



The GREEN MANTLE  
of  
ROMANTICISM

Christine Avery &  
Michael Colebrook

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## Preface

This book had a complex genesis. The original intention (by MC) was to produce an accessible account of the life and work of John Muir, who richly deserves to be better known in this country. It seemed that a good way of doing this would be to set Muir within the context of English Romanticism. This is where the assistance of CA was sought. It soon became obvious that the tail was beginning to wag the dog. We decided that the way out would be to widen the scope of the study to make it a contribution towards a reassessment of Romanticism in the context of modern ecological thinking.

The result has been an enriching collaboration in which CA is responsible for the chapters on Coleridge, Wordsworth and Shelley, while MC produced those on Emerson and Thoreau and Muir. The Introduction and Conclusions are joint efforts.

Christine Avery

Michael Colebrook

Plymouth, July 2008





# I

## INTRODUCTION

If it is said that I am concealed by the existence of the world, then who is it that blossoms in the form of the world? Can a red jewel be concealed by its own lustre? Does a chip of gold lose its goldness if turned into an ornament? Does a lotus leaf lose itself when it blossoms into so many petals? When a seed of grain is sown and grows into an ear of corn, is it destroyed or does it appear in its enhanced glory? So there is no need to draw the curtain of the world away in order to have my vision, because I am the whole panorama.

Janeshwar. The Mystic Vision

The American writer Alvin Toffler coined the phrase ‘future shock’ to describe the condition of disorientation caused by the imminent arrival of a future for which we are unprepared, socially, ethically, spiritually. There is a realisation that the way we humans are living on the Earth is simply not sustainable. The threat and challenge of climate change and the introduction of the technologies of genetic manipulation, are examples of prospects that we simply do not know how to deal with. The situation is not unique to the present time. The early nineteenth-century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Hegel was perhaps referring to the same feelings when he commented that philosophy always arrives on the scene too late.

Paradoxically, it seems possible that some of the effects of ‘future shock’ could be mitigated by paying more attention to the past, by recognising that there may well have been prophets and seers who have already been where we are now and whose insights and inspiration are still relevant. Richard Tarnas, in his monumental *The Passion of the Western Mind*, writes:

From the complex matrix of the Renaissance had issued forth two distinct streams of culture, two temperaments or general approaches to human existence characteristic of the Western mind. One emerged in the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment and stressed rationality, empirical science, and a skeptical secularism. The other was its polar complement, sharing common roots in the Renaissance and classical Greco-Roman culture ... but tending to express just those aspects of human experience suppressed by the Enlightenment’s overriding spirit of rationalism. First conspicuously present in Rousseau, then in Goethe, Schiller, Herder, and German Romanticism, this side of the Western sensibility fully emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and has not since ceased to be a potent force in Western culture and consciousness from Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Holderlin, Schelling, Schleiermacher, the Schlegel brothers, Madame de Staël, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Hugo, Pushkin, Carlyle, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and onward in its diverse forms to their many descendants, countercultural and otherwise, of the present era.<sup>1</sup>

The western world followed the path of the first of these two cultural streams and embraced the Enlightenment with its stress on rationalism, the universality of its values and its adulation of the scientific method. The rationalistic and scientific approach led to a mechanistic and utilitarian view of the natural world which is responsible for many of the problems we face today. Romanticism, on the other hand, embraced a very different sensibility, it drew on the qualities of

imagination and intuition, of feeling and sentiment. It is of the heart as well as the head.

Tracing the history of the concept shows very clearly that Romanticism is easily diluted or debased into 'romanticism'. This is not necessarily a damning criticism of Romanticism itself any more than the remark that most flowers soon wither is a slur on flowers. But it is interesting and relevant that by far the commonest current uses of the word 'romantic' are derogatory. Max Oelschlaeger, for instance, though he treats individual Romantic poets with just appreciation (in *The Idea of Wilderness*<sup>2</sup>), almost always uses the word 'romantic' elsewhere in the book in a negative sense. A contemporary journalist writes on Hollywood films about dying of cancer, that the makers 'support their romantic agendas by evading and overlooking hard realities.'<sup>3</sup> The Keats who qualified as an apothecary after five years of work with the sick, nursed his brother through terminal illness, and incorporated all this, together with justified fears about his own premature death, into the fabric of his thinking and his poetry, might well have been a little rueful at reading this use of the word; likewise the Wordsworth who offers a painfully accurate portrait of the effect of unemployment in *The Ruined Cottage*, and came to give thanks for 'years that bring the philosophic mind.' It is worth noticing that contemporaries of the Romantics also used the word 'romantic' negatively. Charles Lamb remarked that the Lakes scenery was evidently 'that which tourists call romantic' and that the tourists tended to indulge in a 'spluttering about it, and toss their splendid epithets around them.'<sup>4</sup> Behind this lies a diffuse eighteenth century romanticism which was part of the taken-for-granted (but still in some ways potent) background of the literary Romantics in whom we are most interested.

Is there any such thing as 'Romanticism'? The question springs to mind because the term is used in vague and contradictory senses. For many people, the idea of 'all for love and the world well lost' may

be the uppermost meaning though that is the one least relevant to the theme of this book. Ranging more widely, we can claim that there is a 'Romantic' sensibility which can be spotted here and there throughout history. There are the Shakespearean comedies which incorporate the experience of being entranced in woods or cast upon wild seas. The Middle Ages, in which the 'Romance' stories originated, let loose a restless, questing spirit – one thinks of Sir Gawain's search through the midwinter forest for the Green Knight. Going much further back, we can argue that Euripides' *Medea*, in her passionate self-assertion, is as Romantic as anybody in fiction or history. But the contradictions are quite striking. For instance, most individualist outcasts have a Romantic aura, but, according to Isaiah Berlin<sup>5</sup>, Fascism, with its ideals of race conformity and gender stereotype, can also be described as a version of Romanticism. It is as if from its roots, which Isaiah Berlin so ably describes, branches spread out in many directions.

There is no 'essence of Romanticism' to be found by collecting all the uses of the word and boiling them down. It is perhaps significant that Richard Tarnas effectively defines Romanticism by providing a list of names of figures generally considered to be Romantics. It may seem that the term is often just a convenient label for a bundle of characteristics loosely linked by proximity in time. But among these characteristics our interest focuses on a particular quality of relationship with 'Nature', conceived of (in common sense terms at the moment) as the world not created by us; questions of the self and consciousness in this cosmic context; and the possibilities of integrating feeling and intuition or experience with reason, intellectual integrity or scientific modes of thought. Many of the Romantics sought a deep relationship with the natural world and saw in it a source of revelation and of wisdom. This quest can lead to some paradoxical conclusions but we believe them to be significant and productive.

In its vision of nature, the high Romantic period is of particular relevance because of the concurrent emergence of the concept of 'deep time' and of evolutionary processes at work in shaping the world. Any view of the natural world that does not include the almost inconceivably long time perspective of evolutionary change is inevitably incomplete and can be said to be missing a vital dimension. The Enlightenment embraced evolutionary theories as providing the last nail in the coffin of the supernatural: they provided rational and naturalistic explanations of how things came to be. For Thomas Henry Huxley, among others, evolution provided a powerful argument for a mechanically determined world: 'the existing world lay, potentially in the cosmic vapour, and a sufficient intelligence could, from a knowledge of the properties of that vapour, have predicted, say, the state of the Fauna of Great Britain in 1869.'<sup>6</sup> Many of the Romantics also welcomed the concept of evolution, although their response was very different. For them, evolution enriched and confirmed their view of nature as organic: as alive and vibrant. It opened up an exciting new perspective on the natural world.

Echoing Martin Heidegger, Jonathan Bate<sup>7</sup> poses the question, 'What are poets for?' He goes on to suggest: 'could it be to remind the next few generations that it is we who have the power to determine whether the earth will sing or be silent? As earth's own poetry ... is drowned ever deeper ... so there will be an ever greater need to retain a place in culture ... for the song that names the earth'. In response to this, we have attempted in this study to present a series of pen portraits, some fairly detailed, others quite brief, of a selection of English speaking Romantics who have left us a record in poetry and prose of their experiences of the natural world and whom, we believe contributed significantly to 'the song that names the earth'.

We start with Samuel Taylor Coleridge who was without doubt the most scholarly and erudite of the early nineteenth century English Romantics. Inevitably we include William Wordsworth.

A. N. Whitehead wrote of him that he was, 'passionately absorbed in nature. It has been said of Spinoza that he was drunk with God. It is equally true that Wordsworth was drunk with nature. But he was a thoughtful, well-read man, with philosophical interests, and sane even to the point of prosiness. In addition, he was a genius.'<sup>8</sup> Any consideration of Coleridge and Wordsworth would be incomplete without mention of the brief blaze of glory that was Percy Bysshe Shelley. From these we move across the Atlantic and look briefly at Ralph Waldo Emerson who was substantially responsible for introducing Romanticism to the United States. We look even more briefly at Henry David Thoreau<sup>9</sup> who took Romanticism into the American wilderness. We finish with John Muir who, while less well known than the others, can lay claim to the position of major prophet of the wilderness and father of the modern environmental movement.

## II

### COLERIDGE

#### Romantic poet and philosopher

First a brief scene from 1797: it is a warm June evening. The Wordsworths, William and his sister Dorothy, are working in the vegetable garden at the back of Racedown Lodge, a house in an isolated part of Dorset of which they have been tenants for the last two years. Looking up, one of them catches sight of a figure who, as Dorothy wrote: 'did not keep to the high road but leaped over a gate and bounded down a pathless field towards us.'<sup>1</sup> Coleridge, fresh from preaching at the Unitarian chapel at Bridgwater the day before, has walked the forty miles to Racedown to renew an acquaintance with Wordsworth begun in Bristol two years ago and continued since mostly by correspondence. Although the visit was intended to last only a few days it stretches to a fortnight and in July the Wordsworths are visiting Coleridge in his cottage at Nether Stowey. Shortly afterwards William and Dorothy have moved to Alfoxden to be near Coleridge and the ten years of greatest creativity for both poets has begun.

At this time, Coleridge was twenty-five. Perhaps more than anybody, he represents and embodies the Romantic quality of unbounded energy. His enthusiasm surged out and embraced people as well as illuminating books and ideas. One American who heard Coleridge talk said, with some humour but with equal admiration, that he had not encountered such a torrent since visiting Niagara Falls.



Wordsworth, in spite of his northern aversion to overstatement, seems to have found the word ‘wonderful’ the best to describe Coleridge. Comparisons with natural forces crop up often in contemporaries’ impressions of Coleridge. De Quincey, for instance, recalled meeting him for the first time:

Coleridge, like some great river, the Oreallana or the St. Lawrence, that, having been checked and fretted by rocks or thwarting islands, suddenly recovers its volume of waters and its mighty music, swept at once, as if returning to his natural business, into a continuous strain of eloquent dissertation, certainly the most novel, the most finely illustrated, and traversing the most spacious fields of thought by transitions the most just and logical, that it was possible to conceive.<sup>2</sup>

Such energy, wherever it appears, arouses wonder and fascination. It takes us beyond the mundane and the mechanical into the area where poetry and religion hold their neighbouring territories. Matthew Fox, in *Original Blessing*, adopts as one of his themes the Dabhar, the Hebrew word usually translated as ‘the word’ but having deeper and wider connotations than the modern sense of ‘word’, senses far more akin to our experience of creative force.<sup>3</sup> This is where one would locate the phenomenon that was Coleridge. Notoriously, the energy was not under Coleridge’s control. It was interwoven with an ‘indolence’ and unreliability which, quite apart from any moralistic impulses, in practice exasperated everyone who knew him. From a distance, he might seem an easy target for all anti-romantics who might choose to interpret his vacillation, procrastination, opium addiction and the undoubted pain and frustrations of his life as typifying the treacherous flipside of any Romantic allegiance. But more knowledge of Coleridge’s life shows this to be an inaccurate as well as a patronising judgement. For example, when he was lecturing at the Royal

Institution in 1808 it was the carefully prepared lectures that were disasters and the spontaneous ones that people found mind-expanding and inspiring. This brings us into the misty area where the human (willed?) and the natural (spontaneous?) interact in much more subtle and unpredictable ways than anyone has adequately explored.

There is certainly no simple answer to the question of where Coleridge's creative energy came from. But there is no doubt that he himself felt it to be rooted in a relationship to nature which he, just as firmly as Wordsworth, saw as originating in childhood. He was born in the Devon village of Ottery St. Mary and always felt that being sent away to school in London at the age of nine was a harmful rupture of the ties that bound him to the Devon countryside. He wrote of this time: 'For I was reared/ In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,/ And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.' In the same poem, 'Frost at Midnight', he wrote, addressing his infant son, Hartley:

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.  
Great universal Teacher! He shall mould  
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

This was the ideal. And in reality, Coleridge always placed a great importance on enabling his children to grow up in country places. The fact that the tuition of Nature was not enough to fit Hartley, at least,

for the demands of living bears witness to social complexities beyond our present scope.<sup>4</sup> His early brilliance and originality turned to dissipation and eccentricity. Hartley's off-key life was one of S.T. Coleridge's greatest griefs.

Coleridge himself cannot be seen as a pure child of nature. The positive side of his own childhood exile in London, at Christ's Hospital Bluecoat School, was that he received an education which had valuable elements, in spite of the repressive pedagogic attitudes of the time. He also began a lifelong friendship with Charles Lamb, and was, after all, surrounded by the city which had more recently nourished the genius of Blake. It was another friend from Christ's Hospital who introduced him to Southey when, as a Cambridge undergraduate, he touched down at Oxford during a summer walking tour. Southey already wore the distinction of having been expelled from Westminster School for writing an essay against flogging. Both young men, generous and idealistic by nature, were engrossed and inspired by the currently unfolding events of the French Revolution. Southey had recently read Godwin's radical *Enquiry into Political Justice* (published in early 1793, just after the guillotining of Louis XVI in Paris), and introduced Coleridge to Godwin's libertarian ideas. Both also read Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man* for which Paine, though in France at the time (1792), had been convicted of 'seditious libel'.

Coleridge had suffered at school from his 'charity boy' status and afterwards from chronic financial desperation and this plight must also have fed into his desire for more generous and humane forms of society. Out of such a mixture of influences came the plans to emigrate to America and form, in the wilderness, a new and harmonious community. It was named by Coleridge 'Pantisocracy' meaning 'rule by all'. Although this plan failed – because of lack of money and the succumbing of the recruits to caution and practicality – further yearn-

ings after the ‘good society’, in the form either of plans or imaginings, crop up throughout the rest of Coleridge’s life. An ideal of social good, with environmental implications, was always near the heart of his thinking. This contradicts Bertrand Russell’s view (probably governed by centralizing Byron) that ‘The Romantic movement, in its essence, aimed at liberating human personality from the fetters of social convention and social morality.’ Nothing in Coleridge seems to point to such ultimate social subversion. His early enthusiasm for the French Revolution led to a tenacious reputation for ‘Jacobinism’ with some while others (such as Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt) reviled him for later reneging on libertarian ideas: but at every stage Coleridge’s motivation was blatantly idealistic and pro-social, not nihilistic and anti-social. On the level of everyday behaviour and way of life, he was a deeply convivial man who absolutely needed other people for the conversation which was his lifeblood and for emotional support.

It seems clear that for Coleridge, there was no interest or inspiration in dwelling on a conflict between ‘Nature’ and culture. On the contrary, in ‘To France: An Ode’ (1798) he finds that the ‘Liberty’ so dear to him politically is expressed, embodied and renewed in natural things:

Ye Clouds! that far above me float and pause,  
Whose pathless march no mortal may control!  
Ye Ocean-Waves! that, wheresoe’er ye roll,  
Yield homage only to eternal laws...  
Yea, every thing that is, and will be free!  
Bear witness for me, wheresoe’er ye be,  
With what deep worship I have still adored  
The spirit of divinest Liberty.<sup>5</sup>

Here there is a clear affinity, but also an interesting contrast, with the thinking of John Muir. In the words of Michael Cohen, Muir's core aspiration was to: 'Leave civilization and society and enter the self-consistent realm of Nature' and to 'Cease to believe that philanthropy was the highest good. He would pledge his allegiance to Nature.'<sup>6</sup> Muir himself wrote: 'I never tried to abandon creeds or codes of civilization; they went away of their own accord, melting and evaporating noiselessly without any effort and without leaving any consciousness of loss.'<sup>7</sup> In spite of the calm explanation this may appear reckless to those anti-Romantics who hold that 'good' behaviour is a fragile, socially imposed bridle barely controlling our natural 'bad' behaviour. The strength and ubiquity of this view, especially in America, is well documented by Roderick Nash in *Wilderness and the American Mind*.<sup>8</sup> In fact, although Muir's turning away from social constraints was real enough, and deep enough, the result was paradoxically civilizing. His writing in itself arose from a social impulse which bound him to the community of human beings even when it was driven by the usual authorial desire to change those human beings. His personal dealings with the intellectual and political luminaries of his age also revealed a highly developed moral being, not a grunting barbarian. The question of 'Nature' versus 'culture' remains, of course, unresolved by all this, but perhaps we may be moving a little closer to bringing it into clearer focus.

From this point I will adopt a 'key-texts' approach and look at the philosophical content of some of Coleridge's most lasting poems. This is not meant to imply that the poetry and the 'philosophy' are separable. I would argue that we respond holistically – to poetic quality and philosophical depths in one comprehensive act of the mind.

## ‘The Eolian Harp’ and ‘This Lime Tree Bower My Prison’

In August 1795 when living with Sara Fricker (whom he married in October that year) at Clevedon in Somerset, Coleridge wrote ‘The Eolian Harp’, addressing the poem to Sara. Analysis of this poem reveals much about his philosophical and imaginative identity at this time in spite of its informal and conversational tone. Coleridge and his Sara sit outside their cottage, at sunset, in contemplative mood. Although this dwelling is described as a ‘simple Cot’ which might in some hands be merely a well-worn convention, or even a sentimental invention, in this case it is literally and soberly just what Coleridge says it is: the description of white jasmine and myrtle around the walls and the scent of beanflowers from a nearby field has the ring of reality which grounds us and makes us more receptive to the fanciful and speculative elements which come later. The harp itself, apparently set in a window frame, is first caressed by the wind, then ‘boldlier swept’ making melodies which are ‘footless and wild’ and hover ‘on untam’d wing’. Coleridge continues, making a seamless transition between the wind and something implicitly felt to be like the wind but greater:

O! the one Life within us and abroad,  
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,  
A light in sound, a sun-like power in light,  
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where -

This is what most people would interpret as pantheism and it certainly has the exaltation and mystical quality of pantheism. However, it does not say that God is identical with the physical universe or that God is equally everywhere – as a pure pantheism such as Spinoza’s would maintain. For Spinoza, everything that we perceive is an aspect of Godhead. For Coleridge in these lines the opposite applies: God is an aspect of some things, or in other words, the godlike power is a varying, fleeting, dynamic and uncapturable aspect of our experience of the universe.

As well as transcending the senses by becoming ‘a light in sound’ this power is ‘rhythm in thought’ which suggests a unity between intellectual processes and music (or dance, or verse). Although something more powerful than sense experience is present, the senses are in no way downgraded. The poem continues with Coleridge telling Sara that earlier in the day he lay on the slope of a hill watching the sea’s sparkle through half-closed eyelids, and in this state of apparent indolence thoughts came and played on his consciousness just as the wind plays on the Eolian harp. The thoughts seem to him as free and as natural as the winds. This now prompts him to a fine swoop of speculation:

And what if all of animated nature  
Be but organic Harps diversely fram’d,  
That tremble into thought, as o’er them sweeps  
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,  
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

Here the human mind, nature and God are felt to be as intimately connected as they are for any of the world-affirming mystics.<sup>9</sup> However, Coleridge’s onrush of ideas is halted by the ‘serious eye’ of Sara who considers that they are not Christian enough. Thus ‘holily dispraised’, Coleridge backs off. He reminds himself that he is ‘A sinful and most miserable man, / Wilder’d and dark’, and the poem ends with gratitude that he has nevertheless been granted ‘this Cot’ and Sara, his ‘heart-honour’d Maid’.

The intervention of Sara may strike the modern reader as excessively pious, jarring against the freer and wilder speculation. But the sense of ‘original sin’ was Coleridge’s own and cannot be wished away. We will revert to this point later when considering Coleridge’s philosophical background.

When the Wordsworths (and Charles Lamb from London) arrived to stay at Nether Stowey, Sara, possibly pushed too far by having to provide for three gifted and loquacious visitors, and her own new baby, in a small, damp and semi-derelict cottage, accidentally dropped a skillet of boiling milk on Coleridge's foot, with the result that he had to stay at home while his friends went out walking over the Quantocks. The loss of this longed-for expedition resulted in the poem 'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison', addressed, again in conversational mode, to Charles Lamb.

This poem like the earlier one shows Coleridge evoking natural sights and sounds so persuasively that the reader as good as shares the sensations. His eye observes with a naturalist's neutrality and precision as when he notes:

that branchless ash,  
Unsunned and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves  
Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still,  
Fann'd by the water-fall!

And later in the poem he provides a footnote linking his observation of the sound of a rook's wings 'creaking' as it flies home with a similar observation (on the Savannah Crane) by the traveller and naturalist, Bartram. This is hardly 'romantic' cloudiness or aversion to simple fact. However, Coleridge does imagine Lamb to have 'pined/ And hungered after Nature, many a year/ In the great city pent' which, considering Lamb's later voiced views on London vs the country and the fact that he was a lifelong Londoner, may not have been totally accurate. Perhaps it is more difficult to be justly aware of that part of nature which we call 'human' than to be a faithful observer of nature as our 'wild' environment. Not even the most committed advocate of Coleridge would claim that he was sensitive to the feelings and experiences of the people around him. As a Romantic poet



of nature he is nearer to the insights of philosophy and mysticism than to the psychological and social explorations that may or may not be related to them in an ever-changing pattern of connections.

Coleridge continues 'This Lime Tree Bower my Prison' by urging his friend to stand

. . . gazing round  
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem  
Less gross than bodily; and of such hues  
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes  
Spirits perceive his presence.

Here the sense of nature as an expression of some power behind it, communicating through it is surely a direct personal perception, although he had already encountered similar intuitions in the writings of Boehme and later found apparent confirmation in the Naturphilosophie of Schelling.

### **The Rime of the Ancient Mariner**

In the autumn of 1797 Coleridge began working on 'The Ancient Mariner'. This imaginary traveller's tale contains the symbolic killing of a natural creature, the albatross, which his biographer, Richard Holmes<sup>10</sup> considers identifies the poem as a 'green parable'. He suggests that this is so because of 'the idea of man's destructive effect on the natural world, so that human moral blindness inadvertently introduces evil into the benign systems of nature, releasing uncontrollable forces that take terrible revenge.' Holmes also suggests (in a footnote) 'the notion of the 'green parable' deserves further exploration.' What follows is not a full-scale, detailed exploration but an outline intended to highlight the theme of the human relationship to nature. My interpretation does not suggest that 'nature' as it appears in 'The Ancient Mariner' does embody 'benign systems' in any comfortable sense.

'The Ancient Mariner' is a ballad written in a simple style, gripping the reader by its sensuous imagery and archetypal emotions. The Mariner is the vagrant, the anguished misfit, who waylays the narrator and prevents him from joining in one of the most celebratory and social of all human events, a wedding. Why this particular guest? There is no given reason and this encourages the reader to identify with him as an 'Everyman' figure. He is about to be forcibly removed from a state of merely social relatedness and turned towards the 'otherness' of the environment. The guest – and the reader – are compelled to accompany the Mariner in imagination away from the scene of the wedding, beyond the safe world of the land, the church, the lighthouse, and into the unknown. The storm and the ice that the seafarers encounter are anti-human and feel as if anti-life. Common sense at this point might raise its prosaic head and say, 'Why go? What do you gain by tempting nature to do its worst?' The revelatory perception that the world is not made for us, that there are places where we are not meant to be, is here implicit and it also has an implicit answer. The spirit of the explorers whose accounts of their voyages Coleridge read with constant fascination animates the poem, as in the line, 'We were the first that ever burst into that silent sea'. There is a contradiction here. We know that the early explorers were often motivated by greed for gold and other riches, were destructive and exploitative and provide a classic case of imperialistic aggression. But there remains a thread in the bundle of explorers' motivations which is to do with expanding human consciousness, expressing human (and natural?) energy. This is what animates and sustains the poem: though the enterprise within it is blind, it contains a natural drive, and it resonates with the deep-laid romanticism of the prehistoric racial past.

Into the alien (though awesomely beautiful) world of sea and cold comes the great bird flying. The reader feels the exaltation, the response of 'this shouldn't be able to live here, but it gloriously and

awesomely can. . .’ The experience suggests to the sailors something religious, ‘As if it had been a Christian soul, / We hailed it in God’s name.’ There is not only a communication between the creature and the human beings – it comes to their call and eats their food – there is also a temporary sense of a kind of universal complicity, a wholeness which works for all its elements, expressed by the following south-wind which takes the mariners where they want to go. This recalls the experience of people close to nature that certain states of sensitivity and goodwill lead to a perception that ‘all things work together for good’. No doubt at least part of this is due to the concentrated mind’s enhanced ability to integrate discordant experiences into new and reconciling patterns. But some things cannot be integrated at the moment of their happening. The wanton destruction of harmony and relatedness is represented in the poem by the act gratuit of the Mariner. For no reason at all, meanly and meaninglessly, he shoots the albatross ‘with my cross-bow.’ This is not part of risky exploration. It is something different – a perverseness, a disconnection. It demands the forging of a new pattern, worked out with anguish through the dimension of time.

The killing of the albatross has frequently been seen by critics as a trivial, token act<sup>11</sup> but surely only the compartmentalized thinking of a misplaced rationalism could interpret it in this way. The shooting actually stands for every act of mindless cruelty, all failure to respect and feel with other life forms. There is a parallel with John Muir’s detestation of the wanton destruction of bears in Yosemite since they ‘are made of the same dust as we, and breathe the same winds and drink of the same waters.’<sup>12</sup> In standing for all similar actions the killing of the albatross also reinforces that habit of mind which operates symbolically – senses affinities and has an intuitive awareness of connection. If the albatross stands for life itself, the story of killing it foreshadows – carries the warning and the darkness – of complete ecological disaster.

For the Ancient Mariner the shooting of the bird brings a retribution which represents the unbearable. The wind drops leaving the ship becalmed and there is no water to drink so that the sailors all die slowly of thirst except for the Mariner himself who has to suffer instead 'the nightmare Life-in-Death'. His situation is redeemed by another spontaneous act, his blessing of the water snakes that swim around the ship. He does it 'unawares', in a moment of grace rather than moralistic will. Although the snakes are alien and other (the way most people tend to experience snakes) still they are alive and beautiful. The blessing causes the albatross to fall off the Mariner's neck, like the millstone of Christian iconography or the burden from the back of Bunyan's pilgrim, and sink 'like lead into the sea'. Again, the act stands for all impulses towards honouring and preserving our natural environment and it is to do with emotions and the unconscious (or 'grace') as much as with reason or calculations about expediency.

The 'Ancient Mariner' is an essentially Christian poem and in this way differs from most Romantic texts and sharply from the spirit of such Romantic inheritors such as Tennyson, Hardy and Lawrence. In the unexplored territory, the place where we are not welcome, although there is intolerable suffering there are also the tokens of a transcending intelligence. The cross imagery is unmissable. The Mariner too is a Christ figure to the extent that he bears the burden for the rest of the crew who share his guilt because at one stage they had thoughtlessly, mob-like, cheered his destructive act. At the end of the poem when the pilot's boat goes out to investigate the homecoming, spectral ship, neither the pilot nor the boatboy can bear the encounter. The pilot faints and the boatboy goes mad. Only the 'holy Hermit' has (barely) enough strength to address the Mariner and receive his confession. The Mariner himself becomes part of nature as well as remaining human: 'I pass like night from land to land/ I have strange power of speech.' This particular transcending of a duality perhaps represents a deep human need.

Contemporary responses to the poem perhaps indicate something about its prophetic originality. Southey wrote a disparaging review including the comment: 'We do not understand the story sufficiently to analyse it. It is a Dutch attempt at German sublimity.'<sup>13</sup> There were other more sympathetic views (not many, though including Charles Lamb's) but perhaps Southey's bafflement suggests that the poem went beyond the shared Romantic consciousness of that moment and that more time was needed for it to become as transparent and relevant as it is for us today.

Wordsworth's reactions are also revealing. When working on the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800 Wordsworth (although he had contributed ideas and even lines to the poem at its inception), insisted on consigning 'The Ancient Mariner' to the end of the volume and complained: 'The Poem of my Friend has indeed great defects; first, that the principal person has no distinct character... secondly that he does not act, but is continually acted upon: thirdly, that the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other...'<sup>14</sup> To which a defender of the poem might respond, firstly: that an Everyman does not need a 'distinct character' since character must be the result of reflective personal development: in killing the albatross the Mariner exemplifies the qualities of an undeveloped and therefore characterless human being, the moral implication being that development is always demanded of us; secondly that to be acted upon must be a central part of the human experience of nature – only a lurking machismo within a patriarchal mindset could interpret this necessity as purely negative; and thirdly that the events of the poem connect in the chain: destruction leads to suffering; then blessing leads to enlightenment and a prophetic imperative. The 'passivity' of the Mariner connects up with the concept of 'passive attentiveness' as developed by Goethe. Wordsworth himself expressed it in the phrase 'wise passiveness', describing the state of mind wherein 'one

impulse from the vernal wood can teach you more of man, of moral evil and of good than all the sages can.' ('The Tables Turned'). There is, however a radiant paradox here in that an understanding of the mind as an active participant in perception is also essential to Romanticism. The two apparently opposite states, passive and participative, go together in a unity which needs to be experienced directly.

### **Dejection: An Ode**

Coleridge was hurt and undermined by Wordsworth's denigrating comments on 'The Ancient Mariner'. During these years he was also suffering from a deepening estrangement from his wife, from the effects of opium addiction, and from the fact that he was in love with the unattainable Sara Hutchinson, the sister of Mary, Wordsworth's future wife. It was to this Sara that he addressed the published version of 'Dejection: An Ode', written in 1802. An earlier version was addressed directly to Wordsworth and the poem is among other things a response to a draft of Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' which proclaimed the healing power of nature. 'Dejection' is true to the Romantic ethic of experience: what seems actual to the self at any given time must be taken seriously; no doctrine or dogma can override the authenticity of what is perceived by the whole of the honest mind in its questioning progress. The poem and the experience it incarnates achieve generality – it is not necessary to be addicted to opium or unhappily in love to empathize with the Coleridge of 'Dejection'.

The burden of the poem is that nature cannot heal a mind which has lost its power to feel, and is no longer borne along by that energy (natural or divine) which once seemed inseparable from the self. The night sky, wonderfully described, and thereby 'given' to the reader, is not given to the one who describes it. The sky shows all the signs of a coming storm. Now the Eolian harp is not 'caressed' or 'boldlier swept', as before, by animated winds but is raked with a random

roughness which produces moans and sobs. This is not 'benevolent', nature but the poet looks forward to the storm since it may 'startle this dull pain and make it move and live!' The fourth stanza contains the philosophical core of the poem:

O Lady! we receive but what we give  
And in our life alone does nature live:  
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!  
And would we aught behold of higher worth,  
Than that inanimate cold world allowed  
To the poor loveless, ever-anxious crowd,  
Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth  
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud  
Enveloping the Earth –  
And from the soul itself must there be sent  
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,  
Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

This idea, shaped out of the darkness and self-protective paralysis of depression, presents a very modern form of humanism, in stark contrast to the open-minded pantheism of the earlier poems. (Curiously, R.H. Tawney quotes the lines 'We receive but what we give,/ And in our life alone does Nature live', when describing the spiritual desert created by the Puritan worldview.)<sup>15</sup>

Coleridge goes on to lament the fact that affliction, the kind of suffering which damages and threatens to quench human consciousness, has suspended 'what nature gave me at my birth, My shaping spirit of Imagination.' All he can do about this is 'be still and patient all I can'. Or – he may pursue 'abstruse research' since the enquiring, merely rational mind, split off from the whole, feeling person, is surprisingly tough. The poet turns again to listen to the wind which vividly recalls all the worst human experiences – of torture, absolute

abandonment, madness and war. There follows a curious passage describing how the wind drops and there comes into his mind a vision reminiscent of the 'Lucy Gray' poem of Wordsworth. The image of a lost and terrified child apparently comforts him. It is 'A tale of less affright, And tempered with delight'. This reaction is strange and somewhat disturbing. Is Coleridge anticipating the often sentimental fascination with lost children, usually (but not always) female, which Dickens drew upon in the portrayal of Little Nell? Is this child so safely remote from the masculine author that he need not or cannot empathize with her? Or has she become part of suffering but sacred nature, like the Ancient Mariner himself? Alternatively, we may simply be looking at another (in this case too facile) way of asserting the power of imagination to shape and distance pain and thereby enable it to be woven into a life-affirming fabric. The reader must be left to decide exactly what is happening in the poem. The question becomes part of an unexpectedly satisfying discordance of elements. There is, for instance, the perfectly pitched, ringingly exultant description of natural things which belies the assertion that the shaping spirit of Imagination is destroyed. And there is the idealisation of Sara ('O pure of heart!' and 'virtuous Lady') which is mysteriously complementary to that disturbing callousness about the plight of the lost girl who 'moans low in bitter grief and fear.'

The poem ends with a blessing of Sara Hutchinson which is in a sense equivalent to the Ancient Mariner's blessing of the living creatures around his ship. It expresses the poet's Romantic generosity of spirit which cannot be quenched even by the darkest experiences. Coleridge sees Sara as still having that human joy which animates the dead universe. In this way she becomes a mirror of that joy for him. The connectedness of certain human beings (if not, at this point, of human beings with the universe) can still be affirmed, even out of the heart of isolation.



'Dejection' was written with a Romantic faithfulness to his own feelings which seems to have been cathartic for Coleridge as it can be for the reader and he seems to have soon recovered his resilience. Not long afterwards Dorothy Wordsworth described him as looking and feeling well and strong and able to impart some of that strength to others: 'our physician, Coleridge'<sup>16</sup> is the phrase she uses. Also within months he was writing to a newly made friend, William Sotheby: 'Thank Heaven! my better mind has returned to me,' and adding the declaration that: 'Nature has her proper interest; and he will know what it is, who believes and feels, that every Thing has a Life of its own, and that we are all one Life. A Poet's Heart and Intellect should be combined, intimately combined and unified with the great appearances in Nature...'<sup>17</sup> This is part of Coleridge's essential message, expressed in various ways throughout his life, poetry and prose writings. It provides a beacon of possibility, not well understood, or accepted, by most contemporaries or Victorian successors but able to add its power to modern thinking about nature.

### **Philosophical influences on Coleridge**

The following brief overview is highly selective. It is difficult to be anything else since Coleridge was immensely learned and his views went on developing throughout his life. One of the most important facts about Coleridge is that from childhood he was an omnivorous, compulsive reader and one whose mind retained and constantly worked on whatever he read. He said himself, 'I am, and ever have been, a great reader – and have read almost everything – a library cormorant.'<sup>18</sup> J.H. Muirhead wrote of him: 'There was no recorded line of thought with which he was unacquainted and with which his soul had not some bond of sympathy.'<sup>19</sup> The purpose of my overview is simply to follow a thread and support an argument in favour of what the Romantics teach us about relating to Nature.

## David Hartley

During these years of the mid 1790s when the friendship with Wordsworth was beginning, David Hartley's *Observations on Man* (1749) was one of the books which most influenced Coleridge. Hartley is now of merely historical interest, but at the time, he had great appeal to Coleridge (and also to Wordsworth) for three main reasons. The first was that, as a physician and physiologist, Hartley was committed to a 'scientific' approach. He grounded his psychology partly on Locke's 'associationism', wherein sensations of the physical world imprint themselves automatically on the passive tabula rasa of the mind, and partly on Isaac Newton's theory of 'vibrations' according to which the brain's substance automatically vibrates in response to physical stimuli. It must therefore have seemed at the time to be at the cutting edge of enlightened thought. In view of later dismissals of 'romanticism' it seems important to stress that the great Romantics never pettishly tossed aside the scientific and rationalist thinking of their age. As much as any modern thinker, they sought to engage with it fully, and reconcile it with whatever else seemed imperatively real in their experience.

The second reason was equally strong but with more imaginative resonance. It was that Hartley made the closest possible connections between sense experiences and ideas. His whole drive was to show that being in a physical body accounted fully for the development of the mind. For instance, he talks with obvious empathy of the baby learning the meaning of the word 'nurse' by associating it with the sensations of warmth, milk and a recurrent human presence. It is not a long jump from here to Wordsworth's delight in remembering the river Derwent 'which loved to blend his murmurs with my nurses's song'. The sense of the concrete (albeit handled by a sharp, critical mind) is very strong in Hartley and gives him a natural affinity with the poetic spirit.

The third reason for Coleridge and Wordsworth's early veneration of Hartley was that he was a religious man as well as a scientist. The greater part of *Observations on Man* is devoted to showing (or trying to show) that the physical world was designed by God to lead us towards 'theopathy'. This seems to mean an identification with God in feeling and vision, desire and direction. However, the thread leading from physical sensation to ideas to God is a fragile one. Locke's associationism led more directly to modern reductionist behaviourism. The problem of freewill versus determinism is perhaps the weakest point. Hartley wrote: 'The Will is therefore that Desire or Aversion which is strongest for the then present Time... Since therefore all Love and Hatred, all Desire and Aversion, are factitious, and generated by Association, i.e. mechanically, it therefore follows that the Will is mechanical also.'<sup>20</sup> Following Hartley with his usual vehement enthusiasm Coleridge wrote in 1794 'I am a compleat Necessitarian – and understand the subject as well almost as Hartley himself – but I go further than Hartley and believe in the corporality of Thought – namely that it is motion.'<sup>21</sup> Hartley himself dealt with the problem that total determinism annihilates ethics by arguing, rather lamely it may be thought, that we have a 'practical' knowledge of freewill which allows us to exercise it, and that the more we understand how our associations drive us, the more we can control them. For instance, if you knew that the sight of a bottle of wine would trigger off an alcoholic reaction, you could carefully avoid encounters with bottles of wine! Clearly, this argument will hold neither water nor wine. It presupposes a free self whose existence has already been denied. Coleridge wrote in *Biographia Literaria*, 'I had successively studied in the schools of Locke, Berkeley, Leibnitz and Hartley and could find in neither of them an abiding place for my reason...'<sup>22</sup>

## Rousseau

Let us not say in our imbecile vanity that man is king of the world and that the sun, the stars, the firmament, the air and the seas were made for him; that plants grow to feed him or that animals exist so that he can devour them. . .

Rousseau, *Lettres Morales*, iv, 1100.

Rousseau's influence in England was potent and pervasive at this time although he had died in 1778. Wordsworth and Dorothy were currently bringing up their foster child, little Basil Montagu, according to Rousseauistic principles, by all accounts with great success. The unspent influence of Rousseau can also be clearly seen from the reminiscences of Hazlitt. Writing about his own life at this time, before he met Wordsworth or Coleridge, Hazlitt said: 'nothing could exceed the gravity, the solemnity, with which I carried home and read the Dedication to *The Social Contract*, with some other pieces by the same author which I picked up at a stall in a coarse leathern cover.'<sup>23</sup> Hazlitt went on reading Rousseau intensively for the next two years. In order to convey something of the strength of his response, here is a little more of what he said about his first reading of *La Nouvelle Heloise*:

I once sat on a sunny bank in a field in which the green blades of corn waved in the fitful northern breeze, and read the letter in the New Eloise in which St Preux describes the Pays de Vaud. I never felt what Shakespeare calls my 'glassy essence' so much as then. My thoughts were pure and free. They took a tone from the objects before me, and from the simple manners of the inhabitants of mountain-scenery, so well described in the letter. The style gave me the same sensation as the drops of morning dew before they are scorched by the sun. . .<sup>24</sup>

The enthusiasm and informality of this account indicates a kind of love at first sight, a given fact of experience, as of one already primed by surrounding zeitgeist influences to be receptive, rather than a position which had to be reached by philosophical argument. Hazlitt, it is clear, is equally interested in his own mind and in the fact that the world of nature seems (in some very spontaneous way) to become part of that mind. At this point it might almost be said that the Romantics shared a mode of consciousness: in the experience of connection there are no important distinctions between individuals. Rousseau, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Hazlitt (and later on Shelley) were in this way part of a tide of sensibility as communal as the collective Unconscious. For this reason, it seems important to keep Rousseau in mind when considering the thinking of Coleridge.

## **Kant**

Max Oelschlaeger claims that Kant's *Critique of Judgement* 'opened the door for the Romantics.'<sup>25</sup> In spite of the fact the Kant himself is not seen as a Romantic or a mystical philosopher but rather as a son of the Enlightenment, the veneration which Coleridge felt for him and the fact that the undoubtedly Romantic thinkers Schelling and Fichte saw themselves as Kantians tends to support this view.

Coleridge spent ten months in Germany from September 1798, mostly at Göttingen where he was accepted as part of the university community, attending lectures, enjoying the friendship and admiration of professors and students alike and clearly loath to leave in the summer of 1799. He wrote, from the vantage point of 1815, 'I made the best use of my time and means; and there is therefore no period of my life on which I can look back with such unmingled satisfaction.'<sup>26</sup> He returned to England with £30 worth of books of German philosophy and pursued his intensive studies in the years ahead.

Coleridge wrote to Thomas Poole in 1801 to say that Kant had finally freed him from ‘the doctrine of necessity’<sup>27</sup>. A week later he elaborated on this: ‘if the mind be not passive, if it be indeed made in God’s image, the image of the Creator, there is ground for the suspicion that any system built on the passiveness of the mind must be false as a system.’<sup>28</sup> How did he reach this point? And what does it mean?

The Kantian perspective most relevant to our theme is the epistemological one. According to Kant, our perceptions are caused by a real world, external to us, but we can never know this world, this ‘thing-in-itself’ because our minds transform it in the act of perception. We are born with the perceptual frameworks such as space and time which do not arise out of our experience although they need experience to activate them. The world as it appears to us, already ‘cooked’ by our sensual and mental apparatus, is the ‘phenomenal’ world and we can, of course, study the way it consistently appears to us and thereby establish those regularities which count as scientific knowledge. The unknown and unknowable reality behind all this Kant calls the ‘noumenal’ world. If we try to apply our usual thought processes to this we encounter nothing but contradictions and dead-ends. Such pure scepticism, or austere agnosticism about anything beyond our normal, subjective sense experiences (as checked out and amplified by scientific method) ties in with modern attitudes, and is indeed part of the foundation of these attitudes.

So what was Coleridge, the philosopher of (English) Romanticism, doing with Kant? Looking at Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* gives some clues about this. There he refers to the possible unity of the ‘supersensible substrate’ guaranteed by God, a being we can approximately conceive of, or imagine, in some tentative, ‘as if’ fashion, but never reduce to the ‘object’ status of the demonstrable. Neither God nor purpose, which is the source of all aesthetic pleasure, are solid,

detachable, objectifiable facts. Nevertheless, such transcendental elements are interwoven with our ordinary perception and are inseparable from it. A world genuinely reduced to the provable, to whatever can be distanced enough to be weighed, measured or counted, would be uninhabitable by any human mind. So however rigorous the dedication to 'fact' or rationality, some sense of awe, or irrational delight, or hope, creeps or leaps back in, if the mind is to retain its sanity. This can be perceived on the everyday level but also follows through to artistic expression, as when Whitman writes of:

an intuition of the absolute balance, in time and space, of the whole of this multifariousness, this revel of fools and incredible make-believe and general unsettledness we call the world; a soul-sense of that divine clue and unseen thread which holds the whole congeries of things, all history and time, and all events, however trivial, however momentous, like a leashed dog in the hand of the hunter. Of such soul-sight and root-centre for the mind mere optimism explains only the surface.

This is certainly highly Romantic, and arguably consistent with what Kant was pointing at in *The Critique of Judgement*.

Kant distinguished between 'Reason', the highest human faculty, which may intuit the unproveable, and 'Understanding', that part of the mind which is employed in the project of science. This distinction was taken up by Coleridge and other contemporaries, as also, later, by Emerson. Reason works in the area where choice is experienced and therefore it recognizes purpose. This is particularly relevant to any poet since Kant sees the sense of purpose – in nature or in the art work – as the source of all aesthetic pleasure. The idea should not be interpreted narrowly. It does not call for a blueprint with definite, predetermined goals. Nor is it practical or utilitarian – a person experiencing a storm, an avalanche, or the passing by of a

lion may have a sense of natural splendour – and of the purpose to be splendid – which is completely detached from his or her survival needs. It can be understood as the drive to create, to throw up diversity, to recombine in ever-new patterns of relationship. These are surely ‘purposes’, but open-ended, not restrictive or formulaic ones. Such purposes could include one thing being ‘for’ another, as the death of an animal can be seen as meant to maintain the soil and provide space for a new animal. One thing ‘serving’ another in this way does not negate the value of any individual entity but can be maintained in balance with it, in that ‘double vision’ which Blake contrasted with the ‘single vision and Newton’s sleep’. This is a necessary orientation though it does not, of course, resolve all the concrete dilemmas with which we are confronted and with which the whole, integrated mind is obliged to struggle.

The above uses Kant as a jumping off point as all the Romantics and the Kantian philosophers (including Schelling, Fichte etc.) naturally did. In *Biographia Literaria*, completed in 1815, as Coleridge was recuperating from the opium-induced mental and physical collapse of 1814, he devotes the central chapters to his philosophical development. Leaving aside the chapters on Hartley, we can look at chapters VIII to XIII for more light on his developed thinking.

It is central to Coleridge’s contribution to Romantic philosophy that the mind is understood as being active and autonomous by nature, and therefore as having a degree of freedom. At the level of experience it is obvious that what we call the physical – food, weather, drugs – all have more or less effect or influence on the mind. The Romantic tends to rejoice in this fact, at least insofar as the ‘physical’ adds up to meaningful patterns, or seems to communicate a sense of wholeness, connection and ‘atmosphere’. But these patterns or meanings are all mediated by the creative human mind. In the core



Romantic philosophy, perception is a form of imagination. As Coleridge proclaimed in the much explained passage in Chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria*: ‘The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception’. This appears to overlap with some modern views of the mind/brain as constructing its reality, which, of course, is an active process. Coleridge, however, was equally determined to affirm that what the mind ‘naturally’ assumed to be real was real – ‘this sheet of paper, for instance, as a thing in itself, separate from the phenomenon or image in my perception’.<sup>29</sup> You may be (in fact, must be) imagining the piece of paper – but at the same time you have a deep, sane conviction that the piece of paper is not a dream, but has a solid reality and identity of its own.

How can these two assertions both be true? Coleridge expresses his solution as: ‘This again is no way conceivable but by assuming as a postulate that both are ab initio identical and co-inherent; that intelligence and being are reciprocally each other’s substrate’.<sup>30</sup> Instead of expanding on this point in lucid terms, for the benefit of those of us who do not spend most of our time swimming around in philosophical jargon, Coleridge leaps off into a listing of all the past thinkers who, he believes, would bear witness to this truth, including Plato and Plotinus, Ficino, Giordano Bruno and Jacob Boehme (the shoemaker-mystic for whose name Coleridge uses the alternative spelling ‘Behmen’). He then diverts himself (and possibly his reader) by asserting that unlearned people like Boehme can be in direct touch with truths which elude ‘the haughty priests of learning.’ And he expresses his gratitude that mystics such as Boehme ‘contributed to keep alive the heart in the head; gave me an indistinct, yet stirring and working presentiment, that all the products of the mere reflective faculty partook of death, and were as the rattling twigs and sprays in winter into which a sap was yet to be propelled from some root to which I had not penetrated...’<sup>31</sup> Coleridge goes on to

pay tribute to Kant, 'the illustrious sage of Königsberg', and to defend him from the charge of obscurity. The implication is that Kant has enabled Coleridge to reach this point of affirming that an underlying, dynamic unity enables our minds to perceive and freely respond to, rather than being mechanically determined by, the physical world of Nature.

From here it is an easy step to the claim that human imagination acts 'as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM' (BL p.167). Mind is universally active in the universe, and is not simply pushed about by what we understand as the regular, mechanical laws of physics. As he has asserted earlier<sup>32</sup>, being and knowing are ultimately one and the same: 'Thus the true system of natural philosophy places the sole reality of things in an absolute ... in the absolute identity of subject and object, which it calls nature, and which in its highest power is nothing else but self-conscious will or intelligence.'<sup>33</sup> In other words, God is an ultimate wholeness of being-knowing, which transcends the mundane duality by which the two seem utterly different. As he says (with a disapproval which has been echoed by many since): 'Des Cartes was the first philosopher who introduced the absolute and essential heterogeneity of the soul as intelligence and the body as matter ...'<sup>34</sup> In rebuttal of Descartes he asserts that when matter becomes intelligible it is because of transcendent unity of matter and mind which originates in God and is reflected in every human mind. From this idea flows Romantic creativity, just as – it might be claimed – some form of it is fundamental to any spiritual vision of Nature.

### **Schelling and pantheism**

How does this relate to pantheism? It can be maintained that all poets, and Coleridge among them, respond to the world as if it was imbued with divine value and therefore are natural pantheists. This

experience of value is palpable and shareable by anyone reading poetry or confronting the natural world with sufficient awareness combined with a sufficient composure. Some people might want to leave the matter there, fearing the hob-nailed boots of the rationalist, or the dry formulations (see above) of the philosopher, but Coleridge was always driven onwards both by spiritual yearning and by the philosophical desire to explain.

Coleridge refers to Kant's philosophy several times as 'dynamic', which is not so much an adjective of approval as a categorisation. Kant's thinking encompassed the changing and active nature of things. Very much in the same spirit, Jacob Boehme, out of mystic experience, saw everything as process: 'The life of the world is a battle, a becoming, a vast process, all fire and dynamism.'<sup>35</sup> Also according to Boehme, there is a constant flow from a divine source to its expression in Nature: 'Nature is a counterstroke to the divine knowledge, whereby the eternal (one) will with unfathomable supernatural knowledge make itself perceptible, visible, effectual and desireful.'<sup>36</sup> This is to assert, out of mystical experience, an interaction between the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds which Kant had kept distinct.

Friedrich Schelling, who was a follower of Kant but admired Boehme as much as Coleridge did, took up this idea and re-expressed it more philosophically. He saw nature as 'the form by means of which the Absolute acquires "outness" and knows itself through another; it is a symbol of the Absolute which, like all symbols, takes on the independent life of that which it signifies.'<sup>37</sup> And again, 'Nature ... is akin to spirit, and the opposition between subject and object which is characteristic of spirit recurs in nature as an all-pervasive polarity between opposite forces...'<sup>38</sup> A poetic embodiment of these ideas may be seen, for instance in Hopkins with his image of everything in the world fountaining out from the hand of God and falling back into it:

Thee, God, I come from, to thee go,  
All day long I like fountain flow  
From thy hand out, swayed about  
Mote-like in thy mighty glow. . . <sup>39</sup>

Coleridge would surely have recognized and acclaimed the experience expressed in these lines. About Schelling himself he wrote: 'In Schelling's *Natur-Philosophie* and the *System des Transcendentalen Idealismus*, I first found a genial coincidence with much that I had toiled out for myself, and a powerful assistance in what I had yet to do.'<sup>40</sup>

However, in his later thinking, Schelling seems to have conflated the Absolute with the symbolic expression of the Absolute in a way which destroys some necessary distinctions. He saw himself as taking Spinoza's view of the world a stage further, seeing everything as equally divine. Coleridge's references to Spinoza were not those of a disciple and he later wrote that he had been intoxicated 'by the vernal fragrance and effluvia from the flowers and first fruits of Pantheism while still unaware of its bitter root.'<sup>41</sup> The problem with pantheism as a philosophical position is very well demonstrated by Thomas McFarland in his *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition*, from which the following discussion partly derives.

McFarland gives full weight to the point that a poet's vision of the world has qualities which seem 'transcendent' or divine to both the poet and the competent reader. However, to go from this to maintaining, as Spinoza did, that nature (or everything) is God, has alarming consequences. It means that all distinctions are false and illusory. In the moral realm, good and evil are no different, implying that to torture someone is as divine as making love with him or her. This seems too much of an outrage to the best of normal human feelings. It also paralyses action because no one state can be seen as better or

worse than another. Pantheism would be entirely in keeping with any sort of oppressive or unjust political system. It abolishes all freedom since no individual or entity acts of itself but automatically expresses the will of God. This too contradicts our normal intuition that we have some freewill (however limited) and that this is one of the most interesting and creative things about us.

Pantheism is clearly unRomantic to the extent that it downgrades freedom and the individuality that blossoms out of freedom. The fingerprint of individual uniqueness which we greet with natural pleasure and approval (sometimes calling it 'originality') vanishes into undifferentiated 'being'. The sense of diversity, variation and newness equally, must be reduced by the whole-hearted pantheist to illusion or triviality. There is no framework in pantheism for thinking about process, dynamic or evolution. The colour and change and variety of the world are implicitly denied. Therefore it is anti-experiential and anti-Romantic and arguably anti-ecological in a fundamental way. In terms of perception and ontology, pantheism appears to be in free fall towards total blandness or entropic meltdown, where the lack of any real contrast culminates in the death of meaning itself.

Hence Coleridge's rejection which is partly philosophical but also rooted in his perception of himself as struggling with dark powers – opium addiction, frustrated, obsessional love for Sara Hutchinson, lifelong ill-health. He remained Kantian and therefore in an important sense dualistic to the end. McFarland sees this as a heroic position; 'This inability either really to accept or wholeheartedly to reject pantheism is the central truth of Coleridge's philosophical activity. For Coleridge, as for Hamlet, another symbolic figure from our cultural past with whom, as we know, Coleridge identified himself, this seeming indecision before conflicting claims is a

true emblem of his integrity.’<sup>42</sup> In spite of being the most significant and influential Romantic philosopher in English, Coleridge remains a Kantian and even Platonic dualist – a glorious failure in the enterprise of equating Nature and God. I suggest that we need to take on the challenge of this fact and not risk losing it in a cloud of facile and partial statements about how ‘we are part of nature’ and everything is a glorious unity.

### III

## WORDSWORTH

### Nature as Experience and Meaning

In this book, we are looking to the Romantics principally for an attitude towards nature: a viable, philosophically defensible and humanly satisfying attitude – one with good repercussions for the personal, the cultural and the global fates. Inevitably, such an enquiry tends to turn into a contrasting of good/bad. We claim that the Romantics were champions of inexhaustible nature as opposed to stale society; sappy feeling in contrast to arid rationality; visions and dreams at the expense of scientific rigour ... and so on.

But the heart of the question might be: do the Romantics, or do we, intend these opposites to fight it out to the death so that one side is totally discredited? Or is there meant to be an accommodation, so that each side is stripped down and strengthened by the challenge of the other, followed by a reconciliation, a new balance, or even a Hegelian synthesis of the elements? Which does the example of our key figures point towards?

The basic conflict (good versus bad) can be expressed in different ways, with various terms and concepts. For instance, A.N. Whitehead, as a mathematician and philosopher well aware of the nature of science and rationality, but also having an evident understanding of intuition and imagination, offers a particularly rich and

helpful description. In a lecture delivered in 1925 entitled *The Romantic Reaction* he postulates a ‘radical inconsistency’<sup>1</sup> in Western thought since the rise of science and rationalism. The contradiction as he expresses it is between a materialist and mechanistic world-view which takes Newtonian science and Enlightenment reason as its law, and a natural, intuitive sense of the world as being organic, concrete, interrelated and capable in parts of freedom and self-determination. He says that many people simply ignore this contradiction, but implies that modern thought would be given coherence, energy and new direction if we managed to reconcile it. Wordsworth is seen as rejecting science and rationalism out of moral revulsion, convinced that something essential was left out by it. But he is valued by Whitehead because, in Whitehead’s terms, he ‘always grasps the whole of nature as involved in the tonality of the particular instance.’ So Wordsworth expresses a powerful alternative mode of thought at a time when a crass materialism and mechanism might easily have prevailed. He is, however, castigated by Whitehead for simply disliking – throwing overboard – the scientific mode.

Is this justified? Probably not. Stephen Gill points out the excellence of the teaching at Wordsworth’s school, Hawkshead, and its close connections with Cambridge which meant that mathematics and natural science were highlighted. This enlightened teaching ‘seems to have carried Wordsworth over the threshold of uncomprehending incompetence which is often the limit of a more literary sensibility, and into an imaginative response both to the beauty revealed by Newtonian physics and to the permanence of geometry’s “independent world/ Created out of pure intelligence”.’<sup>2</sup> In the part of the *Prelude* devoted to his Cambridge career, Wordsworth writes of how he felt about ‘geometric science’:



A pleasure quiet and profound, a sense  
Of permanent and universal sway,  
And paramount belief; there recognised  
A type, for finite natures, of the one  
Supreme Existence, the surpassing life  
Which – to the boundaries of space and time,  
Of melancholy space and doleful time,  
Superior, and incapable of change,  
Nor touched by welterings of passion – is,  
And hath the name of God... (Bk. VI, ll.130-139)

This is not what most people would call ‘romantic’ although it is clearly ‘Romantic’ in being part of the core thinking of one of the greatest of the Romantics poets. Geoffrey Durrant has observed that ‘a scientific view of the universe entered into the very texture of Wordsworth’s imagination.’<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, Wordsworth, like Coleridge, was holistic in desire and ambition and this implies an ideal of integrating all current knowledge and significant experience into a workable, dynamic whole. For many years Wordsworth planned and made trial runs for a massive poem about everything: man, the universe, society and so forth. In this he was egged on by Coleridge who seemed to feel that his friend would have failed in his poetic mission if he did not produce this Dantean masterpiece. In spite of all ambitions and efforts Wordsworth only managed to write various fragments eventually put together as ‘The Excursion’ (1814). Was this inability to make a comprehensive synthesis a failure? From the point of view of the present, the very idea of including ‘everything’ in one poem, or indeed in one mind, sounds absurd. But the drive towards it, comparable to the scientific pursuit of a unified theory of all physical forces, can be understood.

*The Prelude* was Wordsworth's way of building an approach to the unachievable synthesis of all his knowledge and vision. He wanted to explore the experiences which had made him what he was before using that developed consciousness to interpret the total world picture. The first version of the poem was completed in 1805 but was not published until 1926. It was personal and confessional in a way which, in spite of Rousseau's example, was not acceptable at the time. *The Prelude* that the Victorians knew, a not radically different, but somewhat longer and politically toned-down version, was felt to be unsuitable for publication during his lifetime and appeared shortly after his death in 1850. Emerson, Thoreau and others who were first drawn to Wordsworth during his lifetime knew primarily the Wordsworth of Lyrical Ballads and the later collections. However, the Wordsworth nearest to the heart of our theme can be seen most clearly and fully in *The Prelude*.

## Childhood

If we look at key passages in *The Prelude* we can see the characteristic forms of Wordsworth's vision. He writes of childhood with a directness and individual quality not previously known in literature. Since the child is less bound than the adult by the *idées reçues* of a socially constructed reality, this was the natural place for a fresh vision to begin. From the beginning there is a sense of the duality of experience which is transcended by an ultimate unity:

Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up  
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear (Bk. I, lines 301-2)

From here onwards in his poetic autobiography Wordsworth describes 'the sports of wider range' which he was able to enjoy as a ten-year-old at Hawkshead, boarded out with Anne Tyson and attending Hawkshead Grammar school. Setting snares for woodcocks,

at night, alone, he experienced a sense of being ‘a trouble to the peace’ of the hills around him. Occasionally he stole the prey from other people’s snares and then a sense of pursuit and blame would frighten him. The pursuer did not seem to be human since it was capable of noiseless movement and had a superhuman ubiquity. One could, of course, identify this sense of wrongdoing and possible retribution as something originating in socialization – an internalised, aggrandized parent figure. Maybe the ‘low breathings’ and ‘steps almost as silent as the turf they trod’ were simply authority figures projected and given mysterious power by an imaginative and vulnerable child. On the other hand, perhaps not – the poet, with his adult insight, does not choose to hint at any comparison between these wilderness forces and the social experiences of childhood. From the perspective of Whitehead, this pressure of wholeness, bearing down upon the instant, would be exactly what made Wordsworth so great and original.

The sense of being in touch with nature rather than culture is equally strong in the incident he goes on to describe (ll. 357-400) when, on a summer night, he stole a boat from the lakeside, ‘an act of stealth and troubled pleasure’. The ‘trouble’ element seems not to cloud the pleasure in the least – he is conscious of, and evokes for us, the sparkling of moonlight on the water, and an enjoyment of his own skill in rowing. Powerful and in control he focuses on ‘the summit of a craggy ridge’ in order to use it as a landmark and ensure that his course is straight. Although his purpose is very practical the boy is also aware of the ‘craggy ridge’ as a limit, an ‘utmost boundary’. It marks the edge of physical vision and in some sense the edge of thought or consciousness. Then suddenly, as he gets further from the ridge, another height rears up behind it, ‘as if with voluntary power instinct’. Alarmed by this he rows onwards all the more strongly but the sense of alien power and threat increases until he turns back, ‘with trembling oars’ and returns the boat to its mooring place. There are

no social consequences to the boy's act of social deviance and no apparent fear of human retribution. But Wordsworth the child in direct relation to his landscape, his environment, is deeply stirred and troubled. He has 'a dim and undetermined sense of unknown modes of being'. These even temporarily blot out all the pleasanter images of landscape and colours, as if he had ventured behind the smooth facade of appearances and touched an underlying darkness.

Although any earlier poet would almost certainly have received this as a negative experience, Wordsworth takes it as an occasion for addressing the 'Wisdom and Spirit of the universe'. He sees this Spirit as providing the experiences. The pain and fear they involve are salutary and 'purifying'. They evidently free him from the triviality of human intercourse, and put him in touch with forces of life. Even more, they suggest an intentionality: '*thou* didst intertwine for me/The passions that build up our human soul.' (My italics).

Of course, one important question here is about the balance between literal and metaphorical language. Wordsworth might be saying 'it was as if there was a Power providing experiences for me which gave greater depth and reality to my being.' He is interested in being true to the experience, exactly as it was, rather than making dogmatic claims about the nature of the universe. This capacity to rest in the 'as if', an ability to take subjectivity with the utmost seriousness without trying to anchor it in certainty, seems to be one of the best contributions of Romanticism to the possibilities of the human spirit. It counters Enlightenment scepticism (and modern reductionism) without inviting us to return to naive or pre-scientific forms of belief. The affinity with Coleridge and the Kantian background is very clear in all of this.

Book II of the *Prelude* gives us an insight into what Wordsworth considered to be inferior or distorting ways of thinking. While tracing

the development of his attitude to nature he comes to a point where he pulls up and stands back, saying:

But who shall parcel out  
His intellect by geometric rules,  
Split like a province into round and square?  
Who knows the individual hour in which  
His habits were first sown, even as a seed?  
(line 202 onwards)

Rather than being a wholesale rejection of intellect this simply indicates its limits and asserts that consciousness is not the same thing as calculation. Consciousness is an emergent unity – something not to be explained, or explained away, in terms of its analysed elements.

In tandem with this is a recognition that sometimes psychic development can seem to be independent of clock time and date time. Events may be drawn in, by hindsight, to symbolize psychic crises and illuminations, but there is not always a definite tie between a given event, as it unfolds on the surface, and the full meaning that reflection gives to it. This contradiction might tend to subvert any neat theory about how the mind is embedded, or not embedded, in the context of nature. But the vital point is that it is experiential – rooted in the clearest, most aware states of consciousness, which flow through subjective time rather than being manacled to the ‘objective’ or measurable moment. That Wordsworth did find particular events to be significant in the development of his mind and spirit is undeniable, and will be further illustrated below. A spirituality which altogether dispensed with physical and historical anchors would (arguably) be as sterile as one which insisted that all truths must be literal and verifiable. But it seems important to note that Wordsworth does balance ‘immanence’ (in his dwelling on actual events) with recognitions of ‘transcendence’ in his description of less placeable realities.

Wordsworth goes on to address Coleridge:

Thou, my Friend! art one  
More deeply read in thy own thoughts; to thee  
Science appears but what in truth she is,  
Not as our glory and our absolute boast,  
But as a succedaneum, and a prop  
To our infirmity. No officious slave  
Art thou of that false secondary power  
By which we multiply distinctions, then  
Deem that our puny boundaries are things  
That we perceive, and not that we have made.  
(ll. 210-219)

Obviously, 'science' is not used in the modern sense. Here it seems to mean the analytical and critical power of the mind which is 'secondary' in comparison with the primary power of direct perception or experience. The primary power Wordsworth goes on to equate with Kantian 'Reason', (line 231) and he declares rather elliptically that it 'hath no beginning' presumably because it is divine in origin and nature. Wordsworth's religious nature was not dogmatic or fundamentalist. Therefore there seems to be no reason why the discoveries of science about the age of the universe or the descent of *Homo sapiens* should have seriously threatened his convictions.

Perhaps we may take it, then, that Whitehead overstates the case in saying that Wordsworth rejected 'science' (in our sense) as such. Wordsworth had his own calling and 'doing science' was properly not part of it but he would not have rejected any creative form of thought.

## Birds

'The Green Linnet', written in 1803, is one of the best examples of Wordsworth's ability to fuse opposites into a living unity. Essential to this is the atmosphere of joyful attentiveness which pervades the five stanzas. This is not a flat, 'present-moment-only' awareness but embraces the cyclical nature of the year. The third word of the poem is 'fruit-tree', which brings autumn to mind, and the 'birds and flowers' are greeted as 'my last year's friends'. The sense of seasonal appearances and disappearances, deaths and rebirths, is ever present.

The second stanza shows the poetic mind easily juggling with those oppositions which so arduously and contentiously exercise us when spelled out in intellectual terms:

One have I marked, the happiest guest  
In all this covert of the blest:  
Hail to thee, far above the rest  
In joy of voice and pinion!  
Thou, Linnet, in thy green array,  
Presiding Spirit here today,  
Dost lead the revels of the May:  
And this is thy dominion.

The linnet is spoken to, hailed, as we would greet another conscious being. We know it is a bird, a part of nature, but at the same time it is a 'guest' as the poet feels himself to be in the environment. Its 'green array' draws attention to the fact that it is part of a predominantly green world, so perhaps it ought to blend invisibly into the background: but far from doing that, it proclaims its presence by a superlative quality, a highlight of joyousness, and thereby becomes the focus of attention. All sorts of human, somewhat folkloric associations are called up by the idea of leading the revels – a vista of

country celebrations, even maybe lords of misrule. But the bird is also a 'Spirit', because it has meaning, and this is what spirit is.

Wordsworth goes on to describe the 'birds, butterflies and flowers' as 'all one band', a cohesive array of 'paramours', or lovers, linked to each other by reciprocal desire and need, but by contrast the linnets are by itself. Again like the poet, it is 'sole in thy employment'. Its solitude is about being beyond neediness, however temporarily. Wordsworth is regularly castigated for being 'the egotistical sublime', the single and singular, self-conscious Ego. But if this stands for the achievement of being itself, which is a singularity, why not? Fragments of being, for example a bird or a human, can at times mirror the wholeness of being. But this is not a fixed and absolute state for the individual: the lightness, variability of the bird and its movement, contradicts any absolutes. Everything is part of a process, a moving pattern, and it is the process which is fundamental.

The fourth stanza is sensuously the most delightful, remarkably prescient of Impressionism in its effect:

Amid you tuft of hazel trees  
That twinkle to the gusty breeze,  
Behold him perched in ecstasies,  
Yet seeming still to hover;  
There! where the flutter of his wings  
Upon his back and body flings  
Shadows and sunny glimmerings  
That cover him all over.

There are deliberately flighty ambiguities. Is the bird perching or hovering? It somehow manages to do both at once. The poet does not need to anchor himself in perceptual certainties because his centered consciousness (his ego?) is so strong and grounded. Everything



is seen from his standpoint, which the reader shares: 'My dazzled sight he oft deceives, / A brother of the dancing leaves...' There is a balance of seeing and not seeing, a confidence of equipoise.

In the final stanza the linnet flies from the bushes to settle in the 'cottage eaves' from which he can start to sing. Wordsworth chooses to see this phase of self-expression as transcending the 'voiceless' stage when the bird was seen but not heard. We are liberated by the romantic 'as if' once again: it is 'as if... he mocked and treated with disdain' his previous 'voiceless Form'. This is a playful exaggeration, of course, but the capitalization of 'Form' has resonance. Later, in a sonnet with the title 'After-thought', concluding his 'River Duddon' sequence, Wordsworth was to write:

Still glides the Stream and shall for ever glide;  
The Form remains, the Function never dies;  
While we, the brave, the mighty and the wise,  
We men, who in our morn of youth defied  
The elements, must vanish; – be it so!  
Enough, if something from our hands have power  
To live, and act, and serve the future hour;  
And if, as toward the silent tomb we go,  
Through love, through hope, and faith's transcendent  
dower,  
We feel that we are greater than we know.

As Heraclitus pointed out, 'you never step twice in the same river'. But here the flow of the river, the full sensuous reality of depths and shallows, light and dark and an infinitude of other aspects, shows continuities of form, natural laws which underlie the individual appearances. Wordsworth expresses a state of being in which there are three strands: nature's changeableness; the intuition of universal laws governing change (which are in fact those sought and explored

by science), and the human mind-body which finds itself caught up in the change while observing continuity. These strands, often separated and set at odds with each other in cultural conflicts such as Romantic versus classical, spirit against senses, idealist as opposed to realist, are held together in an embracing and accepting state of consciousness.

Like the river, the linnet is a 'Form' but also a subjectivity which the poet (like all Romantic poets when inspired by birds) addresses as an equal. The importance of this stance for the well-being of the human mind and the planet could hardly be over-emphasized.

## Mountains

In 1890, during his summer vacation from Cambridge, Wordsworth and a friend undertook a walking tour of the continent, travelling about 3000 miles in all, at least 2000 of them on foot. This journey is described in Book VI of the *Prelude*. In this book, one of the most striking and significant passages is Wordsworth's account of crossing the Alps by the Simplon Pass. The travellers lost their way, became anxious and 'perplexed' and then were incredulous when a passing peasant told them that they had already crossed over the highest point and were beginning to descend on the other side. They had a sense of anti-climax, disappointed that they had literally missed the 'peak experience'. This psychological and physical context for the moment of vision which follows is obviously important. Moments of visionary experience are, for Wordsworth, always related to such realities, although, as argued earlier, some of the untidier or more meaning-resistant 'literal details' may be edited out.

Immediately after his quite anecdotal description of the incident Wordsworth breaks into an address to 'Imagination' as 'that awful

Power'. This passage is unusually obscure, for Wordsworth. Indeed, he admits the inadequacy of 'human speech' before going on to describe Imagination as action, as dynamic rather than entity:

That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss  
Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,  
At once some lonely traveller. I was lost:  
Halted without an effort to break through;  
But to my conscious soul I now can say –  
'I recognize thy glory:' in such strength  
Of usurpation, when the light of sense  
Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed,  
The invisible world, doth greatness make abode  
There harbours; whether we be young or old,  
Our destiny, our being's heart and home,  
Is with infinitude and only there;  
With hope it is, hope that can never die,  
Effort and expectation and desire,  
And something ever more about to be. (ll.594-608)

Some students of Wordsworth have seen this passage as evidence that the poet claims 'a possibility for consciousness to exist entirely by and for itself, independently of all relationship to the outside world.'<sup>4</sup> This is then seen as a reason for dismissing Wordsworth as a self-obsessed solipsist. I suggest that such an interpretation is perverse, but it points us all the more urgently to the question of how the mind relates to the universe. The poet-traveller in the anecdote is literally there on the mountain: we need to believe that he physically climbed it on this occasion rather than imagining it. (And, of course, there is no doubt that he did.) But in this real confrontation with otherness he is 'lost' both physically and in his mind. In this double state,

sense experience intensifies, becomes a 'flash' and then 'goes out' – and both seem to be needed to reveal 'the invisible world'.

This becomes clearer soon after in Book VI, when he describes, with great power and fascination, the rest of the journey down the far side of the Alp. He observes:

. . . The immeasurable height  
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,  
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,  
And in the narrow rent at every turn  
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,  
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,  
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,  
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side  
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight  
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,  
The unfettered clouds and region of the Heaven,  
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light –  
Were all like workings of one mind, the features  
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;  
Characters of the great Apocalypse,  
The types and symbols of Eternity,  
Of first and last, and midst, and without end. (ll.624-640)

This could only be seen as inner experience divorced from the natural world if one deliberately ignores what the poet is actually saying. He is talking of an experience, and one which binds everything, physical and psychological, together into unity. The reader may or may not be able to share such visions, but it seems absurd to attribute to Wordsworth any reader's inability to grasp this sense of unity.

In describing nature and his own experience Wordsworth does not, exhaust the possibilities. John Muir and others who came

after were to add their own individual visions of what both Wordsworth and Coleridge saw as the underlying truth of things. We might, however, agree with (and expand), Jonathan Bate's claim that 'Wordsworth did for Ruskin what he did for nearly all his nineteenth century readers: he taught him how to walk with nature.'<sup>5</sup> This nature remains equivocal, unpredictable, not able to be neatly circumscribed by human moral categories. Perhaps it is the mechanist who is more likely to use exclusive human categories in his attitude to nature: e.g. 'indifferent', 'unconscious', 'inhuman' or even 'malevolent'. Wordsworth does not use such dogmatic terms. He avoids them, arguably, by remaining firmly personal and individual – 'the egotistical sublime', proving its usefulness. Relevant to this point is the testimony of one nineteenth century reader who attributed to Wordsworth his permanent recovery from deep depression and despair, induced by placing too much emphasis on rational analysis and the impersonality of philosophy. This was John Stuart Mill, who wrote in his *Autobiography* (published after his death in 1873), about reading Wordsworth's lyrical poems (not, it may be noted, the long narrative poems or the Prelude):

In the first place, these poems addressed themselves powerfully to one of the strongest of my pleasurable susceptibilities, the love of rural objects and natural scenery; to which I had been indebted not only for much of the pleasure of my life, but quite recently for relief from one of my longest relapses into depression... But Wordsworth would never have had any great effect on me, if he had merely placed before me beautiful pictures of natural scenery. Scott does this still better than Wordsworth and a very second-rate landscape does it more effectually than any poet. What made Wordsworth's poems a medicine for my state of mind was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of

beauty. They seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of. In this I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared by all human beings...<sup>6</sup>

It is clear from this that turning outwards to Nature and inwards to subjectivity can be deeply complementary, the one stimulating and strengthening the other. We are reminded of John Muir's striking phrase about 'going out' being 'really going in': 'I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.'<sup>7</sup>

A century later, another writer well aware of the contemporary context of scientific knowledge and nihilistic secularism wrote in a similar way: 'I am an old and unregenerate Wordsworthian... Wordsworth's whole idea was that man and nature are closely inter-linked, that morality goes right back into our relationship with the world and that our sense of the divine can be most powerfully mediated through our relations with the world of nature.'<sup>8</sup> This was Aldous Huxley, taking a step further on from his earlier position, forcefully argued in 'Wordsworth in the Tropics'<sup>9</sup>, that if Wordsworth had ever had the chance to travel in a tropical rainforest, and seen natural ferocity at its worst, this would have destroyed his sense of harmony and affinity with nature. The Wordsworth whose own father had died, when Wordsworth was thirteen, as a result of being lost and benighted on the Cumbrian hills, arguably did not need any shouted lessons on the 'nature of nature'. The full message is there to be read by the open mind whatever the climate or latitude in which 'nature' is manifesting itself.

Whitehead's argument is full of insight and interest, and its whole object is to urge us onwards to a fuller understanding of the great cultural opposites that split our minds and our societies. Perhaps

he was wrong, and superficial, about the Romantics' views of science and reason. But he points us towards the deeper oppositions we need to come to terms with when feeling our way towards a worldview that includes imagination, reason, science and poetry, and follows the dynamic cycle through to practical action.

## IV

### SHELLEY

#### Reason and Imagination

This chapter has three aims: first, to offer a glimpse of how Shelley, driven by passion and imagination as he was, related justly to ‘reason’ and scientific enquiry. This, admittedly, is to beg the question in that I am assuming that there is a ‘good’ kind of science, one which includes on-going, open-minded curiosity about the physical, demonstrable, shared (in fact ‘phenomenal’) world. I am riding on A. N. Whitehead’s chariot which is drawn by the two horses: ‘Science/Reason’ and ‘Imagination/Intuition’. And I am continuing to do that, in spite of Whitehead’s demonstrable lack of lit. critical credentials, because there seems to be in his overview some glimmer of real truth, some unmistakable – but hard-to-capture – signature of rightness, which I do not wish to lose sight of. The second, subsidiary aim in this chapter is to point out how critical ‘reason’ in the shape of a mechanistic, anti-Romantic mindset, has often and characteristically missed Shelley’s essence and value. The third aim, which hopes to be more positive and clinching, is to demonstrate the integrated, exemplary unity of reason and imagination in two major poems, *Mont Blanc* and *Ode to the West Wind*.

It is significant that Whitehead appears to find Shelley the most sympathetic of the Romantics: this is because he was in tune with science – in the modern sense, of course. Whitehead even asserts, ‘What



the hills were to the youth of Wordsworth, a chemical laboratory was to Shelley. . . . If Shelley had been born a hundred years later, the twentieth century would have seen a Newton among chemists.<sup>1</sup> The literary critic and historian Graham Hough disagrees with this pleasingly extravagant view. He notes 'how fragmentary and capricious were Shelley's dealings with science.'<sup>2</sup> But it is clear that Shelley was strongly interested in every aspect of science that was accessible to him at the time. At Eton, he experimented with gunpowder and tried to make a small steam engine. At Oxford, he crammed his rooms with scientific equipment, including an 'electrical machine' which 'had already been tried out on a tom-cat (a friend holding the cat down, Shelley applying the wires) and on the dim, terrified son of Shelley's scout.'<sup>3</sup> Ann Wroe cites many other examples of this kind of activity, including sniffing ether, possibly brewing up nitrous oxide and leaning over pools in the hope of inhaling the hydrogen bursting out of bubbles from the water plants. From this it is obvious that his interest in science was 'hands on', empirical, and also that it contained that drive towards finding out at all costs which imperiously over-rides human and animal rights. It points back towards Bacon (a favourite author of his), in the suggestion of being ready to torture nature to reveal her secrets, and forward to the twentieth century unleashing of atomic destruction.

As a practical scientist, the young Shelley was wild and undisciplined to the point of being an on-going disaster, surviving more by luck than judgement. But he was also an omniverous reader of scientific writings, including Humphrey Davy's books and lectures, and he was well aware of the philosophical implications of the new discoveries. For instance, as Whitehead also points out, Shelley could see the fleetingness and transformational quality of matter and forms which Lyell in geology and Darwin in biology were later to make so vivid to the common consciousness. It is almost as if Shelley intuited

these perceptions before the scientists had reached the point of demonstrating and making them public.

Apart from being sympathetic to science and prescient about imminent scientific revolutions, Shelley was also among the most intellectual of all English poets who, according to his friend Hogg, often read for 16 out of the 24 hours in a day. Trelawny, another friend and later biographer, wrote of his first meeting with Shelley that he could not at first believe that this ‘tall, thin stripling’ with a ‘flushed, feminine, artless face’ could be in truth the poet and the ‘veritable monster’ of repute who had been ‘denounced by the rival sages of our literature as a founder of the Satanic school.’ However, when Shelley was invited to talk about the book he held in his hand – a play of Calderon – Trelawny was immediately converted and wrote: ‘The masterly manner in which he analysed the genius of the author, his lucid interpretations of the story, and the ease with which he translated into our language the most subtle and imaginative passages of that Spanish poet were marvellous, as was his command of the two languages. After this touch of his quality, I no longer doubted his identity.’ This account comes from Peacock’s *Memoirs of Shelley*.<sup>4</sup> Peacock was Shelley’s critical friend, a clear-minded, witty being who blithely caricatured Shelley as the character Scythrop in his short satirical novel *Nightmare Abbey*.

It was in response to Peacock’s polemical *Four Ages of Poetry* that Shelley wrote his own poetic manifesto *A Defense of Poetry*, in the year before his death, 1821. The argument between them takes up many of the themes we are looking at. Peacock wrote, half-ironically but with some force, that poetry belonged to the past: it was full of outdated beliefs and fancifulness and of no use to the rational modern person. Scientific and utilitarian thinking were the mark of the future while poetry should be left behind with ‘barbarous manners,

obsolete customs and exploded superstitions.’ In reply to this Shelley chose to contrast reason and imagination, both being essential but imagination being pre-eminent because:

Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those quantities, both separately and as a whole. Reason respects the differences, imagination the similitudes of things. Reason is to the imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.<sup>5</sup>

At this moment in his life, Shelley had brought reason and imagination into a state of balance, though it may have been precarious and temporary. At the point of balance, the degree to which he sounds like a modern deep ecologist is very striking. He writes that ‘the social sympathies’ which exist as soon as there are two beings co-existing, naturally develop towards ‘equality, diversity, unity, contrast, mutual dependence’ (p. 69) and it is clear that he is also very conscious of emergent qualities: ‘the future is contained within the present as the plant within the seed. . .’ Shelley goes on to argue that language itself is poetry, that ‘the great secret of morals is love’ and that ‘The great instrument of moral good is the imagination’ since it enlarges the sympathies: ‘a man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others. . .’ (p.79). He also puts forward a very useable conception of infinity when describing a great poem: ‘All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn which contained all oaks potentially. Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed.’ (p. 96) This image of the veils is echoed in the poem ‘Mont Blanc’ which we will look at in the next section. At this point we take note that Shelley’s interest in science led him to use several metaphors derived from the content of scientific

discovery (as opposed to the scientific mode of mind). Early in the essay he derides translation: 'it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principles of its colour and odour. . .'; and in his concluding, heightened words of persuasion he praises contemporary poets for 'the electric life which burns within their words'.

### **'Mont Blanc'**

Questing for Shelley's contribution to a new, holistic understanding for us in the present, we can examine more closely the poem that Whitehead quotes and praises as communicating that 'Presence in nature' which has already been found in Wordsworth. This is 'Mont Blanc', a relatively early poem written in 1816 and usually seen as strongly influenced by Wordsworth.

While considering the poem I would also like to bear in mind a common criticism of Shelley which is that he was narcissistic and self-absorbed. Critics who feel at home in the Enlightenment and correspondingly uneasy with the Romantic essence of Shelley's verse, take it for granted that all sensible people will know the difference and the boundaries between the self and the not-self. But this is surely to beg the question.

Since Shelley was a poet rather than a philosopher he communicates through images and emotions: first by conjuring up a compelling, very visual image of a river. This river is the universe itself and we are assured that it is 'everlasting', although this word is in tension with the strong sense of extreme and unpredictable change – the waters are 'now dark, now glittering – now reflecting gloom, now lending splendour'. It is asserted that this river (which is everything) 'flows through the mind'. Again, as a poet Shelley has the luxury of declaring rather than demonstrating. The philosopher would have to ask whether what appears in the mind is actually the same as what

exists 'out there' in the universe. Here the question is triumphantly solved by poetic fiat and poetic faith. There is a difference between 'human thought' and the universal stream but also a delightful affinity. Human thought is like a 'feeble brook' which not only adds its sound to the great river's sound, but also is nearly indistinguishable from it because of a complex process of reverberation and blending: we can't tell for sure which sound comes from which. Moreover, though we are not told what might be the source of the universal river, the brook of human thought comes from 'secret springs'. The question of the 'secret' is left to alert and intrigue the reader's consciousness. The overall emotional tone is of exhilaration and wonder through being almost (note almost) taken over by the grandeur of nature. This feeling mounts to a crescendo in the last three lines which end with this mountain-born river bursting its banks with an effect of madness and chaos.

At the beginning of the next section we are placed in the actual, the concrete, by the river name, 'Arve', – a definite geographical location. But although we feel that this refers to a real place which anyone could visit, it is also implied that the Arve is a Platonic shadow or temporary manifestation of the underlying 'Power'. The subject and dynamic force here is really the 'Power' which happens to express itself in this particular Italian river. This immediately gives rise to a humanisation of the Arve which is seen as having a throne at its source (also 'secret'), and is addressed as 'thou'. The personification even has a gender, in that it has a 'brood of pines' clinging around it. The 'chainless winds' which come to 'drink the odours' of the brood of pines are also centres of consciousness, not mechanical or impersonal forces. (This is not a charming conceit, as for instance in a typically 18th century poem such as Pope's 'Where e'er you walk, cool gales shall fan the glade...' Instead it points to a reality felt by the poet and the reader.)

The poet continues by addressing the ravine where rainbows – transparent, fleeting, partly illusory things – veil the waterfall. The waterfall is also ‘aetherial’ and is another layer of veiling over ‘some unsculptured image’. One imagines this as the rock-face beneath the water, which no human hand has carved but which still has a meaningful shape (meaning being of the essence of the concept of an image). But an image still refers onward to something else so there is a sense of veil behind veil or a receding vista of realities, or pointers to reality. In a syntactically obscure clause Shelley here introduces the notion of a ‘strange sleep’. It is not very clear whether this sleep is equivalent to the bedrock behind the waterfall, the rock in its impenetrable hardness and internal darkness – or not! Once again, a questing and questioning, ambiguous and alerting spirit hovers over the lines.

Shelley develops the idea of the sleep by declaring that the depth of the ravine, and the ceaseless noise and movement of the river induce in him a state of trance wherein his mind ‘renders and receives fast influencings’ from the universe. We notice the paradox encapsulated in the word ‘renders’. Rendering is an active process, as of an artist painting a landscape or a musician interpreting some music, and yet the dominant assertion is that the mind is passive. In its passivity the mind becomes part of a ‘legion of wild thoughts’ which recall the wandering, conscious winds from earlier in the poem. Where these thoughts or winds come to rest is in the cave of ‘the witch Poesy’. This recalls Plato’s cave where the shadows of illusion dance on the walls – but there is a different feeling about it. Again the section ends in a peak of exaltation where the poet senses that the legion of thoughts have come home to their source, because the sought-for origin of all is somehow there.

The third section of the poem reiterates the idea of sleep, and death too, as possibly sources of knowledge. The poet is not sure whether he is asleep or awake and his 'very spirit' seems about to vanish – but for the first time in the poem *Mont Blanc* itself enters the picture, and contributes a sense of firmness and serenity. The following lines portray the landscape around the mountain, the surrounding mountains and glaciers, valleys and rocks as utterly inhospitable. The hunter may leave his bones there for the eagle and wolf to find but this is not a place for domestication. This wilderness (for which Shelley's usual word is 'desert') does not in fact crush the mind but prompts it towards a strong, quasi-scientific questioning such as, did earthquakes cause all this desolation, or was there a sea of fire where there is now snow and rock? I am not sure that Shelley wants a scientific, literal-minded answer to these questions because it is just here where there is no answer, no human voice, that there seems to be 'a mysterious tongue', a message received – not by all but by the 'wise, and great, and good'. This message is not, however, about human morality. Once again, Shelley's syntax becomes (deliberately?) misleading but there is a suggestion that there are only two possible responses to the wildness: an 'awful doubt' or a 'mild' kind of faith. There is a cloudiness covering the question of whether this faith reconciles humanity with nature or prevents such a reconciliation.

Section IV has an apocalyptic theme. It begins with one of Shelley's sweeping, celebratory lists of landscape elements, including, finally 'the works and ways of man', all seen as impermanent, changing, involved in the cycles of living and dying. These things all teach the mind, but the Power which seems to be their source 'dwells apart in its tranquillity'. Now for the first time the poet is nearly overwhelmed ('so much of life and joy is lost') when he sees a city-like rock formation which is actually 'a city of death' and a 'flood of ruin' which is massively destructive. It kills insects, animals and birds and

finally humankind which tries to flee but ends up evaporating and leaving no trace.

The final section, V, returns to the image of Mont Blanc which, in spite of everything, acts as an anchor and stay for the mind. It seems that 'the power is there' – though not necessarily the Power with the capital 'p'. The poet leads the reader to an awed contemplation of this non-human, anti-human locus of 'otherness' whose beauty is wrapped up with paradox. The snowflakes burn as rays from the setting sun shoot through them and the winds are silent simply because nobody hears them. Contemplation rests on the 'secret Strength of things' – a direct, noumenal intuition of the kind which poets affirm in us though science cannot incorporate it. The ending of the poem is poetically flawed because it presents a philosophical puzzle rather than an intuitive vision. Shelley asks, apparently addressing the 'the secret Strength':

And what were thou, and earth and stars, and sea,  
If to the human mind's imaginings  
Silence and solitude were vacancy?

I interpret this as meaning that solitude and silence (and the cosmic entities in which they become actual) are not vacancy to the imaginative mind. They feel like a means of being authentically connected with the universe, even if this is a 'desert' experience. In a most literal sense, Shelley has an 'I-thou' relationship with them.

Shelley described 'Mont Blanc' as 'an undisciplined overflowing of the soul' and asserted the Romantic claim which makes many people profoundly antagonistic, that powerful feelings are worthy of expression and can have a revelatory effect. I want to pursue this conflict a little further because it illuminates the point at issue. F.R. Leavis provides an example of rationalistic unwillingness to surf poetic currents



of feeling and vision in his essay on Shelley published in 1936. Leavis dismisses most of Shelley's poetry but tries to show that the 'Ode to the West Wind', 'one of his best poems', is weakened by what he (Leavis) sees as 'romanticism'. He quotes (p. 346) the following lines:

Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's commotion  
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,  
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,  
  
Angels of rain and lightning; there are spread  
On the blue surface of thine aery surge,  
Like the bright hair uplifted from the head  
  
Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge  
Of the horizon to the zenith's height,  
The locks of the approaching storm.

According to Leavis this is an example of Romantic imprecision, almost a dimming of consciousness as the parts of the imagery fail to cohere, being lost in self-indulgent vagueness and a hallucinatory haze. I would argue the opposite: that the lines express and stimulate a strong and coherent consciousness. The west wind is the 'thou' being addressed. This wind as it streams along has clouds on it just as a stream of water might have dead leaves. The clouds and the leaves, metaphorically fused by strong feeling, can be seen as shaken from the 'tangled boughs' of heaven and ocean because heaven and ocean are experienced as one system – they are tangled together by that very sense of affinity which gives rise to all metaphor and (perhaps) all mysticism and all respect for the sacred wholeness of the natural world.

However, the sense of wholeness does not obliterate a sense of distinction. The 'Angels of rain and lightning' are (dynamically and beautifully) the clouds but (obviously) not the leaves; the leaves fade

away at the edge of the mind while we lift our eyes to the sky again. Then we have a sentence whose subject, the 'locks of the approaching storm', comes at the end – we have to wait for it as if watching something approaching, developing and finally present. All this takes place against the ultimate blueness of sky. Clouds, like hair are spread out against this, in streaming motion like the hair of 'some fierce Maenad' – someone in a destructive frenzy. Leavis objects to the 'smoothness' of the sky being juxtaposed with the maddened surging of wind and clouds, but isn't this just the point? Nature contains these extremes and the poetic consciousness brings them together and allows us to comprehend the wholeness.

It is also very interesting that a strong sense of horizontal and vertical are implicit in the lines. Whitehead commended Shelley for describing the astronomical setting of the earth accurately and visually. Although Shelley's poetry often suggests the experience of music, a more Dionysian art than painting, perhaps these 'West Wind' lines also show a visual artist's balancing of the sense of up and down. Streams are obviously and strongly horizontal, as is the blown-back hair of the running Maenad, and the wind seems to force trees towards the horizontal; but the use of 'steep' for the sky reminds us of the counteracting up-and-down dimension, and the vision of 'the horizon to the zenith's height' further accentuates that sense of the vertical. There is an Apollonian coolness in this sense, more associated with reason, light and criticism than with raw emotion.

Arguably, the Leavis response to Shelley, and all the background of Enlightenment rationalism which it suggests, is near the heart of our theme. Leavis says of Shelley; 'This poetry depends for its success on inducing a kind of attention that doesn't bring the critical intelligence into play: the imagery feels right, the associations work appropriately, if (as it takes conscious resistance not to do) one accepts

the immediate feeling and doesn't slow down to think.' (p. 348). In fact, Shelley speeded up to think and thereby demonstrated a highly effective way of integrating feeling and reason.

Shelley was a paradoxical being. At school he read Hume, and Baron d'Holbach, and the French encyclopaedists, and took up his stance as an atheist and materialist. Unlike the young Charles Darwin (born in 1809) Shelley never admired the clergyman Paley's *Evidences of Christianity* or *Natural Theology*. By contrast, and notoriously, he chose while at Oxford to write and publish, with his friend Hogg, *The Necessity of Atheism* which attacked the authoritarian form of religion which was obligatory at the time. ("Every reflecting mind must allow that there is no proof of the existence of a deity.") Authority was hateful to him and revelation, received via other minds and writings, was not a meaningful notion. And even late in his short life he showed a hardness of reasoning which compels respect. Asked by Trelawny "whether he believed in the immortality of the spirit, Shelley snapped: 'Certainly not; how can I? We know nothing; we have no evidence; we cannot express our inmost thoughts. They are incomprehensible even to ourselves.'"<sup>7</sup> But his acute, sensuous awareness of the natural world, his response to it, and his emotional intensity pulled in another direction. His energetic spirit tore madly at the stake of static materialism to which he had tethered it and he ended up wrenching the stake out of the ground and flying off with it. He was energised by his own recurrent revelations of Beauty, from boyhood onwards, and though this reality was tormentingly elusive, it was part of his inmost experience, and, beyond denial, the most valuable part of it. Even when at school he read Erasmus Darwin, (Charles Darwin's grandfather), his mind vibrated in agreement with the perception that all of Nature was pervaded by life and

sentience. With every natural affinity and every yearning of desire, he was a Platonist. He reached towards

The Light whose smile kindles the Universe,  
That beauty in which all things work and move,  
That Benediction which the eclipsing Curse  
Of birth can quench not, that sustaining Love  
Which through the web of being blindly wove  
By man and beast and earth and air and sea,  
The fire for which all thirst . . .

(‘Adonais’ ll 478-485)

Shelley’s was a dynamic and experience-based way of relating Reason and Imagination, and it was fully realised in his poetry rather than in his life. It does not provide a simple formula – but it is a way which has always been sensed by sympathetic readers of the Romantics and has made its own small (in the total cultural context) but priceless contribution to the health and balance of the human mind.

V

EMERSON and THOREAU

Transcendentalism

On Christmas Day 1832 the 29-year-old American poet, essayist and Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson, left Boston for a Grand Tour of Europe. He travelled the length of Italy and on through France reaching England in the following July. While there, he visited Wordsworth and Coleridge. Both men were then in their sixties and Emerson's visit was probably in the nature of a pilgrimage to the feet of the Grand Old Men of English Romanticism.

The claim that Emerson introduced the Romantic outlook to America can be upheld: it is supported by both Thomas Berry and by Max Oelschlaeger in his extensive study of this period. The first fruits of the Romantic influence on Emerson appeared in 1836 with the publication of his essay *Nature*, which he started writing on the voyage home from Europe, and with the first meetings of what became the Transcendental Club. It is clear from the introduction to *Nature* that the prime motivation of Emerson's concern with the natural world was as a source of religious inspiration and insight:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?

Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs! Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe. . . There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the new thoughts were about evolution. Even though Darwin's *Origin of Species* was not published until 1859, ideas and theories about evolution were current. In a historical sketch added to an edition of *The Origin* published in 1872, Darwin provides a brief account of thinking about organic evolution prior to the first publication of his study. Together they are sufficient to show that ideas about the evolution of species were quite widely held and likely to be known to scholars in other disciplines. In an essay (also titled *Nature*) published in 1844 Emerson wrote:

All changes pass without violence, by reason of the two cardinal conditions of boundless space and boundless time. Geology has initiated us into the secularity of nature, and taught us to disuse our dame-school measures, and exchange our Mosaic and Ptolemaic schemes for her large style. We knew nothing rightly, for want of perspective. Now we learn what patient periods must round themselves before the rock is formed, then before the rock is broken, and the first lichen race has disintegrated the thinnest external plate into soil, and opened the door for the remote Flora, Fauna, Ceres, and Pomona to come in. How far off yet is the trilobite! how far the quadruped! how inconceivably remote is man! All duly arrive, and then race after race of men. It is a long way from

granite to the oyster; farther yet to Plato, and the preaching of the immortality of the soul. Yet all must come, as surely as the first atom has two sides.<sup>2</sup>

Evolution requires the observer to view the natural world with completely new eyes; as Emerson realised, ‘We knew nothing rightly, for want of perspective’. All stories of origins, all ideas about how things came to be have to be reassessed and set in the context of apparently boundless time. Emerson calls for a poetry and philosophy of insight derived from direct experience of nature and in nature he finds healing and gracious enlightenment:

In the woods ... a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period so ever of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,— no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all the currents of the Universal being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.<sup>3</sup>

What Emerson sought was a new reading of the Book of Nature in the form of a revised natural theology, one which takes due account of the teachings of the natural world and which breaks free of outworn traditions. His vision is, nevertheless, constrained by a firm belief that humanity represents the apex of the evolutionary process. He speaks of, ‘the kingdom of man over nature, which ... he shall enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight.’<sup>4</sup>

It was left to Henry David Thoreau to take up Emerson's challenge with a more open mind and a willingness to experience nature in its wildness. Thoreau graduated from Harvard in 1837 and became a member of the Transcendental Club. Although wanting to establish himself as a writer, Thoreau joined his brother in running a school. This closed down in 1841 and Emerson offered Thoreau a place in his home in Concord, earning his keep as a handyman, while concentrating on his writing. There he stayed until July 1845 when he moved into a hut that he built for himself near the shore of Walden Pond just 3 Km south of Concord and on land owned by Emerson. In the following August, Thoreau had an encounter with really wild nature during an excursion to Mount Katahdin in Maine. On reaching the summit alone he found that:

The mountain seemed a vast aggregation of loose rocks, as if some time it had rained rocks, and they lay as they fell on the mountain sides, nowhere fairly at rest, but leaning on each other, all rocking-stones, with cavities between, but scarcely any soil or smoother shelf. They were the raw materials of a planet dropped from an unseen quarry, which the vast chemistry of nature would anon work up, or work down, into the smiling and verdant plains and valleys of earth. This was an undone extremity of the globe. . . Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends. He is more alone than you can imagine. There is less of substantial thought and fair understanding in him, than in the plains where men inhabit. His reason is dispersed and shadowy, more thin and subtle, like the air. Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, why came ye here before your time? This ground is not prepared for you. Is it not enough that I smile in the valleys? I have



never made this soil for thy feet, this air for thy breathing, these rocks for thy neighbors. I cannot pity nor fondle thee here, but forever relentlessly drive thee hence to where I am kind. Why seek me where I have not called thee, and then complain because you find me but a stepmother? Shouldst thou freeze or starve, or shudder thy life away, here is no shrine, nor altar, nor any access to my ear. . .

And yet we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast and drear and inhuman, though in the midst of cities. Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhand-selled globe. . . It was Matter, vast, terrific, – not his Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or be buried in, – no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there, – the home, this, of Necessity and Fate. There was there felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. . . I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. . . What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! – Think of our life in nature, – daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, – rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we? <sup>5</sup>

There are clear echoes here of Shelley's response to Mont Blanc,  
The wilderness has a mysterious tongue  
Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,  
So solemn, so serene, that man may be,  
But for such faith, with nature reconciled;

Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal  
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood  
By all, but which the wise, and great, and good  
interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.

Thoreau lived in his hut by Walden Pond for just over another year and during that time he clearly managed to assimilate his experience on Ktaadn. In his book about Walden Pond he wrote:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear, nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to “glorify God and enjoy him forever”.<sup>6</sup>

In his life by Walden Pond, Thoreau cultivated an acute awareness of the natural world. He walked through his world with due attention to what was going on there, even though he recognised that he did not understand most of it. What Thoreau learned from Mount Ktaadn was that Emerson’s ‘kingdom of man over nature’ is an illusion; from Walden Pond he learned that the good life is lived in

harmony with nature in ‘the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man’ which had to be acknowledged and respected. In a later essay, *Walking*, Thoreau claimed that, ‘In Wildness is the Preservation of the World’. Thomas Berry claims that this ‘is a statement of unsurpassed significance in human affairs’.<sup>7</sup> Thoreau intuitively understood that in an evolving world wildness is a necessary prerequisite of creativity and that efforts to tame and control the world, to civilise it, are doomed to failure. Thoreau also believed that wildness can only be experienced in true wilderness, as he wrote in *Walden*:

We need the tonic of wildness – to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature.<sup>8</sup>

In his relatively short life, he died at the age of 42, Thoreau lived in semi-wilderness for just over two years and made a number of other excursions into wilderness areas. For John Muir, the last of our authors, his encounter with wilderness became a lived experience to such an extent that separation from it caused problems of both physical and mental well-being.

VI

JOHN MUIR

Prophet of the Wilderness

Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze  
That blows from the green fields and from the clouds  
And from the sky – it beats against my cheek,  
And seems half-conscious of the joy it gives.  
Oh welcome messenger, oh welcome friend!  
A captive greets thee, coming from a house  
Of bondage, from yon city's walls set free,  
A prison where he hath been long immured.  
Now I am free, enfranchised and at large,  
May fix my habitation where I will.

We do not know if John Muir was familiar with Wordsworth's *Prelude* but even if he was not he would have sympathised with the sentiments of these opening lines. We do know that Muir read the Romantic poets, and, like Emerson and Thoreau, he was strongly influenced by them. In 1893 Muir left his home in California and made a trip to the East coast and on to Europe. He visited Concord and laid flowers on the graves of both Emerson and Thoreau, and while in Great Britain he visited Grasmere and sent his daughter a pressed leaf picked from a tree overhanging Wordsworth's grave.

In Graham White's introduction to the recently published Scottish edition of the biography of John Muir by Frederick Turner, he writes:

For the general public in the USA, Muir is ensconced in the environmental pantheon alongside Thoreau, Emerson and Audubon; indeed for many, he has transcended mere historical fact to become a mythic archetype, casting his protective aegis across the continent as the ever-watchful guardian of Nature. In Scotland, he remains virtually unknown to the mass of the people.<sup>1</sup>

The same can be said of Scotland's neighbours in the rest of the UK and we feel that it is necessary to go into some biographical detail before attempting an analysis of John Muir's thinking and his significance for the modern environmental movement.

John Muir was born at 128 High Street, Dunbar, Scotland on 21st April 1838. It is typical of him that he opens the autobiography of his youth with the statement that, 'When I was a boy in Scotland I was fond of everything that was wild . . . though solemnly warned that I must play at home in the garden and back yard, lest I should learn to think bad thoughts and say bad words. All in vain. In spite of the sure sore punishments that followed like shadows, the natural inherited wildness in our blood ran true on its glorious course as invincible and unstopable as stars'. We are told about the sea and the sky, the birds and the fields, and 'a mother field mouse with half a dozen naked young hanging to her teats', before being introduced to his own parents, Daniel and Ann, his grandfather, his elder sisters Margaret and Sarah and younger brother David.

In 1849 when John was 11 years old, his father suddenly announced one evening, 'you needna learn your lessons the nicht, for we're gan to America the morn!' The family emigrated to America

and started farming at Fountain Lake in Marquette County, Wisconsin. Again, John's first comments about his new life refer to wildness, 'This sudden plash into pure wildness – baptism in Nature's warm heart – how utterly happy it made us! Nature streaming into us, wooingly teaching her wonderful glowing lessons, so unlike the dismal grammar ashes and cinders so long thrashed into us.' Not for the best part of three chapters, dealing with the natural surroundings, the lake, the birds and the animals, do we learn of the long hours of intense physical labour that were expected of him.

John got no schooling. His father, who was deeply religious with a strong fundamentalist faith, devoted more and more of his time to evangelism. He became an itinerant preacher and left most of the running of the farm to the rest of his family, with the bulk of the burden falling on the eldest son John. In spite of, perhaps because of his father's disapproval, John did his best to educate himself, reading widely in literature, including the English Romantics, and in mathematics and philosophy.

In 1860, at the age of 22, John Muir left home, taking with him a clock he had made entirely from wood and a thermometer of his own design. These attracted considerable attention when displayed at a Fair at Madison. This success led to his enrolling as a student at the University of Wisconsin, where he studied for two and a half years, maintaining himself by teaching in a local school. At the University he was introduced to the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, to the evolutionary theories in geology of Charles Lyell and Louis Agassiz and the very new and up-to-date theory of the *Origin of Species* just published (1859) by Charles Darwin. While at Wisconsin John Muir developed a passionate interest in botany that was to enrich so much of the rest of his life.

In 1864 without completing his studies at Wisconsin, John Muir went to Canada. The more recent of his biographers are clear that he did this in order to avoid being drafted into the Union army to fight in the civil war. Previous biographers were more reticent on this point. On his return to America, Muir got a job as an engineer at a carriage factory in Indianapolis. In an accident he suffered serious damage to one of his eyes. On recovering, a process that took several months, Muir decided to give up on mechanical inventions and to devote the rest of his life to the study of 'the inventions of God', as he put it.

In the year 1867, at the age of 29, Muir set out on a very long walk of 1000 miles from Indianapolis to Florida. Influenced by the writings of the German geographer and explorer Alexander von Humboldt<sup>2</sup>, Muir's original intention was to reach South America. He was diverted from this by suffering from a fairly serious fever in Florida. On recovering, and by a roundabout route via Cuba and New York, he arrived in San Francisco on 28th March 1868 and immediately made his way to the Yosemite Valley in the Sierra Nevada mountains which was to be his home, off and on, for the next twelve years. For the first five years John Muir lived throughout the year in or near the valley, earning his keep by various tasks, caring for sheep, managing a saw-mill, and guiding. He saw to it that paid work occupied as little of his time as possible and that most of his time was spent exploring and studying the Yosemite valley and its surroundings.

What sparked John Muir's intense interest in Yosemite, apart from the sheer beauty and magnificence of the place, was a geological controversy about how the valley came to be. Josiah D. Whitney, then head of the California State Geological Survey and a major figure in American geology, was a supporter of the catastrophe school of geology which believed that earthquakes, volcanoes and floods,

major upheavals and cataclysmic events in general played a key role in forming existing landscapes. The generally accepted story about the Yosemite Valley was that it was formed by a collapse into some subterranean abyss. John Muir came to believe that it was formed by the action of glaciers, and indeed that the whole of the Sierra Nevada range, with the possible exception of some of the highest peaks, was sculptured by the action of ice acting over tens of thousands of years. It was this conviction, and the need to communicate it, that started him writing a series of articles which appeared in the *New York Tribune* and the *Overland Monthly*. These articles, illustrated with his own sketches, have recently been reprinted.<sup>3</sup> They demonstrate the comprehensive and meticulous nature of John Muir's observations as he describes both the tracks of the ancient glaciers in the region and also how these sculpted the pinnacles, domes, canyons, and other features of the Yosemite landscape. In a letter to Jeanne Carr, he comments, 'All depends on the goodness of one's eyes. No scientific book in the world can tell me how this Yosemite granite is put together, or how it has been taken down. Patient observation and constant brooding above the rocks, lying down upon them for years as the ice did, is the way to arrive at the truths which are graven so lavishly upon them.' He elaborated on his method in one of his articles in *Overland Monthly* (1873):

This was my 'method of study': I drifted about from rock to rock, from stream to stream, from grove to grove. Where night found me, there I camped. When I discovered a new plant, I sat down beside it for a minute or a day, to make its acquaintance and try to hear what it had to say. When I came to moraines, or ice-scratches upon the rocks, I traced them, learning what I could of the glacier that made them. I asked the boulders I met whence they came and whither they were going. I followed to their fountains the various soils upon which the forests and meadows are planted; and



when I discovered a mountain or rock of marked form and structure, I climbed about it, comparing it with its neighbors, marking its relations to the forces that had acted upon it, glaciers, streams, avalanches, etc., in seeking to account for its form, finish, position, and general character. It is astonishing how high and far we can climb in mountains that we love, and how little we require food and clothing. Weary at times, with only the birds and squirrels to compare notes with, I rested beneath the spicy pines, among the needles and burrs, or upon the plushy sod of a glacier meadow, touching my cheek to its gentians and daisies. No evil consequence from 'waste of time,' concerning which good people who accomplish nothing make such a sermonizing, has befallen me.<sup>3</sup>

In May 1871 Ralph Waldo Emerson visited Yosemite with some friends. In an account of the event Muir says, 'I was excited as I had never been excited before, and my heart throbbed as if an angel from heaven had alighted on the Sierran rocks.' After some hesitation Muir introduced himself to Emerson and over the following days they spent much time together. When Emerson's party left the valley, Muir was invited to accompany them as far as the Mariposa Grove of Sequoia trees. To his profound disappointment he was unable to persuade Emerson's friends to allow him to camp out under the trees, 'but the house habit was not to be overcome, nor the strange dread of pure night air, though it is only cooled day air with a little dew in it. . . And to think of this being a Boston choice. Sad commentary on culture and the glorious transcendentalism. . . After sundown I built a great fire, and as usual had it all to myself. And though lonesome for the first time in these forests, I quickly took heart again – the trees had not gone to Boston, nor the birds.'

After the first few years John Muir did not live continuously in the valley. He passed the winters, increasingly occupied by writing,

in either Oakland or San Francisco, and his summers were spent on trips to other areas of the Sierra Nevada mountains, and further afield in Oregon and elsewhere. He developed a particular affinity for the area of Mount Shasta, a volcanic region at the northern limit of the range. In the summer of 1877 Muir was invited to guide the botanists Professor Asa Gray and Sir Joseph Hooker (then director of Kew Gardens) on a trip to Mount Shasta during which they shared their passion for trees. At about this time John Muir began to write and lobby in public for the protection of his beloved forests. This developed into a general concern for the conservation of wilderness areas, an activity that occupied an increasing proportion of his energies. He had already begun to question the impact of humans on the mountains in a journal for 1875:

Will all this garden be made into beef and mutton pastures, and be delved by the hog-herd and ditcher's spade? I often wonder what man will do with the mountains – that is, with their utilizable, destructible garments. Will he cut down all the trees to make ships and houses? If so, what will be the final and far upshot? Will human destructions like those of Nature – fire and flood and avalanche – work out a higher good, a finer beauty? Will a better civilization come in accord with obvious nature, and all this wild beauty be set to human poetry and song? Another universal outpouring of lava, or the coming of a glacial period, could scarce wipe out the flowers and shrubs more effectually than do the sheep. And what then is coming? What is the human part of the mountains' destiny? <sup>4</sup>

Although, during these years John Muir spent much of his time alone, either on his 'long lonely excursions' or at his writing desk, he had a wide circle of friends and acquaintances and he kept up a lively correspondence with his family and other near and distant friends.

Through Jeanne Carr, he was introduced some time in 1874 to Louie Wanda Strentzel the daughter of a Polish immigrant who owned a large fruit farm near Martinez, just over 30 miles north east of San Francisco. The friendship developed over the years and on the eve of the first of Muir's numerous trips to Alaska, Louie and John got engaged in 1879. Two years later on April 14th 1880 they were married. In July of the same year Muir went on his second trip to Alaska, which included an adventure with a dog, Stikeen. Muir's account of this richly deserves its reputation as one of the best of animal stories.<sup>5</sup> The main intention of the Alaska journeys was to explore and enjoy the glaciers and mountains for their own sakes but also to see glaciers actually at work and so add to knowledge of how glaciation can form landscapes. The third trip to Alaska in 1881, recorded in *The Cruise of the Corwen*,<sup>6</sup> was to be the last extensive trip for several years. Muir had rented from his father-in-law part of the Strentzel fruit ranch at Martinez, which he now had to manage, a very different prospect from his previous experience of farming in Wisconsin. The birth of two daughters, Wanda in 1881 and Helen in 1886 added to his responsibilities. Muir summarises his life during these years:

About a year before starting on the Arctic expedition I was married to Louie Strentzel, and for ten years I was engaged in fruit-raising in the Alhambra Valley, near Martinez, clearing land, planting vineyards and orchards, and selling the fruit, until I had more money than I thought I would ever need for my family or for all expenses of travel and study, however far or however long continued. But this farm work never seriously interrupted my studies. Every spring when the snow on the mountains had melted, until the approach of winter, my explorations were pushed farther and farther. Only in the early autumn, when the table grapes were gathered, and in winter and early spring, when the vineyards and orchards were pruned and cultivated, was my personal supervision given to the

work. After these ten years I sold part of the farm and leased the balance, so as to devote the rest of my life, as carefree as possible, to travel and study. Thus, in 1891, I was again free from the farm and all bread winning cares.<sup>7</sup>

Among the summer trips made by Muir over this period, an important one was a visit to his family in 1885. On hearing that his father, who was staying with his youngest daughter in Kansas City, was unwell, Muir decided to start by visiting his mother and brother in Wisconsin. While he was there he had a clear premonition that his father had not long to live. He persuaded most of the family to travel to Kansas City where they had just three days with Daniel Muir before he died.

In 1889 Muir arranged to visit Yosemite with Robert Underwood Johnson the editor of *Century* magazine to which Muir was a regular contributor. Johnson suggested that Muir should start a campaign to get the area designated as a National Park. Through Muir's articles and effective lobbying by Johnson in Washington the campaign made good progress and just over a year later, on 1st October 1890 Yosemite National Park came into being. The Yosemite valley itself had already been declared a Reservation in 1864, and it remained under the management of the State of California. The new legislation substantially extended the area designated as a Park.

In 1892 John's younger brother David moved from Wisconsin and took over the Martinez ranch. In the same year, and at the urging of his friends, Muir was instrumental in forming the Sierra Club which held its first meeting on 4th June, 1892. Its declared aims were 'to explore, enjoy and render accessible the mountain regions of the Pacific Coast, to publish authentic information about them [and] to enlist the support and co-operation of the people and government in preserving the forests and other natural features of the Sierra Nevada

Mountains.' The following year, 1893, it seems that John Muir had the confidence, and the means, to go on an extended trip to the East coast and on to Europe. Muir managed three more trips to Alaska in '96, '97 and '99, and also in 1896 he took part in a U.S. Forestry Commission survey in Idaho, Oregon and Washington. To crown an eventful year he was awarded an honorary degree by Harvard University, matched a year later by an honorary L.L.D. from his own University of Wisconsin.

President Theodore Roosevelt visited the High Sierra in May 1903 and expressed a desire to meet John Muir, then 65 years of age. They spent three days on their own camping out under the trees of the Yosemite woods. In an address given at Sacramento a few days later the President said:

I have just come from a four days' rest in Yosemite, and I wish to say a word to you here in the capital city of California about certain of your great natural resources, your forests and your water supply coming from the streams that find their sources among the forests of the mountains. . . . No small part of the prosperity of California in the hotter and drier agricultural regions depends upon the preservation of her water supply; and the water supply cannot be preserved unless the forests are preserved. As regards some of the trees, I want them preserved because they are the only things of their kind in the world. Lying out at night under those giant Sequoias was lying in a temple built by no hand of man, a temple grander than any human architect could by any possibility build, and I hope for the preservation of the groves of giant trees simply because it would be a shame to our civilization to let them disappear. They are monuments in themselves.

I ask for the preservation of other forests on grounds of wise and farsighted economic policy. I do not ask that lumbering be stopped

. . . only that the forests be so used that not only shall we here, this generation, get the benefit for the next few years, but that our children and our children's children shall get the benefit. In California I am impressed by how great the State is, but I am even more impressed by the immensely greater greatness that lies in the future, and I ask that your marvellous natural resources be handed on unimpaired to your posterity. We are not building this country of ours for a day. It is to last through the ages.<sup>8</sup>

One has a clear vision of John Muir standing at the President's elbow. Roosevelt went on to double the number of National Parks, create sixteen National Monuments, including the Grand Canyon and dramatically increase the areas designated as National Forests.

In 1905 Muir and the Sierra Club, worried about the mismanagement of the Yosemite valley reserve by state commissioners, campaigned for it to be transferred to Federal control and become an integral part of the National Park, which duly happened the following year. Two years later the Sierra Club and John Muir were having to oppose a proposal by San Francisco to dam the Hetch Hetchy valley, which was within the designated area of the Yosemite National Park, to provide water for the city which had just been devastated by the earthquake of 1906. The battle raged for the next seven years but was finally lost in 1913. It was to cast a shadow over John Muir's final years. His wife Wanda died in 1905, and thereafter Muir's time was mainly devoted to the battle for Hetch Hetchy and overseeing the collection of many of his articles into book form. He was persuaded in 1908 to dictate his autobiography while a guest of Edward Harri-man in Oregon. His dog story *Stickeen* was first published in 1909 and *My First Summer in the Sierra* in 1911. Muir did one more trip. At the age of 73, in 1911 he finally visited South America and went on to Africa in a trip lasting most of the year. In 1912 *The Yosemite* was published, followed in 1913 by *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*.

John Muir died of pneumonia, at the age of 76, in Los Angeles, on 24th December 1914. He was buried in the Strentzel family cemetery in the Alhambra Valley, Martinez.

It is possible to view the whole of John Muir's life up to his arrival in the Yosemite valley as a long and careful preparation for this event. In Book 1 of his poem *The Prelude*, William Wordsworth wrote, ' . . . . But I believe/ That nature, oftentimes, when she would frame/ A favoured being, from his earliest dawn/ Of infancy doth open out the clouds/ As at the touch of lightning, seeking him/ With gentlest visitation.' There can be little doubt that John Muir was a favoured being in Wordsworth's sense. From his early boyhood in Scotland, nature sought him out, or rather John Muir and nature sought each other and the gentle visitations were all the more effective in their stark contrast to the harsh demands and disciplines of school and father and farm. But, it is clear that his contacts with wild nature offered him not simply a means of escape, they represented an inherent trait in his character which was 'as invincible and unstoppable as stars'.

For many years Muir struggled with an internal conflict between his Calvinist upbringing which stressed the virtues of duty to family and hard, unrelenting work as essential to salvation and, on the other hand, the lure of the natural world in its wildest aspects. What finally tipped the balance was the serious accident to his eye in the carriage factory in Indianapolis in 1867 when he was 29 years old. 'As soon as I got out into Heaven's light I started on another long excursion, making haste with all my heart to store my mind with the Lord's beauty and thus be ready for any fate, light or dark. And it was from this time that my long continuous wanderings may be said to have fairly commenced. I bade farewell to all my mechanical inventions, determined to devote the rest of my life to the study of the inventions of God.'

The proper study of ‘the inventions of God’ requires more than just enthusiasm, it requires knowledge and needs to be guided by a philosophy. The knowledge John Muir gained first and foremost through his intimate contacts with nature, both wild and on the farm, formalised and supplemented by his studies of the natural sciences at the University of Wisconsin. Muir’s academic training was at the hands of teachers who had been strongly influenced by Charles Lyell and Louis Agassiz who emphasised that the way to find out about nature was by extensive and detailed studies in the field, as opposed to theorising in the study or laboratory, although he needed little urging in this respect.

An incident during his stay in Canada is worth telling in his own words:

I set off on the first of my long lonely excursions, botanising in glorious freedom around the Great Lakes and wandering through innumerable tamarac and arbor-vitae swamps, and forests of maple, basswood, ash, elm, balsam, fir, pine, spruce, hemlock, rejoicing in their bound wealth and strength and beauty, climbing the trees, revelling in their flowers and fruit like bees in beds of goldenrods, glorying in the fresh cool beauty and charm of the bog and meadow heathworts, grasses, carices, ferns, mosses, liverworts displayed in boundless profusion.

The rarest and most beautiful of the flowering plants I discovered on this first grand excursion was *Calypso borealis* (the Hider of the North). I had been fording streams more and more difficult to cross and wading bogs and swamps that seemed more and more extensive and more difficult to force one’s way through. Entering one of these great tamarac and arbor-vitae swamps one morning, holding a general though very crooked course by compass, struggling through tangled drooping branches and over and under broad



heaps of fallen trees, I began to fear that I would not be able to reach dry ground before dark, and therefore would have to pass the night in the swamp. . .

But when the sun was getting low and everything seemed most bewildering and discouraging, I found beautiful *Calypso* on the mossy bank of a stream, growing not in the ground but on a bed of yellow mosses in which its small white bulb had found a soft nest and from which its one leaf and one flower sprung. The flower was white and made the impression of the utmost simple purity like a snowflower. No other bloom was near it, for the bog a short distance below the surface was still frozen, and the water was ice cold. It seemed the most spiritual of all the flower people I had ever met. I sat down beside it and fairly cried for joy.

It seems wonderful that so frail and lowly a plant has such power over human hearts. This *Calypso* meeting happened some forty-five years ago, and it was more memorable and impressive than any of my meetings with human beings excepting, perhaps, Emerson and one or two others. . .

How long I sat beside *Calypso* I don't know. Hunger and weariness vanished, and only after the sun was low in the west I plashed on through the swamp, strong and exhilarated as if never more to feel any mortal care.<sup>9</sup>

The original version of this passage was written as a letter to John Muir's professor at Wisconsin who sent it to the Boston Recorder where it was published. The passage is significant from two points of view.

Firstly, it is part of an account of the first of his 'long lonely excursions' that were to become a feature of his life. These excursions made him what he became. The later trips in Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada mountains were often arduous explorations into unknown

territory. John Muir became an outstanding mountaineer. Samuel Hall Young described his abilities, 'I had been with mountain climbers before, but never one like him. A deer-lope over the smoother slopes, a sure instinct for the easiest way into a rocky fortress, an instant and unerring attack, a serpent glide up the steep; eye, hand and foot all connected dynamically; with no appearance of weight to his body.' Muir's trips often took several weeks and involved hundreds of miles of wilderness journey, not counting the climbs and descents. All this was done with the minimum of equipment, matches, a sack of flour, tea, and a blanket, sometimes a mule or horse for the longer trips.

Secondly, the publication of his letter introduced John Muir to the fact that he could write things that others wanted to read. He was, at the best of times, a reluctant author. As he says, 'When I began my wanderings in God's wilds, I never dreamed of writing a word for publication, and since beginning literary work it has never seemed possible that much good to others could come of it. Written descriptions of fire or bread are of but little use to the cold or starving. Descriptive writing amounts to little more than "Hurrah here's something! Come!"' Others did not share this view. Several of his friends encouraged him and none more than Jeanne Carr, the wife of one of Muir's professors at Wisconsin, who had moved to California. She not only urged him to write, but also did her best to see that his work was published. Muir did all his writing with a quill pen, and his first biographer was of the opinion that, 'The most patriotic service ever rendered by an American eagle was that of the one who contributed a wing pinion to John Muir for the defence of the western forests.'

Muir shared the view of many of the Romantics that the experience of nature was essentially a spiritual experience 'a sanctity which shames our religions', [Muir is quoting Emerson] particularly the narrow form of Christianity in which Muir had been brought up.

For most of his contemporaries the gates of the forest provided the way to a rich harvest of timber or were regarded as being the boundary of a savage wilderness that had to be tamed.

Another significant factor in Muir's approach to the natural world was his innate ability as a craftsman and inventor<sup>10</sup>. Muir saw in nature not only God as artist creating beauty but also God as craftsman creating a natural world of intricately functioning structures. It may well have been his craftsman's eyes that enabled him to accept, apparently without too much difficulty, the new ideas about the evolutionary view of nature. Just as the craftsman's skill develops with time and practice so John Muir saw the creative activities of the divine acting in the natural world shaping it into ever more complex and beautiful forms; 'Only the fingers of God are sufficiently gentle and tender for the folding and unfolding of petaled bundles of flowers.'

Frederick Turner claims that Muir's thousand-mile walk from Indianapolis to the Gulf served as a noviciate, a final but necessary step in the preparation for his later experience in the Yosemite valley. On a practical level the walk provided him with his first experience of real mountains, but there are also two passages in Muir's account of his long walk that show how his thinking was developing at this time.

While delayed at the town of Savannah waiting for some money he had arranged to be sent to him, he spent several nights at the Bonaventure graveyard.

I gazed awe-struck as one new-arrived from another world. Bonaventure is called a graveyard, a town of the dead, but the few graves are powerless in such a depth of life. The rippling of living waters, the song of birds, the joyous confidence of flowers, the

calm, undisturbable grandeur of the oaks, mark this place of graves as one of the Lord's most favoured abodes of life and light.

On no subject are our ideas more warped and pitiable than on death. Instead of the sympathy, the friendly union, of life and death so apparent in Nature, we are taught that death is an accident, a deplorable punishment for the oldest sin, the arch-enemy of life, etc. Town children, especially, are steeped in this death orthodoxy, for the natural beauties of death are seldom seen or taught in towns. . .

But let children walk with Nature, let them see the beautiful blendings and communions of death and life, their joyous inseparable unity, as taught in woods and meadows, plains and mountains and streams of our blessed star, and they will learn that death is stingless indeed, and as beautiful as life, and that the grave has no victory, for it never fights. All is divine harmony.<sup>11</sup>

These musings are far removed from the view of death as the wages of sin that was part of his father's faith. In his analysis of this passage Frederick Turner says, 'The inseparability of life and death and their reconciliation in nature had been a theme of the Romantics for over half a century, and Muir had first encountered it in reading them. But judged in the context of Muir's personal history, the meditation evidences a major breakthrough against the inhibiting intellectual and spiritual influences of his childhood and adolescence.' The view of nature as process, as a continuing cycle of life and death, of building and breaking, were to become a cornerstone of John Muir's philosophy of nature. He came to experience storm and earthquake, fire and flood as essential features of the creative processes of the natural world.

The second passage was written at the end of his 1000 mile walk, at Cedar Key in Florida, during his long recovery from a fever:

The world, we are told, was made especially for man – a presumption not supported by all the facts. A numerous class of men are painfully astonished whenever they find anything, living or dead, in all God’s universe, which they cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful to themselves. They have precise dogmatic insight of the intentions of the Creator . . . He is regarded as a civilized, law-abiding gentleman in favour either of a republican form of government or of a limited monarchy; believes in the literature and language of England; is a warm supporter of the English constitution and Sunday schools and missionary societies; and is as purely a manufactured article as any puppet of a halfpenny theatre.

With such views of the Creator it is, of course, not surprising that erroneous views should be entertained of the creation. To such properly trimmed people, the sheep, for example, is an easy problem – food and clothing ‘for us,’ eating grass and daisies white by divine appointment for this predestined purpose, on perceiving the demand for wool that would be occasioned by the eating of the apple in the Garden of Eden. . .

But if we should ask these profound expositors of God’s intentions, how about those man-eating animals – lions, tigers, alligators – which smack their lips over raw man? Or about those myriads of noxious insects that destroy labour and drink his blood? Doubtless man was intended for food and drink for all these? Oh, no! Not at all! These are unresolvable difficulties connected with Eden’s apple and the Devil. . .

Now, it never seems to occur to these far-seeing teachers that Nature’s object in making animals and plants might possibly be first

of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one. Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unity of creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit – the cosmos? The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest trans-microscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceitful eyes and knowledge.

From the dust of the earth, from the common elementary fund, the Creator has made Homo sapiens. From the same material he has made every other creature, however noxious and insignificant to us. They are earth-born companions and our fellow mortals. The fearfully good, the orthodox, of this laborious patchwork of modern civilization cry 'Heresy' on every one whose sympathies reach a single hair's breadth beyond the boundary epidermis of our own species. Not content with taking all of earth, they also claim the celestial country as the only ones who possess the kind of souls for which that imponderable empire was planned.

This star, our own good earth, made many a successful journey around the heavens ere man was made, and whole kingdoms of creatures enjoyed existence and returned to dust ere man appeared to claim them. After human beings have also played their part in Creation's plan, they too may disappear without any general burning or extraordinary commotion whatever.

Plants are credited with but dim and uncertain sensation, and minerals with positively none at all. But why may not even a mineral arrangement of matter be endowed with sensation of a kind that we in our blind exclusive perfection can have no manner of communication with?<sup>12</sup>

This passage is a good example of Muir's irrepressible and wry sense of humour which, as a literary form, probably shows the influence of one of his favourite poets, Robert Burns. It has also been interpreted as implying that he had totally repudiated the Christian faith. Lynn White, in his much quoted article 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis'<sup>13</sup>, claimed that 'Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has known.' It is clear from the above passage that John Muir no longer believed in this element of the Christian faith, but as Lynn White acknowledges 'Christianity is a complex faith' and through its history there have been those, usually within the mystical tradition, who have recognised the presence of the divine in the whole of creation.

It is clear that John Muir experienced God as immanent, as intimately present within the whole of creation, so much so that several writers have claimed that Muir was a pantheist. It is true that he almost completely withdrew from any form of institutional religion, as he wrote to his brother David, 'I have not been at church a single time since leaving home. Yet this glorious valley might well be called a church, for every lover of the great Creator who comes within the broad overwhelming influences of the place fails not to worship as he never did before.' He found God revealed and perceptible in nature rather than in church or the scriptures but throughout his writing he speaks of God as a transcendent being, separate from but acting within creation. In a letter to a friend he wrote 'God does not appear, and flow out, only from narrow chinks and rounded bored wells here and there in favoured races and places, but He flows in grand undivided currents, shoreless and boundless over creeds and forms and all kinds of civilizations and peoples and beasts, saturating all and fountainising all.'

The passage also shows that even at this stage in his wanderings Muir had developed a thoroughly biocentric outlook. He saw the world as much more than simply a backdrop for human activity, he saw creation as an integrated whole, in which all creatures are our earth-born companions and are essential to the completeness of the cosmos.

Thus was John Muir 'prepared' for his first encounter with the Yosemite valley in April 1868. There was one aspect that he was clearly not prepared for, the scale of the natural features of the valley. On first seeing the Bridalveil fall Muir said to his companion, 'See that dainty little fall over there. I should like to camp at the foot of it to see the ferns and lilies there may be there. It looks small from here, only about fifteen or twenty feet, but it may be sixty or seventy.' As he was later to find out the full height of the fall is over 900ft! Michael Cohen claims that 'Yosemite required a sensibility which could only be cultivated in Yosemite.'

The five years he spent in and around the valley and in the High Sierras were probably the most significant of his whole life. In a magnificent setting of wondrous beauty, a wide variety of natural systems were laid out before him, from high mountain peak to lowland valley; from glacier to stream, river, pond and lake; from bare rock through some of the world's finest forests to lush meadows. In a comparatively restricted area and over a few seasons he was able to study and experience many of the natural processes involved in the evolution of landscape. He was able to pull together his previous knowledge and experience into a more comprehensive and inter-connected whole. He described one of the smaller valleys in the area as, 'a botanical garden, with dwarf arctic willows two inches high at one end, the trees, bush Compositae, and wandy half-tropical grasses at the other; the two ends only half a day apart, yet among its miniature



bogs, prairies, and heathy moorlands the botanist may find representations of about as many climates as he would in travelling from Greenland to Florida.'

In the account of his first summer in the mountains he wrote:

No Sierra landscape that I have seen holds anything truly dead or dull, or any trace of what in manufactories is called rubbish or waste; everything is perfectly clean and pure and full of divine lessons. This quick, inevitable interest attaching to everything seems marvellous until the hand of God becomes visible; then it seems reasonable that what interests him may well interest us. When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. One fancies a heart like our own must be beating in every crystal and cell, and we feel like stopping to speak to the plants and animals as friendly fellow mountaineers. Nature as a poet, an enthusiastic workingman, becomes more and more visible the farther and higher we go; for the mountains are fountains – beginning places, however related to sources beyond mortal ken.<sup>14</sup>

Nature is both poet and craftsman, creating beauty through intricate processes and structures in which the living and the non-living are combined in such a way that all distinctions become blurred and everything is 'hitched to everything else.' In contrast to Thoreau, who found the summit of Ktaadn a hostile place because 'the tops of mountains are among the unfinished parts of the globe', Muir sees them as beginning places. The image of mountains as fountains is one Muir uses often in his writing. The mountain peaks were the sources of the glaciers which played a major role in the evolution of the landscape and they played an ongoing role as the gathering points of clouds and storms and snowfall. But there was more to the mountains

than this, Muir came to see the mountains as untamed and untameable wilderness and as such an immediate source of the spiritual dimension of nature.

In his masterly analysis of the role of the poet in overcoming human alienation from nature Jonathan Bate recognises that the very existence and use of language plays a part in the alienation, 'the impossible task of the ecopoet is to speak the silence of the place'<sup>15</sup>. John Muir seems to have instinctively realised this, 'When my friends urged me to begin [writing], saying, "We cannot all go to the woods and mountains; you are free and love wildness; go and bring it to us", I used to reply that it was not possible to see and enjoy for others any more than to eat for them or warm for them. Nature's tables are spread and fires burning. You must go warm yourselves and eat.' A major theme of much of Muir's writing was an attempt to persuade others to climb the mountains or camp in the forests and experience their spirituality for themselves, and even when he was campaigning for the strict preservation of wilderness areas his vision always included provision for human visitors. 'But if you will go to the midst of these bleached bones of mountains and dwell confidently and waitingly with them, be assured that every death-taint will speedily disappear; the hardest rocks will pulse with life, secrets of divine beauty and love will be revealed to you by lakes, and meadows, and a thousand flowers, and an atmosphere of spirit be felt brooding over all.'

When Muir refers to spirit he is not pointing to anything supernatural. It is not easy to define his conception of the spiritual but perhaps is best considered as a transcendental dimension of the natural. In one of his journals he wrote:

Now all of the individual 'things' or 'beings' into which the world is wrought are sparks of the Divine Soul variously clothed upon with flesh, leaves, or that harder tissue called rock, water, etc.

Now we observe that, in cold mountain altitudes, Spirit is but thinly and plainly clothed. As we descend down their many sides to the valleys, the clothing of all plants and beasts and of the forms of rock becomes more abundant and complicated. When a portion of Spirit clothes itself with a sheet of lichen tissue, colored simply red or yellow, or grey or black, we say that is a low form of life. Yet is it more or less radically Divine than another portion of Spirit that has gathered garments of leaf and fairy flower and adorned them with all the colors of Light, although we say that the latter creature is of a higher form of life? All of these varied forms, high and low, are simply portions of God, radiated from Him as a sun, and made terrestrial by the clothes they wear, and by the modifications of a corresponding kind in the God essence itself. The more extensively terrestrial a being becomes, the higher it ranks among its fellows, and the most terrestrial being is the one that contains all the others, that has, indeed, flowed through all the others and borne away parts of them, building them into itself. Such a being is man, who has flowed down through other forms of being and absorbed and assimilated portions of them into himself, thus becoming a microcosm most richly Divine because most richly terrestrial, just as a river becomes rich by flowing on and on through varied climes and rocks, through many mountains and vales, constantly appropriating portions to itself, rising higher in the scale of rivers as it grows rich in the absorption of the soils and smaller streams.<sup>16</sup>

In this passage Muir is implying that life is a manifestation of spirit and that as spirit is indivisible so also is life, while at the same time, it grows in richness through the evolutionary development of more intricate forms. But Muir also experienced spirit acting through inanimate forms. In a letter to Jeanne Carr written in 1871, just three years after his arrival in the valley, he writes:

Glaciers made the mountains and ground corn for all the flowers, and the forests of silver fir, made smooth the paths for human feet until the sacred Sierras have become the most approachable of mountains. Glaciers came down from heaven, and they were angels with folded wings, white wings of snowy bloom. Locked hand in hand the little spirits did nobly; the primary mountain waves, unvital granite, were soon carved to beauty. They bared the lordly domes and fashioned the clustering spires; smoothed godlike mountain brows, and shaped lake cups for crystal waters ...wove myriads of mazy canyons, and spread them out like lace. They remembered the loudsong rivers and every tinkling rill. The busy snowflakes saw all the coming flowers, and the grand predestined forests. They said, 'We will crack this rock for Cassiope where she may sway her tiny urns. Here we'll smooth a flat for green mosses, and round a bank for bryanthus bells'. Thus laboured the willing flake-souls linked in close congregations of ice, breaking food for the pines, as a bird crumbles bread for her young, spiced with dust of garnets and zircons and many a nameless gem; and when food was gathered for the forests and all their elected life, when every rock form was finished, every monument raised, the willing messengers, unwearied, unwasted, heard God's 'well done' from heaven calling them back to their homes in the sky.<sup>17</sup>

The language may be fanciful – Muir was writing to a good friend – but there is little doubt this passage reflects his fundamental view of all natural things as spiritual as well as material entities. It also clearly implies, albeit in an evolutionary context of deep time, that he believed in some form of divine design at work in nature even though it would seem from the passage that much of the detailed work was, in a real sense, 'delegated' to the labouring flake-souls of the ice.

There can be little doubt that Muir's view of spirit as permeating the whole of the natural world was derived from his own openness to it. Another letter to Jeanne Carr, probably written some time in 1870 during his first full year in Yosemite, is certainly worth quoting in full:

Squirrelville, Sequoia Co. Nut Time

Dear Mrs. Carr.

Do behold the king in his glory, King Sequoia! Behold! Behold! seems all I can say. Some time ago I left all for Sequoia and have been and am at his feet; fasting and praying for light, for is he not the greatest light in the woods, in the world? Where are such columns of sunshine, tangible, accessible, terrestrialised? Well may I fast, not from bread, but from business, book-making, duty-going and other trifles, and great is my reward already for the manly, treely sacrifice. What giant truths since coming to Gigantea, what magnificent clusters of Sequoiac because. From here I cannot recite you one, for you are down a thousand fathoms deep in dark political quagg, not a burr-length less. But I'm in the woods, woods, woods, and they are in me-ee-ee. The King tree and I have sworn eternal love – sworn it without swearing, and I've taken the sacrament with Douglas squirrel, drunk Sequoia wine, Sequoia blood, and with its rosy purple drops I am writing this woody gospel letter.

I never before knew the virtue of Sequoia juice. Seen with sunbeams in it, its colour is the most royal of all royal purples. No wonder the Indians instinctively drink it for they know not what. I wish I were so drunk and Sequoical that I could preach the green brown woods to all the juiceless world, descending from this divine

wilderness like a John the Baptist, eating Douglas squirrels and wild honey or wild anything, crying, Repent, for the Kingdom of Sequoia is at hand!

There is balm in these leafy Gileads – pungent burrs and living King-juice for all defrauded civilization; for sick grangers and politicians; no need of Salt rivers. Sick or successful come suck Sequoia and be saved.

Douglas squirrel is so pervaded with rosin and burr juice his flesh can scarce be eaten even by mountaineers. No wonder he is so charged with magnetism! One of the little lions ran across my feet the other day as I lay resting under a fir, and the effect was a thrill like a battery shock. I would eat him no matter how rosiny for the lightning he holds. I wish I could eat wilder things. Think of the grouse with balsam-scented crop stored with spruce buds, the wild sheep full of glacier meadow grass and daisies azure, and the bear burly and brown as Sequoia, eating pine-burrs and wasps' stings and all; then think of the soft lightningless poultice-like pap reeking upon town tables. No wonder cheeks and legs become flabby and fungoid! I wish I were wilder, and so, bless Sequoia, I will be. There is at least a punky spark in my heart and it may blaze in this autumn gold, fanned by the King. Some of my grandfathers must have been born on a muirland for there is heather in me, and tinctures of bog juices, that send me to Cassiope, and oozing through all my veins impel me unhaltingly through endless glacier meadows, seemingly the deeper and darker the better.

See Sequoia aspiring in the upper skies, every summit modelled in fine cycloidal curves as if pressed into unseen moulds, every bole warm in the amber sun. How truly godful in mien! I was talking the other day with a duchess and was struck with the grand bow with which she bade me goodbye and thanked me for the

glaciers I gave her, but this forenoon King Sequoia bowed to me down in the grove as I stood gazing and the high bred gestures of the lady seemed rude by contrast.

There goes Squirrel Douglas, the master spirit of the tree-top. It has just occurred to me how his belly is buffy brown and his back silver grey. Ever since the first Adam of his race saw trees and burrs, his belly has been rubbing upon buff bark, and his back has been combed with silver needles. Would that some of you wise – terribly wise – social scientists, might discover some method of living as true to nature as the buff people of the woods, running as free as the winds and waters among the burrs and filbert thickets of these leafy, motherly woods.

The sun is set and the star candles are being lighted to show me and Douglas squirrel to bed. Therefore, my Carr, goodnight. You say, ‘When are you coming down?’ Ask the Lord – Lord Sequoia.<sup>18</sup>

The letter epitomises Muir’s relationships with the natural world, achieved through an extended consciousness to include nature within his selfhood. At the same time there is no hint of his merging with nature or losing himself in nature. What there is, is a clear and utterly joyful opening up to nature, an extension of self to embrace the selves of the trees and the squirrels while still retaining an obvious respect for, and delight in, their separateness and individuality. During Muir’s sojourn in Yosemite this extended consciousness became a continuously lived experience to the extent that separation from wilderness would present problems for him in both physical and mental wellbeing for the rest of his life.

Muir’s particular genius was to experience the whole of nature as a harmonious process in which all phenomena play a positive role. He recognised that the destructive powers of earthquake, wild-fire,

storm, flood and avalanche are an integral part of the evolving life of the landscape. They provide opportunities for renewal and, in the long term have to be considered as creative. His reaction to a violent earthquake which occurred while he was living in Yosemite is typical:

Though I had never enjoyed a storm of this sort, the thrilling motion could not be mistaken, I ran out of my cabin, both glad and frightened, shouting, 'A noble earthquake!' feeling sure I was going to learn something. The shocks were so violent and varied, and succeeded one another so closely, that I had to balance myself carefully in walking as if on the deck of a ship among waves, and it seemed impossible that the high cliffs of the valley could escape being shattered.

When the shocks finished Muir was able to examine a newly formed talus while the fragmented rocks were still hot from their long cascade down the side of the valley.

On another occasion he spent several days studying the effects of a forest fire:

Varied beauty of fire effects: fire grazing, nibbling on the door among old close-packed leaves; spinning into thousands of little jets – lamps of pure flame on twigs hung loosely, and taller spurts of flame; big bonfires blazing where heavy branches are smashed in heaps; old prostrate trunks glowing like red-hot bars. Smoke and showers of white huffy ashes from the fire boring out trunks, rills of violet fire running up the furrows swiftly, lighting huge torches flaming overhead two hundred feet, on tops of pillars dried and fractured by lightning strokes. Down below working among arches of roots and burning whole trunks hollow into huge tubes as they stand up, which you may look through as telescopes and see the stars at noon-day. . Smoke fragrant like incense ascending,



browsing on fallen twigs and tiny rosebushes and *Chamaebatia*, flames advancing in long bent lines like a flock of sheep grazing, rushing in a roaring storm of energy like devouring lions, burning with fierce fateful roar and stormy booming; black and lurid smoke surges streaming through the trees, the columns of which look like masts of ships obscured in scud and flying clouds. Height and hollow filled with red surges, billows roaring uphill in ragged-edged flapping cataracts. Every living thing flaming.<sup>19</sup>

One of the most vivid passages in all of Muir's writings relates to a wind storm and is worth quoting at some length:

One of the most beautiful and exhilarating storms I ever enjoyed in the Sierra occurred in December 1874, when I happened to be exploring one of the tributary valleys of the Yuba River. . . Instead of camping out, as I usually do, I then chanced to be stopping at the house of a friend. But when the storm began to sound, I lost no time in pushing out into the woods to enjoy it. For on such occasions Nature has always something rare to show us, and the danger to life and limb is hardly greater than one would experience crouching deprecatingly beneath a roof.

It was still early morning when I found myself fairly adrift. Delicious sunshine came pouring over the hills, lighting the tops of the pines, and setting free a steam of summery fragrance that contrasted strangely with the wild tones of the storm. The air was mottled with pine-tassels and bright green plumes, that went flashing past in the sunlight like birds pursued. But there was not the slightest dustiness, nothing less pure than leaves, and ripe pollen, and flecks of withered bracken and moss. I heard trees falling for hours at the rate of one every two or three minutes; some uprooted, partly on account of the loose, water-soaked condition of

the ground; others broken straight across, where some weakness caused by fire had determined the spot. The gestures of the various trees made a delightful study. Young sugar pines, light and feathery as squirrel-tails, were bowing almost to the ground; while the grand old patriarchs, whose massive boles had been tried in a hundred storms, waved solemnly above them, their long, arching branches streaming fluently on the gale, and every needle thrilling and ringing and shedding off keen lances of light like a diamond. . . . But the silver pines were now the most impressively beautiful of all. Colossal spires 200ft. in height waved like supple goldenrods chanting and bowing low as if in worship, while the whole mass of their long, tremulous foliage was kindled into one continuous blaze of white sun-fire. The force of the gale was such that the most steadfast monarch of them all rocked down to its roots with a motion plainly perceptible when one leaned against it. Nature was holding high festival, and every fibre of the most rigid giants thrilled with glad excitement. . . .

Toward midday, after a long, tingling scramble through copses of hazel and ceanothus, I gained the summit of the highest ridge in the neighbourhood; and then it occurred to me that it would be a fine thing to climb one of the trees to obtain a wider outlook and get my ear close to the Æolian music of its topmost needles. After cautiously casting about, I made choice of the tallest of a group of Douglas spruces that were growing close together like a tuft of grass, no one of which seemed likely to fall unless all the rest fell with it. Though comparatively young, they were about 100ft. high, and their lithe, brushy tops were rocking and swirling in wild ecstasy. Being accustomed to climb trees in making botanical studies, I experienced no difficulty in reaching the top of this one, and never before did I enjoy so noble an exhilaration of motion. The

slender tops fairly flapped and swished in the passionate torrent, bending and swirling backward and forward, round and round, tracing indescribable combinations of vertical and horizontal curves, while I clung with muscles firm braced. . .

In its widest sweeps my tree-top described an arc from twenty to thirty degrees, but I felt sure of its elastic temper, having seen others of the same species still more severely tried – bent almost to the ground indeed, in heavy snows – without breaking a fibre. I was therefore safe, and free to take the wind into my pulses and enjoy the excited forest from my superb outlook. The view from here must be extremely beautiful in any weather. Now my eye roved over the piny hills and dales as over fields of waving grain, and felt the light running in, ripples and broad swelling undulations across the valleys from ridge to ridge, as the shining foliage was stirred by corresponding waves of air. Oftentimes these waves of reflected light would break up suddenly into a kind of beaten foam, and again, after chasing one another in regular order, they would seem to bend forward in concentric curves, and disappear on some hillside, like sea-waves on a shelving shore. The quantity of light reflected from the bent needles was so great as to make whole groves appear as if covered with snow, while the black shadows beneath the trees greatly enhanced the effect of the silvery splendour. . .

I kept my lofty perch for hours, frequently closing my eyes to enjoy the music by itself, or to feast quietly on the delicious fragrance that was streaming past. The fragrance of the woods was less marked than that produced during warm rain, when so many balsamic buds and leaves are steeped like tea; but, from the chafing of resinous branches against each other, and the incessant attrition of myriads of needles, the gale was spiced to a very tonic degree.

And besides the fragrance from these local sources there were traces of scents brought from afar. For this wind came first from the sea, rubbing against its fresh, briny waves, then distilled through the redwoods, threading rich ferny gulches, and spreading itself in broad undulating currents over many a flower-enamelled ridge of the coast mountains, then across the golden plains, up the purple foot-hills, and into these piny woods with the varied incense gathered by the way.<sup>20</sup>

It has been said that trees are imperfect man and seem to bemoan their imprisonment rooted in the ground. But they never seem so to me. I never saw a discontented tree. They grip the ground as though they liked it, and though fast rooted they travel about as far as we do. They go wandering forth in all directions with every wind, going and coming like ourselves, travelling with us around the sun two million miles a day, and through space heaven knows how fast and far!<sup>21</sup>

Muir is not content simply to describe the storm, detailing how trees were felled by the wind and contrasting this with the apparent joy and excitement of the survivors, he also sought to participate in the storm, while keeping within the bounds of prudence, by climbing to the top of a carefully selected tree. There he could feel the effect of the wind on his tree and also 'see' the wind made visible through the changing patterns of tree-wavings over 'the piny hills and dales' around him and through the sounds and smells of the wind in the trees.

In contrast to Muir's detailed analyses of the phenomena of earthquake, storm, flood and fire, a number of commentators have noted that he has very little to say about predation and the other means by which animals eat and destroy each other. He was not himself a hunter and he did not live off the land during his many and prolonged

excursions. Much of the current thinking about interrelationships within and between living creatures was strongly influenced by ideas about the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest; ideas initiated by Thomas Malthus and Herbert Spencer and taken over, albeit reluctantly, by Darwin and incorporated in his theory of evolution by natural selection. It is possible that John Muir simply could not reconcile these ideas with his experientially based intuition of balance and harmony. On the other hand, it is much more likely that he simply did not see predation as a problem. In the essay 'Wild Wool' he writes:

Plants, animals and stars are all kept in place, bridled along appointed ways, with one another, and through the midst of one another – killing and being killed, eating and being eaten, in harmonious proportions and quantities. And it is right that we should thus reciprocally make use of one another, rob, cook and consume, to the utmost of our healthy abilities and desires. . . Wild lambs eat as many wild flowers as they can find or desire, and men and wolves eat the lambs to just the same extent.<sup>22</sup>

John Muir's basic model of the natural world was based on the overarching concept of divine harmony in which 'everything is perfectly clean and pure and full of divine lessons'. It is clear from his many descriptions of scenery and landscape that he did not draw any fundamental distinction between animate and inanimate forms: they are inextricably intertwined, both possess characteristics of 'life' and are imbued with spirit. He also comments, 'There need be no lasting sorrow for the death of any of Nature's creations, because for every death there is always born a corresponding life.' On an even more positive note he wrote in one of his journals, probably for 1875:

The common purity of Nature is something wonderful – how she does so vast a number of different things cleanly without waste or dirt. I have often wondered by what means bears, wild sheep, and

other large animals were so hidden at death as seldom to be visible. One may walk these woods from year to year without even snuffing a single tainted smell. Pollution, defilement, squalor are words that never would have been created had man lived conformably to Nature. Birds, insects, bears die as cleanly and are disposed of as beautifully as flies. The woods are full of dead and dying trees, yet needed for their beauty to complete the beauty of the living. . . How beautiful is all Death!

One would never think of removing a single dead limb or log from these woods were the thing not suggested by man foresters, such is the sense of fitness and completeness. In contemplating some lovely grove, I have wondered how if this dead stump or white mast were removed, would it be bettered. But I never could see room for even such paltry improvement. See the fineness of finish, how each object catches the light. Look at this dead forest, burned – its branches down-curved around the trunks like a white fog or cloud, or overgrown with lichens as if living. There is a dead stump with a woodpecker on it, and alive with mosses and lichens – homes, too, for beetles and ants. And so, when we walk the aisle-like defiles of the woods over ridges, through meadows, and still, cool glens, we find each in perfect beauty, as if God had everywhere done His best in putting it in order that very day.<sup>23</sup>

Michael Cohen comments that a ‘constant attention to concreteness, which was Muir’s single most powerful literary virtue, causes the critic problems when he looks for a theory, philosophical or ecological.’<sup>24</sup> It is certainly true that most of the more illuminating passages of Muir’s writing take the form of narrative descriptions that are almost impossible to summarise. The only way to find out about Muir is to read him. He is by far his own best advocate.

Most of Muir's biographers and commentators have stressed the problems of arriving at any overall assessment of him. He defies classification as scientist, mountaineer, writer, conservationist, philosopher or mystic because he was all of these. He simply did not recognise such distinctions and this is reflected in his writing. He saw and thought and lived in a context of wholes. Through an almost total openness to the natural world as an organic, living, dynamic whole he developed a sensibility that is more than biocentric, it can only be described as cosmocentric in its all-embracing scope, and, as a result of the various cultural and experiential influences that contributed towards making him what he became, his response was articulated in terms of an inextricable blend of science, philosophy, aesthetics and spirituality.

There is only one designation that comes near to describing John Muir: he was a prophet. He could have been referring to himself when he said, 'The mountains are fountains of men as well as of rivers, of glaciers, of fertile soil. The great poets, philosophers, prophets, able men whose thoughts and deeds have moved the world, have come down from the mountains – mountain-dwellers who have grown strong there with the forest trees in Nature's workshops.' In his writing Muir was openly critical of the anthropocentric rationalism and narrow materialism of American civilisation. He recognised, as did Thoreau, Emerson and many of the Romantics that a deep sense of alienation from the natural world coupled with a failure to recognise its spiritual dimension was the root cause of the problem. But, like a true prophet, he was not content with analysis and criticism, he was in a position to propose a solution:

Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.<sup>25</sup>

Through his openness to nature he saw that we are at home in the natural world. As he wrote, with deceptive simplicity, in his journal in the year before he died, 'I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.'<sup>25</sup> He experienced nature as process, 'the world, though made, is yet being made; that this is still the morning of creation' and he saw the divine as actively involved in the making. The world is not 'fallen', it is still being made and is an expression of divine harmony. It is not only the mountains – all things and all creatures are fountains, beginning places, potential sources of creativity.

Above all, John Muir saw the natural world in general and wilderness in particular as fountains of truth and beauty and as a source of lessons for human society. According to Linne Marsh Wolfe:

As he matured, his manuscripts increasingly reveal the substitution of the word "Nature" or "Beauty" for "God" and "the Lord." Indeed, to him they appear to have been synonymous. He had Wordsworth's pantheistic 'sense of animating life in Nature, the dim impersonal personality creating and informing all things.' In a journal he wrote: 'the pines spiring around me higher, higher to the star-flowered sky, are plainly full of God. God in them. They in God . . . Oh, the infinite abundance and universality of Beauty. Beauty is God. What shall we say of God, that we may not say of Beauty!'<sup>26</sup>

He also saw the natural world as a source of lessons for human society. He is constantly contrasting the narrowing constraints of 'civilisation' with the freedom of wildness and the liberating effect of being open to nature:

Our tidal civilizations will ebb and flow, we will continue, heaven only knows how long, to choke our minds in moulds of our own making, and discover discord in Earth's simplest harmonies, but God's creation as a whole is unchangeably pure, unfallable, undepravable.



. . . Every purely natural object is a conductor of divinity, and we have but to expose ourselves in a clean condition to any of these conductors, to be fed and nourished by them. Only in this way can we procure our daily spiritual bread.

In spite of Muir's 'constant attention to concreteness' he also clearly believed in a divine plan for the world in the form of fundamental laws governing an evolutionary dynamic manifest as complex and subtle harmonies in nature, involving life and death, building and breaking. In an interview late in his life Muir said, 'somewhere before evolution was, was an Intelligence. You may call that intelligence what you please; I cannot see why so many people object to call it God.' At the same time, Muir saw God intimately involved in concreteness. His belief can probably best be described as a form of pantheism: a belief that visualises the divine as immanent in the whole of creation but also transcendent. There is an asymmetry in the relationship between God and creation in that the created order is wholly dependent on God but God is not wholly dependent on creation. Pantheism is a complex belief depending on precisely how the immanence of the divine is regarded, either as spirit permeating the whole of creation or, at the other extreme, creation may be visualised as a material manifestation of the divine and regarded in a sense as the Body of God. John Muir would seem to be close to the latter end of the pantheist spectrum.

Max Oelschlaeger claims that, 'Posterity has treated John Muir well, for the richness of his intellectual and institutional legacy continues to grow.' His reputation as a pioneer conservationist and as an effective campaigner for the preservation of wilderness is secure. His contribution to ecological philosophy and spirituality is also substantial but is as yet not fully appreciated. As Oelschlaeger also says, 'he is best understood as one of that rare breed whose life unifies theory and praxis.'<sup>27</sup> Nowhere in his writings does he attempt a clear and comprehensive presentation of his views. These have to be sought, bit

by bit, in his books and particularly in his letters and journals. The process is richly rewarding. Although not always acknowledged, many of Muir's ideas are re-emerging and being given new life in the modern ecological movement. His critique of anthropocentrism is echoed in many recent studies and his vision of the implications of an evolutionary universe was well ahead of its time. But above all, he speaks to us today most clearly and insistently in his call to experience the natural world in its wildness, both as a source of spiritual enlightenment and as nurturing a true sense of belonging to the earth, with all that this implies for the structuring of human society and for our individual life styles. But we have to let John Muir have the last word on the harvests of healing and wisdom available to all of us:

And thus we find in the fields of Nature no place that is blank or barren; every spot on land or sea is covered with harvests, and these harvests are always ripe and ready to be gathered, and no toiler is ever underpaid. Not in these fields, God's wilds, will you ever hear the sad moan of disappointment, 'All is vanity'. No, we are overpaid a thousand times for all our toil, and a single day in so divine an atmosphere of beauty and love would be well worth living for, and at its close, should death come, without any hope of another life, we could still say, 'Thank you, God, for the glorious gift!' and pass on. Indeed, some of the days I have spent alone in the depths of the wilderness have shown me that immortal life beyond the grave is not essential to perfect happiness, for these diverse days were so complete there was no sense of time in them, they had no definite beginning or ending, and formed a kind of terrestrial immortality. After days like these we are ready for any fate – pain, grief, death or oblivion – with grateful heart for the glorious gift as long as hearts shall endure. In the meantime, our indebtedness is growing ever more. The sun shines and the stars, and new beauty meets us at every step in all our wanderings.<sup>28</sup>

## VII

### CONCLUSIONS

#### The Green Mantle of Romanticism

In one of the clearest foundational statements of the Renaissance, Pico della Mirandola in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486) put these words into the mouth of God:

Neither an established place, nor a form belonging to you alone, nor any special function have We given to you, O Adam, and for this reason, that you may have and possess, according to your desire and judgement, whatever place, whatever form, and whatever function you shall desire. The nature of other creatures, which has been determined, is confined within bounds prescribed by Us. You, who are confined by no limits, shall determine for yourself your own nature, in accordance with your own free will. . .<sup>1</sup>

Pico's words were prophetic, within a decade Columbus reached America, Vasco Da Gama reached India and Copernicus started the astronomical observations that would lead ultimately to the overthrow of medieval cosmology. Pico's world did seem to become limitless and his clarion call has echoed down the centuries. A modern version of Pico's statement can be found in H.G. Wells' *The Shape of Things to Come* in which the hero of the story declaims:

For mankind [there can be] no rest and no ending, he must go on – conquest beyond conquest – first this little planet and its winds

and waves, and then all the laws of mind and matter that restrain him, and then the planets above him – and at last out across the immensities of space to the stars; and when he has conquered all the deeps of space and all the mysteries of time, he will still be beginning. . . All the Universe or nothing – which shall it be, which shall it be?<sup>2</sup>

Pico's divine remit has been translated into the right of conquest: to an inexorable and never ending struggle against the apparent constraints of the natural world. Both statements see humanity as opposed to and effectively transcending the rest of nature through the gift of freedom – visualised as unique to humankind – while the rest of nature is confined within prescribed bounds. These bounds, attributed by Pico to divine ordinance, became, in the hands of Descartes and Newton, intrinsic properties of the material universe.

From its very beginnings, there is a clear stream of Romantic writing that presented an almost diametrically opposite view and which reached its apogee in the authors considered in this study. Coleridge opened his 'France: an Ode', with a complete stanza about nature (see p.12). Only in the second stanza did he introduce the subject of his poem:

When France in wrath her giant limbs upreared,  
And with that oath which smote earth, air, and sea,  
Stamped her strong foot and said she would be free. . . <sup>3</sup>

The poet sees the quality of freedom residing in natural phenomena. Nature is acknowledged as the model which humans should follow. It is a feature of much of Romantic writing that nature is put first; people and their thoughts and activities come second. This is clearly no mere literary artifice, it represents a particular view of the relationship between humanity and the rest of the natural world.

There is a clear realisation that the presence of the rest of nature is necessary to all human endeavour and this needs to be constantly acknowledged and given pride of place.

The role of the 'nature prologue' is varied and complex. Sometimes it is simply there to set the scene. Wordsworth's *The Excursion* is a good example.

'Twas summer, and the sun had mounted high:  
Southward the landscape indistinctly glared  
Through a pale steam; but all the northern downs,  
In clearest air ascending, showed far off  
A surface dappled o'er with shadows flung  
From brooding clouds; shadows that lay in spots  
Determined and unmoved, with steady beams  
Of bright and pleasant sunshine interposed;

We are told about the season, the time of day, the weather and the general features of the landscape. Then we focus on the poet:

Across a bare wide Common I was toiling  
With languid steps that by the slippery turf  
Were baffled; nor could my weak arm disperse  
The host of insects gathering round my face,  
And ever with me as I paced along.<sup>4</sup>

Anybody with any experience of the countryside would have no difficulty in visualising the scene in its totality as the poet makes his laborious way to meet the Wanderer and hear his tale. The narrative is set in open rolling heathland, it is a calm day and it has just stopped raining. Wordsworth clearly saw this evocative description of landscape and season as providing an essential context for the subsequent reflections. Humans live within the natural world, it is essential to our existence. We cannot transcend the constraints imposed by nature because we are part of it.

There is a common misconception of the Romantic view of nature that it focussed on the beautiful and picturesque, the host of dancing daffodils, and ignored the apparent dark side, the violence, death and decay. If anything it was the followers of the Enlightenment who did their best to create gardens, parks and landscapes from which the dark side of nature was banished. It is clear that the authors included in this study acknowledged the dark side; they gloried in the wildness of nature and saw in it a fountain of freedom and a source of liberation from the prevailing and stultifying insistence on strict rationalism.

There is more here than 'the Book of Nature' as an external source from which humans can learn about themselves and the quality of reality. Putting nature first is a recognition of the concept of human participation and existence within the natural world as home and habitat, as the context within which problems arise and aspirations must be defined.

For Galileo the Book of Nature was written in the language of mathematics, it is an account of the laws of nature. For the Romantic it is written in the language of earth, air, fire and water. Reading it is a process of personal experience gained from physical encounters with the natural world, and such encounters are frequently challenging: Wordsworth rowing his boat on Ullswater or baffled by the slippery turf, Thoreau clambering on the rocks of Mount Ktaadin, Muir clinging to his treetop in a storm. The physical element is a necessary and essential part of the total experience. This is reflected particularly in the writings of John Muir: time and again he emphasises the physical aspects of his experiences. His hermit-like existence in a cabin in the Yosemite valley was not one of isolation from the human world but of opening himself up to the natural world, to its dark side as well to its beauties, and the realisation that he is part of the story of the universe.

The effects of such experiences can be profound, even life-transforming. The American ecotheologian and cultural historian, Thomas Berry tells of a childhood encounter with a meadow. His family moved into a new house on the edge of town:

The house, not yet finished, was situated on a slight incline. Down below was a small creek and there across the creek was a meadow. It was an early afternoon in late May when I first wandered down the incline, crossed the creek, and looked out over the scene.

The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember. It was not only the lilies. It was the singing of the crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in a clear sky. It was not something conscious that happened just then. I went on about my life as any young person might do.

Perhaps it was not simply this moment that made such a deep impression upon me. Perhaps it was a sensitivity that was developed throughout my childhood. Yet as the years pass this moment returns to me, and whenever I think about my basic life attitude and the whole trend of my mind and the causes to which I have given my efforts, I seem to come back to this moment and the impact it has had on my feeling for what is real and worthwhile in life.

This early experience, it seems, has become normative for me throughout the entire range of my thinking. Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; whatever opposes this meadow or negates it is not good. My life orientation is that simple. It is also that pervasive. It applies in economics and political orientation as well as in education and religion.<sup>5</sup>

Encounters with nature are specific events, they take place at particular places and times. They can be fleeting moments, the swooping dive of a sparrow-hawk or the alighting of a butterfly, or they can reflect the apparent permanence of nature, a granite mountain or an aged yew tree. They are, of necessity, intensely personal. Whatever the form of such encounters, they contribute towards our complex and profound feelings for particular places or more generally for the totality of the natural world. When John Muir wrote, 'going out I found was really going in', he was acknowledging that he existed within the natural world and the very essence of his humanity was derived from it.

It can be argued that accepting humanity as existing totally within the natural world is to see it as diminished and constrained. Human abilities have evolved beyond the point of meeting the bare needs of survival and the human imagination recognises no limits to its activities. As Loren Eiseley puts it, 'in this ability to take on the shape of his own dreams, man extends beyond visible nature into another and stranger realm.'<sup>6</sup> The significance of human achievements in this stranger realm cannot be doubted, much of human culture and what we see as progress is based on attempts to translate such dreams into reality. The Romantic vision also contains dreams of the stranger realm but they are always interpreted in terms of the paradox that true creativity is only possible within the constraints of a specific context and for the human that context is the natural world. If this context is visualised in terms of a strictly mechanistic system then it certainly does constitute an unacceptable limit to human aspirations. The Romantic vision, however, is of a natural world that is constantly beckoning us onwards and is a continual challenge to human creativity. The natural world is magnificent beyond our imagining, it is terrifying and exhilarating, beautiful and appalling, triumphant and tragic. It is wild and free.



There is also in the Romantic vision a clear recognition that the spiritual domain extends beyond the human and embraces the whole of existence. Basil Willey suggests that, 'Ever since the Renaissance the Creation had been steadily gaining in prestige as "the art of God"... The emotion of the "numinous", formerly associated with supernature, had become attached to Nature itself; and by the end of the eighteenth century the divinity, the sacredness of nature was, to those affected by this tradition, almost a first datum of consciousness.'<sup>7</sup> The key English-speaking figures in this process were the naturalists John Ray (1628-1705) and Gilbert White (1720-1793) and the theologian William Paley (1743-1805). They represent two contrasting strands of thinking about nature. Ray and Paley continued and greatly extended the pre-Renaissance concept of the study of Nature as a means of learning about God. They saw the phenomena of nature primarily as manifestations of the wisdom and ingenuity of God. In contrast, Gilbert White wished to draw attention to 'the wonders of Creation' in their own right, and his method was patient and careful observation in the field as opposed to the taxonomist's laboratory or the dissecting room.

Emerson echoes Paley's natural theology but extends it to effectively claim the priority of nature over scripture as a source of revelation. In his essay 'Nature' (1849) he writes, 'the noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God. It is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual and strives to lead the individual to it.'<sup>8</sup>

Thoreau's spirituality was coloured by his opposition to traditional Christianity and what he saw as its antagonism to the natural world. He withdrew from the church at an early age. Of all the writers considered in this study Thoreau was perhaps the closest to being a pantheist and he looked for inspiration to religions which honoured the natural world. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* he

wrote, 'In my Pantheon, Pan still reigns in his pristine glory, with his ruddy face, his flowing beard, and his shaggy body, his pipe and his crook, ... for the great god Pan is not dead, as was rumoured. No god ever dies. Perhaps of all the gods of New England and of ancient Greece, I am most constant at his shrine'.<sup>9</sup>

John Muir combines elements of both Emerson and Thoreau. While he rejected Emerson's anthropocentrism and Thoreau's pantheism, he saw the rest of the natural world existing by and for itself and also as a source of revelation about God. Muir, with others of his time, faced the task of trying to reconcile the role of God as creator with the then new ideas of an evolving Earth. For many this posed an almost insuperable problem. John Ruskin is quoted as telling a good friend, '[My faith] which was never strong, is being beaten into mere gold leaf. . . . If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses.'<sup>10</sup> For Muir, the geologist, living in the midst of what he saw as an evolved and evolving landscape, there was no doubt about evolution. He also had no doubts about God and in his parable of the glaciers (see p. 101) he conveys something of his thoughts about the relationship between Creation and Creator. In particular, and ahead of his time, Muir recognised the Earth as process, 'the world, though made, is yet being made; that this is still the morning of creation'. Also ahead of his time, he recognised the significance of the fact that humans are newcomers on the Earth. This is essentially a matter of perspective. The larger the time-scale – and the sense of infinite space – the smaller the human species seems to be. The logical conclusion of this would be the total disappearance (both subjective and historical) of human consciousness and of the meaning which includes our perception of transcendence. This end-point is exemplified by the loss of mind which blighted the last

ten years of Ruskin's life. The great Romantics, particularly Coleridge, Shelley, Wordsworth and Thoreau had each in their different ways been to this point and survived the challenge. Like them, Muir found in Nature abundant affirmation beyond the willed processing systems of the rational mind (though not necessarily opposed to them). In this way, Muir takes his place as a vital figure in the ongoing stream of Romantic spirituality.

There is a clear trend in the modern environmental movement to seek for suppressed or neglected traditions as guides and sources of wisdom in our confused age. In this context we would like to suggest that the time has come for a resurrection and reassessment of the best of Romanticism. In this contribution we have identified a number of features of Romantic thinking which we believe are very relevant to the problems we face today.

The most significant of these is the emphasis on the human as existing totally within the natural world, and not as above or opposed to it. This is manifest in many ways in Romantic thinking but most clearly in the practice of setting human activity firmly in the context of nature.

Secondly, while evolutionary theories were very much the product of the Enlightenment it was the Romantics who achieved the more profound insight into their significance. Although originally inspired by the Romantic naturalist Alexander von Humbolt, Darwin's interpretation of evolutionary processes in terms of struggle and competition led him towards a more mechanistic view of the natural world. In the context of the Romantic vision of an integrated and organic Nature, evolutionary processes were readily incorporated into this vision as giving Nature a dynamic and inherently creative aspect.

Finally, humans have established a position in the natural world within which we like to think we can survive. We would like the rest of nature to conform to our anthropocentric view of how the world should be. The Romantic emphasis on experience of physical encounter with the natural world can provide a deeper understanding of it as it really is, existing in its own right and having its own ways.

## Notes

### I Introduction

1. Richard Tarnas. *The Passion of the Western Mind*, p. 366.
2. Max Oelschlaeger. *The Idea of Wilderness*, 1991.
3. *The Guardian*. 29/1/99
4. Charles Lamb, quoted by Richard Holmes. Coleridge, *Early Visions*, p. 331.
5. Isaiah Berlin. *The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 145.6.
6. Thomas Henry Huxley. *The Genealogy of Animals*.
7. Jonathan Bate. *The Song of the Earth*, p. 282.
8. Alfred North Whitehead. *Science and the Modern World*, p. 103.
9. For those readers who feel that our treatment of Thoreau is too brief, see, Donald Worster. *Nature's Economy*, pp. 57-98.

### II Coleridge

Abbreviations:

- B.L. Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Biographia Literaria* (Dent, Everyman Library, 1965).
1. Quoted by Stephen Gill. *Wordsworth, A Life*, p. 186.
  2. Richard Holmes. *Coleridge, Darker Reflections*, p. 100.
  3. Matthew Fox. *Original Blessing*, pp. 36-39.
  4. The happier life of Coleridge's other surviving son, Derwent Coleridge, is explored in Raymonde and Godfrey Hainton's excellent book, *The Unknown Coleridge*.
  5. Coleridge's excess of exclamation marks is, it must be said, a bit of an embarrassment!
  6. Michael Cohen. *The Pathless Way, John Muir and American Wilderness*, pp. 25-26
  7. *Ibid.* p. 26.
  8. Roderick Nash. *Wilderness and the American Mind*, *passim*.

9. For instance, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart
10. Richard Holmes. *Coleridge, Early Visions*, p. 173.
11. See for instance, Edward Bostetter. 'The Nightmare World of The Ancient Mariner', in Kathleen Coburn, pp. 65-77.
12. Michael Cohen. *The Pathless Way*, p.24
13. Southey, quoted by Richard Holmes, *Coleridge, Early Visions*, p. 200.
14. Wordsworth, quoted by Richard Holmes, *op cit.* p. 285.
15. R.H. Tawney. *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, p. 228.
16. Richard Holmes. *Coleridge, Early Visions*, p. 322.
17. *Ibid.* pp. 326-7.
18. *Ibid.* p. 18
19. J.H. Muirhead. *Coleridge as Philosopher*, p. 35.
20. *Observations on Man*, Proposition 89, p. 371.
21. *Coleridge's Collected Letters*, I, p. 137. Quoted by Theodore L. Huguelet in his Introduction to *Observations on Man*, p. xiv.
22. B.L. p. 79.
23. P.P. Howe. *William Hazlitt*, p.53.
24. *Ibid.* p. 53.
25. Max Oelschlaeger. *The Idea of Wilderness*, p. 113.
26. B.L. p. 115.
27. J.H. Muirhead. *Coleridge as Philosopher*, p. 75.
28. *Ibid* p. 76.
29. B.L.. p. 167.
30. B.L. p. 111.
31. B.L. p. 80.
32. B.L.. p. 83.
33. B.L.. p. 155.

34. B.L.. p. 74.
35. Nicholas Berdyaev in his introduction to Boehme's *Six Theosophic Points and Other Writings*, p. vii.
36. Nicholas Berdyaev. op. cit. p. viii.
37. Quoted by Raimondo Modiano in *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature*, p. 161.
38. Op. cit. p. 162.
39. G.M.Hopkins. *Poems*, p. 194.
40. B.L.. p. 86.
41. Quoted by J.H. Muirhead. *Coleridge as Philosopher*, p. 118.
42. McFarland. *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition*, p. 107.

### **III Wordsworth**

1. A.N. Whitehead. *Science and the Modern World*, p. 94.
2. Stephen Gill. *William Wordsworth: A Life*, p. 28.
3. Geoffrey Durrant. *Wordsworth and the Great System*. p. 3.
4. Paul de Man (1960) quoted by Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, p. 7.
5. Jonathan Bate. op. cit. p. 8.
6. John Stuart Mill. *Autobiography*, p. 125.
7. Linnie Marsh Wolfe (Ed.). *John of the Mountains*, p.222.
8. Aldous Huxley. 'More Nature in Art', *The Human Situation* (1959).
9. Aldous Huxley. 'Wordsworth in the Tropics', *Do What you Will* (1929).

### **IV Shelley**

1. A.N. Whitehead. *Science and the Modern World*, p. 105.
2. Graham Hough. *The Romantic Poets*, p. 138.
3. Ann Wroe. *Being Shelley*, p. 300
4. Thomas Love Peacock. *Memoirs of Shelley*, ed. H.F.B. Brett-Smith, p. 74.

5. P.B. Shelley. *Defence of Poetry*, ed. H.F.B. Brett-Smith 1953, p. 23
6. F.R. Leavis. 'Shelley' in *English Romantic Poets*, pp. 345-365
7. Ann Wroe, op. cit. p. 285

## V Emerson & Thoreau

1. Richard Porior (Ed.). *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 3.
2. Ibid. p. 240.
3. Ibid. p. 6.
4. Ibid. p. 36.
5. Thoreau. *Maine Woods*, paragraphs 70-77, extracts.
6. Thoreau. *Walden*, p.80.
7. Thomas Berry. *The Great Work*, p. 50.
8. Thoreau. *Walden*. p. 281.

## VI John Muir

Abbreviations:

W-DB: Terry Gifford (Ed.) John Muir. *The Eight Wilderness-Discovery Books*.

L&L: Terry Gifford (Ed.) *John Muir. His Life and Letters and Other Writings*.

JoM: Linnie Marsh Wolfe (Ed.) *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*.

1. Frederick Turner. *John Muir, From Scotland to the Sierra*, pp. xv-xvi.
2. Alexander von Humbolt (1769-1859), German naturalist and explorer. His major work, published between 1805 and 1834 was an account of his travels in South America. It was his intention, 'to find out how nature's forces act upon one another, and in what manner the geographic environment exerts its influence on animals and plants. In short, I must find out about the harmony of nature.' Under the influence of Goethe, he conceived the cosmos to 'as one great animated breath of life'. 'An analysis of Muir's philosophy of nature in its grasp of cosmic unity amid the complex-



ity of phenomena reveals a close affinity with that of Humboldt'.  
(Linne Marsh Wolfe. *Son of the Wilderness*. p. 82)

3. L&L. pp. 389-508.
4. JoM. p. 215.
5. L&L. pp. 681-696.
6. L&L. pp. 708-851.
7. L&L. p. 278.
8. L&L. p. 376.
9. L&L. pp. 70-71.
10. See, for example, Linne Marsh Wolfe. *Son of the Wilderness*, pp. 11. 96-99.
11. W-DB. pp139-140
12. W-DB. pp. 160-161.
13. Lynn White. 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis',  
*Science*, 155 (1967) pp. 1203-1207.
14. W-DB. p. 248.
15. Jonathan Bate. *The Song of the Earth*, p. 151.
16. JoM. pp. 137-8.
17. L&L. pp. 138-139.
18. L&L. pp. 139-141.
19. JoM. p. 230.
20. W-DB. pp. 398-401.
21. JoM. p. 313.
22. W-DB. p.874.
23. JoM. p. 222.
24. Michael Cohen. *The Pathless Way*. . . , p.147.
25. W-DB. p. 481.
26. JoM. p. 439.

27. Linne Marsh Wolfe. *Son of the Wilderness*, p. 267.

28. Max Oelschlaeger. *The Idea of Wilderness*, p. 172.

29. JoM. p. 301.

## **VII Conclusions**

1. Quoted in Richard Tarnas. *The Passion of the Western Mind*, pp. 214-215.

2. H.G. Wells. *The Science Fiction*.

3. Duncan Wu (Ed.). *Romanticism, an Anthology*, p. 518.

4. William Wordsworth. *The Excursion*.

5. Thomas Berry. *The Great Work*, pp. 12-13.

6. Loren Eiseley. *The Unexpected Universe*, p. 182.

7. Basil Willey. 'On Wordsworth and the Locke Tradition.' In M H Abrams (Ed.), p. 121.

8. Richard Porior (Ed.). *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 29.

9. Thoreau. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, p.94.

10. Quoted in A. N. Wilson. *God's Funeral*, p. 266.

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[http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/stc/Coleridge/poems/poems\\_links.html](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/stc/Coleridge/poems/poems_links.html)

Wordsworth, complete poetical works:

<http://www.bartleby.com/145/index.html>

Shelley, complete poetical works:

<http://www.bartleby.com/139/index.html>

Emerson, a good selection of his writing:  
<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/books/authors.html>  
and search for Emerson Ralph Waldo.

Thoreau, a good selection of his writings:  
<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/books/authors.html>  
and search for Thoreau Henry David.

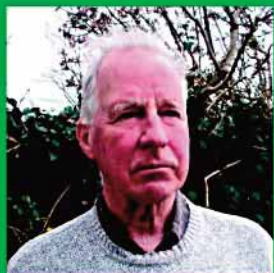
Muir, a collection of his writings, including the texts of his books:  
[http://www.sierraclub/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/writings/](http://www.sierraclub/john_muir_exhibit/writings/)

The poets and other writers who became labelled as Romantics based their ideas and their creative work on an intense I-thou relationship with Nature. From this experience they derived revelation and wisdom. The authors of this book, one a scientist and the other with a literary background, look at the organic interpretation of nature, at the emerging ideas about deep time and evolution and the status of human subjectivity, as they appear in the work of some major Romantic writers, including Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Emerson, Thoreau and John Muir. We believe that their ideas are relevant today.



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**Christine Avery** was born in Plymouth, between Dartmoor and the sea, and from childhood onwards has experienced nature as the prime source of beauty, meaning and joy. During her education, at school and while reading English at Somerville College, Oxford, the Romantic poets were of central interest to her. She is a feminist, a



introduced to the life and work of John Muir during a sabbatical spent in Southern California.

**Michael Colebrook's** fascination with the natural world was stimulated by long hours spent gazing into a small stream that ran across the bottom of the family garden. After training in zoology his interest in the Romantics was aroused by two years spent living on the shores of Windermere while engaged in research on the plankton of the