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Ideas of Nature

One touch of nature may make the whole world kin, but usually, when we say nature, do we mean to include ourselves? I know some people would say that the other kind of nature—trees, hills, brooks, animals—has a kindly effect. But I've noticed that they then often contrast it with the world of humans and their relationships.

I begin from this ordinary problem of meaning and reference because I want this inquiry to be active, and because I intend an emphasis when I say that the idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history. Like some other fundamental ideas which express mankind's vision of itself and its place in the world, 'nature' has a nominal continuity, over many centuries, but can be seen, in analysis, to be both complicated and changing, as other ideas and experiences change. I've previously attempted to analyse some comparable ideas, critically and historically. Among them were culture, society, individual, class, art, tragedy. But I'd better say at the outset that, difficult as all those ideas are, the idea of nature makes them seem comparatively simple. It has been central, over a very long period, to many different kinds of thought. Moreover it has some quite radical difficulties at the very first stages of its expression: difficulties which seem to me to persist.

Some people, when they see a word, think the first thing to do is to define it. Dictionaries are produced, and, with a show of authority no less confident because it is usually so limited in place and time, what is called a proper meaning is attached. But while it may be possible to do this, more or less satisfactorily, with certain simple names of things and effects, it is not only impossible but irrelevant in the case of more complicated ideas. What matters in them is not the proper meaning but the history and complexity of meanings: the conscious changes, or consciously

different uses: and just as often those changes and differences which, masked by a nominal continuity, come to express radically different and often at first unnoticed changes in experience and history. I'd then better say at once that any reasonably complete analysis of these changes in the idea of nature would be very far beyond the scope of a lecture, but I want to try to indicate some of the main points, the general outlines, of such an analysis, and to see what effects these may have on some of our contemporary arguments and concerns.

The central point of the analysis can be expressed at once in the singular formation of the term. As I understand it, we have here a case of a definition of quality which becomes, through real usage, based on certain assumptions, a description of the world. Some of the early linguistic history is difficult to interpret, but we still have, as in the very early uses, these two very different bearings. I can perhaps illustrate them from a well-known passage in Burke:

In a state of *rude* nature there is no such thing as a people. . . . The idea of a people is the idea of a corporation. It is wholly artificial; and made, like all other legal fictions, by common agreement. What the particular nature of that agreement was, is collected from the form into which the particular society has been cast.

Perhaps *rude*, there, makes some slight difference, but what is most striking is the coexistence of that common idea, *a state of nature*, with the almost unnoticed because so habitual use of *nature* to indicate the inherent quality of the agreement. That sense of nature as the inherent and essential quality of any particular thing is, of course, much more than accidental. Indeed there is evidence that it is historically the earliest use. In Latin one would have said *natura rerum*, keeping nature to the essential quality and adding the definition of things. But then also in Latin *natura* came to be used on its own, to express the same general meaning: the essential constitution of the world. Many of the earliest speculations about nature seem to have been in this sense physical, but with the underlying assumption that in the course of the physical inquiries one was discovering the essential, inherent and indeed immutable laws of the world. The association and then the fusion of a name for the quality with a name for the things observed has a precise history. It is a central formation of idealist thought. What was being looked for in nature was an essential principle. The multiplicity of things, and of living processes, might then be mentally organized around a single essence or principle: a nature.

Now I would not want to deny, I would prefer to emphasize, that this singular abstraction was a major advance in consciousness. But I think we have got so used to it, in a nominal continuity over more than two millennia, that we may not always realize quite all that it commits us to. A singular name for the real multiplicity of things and living processes may be held, with an effort, to be neutral, but I am sure it is very often the case that it offers, from the beginning, a dominant kind of interpretation: idealist, metaphysical, or religious. And I think this is especially apparent if we look at its subsequent history. From many early cultures we have records of what we would now call nature spirits or nature gods: beings believed to embody or direct the wind or the sea or the forest or the moon. Under the weight of Christian interpretation we are accustomed to calling these gods or spirits pagan: diverse and variable manifestations before the revelation of the one true God. But just as in religion the moment of monotheism is a critical development, so, in human responses to the physical world, is the moment of a singular Nature.

Singular, Abstracted and Personified

When Nature herself, as people learnt to say, became a goddess, a divine Mother, we had something very different from the spirits of wind and sea and forest and moon. And it is all the more striking that this singular abstracted and often personified principle, based on responses to the physical world, had of course (if the expression may be allowed) a competitor, in the singular, abstracted and personified religious being: the monotheistic God. The history of that interaction is immense. In the orthodox western medieval world a general formula was arrived at, which preserved the singularity of both: God is the first absolute, but Nature is His minister and deputy. As in many other treaties, this relationship went on being controversial. There was a long argument, preceding the revival of systematic physical inquiry—what we would now call science—as to the propriety and then the mode of this inquiry into a minister, with the obvious question of whether the ultimate sovereignty was being infringed or shown insufficient respect. It is an old argument now, but it is interesting that when it was revived in the nineteenth century, in the arguments about evolution, even men who were prepared to dispense with the first singular principle—to dispense with the idea of God—usually retained and even emphasized that other and very comparable

principle: the singular and abstracted, indeed still often and in some new ways personified, Nature.

Perhaps this does not puzzle others as much as it puzzles me. But I might mention at this stage one of its evident practical effects. In some serious argument, but even more in popular controversy and in various kinds of contemporary rhetoric, we continually come across propositions of the form 'Nature is...', or 'Nature shows...', or 'Nature teaches...'. And what is usually apparent about what is then said is that it is selective, according to the speaker's general purpose. 'Nature is...'—what? Red in tooth and claw; a ruthlessly competitive struggle for existence; an extraordinary interlocking system of mutual advantage; a paradigm of interdependence and cooperation.

And 'Nature is' any one of these things according to the processes we select: the food-chain, dramatized as the shark or the tiger; the jungle of plants competing for space and light and air; or the pollinator—the bee and the butterfly—or the symbiote and the parasite; even the scavenger, the population controller, the regulator of food supplies. In what is now seen so often as the physical crisis of our world many of us follow, with close attention, the latest reports from those who are observing and qualified to observe these particular processes and effects, these creatures and things and acts and consequences. And I am prepared to believe that one or other of the consequent generalizations may be more true than the rest, may be a better way of looking at the processes in which we also are involved and on which we can be said to depend. But I am bound to say I would feel in closer touch with the real situation if the observations, made with great skill and precision, were not so speedily gathered—I mean, of course, at the level of necessary generalization—into singular statements of essential, inherent and immutable characteristics; into principles of a singular nature. I have no competence to speak directly of any of these processes, but to put it as common experience: when I hear that nature is a ruthless competitive struggle I remember the butterfly, and when I hear that it is a system of ultimate mutual advantage I remember the cyclone. Intellectual armies may charge each other repeatedly with this or that selected example; but my own inclination is to ponder the effects of the idea they share: that of a singular and essential nature, with consistent and reconcilable laws. Indeed I find myself reflecting at this point on the full meaning of what I began by saying: that the idea of nature contains an extraordinary amount of human history. What is often being argued, it

seems to me, in the idea of nature is the idea of man; and this not only generally, or in ultimate ways, but the idea of man in society, indeed the ideas of kinds of societies.

For the fact that nature was made singular and abstract, and was personified, has at least this convenience: that it allows us to look, with unusual clarity, at some quite fundamental interpretations of all our experience. Nature may indeed be a single thing or a force or a principle, but then what these are has a real history. I have already mentioned Nature the minister of God. To know Nature was to know God, although there was radical controversy about the means of knowing: whether by faith, by speculation, by right reason, or by physical inquiry and experiment. But Nature the minister or deputy was preceded and has been widely succeeded by Nature the absolute monarch. This is characteristic of certain phases of fatalism, in many cultures and periods. It is not that Nature is unknowable: as subjects we know our monarch. But his powers are so great, and their exercise at times so apparently capricious, that we make no pretensions to control. On the contrary we confine ourselves to various forms of petition or appeasement: the prayer against storm or for rain; the superstitious handling or abstention from handling of this or that object; the sacrifice for fertility or the planting of parsley on Good Friday. As so often, there is an indeterminate area between this absolute monarch and the more manageable notion of God's minister. An uncertainty of purpose is as evident in the personified Nature as in the personified God: is he provident or indifferent, settled or capricious? Everyone says that in the medieval world there was a conception of order which reached through every part of the universe, from the highest to the lowest: a divine order, of which the laws of nature were the practical expression. Certainly this was often believed and perhaps even more often taught. In Henry Medwall's play *Nature* or in Rastell's *The Four Elements*, Nature instructs man in his duties, under the eye of God; he can find his own nature and place from the instructions of nature. But in plague or famine, in what can be conveniently called not natural laws but natural catastrophes, the very different figure of the absolute and capricious monarch can be seen appearing, and the form of the struggle between a jealous God and a just God is very reminiscent of the struggle in men's minds between the real experiences of a provident and a destructive 'nature'. Many scholars believe that this conception of a natural order lasted into and dominated the Elizabethan and early Jacobean

personifications, but this new emphasis, that nature itself had a history, and so might be seen as an historical, perhaps the historical force, was another major moment in the development of ideas.

It is already evident, if we look at only some of the great personifications or quasi-personifications, that the question of what is covered by nature, what it is held to include, is critical. There can be shifts of interest between the physical and the organic world, and indeed the distinction between these is one of the forms of the shaping inquiry. But the most critical question, in this matter of scope, was whether nature included man. It was, after all, a main factor in the evolution controversy: whether man could be properly seen in terms of strictly natural processes; whether he could be described, for example, in the same terms as animals. Though it now takes different forms, I think this question remains critical, and this is so for discoverable reasons in the history of the idea.

In the orthodox medieval concept of nature, man was, of course, included. The order of nature, which expressed God's creation, included, as a central element, the notion of hierarchy: man had a precise place in the order of creation, even though he was constituted from the universal elements which constituted nature as a whole. Moreover, this inclusion was not merely passive. The idea of a place in the order implied a destiny. The constitution of nature declared its purpose. By knowing the whole world, beginning with the four elements, man would come to know his own important place in it, and the definition of this importance was in discovering his relation to God.

Yet there is all the difference in the world between an idealist notion of a fixed nature, embodying permanent laws, and the same apparent notion with the idea of a future, a destiny, as the most fundamental law of them all. The latter, to put it mildly, is less likely to encourage physical enquiry as a priority; the purpose of the laws, and hence their nature, is already known: that is to say, assumed. And it is then not surprising that it is the bad angel who says, in Marlowe:

Go forward, Faustus, in that famous art
Wherein all Nature's treasure is contained.

What was worrying, obviously, was that in his dealings with nature man might see himself as

Lord and Commander of these elements.

It was a real and prolonged difficulty:

Nature that framed us of four elements
Warring within our breasts for regiment
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds.

But though this might be so, aspiration was ambiguous: either to aspire to know the order of nature, or to know how to intervene in it, become its commander; or, putting it another way, whether to learn one's important place in the order of nature, or learn how to surpass it. It can seem an unreal argument. For many millennia men had been intervening, had been learning to control. From the beginning of farming and the domestication of animals this had been consciously done, quite apart from the many secondary consequences as men pursued what they thought of as their normal activities.

The Abstraction of Man

It is now well enough known that as a species we grew in confidence in our desire and in our capacity to intervene. But we cannot understand this process, indeed cannot even describe it, until we are clear as to what the idea of nature includes, and in particular whether it includes man. For, of course, to speak of man 'intervening' in natural processes is to suppose that he might find it possible not to do so, or to decide not to do so. Nature has to be thought of, that is to say, as separate from man, before any question of intervention or command, and the method and ethics of either, can arise. And then, of course, this is what we can see happening, in the development of the idea. It may at first seem paradoxical, but what we can now call the more secular and more rational ideas of nature depended on a new and very singular abstraction: the abstraction of Man. It is not so much a change from a metaphysical to a naturalist view, though that distinction has importance, as a change from one abstract notion to another, and one very similar in form.

Of course there had been a long argument about the relations between nature and social man. In early Greek thought this is the argument about nature and convention; in a sense an historical contrast between the state of nature and a formed human state with conventions and laws. A large part of all subsequent political and legal theory has been based on some sense of this relation. But then of course it is obvious that the state of

nature, the condition of natural man, has been very differently interpreted. Seneca saw the state of nature as a golden age, in which men were happy, innocent and simple. This powerful myth often came to coincide with the myth of Eden: of man before the fall. But sometimes it did not: the fall from innocence could be seen as a fall into nature; the animal without grace, or the animal needing grace. Natural, that is to say, could mean wholly opposite conditions: the innocent man or the mere beast.

In political theory both images were used. Hobbes saw the state of men in nature as low, and the life of pre-social man as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. At the same time, right reason was itself a law of nature, in the rather different constitutive sense. Locke, opposing Hobbes, saw the state of nature as one of 'peace, goodwill, mutual assistance and cooperation'. A just society organized these natural qualities, whereas in Hobbes an effective society had overcome those natural disadvantages. Rousseau saw natural man as instinctive, inarticulate, without property, and contrasted this with the competitive and selfish society of his own day. The point about property has a long history. It was a widespread medieval idea that common ownership was more natural than private property, which was a kind of fall from grace, and there have always been radicals, from the Diggers to Marx, who have relied on some form of this idea as a programme or as a critique. And indeed it is in this problem of property that many of the crucial questions about man and nature were put, often almost unconsciously. Locke produced a defence of private property based on the natural right of a man to that with which he has mixed his own labour, and many thousands of people believed and repeated this, in periods when it must have been obvious to everybody that those who most often and most fully mixed their labour with the earth were those who had no property, and when the very marks and stains of the mixing were in effect a definition of being propertyless. The argument can go either way, can be conservative or radical. But once we begin to speak of men mixing their labour with the earth, we are in a whole world of new relations between man and nature, and to separate natural history from social history becomes extremely problematic.

I think nature had to be seen as separate from man, for several purposes. Perhaps the first form of the separation was the practical distinction between nature and God: that distinction which eventually made it possible to describe natural processes in their own terms; to examine them without any prior assumption of purpose or design, but simply as

processes, or to use the historically earlier term, as machines. We could find out how nature 'worked'; what made it, as some still say, 'tick' (as if Paley's clock were still with us). We could see better how it worked by altering or isolating certain conditions, in experiment or in improvement. Some of this discovery was passively conceived: a separated mind observing separated matter; man looking at nature. But much more of it was active: not only observation but experiment; and of course not only science, the pure knowledge of nature, but applied science, the conscious intervention for human purposes. Agricultural improvement and the industrial revolution follow clearly from this emphasis, and many of the practical effects depended on seeing nature quite clearly and even coldly as a set of objects, on which men could operate. Of course we still have to remind ourselves of some of the consequences of that way of seeing things. Isolation of the object being treated led and still leads to unforeseen or uncared-for consequences. It led also, quite clearly, to major developments in human capacity, including the capacity to sustain and care for life in quite new ways.

But in the idea of nature itself there was then a very curious result. The physical scientists and the improvers, though in different ways, had no doubt that they were working on nature, and it would indeed be difficult to deny that this was so, taking any of the general meanings. Yet at just the first peak of this kind of activity another and now very popular meaning of nature emerged. Nature, in this new sense, was in another and different way all that was not man: all that was not touched by man, spoilt by man: nature as the lonely places, the wilderness.

The Natural and the Conventional

I want to describe this development in some detail, but because we are still so influenced by it I must first draw attention to the conventional character of this unspoilt nature; indeed the conventional terms in which it is separated out. There are some true wildernesses, some essentially untouched places. As a matter of fact (and of course almost by definition) few people going to 'nature' go to them. But here some of the earlier meanings of 'Nature' and 'natural' come in as a doubtful aid. This wild nature is essentially peaceful and quiet, you hear people say. Moreover it is innocent; it contrasts with man, except presumably with the man looking at it. It is unspoilt but also it is settled: a kind of primal settlement. And indeed there are places where in effect this is so.

But it is also very striking that the same thing is said about places which are in every sense man-made. I remember someone saying that it was unnatural, a kind of modern scientific madness, to cut down hedges; and as a matter of fact I agreed that they ought not to be cut down. But what was interesting was that the hedges were seen as natural, as parts of nature, though I should imagine everyone knows that they were planted and tended, and would indeed not be hedges if men had not made them so. A considerable part of what we call natural landscape has the same kind of history. It is the product of human design and human labour, and in admiring it as natural it matters very much whether we suppress that fact of labour or acknowledge it. Some forms of this popular modern idea of nature seem to me to depend on a suppression of the history of human labour, and the fact that they are often in conflict with what is seen as the exploitation or destruction of nature may in the end be less important than the no less certain fact that they often confuse us about what nature and the natural are and might be.

It is easy to contrast what can be called the improvers of nature and the lovers or admirers of nature. In the late eighteenth century, when this contrast began to be widely made, there was ample evidence of both kinds of response and activity. But though in the end they can be distinguished, and need to be distinguished, I think there are other and rather interesting relations between them.

We have first to remember that by the eighteenth century the idea of nature had become, in the main, a philosophical principle, a principle of order and right reason. Basil Willey's account of the main bearings of the idea, and of the effects and changes in Wordsworth, cannot, I think, be improved upon.² Yet it is not primarily ideas that have a history; it is societies. And then what often seem opposed ideas can in the end be seen as parts of a single social process. There is this familiar problem about the eighteenth century: that it is seen as a period of order, because order was talked about so often, and in close relation to the order of nature. Yet it is not only that at any real level it was a notably disorderly and corrupt period; it is also that it generated, from within this disorder, some of the most profound of all human changes. The use of nature, in the physical sense, was quite remarkably extended, and we have to remember—which we usually don't, because a successful image was imposed on us—

²*The Eighteenth Century Background*, London 1940.

that our first really ruthless capitalist class, taking up things and men in much the same spirit and imposing an at once profitable and pauperizing order on them, were those eighteenth-century agrarians who got themselves called an aristocracy, and who laid the real foundations, in spirit and practice (and of course themselves joining in), for the industrial capitalists who were to follow them.

A state of nature could be a reactionary idea, against change, or a reforming idea, against what was seen as decadence. But where the new ideas and images were being bred there was a quite different perspective. It is significant that the successful attack on the old idea of natural law should have been mounted just then. Not that it didn't need to be attacked; it was often in practice mystifying. But the utilitarians who attacked it were making a new and very much sharper tool, and in the end what had disappeared was any positive conception of a just society, and this was replaced by new and ratifying concepts of a mechanism and a market. That these, in turn, were deduced from the laws of nature is one of the ironies we are constantly meeting in the history of ideas. The new natural economic laws, the natural liberty of the entrepreneur to go ahead without interference, had in its projection of the market as the natural regulator a remnant—it is not necessarily a distortion—of the more abstract ideas of social harmony, within which self-interest and the common interest might ideally coincide. But what is gradually left behind, in the utilitarians, is any shadow of a principle by which a higher justice—to be appealed to against any particular activity or consequence—could be effectively imagined. And so we have this situation of the great interferers, some of the most effective interferers of all time, proclaiming the necessity of non-interference: a contradiction which as it worked itself through had chilling effects on later thinkers in the same tradition, through John Stuart Mill to the Fabians.

For and Against Improvement

And then it is at just this time, and first of all in the philosophy of the improvers, that nature is decisively seen as separate from men. Most earlier ideas of nature had included, in an integral way, ideas of human nature. But now nature, increasingly, was 'out there', and it was natural to reshape it to a dominant need, without having to consider very deeply what this reshaping might do to men. People talk of order in those cleared

estates and those landscaped parks, but what was being moved about and rearranged was not only earth and water but men. Of course we must then say at once that this doesn't imply any previous state of social innocence. Men were more cruelly exploited and imposed on in the great ages of natural law and universal order; but not more thoroughly, for the thoroughness depended on new physical forces and means. Of course it soon happened that this process was denounced as unnatural: from Goldsmith to Blake, and from Cobbett to Ruskin and Dickens, this kind of attack on a new 'unnatural' civilization was powerfully deployed. The negative was clear enough, but the positive was always more doubtful. Concepts of natural order and harmony went on being repeated, against the increasingly evident disorder of society. Other appeals were attempted: to Christian brotherhood and to culture—that new idea of human growth, based on natural analogy. Yet set against the practical ideas of the improvers, these were always insufficient. The operation on nature was producing wealth, and objections to its other consequences could be dismissed as sentimental. Indeed the objections often were, often still are, sentimental. For it is a mark of the success of the new idea of nature—of nature as separated from man—that the real errors, the real consequences, could be described at first only in marginal terms. Nature in any other sense than that of the improvers indeed fled to the margins: to the remote, the inaccessible, the relatively barren areas. Nature was where industry was not, and then in that real but limited sense had very little to say about the operations on nature that were proceeding elsewhere.

Very little to say. But in another sense it had a great deal to say. New feelings for landscape: a new and more particular nature poetry; the green vision of Constable; the green language of Wordsworth and Clare. Thomson in *The Seasons*, like Cobbett on his rural rides, saw beauty in cultivated land. But as early as Thomson, and then with increasing power in Wordsworth and beyond him, there came the sense of nature as a refuge, a refuge from man; a place of healing, a solace, a retreat. Clare broke under the strain, for he had one significant disadvantage; he couldn't both live on the process and escape its products, as some of the others were doing and indeed as became a way of life—this is a very bitter irony—for some of the most successful exploiters. As the exploitation of nature continued, on a vast scale, and especially in the new extractive and industrial processes, the people who drew most profit from it went back, where they could find it (and they were very ingenious) to an unspoilt

nature, to the purchased estates and the country retreats. And since that time there has always been this ambiguity in the defence of what is called nature, and in its associated ideas of conservation, in the weak sense, and the nature reserve. Some people in this defence are those who understand nature best, and who insist on making very full connections and relationships. But a significant number of others are in the plainest sense hypocrites. Established at powerful points in the very process which is creating the disorder, they change their clothes at week-ends, or when they can get down to the country; join appeals and campaigns to keep one last bit of England green and unspoilt; and then go back, spiritually refreshed, to invest in the smoke and the spoil.

They would not be able to go undetected so long if the idea they both use and abuse were not, in itself, so inadequate. When nature is separated out from the activities of men, it even ceases to be nature, in any full and effective sense. Men come to project on to nature their own unacknowledged activities and consequences. Or nature is split into unrelated parts: coal-bearing from heather-bearing; downwind from upwind. The real split, perhaps, is in men themselves: men seen, seeing themselves, as producers and consumers. The consumer wants only the intended product; all other products and by-products he must get away from, if he can. But get away—it really can't be overlooked—to treat leftover nature in much the same spirit: to consume it as scenery, landscape, image, fresh air. There is more similarity than we usually recognise between the industrial entrepreneur and the landscape gardener, each altering nature to a consumable form: and the client or beneficiary of the landscaper, who in turn has a view or a prospect to use, is often only at the lucky end of a common process, able to consume because others have produced, in a leisure that follows from quite precise work.

Men project, I said, their own unacknowledged activities and consequences. Into a green and quiet nature we project, I do not doubt, much of our own deepest feeling, our senses of growth and perspective and beauty. But is it then an accident that an opposite version of nature comes to force its way through? Nothing is more remarkable, in the second half of the nineteenth century, than the wholly opposite version of nature as cruel and savage. As Tennyson put it:

A monster then, a dream,
A discord. Dragons of the prime
Which tear each other in the slime.

Those images of tearing and eating, of natural savagery, came to dominate much modern feeling. Disney, in some of his nature films, selects them with what seems an obsessive accuracy. Green nature goes on, in the fortunate places, but within it and all about it is this struggle and tearing, this ruthless competition for the right to live, this survival of the fittest. It is very interesting to see how Darwin's notion of natural selection passed into popular imagery—and by popular I mean the ordinary thoughts and feelings of educated men. 'Fittest', meaning those best adapted to a given and variable environment, became 'strongest', 'most ruthless'. The social jungle, the rat race, the territory-guarders, the naked apes: this, bitterly, was how an idea of man re-entered the idea of nature. A real experience of society was projected, by selective examples, on to a newly alienated nature. Under the veneer of civilization was this natural savagery: from Wells to Golding this could be believed, in increasingly commonplace ways. What had once been a ratification, a kind of natural condonation, of ruthless economic selfishness—the real ideology of early capitalism and of imperialism—became, towards our own day, not only this but a hopelessness, a despair, an end of significant social effort; because if that is what life is like, is naturally like, any idea of brotherhood is futile. Then build another refuge perhaps, clear another beach. Keep out not so much the shark and the tiger (though them when necessary) as other men, the grasping, the predatory, the selfish, the untidy, the herd. Let mid-Wales depopulate and then call it a wilderness area: a wilderness to go to from the jungle of the cities.

Ideas of nature, but these are the projected ideas of men. And I think nothing much can be done, nothing much can even be said, until we are able to see the causes of this alienation of nature, this separation of nature from human activity, which I have been trying to describe. But these causes cannot be seen, in a practical way, by returning to any earlier stage of the idea. In reaction against our existing situation, many writers have created an idea of a rural past: perhaps innocent, as in the first mythology of the Golden Age; but even more organic, with man not separated from nature. The impulse is understandable, but quite apart from its element of fantasy—its placing of such a period can be shown to be continually recessive—it is a serious underestimate of the complexity of the problem. A separation between man and nature is not simply the product of modern industry or urbanism; it is a characteristic of many earlier kinds of organized labour, including rural labour. Nor can we look with advantage

to that other kind of reaction, which, correctly identifying one part of the problem in the idea of nature as a mechanism, would have us return to a traditional teleology, in which men's unity with nature is established through their common relation to a creator. That sense of an end and a purpose is in important ways even more alienated than the cold world of mechanism. Indeed the singular abstraction which it implies has much in common with that kind of abstract materialism. It directs our attention away from real and variable relations, and can be said to ratify the separation by making one of its forms permanent and its purpose fixed.

The point that has really to be made about the separation between man and nature which is characteristic of so many modern ideas is that—however hard this may be to express—the separation is a function of an increasing real interaction. It is easy to feel a limited unity on the basis of limited relationships, whether in animism, in monotheism, or in modern forms of pantheism. It is only when the real relations are extremely active, diverse, self-conscious, and in effect continuous—as our relations with the physical world can be seen to be in our own day—that the separation of human nature from nature becomes really problematic. I would illustrate this in two ways.

In our complex dealings with the physical world, we find it very difficult to recognize all the products of our own activities. We recognize some of the products, and call others by-products; but the slagheap is as real a product as the coal, just as the river stinking with sewage and detergent is as much our product as the reservoir. The enclosed and fertile land is our product, but so are the waste moors from which the poor cultivators were cleared, to leave what can be seen as an empty nature. Furthermore, we ourselves are in a sense products: the pollution of industrial society is to be found not only in the water and in the air but in the slums, the traffic jams, and not these only as physical objects but as ourselves in them and in relation to them. In this actual world there is then not much point in counterposing or restating the great abstractions of Man and Nature. We have mixed our labour with the earth, our forces with its forces too deeply to be able to draw back and separate either out. Except that if we mentally draw back, if we go on with the singular abstractions, we are spared the effort of looking, in any active way, at the whole complex of social and natural relationships which is at once our product and our activity.

The process, that is to say, has to be seen as a whole, but not in abstract

or singular ways. We have to look at all our products and activities, good and bad, and to see the relationships between them which are our own real relationships. More clearly than anyone, Marx indicated this, though still in terms of quite singular forces. I think we have to develop that kind of indication. In industry, for example, we cannot afford to go on saying that a car is a product but a scrapyards a by-product, any more than we can take the paint-fumes and petrol-fumes, the jams, the mobility, the motorway, the torn city centre, the assembly line, the time-and-motion study, the unions, the strikes, as by-products rather than the real products they are. But then of course to express this we should need not only a more sophisticated but a more radically honest accounting than any we now have. It will be ironic if one of the last forms of the separation between abstracted Man and abstracted Nature is an intellectual separation between economics and ecology. It will be a sign that we are beginning to think in some necessary ways when we can conceive these becoming, as they ought to become, a single discipline.

But it is even harder than that. If we say only that we have mixed our labour with the earth, our forces with its forces, we are stopping short of the truth that we have done this unequally: that for the miner and the writer the mixing is different, though in both cases real; and that for the labourer and the man who manages his labour, the producer and the dealer in his products, the difference is wider again. Out of the ways in which we have interacted with the physical world we have made not only human nature and an altered natural order; we have also made societies. It is very significant that most of the terms we have used in this relationship—the conquest of nature, the domination of nature, the exploitation of nature—are derived from the real human practices: relations between men and men. Even the idea of the balance of nature has its social implications. If we talk only of singular Man and singular Nature we can compose a general history, but at the cost of excluding the real and altering social relations. Capitalism, of course, has relied on the terms of domination and exploitation; imperialism, in conquest, has similarly seen both men and physical products as raw material. But it is a measure of how far we have to go that socialists also still talk of the conquest of nature, which in any real terms will always include the conquest, the domination or the exploitation of some men by others. If we alienate the living processes of which we are a part, we end, though unequally, by alienating ourselves.

We need different ideas because we need different relationships.

Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night.
God said, let Newton be, and all was light.³

Now o'er the one half world
Nature seems dead.⁴

Between the brisk confidence and the brooding reflection of those remembered lines we feel our own lives swing. We need and are perhaps beginning to find different ideas, different feelings, if we are to know nature as varied and variable nature, as the changing conditions of a human world.

³ Alexander Pope, *Epitaph Intended for Sir Isaac Newton*.

⁴ Macbeth, II, i.