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## **“Awful doubt” and “faith so mild”: The Images of Nature from William Blake to Matthew Arnold**

### **Abstract**

In the present article I intend to explore chosen images of nature in selected poetical works by William Blake, William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Alfred Tennyson and Matthew Arnold, in order to trace significant shifts in their use of natural imagery. While in Romantic poetry, in general, images from nature are used to portray spiritual experience of finding comfort and sustenance in communing with nature, or, alternatively, a sense of being overwhelmed in the face of an omnipotent power, Victorian poems register deep uneasiness and a fear of nature, which has nothing to do with the experience of the sublime. This shift can be attributed, at least in part, to ground-breaking scientific discoveries and overwhelming technological progress in Victorian England, which resulted in confusion and disquiet as far as basic existential issues (the existence of God, the relation between God and man, the origin of the universe) were concerned.

**Key words:** English poetry, Romanticism, Victorian Age, natural imagery, spirituality, faith, science, doubt

To declare that Romantic poetry abounds in natural imagery is to state the obvious. Blake's echoing green and a garden of love, Wordsworth's fields of daffodils, Shelley's Mont Blanc or Mediterranean seascapes, Keats's embalmed darkness with a singing nightingale, Clare's badgers' holes and birds' nests are only a few well-known examples of how the Romantics deploy nature and natural landscapes in their poetry. The legacy of the Romantic period was passed on to the Victorian poets, whose texts, although being less inwardly oriented and more focused on their contemporary – scientific, technological, psychological – concerns, nevertheless still resort to the images of nature. Abundant natural imagery in the poetry of Tennyson and Arnold, nevertheless, serves a different purpose altogether. While in Romantic poetry, in general, natural images are used to portray spiritual experience of finding comfort and sustenance in communing with nature, or, alternatively, a sense of being overwhelmed in the face of an omnipotent power, Victorian poems register deep uneasiness and a fear of nature, which has nothing to do with the experience of the sublime. In the present text I intend to explore chosen images of nature in selected poetical works by Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson and Arnold, in order to trace transformations in imagery, whose

connotations shift significantly. Whereas for the Romantic poets nature connoted harmony, unity, spirituality and freedom, their Victorian followers deployed images of the natural world to record their feelings of growing anxiety, the lack of stability and the loss of hope.

William Blake's responses to the object world are diverse and at times puzzling. Generally, whenever Blake uses the adjective "natural" he does so with purely negative meaning of "impoverished" (Natural Man), "fallen" (Natural World), "deceitful" (Natural Religion); on the other hand, nevertheless, we find in his poetry a cry of delight and admiration of the beauty of nature. Some of his descriptions of the natural world belong to the finest in English poetry; when he depicts flowers at dawn, the reader entertains the illusion that he can almost smell their perfume and touch their delicate petals:

First, ere the morning breaks, joy opens in the flowery bosoms,  
 Joy even to tears, which the Sun rising dries: first the Wild Thyme  
 And Meadow-sweet, downy and soft, waving among the reeds,  
 Light springing on the air, lead the sweet dance; they wake  
 The Honeysuckle sleeping on the oak; the flaunting beauty  
 Revels along upon the wind; the White-thorn, lovely May,  
 Opens her many lovely eyes; listening the Rose still sleeps—  
 None dare to wake her; soon she bursts her crimson-curtain'd bed  
 And comes forth in the majesty of beauty. Every Flower,  
 The Pink, the Jessamine, the Wallflower, the Carnation,  
 The Jonquil, the mild Lily opes her heavens; every Tree  
 And Flower and Herb soon fill the air with an innumerable dance,  
 Yet all in order sweet and lovely. Men are sick with love!  
 (*Milton*, II. 51–62 E 131)

The description merges sensual appeal with spiritual thought. The physical beauty appreciated by the senses generates the sense of order, unity and harmony, up to the moment of excess and overflowing, recorded in the surprising statement that "[m]en are sick with love." Blake's natural world, when described with admiration, always appears as animated, dynamic and personified. As Barbara F. Lefcowitz suggests, "the only valid generalization one can make about Blake's overall attitude toward nature is that he almost never treats it apart from a human context" (121). This statement is almost universally true: when in *The Lamb* Blake endows the title animal with such attributes as "softest clothing, wooly bright" (l. 6) and "tender voice" (l. 7), he hastens to assert the unity between the human, the natural and the divine: "I a child & thou a lamb, / We are called by his name" (ll. 17–18). The same is true about *The Book of Thel*: the Lily of the Valley, the Cloud and the Clod of Clay, who appear as Thel's interlocutors, are fully anthropomorphic, as evidenced not only by the text of the poem, but also by the artist's illustrations for his work; similarly, in *Jerusalem* Blake states that viewed imaginatively, "all are Men in Eternity, Rivers, Mountains, Cities, Villages All are Human" (71.15, E 225) and in *Auguries of Innocence* he announces that we should be able to see "a heaven in a wild flower" and "the world in a grain of sand" (E 490). We are granted a vision of all-encompassing, eternal, natural-turned human-turned-godlike unity.

On the other hand, to worship matter without spiritual content, without essential awareness that what we see depends entirely on our spiritual state (“As a Man Is, So He Sees. As the Eye is formed such are its Powers” (E 702), states Blake elsewhere) is a deadly error, as it denotes succumbing to the Natural Religion, or Deism, “Single Vision and Newton’s Sleep” (E 722). Purely natural things, without their spiritual content, are material, and therefore a product of Blake’s fallen Demiurge, Urizen; thus, to worship them without seeing their connection to humanity and God is a dire mistake. In his annotations to Emmanuel Swedenborg’s *Divine Love*, Blake states that “Meer Nature” is “Hell” (E 6035), but goes on to explain that “to the eyes of the Man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself” (E 702). Therefore, nature and natural images are beautiful and awe-inspiring as long as we use Imagination, the divine faculty within us, while perceiving them – it may be stated that man sanctifies nature in his act of imaginative perception.

In turn, Wordsworth’s treatment of nature earned him Blake’s acute disapproval. In his marginalia to Wordsworth’s *Poems* (1815) Blake wrote: “I see in Wordsworth the Natural Man rising up against the Spiritual Man Continually & then he is No Poet but a Heathen Philosopher at Enmity against all true Poetry or Inspiration” (E 666). As his point of reference Blake used St Paul’s primary distinction between the natural body and a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15.44) and criticised Wordsworth for elevating material nature to the level of the Absolute. Similarly, annotating the passage from an introduction to *The Excursion* (1814), where Wordsworth enthuses:

How exquisitely the individual Mind  
 (And the progressive powers perhaps no less  
 Of the whole species) to the external World  
 Is fitted:--and how exquisitely, too--  
 Theme this but little heard of among men--  
 The external World is fitted to the Mind;  
 (I. 816–822)

Blake angrily retorts: “You should not bring me down to believe such fitting & fitted, I know better and please your Lordship” (E 667). The reason for Blake’s displeasure is clear enough, and can be explained by Wordsworth’s pantheistic tendencies. In a famous passage from *Tintern Abbey* Wordsworth finds a sense of restoration and peace thanks to the feeling of interconnection and a communion with the world around, brought about by the power that resides everywhere and joins all things, animate and inanimate. He experiences:

[...] a sense sublime  
 Of something far more deeply interfused,  
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
 And the round ocean and the living air,  
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;  
 A motion and a spirit, that impels  
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
 And rolls through all things.  
 (II. 95–102)

Wordsworth's sublimity stems from an overwhelming feeling of unity and permanence, the origin of which he locates in the force that "rolls through all things." Jerome McGann comments that when Wordsworth claims that "Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her" (ll. 121–2), he "asserts his faith in the One Life and the ultimate benevolence of history in a natural world" (298). The power which he senses in *Tintern Abbey* is the same force which he glimpsed in the field of joyful daffodils and experienced walking by the seaside in Calais in 1802 – majestic and overwhelming, but at the same time unequivocally benign:

It is a beauteous Evening, calm and free,  
The holy time is quiet as a Nun  
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun  
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;  
The gentleness of heaven is on the Sea;  
Listen! the mighty Being is awake,  
And doth with his eternal motion make  
A sound like thunder—everlastingly.  
("It is a beauteous Evening," ll. 1–8)

The impression of beauty and calm of the landscape is infinitely multiplied by a sheer sensation of energy and divine might, generated by the thunder-like sound of the lapping waves. This sound, likewise, is responsible for the sense of permanence and stability. Wordsworth's landscape, inspiring awe, endowed with the powerful presence of the divine, is nevertheless benevolent: it communicates the gentleness of nature (and God) and the link between the present, the past and the future; the speaker enjoys the sense of interconnection and with trust embraces his place in the universe.

Pantheistic elements, although with less benevolent echoes, are also present in the poetry of P.B. Shelley. Christopher R. Miller has noted the importance of images taken from nature in Shelley's visionary poems: "As elusive as the subjects of Shelley's more famous odes seem, they are based in some perceptible reality: the sound of the skylark, if not the sight of it; the periodic appearance of Mont Blanc through the clouds; the feel of the West Wind and its visible effect on autumn leaves" (591). In "Ode to the West Wind" Shelley describes an omnipotent life-giving and life-taking power, in the guise of the wind. The wind is "the breath of Autumn" (l. 1) "Destroyer and preserver" (l. 14) "Wild Spirit," which is "moving everywhere" (l. 13) and at whose presence clouds, trees and oceans tremble. That the wind is much more than a sheer natural force becomes evident in the course of Shelley's ardent address. The "Ode" is, at once, a record of a past experience of the union with the wind and a passionate prayer for this experience to be repeated. The speaker yearns for the merge with the absolute force, an experience of total abandon, at times rendered in suggestively violent images: "O, lift me, like a wave, a leaf, a cloud! (l. 34); "be thou, Spirit fierce, /My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!" (ll. 61–62). In terms which are covertly erotic, he confesses that he wishes to "pant beneath the Wind's power" (l. 45), to give in completely to an experience of total powerlessness, helplessness and a willing surrender. The result of this surrender is poetry – the wind acts as a spirit of inspiration, stroking the chords

of the Aeolian Lyre (favourite Romantic image of the artist), which results in the composition of divinely-inspired music.

Another poem by Shelley which communicates through natural imagery is *Mont Blanc*. As one of the most famous texts in Shelley's *oeuvre*, *Mont Blanc* is a profound meditation on the relations between the external and the internal, mind and nature. The major metaphor, established in the opening section of the poem, is the river of universal thought flowing through the mind, which is accompanied by a "feeble brook" (l. 7) of an individual mind, its tributary. From such abstract notions Shelley moves to talk about the tangible physical landscape of the Arve and its ravine, thus establishing the analogy between internal and external landscapes. Talking about the waters of the river he describes their tumult, commotion and might, resulting from the presence of the everlasting, omnipotent power, which "comes down" in the "likeness of the Arve" and bursts "through these dark mountains like the flame/of lightning through the tempest" (ll. 16–19). This power underlies all mental activity, and the individual mind, like the caverns of the ravine, echoes the sound of rolling waters, "unresting sound" (l. 33) "a loud, lone sound no other sound can tame" (l. 31), "a sound but half its own" (l. 6). Shelley does not let his reader forget that what interests him most is the relation of the universal mind to individual thought, and that the landscape is, in fact, a starting point for an intense meditation:

Dizzy Ravine! And when I gaze on thee  
I seem as in a trance sublime and strange  
To muse on my own separate fantasy,  
My own, my human mind, which passively  
Now renders and receives vast influencings,  
Holding an unremitting interchange  
With the clear universe of things around;  
(ll. 34–40).

The power that comes down in the likeness of the Arve, the principle of human thought, is received and echoed by an individual mind, just like the sound of the rolling waters that the ravine of Arve echoes and multiplies. The mind, thus, remains in constant contact with both the universal principle (the symbolic image of the river of thought) and the external (the physical landscape around). Crucially though, Shelley never states that the power is the river; it can take many shapes, as it is immanent, in-dwelling in the world which is infused with its divine might. Thus, the same power is figured as inhabiting Mont Blanc itself, but then the imagery drastically changes:

Power dwells apart in its tranquillity,  
Remote, serene and inaccessible [...]  
Mont Blanc yet gleams on high – the power is there,  
The still and solemn power of many sights,  
And many sounds, as much of life and death.  
(ll. 96–97; 127–129)

The peak of Mont Blanc is an ordering principle, towering over the turmoil and commotion of the whirling waters of the Arve. In contrast to the river, it connotes stability,

permanence and indifference. Harold Bloom, comparing Shelley and Wordsworth, states that:

Wordsworth had a sense of “a motion and a spirit” that rolled through all external phenomena and that simultaneously moved both the thinker and the object of his thought. This motion and spirit was benevolent, and moral in its human effects. Shelley is not so sure as he contemplates Mont Blanc, Europe’s highest peak, and seeks to commune with a spirit hidden behind the glaciers and icy torrents. (293)

Unlike in Wordsworth’s poetry where the in-dwelling divine element was mild and benign, in Shelley’s poem the power is neither positive nor negative, but permanent, overwhelming and generally indifferent. It rules the universe, it can take many shapes; it can be dynamic and engaged, as when it is figured as the whirling waters of the river, or majestic, withdrawn and inaccessible when imagined as dwelling in the towering mountain. The gap between these two landscapes, between which the poem consistently oscillates (the internal and the external, the subjective and the objective, the dynamic and the static), is finally bridged in the last section of the text, when Shelley, addressing the mountain, states:

The secret Strength of things  
Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome  
Of Heaven is a law, inhabits thee!  
And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,  
If to the human mind’s imaginings  
Silence and solitude were vacancy?  
(ll. 139–144)

The ending of *Mont Blanc* has been much debated. Earl Wasserman notes that Shelley has adopted “a fairly orthodox psychological idealism that is close in its general outlines to Berkeley’s. [...] Since all qualities are subjective, there is no ‘matter’ or ‘substance,’ and therefore the reality of anything is dependent upon its being perceived” (203). On the other hand, some recent readings of Shelley’s poem offer a more materialist stance on the question of the interrelations between mind and nature, matter and thought. Thus, Christopher Hitt claims that:

To hear the pure voice of the mountain (rather than the many voices that would prepackage the mountain for us), to stare down the abyss of “how little we know,” would be to discover a world we had not seen before. Having unwritten the mountain as text, Shelley leaves us with only a vacancy and an invitation to consider nature through that vacancy—as nothing but solid, inert matter, “the naked countenance of earth.” (157–8)

Shelley does not, in my opinion, go as far as to deny the objective existence of the physical world; neither does he encourage the reader/viewer to adopt a purely materialist perspective; he rather suggests, though, that without “silence and solitude” that enable the contemplation and meditation upon the universe around (“human mind’s imaginings”), the material forms that surround us would remain mere husks; it is the

activity of the mind, propelled by the “secret Strength of things/That governs thought” that gives meaning to the external world.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, the faith that the world is permeated with the divine presence which endows it with the sense of purpose and interconnection, and the belief in humanized, visionary universe was severely weakened as a result of rapid technological progress and scientific discoveries. The publication of Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830–33) introduced disturbing ideas about the universe: that “what are seemingly the most stable group of natural phenomena, those of the earth beneath our feet, have changed gradually but momentously over history through the actions of such currently observable terrestrial forces as volcanic activity, strata-building, and wind and water erosion,” which also proves that the earth is much older than the biblical account suggests, and that “its history can be explained without references to such divine interventions as the great flood” (Brown 139–140). Crucially, the conviction that man derives directly from God and is a product of the divine creation was questioned by the discoveries of evolutionary science. An early evolutionary tract *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) by Robert Chambers discussed the progressive transmutation of species, while Darwin’s seminal *On the Origin of Species* (1859) proved equally revolutionary as far as the belief in creationism was concerned. These discoveries, accompanied by rapid technological progress which showed the power of machines, caused understandable confusion and anxiety among the Victorians, and the echoes of such havoc are distinctly audible in poetry of the age.

Tennyson’s famous elegy *In Memoriam* voices general unease about the relation of religion and science, or nature and God:

Are God and Nature then at strife,  
That Nature lends such evil dreams?  
So careful of the type she seems,  
So careless of the single life;  
(CV, ll. 5–8)

The consideration that according to the process of natural selection specific types will gradually alter in order to adapt best to the changing environment and that nature, in order to ensure its continuation and development, will preserve only the best-adapted species, casts doubts as to the significance of particular individuals, their uniqueness and singularity. This stays in obvious contradiction to a set of convictions which Tennyson examined in the previous section of *In Memoriam*:

That nothing walks with aimless feet;  
That not one life shall be destroy’d,  
Or cast as rubbish to the void,  
When God hath made the pile complete;  
That not a worm is cloven in vain;  
That not a moth with vain desire  
Is shrivell’d in a fruitless fire,  
Or but subserves another’s gain.  
(CIV, ll. 5–12)



The passage entertains the hope that maybe, after all, all is well with the world and that whatever happens, happens according to God's will and purpose. Tennyson's language, however, registers acute disquiet, evident in phrasing and imagery. "In vain," "fruitless fire," "cast as rubbish to the void," "shrivelled," "vain desire," though modified by negations at the beginning of the lines ("that nothing," "that not," "or but"), have a distinctly pessimistic sound; the most poignant image, however, is the pile of human and natural waste, which brings to mind both archaeological and geological excavations, piles of shells, bones and fossils, pure matter. It is not surprising, then, that Tennyson concludes with a statement of helplessness, alienation and the lack of hope:

So runs my dream: but what am I?  
 An infant crying in the night:  
 An infant crying for the light:  
 And with no language but a cry.  
 (CIV, ll. 17–20)

In Donald S. Hair's reading, by visualising himself as an infant crying in the night – surrounded by unknown reality and not of his own making – Tennyson makes the child's cry an inarticulate indication of human desire. "The cry is the source and generating power for God and immortality, but defies complete articulation" (124–5). The desire is articulated, but its fulfilment does not come, at least not at this moment in the poem. Tennyson's doubt is also recorded in another potent image, used in this passage and recurring throughout *In Memoriam*: the dream. As Daniel Brown notes, the dream "provides a series of curious shifting and sceptical commentaries on both positivistic science and Romantic metaphysics" (141). While the dream in Romantic poetry is chiefly identified with vision, the communication with the spiritual realm beyond the materialistic confines of the object world, and the poet derives his insight, power, and inspiration from it, in Tennyson's text it soon comes to signify sceptical stance, and might be viewed as an expression of unwarranted idealism or sheer delusion.

It is in section 56 of *In Memoriam*, however, that Tennyson's take on nature is most unequivocal:

"So careful of the type?" but no.  
 From scarped cliff and quarried stone  
 She cries, "A thousand types are gone:  
 I care for nothing, all shall go.  
 "Thou makest thine appeal to me:  
 I bring to life, I bring to death:  
 The spirit does but mean the breath:  
 I know no more."  
 (ll. 1–8)

In his dialogue with the earlier voiced conviction that even if nature disregards single individuals she, at least, preserves types, Tennyson reaches a turning point. Now his Mother Nature not only takes on the life-giving and life-taking power which was the divine prerequisite so far (to compare Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*), but she shows

her brutal, ruthless, deterministic and totally inhuman face. The image of scarps and quarries follows the picture of the pile of natural waste from the previous section. All that remains is pure matter; the spirit in naturalistic science means only breath, its connotations with the soul or the divine breath – the spark of divinity in man – are completely obliterated. No wonder that the crowning descriptive phrase that Tennyson offers in this section is “Nature, red in tooth and claw” (l. 15). As James Ali Adams notes, Tennyson’s Nature appears as “as a personification – an extended, strikingly elaborate personification of the world-image Tennyson derived from contemporary science” (7).

The mood of uncertainty, disquiet and confusion as to the relation between nature, man and God that permeated many sections of *In Memoriam* is even intensified in Matthew Arnold’s *Dover Beach*, the last text to be mentioned in this brief overview. The poem was published in 1867 – eighteen years later than *In Memoriam* and eight years since the publication of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859). The most important images in the text derive from nature: the speaker observes the sunset at the beach of Dover, and in the distance he contemplates the glimmering lights at the French coast of Calais. Interestingly, it is also Calais beach which Wordsworth describes in the already mentioned “It is a beauteous evening,” and the details of both poems are very similar: the evening, the sunset, the roaring sea. However, while Wordsworth experiences the scenery directly, strolling along the seashore, Arnold is distanced from the natural world even physically in his poem – after all, he relates a view from the window. Other differences can be multiplied: Wordsworth’s sonnet exalts the harmony and beauty of the natural scene and confidently states the presence of God in nature; Wordsworth feels awe, generated by the sensation of divine might and permanence and leading to the realization of human uniqueness and subjectivity. None of these can be found in Arnold’s poem. Although at the beginning the monologue reads as a conventional nature poem:

The sea is calm tonight.  
 The tide is full, the moon lies fair  
 Upon the straits; on the French coast the light  
 Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,  
 Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay,  
 (ll. 1–5)

its tranquillity is severely misleading, since it only prepares the reader for a series of shocking realizations: that people are like pebbles, “which the waves draw back, and fling, / At their return, up the high strand (l. 10–11); that their “grating roar” (l. 9) is an endless sound, already experienced in ancient times (“Sophocles long ago / Heard it on the Ægean,” ll. 15–16), but now it denotes “human misery” (l. 17) and “the eternal note of sadness” (l. 13); that the world, which once seemed “a land of dreams, / So various, so beautiful, so new” (ll. 31–32), in fact, has “really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain” (l. 33–34). In her article on philosophical concepts behind *Dover Beach*, Mary Midgley sums up Arnold’s stance: “No joy, no love, no light? As Arnold saw it at that moment, the loss of Christian doctrines about God and the soul drained away all the normal meaning from life, leaving us desperately trying to make sense of a dead, empty world by pulling on our own bootstraps” (209).

The dominant natural (but also symbolic) image which structures the whole poem is “The Sea of Faith” (l. 21), which, once at its full, now is receding. When religious faith and trust that the world is divinely ordered and that man is God’s beloved creature are gone, all that is left are the “naked shingles of the world” (28). Arnold finishes his pessimistic poem with another image, a final proclamation of human insignificance and incomprehension in the face of mechanistic natural forces:

And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.  
(ll. 35–37)

To conclude, man’s view of the surrounding universe and the human place in the world has drastically changed within less than a century. These changes are well mirrored in the significance of natural imagery in the most famous poems of the period. Ground-breaking scientific discoveries and overwhelming technological progress in Victorian England resulted in confusion and disquiet as far as basic existential issues were concerned. The theories of natural selection and the survival of the fittest, the scientific hypotheses as to the beginning and the shaping of the universe severely clashed with dominant religious beliefs. The shifts in the deployment and connotations of poetic images of nature not only register various responses to these conflicts but also testify to the transformation of the way the poets experienced themselves in the world – from the sense of inclusion and dwelling “at home” to the sensation of being uprooted, the feelings of deep apprehension, foreboding and unease.

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