NATURE AND THE AUGUSTAN
POETS

BY

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I

The deeper one dips into Augustan poetry, the more one
is struck by the frequency with which the word "Nature" (writ
with the initial capital) occurs. Popular superstition may
incline to the view that these antique poets meant little if
anything by the term; but the truth is that several distinct,
but not opposed, meanings are to be found between Denham
and Dyer, who may be taken as the two limits of this survey.
For the origins of their 'Natures' we need go no further back
than to Bacon, and to Hobbes with his mechanical universe
based on motion. It is through Hobbes that Nature becomes
something of a mechanical abstraction of laws; and it is
significant that the Laws of Nature in the Leviathan are treat-
ed, not in their relation to the inorganic universe so much as in
that to a community of men. One of these, as we read, is
"that men performe their covenants made." Laws of Nature
are "found out by reason"; but they are not all powerful in
themselves; "Covenants without the sword are but words......
therefore notwithstanding the Lawes of Nature, if there were no
power erected......every man will......rely on his own strength
......" So we are brought at once to that humanisation of
Nature that was one of its chief aspects during the period.
Nature as an abstract mechanism regarded especially in relation to the human commonwealth, is a conception that explains much of the 'artificiality' in the age and its poetry, and drives criticism toward law and order, and away from excess. As Buckingham says,

Great Hobbes appeared, and by plain reason's light
Put such fantastic forms to shameful flight.

Buckingham evidently did not share Dryden's notion of an ideal Nature, and, in demanding poetry to fit the rule (Essay on Poetry) refuses to countenance "a perfect monster, which the world ne'er saw." In those days the return to nature was, an entirely decorous process.

The Baconian-Aristotelian idea of imitation demanded that poetry should treat, not of the particular, i.e. should not be realistic in the modern sense, but of the general or essential; from which we may expect a tendency in the poets to make an abstraction of Nature. Bacon himself calls actuality "the nature of things," in opposition to the "more absolute varietie" that may be found in poetry. The use of the word 'nature' here may seem to be confusing at first sight; but Pope elucidates the matter. The remodelling of Nature according to rule is

...Nature still, but Nature methodised;
Nature, like liberty, is but restrained
By the same laws that she herself ordained.

(Essay on Criticism).

"Nature methodised," clearly a 'post-Hobbesian' expression, is a good apologia for more than the periwig or "a temple Gothic or Chinese."

The province of poetry, according to Aristotle, is general, and that of History, particular truth; and this opinion will be seen to have exerted its power practically throughout the "Palladian" age. Moreover it may be, and no doubt was, held together with a Platonic theory of art recommended by Dryden in his Parallel of Poetry and Painting, and borrowed by him from Bellori; translating from whom he remarks that "Nature
always intends a consummate beauty in her productions, yet through the irregularity of the matter the forms are altered." Nature then keeps somewhere an ideal universal Beauty which is not always manifest in particular instances; and so the artist, in "imitating Nature" (that parrot-cry of the Augustan age!) takes the universal, and not the particular, for his model. Such a reading of Nature is not irreconcileable with Nature methodised; but it seems to give rise to a third conception, by contrast—the Nature of the particular, of haphazard actuality. Even as early as 1718, in Christopher Pitt's lines to Sir James Thornhill, there is a feeling after it:

While thy swift art unravels Nature's maze
And imitates her works, and treads her ways,
Nature with wonder sees herself outdone
... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...
Still be it thine, O Thornhill... ... ...
To vanquish Nature in the generous strife.

Here is, at least, the germ of the notion that Nature cannot order herself so well, but that man may improve upon her. Edward Young seems to recognise two elements; (a) the divinely directed, which the divinity transcends, and through the agency of which "Heav'n different growths to different lands imparts"; a view not remote from that of Blackmore, Hobbes' opponent, save that Blackmore's Deity is in closer contact with Nature, whereas in Young's Last Day

...The Great Ruler of the world, from high,
Looks smiling down with a propitious eye
(line omitted)
And bids tempestuous Nature silent stand.

(b) An unruly element that may be conquered. Here will originate "the fools of Nature" who "ever strike on bare outsides; and loathe, or like As glitter bids; in endless error vie." There are several allusions to it in Night Thoughts, such as "or is it feeble Nature calls me back?" or "leaving gross Nature's sediments below." Young cut his creed according to
his cloth; and we may gather from Night Thoughts, The Last Day, and other poems, that it was an orthodox creed, and that the two elements (a) and (b) are practically God and the Devil, disguised in powder and periwig. We know that he studied Aquinas, with his theory of the God in whose mind Universals take precedence, which must have contributed to his conception of (a); while in regard to (b), we must not forget the deistic view of a divinely created Nature that has been left to function automatically; Young was orthodox *indeed, but not, surely, ignorant of current thought. He can imagine an Universe not under divine command; but so it falls to ruin, in the midst of which "this rock of ages" alone offers security,—a picture very different from that of a correctly functioning mechanical cosmos.

Young's (a) Nature, divinely-ordered and benign, cannot, like Pitt's, be surpassed by art; and there are two passages in the Night Thoughts where art is attacked on moral grounds; it is art, he declares in the first, that "wipes off th' indebted blush from Nature's cheek, and bronzes every shame,"—art, that is, as applied to life and character. The recognition of art in the aesthetic field comes later; Shenstone, writing in 1750, when taste had swung a few points nearer the Magnetic North of romantic picturesque, throws art into opposition with Nature "unmethodised,"—the Nature of primroses and "the mountain's airy pile" (Rural Elegance). Art shapes "the gay alcove, but Nature paints the field."

Sir Richard Blackmore, though no cleric, was strongly pious, and assailed Aristotle on the score of Atheism with all the fervour of a mediaeval churchman. He impeached Hobbes on the same charge, and calls him, in Book III of his Creation,

* Indeed, cf., in Night VII,
That hallow'd page fools scoff at......
............................thrice venerable code!
Deists! perform your quarantine; and then
Fall prostrate, ere you touch it, lest you die.
NATURE AND THE AUGUSTAN POETS

an "insulting Briton"

Who with contempt on blest religion trod,
Mock'd all her precepts, and renounc'd his God.

Tending toward the doctrine of a God-impregnated universe, he
anticipates, in some small measure, the more concrete and
scientific findings of Erasmus Darwin, Samuel Butler, and
Bergson; had the question of luck versus cunning in evolution
been put to him, he would have plumped for divine cunning.
But he died twenty years before Buffon published, and his argu-
ments are crudely put; Darwin proves his "Great Architect,
Ens Entium" by a minute examination of the manner in which
creatures fit themselves by their own exertions (cf. Zoonomia);
while Blackmore can but grope blindly after a similar idea, in
this passage on instinct:

Say, what contexture did by Chance arrive
Which to brute creatures did their instinct give?
Whence they at sight discern and dread their foe,
Their food distinguish, and their physic know?

though elsewhere he lapses into nonsense, as when he tries to
infer the divinity of Nature from the existence of two sexes.

He might have strengthened his case against Hobbes by a
reference to Sheffield, Duke of Buckingham, though it would
have been injudicious. "Sharp-judging Adriel" was a disciple
of Hobbes, and moreover had satirically described Blackmore
as coming to claim the Laureateship "with a huge mountain-
load of heroical lumber." In The Rapture he carries the
dogma of the rightness of Nature to a point at which Black-
mores's moral susceptibilities might well have been outraged:

Our appetites are Nature's laws, and given
Under the broad authentic seal of Heaven.
Let pedants wrangle, and let bigots fight
To put restraint on innocent delight,
But Heaven and Nature's always in the right;
They would not draw poor wretched mortals in
Or give desires that shall be doom'd for sin.

Proceeding to specify the "innocent delight," he extols
wine and demands "some rural nymph, soon taken, soon embraced." Such, Blackmore might have said, was the result of reading Hobbes.

There are those who will scent mysticism in the discovery of a divine spirit and purpose in Nature; and this discovery is certainly made by the mystical Henry Brooke, novelist, poet and Enthusiast, whose *Hymn to Universal Beauty* appeared about 1736, some twenty-two years after the *Creation* of Blackmore, than whom he goes a little farther and fares a little better. *His* Nature is summed up in a line; "Light, matter, motion, music, order, laws!" But the cause of these phenomena, he continues, is not "Nonentity" but (and here we get a good stage nearer the more emotional view),

"He who inaccessible remains
Yet omnipresent through all Nature reigns.

A footnote, at the same time, seems to hit out at the 'mechanists' who derive from Hobbes: "one of the atheistical unaccountable evasions, is to account for the order of Nature by matter and motion."

Like Blackmore before him and Darwin after him he turns to Science for his examples; but like Blackmore his science is as amateurish as Darwin's is professional. Yet the two Augustan writers are sounding a prelude to creative evolution—that mystical theory—which is not wholly worthless; and poetically, there are flights in *Universal Beauty* which will prepare the timid reader for the shock of *The Botanic Garden*; this, for example, from Book III, on the germination of seeds:

The radicle now obvious they unfold
And to its infant lips their liquors hold;
The instinctive lips imbibe the gentle tide
And through their veins the milky liquids glide,
Ascending visit the inclusive plume
(Where Nature wantons in minutest room,
Where folded close, her implicated size
Of trunk, branch, leaf, and future semen lies),
a description not without value for conveying the quick, as opposed to the mechanical, Nature. The device of personification was here useful to Brooke, as it was later to Darwin, for the purpose; but Darwin applies it with a Baroque audacity that would have upset Pope, had he revised The Botanic Garden, as he did Brooke's poem. Darwin had no trace of the visionary fires of Behmen or Blake; yet the quotation from the Behmenist Brooke is nearer to Darwin's work by a prodigious space than anything of Blake's*.

Possibly, and allowing for the fact the mystic generally finds human language to be inadequate, his true idea of Nature is nowhere fully expressed in Universal Beauty which, if it be considered as a work of mystical enthusiasm, is a very tame thing, but if as a more rationally argumentative thesis, meritorious in parts. Actually it is neither quite the one nor the other, but the Rational is strong. Set it beside The Prelude, and we shall see at once how impossible it would have been for Wordsworth's Nature to exist in 1736. For what is the essence of Universal Beauty?

Of reason then the co-eternal cause,
Thyself all reason, and thy will all laws,
—an uncompromising barrier of Augustan dogma, this; which, with the neo-Platonic subtleties about

While thou, sole infinite essential, reigned
And of finites the infinite contained

might pass for wild mysticism amidst the sobriety of deist speculators and theologians; but has little to do with the more directly thrilling spirit of Wordsworth's Platonism through which Nature (landscape or "universe-scape") becomes a symbol of the eternity immanent in it. There have been hints at immanence, as we have seen; but it is the curious emotional

* Nevertheless, Blake contributed a most visionary plate to The Botanic Garden.
The thrill that makes Wordsworth's Nature new and different from any of the previous Natures.

And not alone

'Mid gloom and tumult, but no less 'mid fair
And tranquil scenes, that universal power
And fitness in the latent qualities
And essences of things, by which the mind
Is moved with feelings of delight, to me
Came strengthened with a superadded soul
And virtue not its own.

It is because this romantic thrill is wanting in a Blackmore or a Brooke that the petulant reader of today, spoiled by indulgence in the looser emotions of the nineteenth century, with its nature-worship and folklore-worship, may turn from their Augustan Nature with the complaint that she is smug and tedious. The truth is that, after Wordsworth, the older views indeed lingered, but became gradually as unintelligible to the romantic mind as Japanese music is to the average Western ear.

A slight countermarch is now required. We have seen that among deist tenets there was a sort of compromise with the Nature that, originally created by God, they believed to have become detached and to be functioning independently. Pope was affected by deism, but not consistently so*; indeed at one time, though, unlike the mystics, he presumes not God to scan, he comes nevertheless to the nearly Pantheistic point of admitting

All are but parts of one tremendous whole
Whose body Nature is, and God the soul

which is nearer the mark than Young's transcendent God. At the same time he is not thus banishing order,—even mechanical, from the terrain swept by his perspective view. The voice of Nature addresses man:

* He professed, let it not be forgotten, the Roman faith.
NATURE AND THE AUGUSTAN POETS  505

Mark what unvaried laws preserve each state,
Laws wise as Nature, and as fixed as fate.

So he brings us back to Nature methodised (in the Essay on Man), but the prospect is broadened and mellowed with the vision of a democratic golden or Saturnian epoch "when love was liberty and Nature law." The latter interpretation is more humanised than that of the Essay on Criticism, as one would expect.

As for another and altogether less philosophical interpretation of the word in the sense of "Rural scenery" as used by Pope and others, this will be dealt with in the following section. It is now clear enough that in writing of Nature, the thing that Pope experienced is very different from the thing that Brooke experienced. Yet at this distance there is an apparent similarity of manner, sufficient to excuse the impatient for concluding that "they meant very much the same thing after all." In this particular case we must first eliminate the fact that Pope touched up Universal Beauty; there still remains, as there does in most 'Palladian' poetry, a similarity of manner arising from the influence of theories,—and two especially—of imitation and representation. The two have been already mentioned, viz., (1) the Aristotelian theory of generality, and (2) the Platonic-idealistic theory as set forth in Dryden's Parallel. Both of these bring us to Nature methodised; whether in the emotions, abstracted and elevated to the pomp of Heroic Drama, or in a landscape conceived by Poussin or remodelled by Capability Brown.

II.

The two theories described above, when applied to the treatment of landscape, (reverting to the "nature-landscape" interpretation,) are by no means at variance with the basic belief that the proper study of mankind is man, and that vegetable and mineral Nature is made for man, and not man for
Nature as romantics like Ruskin seemed to believe. The Augustan poets, contrary to vulgar opinion, saw far further than "White's" or "Will's"; and if they admired the Hesperian hues of Claude, they also took pleasure in the rural beauties that inspired them. But from what has gone before, it is consistent and even desirable that they should most fully appreciate the canvas, the landscape seen and reorganised into something harmonious by the artist. Such an attitude is reflected in complimentary poems to painters (we have no such thing nowadays), like Dryden's Ode to the memory of Anne Killigrew, whose landscapes of

...lofty trees, with sacred shades,
And perspectives of pleasant glades,

were peopled (a significant fact) with "nymphs of brightest form" and "shaggy satyrs standing near," as was still the usage in Fragonard's time, the good days before the Naturalist schools sent this delightful anthropomorphism to the wall. John Hughes, again, in his less familiar address to Mr. Constantine, is content to observe the scene through the artist's eye:

> While o'er the cloth thy happy pencil strays,
> And the pleas'd eye its artful course surveys,
> Here tufted groves rise boldly to the sky,
> There spacious lawns, more distant, charm the eye;
> The crystal lakes in borrow'd tinctures shine,
> And misty hills the fair horizon join,
> Lost in the azure borders of the day...

They viewed the countryside itself with the same eye for general effect, as may be seen in any descriptive verse done "straight from life." The first great landscape poem in the Augustan manner comes at the very beginning of the movement; it is Denham's Cooper's Hill (1643), a work that, austere in its treatment of scenery, yet renders all the rich but cool dignity of the lower Thames district. Throughout the poem, it should be noted, Nature, the system of laws, is never once confounded with 'the country,' a manifestation of those laws:
NATURE AND THE AUGUSTAN POETS

Nature design'd
First a brave place, and then as brave a mind,
and again,
While the steep horrid roughness of the wood
Strives with the gentle calmness of the flood.
Such huge extremes when Nature doth unite
Wonder from these results, from this delight,

This is still the personified abstraction of laws; but by the
time we come to Pope's Windsor Forest, (1704-13), the word
Nature is being used more loosely to denote "what is out of
doors."

Happy next him who to these shades retires,
Whom Nature charms.

Pope arrives at a 'crystallisation' (to borrow a term from
Mr. Middleton Murry) of the idea of physical Nature; but
it rests with Parnell to impart to it the semi-human
substance of a goddess,—a polite deity, one would say, conceived
in the manner of the late 17th century followers of Guido
Reni.

We can picture the 'dame,' large, plump, and clad in
exiguous and fluttering vestments, with her "wanton smiles and
airy play":

Green was her robe, and green her wreath,
Where'er she trod, 'twas green beneath;
Where'er she turn'd, the pulses beat
With new recruits of genial heat;
And in her train the birds appear,
To match for all the coming year.

This is no longer a primitive vegetation-spirit, but the
portraiture of an idea refined by centuries of the classical
Renaissance imposed on the academic mediaevalism of such
allegorical personages as De Lorris and the Chaucerians had
imagined. Its beauty, and the beauty of Parnell's Anacreontic, is,
of the bevelled and adjusted order, far more important than is
yet acknowledged; this reluctance is possibly due in part to the
more recent and wholly opposite Wordsworthian conception of

    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.

But we should not expect, if we have any historical sense, to encounter such a brooding of the spirit as this over Pope's Arcadian pastures; it will be far otherwise. There the sunlit prospect breeds, as he watches, an host of bright Rococo phantoms:

    See Pan with flocks, with fruits Pomona crown'd,
    Here blushing Flora paints th' enamelled ground,
    Here Ceres' gifts in waving prospect stand......

and though the poetasters of 1910 might have exclaimed, turning to their *Shropshire Lad*, "vieux jeu! the dead jargon of a soulless age," it would be because they forgot that such language once lived intensely, as it will live again. Even now we are finding the mythologic décor of eighteenth century pictures (I recall some of Woollett's) agreeable; and it may not be long before Flora and Pomona are once more welcome in "nature-poetry,"—indeed, the gods are already returning.

This tradition of Personification, so ripe and ancient, not merely conventionalised and so in that way methodised Nature, but imparted to it the urbanity of humanism whereby it might and doubtless did appeal to minds for whom Man and society provided the central problem. It was classicised Nature for human use; and those who scorn it miss much that is sheer loveliness: a stormy hillscape by Claude, with cowherds hurrying to shelter beneath a ruined Corinthian peristyle; groves where the Satyrs of Fragonard dance to a sistrum; or the champaign of Pope's pastorals, in which Naiads weep by the Thames, and gentle gales, blowing toward Delia,

    bear my signs along,
    For her the feather'd choirs neglect their song,
    For her the limes their pleasing shades deny.
These last lines are chosen for their ‘‘feather’d choirs’’ and ‘‘pleasing shades,’’ general terms that offended the penultimately modern ear, for which even ‘‘the green gleam of dewy-tassell’d trees’’ is scarcely pictorial enough*.

But if ever the English made a slight approach to thinking in Universals** it was then, when the two art-theories, Aristotelian and Platonic, were bearing fruit. If the ‘universalising’ method tended to become merely periphrastic and so to produce, especially at a later phase, absurd ‘‘cennings’’ like Dyer’s ‘‘Neptunian Albion’s high testaceous food’’ for ‘‘oysters,’’ on the other hand it more frequently disciplines description within the limits of graceful economy, avoiding the purple patch of minutiae such as might win the lyrical and amateur botanist a reputation for spiritual pride:

Eyebright and pimpernel
And pansy and poppyseed
... ... ... ... ... ...
Cowslip and buttercup
Daisy and daffodil,

And the rest of the seedsman’s catalogue. Yet this*** is the purple patch at its best; and of the worse there is legion. Milton, it is true, gave us his catalogue in Lycidas; but as Mark Pattison correctly observes, he was not,—deliberately not, I think, like Denham,—a minute examiner of natural phenomena. The schoolbooks used to make capital out of the inaccuracy of Milton’s botanic ‘chronology’; but it is a healthy sign of the coming generality of the Nature-cult; while the anti-naturalistic manner of Denham, which achieves its effects in a few bold strokes, is no less praiseworthy.

But his proud head the airy mountain hides

* Tennyson, The Princess.
** Which, according to Mr. G. B. Sansom, is not characteristic (V. his Notes on the Japanese Language, vol. II, 2nd series of the Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan).
*** The Idle Flowers, by Robert Bridges.
Among the clouds; his shoulders and his sides
A shady mantle clothes.

The recent naturalistic poet would have expanded this into a page of jargon from Forestry and Geology, and still have failed to contrive a picture. The fault is largely Ruskin's, who, in his ignorance of the trend of thought at the time of the Grand Manner, attacks Claude with almost insane fury. He will have it that Claude was a dunce, and accuses him of having been unable to feel or understand the simplicity of real rock lines*; to which the reply is that Claude was not a Naturalist-realist. And this is, of course, true of the poets who described scenery in those days; it was so as far back as Milton, and remained so partly because of Milton's influence over Augustan descriptive poetry, especially after 1705, the year in which Philips' Miltonic Blenheim was published. The later part of the century does not fall strictly within the scope of this essay; but a glance at some of the earlier Miltonians will reveal the process at work. Thomson writes in Winter (1726),

The horizontal sun
Broad o'er the south, hangs at his utmost noon
And ineffectual strikes the gelid cliff.

This is how Claude would have seen it; not, as Ruskin, the tertiary cliff with inclined strata, or glacial curvatures, or what not, but, in all its essential grandeur, the gelid cliff.

In the didactic poem, it goes without saying, detail must be expected to gather more thickly; which will explain passages such as this, from John Philips' Cider:

Berries and sky-dy'd plumbs, and what in coat
Rough, or soft-rin'd, or bearded husk, or shell,
Fat olives, and Pistacio's fragrant nut
And the Pine's tasteful apple......

But neither is the detail too finicky, nor is it disproportionate to the length of the poem.

* Modern Pointers, "Precipices."
The ‘universalising’ craft, however, which is one of the ingredients of the Grand manner, is not confined to the Miltonic poem, but is to be seen wherever the two more generally distributed art-theories (v. supra) are put into practice. Pomfret, a contemporary of Dryden’s, presents in some Pindarics on the General Conflagration, with all the proper restraint and universality of diction, a fine lurid portrait of the world burning to death, such as may help us to understand the somewhat later appreciation of sensational gloom, whether in Salvator or Piranesi.

The trembling Alps abscond their aged heads
In mighty pillars of infernal smoke,
Which from the bellowing caverns broke
And suffocates whole nations as it spreads.
Sometimes the fire within divides
The massy rivers of those secret chains
Which hold together their prodigious sides,
And hurls the shattered rocks o’er all the plains.

Turning to Yalden who, as Tickell relates, “learn’d to gain the laurel crown” at Magdalen, we may discover large beauties and a sublimity of this general kind in the *Hymn to Darkness*; and recollecting the quiet richness of an engraving of Magdalen by Basire, (was it the second of the trio?), may ramble with Tickell in Danby’s Physic Garden. (*Oxford, 1707*).

Somerville’s *Chase* brings us to the Miltonic school at a later phase (1735) when the tentatives of Philips and Thomson had shown the way. One may decide that now the descriptive severity is here and there a little relaxed, and that in these lines there is a reflection, though faint, of that sudden warmth that pervaded Thomson’s *Castle of Indulgence*, illuminating a well-known stanza (“As when a shepherd of the Hebrid Isles”) with the first glow,—the false dawn, perhaps, of romanticism.

Ere yet the morn dispels the fleeting mists,
The signal given by the loud trumpet’s voice,
Now high in air 'th' imperial standard waves,
Emblazoned rich with gold, and glittering gems
And like a sheet of fire through the dun gloom
Streaming meteorous.

It is colder, more derivative, than Thomson's stanza; but there seems to be an increase in sensitiveness to colour and "atmosphere," in comparison with the average before Thomson. And, passing on to Dyer, Wordsworth's favourite who, though Grongar Hill was published as early as 1727, should be placed well beyond Somerville in the chart of the aesthetic drift, this quality, we shall find, is more abundant.

In several of the poems named or quoted above, 'gloom' (v. Pomfret's General Conflagration, Yalden's Hymn to Darkness), it will be noticed, possesses an high 'psychological value,' just as it did in the graphic art of the time. Burke devotes a substantial portion of On the Sublime and Beautiful to darkness, and maintains that "the great ought to be dark or gloomy." This preoccupation, the almost continual accompaniment of Post-Elizabethan or true neo-classicism, lived long; brought into prominence by Milton, it persisted through two centuries, and may be seen expiring in an ode of Kirke White's addressed to "H. Fuseli, Esq., on seeing engravings from his designs":

Mighty magician! Who on Torneo's brow,
When sullen tempests wrap the throne of night,
Art wont to sit and catch the gleam of light
That shoots across the gloom opaque below.

This ponderous classic darkness pierced with one or two white rays, dry in treatment from a manner of etching which, like Woollett's is still in debt to the burin, was dear to Fuseli (cf. his Creation of Eve, about 1803), and though it has been fashionabe to laugh at his productions and compare them unfavourably with Blake's—Blake owes much to the same tradition, by the way,—he remains as a monument of that spirit of the Sublime in Nature which passed from Milton to Young, and thence to the days of Trafalgar when Napoleon was reading his Ossian.