

The Eighteenth Century Background

*Studies on the Idea of Nature
in the Thought of the Period*

By

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Preface

LIKE its predecessor *The Seventeenth Century Background* (1934), this book is the outcome of lectures delivered in the Faculty of English at Cambridge. It is intended as a companion volume to the other work, and continues the story down to the end of the eighteenth century. Whereas for the seventeenth century 'Truth' seemed to be the key-word, this time it is 'Nature'. I have not presumed to write even an outline 'history' of eighteenth century thought in general, but have tried to illustrate the importance, in that century, of the idea of 'Nature' in religion, ethics, philosophy and politics, and in particular to indicate some stages in that divinization of 'Nature' which culminates in Wordsworth. This is the central theme of the book, and from this it derives whatever unity it may have—though I have at times elaborated the study of certain representative writers to cover a wider field. Much of what follows can be regarded as prolegomena to the study of Wordsworth and Coleridge. The whole book is addressed, partly to the general reader who takes an unprofessional interest in the history of ideas, and partly to the literary student who may care to seek for explanations or analogies outside the sphere of 'pure' literature.

The closing chapters of the book were written under the shadow of approaching war, and when the catastrophe finally came I wondered at first whether it was fitting to come forward, at such a time, with studies so remote from actuality. But possibly if it is ever worth while to study past modes of thinking and feeling, it is none the less so now, and it happens that the eighteenth century can per-

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haps offer us, not merely escape or refreshment, but even actual guidance in our present troubles.

My acknowledgments are due, and are gratefully given, to the Clarendon Press for permission to include, as the first chapter, my contribution to *Seventeenth Century Studies Presented to Sir Herbert Grierson* (1938).

B. W.

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CHAPTER I

The Turn of the Century

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

THE eighteenth century—‘the silver age of the European Renaissance’—virtually begins in the final decades of the seventeenth. When we enter those decades we recognize on all sides the familiar eighteenth century landmarks, lit by the familiar illumination of the time. Glory and loveliness may have passed away, but so also have the fogs and glooms of history; the common daylight which now descends upon a distracted world may be prosaic, but at least it is steady and serene, and has not yet become dark with excessive light. One meets everywhere a sense of relief and escape, relief from the strain of living in a mysterious universe, and escape from the ignorance and barbarism of the Gothic centuries. Nature's laws had been explained by the New Philosophy; sanity, culture, and civilization had revived; and at last, across the vast gulf of the monkish and deluded past, one could salute the ancients from an eminence perhaps as lofty as their own. In England there was added to the general feeling of emancipation from historic spectres a sense of security from the upheavals of the Civil War period. ‘We have been so long together bad Englishmen’, wrote Dryden in 1668, ‘that we had not leisure to be good poets’; but now, ‘with the restoration of our happiness, we see revived Poesy lifting up its head, and already shaking off the rubbish which lay so heavy on it’.

In this ‘noble Eluctation of Truth, wherein, against the tenacity of Prejudice and Prescription, this Century now prevaieth’, no conception played a more significant part than that of ‘Nature’, and in the present chapter it is

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proposed to examine some of the uses to which that idea was put at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries. 'Nature' has been a controlling idea in Western thought ever since antiquity, but it has probably never been so universally active as it was from the Renaissance to the end of the eighteenth century. Nature was the grand alternative to all that man had made of man; upon her solid ground therefore—upon the *tabula rasa* prepared by the true philosophy—must all the religion, the ethics, the politics, the law, and the art of the future be constructed. Leslie Stephen has said that 'Nature is a word contrived in order to introduce as many equivocations as possible into all the theories, political, legal, artistic or literary, into which it enters'. An American scholar has recently distinguished sixty different senses of the term. Even in the seventeenth century Robert Boyle,¹ the natural philosopher, could enumerate eight senses of the word as used in philosophy and natural science, and Pierre Bayle,² complaining of the ambiguity of the same word, mentions that eleven different meanings for it can be discovered in 1 Corinthians. Nevertheless in our period it was not the ambiguity of 'Nature' which people felt most strongly; it was rather the clarity, the authority, and the universal acceptability of Nature and Nature's laws. The laws of Nature are the laws of reason; they are always and everywhere the same, and like the axioms of mathematics they have only to be presented in order to be acknowledged as just and right by all men. The historic rôle of 'Nature' at this time was to introduce, not further confusion, but its precise opposites,—peace, concord, toleration; and progress in the affairs of men, and, in poetry and art, perspicuity, order, unity, and proportion.

¹ *A Free Inquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature*: Works (1744). vol. iv.

² *Réponse aux questions d'un Provincial* (1706 ed.), vol. ii, ch. cv, p. 391.

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1. *Natural Science and Natural Religion*

This was the Golden Age of natural theology and deistical freethinking: the age of Spinoza and of Bayle, of the Cambridge Platonists, of Locke, Toland, Blount, Collins, Clarke, Wollaston, Shaftesbury, Tindal, and the rest. During the Christian centuries religion had rested upon revelation; now it rested largely upon 'Nature', and even the orthodox, who retained the supernatural basis, felt that faith must be grounded firmly upon Nature before one had recourse to super-nature. 'All the duties of Christian religion', says Archbishop Tillotson himself, 'which respect God, are no other but what natural light prompts men to, excepting the two sacraments, and praying to God in the name and by the mediation of Christ.' 'And even these', continues Anthony Collins¹ (after quoting this passage), 'even these, he justly observes, are of less moment than any of those parts of religion which in their own nature tend to the Happiness of human Society'. Whereas 'Nature', in one sense, had been opposed to 'Grace', and in another sense—as 'natural Light'—could at best conduct the Christian pilgrim to the point where Beatrice must supersede Virgil, now 'Nature' (in perhaps yet another sense) was to furnish the principal evidences of religion, while a somewhat embarrassing Revelation must be harmonized with it as best might be. How had this situation arisen? To account fully for the change would be an intricate task; let us merely remind ourselves of two relevant forces—the scientific movement of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, and the religious conflicts following the Reformation. By the 'scientific movement' is meant the work of (for example) Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Bacon, Harvey, Gilbert, Descartes, Boyle, the Royal Society, and Newton. For our purposes the results of this great movement were twofold. First, it produced a 'climate of opinion' in which supernatural

¹ *Discourse of Freethinking* (1713), p. 136.

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and occult explanations of natural phenomena ceased to satisfy, and the universe came more and more to be regarded as the Great Machine, working by rigidly determined laws of material causation. The supernatural, in both its divine and its diabolical forms, was banished from Nature. But, if one may put it so, Satan was banished on harsher terms than his divine Antagonist: and this brings us to the second point, namely, that though the new philosophy was anti-supernaturalist, it was not at first anti-religious. Most of the great scientists just mentioned conceived that they had rendered the highest services to religion as well as to science, and Descartes, Boyle, and Newton, as is well known, were notable theists. As Bacon had said (and Sir Thomas More before him), science was the study of the *works* of God, and this should be almost, if not quite, as pious a pursuit as the study of his *word*. A little learning might be a dangerous thing, but deeper draughts of philosophy would bring us back to sober faith. This view involved a changed attitude towards Nature and natural science; it meant that Nature was rescued from Satan and restored to God. For the physical world, in spite of its divine origin, was traditionally held to have shared in the fatal consequences of the fall of man, and to have become the chosen abode of the apostate spirits. Science in the Middle Ages was largely black magic; Nature was full of pagan divinities turned devils, and to meddle with it was to risk damnation. Friar Bacon was imprisoned as a sorcerer, and the Faust story illustrates the fascinated horror with which, as late as the sixteenth century, the popular mind regarded scientific knowledge. But now the more fortunate Francis Bacon could announce with conviction and authority that science was not the forbidden knowledge; that God had provided two channels of revelation, not one merely: the Scriptures, of course, but Nature also. Did not the Psalmist write *Coeli enarrant gloriam Dei*? And Bacon's follower, Sir Thomas Browne, assured his readers that 'there is no danger to profound these mysteries', and that God prefers a 'devout and

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learned admiration' of his works to that 'gross rusticity'¹ which stares and gapes at Nature, or trembles at portents where none were intended.

Science, then, it may be said, played an all-important part in producing the divinized 'Nature' of the eighteenth century (and ultimately of the 'romantic' generation). That science was thus able, for a time, to furnish natural religion with one of its two indispensable foundations—belief in a divine universe—was perhaps due to the fact that the findings of science, up to date, could fuse harmoniously with the presuppositions inherited from Christianity, which, though shaken by controversy, still remained as almost unquestioned certainties in men's hearts. For what had science revealed? Everywhere design, order, and law, where hitherto there had been chaos. Whether one contemplated the infinitely great through the optic glass of the Tuscan artist, or the infinitely little through the microscope of Malpighi, one received at every turn new assurance that all was 'according to the Ordainer of order and mystical mathematicks of the city of heaven'. Biology had as yet revealed no disturbing ancestries, and man was still unassailed by anthropology and psycho-analysis. Materialism itself could scarcely dispense with a divine hypothesis (though this soon followed): the Great Machine presupposed the Divine Mechanic. And when Newton bound together in one dazzling synthesis the great and the little, the stars in their courses and the fall of an apple, a thankful generation, at once scientific and pious, could exclaim with its spokesman, Alexander Pope:

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

and with its other spokesman, Addison:

The spacious firmament on high
With all the blue aethereal sky
And spangled heavens, a shining frame,
Their great Original proclaim.

¹ *Religio Medici*, i, sect. xiii.

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Secondly, how did the religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries lead up to the growth of natural religion in our period? Briefly, by calling in doubt all the points of the faith, and reducing them to the level of controversy. Christianity, instead of producing Christian individuals and societies, seemed for so long to have been producing disputes, persecutions, and wars, and had, in the Protestant countries, not only renounced the Holy See but split up further into so many sects, that a desire arose during the seventeenth century to formulate a creed which should be acceptable to all good and reasonable men. Christianity was based upon Revelation: well and good, but what had in fact been revealed? No one seemed to know, or rather—which was worse—everybody seemed to know that his own version was the only correct one. As Anthony Collins complained in his *Discourse of Free-thinking*, the Bible might be divinely inspired, but this had not prevented its official interpreters from disagreeing on all fundamentals; there was hardly in those days one clergyman 'that has consider'd and examin'd things with care, that believes all the Thirty-Nine Articles, in their proper and original meaning'. 'All Faiths have been shaken', writes Charles Blount, 'but those only which stand upon the Basis of Common Reason.'¹ What then? Must we abandon religion itself along with the metaphysical jargon bequeathed by our uncouth forefathers? By no means; there were ways of escape. The Cambridge Platonists, for example, adopted the technique of setting religion in a new framework, and changing the vocabulary of exhortation. The Platonic and neo-Platonic tradition was ready at hand to supply them with both. To platonize was to avoid the controversial danger-zone; it was to suggest that salvation did not depend upon the correct solution of the credal puzzles. Platonism had after all been, if not the Church's one foundation, at any rate (as John Smith observed) the 'Church's loving Nurse'. The values which Christians and all men respected had been taught by Plato,

¹ *Religio Laici: Written in a letter to John Dryden, Esq., 1683*, p. 85.

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and the advantage of approaching them by the Hellenic route was that it led you direct to the summits, and avoided all the theological morasses which beset you on the Christian side. But above all, there was the Grand Alternative, Nature; that at least proclaimed its divine Original unmistakably. 'The works of Nature everywhere sufficiently evidence a Deity', said Locke; sufficiently, that is, for us to be able to dispense with a troublesome and controverted revelation. Nature simply obtruded upon us its evidence for divine activity and wisdom: why then seek the living amongst the dead? why seek for evidence of what we already know? and especially why seek it in the 'historical' annals of an illiterate Semitic tribe? But that was not all. Natural religion reaches God not only through the starry heavens above, but also through the moral law within: through Reason as well as Nature. *Intra te quaere Deum*; look for God within thyself. And what exactly would you find when you looked within? Not the questionable shapes revealed by psycho-analysis, but something much more reassuring: the laws of God and Nature inscribed upon the heart, the 'ideas of first impression', 'truths of first inscription', 'common notions (*communes notitiae*)'—to mention a few of the names by which they were then known. From these clear imprints Lord Herbert of Cherbury had already formulated his fundamentals of natural religion: acknowledgment of God's existence, duty towards Him and our neighbour, necessity for repentance, future state of rewards and punishments. The knowledge of these points, as even the Schoolmen had held, could be attained without revelation, by that Reason which, in Locke's phrase, is

'natural Revelation, whereby the Father of Light, and fountain of all knowledge, communicates to mankind that portion of truth which he has laid within the reach of their natural faculties.'¹

These are the saving truths vouchsafed not merely to a 'chosen people', but to all mankind, 'Enacted by the All-

¹ *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, bk. iv, 19, sect. 4.

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wise and Supreme Being from the beginning of the World, and therefore not to be destroyed or altered by every whiffing Proclamation of an Enthusiast'.¹ To the question, What must I do to be saved?, therefore, natural religion made answer: 'We want not so much knowledge to tell us what to do, as Wills to do that which we may know!' You know perfectly well what to do: your own nature informs you. Follow Reason, the God within; look after your conduct and your creed will take care of itself. In short, whether you looked without or within, Nature (without any supernatural revelation) offered you all that was needful for salvation. One should endeavour to realize how persuasive, and how sound, these injunctions must have seemed at that time. You had then upon the surface a great deal of obvious and clamorous dissension about doctrinal principles, but below the surface a far greater mass of real unanimity about the nature of the good life—the end and purpose of living. To this body of beliefs and attitudes, the product of the blended traditions of Greece and of Palestine, appeal could confidently be made, as to Nature itself. However furiously the sects might brawl, these common notions would remain. Whether this attitude can seem so obviously wise and so available to-day as it did to the Platonists and Deists of our period, and to such later followers as Matthew Arnold, Tulloch, or Dean Inge, is open to question. We cannot now be so sure that it is God we shall find if we look without, and perhaps still less if we look within. Even in the seventeenth century some warning notes were heard. Pascal found nothing but terror in the thought of inter-stellar space; Nature only proved God to one who already believed. And even Dryden could write with well-affected conviction:

These truths are not the product of thy Mind,
But dropt from Heaven, and of a Nobler Kind.
Reveal'd Religion first inform'd thy Sight,
And Reason saw not till *Faith* sprung the Light.

¹ Charles Blount, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

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Hence all thy *Natural Worship* takes the Source:
'Tis *Revelation* what thou thinkst *Discourse*.¹

But few believed this report: on the contrary, the light sprung by faith had become so dimmed by controversy that Nature now seemed to supply the true divine sunshine. 'Twas discourse what we thought revealed. Let us not evade the issues, says Toland, by prating about our sinful and corrupted state since the Fall. We have got reason enough if only we will take the trouble to be reasonable. And the Gospel 'affords the most illustrious Example of close and perspicuous Ratiocination conceivable'.² 'What is revealed in Religion, as it is most useful and necessary, so it must and may be as easily comprehended, and found as consistent with our common Notions, as what we know of Wood or Stone, of Air, of Water, or the like. . . . As for God, we comprehend nothing better than His Attributes.'³ The essence of the New Testament revelation was, for Toland, that it did really reveal, that is, make plain and comprehensible, things formerly mysterious. Had it been otherwise, where would have been the superiority of Christianity over 'the idle dreams of the philosophers', the 'impieties and fables of the Alcoran', or the other esoteric quackeries with which the world was already overstocked? Faith itself is 'entirely built upon ratiocination', since it consists in trusting those to whom we believe God has spoken, and the latter belief must be established by evidence. As for 'the vulgar', who are said to be incapable of rational conviction—'the vulgar are more oblig'd to Christ, who had a better Opinion of them'. It is 'the gibberish of the divinity schools which is above their heads, not the plain, easy truths of Christianity. Jesus taught pure morals, a reasonable worship, and just conceptions of heaven; He 'stripp'd the Truth' bare of all ceremonial and symbolical trappings, and made it 'easy and obvious to the meanest Capacities'.⁴ Strip-

¹ *Religio Laici* (1682), 66-71.

² Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1702), p. 46.

³ *ibid.*, pp. 79-86.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 151.

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ping the truth bare was what that age and generation felt itself to be mainly engaged upon: stripping it bare of mythology and all the accretions of paganism and popery. Protestantism, which evolved in England (and elsewhere) through Puritanism into 'rationalism', had always been in almost equal measure anti-pagan and anti-Catholic; the sin of popery was that in proselytizing the pagans it had absorbed so many of the pagan beliefs and practices. Now more than ever it was felt that the late era of controversy had obscured the divine simplicity and rationality of early Christianity, which had really been so exactly like the natural religion of the reign of William and Mary. That the freethinkers should have thought their deism more 'natural' than paganism or popery illustrates a familiar ambiguity in the meaning of that term. If 'natural' means what is original or primitive, natural religion would be that which was most deeply grounded in prehistory and the collective unconscious, while deism of the Stoical or eighteenth century varieties would appear as a late product of civilized sophistication. But, for our deists, 'natural' meant what is congenial to the mind of an abstract Man whose traits corresponded to those of the *honnête homme*, the man of parts and sense, who had become the moral norm of the age.

Speaking broadly, we are confronted, on approaching the eighteenth century, with a steady decline in what has been called the tragic sense of life. We have gone on too long, it was felt, repeating that we are miserable offenders, and that there is no health in us. We must change these notes to something more cheerful, something more befitting a polite and civilized age. As that excellent representative of the time, Halifax, puts it in *The Character of a Trimmer* (1684): 'there should not always be Storms or Thunder; a clear Sky would sometimes make the Church look more like Heaven',—our Church, especially, which (thank Heaven) is itself 'a Trimmer between the phrenzy of Platonick visions and the Lethargick Ignorance of Popish Dreams'. 'Religion', says the same author in his