

## Chapter 1 Prologue: Civilization versus Nature

The character of great works is exactly this: that in them the full presence of the inner world combines with and is reconciled to the full presence of the outer world. And in them we see that the laws of these two worlds are not contradictory at all; they are one all-inclusive system; they are laws that somehow we find it almost impossible to keep, laws that only the greatest artists are able to restate. They are the laws, simply, of human nature. And men have recognized all through history that the restating of these laws, in one medium or another, in great works of art, are the greatest human acts.

Ted Hughes

Since the dawn of civilization men have been fully aware that the enemy of civilization was nature, both wild inhuman nature out there beyond the city walls, and human nature, doomed to disease and mortality, selfish and destructive. For those who advocated worshipping nature, or at least accepting her laws, predation had always been a particular problem. Hesiod, eight centuries B.C., was well aware that

Fish, fowl, and savage beasts, (whose law is power)  
Jove lets each other mutually devour.

Why does Jove do so? Is his law also naked power? When Job protests that God 'destroyeth the perfect and the wicked', God boasts of being a god of raw animal power, that the chief of his ways is behemoth. In the third century the Manichaeans were driven by the discrepancy between a supposed god of love and the savagery of his creation to the conclusion that all matter is intrinsically evil, and the material creation was not, therefore, the work of God. In 1779 David Hume, looking at the 'immense Profusion of Beings' in the Universe, concluded:

How hostile and destructive to each other! How insufficient all of them for their own Happiness! How contemptible or odious to the Spectator! The whole presents nothing but the Idea of a blind Nature, impregnated by a great vivifying Principle, and pouring forth from her Lap, without discernment or parental Care, her maim'd and abortive Children.

*[Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion]*

This has been an irresolvable problem for Christians and a powerful argument for rational skeptics to this day.

In 1861, possibly in response to *The Origin of Species* of two years earlier, John Ruskin admitted that, although strongly drawn to natural history, he found the subject terrifying:

Its abysses of life and pain; of diabolical ingenuity — merciless condemnation — irrevocable change — infinite Scorn — endless advance — immeasurable scale of beings incomprehensible to each other — every one important in its own right — and a grain of Dust in its Creator's — it makes me giddy and desolate beyond all speaking.<sup>1</sup>

What terrified him was not so much the behaviour of creatures as their appearance. Ruskin believed that all non-human creatures existed solely to give pleasure to human eyes. His own criteria for beauty (which he believed to be absolutes) were so narrow and rigid that at least half of creation failed to meet them, and a great many creatures seemed to him positively repulsive. Far from causing him to question his premise, this emboldened him to argue for two opposing creations: all beautiful things created by God for man's pleasure and spiritual improvement, and all ugly things by the devil in order to undermine this divine scheme. Thus all reptiles and a great many other animals, most insects, and half of the plant kingdom were deemed evil.<sup>2</sup> The creatures which terrified him most were snakes and crocodiles, the very same creatures which had invaded Coleridge's nightmares. For Hopkins it was to be the 'residuary worm', the inheritor of all life on earth.

In 1894 T. H. Huxley, constructing a scientific/secular morality out of his unDarwinian interpretation of evolutionary theory, wrote:

That which lies before the human race is a constant struggle to maintain and improve, in opposition to the State of Nature, the State of Art of an organized polity; in which, and by which, man may develop a worthy civilization, capable of maintaining and constantly improving itself, until the evolution of our globe shall have entered so far upon its downward course that the cosmic process resumes its sway; and, once more, the State of Nature prevails over the surface of our planet.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bradley and Ousby, eds. *The Correspondence of John Ruskin and Charles Eliot Norton*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, 65-6.

<sup>2</sup> See Mahood, 'Ruskin's flowers of evil', in *The Poet as Botanist*, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> T.H.Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, Macmillan, 1894, 44-5. Huxley, though a wholehearted proponent of Darwin's theory, was radically opposed to the spirit of it. Richard Mabey has described Darwin's book as 'a message of great beauty, as expressed in the heart-stirring final sentence of *On the Origin of Species*: "Whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and wonderful have been, and are being, evolved"'.<sup>3</sup>

H. G. Wells had studied biology with Huxley, and shared his views. In his *Outline of History* (1919) he presented the evolution of man as a steady progress from the Neanderthals ('gorilla-like monsters') to ourselves.

The 'worthy civilization' which Huxley sought to maintain was an industrial society based on the biblical premise that nature existed for man's use and profit. Our present idea of sustainability (though clearly a better option than unsustainability) is simply a way of trying to ensure that we manage our use of nature in such a way as to be able to continue to exploit it (and convert it into profits) indefinitely.

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For thousands of years, while the leaders and 'thinkers', priests and theologians, politicians, scientists, industrialists, developers, multinationals, have been degrading nature, it has, until very recently, been left largely to the mythmakers and imaginative writers, especially poets, to worship or even defend her.

The earliest gods were invented in an attempt to explain how this world had come into being. By analogy with the process of creating new life in living creatures, it was assumed that some cosmic female must have given birth to the world. This priority of the female was reflected in the prevalence of matriarchies in the early world. Agriculture began, we are told, in Sumer, about 5000 B.C., and independently elsewhere. Once widely established, it made hunter-gathering and the nomadic life unnecessary. Tribes could stay in one place. About a thousand years later the first city-states were formed.

An ancient Babylonian myth describes the slaughter of the mother-goddess Tiamat by the young sun-god Marduk. That myth Campbell places in a line of development of creation myths which progressively spurns the female. First, the world was created by a goddess without consort, then by a goddess fecundated by a consort, then fashioned from the body of a goddess killed by a young warrior-god, then by the unaided power of a male god. Historically, Campbell speculates that this progression reflects 'the conquest of a local matriarchal order by invading patriarchal nomads, and their reshaping of the local lore of the productive earth to their own ends':

And we are going to find, throughout the following history of the orthodox patriarchal systems of the West, that the power of this goddess-mother of the world, whom we have here seen defamed, abused, insulted, and overthrown by her sons, is to remain as an ever-present threat to their castle of reason,

which is founded upon a soil that they consider to be dead but is actually alive, breathing, and threatening to shift.<sup>4</sup>

A later, more sophisticated account of the creation of man and his status in the world is the story of Prometheus. Prometheus was a Titan. The Titans shared immortality with the gods but the capacity for suffering with man. In Hesiod's account, Prometheus created men as an improvement on Zeus' creation. elaborated on Hesiod's account:

Though all the beasts  
Hang their heads from horizontal backbones  
And study the earth  
Beneath their feet, Prometheus  
Upended man into the vertical –  
So to comprehend balance.  
Then tipped up his chin  
So to widen his outlook on heaven.<sup>5</sup>

Instead of cowering in mud man became the 'godlike novelty' of all creation, the only creature capable of looking beyond the earth and of aspiring to a condition of superiority to its conditions and processes. Thus Prometheus planted in man the seeds of rebellion against the given conditions, nature's laws. Also man's upright stance freed his hands to become tool-maker and technician, to build civilization.

Prometheus could teach man all the necessary skills, but only with the aid of fire, which Zeus had withheld from man, believing that only the gods could be trusted to handle its creative/destructive energy responsibly. Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to man. A surviving fragment of Aeschylus' *Prometheus the Fire Kindler* is part of a lesson in smelting. As Aeschylus writes in *Prometheus Bound*:

And fire has proved  
For men a teacher in every art, their grand resource.

It was not long before man was forging weapons.

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, Souvenir Press, 1974, 80,86.

<sup>5</sup> Ted Hughes: *Collected Poems*, ed. Keegan, Faber and Faber, 2003, 868. All subsequent quotations from Hughes' poems for adults are from this volume.

Thus Prometheus (perhaps for the best of motives, but where was his fabled foresight?) in effect determined that the Neolithic Golden Age should be violently replaced by the terrible Age of Bronze:

Earth's natural plenty no longer sufficed.  
Man tore open the earth, and rummaged in her bowels.  
Precious ores the Creator had concealed  
As close to hell as possible  
Were dug up – a new drug  
For the criminal. So now iron comes  
With its cruel ideas. And gold  
With crueller. Combined they bring war –  
War, insatiable for the one,  
With bloody hands employing the other.  
Now man lives only by plunder.

[*Tales from Ovid* 12]

Nietzsche gives an account of the permanent relevance of the Prometheus:

The presupposition of the Prometheus myth is primitive man's belief in the supreme value of fire as the true palladium of every rising civilization. But for man to dispose of fire freely, and not receive it as a gift from heaven in the kindling thunderbolt and the warming sunlight, seemed a crime to thoughtful primitive man, a despoiling of divine nature. Thus the original philosophical problem poses at once an insoluble conflict between men and the gods, which lies like a huge boulder at the gateway to every culture.<sup>6</sup>

The latest product of the gift of fire is nuclear power. Roszak reports that

J. Robert Oppenheimer, witnessing the first test of a nuclear weapon, confessed to tasting sin. But he and all his colleagues knew from the beginning what lay waiting at the end of the project. And which was the stronger flavor, the sin, or the satisfaction of having stolen fire from the gods?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy*, Anchor, 1956, 63.

<sup>7</sup> Roszak, Theodore, *Where the Wasteland Ends*, Anchor, 1973, 195.

Edgar Allen Poe's phrase 'the glory that was Greece' is generally taken to refer to the civic and cultural achievements of the age of Pericles, the leading statesman of Athens from 450 to his death in 429 B.C. His very name meant 'surrounded by glory'. And the feather in his cap was the drama of his age. Sophocles' *Antigone* was probably first produced in 442. The play could equally have been called *Creon*, since Antigone and Creon destroy each other. Though the Theban elders (obtuse, sheeplike and sycophantic, like many civic elders to this day) do not question Creon's ruling that the body of Polynices be left unburied, the play as a whole vindicates Antigone, and exposes the supposedly civic values of Creon as hubristic and blasphemous. That anyone at all should be 'left unburied, his corpse / carrion for the birds and dogs to tear / an obscenity' [68] (in Creon's own words) is an offence against the gods.<sup>8</sup> What Creon has done is an act of moral and physical pollution, which might well cause an actual plague, but, in any case, rises stinking to the nostrils of the gods. It is a violation both of human morality and natural law.

Early in the play the Chorus sings one of the most famous Odes in Greek drama, known as the Ode to Man. Here man is praised without reservation for the mastery he has achieved over nature. Both Pericles and Demosthenes were to quote this speech with approval. Yet the whole purpose of the speech in its dramatic context is to expose the shallowness and tragic folly of Creon and the whole matrix of values he represents. Every claim made in the Ode is demolished elsewhere in the play. The first example given is man's mastery of the sea. Yet the power of the sea is to be evoked later with exactly the opposite meaning, as a symbol of the irresistible power of the divine curse:

the ruin will never cease, cresting on and on  
from one generation on throughout the race -  
like a great mounting tide  
driven on by savage mountain gales  
    surging over the dead black depths  
rolling up from the bottom dark heaves of sand  
and the headlands, taking the storm's onslaught full-force,  
roar, and the low moaning

echoes on and on

[91]

or of Destiny itself:

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<sup>8</sup> All quotations from *Antigone* are from Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, tr. Fagles, Penguin, 1984.

neither wealth nor armies  
towered walls nor ships  
black hulls lashed by the salt  
can save us from that force.

[108]

The second claim made for man is that 'the oldest of the gods he wears away / the Earth, the immortal, the inexhaustible / as his plows go back and forth, year in, year out'. The Chorus finds it admirable that man exhausts the only apparently inexhaustible mother by perpetual rape. By the time of Sophocles man had worn away the earth to such an extent that he was already well on the way to reducing a green and fertile land to the largely rocky desert Greece is today. Plato's Critias was to remember a time when 'the country was unspoiled: its mountains were arable highlands and what is now stony fields was once good soil. ... What now remains is like the skeleton of a sick man, all the fat and soft earth wasted away and only the bare framework of the land left'.

Next the Ode passes to man the hunter:

And the blithe, lightheaded race of birds he snares,  
the tribes of savage beasts, the life that swarms the depths -  
with one fling of his nets  
woven and coiled tight, he takes them all,  
man the skilled, the brilliant!

[76]

Yet only four pages later the sentry gives us a less anthropocentric point of view when he compares Antigone screaming over her brother's body to 'a bird come back to an empty nest / peering into its bed, and all the babies gone' [80]. And it is to be the unnatural behaviour of birds which prompts Teiresias to make the tests of sacrifice which reveal that the blight upon Thebes is Creon's doing. Hunting is presented in many myths as a perverse violation of mother nature, the penetration of living flesh with a spear being an obvious displacement of the loving penetration Aphrodite requires. Hunting proves fatal to Adonis and Actaeon and Hippolytus.

Another of the supposed achievements of man is in 'training the stallion, clamping the yoke across / his shaggy neck'. But Creon is shortly to be proved wrong in his assertion that (speaking of Antigone) he has known 'spirited horses you can break with a light bit' [83]. Against the Ode's claim for the wonder of the use of language, the play sets Antigone's screams, her dumb resistance, her spit in the face of Creon. Against wind-swift thought, it sets the deeper motions of the heart. The chorus is later forced into a choice between Creon and Aphrodite. It chooses Creon, for Love is a madness:

Love! -  
you wrench the minds of the righteous into outrage,  
swerve them to their ruin. [101]

What Creon calls woman's law is the law of Love, not only the law of Aphrodite, but also of Zeus himself, the god of family love. Polynices is Creon's nephew. His denial of the sanctity of love and marriage ('You'd kill your own son's bride?' 'Absolutely: there are other fields for him to plow' [89]) and family bonds makes it appropriate that his punishment should be to lose both wife and son. As Teiresias says: 'this is violence / you have forced upon the heavens' [115].

The last achievement the Ode specifies is that man has 'the mood and mind for law that rules the city'. But we are soon to see that while Creon inhabits an exclusively human and male world of what passes for intelligence and civic values, Antigone is throughout associated with that which lies beyond the city walls, with what Segal calls 'the subjugated natural world', and with the gods, including the gods of night and the underworld. The chorus sides with Creon partly because he is male and Antigone female. Creon himself makes the most of that distinction. We must, he says, 'never let some woman triumph over us' [94]. What a man prays for, he says, is 'to produce good sons'. His imagery reveals that he would really like to reduce women to the status of slaves, or even beasts of burden. It needs Teiresias (a man who had known what it was to be a woman) to heal the split, to show that neither the psychic health of the individual nor the health of the state can be maintained cut off from what lies beyond and beneath the city, the one life we share with animals and gods.

The Ode to Man ends with the absurd hubristic claim for 'ready, resourceful man' that he is 'Never without resources'

never an impasse as he marches on the future -  
only Death, from Death alone he will find no rescue  
but from desperate plagues he has plotted his escapes. [77]

Odysseus himself would hardly have dared to make such a claim. By the end of the play the chorus is to be suitably humbled:

The mighty words of the proud are paid in full  
with mighty blows of fate, and at long last  
those blows will teach us wisdom. [128]

And Creon, the embodiment, for the chorus, of all the virtues of man, is judged by the play, and, ultimately, by himself, to be the very nobody Odysseus was so determined not to be: 'I don't even exist - I'm no one. Nothing' [126].

The Ode is not, in fact, a portrait of ideal man, but of a false ideal, of outrageously, blindly arrogant man, and a portrait therefore not only of Creon but of many other tragic protagonists, and also of the leaders of Athens (and of most nations since).

In the final ode of the play the chorus belatedly remembers that Thebes is the 'mother-city' of Dionysus, whom they invoke as the only remedy for the ills caused by man. The healing spirit for which they plead, the joyful renewal of nature's bounty, the participation of men and women in the cosmic dance, is manifest in the very language and rhythms of this ode:

Lord of the dancing —  
dance, dance the constellations breathing fire!  
Great master of the voices of the night!  
Child of Zeus, God's offspring, come, come forth!  
Lord, king, dance with your nymphs, swirling, raving  
arm-in-arm in frenzy through the night  
they dance you, Iacchus —  
Dance, Dionysus  
giver of all good things! [119]

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I have discussed the Ode to Man at such length because it is typical of the allegiance of the dramatists to Nature (Dionysos, Aphrodite) against Civilization (Apollo, representing reason and culture and law, and Athene representing military manliness). The dramatists were dependent on myths which had been orally transmitted for a thousand years before the literate era in Greece began about 700 B.C. A surprising number of the ones which were taken up by the tragedians and made familiar to us seem to have come into being as prophetic warnings against the dangers of male hubris, man's belief that, ensconced in his 'castle of reason', he is superior to women and independent of nature. Oedipus and Pentheus both use the same arguments as Creon to justify their murderous and doomed attacks on Nature.

Oedipus was a prime example of the madness which moved men to think themselves, by virtue of intelligence and civilization, superior to nature. During the burning of the beasts in the foot-and-mouth disease epidemic of 2001, the eerily unused Skipton cattle market echoed to these words:

Cows with their ribs showing like roof-slats,  
Vast pyres of mouldering sheep – that's the meadows. [7]

It was the Northern Broadsides production of Blake Morrison's translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus*.<sup>9</sup> The source of the plague is the rotting body of Nature herself in the form of the Sphinx, which Oedipus, horrified, like his people, with the Goddess as devourer, has killed. In Hughes' version of Seneca's *Oedipus* we find the line: 'her stench is a fog smothering us as if we were living inside her carcass' [19].

Nietzsche linked the solving of the riddle with the parricide and incest:

How should man force nature to yield up her secrets but by successfully resisting her, that is to say, by unnatural acts? This is the recognition I find expressed in the terrible triad of Oedipean fates: the same man who solved the riddle of nature (the ambiguous Sphinx) must also, as murderer of his father and husband of his mother, break the consecrated tables of the natural order. It is as though the myth whispered to us that wisdom ... is an unnatural crime, and that whoever, in pride of knowledge, hurls nature into the abyss of destruction, must himself experience nature's disintegration.

[*The Birth of Tragedy*, 61]

How, then, should Oedipus have behaved towards the Sphinx? The ambiguity of the Sphinx lies in the fact that she appears different to different eyes. Oedipus is blind to her beauty:

By deficient eyes she is reduced to inferior states, by the evil eye of ignorance she is spellbound to banality and ugliness. But she is redeemed by the eyes of understanding. The hero who can take her as she is, without undue commotion but with the kindness and assurance she requires is potentially the king, the incarnate god of the created world.<sup>10</sup>

Peter Redgrove draws attention to an Attic cup which depicts Oedipus sitting deep in thought in front of the earth-oracle, the Sphinx on her column. She has a lion body, but is also 'a lovely attentive maiden'.<sup>11</sup> This was probably once

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<sup>9</sup> *Oedipus and Antigone*, tr. Morrison, Northern Broadsides, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton University Press, 1972, 116.

<sup>11</sup> Redgrove, Peter, *The Black Goddess*, Bloomsbury, 1987, xxviii.

interpreted as man receiving from the goddess an oracular revelation of her triple nature. She is a symbol of the union of opposites, the earthly and the divine, body and spirit, instinct and intelligence, male and female, ugliness and beauty. Redgrove writes:

If Oedipus had been aware of the duty he owed to forces greater than himself, the tragedy would not have occurred and the city would have been free of pestilence. ... The ignorance of Oedipus ushered in the plagues of our superbly empty-clever modern age, full of disasters unconsciously invited. [*The Black Goddess* xiv]

The Sphinx threw herself into the sea. Redgrove interprets this as a descent into the unconscious where she 'still operates in our lives as both curse and blessing. Moreover, the unconscious mind is no mere lumber-room of childhood errors and traumata but a living, breathing, sensing, perfumed, luminous Sphinx' [xxx]. The Sphinx, then, is the female, the Earth mother seen by civilized man as a threat and a monstrosity. He seeks to unriddle her mysteries, to replace her with the rule of his own unaided cunning and will.<sup>12</sup>

It is no coincidence that this theme should have surfaced so often in Greek drama. All the plays which have come down to us were probably written for the most important festival of the year in Athens, the Great Dionysia. Far from enforcing civic solidarity, the Great Dionysia was an act of worship of Dionysos, god of wild things and nature's bounty, of women, and of irrational creativity. The function of the spring festival, presided over by the statue of Dionysos, was to keep alive deeper values than those expressed the rest of the year in the rhetoric of the politicians and administrators (who imprisoned Aristophanes, and tried several times without success to put a stop to the Dionysia). Its function was metaphorically to break down the walls within which man attempted to pursue his autonomous life, and let in the disorderly energies of Nature.

Aristophanes' *The Frogs* was performed at the Great Dionysia in 405, possibly the same festival at which *the Bacchae* was performed. *The Frogs*, for all its knock-about comedy, is almost as tragic in its implications for Athens as *The Bacchae*. The idea of the play is that since the three great poets, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, were all now dead, the only hope for Athens was to send Dionysos down to Hades to bring back the greatest of them. When Dionysos gets there, the ghost of Euripides asks him what he wants a poet for. 'To save the city of course', he replies. The comedy lies entirely in the idea that a dead poet might be

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<sup>12</sup> For a full account see 'The Curse of the Sphinx' in Sagar, *Literature and the Crime Against Nature*, Chaucer Press, 2005.

brought back, not at all in the idea that a poet might save the city. The absolute seriousness of that proposition marks the difference in the status of the poet in Athenian society from our own. The idea that a poet could save us if listened to would provoke almost universal laughter, not least among academics. Yet even then the saving wisdom of the tragic poet was not heeded. Both statesmen and people preferred, in Aristophanes' words, to 'sit at the feet of Socrates / Till they can't distinguish the wood from the trees / And tragedy goes to POT'. The poet shares, it seems, the curse of Cassandra. The gift of prophesy must be paid for by the fate of never being heeded. The elected leaders pursued their hubristic, blind, suicidal policies with the support of the majority of the electorate. The following year Athens fell. There followed the long decadence, and the rise of Rome.

The tragic poets had foreseen not only that, but that Athens was creating a template for all Western civilization, which would eventually succeed in spreading universal plague, spilling all germens, destroying Sphinx, Dionysos, 'great creating Nature' herself.

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For Ovid the fall of man came with the transition from the Age of Brass, when still

Mankind listened deeply  
To the harmony of the whole creation,  
And aligned  
Every action to the greater order

[*Collected Poems* 870]

to the terrible Age of Iron:

Earth's natural plenty no longer sufficed.  
Man tore open the earth, and rummaged in her bowels.

[871]

Shakespeare acknowledged the dark side of nature, those 'monsters of the deep' that prey on each other. But the theme of man's crime against nature is prevalent throughout his work, from the early poem *Venus and Adonis* to the last plays. His Adonis, like Euripides' Hippolytus, spurns Venus (whom Hughes calls the 'Goddess of Complete Being'), as threatening his male autonomy, and rejects love in favour of hunting, a perverse violation of the body of the goddess. His treatment of her provokes the transformation of the triple goddess into her destructive underworld self, embodied in a ravaging boar, which kills him.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, set in ancient Athens, has much in common with the Greek plays we have discussed, and is just as subversive. There is the same contrast as in *The Bacchae* between the walled-in 'civilized' world, with its strict unnatural laws, and the natural world outside the walls, with its very different laws. (Shakespeare is to use that same structure again in *As You Like It*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and all the late romances.)

Theseus is the same hubristic, chauvinistic type as Creon. He seems to expect Hippolyta to be grateful for having been defeated in battle and then abducted by him. She responds to his blandishments with sullen silence. Egeus enters, and love, which should be concord, turns to discord and 'vexation'. That his daughter Hermia should have fallen in love with Lysander, rather than the Demetrius, the man of his choice, Egeus can explain only as witchcraft. Towards the end of the play Theseus reveals that for him too love is a matter of 'seething brains', beyond the reach of 'cool reason', a form of lunacy. Love, therefore, has no place in an ordered society. It belongs in that other outer world of night, and woods, and dreams, and 'fairy toys'. Theseus agrees with Egeus that the ancient patriarchal law of Athens must be enforced. If Hermia will not obey her father she must choose either to die or to 'abjure / For ever the society of men' by becoming a nun. When Hermia says that she does not know 'by what power' she is made bold to refuse her father and her king, it is not simply the power of human love. At this crisis she becomes (like Antigone) the representative and embodiment in the human world of what Hughes came to call the 'Goddess of Complete Being'.

The play could easily, at this point, become a tragedy, and end with Theseus enlightened only at the cost of the lives of both Hermia and Hippolyta. Or it could continue in the mode of a problem play, with Theseus, like Angelo in *Measure for Measure* or Bertram in *All's Well that Ends Well*, publicly humiliated by his bride, and love, rather theoretically, vindicated. Shakespeare chose the comic mode, but the issues are no less serious for that.

In the dream world of the fairies the same issues are played out on a cosmic scale. The fairies are specifically associated with 'triple Hecate' [V i 370]. Titania, is the play's embodiment of that goddess. In the heavens she is Luna, the moon. On earth she is the goddess of love, motherhood and all nature's riches. In the underworld she is Proserpina, nature in its annual abeyance. But this is her most important phase, for it is here that she must undergo her 'marriage of the living dark' (in Lawrence's phrase) with Pluto, without which there would be no subsequent spring and harvest. If Proserpina and Pluto (or, in the play, Titania and her consort Oberon) cannot achieve concord, the delicate balance of the natural order will collapse, releasing a plague very like the plague which ravages Thebes after the death of the sphinx at the beginning of *Oedipus the King*, but worldwide. It may seem extreme to compare the Shakespeare play considered most suitable for

children with the Oedipus plays, but in fact Seneca's *Oedipus* was Shakespeare's source for Titania's speech re-enacting the fall:

Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,  
As in revenge have suck'd up from the sea  
Contagious fogs; which, falling in the land,  
Hath every pelting river made so proud  
That they have overborne their continents. ...  
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,  
And crows are fatted with the murrion flock. ...  
The human mortals want their winter cheer:  
No night is now with hymn or carol blest.  
Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,  
Pale in her anger, washes all the air,  
That rheumatic diseases do abound.  
And thorough this distemperature we see  
The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts  
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose;  
And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown,  
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds  
Is, as in mockery, set; the spring, the summer,  
The chiding autumn, angry winter, change  
Their wonted liveries; and the mazed world,  
By their increase, now knows not which is which.  
And this same progeny of evils comes  
From our debate, from our dissension;  
We are their parents and original. [II i 88-117]

This passage is disconcertingly prophetic of both the foot-and-mouth disease epidemic and the already apparent consequences of climate change.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* even includes its own satyr play. Puck is surely a satyr, (and Caliban could convincingly be played as one), and the rude mechanicals, though they violate all the proprieties of art and manners, or precisely by doing so, eliminate the class divide and humanize the courtiers. The play ends with three marriages in a palace now open to 'fairy time', and the fairies (themselves now in concord) bless it. The play is (like Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*) an attempt to reclaim the pagan world of fairy, as defined within the play, as necessary to human health and wholeness.

In *The Winter's Tale*, Perdita pooh-poohs man's claim to be able to improve on 'great creating nature' – a phrase which echoes Montaigne's 'our great and

puissant mother Nature'. Montaigne's extremely modern thought (his attack on colonialism, for example) was more directly incorporated into *The Tempest*, where Prospero finally drops his Faustian attempt to dominate all nature's powers, and is forced to recognize Caliban's superior title to the island by virtue of his sympathetic understanding and acceptance of nature's laws and bounty.<sup>13</sup>

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The industrial revolution accelerated the process of dividing man from nature. Our received idea of the Romantic poets is that they undertook to heal this split, to redeem nature, and largely succeeded. Typical of this view was the account of the legacy of the Romantics given by Alfred North Whitehead in his *Science and the Modern World* (1925). Here is Edmund Wilson's summary of that account:

What had really taken place, says Whitehead, is a philosophical revolution. The scientists of the seventeenth century who presented the universe as a mechanism had caused people to draw the conclusion that man was something apart from nature, something introduced into the universe from the outside and remaining alien to all that he found. But a romantic poet like Wordsworth has come to feel the falsity of this assumption: he has perceived that the world is an organism, that nature includes planets, mountains, vegetation and people alike, that what we are and what we see, what we hear, what we feel and what we smell, are inextricably related, that all are involved in the same great entity. Those who make fun of the Romantics are mistaken in supposing that there is no intimate connection between the landscape and the poet's emotions. There is no real dualism, says Whitehead, between external lakes and hills, on the one hand, and personal feelings, on the other: human feelings and inanimate objects are interdependent and developing together in some fashion of which our traditional notions of laws of cause and effect, of dualities of mind and matter or of body and soul, can give us no true idea. The Romantic poet, then, with his turbid or opalescent language, his sympathies and passions which cause him to seem to merge with his surroundings, is the prophet of a new insight into nature: he is describing things as they really are; and a revolution in the imagery of poetry is in reality a revolution in metaphysics.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For a full account of this theme in Shakespeare see the three chapters on him in *Literature and the Crime Against Nature*.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, Edmund, *Axel's Castle*, Scribner's Sons, 1954, 5-6.

This is surely a gross oversimplification. It is a huge claim that there is any such thing as ‘the Romantic poet’, with a consistent attitude to nature, and that he is ‘describing things as they really are’.

Blake’s delight in much of Wordsworth (especially the ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’) was tempered, according to Crabb Robinson, by ‘the reproaches he continually cast on W. for his imputed worship of nature, wh. in the mind of Blake constituted Atheism’ [Wilson 333].

It is, of course, true that Wordsworth began his poetic career as an avowed ‘worshipper of nature’; but he was able to maintain that position for a while only by turning a blind eye to those aspects of nature which are not easy to worship. In ‘The Tables Turned’ he wrote:

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

Did Coleridge have such passages in mind when he wrote:

Never to see or describe any interesting appearance in nature, without connecting it by dim analogies with the moral world, proves faintness of impression. Nature has her proper interest; and he will know what it is, who believes and feels, that everything has a life of its own, and that we are all *one life*.<sup>15</sup>

In any case, woods are not vernal for long. As Tennyson wrote:

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,  
The vapors weep their burthen to the ground,  
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,  
And after many a summer dies the swan. [‘Tithonus’]

In 1879 Leslie Stephen wrote in ‘Wordsworth’s Ethics’:

He seems at times to have overlooked that dark side of nature which is recognized in theological doctrines of corruption, or in the scientific theories about the fierce struggle for existence ... Is there not a teaching of nature

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<sup>15</sup> Coleridge, S. T., *The Collected Letters*, ed. E. L. Griggs, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1956-9, II, 864.

very apt to suggest horror and despair rather than a complacent brooding over soothing thoughts?

It is this blindness in Wordsworth which Aldous Huxley satirized in 'Wordsworth in the Tropics'. But it is not necessary to transport Wordsworth to a steaming equatorial jungle to see the inadequacy of his description of 'reality'. There is plenty of savage nature in the Lake District. He saw hawks every day, and turned a blind eye to their natures, to that Nature of which the hawk is symbol, and to the God of hawks. A slumber sealed his spirit also to the glaring evidence of human suffering and mortality.

Wordsworth's beloved Lucy was not immortal. Like all creatures she was doomed to be 'roll'd round in earth's diurnal course / With rocks and stones and trees!' He did not want her to be as deeply interfused with nature as that. Nature is easy to worship when one subtracts decay and death. He 'could have fancied that the mighty Deep / Was even the gentlest of all gentle Things' ['Elegiac Stanzas'] until it took his brother in 1805. That 'deep distress', he claimed, humanized his soul. He came to realize that his earlier confidence that 'Nature never did betray the heart that loved her' was no more than 'a fond delusion'. What followed was a gradual repudiation of nature, a growing conviction that he was, in fact, like all men, nature's prisoner, and a belief that the sages who offered man intimations of immortality had more wisdom to offer than mere trees.<sup>16</sup>

Nor was Wordsworth's early worship of nature shared by the other Romantic poets. Coleridge shared it for a while. In 'Frost at Midnight' (1798) he sought to initiate his newborn child into a Wordsworthian pantheism:

But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze  
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags  
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,  
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores  
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear  
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible  
Of that eternal language, which thy God  
Utters, who from eternity doth teach  
Himself in all, and all things in himself.

But he soon came to share Blake's view, and rejected his own earlier Pantheism.

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<sup>16</sup> See the chapter on Wordsworth 'Nature's Priest or Nature's Prisoner' in my *Literature and the Crime Against Nature*; also the subsequent chapters on Coleridge and Hopkins.

Keats described Wordsworth as a ‘large self-worshipper’, and looked where Wordsworth refused to look:

I was at home  
And should have been most happy, — but I saw  
Too far into the sea, where every maw  
The greater on the less feeds evermore. —  
But I saw too distinct into the core  
Of an eternal fierce destruction, ...  
The Shark at savage prey, — the Hawk at pounce, —  
The gentle Robin, like a Pard or Ounce,  
Ravening a worm. [‘Epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds’]

At the end of his short life Keats was able to reconcile himself to mortality, and reaffirm his faith in life on this earth, the world of the senses and seasons. Shelley did not share that faith. In his elegy for Keats he wrote:

Heaven’s light forever shines, Earth’s shadows fly;  
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,  
Stains the white radiance of Eternity. [‘Adonais’]

After the early death of his close friend Arthur Hallam, Tennyson turned savagely against what he called ‘Nature red in tooth and claw’. He had trusted that Love was ‘Creation’s final law’; but since Nature knew nothing of Love, man, if confined to Nature, would be no more than a monster and a discord:

Dragons of the prime,  
That tare each other in their slime,  
Were mellow music matched with him.

‘In Memoriam’ was first published in 1850. Tennyson would have found scientific backing for his subjective reactions only nine years later, with the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin’s spokesman, T. Huxley, certainly thought so. Huxley saw man as ‘compelled to be perpetually on guard against the cosmic forces, whose ends are not his ends, without and within himself’, but nevertheless ‘susceptible of a vast amount of improvement, by education, by instruction, and by the application of his intelligence to the adaptation of the conditions of life to his higher needs’ [Huxley, T. H., 44].

Hopkins travelled the familiar road. He also began as a worshipper of nature, believing that nature was ‘charged with the grandeur of God’. This was not

pantheism but panentheism, since he believed that though God had animated all his creatures with a spark of himself, only a tiny fraction of the divine fire was incarnate, the God of pure spirit being 'a million-times-told' more beautiful and dangerous than his creation. He did not enquire too closely into the implied divinity of the predator, the tse-fly, the plague bacillus. He could praise the kingfisher's ability to catch fire only by ignoring its ability to catch fish. A problem he did face, and could not resolve (except 'somewhere elsewhere'), was that of time, with its concomitant decay and death. By the end he had come to rubbish nature as a Heraclitean fire perpetually destroying its own products: 'Flesh fade, and mortal trash / Fall to the residuary worm'.

A common factor in such writers as Wordsworth, Tennyson and Hopkins is Christianity. God is Love, therefore Love is the prime good. Yet love is clearly not the prime constituent of nature – far from it. Therefore nature is bad, opposed (as 'the world, the flesh and the devil') to God. What cannot be subjected to human (civilized) purposes should be, as far as possible, abolished. Trying to abolish nature is sawing at the branch on which humanity sits. Clearly we cannot live without nature. What is possible is to abolish nature from human consciousness as unworthy of worship or even acceptance.

This was the position from which Yeats set out, preferring dreams of fairyland or an imagined heroic past to the 'Grey Truth' of real life or the 'cold star-bane' of the world as presented to us by science. But these dreams gradually faded, and he came to accept and prefer nature in all its profusion and confusion, its dirt and death.

Coleridge's 'stately pleasure dome', Keats' Grecian urn, and Yeats' Byzantium are all failed attempts to construct a state of art in opposition to the state of nature. They are failures because it is the nature of the poetic imagination to strive for wholeness. The poet cannot afford to 'sliver and disbranch himself from his material sap' [*King Lear* IV ii 34-5], to shoot the albatross, which is his link with the sustaining powers of the natural world, to steal from his own nature 'all the natural man' ['Dejection'], to sever 'the strandentwining cable of all flesh'<sup>17</sup>.

Coleridge has to admit that nothing Kubla Khan can build or cultivate can girdle nature, can stop the flow of the sacred river from its source, an eruption of creative/destructive energy, to its sink in a lifeless ocean. The costly enterprise is futile. Similarly Keats has to admit that the urn's claim to immortalize spring, youth and happy love, is a confidence trick, since the price it exacts is exorbitant, the sacrifice of what Wordsworth calls 'effort, and expectation, and desire, / And something evermore about to be' [*The Prelude*, VI, 541-2]. The perpetuation of

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<sup>17</sup> Joyce, James, *Ulysses*, Bodley Head, 1937, 34.

spring cancels not only the fruitfulness of summer and autumn, but also the joy of another spring. Hughes wrote:

And time was not present they never stopped  
Or left anything old or reached any new thing.  
[‘As I came, I saw a wood’]

It cancels all birth and growth. It cancels life.

In ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ Yeats claims that nature with its young lovers and salmon-falls is a distraction from the mind’s monuments. He turns instead to Byzantium as an image of ‘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. [‘Sailing to Byzantium’]

Yeats’ friend Sturge Moore pointed out to him that since this bird is crafted by a living human goldsmith, modelled on a living bird, and sings, like Homer and Shakespeare only of life in time to lords and ladies, it is entirely nature-dependent. In ‘Byzantium’ Yeats continues to ‘scorn aloud / In glory of changeless metal / Common bird or petal’, but admits at the end of the poem that images from the natural world cannot be purged. He recognizes that he is betraying the Muse by attempting to dispense with them. At the end of his life he wrote: ‘Seek those images / That constitute the wild’, ‘sunlight and wind’, ‘an eagle on the wing’ [‘Those Images’].

The first world war drove Lawrence to try to construct an almost Yeatsian metaphysic within which such a breakdown of civilization could be understood. He saw life as two rivers flowing in opposite directions, the dark river of corruption flowing towards dissolution and death, and the bright river of creation. ‘We roam in the belly of our era’, he wrote, and each era is swept along by whichever river happens to be the stronger current at that time. But he loses control of his imagery when he begins to divide all flora and fauna into incarnations of the spirit of creation or destruction. To the category of destruction he consigns all water and marsh plants, worms and maggots, reptiles, vultures, hyaenas and baboons. And

with something approaching Ruskin's insanity he then accuses these creatures of being corrupt and obscene.

These have ceased to be living creatures in nature's ecology, and have become abstract tokens of his desperation. Fortunately there were real creatures around him, a wagtail sitting on his gatepost, gulls swinging between sea and shore, to help him retain his sanity in those darkest days: 'The world of nature is wonderful in its revivifying spontaneity'<sup>18</sup>. After the war, in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, he attempted to judge nature in its own terms rather than those of over-civilized, over-intellectual, man.

Lawrence's 'savage pilgrimage' was a search for a people somewhere on earth who had found a way of life which married a full humanity with nature's laws. He came to understand and admire the Indians of New Mexico, but the spirit of that place and their racial and cultural evolution in response to it had been so different from his Englishness that he felt it could not be transplanted to Europe or grafted onto himself in exile. The nearest he came to finding what he sought was in the Etruscan tombs of Tarquinia and Cerveteri. These spoke to him of a people who for a short time before they were crushed under the heel of Rome had come close to reversing the fall.

Behind all the dancing was a vision, and even a science of life, a conception of the universe and man's place in the universe which made men live to the depth of their capacity. To the Etruscan, all was alive: the whole universe lived: and the business of man was himself to live amid it all. He had to draw life into himself, out of the wandering huge vitalities of the world.<sup>19</sup>

Aldous Huxley, reviewing Lawrence's *Etruscan Places* in 1932, spoke with the voice of his grandfather T. H. Huxley:

For the sake of the double flute and all it stands for, he [Lawrence] was prepared to sacrifice most of the activities upon which, for the last two thousand years or thereabouts, humanity, at any rate in the West, has set the highest value. The philosophy and practice of non-acceptance have made it possible for man to become, in some respects, more than human.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, III, eds. Boulton and Robertson, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p.97.

<sup>19</sup> *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, ed. de Filippis, Cambridge University Press, 1992, 56-7.

<sup>20</sup> *D.H. Lawrence*, ed. Coombes, Penguin 1973, 273.

Huxley's mindset prevented him from reading what Lawrence had actually written in *Etruscan Places*. He is clearly unable to think in other than dualistic terms. Lawrence is arguing that the refusal to accept the given terms of life, the interdependence of man, flora, fauna, landscape, climate, and the fact of death, together with the hubristic, Faustian, impulse to become 'more than human', had alienated man from his birthright, his atonement with the rest of life, including its creative energies. He does not want to go back to a childish or prelapsarian innocence (or ignorance), rather to develop a more selfless awareness, a holistic and biocentric consciousness. He wants, above all, wholeness.

It is surprising that Huxley should have written his review of *Etruscan Places* in the same year that he published *Brave New World*. There the argument for non-acceptance of nature's laws is put into the mouth of Mustapha Mond, the Controller of the insulated, insane and tyrannical Utopia, who has got rid of flies, mosquitoes, and everything else which could interfere with the comfort and convenience of 'civilized' people. His opponent, the Savage, claims the right to suffer. When Mustapha Mond lists all the forms of suffering that an acceptance of nature would involve, he replies: 'I claim them all'. The reader's sympathies at this point are entirely with the Savage. Huxley's later novels, such as *The Genius and the Goddess* and *Island* move towards a much more Lawrencean position.

T. S. Eliot followed the more familiar route. In *The Waste Land* (1925) he drew heavily on Pagan fertility myths in his critique of modern civilization, but, like Hopkins and Dylan Thomas, he could not cope with time, except by intersecting it with the timeless. Turning finally to Christianity, he reduced life in time to 'dung and death' ['East Coker']. Beckett similarly reduced it to 'the whole bloody business starting all over again. A turd' [*Watt*], but without the redemption from elsewhere.

Dylan Thomas, in the 'Author's Prologue' to his *Collected Poems* (1952), told

How I, a spinning man,  
Glory also this star, bird  
Roared, sea born, man torn, blood blest.

But the tone of his last, best poems is not celebratory. It is a tone of lament, lament for the necessity to put away childish celebration, which is possible only in ignorance of time, 'And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land' ['Ferrn Hill']. Wake, that is, to find oneself in chains. Lament for the small birds of the bay, victims of the hangman hawk who calls 'dilly, dilly, come and be killed' ['Over Sir John's Hill'].

and I who hear the tune of the slow,  
Wear-willow river, grave,  
Before the lunge of the night, the notes on this time-shaken  
Stone for the sake of the souls of the slain birds sailing.

In 'Poem on his birthday' Thomas 'sings towards anguish', tolling his birthday bell for all creatures which 'work their ways to death'. Though at the end of the poem he counts his blessings aloud, the last line, 'As I sail out to die', confirms that the poem mourns a 'voyage to ruin', in which all those blessings are to be lost.

Ted Hughes' poetic journey was in exactly the opposite direction to that of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Tennyson, Hopkins and Eliot. His vision of nature in his early poems is a waking nightmare, in which his primary image is the dragon or devouring serpent. 'To freeze the blood I have no ready arts', Wordsworth wrote in 'Hart-Leap Well'. From the first it was a prime objective of Hughes' art to do precisely that. The first and title poem of his first book, 'The Hawk in the Rain', clearly establishes all the elements as hostile to life. Hughes' rebellion here is not only against Wordsworth, but against one of the most long and powerful traditions of English poetry, in which wind and rain are archetypal symbols for both fertility and spiritual regeneration:

O Western Wind, when will thou blow,  
The small rain down can rain.  
Christ, that my love were in my arms  
And I in my bed again.

[Anon]

At the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer takes for granted that as the sweet showers of April engender the flowers, and the sunshine and gentle breezes prick the hearts of birds into song, so these same impulses will stimulate the hearts of men and women into both physical and spiritual activity. Coleridge describes the lifting of the curse from the Ancient Mariner as a resumption of the fertilizing processes of the natural world:

And when I awoke, it rained.

Hopkins, in his final agony, cried out:

Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.

But nature for early Hughes is sink not source. In 'The Hawk in the Rain' rain drowns, it converts ploughland into the clay of graves, it hacks his head to the bone. The wind – a traditional symbol of inspiration and renewal – 'kills these stubborn hedges' and throws his breath. Hughes admires the hawk's ability to hang still at the 'master-fulcrum of violence', but even the hawk is doomed at last to be smashed, to 'mix his heart's blood with the mire of the land'.

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