THE EVOLUTION OF INSIGHT

And mystic intuition will have corresponding grades of dignity and insight. The grand process of evolution is thus revealed as a many-sided whole—the amount of real existence increases in proportion to the increase of capacity for sharing in form and reason; and along with this goes a growth in power to appreciate the ever higher forms of beauty which emerge in the upward-striving universe. A further thought calls for emphasis. For beings like ourselves, living under conditions which involve so many limitations, a purely aesthetic judgment is practically out of our reach. And on this score also we may venture to tone down the strong expressions used by Jefferies in his estimate of the anti- or ultrahuman character of the strange creatures in the sea. Individual likings and dislikings are the resultants of an enormously complex system of impulses, instincts, prejudices, motives, habits, associations, and the rest.

Few of these factors appear above the threshold of consciousness, though they are continually and influentially operative. Hence it by no means follows that because a particular object is displeasing or disgusting to one individual, or group of individuals, it will be so to all. So undoubted is the resulting relativity of our aesthetic judgments that Hegel was inclined to hold that below the level of man and art there is no real ugliness at all. "Creatures" (he says) "seem ugly to us whose forms are typical of qualities opposed to vitality in general, or to what we have learnt to regard as their own special or typical form of animate existence. Thus the sloth as wanting in vitality, and the platypus as seeming to combine irreconcilable types, and crocodiles and many kinds of insects, simply, it would appear, because we are not accustomed to consider their forms as adequate expressions of life, are all ugly."

Just as, in music, discords become beautiful by being brought into fitting relations with other parts of an ordered whole, so is it with objects which are usually considered ugly, but which are capable of aesthetic beauty when treated in pictures by masters of their craft. To set them in new and fitting relations of light and shade, of colour and composition, is to transform them. Schopenhauer lays great stress on the transforming power of art. He instances many typical paintings of the Dutch school, simple interiors, homely scenes, fruit, vegetables, the commonest tools and utensils, even dead flesh—all are taken up into material for pictures, and, in their special setting, compel our admiration.

We have in these facts concerning pictorial art, a strong corroboration of the inference from the use of discords in music—the relativity of ugliness, and the possibility of its progressive transformation. But there is a further point to be emphasised, one which music, by reason of its abstractness, could not well enforce, and one which is of profound significance for the nature-mystic. Pictorial art is concerned with the representation of external objects. How explain its transforming power? Schopenhauer has an excellent answer to the question. He says that the artist is endowed with an exceptional measure of intuitive insight. He enjoys a genuine vision of the Idea immanent in the object he reproduces in his particular medium—he fixes attention upon this Idea, isolates it, and reveals much that would otherwise escape notice.

The result is that his skill enables others to slip into his mood and share his insight. It is on some such lines as those tentatively traced in the last few paragraphs that the most hopeful solution of the problem of the ugly must be sought. The heart of the matter is that there is no object in external nature which is absolutely ugly —no object which cannot, even as things are, be transformed to some degree by being set in fitting relation to others—no object which is not capable of progress in its capacity for sharing and manifesting the form and reason towards which the universe is striving. Should there be thinkers who, like Kingsley, cannot quite rid themselves of the feeling that ugliness is an absolute reality—a positive mode of existence over against beauty—they can only take refuge in the wider problem of evil.

But care must be exercised, as before observed, to distinguish between moral evil and physical ugliness. To what extent the one may be reflected in the other is a question on which it would not be safe to dogmatise. The main theory, however, stands out clearly, and involves a belief that the material phenomena of the universe, as a grand whole, enjoy a wholesome freedom from positive ugliness. Tennyson's "Ancient Sage" expresses the naturemystic's hopes concerning the fundamental beauty of the world he loves. "My son, the world is dark with griefs and graves, So dark, that men cry out against the Heavens, Who knows but that the darkness is in man? The doors of Night may be the gates of Light; For wert thou born or blind or deaf, and then Suddenly healed, how wouldst thou glory in all The splendours and the voices of the world!

And we, the poor earth's dying race, and yet No phantoms, watching from a phantom shore, Await the last and largest sense to make The phantom walls of this illusion fade, And show us that the world is wholly fair." The fundamental postulates and principles of a consistent Nature Mysticism have now been expounded with a fullness sufficient to allow of a soberly enthusiastic study of the detail of our subject. Let it be noted, however, that though a detailed application of general conclusions is henceforth to be the main business, there will be no forsaking of the broadly human standpoint. For it has been shown, more especially in the chapter on poetry, that the nature-mystic does not arrogate to himself any unique place among his fellows, nor seek to enjoy, in esoteric isolation, modes of experience denied to the mass of humanity.

Wordsworth, for instance, though a prince among modern mystics, appealed with confidence to his countrymen at large: his "we" was in constant evidence—and an ever-growing multitude of nature-lovers responds to his appeal. That is to say, the faculty of intuition he demands is to be found, in varying degrees, latent at least, if not evolved, in the normal human being. The gifted seer seizes and interprets what his less gifted brother obscurely feels. Can we trace this mystic power of nature on the scale of history at large? If the power is real, it should be possible to recognise its grander workings. Moreover, a wide outlook will help us to avoid exaggerations, preciosities, and fanaticisms. Here, then, is our starting-point for detailed study.

If it be true that all normal members of the race share in varying degrees the faculty of mystic intuition, then nature must have had a moulding effect not only on certain gifted individuals, but on the character and destiny of whole communities, peoples, and empires. As behind the language of the Greeks there were age-long promptings of subconscious metaphysics, so behind the aesthetic and spiritual development of this remarkable people there must have been age-long promptings of subconscious mystical intuitions stimulated by the influences of natural phenomena. The moulding force of the immanent ideas, and of the inner life of things, is, for the race at large, and for certain peoples in particular, continuous, cumulative, massive. True, it takes effect chiefly in the sphere of the subconscious. But he will be a poor student of history who fails to reckon with those subtler forces which, though obscure in their action, often extend so widely and go so deep.

An eloquent evidence of nature's power to mould is to be found in the contrasted characteristics of the great religions. The hardy peoples of northwestern Europe were nurtured under stormy skies, were girt in by stern, avalanche-swept mountains, and struggled strenuously against the hardships of rigorous and lengthy winters. What wonder that they filled their heaven with Sturm und Drang—with titanic conflicts of the gods—and heard it echoing with the whirl of hunting, the riot of feasting, and the clang of battle? Their religion was strenuous as their lives—free and fierce—yet tinged with a melancholy that promised rich developments. The favoured Greeks of classical times, "ever delicately walking on most pellucid air," or rocked on the isle-strown waters of the sapphire AEgaean, expanded their soul-life in an environment teeming with light and colour, with harmony and form. For them, therefore, Apollo bent his burnished bow and launched his myriad shafts of gold; Aphrodite embodied visions of foam-born beauty; Athene stood forth in panoply of reason and restraint.

Nature herself lured them to evolve ideals of law and order, of disciplined thought and perfectly proportioned art. What wonder that, prompted by mystic impulses and visions, they purged their inherited religion of its grosser features, and made it a vehicle for philosophic thought and spiritual aspiration. Pass to the wandering children of the desert, cradled amid the great silences of space and time, swallowed up of vastness. Above them by day the burning vault of blue, by night the wheeling galaxies—around them the trackless levels of a thirsty land. Such influences sank deep into their souls, and imparted depth and intensity to their views of the source and meaning of that vastness. Nor can we wonder that in such an environment, the premonitions of the spiritual unity of existence, that were stirring in many hearts, found special sustenance.

Let it be clearly understood that in the striking and unmistakable illustrations just adduced, there is no mere question of the influences of physical environment on social organisation or economic development—though these also react in a thousand ways upon ideas and ideals—but a question of moulding spiritual concepts by the direct influence of the ideas and impulses manifested in external nature. Man's soul was in constant, if generally subconscious, communion with his material environment, and his thinking was thereby largely coloured and fashioned. And if the kind and quality of the influence vary from age to age, and from people to people, it is not the less continuously potent.

The complexities of modern life, the interminglings of civilisations, tend to obscure its manifestations; science, wrongly pursued, seems hostile to continued vigour. But underneath the play of the cross-currents on the surface, is the resistless swing of the tide. An illustration of another class is found in Max Müller's brilliant lectures on "Physical Religion," the chief theme of which is the development of Agni, the Vedic god of fire. The starting-point was the sensuous perception of the physical qualities of fire. The Idea and the will immanent in these qualities gradually raised men's thoughts from the material to the spiritual, until the Eastern world attained to what Max Müller calls "a precious line from the Veda"—"He who above the gods was the One God"—composed at least one thousand years before the Christian era. It was not the result of a supernatural revelation, but a natural outcome of man's thoughts guided and moulded by impressions of outward phenomena.

That is to say, as Max Müller observes, there was nothing in it artificial—simply that which man could not help saying, being what he was and seeing what he saw. In the instances just advanced, the broad principle is most assuredly established that nature has a definite and continuous effect upon the development of man's conduct and thought. And as a consequence of this, we may affirm that Wordsworth's experience is true, in its measure, of all normal members of the race who are in touch with nature: "Therefore am I still A lover of the meadows and the woods And mountains; and of all that we behold Of this green earth; both what they half create And what perceive; well pleased to recognise In nature and the language of the sense, The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul Of all my moral being."

Why, even old in his Dictionary days would write to his friend Langton, in Lincolnshire: "I shall delight to hear the ocean roar, or see the stars twinkle, in the company of men to whom Nature does not spread her volumes or utter her voice in vain." And let us observe, that the naturalness of his feeling keeps him to the simplest, almost monosyllabic, English! In an earlier chapter mention was made of that truly remarkable group of thinkers who, in the sixth century before the Christian era, made the momentous transition from mythology and tradition to philosophy and science.

It was also pointed out that these pioneers, bold as they were, could not shake themselves free from the social and intellectual conditions of their day. And it is precisely this fact of what may be termed contemporary limitations that makes a review of their speculations so valuable to a student of Nature Mysticism. For they lived in times when the old spontaneous nature beliefs were yielding to reflective criticism. Their philosophising took its spring from the fittest products of the mytho-poeic faculty, and thus remained in living contact with the primitive past, while reaching forward, in the spirit of the future, to an ordered knowledge of an ordered whole. The chief object of their search was the Welt-stoff—the substance of the universe—and they were guided in their search by the dominating concepts which had emerged in the long course of the animistic and mythological stages.

Certain forms of external existence have impressed themselves upon the general mind, notably those of water, air, and fire; and to these the reflecting mind naturally turned in its earliest efforts to discover the Ground of things. The interest taken by the nature-mystic in this group of thinkers is twofold. Firstly, he finds that in their speculations there is a large element of primitive intuition, embodied in concepts fashioned by the spontaneous play of reflective thought and free imagination. Closeness to nature is thus secured. And secondly, he rejoices in the fact that these speculations, crude and premature as they inevitably were, contained germs of thought and flashes of insight which anticipate the most advanced speculative science and philosophy of the present day. He maintains that here is corroboration of his view of intuition.

Nature was the teacher—and it was to intuition that she chiefly addressed herself; and the intellect—keen and fresh, but untrained—was able to seize upon the material presented, and to fix it in concepts and theories which share in nature's universal and unending life. Water, air, and fire—what an enormous number and variety of natural phenomena range themselves under these heads! If we try to understand why they were singled out in turn, in the search for the Welt-stoff, we shall have penetrated far into the Nature Mysticism of these famous "elements." Starting, then, with Thales, we ask why he fixed upon water in his attempt (the earliest recorded) to determine the constitution of the universe? What were the properties, qualities, and functions of that "element" which arrested his attention, and governed his crude, but acute and original, speculations?

As already remarked, existing cosmological conceptions played an important rôle, more especially that of the great primeval ocean on which the world was supposed to float. This cosmographical ocean and its accompanying myths will be considered in a subsequent chapter. But restricting our view at present to the physical aspects of water, it is not wholly impossible to recover, and sympathise with, his train of reasoning. Water is wonderfully mobile, incessantly changing, impelled apparently by some inherent principle of movement. Its volatility, also, is very marked; it passes from solid to liquid, and liquid to vapour, and easily reverses the series.

More especially would the old-world thinker be struck by the phenomena of the circulation of water. He would see the vapour drawn up by the sun from lake and ocean, seeming to feed the heavenly fires, and returning to earth in the form of rain. He concluded that this must represent the flow of the cosmic process as a whole. Again, in the falling of dew, in the gatherings of mists, and in the welling-up of fountains, the solid materials of the world are apparently passing into a liquid state. Thales was not the first to note these things. They had been subtly modifying the thoughts of men for untold generations. But he was the first whom we know to have gathered together into a definite theory the vague intuitions which had been so long unconsciously operative. He singled out this mobile element and saw in it the substance of the flux of the world as a whole.

His theory of movement took a wide range. He did not separate the thing moved from the moving force; nor did he draw any distinction between the organic and inorganic—the mechanical and the vital. He regarded all modes of motion as essentially spontaneous and self-determined. Moreover (as Aristotle tells us) he identified this inherent principle of change with what is divine in nature and in the soul. That is to say, the Real, for Thales, is living impulse and continuous process. It is experienced in man's conscious activities, and constitutes the principle of unity in every mode and form of existence. It is on the organic side of this speculation that Aristotle, probably biased by his biological studies, chiefly dwells. Is it possible to trace the grounds of which Thales based his wider induction? Aristotle helps us. He supposes his predecessor to have noted that water and life seem to be inseparable, and that moisture is necessary to the germination and development of all known organisms.

It was natural to conclude that the principle of life is in the water— the conclusion of the reason also harmonising with the intuition stimulated by movement. Nor was the inference altogether unwarranted. Put into historical perspective, it still retains its force and value. The latest biological authorities tell us that all branches of the zoological family tree were formed on the moist shores of large water basins, and that there is no form of life, not only terrestrial, but even of the deep seas which has not passed through a littoral phase. In other words, it is still allowable to hold that the "moist," as Thales generally called his primal element, contains one of the secrets of life.

So close is the earliest to the latest pronouncement on the origin of life on the globe! Reviewing this brief exposition of the leading doctrine of an ancient speculation, what bearing has it on the principles of Nature Mysticism as laid down in preceding chapters? Certain fairly obvious ones. Thales was guided by impressions received from the qualities, behaviour, and functions of water; and they led him to attribute a plastic life to matter. It would be modernising him too severely to style him a hylozoist. But his ascription of a soul to the magnet and to amber carries him far on the way to that metaphysical world-view. Deeply suggestive also is the saying which, if not rightly attributed to him, is at least characteristic of his school—"All things are full of the gods."

We may therefore infer that the physical properties of water are such as to suggest the ideas which have culminated in modern animism. That is to say, water is capable of producing intellectual and spiritual, as well as what are termed physical effects. The deeper view of intuition is justified. And Thales, by virtue of the whole trend and outcome of his speculations, may claim an honoured place in the ranks of the nature-mystics. We have found that the constant movement and change manifested in the circulation of the waters of the globe impressed the mind of Thales and largely determined the course of his speculation. When his great successor, Heracleitus, passed from water to fire, in his search for the Welt-stoff, he by no means became insensible to the mystic appeal of running water. "All things are flowing." Such was the ancient expression of the universal flux; and it is plainly based on the analogy of a stream.

If Heracleitus was not its author, at any rate it became his favourite simile. "We cannot step" (he said) "into the same river twice, for fresh and ever fresh waters are constantly pouring into it." And yet, in a sense, though the waters change, the river remains. Hence the statement assumed a form more paradoxical and mystical—"We step into the same river, and we do not step into it; we are, and we are not." Moving water, then, has the power of stimulating emotion and prompting intuition; and this power is manifested in exceptional degree when the source from which the water issues, and the goal to which it flows, are unknown. These conditions are best satisfied in the case of streams that flow in volume through subterranean caverns.

The darkness contributes its element of undefined dread, and the hollow rumblings make the darkness to be felt. What more calculated to fill the mind of the child of nature with a sense of life and will behind the phenomena? The weird reverberations are interpreted by him as significant utterances of mighty, unseen powers, and the caves and chasms are invested with the awe due to entrances into the gloomy regions where reign the monarchs of the dead. True, it may be said, for the child of nature. But are such experiences possible for the modern mind? Yes, if we can pierce through the varied disguises which the intuitional material assumes as times and manners change. Coleridge, for instance, is thrown into a deep sleep by an anodyne. His imagination takes wings to itself; images rise up before him, and, without conscious effort, find verbal equivalents.

The enduring substance of the vision is embodied in the fragment, "Kubla Khan," the glamour of which depends chiefly on the mystical appeal of subterranean waters. We are transported to where "Alph, the sacred river, ran Through caverns measureless to man, Down to a sunless sea." These three lines make a deeper impression than any others in the poem, and form its main theme. Nor is the feeling of the supernatural unrecognised. Spirits are near with prophetic promptings. From a deep chasm the sacred river throws up a mighty fountain, and for a short space wanders through wood and dale, only to plunge again into its measureless caverns, and sink in tumult to a lifeless ocean: "And mid this tumult Kubla heard from far Ancestral voices prophesying war." Thus when Coleridge's imagination was set free, the mode of feeling declared itself which had persisted down the ages to the present.

The primitive experience is there in its essentials, enriched by the aesthetic and intellectual gains of the intervening centuries. Doubtless there is a living idea, or rather a group of living ideas, behind the phenomena of subterranean waters. Wordsworth has described a more personal experience which chimes in with all that has been said. "Through a rift Not distant from the shore on which we stood, A fixed, abysmal, gloomy, breathing place— Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams Innumerable, roaring with one voice! Heard over earth and sea, and, in that hour, For so it seemed, felt by the starry heavens." If the modern poet could be thus affected, how much more the primitive man who looked down on water falling into chasms, or rushing through their depths. It was natural that such experiences should find expression in his systems of mythology.

The general form they assume is that of springs and rivers in the underworld, the best known of which appear in the Graeco-Roman conceptions of Hades. Homer makes Circe direct Odysseus thus. He is to beach his ship by deep-eddying Oceanus, in the gloomy Cimmerian land. "But go thyself to the dank house of Hades. Thereby into Acheron flow Pyriphlegethon and Cocytus, a branch of the water of the Styx, and there is a rock and the meeting of the two roaring waters." Such were the materials which, with many additions and modifications, developed into the Hades of Virgil's sixth AEneid, with its lakes, and swamps and dismal streams. The subterranean waters figured also in the Greek mysteries, and are elaborated with much detail in Plato's great Phaedo Myth—in all these cases with increasing fullness of mystical meaning. In the popular mind they were incrusted with layers of incongruous notions and crude superstitions.

But, as Plato, for one, so clearly saw, there is always at their core a group of intuitions which have their bearing on the deepest problems of human life, and are capable of moulding spiritual concepts. Still more obviously suffused with mystic meaning and influence are the Teutonic myths concerning the waters of the underworld. The central notion is that of Yggdrasil, the tree of the universe—the tree of time and life. Its boughs stretched up into heaven; its topmost branch overshadowed Walhalla, the hall of the heroes. Its three roots reach down into the dark regions beneath the earth; they pierce through three subterranean fountains, and hold together the universal structure in their mighty clasp.