direction, meaning, or "progress." In the elegy "In Memoriam" Tennyson recorded an elaborate reflection on nature. In these verses, the climax of this reflection, Tennyson dramatizes Nature's message for the modern world:

From scarp'd cliff and quarried stone
She cries, "A thousand types are gone;
I care for nothing, all shall go.

"Thou makest thine appeal to me.
I bring to life, I bring to death;
The spirit does but mean the breath:
I know no more." And he, shall he,

He criticised Spencer, at one point, as had the reform Darwinists, for misconceiving the nature of nature. For Ward, the failure of society to respond spontaneously to subtle modifications of the environment, as Darwinists had maintained it should and must to survive as an organism, "gives rise to social reformers who are legitimate and necessary, nay, natural products of every country and age, and the ignoring of this fact by conservative writers who lay so great stress on the word *natural* is one of the amusing absurdities of the present period."³⁵

In England the reaction against Spencer was conducted by dignified thinkers; as early as 1854 John Stuart Mill felt that "nature" was beginning to cloy, and in his *Nature* lashed out at naturalist thinking. It is difficult to tell whether Mill is after Burke or Spencer; his argument applies equally to both. He allows that in one sense man follows nature, since, if by nature one understands (like Goethe) the totality of things that exist, then he has no alternative but to do so. But if by nature one understands the sum of nonhuman beings and things, then for man to follow nature is both unreasonable and immoral. Nevertheless, the desire to "follow nature" springs perennially in the human breast; and with the arrival of the Darwinian image of nature, this philosophy could be used to justify the direst cruelties, a thought which inspires in Mill an angry eloquence:

The charge of presumptuously attempting to defeat the designs of Providence still retains enough of its original force to be thrown in as a make-weight along with other objections when there is a desire

Man, her last work, who seem'd so fair,
 Such splendid purpose in his eyes,
 Who roll'd the psalm to wintry skies,
 Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,

Who trusted God was love indeed
 And love Creation's final law—
 Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
 With ravin, shriek'd against his creed—

Who loved, who suffer'd countless ills,
 Who battled for the True, the Just,
 Be blown about the desert dust,
 Or seal'd within the iron hills?

No more? A monster then, a dream,
 A discord. Dragons of the prime,
 That tare each other in the slime,³⁸
 Were mellow music matched with him.

Tennyson has expanded his despair with nature to a general despair with human effort and existence; which suggests how deeply the romantic conception of nature had settled in his mind, and probably in the minds of most sensitive or educated people of the nineteenth century. None of Plato, Augustine, Milton, or Mill would have been able to agree with the sentiment expressed in these lines, or rather with the reasons given for it. They would not agree that a disillusion with the beneficence of nature implied anything at all for the human pursuit of the "True and Just." But for the romantic poets, and presumably to some extent for their readers, the demise of romantic nature appeared to leave the universe a cold and empty vacuum devoid of meaning. In his later years Tennyson turned to increasingly complicated forms of mysticism for the kind of support and inspiration poets had long taken from lakes and mountains.

13.

As devastating as Darwin was for the future of romantic naturalism in poetry, the alternative put forward by Mill and others, the "return to civilization," was little better. It was easy to talk about the values of civilization if you were a philosopher, writing in prose, dealing in abstractions. Mill could have written *Nature*, with its affirmation of social, civilized life, if he had been living through the darkest despotism in history; because his position does not imply a dedication to any particular civilization, but to the *idea* of civilization. But if you were a poet, seeking to realize experience imaginatively, to convey a sense of immediacy and emotional authenticity, the actual prospect of nineteenth-century industrial society wasn't very inspiring. It would be difficult to keep the mind fixed on civilization when the eye was fixed on factory, soot, and oppression. Where would the poet find his imagery of high civilization? The past could always be dredged up—Italy, the Renaissance, Byzantium, Greece, and so on.

The adjustment was gradually attempted. In the post-Darwinian era, English poetry exhibits a halting, often half-hearted abandonment of romantic nature, on the one hand, and on the other an attempt to devise or discover an imagery to carry the values of civilization. In some minds, such as that of Matthew Arnold, the two endeavors lie side by side.

Arnold's explicit commitment is to society and the "new humanism," to education, art, true criticism, culture as against

anarchy; and this commitment implied rejecting romantic nature. The following poem is entitled "In Harmony With Nature":

"In harmony with Nature?" Restless fool,
Who with such heat dost preach what were to thee,
When true, the last impossibility—
To be like Nature strong, like Nature cool!

Know, man hath all which Nature hath, but more,
And in that more lie all his hopes of good.
Nature is cruel, man is sick of blood;
Nature is stubborn, man would fain adore;

Nature is fickle, man hath need of rest;
Nature forgives no debt, and fears no grave;
Man would be mild, and with safe conscience blest

Man must begin, know this, where Nature ends;
Nature and man can never be fast friends.
Fool, if thou canst not pass her, rest her slave!

And yet this obligation to surpass nature, to become truly civilized, never actually materialized as art for Arnold. Most of his cultural thoughts and aspirations are recorded rather in his essays. His poems continue to deal with nature, often negatively as above, but occasionally in the old romantic style. These verses are from "Lines Written in Kensington Gardens":

In this lone, open glade I lie,
Screen'd by deep boughs on either hand;
And at its end, to stay the eye,
These black-crown'd, red-boled pine-trees stand!

Birds here make song, each bird has his,
Across the girdling city's hum.
How green under the boughs it is!
How thick the tremulous sheep-cries come! . . .

In the hugh world, which roars hard by,
Be others happy if they can!
But in my helpless cradle I
Was breathed on by the rural Pan.

I, on men's impious uproar hurl'd,
 Think often, as I hear them rave,
 That peace has left the upper world
 And now keeps only in the grave.

Yet here is peace forever new! . . . 39

In other words, the facts of nineteenth-century civilization made the adjustment difficult to make; and kept nature waiting in the wings for numerous encores. For many sensitive people, the simultaneous repulsion from and attraction to nature became a serious psychological problem. For others, the rejection of nature was an occasion to display sour grapes: for Huysmans nature had "finally and totally exhausted the patience of all sensitive minds by the loathsome monotony of her landscapes and skies."⁴⁰

These problems with nature are given full treatment by Joseph Warren Beach in his book *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth Century English Poetry*, to which I refer the reader. There is neither the space nor the necessity here to chart the amazing complexity of "natures" through the novels of Conrad and Hardy, through the poems of Meredith, Swinburne, Browning, and so on. Beach documents the steady attrition of naturalism, and the occasional "preposterous concatenation of mysticism, platonism, and vague definition"⁴¹ conjured up to retard the process. This is fascinating territory, and anyone interested in the fate of nature in the twentieth century will want to reread Hardy in particular. From the point of view of this study, it is sufficient to note the attrition, and the continuing proliferation of natures, and return to the

poets' positive response—their attempt to embrace civilization.

The *past* was the most common aid to this feat. For William Butler Yeats, a poet who rejected romanticism over an agonized lifetime, civilization was none other than Byzantium. In the poem "Sailing to Byzantium" Yeats rejects nature and moves toward the "artifice of eternity":

That is no country for old men. The young
 In one another's arms, birds in the trees
 —Those dying generations—at their song,
 The salmon falls, the mackerel crowded seas,
 Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
 Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
 Caught in that sensual music all neglect
 Monuments of unageing intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
 A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
 Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
 For every tatter in its mortal dress,
 Nor is there singing school but studying
 Monuments of its own magnificence;
 And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
 To the holy city of Byzantium.

O sages standing in God's holy fire
 As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
 Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
 And be the singing masters of my soul.
 Consume my heart away; sick with desire
 And fastened to a dying animal
 It knows not what it is; and gather me
 Into the artifice of eternity.

Once out of nature I shall never take
 My bodily form from any natural thing,
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
 Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
 To keep a drowsy emperor awake;
 Or set upon a golden bough to sing
 To lords and ladies of Byzantium
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come. 42

For T. S. Eliot civilization was the high Middle Ages as mediated through the poetry of Dante, and to some extent preserved in the High Church of England. Other poets came closer to the present; Ezra Pound found civilization in Fascist Italy. W. H. Auden found it first in revolutionary Communism, and finally in the Catholic Church.

14.

As if to prove its resilience and protean versatility, nature worship found perhaps its most intense expression in the post-Darwinian era. Nietzsche and D. H. Lawrence followed and expressed a "nature" a good deal more dynamic and potent than the romantics ever dreamt of.

Nietzsche found himself and Europe together at the end of the Christian era; and as a philosopher he sought an intellectual foundation for a radically different future. He found it in neo-paganism generally, and the doctrine of cyclic periodicity, eternal recurrence, in particular. Nietzsche attributed the peculiar malaise of the later nineteenth century to the frustration of the Christian doctrine of linear time. As civilization became increasingly materialistic, mechanical, and shallow, the doctrine of hope and progress generated its opposite: cynical nihilism. In order to counter this grim outlook, Nietzsche sought to attack the doctrine of progress at its deepest root; and to do this he turned his attention to the early Christian epoch—to the battle of God against the gods, Church against nature, cosmic cycle against supernatural line. It was at this point that men had embarked

on "two thousand years of falsehood." Nietzsche revived paganism and the cyclic world view, and attempted to "translate man back into nature." Against the illusion-stuffed modern, moral, self-improving man, lately become the cynical, sneering, disappointed man, Nietzsche posed his "Zarathustra," who proclaims "the eternal recurrence of life in its unmoralized fulness of creation and destruction, of joy and suffering, of good and evil."⁴³ In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* Nietzsche envisioned a new pagan world:

Everything goeth, everything returneth; eternally rolleth the wheel of existence. Everything dieth, everything blossometh forth again; eternally runneth the wheel of existence. Everything breaketh, everything is integrated anew; eternally buildeth itself the same house of existence. All things separate, all things again greet one another; eternally true to itself remaineth the ring of existence. Every moment beginneth existence, around every Here rolleth the ball There. The middle is everywhere. Crooked is the path of eternity.⁴⁴

Zarathustra, Dionysus, and Nietzsche himself were a kind of composite Antichrist, an alternative to a dead and rotting Christianity. Nietzsche took pleasure in the fact that his adoption of pagan philosophy was itself evidence of a cyclicism in the history of ideas: philosophy had thus moved out of nature, towards the heavens, and then back into nature again like a great vegetable.

And yet neo-paganism was ridden with problems. As was suggested in the first chapter of this study, paganism is almost definitely not a conscious philosophical position; and a closer look at Nietzsche supports this contention. Theologian Karl Lowith writes: "Though [Nietzsche] intended to revert

modern man to the ancient values of classical paganism, he was so thoroughly Christian and modern that only one thing preoccupied him: the thought of the *future* and the *will* to create it."⁴⁵ It is true that Nietzsche was working for a better future, for the progress of the human soul (the subtitle of *Beyond Good and Evil* is "Prelude of a Philosophy of the Future") and thus his position is inconsistent; because no pagan ever had cause to consider the future even as a reality, let alone as something that could be improved by human effort.

But by keeping free of "positions" and plans for the spiritual improvement of humanity, Lawrence avoided such pitfalls. His naturalism, also neo-pagan in many ways, found expression in fiction rather than philosophy; nature (human and cosmic), sex, blood, soil, and cyclic rhythms move through the poems in *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers*, and especially through some of the novels, like a pulse or a flood. The opening of *The Rainbow* (1915) is Laurentian man and nature at its finest. Here are the timeless agricultural rhythms of a still-pagan England, the ideal from which the subsequent story is a kind of "fall":

Heaven and earth was teeming around them, and how should this cease? . . . They knew the intercourse between heaven and earth, sunshine drawn into the breast and bowels, the rain sucked up in the daytime, nakedness that comes under the wind in autumn . . . Their life and interrelations were such: feeling the pulse and body of the soil, that opened to the furrow for the grain and became smooth and supple after their ploughing, and clung to their feet with a weight that pulled like desire. . . . They mounted their horses, and held life between the grip of their knees.⁴⁶

It would be inaccurate to accuse Nietzsche or Lawrence of being anachronistic thinkers—romantic naturalists unaware of Darwin and the heartbreak of the poets. If the alternatives were nature or modern civilization, Nietzsche and Lawrence alike felt that even after Darwin nature still presented the more wholesome course. "Nature red in tooth and claw" is very much accepted, affirmed, in Nietzsche's philosophy of "creation and destruction"; and the same is true of Lawrence. His farmers in *The Rainbow* are not gentle Wordsworthians rhapsodizing over daffodils and brooding hills, but rough men who slaughter and castrate their animals as the necessity arises, who even drown in nature's floods. And yet through their proximity to the Life-Force they possess a dignity denied to the men who live in the town and toil in the colliery. And the magnitude of popular as well as intellectual response to Nietzsche and Lawrence suggests that nature was still in fighting trim.

15.

It was not in literature alone that nature survived. As Europe moved into the twentieth century one of its characteristic intellectual forms—psychoanalysis—had the old nature-civilization debate rooted at its heart.

The basic ideas of psychoanalysis are familiar; Freud identified and emphasized the function of the so-called "id," the sub-conscious which is a potentially antisocial force that is characteristically repressed, managed, sublimated in order to make civilization possible. Psychoanalysis consists in ad-

justing tensions and contradictory claims between the various mental strata, effecting a working balance wherever possible.

For Freud's protégé Carl Jung this was correct but full of misplaced emphases. He saw the *unconscious* (he disliked the denigrating implication of the sub prefix) not as an antisocial force, but as the very basis of society: the collective unconscious. And rather than needing management or repression, the unconscious needed releasing. One found there not chaotic and irrational drives, but friendly advice. Therapy consisted in determining, usually through dream analysis, what advice the collective unconscious was offering.

What is interesting from the point of view of nature is that the id for Freud and Jung alike is identified as the natural part of man. As Freud wrote in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), civilized life is purchased by the reclamation of nature—by transcending nature. In this passage from his *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, Freud makes one of his many identifications of id with nature: "The creation of the mental domain of phantasy has a complete counterpart in the establishment of reservations and nature-parks in places where the inroads of agriculture, traffic, or industry threaten to change . . . the earth rapidly into something unrecognizable. The reservation is to maintain the old condition of things which has been regretfully sacrificed to necessity every where else; there everything may grow and spread as it pleases, including what is useless and even what is harmful. The mental realm of phantasy is also such a reservation re-

claimed from the encroaches of the reality principle."⁴⁷

But for Jung the id was the basis of civilization itself. True civilization was the primitive community, when nature, cycle, myth had been a direct reflection of the collective unconscious. In fact, the contents of the unconscious, the archetypal images, are precisely the icons, gods, and hero figures of true religion and culture. The goal of spiritual development is something "to which all nature aspires,"⁴⁸ especially the natural part of man. In the following passage, from Jung's reflections on the Mother-Archetype, he relates the archetypes generally with nature, and goes on to suggest a tension between this natural-civilized part of man and crass modern society: "Whether he understands them or not, man must remain conscious of the world of the archetypes, because in it he is still a part of Nature and is connected with his own roots. A view of the world or a social order that cuts him off from primordial images of life not only is no culture at all but, in increasing degree, is a prison or a stable."⁴⁹

Thus one's mental balance might depend upon differentiating between conflicting ideas of nature. But then, this is nothing new: every struggle for the soul of man—Augustinian, Calvinist, romantic,—has involved one idea of nature or another.

16.

As if to exhaust all the possible ways of joining together or setting apart man, society, and nature, Adolph Hitler founded the Nazi ideology on a dedication to nature. He uti-

lized a crude form of social Darwinism to justify German expansion: Nature is "bound to the brazen law . . . of the right of victory of the best and the strongest." Nature, capitalized, appears again and again in *Mein Kampf*, the master-concept in Hitler's world view. Man "does not dominate Nature, but . . . based on the knowledge of a few laws and secrets of Nature, he has risen to the position of master of those other living beings lacking this knowledge."⁵⁰

17.

But if Burke and Darwin had been unable to complicate and thus lay to rest modern debate about nature, an intellectual lightweight like Hitler could hardly finish the issue off. As we move toward the present, the old ways of talking about nature persist. The "progressives" who advocate man's salvation through a return to nature, or (what is thought to be the same thing) a return to the "primitive community," struggle against those other "progressives" who see salvation in greater control of nature, in technology. Each side accuses the other of Fascism, and with good reason, because Fascism has something of each of these plans. Those who are doubtful of salvation in the social sphere have a host of romantic natures to which they can retreat. Those who wish for no changes at all also have a range of natures at their disposal: corporation lawyers implicitly trace the roots of their clients back to the great eighteenth-century battle for the freedom of the natural individual from artificial society; conservative scholars cite Burke, and his modern avatars like Michael Oakeshott, as

they labor to disclose the ways in which natural social evolution is always preferable to artificial socialism; the tycoon contemplates the Darwinian jungle roaring beneath his window, in which his natural fitness is hourly substantiated.

And in the humanities departments of the universities, one group of sensitive scholars laments the expulsion of man from nature, primarily due to "science," while another laments the discoveries of biology and psychology which erode the traditional distinctions between men and the beasts. Science expels man from nature, and simultaneously discloses a humanity anchored in the natural environment.

18.

The mid-nineteenth century was possibly the heyday of contention about nature on the one hand, and on the other of unanimous affirmation that the concept "nature" was a useful—nay, crucial—aid to all contemplation of the nonhuman. Perhaps because of the patent visibility of the mental processes involved at that high point, a sounder tradition of *naturphilosophie* began to find a vocabulary and a home in the Western tradition.

Karl Marx penetrated this issue, suggesting that nature is a variable, shifting physically, as well as imaginistically within the human mind in proportion to changing modes of production, distribution, and social existence. Nature is not one thing for pagan, puritan, and romantic; it is many things depending on the modes of economic production and distribution current in any society. While the Marxian idea of nature, along

with its offshoots, would constitute a massive study on its own, it will be useful to consider a few instances of Marx's use of the word "nature": "*Industry is the real historical relation of Nature . . . to man. Consequently, if industry is conceived as an exoteric form of the realization of the essential human faculties, one is able to grasp also the human essence of Nature, or the natural essence of man. Nature, as it develops in human history, in the genesis of human society, is the real nature of man; thus Nature, as it develops in industry . . . is truly anthropological Nature.*"⁵¹ Again: "The abstract hostility between sense and spirit is inevitable so long as the human sense for Nature, or the human meaning of Nature, that is, consequently, the *natural sense of man*, has not yet been produced through man's own labour."⁵² The following passage includes a Goethe-like insight: "Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material reactions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature *as one of her own forces*, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature."⁵³ (Emphasis added.)

Long before the age of serious pollution Marx suggested an ideal relationship between man and nature that anticipates present problems. Men should neither regulate nor fall down

and worship nature. They should "regulate their interchange with Nature rationally. . . ."54 It is the dimension of relation, or interchange, rather than nature itself, that wants regulating. This insight, although limited, is nevertheless rare. The reader may decide how well these insights are integrated with Marxism as a whole, past and present.

This type of insight grew to something of a tradition. It was worked out by subsequent thinkers, many of them Marxians and many not. For instance, here is a reflection on "beauty" by the Marxian literary critic Christopher Caudwell:

But if art works [are] beautiful, and beauty is a social product, how do we find beauty in the natural thing, in seas, skies, a mountain, and daffodils?

To separate in this way natural things from artificial is to make as dangerous a distinction as . . . between mental and material qualities. Society itself is a part of nature, and hence all artificial products are natural. But nature itself, as seen, is a product of society. The primitive does not see seas, but the river Oceanus; he does not see mammals, but edible beasts. He does not see, in the night sky, blazing worlds in the limitless void, but a roof inlaid with patines of bright gold. Hence all natural things are artificial. Does that mean that we can make no distinction between nature and art? On the contrary, we can clearly distinguish two opposites, although we must recognise their interpenetration. In all phenomena, from hats to stars, seasons to economic crises, tides to social revolutions, we can distinguish varying portions of change, varying portions of the ingression of the unlike. The most rapid evolution is that of human society, of its customs, towns, and hand-made products. The next that of animals and plants. The next that of the solar system. The next that of our galaxy. The whole universe in fact changes, but it changes at different rates. The region of most change, human society, as it were, separates itself out from a background of least change, which we call 'nature'—stars, mountains and daffodils. The line can nowhere be precisely drawn; and in all cases it is man, a social product, confronting nature, and finding beauty in it. Nature finds no beauty in nature; animals do not look at flowers or stars. . . . The sea

is beautiful to a European, to an ancient Athenian, to a Polynesian islander, but it is not the same beauty; it is always a beauty rooted in their cultures [and in their modes of economic production]. The frozen sea is to the Eskimo a different beauty from the warm sea of the Gulf; and the blazing sun of the Equator a different beauty from the faint six-months-end sun of the Arctic.

Those elements in nature which are most universal and have changed least in the history of man, may be expected to produce, in interaction with him, the most constant quality. Hence we rightly feel that there is something simple, primitive, and instinctive in the beauty we see in certain simple, primitive things. This must never be pushed too far. The richest and most complex appreciation of natural beauty belongs to the civilized man, not to the primitive. We may oppose the art-work just made to the enduring mountain as an artificial to a natural beauty, but the difference is one of degree. In both cases beauty emerges as a quality due to man, in the course of social process, gazing at a piece of his environment. The ancient town, with weathered walls, full of history and character, is a part of nature, and yet is a completely artificial product; the sun lights it and the wind weathers it. There is no dichotomy between nature and art, only the difference between pioneers and settled inhabitants.⁵⁵

This tradition of insight and analysis has had some fine successes. However, the social nature of nature, the ideational aspect of nature which shifts as society and nature shift together, and the deep interpenetration between man and nature which this implies, remains an esoteric subject. The dichotomy is still the more popular mode of perception.

CONCLUSION

People looking at the same physical, animal, vegetable world from different vantages distill widely different general conceptions—"natures." With regard to environmental problems and solutions, this study generates conclusions on two levels.

1.

The enterprise of trying to attach our environmental crisis to one view of nature or another is problematic. Speaking generally, the sheer number of distinct views makes it difficult to talk about dominant or even principle Western attitudes to nature. There are specific problems as well. "Nature desacralized since Newton"? Newton found his God in nature, as did most of his scientific followers. "Mechanistic view of nature"? A host of countervailing views, notably romantic naturalism and Darwinism, hold the ground between the eighteenth-century clockwork conception and our own era. "Christian arrogance to nature"? Christian views of nature embrace a vast range between puritanical crusading and medieval rural paganism.

As for formulating new conceptions of nature, this plan is also beset by problems. Primarily, it is hard to imagine how any new conception could be kept from joining and intensifying the confusion about nature that is already rife. In other words, it is hard to see how it could lead toward any real alternative to the past, to the post-Renaissance period generally, with its unending proliferation of "natures" (which of course

is the mentality accompanying the emergence of our environmental problems initially). Ironically, "new" ideas of nature, as devised by Lynn White,¹ Theodore Roszak,² and many others, are often designed precisely to take us into the past—the nature of ancient paganism, or of St. Francis.

A radical reorientation of Western thinking as a whole vis-à-vis nature is not likely to take place within the ostensible time limits. The word "nature" has been the focus of many and contradictory kinds of emotion, and this is unlikely to change without some massive corresponding social and economic change—and probably even then only if accompanied by dramatic depopulation. As in many other areas, action will have to be taken in the face of complex and changing views and feelings

2.

On the other hand, just because the confusion of views about nature in our culture is unlikely to change does not imply that the fact of an environment in danger ought to be mediated wholly through that confusion. But there is little to prevent this happening so long as those who popularize ecology insist on integrating into their analyses their various abstract and contending visions of nature. Do we really need to see God or the gods in nature before we begin to act? Abandon technology? Reject science? In his book *Ecological Problems and Western Traditions*,³ John Passmore suggests that ecology is too often employed as a tool to prolong the lives of ancient battles. He refers to the struggle against science and reason waged by the holders of primitivist, romantic and mystic views of nature,

A NOTE ON WORDS

The confusion attaching to the history of "nature" also attaches, predictably, to the histories of numerous closely related words. One of the closest modern relatives of "natural" is "organic," whose development Raymond Williams delineates in *Culture and Society*.¹ In Greece *organon* meant "tool" or "instrument," and the extension "organic" meant something like our "mechanical." But there was also a derivative biological sense of "organic," in that the eye is a tool for seeing, and so on. In English, "organical" and "mechanical" were synonymous in the sixteenth century; but in the eighteenth century, in writers like Burke and Coleridge, the biological derivative began to predominate, and "organic" became in many cases synonymous with "biological" or "natural." At present the two senses coexist: "organic-mechanical" finds its way into "organize" and "organization," which is commonly set in opposition to "organic-natural, biological." For instance, a prevailing distinction in social thought since Burke is the organic (i.e. unplanned, spontaneous, grown) society versus the organized (i.e. planned, regulated, socialist) society.

Similar confusions attach to many of the usual antitheses of "nature," such as "culture." "Culture," which now means for most people that part of human society that is most definitely human, unnatural, made,—the "arts—is an adaptation based on the earlier definition "the tending of natural growth." The instances of our collective ambivalences about nature are

endless, whether we are looking at explicit ideas and arguments or at the slow and unconscious movements of language.

However, scepticism about particular words and ideas must never be allowed to go too far. Words cannot be easily expelled from languages, and those encoding potent ambivalences would probably be hardest to expel. In his chapter on "nature" in *Studies in Words*, C. S. Lewis concludes that while we can all smile at the woman who loved to "walk along a road untouched by the hand of man," people nevertheless "know what they mean by [the word 'nature'] and sometimes use it to communicate what would not be easily communicated without it."² As the extremes of a conceptual continuum, "nature versus art" has been a useful aid to exploration and communication; as a rigid dichotomy it has been a source of misunderstanding, or rather false understanding. But of course the dividing line between these two uses is never easy to discern.

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I enjoy Winter when I am inside
A cup of tea to hotbottle my hands
A cigaret to mazamaze my mind
A glance at you to prickspurwhip my heart
A glance of you to be no more

But

I enjoy ~~the~~ Spring when it's time to leave
Come on the boat and ride back the waves
Again again let's see the god's rebirth
Abroad I will dislakadaise my dreams
I love the sea because I love

I enjoy Summer when it is over
Into ~~the~~ the vines and bloodspring the red grapes
Never and more let's see we killed a god
And more over let's drink his bloody wine
For you love me for me love you

I enjoyed Autumn when the last bird sang
And fewer caused you my precious thirst.
A cup of tears of silver and of gold
shines in my heart no ~~doubt~~ ^{doubt} what it is
Each time you smile one drop escaped