THE CONCEPT OF NATURE IN THE POETRY
OF
ALFRED TENNYSON AND GEORGE MEREDITH

by

James Stuart Stone

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department

of

ENGLISH

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
AUGUST 1950
The Concept of Nature in the Poetry of Alfred Tennyson and George Meredith

by

James Stuart Stone

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Following a general historical discussion of the idea of nature, the study continues with an analysis of the main sources for Tennyson's nature concept. Here some stress is put upon the temperament of the poet as well as upon his scientific, philosophical and religious affinities with the doctrines of progress and evolution.

Chapter three deals with the view of nature in Tennyson's poetry. That Tennyson regarded nature merely as the physical world interpreted by science is demonstrated by a treatment of his poetry that recognizes the different moods of the poet. The conclusion arrived at is that, no matter what mood he was in, Tennyson viewed nature with suspicion. His attempts to embrace pantheism or to escape actuality through mysticism, transcendentalism, or romantic primitivism indicated his failure to reconcile his idea of nature with religious beliefs that demanded personal immortality and absolute morality for man. Because of these emotional needs, Tennyson, especially after the publication of Darwin's scientific treatises on evolution, was forced into a dualism that separated moral (or spiritual) man from a vast, cruel, immoral (or amoral) nature that Tennyson saw as antagonistic to both man and God. For Tennyson man's progress had nothing to do with nature.

Chapter four argues that Meredith adopted Goethe's
idea that nature is a vital, benevolent being that includes man and God in a unity of the real and ideal worlds. Because Meredith avoided the contradictions that science and Kantian transcendentalism introduced into Tennyson's philosophy, he was able to attain to a conception of the creative and ethical oneness of Earth. Hence he could use Darwinism to clarify his basically Goethian concept of nature, for he abjured the ideas of personal immortality and absolute morality and saw man as a creature of Earth who was progressing toward the harmonious altruistic balance of blood, brain, and spirit that existed in essential humanity. Meredith could rejoice in the struggle of life, which he saw as a struggle for balance and not for existence, because he had from the beginning accepted nature as a beneficent Earth to whose operations man must adjust himself.

The last chapter discusses the different approaches of Tennyson and Meredith to nature, their attitudes to nature's law, and their ideas concerning man's place in nature. One argument resulting from this comparison is that Tennyson, applying Kant's transcendental theories and his own emotional reactions to his scientific interpretation of nature, was pessimistic about nature, whereas Meredith, approaching nature by way of the Goethian synthesis and a happy outlook that discerned a desirable mean in all nature's operations, was optimistic about her. Moreover, Meredith's idea of nature was more modern than Tennyson's, for Meredith's belief in altruism and co-operation being the primary law of nature is supported by certain present-day biological and sociological theories.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I  BACKGROUND: GENERAL CONCEPTS OF NATURE (800-1900)  1

II  THE FORMATIVE INFLUENCES UPON TENNYSON'S CONCEPT OF NATURE  24

III  TENNYSON'S CONCEPT OF NATURE AS SEEN IN HIS POETRY  53
   A. Nature regarded as the physical world interpreted by science
   B. Attempted pantheism
   C. Mystical apprehension of "supernature"
   D. Other escapes into a supernature
   E. Nature in Tennyson: Summary

IV  MEREDITH'S CONCEPT OF NATURE  91
   A. Chrysalis period - up to 1859
   B. First impact of Darwinism (1859-1871)
   C. Meredith's mature concept of nature

V  A COMPARISON OF THE CONCEPTS OF NATURE IN MEREDITH AND TENNYSON THAT INCLUDES AN ESTIMATE OF THE RELATIVE MODERNITY OF THEIR PHILOSOPHIES  142

VI  BIBLIOGRAPHY  157
   A. Bibliographical references
   B. Alfred Tennyson
   C. George Meredith
   D. Other references consulted
THE CONCEPT OF NATURE IN THE POETRY OF ALFRED TENNYSON AND GEORGE MEREDITH

BACKGROUND: GENERAL CONCEPTS OF NATURE (800-1900)

The idea of nature has always been a will o' the wisp, changing with each wind and all winds. For example, even in the eighteenth century, when it apparently had received its most stable form, "nature" was recognized by Samuel Johnson as a word which did not lend itself to strict definition. In his Dictionary Johnson defines "nature" in eleven different ways, some obsolescent, some contemporaneous and generally acceptable, and some only beginning to receive the recognition that was later accorded them. Obviously it is impossible for me adequately to treat of either the many concepts of nature listed by Johnson or those many others that were favoured during the eleven hundred years with which I am concerned. Therefore, I shall discuss only the main ideas of nature of each period in order to indicate the general pattern of human thought and feeling which determined in a large measure the concepts of nature in Alfred Tennyson and George Meredith.

Nature - Medieval (800-1450)

Man's position in the order of things after the Fall was the substratum upon which rested medieval man's concept of and attitude toward nature. As a result of Original Sin, man, though he still had some divine attributes, was but a creature of clay that had to follow the teachings of the church in order to achieve salvation. And below him on a fixed hierarchy of being was nature, the world of change that represented, if man
did not approach her with a proper love of and obedience to the Church and to God, a trapdoor opening over the entrance to an actual hell. Nature's transient beauty was therefore a lure that man should avoid as he would avoid the plague or the ever-present emissaries of Satan.

But nature was not entirely devilish, for she had been created by the Deity. Because God had set nature in motion in order that man "might work out his life and destiny"¹, medieval thinkers reasoned that they might see in her some evidence of the moral and spiritual truths that man had to grasp for salvation. As a consequence, nature, though allied with Satan, became a source of moral example for man. Man was to look to her not for "knowledge and enlightenment" - the thirst for knowledge was the temptation that had introduced Original Sin into the world - but for "edification and exemplification"² of the divine truths of which the Church was aware. On the authority of God's ministers medieval man might observe nature's order as an imperfect manifestation of God's power; the practice of white magic (mainly medicinal healing based on astronomical observation) and the compilation of bestiaries that dealt with the admirable ethics of legendary beasts were permissible, but any objective study of nature for its own sake was black magic, the penalty for which was the death of both body and soul.

Nevertheless, many of the ablest thinkers of the middle

ages did not accept the letter, though they did comply with the spirit, of this authoritative church dogma. St. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, appealed to authority only when he had to; although he still regarded nature from the viewpoint of ethics, he did contend that human actions should be based upon the natural law discernible through reason as well as upon the eternal law that was revealed through faith and the church. And St. Francis of Assisi likewise laid more stress upon the goodness of nature than the Church usually condoned. As Randall says:

> Seeing only God in all things, it was natural that Francis should love every man, every beast of the field and bird of the air, that he should rejoice in that fellowship with nature that is bred of and breeds pantheism of the spirit.

St Francis's and Aquinas's attitudes to nature, it is true, were exceptional in this period when authority dictated that nature be seen in symbolic, not aesthetic or rationalistic terms. Yet their different approaches did indicate a growing interest and delight in nature that reflected the influence both of an expanding trade and of the Hellenistic science that was entering Europe through contact with the Arabs. Even Chaucer, a man more representative of the later medieval period than Aquinas or St. Francis, could express his joy in the awakening of new life amongst nature's creatures:

---

3 Ibid., p.207.
Whan that Aprille with hise shoures soote  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,  
And bathed every veyne in swich liquor  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;  
Whan Zephiris eek with his swete breeth  
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth  
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne  
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne;  
And smale foweles maken melodye,  
That slepen al the nyght with open eye -  
So priketh hem nature in hir corages ...

Nature - Renaissance (1450-1662)

The discovery of the classics constituted the first threat to the medieval concept of two widely separated worlds, the world of religion and the world of nature and common life. But, though the science and philosophy of Aristotle and Galen provided the initial impetus toward bringing the two worlds closer together, it remained for renaissance science and philosophy to establish natural theology on a firm basis. One must not, of course, assume that the transition from medieval to renaissance thought was effected in a few decades. Natural history, the study of zoology and botany in particular, did not base its findings upon exact observation of natural phenomena until the time of Francis Bacon. And the Copernican and Cartesian revolutions, which led to the mechanistic and mathematical view of nature so popular for at least 150 years after Newton, did not begin to make themselves manifest until the first half of the seventeenth century.

2 see Raven, English Naturalists from Neckam to Ray, p.47 - "For a century or more the study of nature for its own sake by observation and experiment was carried on alongside of its use for hieroglyphics, symbols, fables, and moralisings."
Hence it is to the Elizabethans that one must look for an aesthetic and scientific appreciation of nature that differs noticeably from that of the medieval period. For just prior to and during Elizabeth's reign the new interest in nature was being, as Raven says, "popularized":

Antiquaries like Leland and Camden, chroniclers like Holinshed and Stow, Latinists like Elyot and Cooper, poets like Spenser and Drayton were beginning to display a concern for nature, an interest in the world about them, a delight in noting and naming its flowers and birds, that were wholly new.

While this popularization was taking place, other men like Francis Bacon were investigating nature's phenomena by means of an experimental method which was as exact as their crude instruments would permit and which was the forerunner of the modern inductive method. Widening the "bounds of man's empire" through an objective knowledge of this world was the pursuit of Bacon and his followers that gave new importance to the concept of nature in an age that had accepted the goodness of both the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit.

Because Bacon's scientific discoveries had to do mainly with the phenomena of earth, he was able to assert man's superiority over nature. But other discoveries were beginning to question this dominance. In the fifteenth century Copernicus had advanced the hypothesis that earth was not the center of a tight, relatively small universe, as the middle ages had conceived it. And Galileo at the beginning of the seventeenth

century consummated this Copernican revolution by experimentally proving the infinite size of the world of nature in which earth was neither central nor significant. Galileo's theories, which indicated the insignificance and relative unimportance of man in this vast scheme, were further ratified by his follower Descartes, who by means of deductive reasoning formulated an hypothesis that subjected man to the mathematical, immutable order of nature. Descartes' explanations could not stand close scrutiny because they were not based on observation or experiment; however, they did form the Cartesian arch into which Newton later set the keystone. And they did inspire in the first half of the seventeenth century/mechanistic concept of nature. Hobbes, following Descartes' lead, suggested that man, who was basically selfish and cruel, should follow nature and her fixed laws and not live according to a morality dictated by his conscience or the church. And Spinoza founded a religion upon the new science, a mechanistic pantheism that saw God as order and man's soul as part of this natural order that was regulated by the mathematical law of necessity. Spinoza's pantheism and Hobbes's morality were not generally acceptable to the majority of the intellectuals of the first part of the century; but the idea of nature as a machine was compatible with their experience and faith. For such a view of nature conformed with both the human experience of designing

2 Ibid., p.186.
3 Ibid., p.244-45.
and constructing machines and the belief in a creative and omnipotent God. Had Descartes been a Newton, the period before 1650 probably would have produced an Analogy to rival Butler's.

But Descartes was no Newton. Hence the most prevalent view of nature in the seventeenth century was neither mechanistic nor mathematical. The emphasis was still on faith and revelation, even though the two worlds of the middle ages had been brought very close to one another. Certainly the mechanistic conception of nature gave support to the widespread belief that nature was in her dotage; but the hope for the return of the golden age and the strong interest in the "noble savage" resulted from a belief in the biblical Eden, not from Cartesianism. The best minds of the latter half of the seventeenth century based their ideas of nature not on mechanical law but on a "sense of wonder and of the reality and presence of God in the world of nature." The neo-platonists, Cudworth and More, for example, were so disturbed by the mechanistic view of nature that they postulated a "plastic nature", a spirit in nature that carried out in a vital way the laws that God had imposed upon nature. And most of the members of the Royal Society, who did not in the main agree with Cudworth's or More's assumption of a separate spirit in nature, did experience a sensible feeling of wonder as to how God manifested his spirit and his will in the world. The general feeling of

1 Raven, English Naturalists from Neckam to Ray, p.343.
"new philosophers" like Sir Thomas Browne was that their scientific appeal to factual evidence, observation, and experiment should be made in order that man might come closer to God through nature. Their scientific approach and their religious belief were thus at one in forming an attitude toward a nature whose matter was informed in some mysterious way by God's spirit.

Nature - Eighteenth Century

[Natural Religion based on Reason]

With Newton the mechanistic view of nature came into full flower. For Newton's picture of nature as a world-machine operating independently of the God that was its first cause became the foundation of the general eighteenth-century faith in a natural religion based on reason, the "light of Nature". Reason, as Newton had shown, proved that an external Creator was "a necessary scientific hypothesis" deducible from the evidence in nature of immutable law, simplicity, order, design and providence. As a result of the operation of reason, nature was interpreted as "the whole rational order of things, of which man was the most important part". The rational design of nature was the true source of eighteenth-century optimism.

Out of Newton's science, therefore, arouse the deistic religion that depended solely upon reason. And what was reason? For Rapin and Pope it was identified with nature, the ancients,

1 Raven, English Naturalists from Neckam to Ray, pp.343ff.
3 Beach, Concept of Nature, pp.77-8.
and the literary rules in such a way that only the educated admirers of the classics could enter its sacrosanct limits. Obviously this literary definition was not the one which the deists, following Newton, could accept. Locke's definition embraced the general conception more fully:

Reason is natural Revelation, whereby the Father of light and fountain of all knowledge, communicates to mankind that portion of truth which He has laid within the reach of their natural faculties.

Locke's "reason" was more in keeping with Newton's deductive and mathematical treatment of nature than with Bacon's inductive view of natural phenomena, for his deistic approach to nature subordinated faith to reason. Through reason alone could man perceive the natural law that governed man's morality as well as all things physical. Locke and the deists in general apparently did not realize that, in stressing the power of man's reason, they were automatically assuming the existence of free will, while at the same time they were recognizing nature's law of necessity through the equation of the moral world with the physical. They praised nature, paradoxically, as both a liberating principle and a supreme regulative power.

But, whatever their errors in logic may have been, the deists held consistently to the idea that religion was to be founded upon the mechanistic laws of nature, upon the universal fixed harmony lauded by Pope in his Essay on Man. Even Bishop

2 Pope's Essay on Man presents a similar but not so explicit idea of reason's existence and function.
3 John Locke, "Essay Concerning Human Understanding" (Bk. IV, Ch. 19, Section 4), The Works of John Locke, London, Tegg, Sharpe and others, 1823, 10 vols.
Butler, representative of orthodoxy in the eighteenth century, founded his belief in revelation upon an analogy of God's laws with a reasoned interpretation of nature's laws. Reason and nature were the causes of his faith, and not the effects of it. Butler's belief in miracles was the only point of difference between his and the deistic natural religion so well described by Benn:

The deist position then ... amounts to this. Reason is our sole and sufficient guide in life. It teaches us that nature is the work of a perfectly good Being, who desires us to be good, not for his sake, but for our own. The rational end of human action is happiness, and happiness is best secured by the observance of moral laws ascertained by studying the natural relations of things ... [Living in an orderly manner is] the law of nature, and such also is Natural Religion.

For the deists reason was all man needed to discern the benevolence and purpose in the order of nature.

Deism carried to its logical extreme became a materialistic, necessarian, and sometimes atheistic, philosophy. In France the Encyclopedists, of whom d'Holbach is the best-known representative, adopted an atheistic materialism. They shelved the religious associations of the earlier deists and assumed that nature working according to fixed laws was all that man could know. And, although they still maintained a faith in reason (or self-interest) and postulated on the basis of that faith a progress of man toward future perfection,

1 cf. Chapter 2, p.36 and p.47.
3 Willey, The Eighteenth Century Background, p.156.
4 The idea of perfectibility was originated by Joseph Priestley, but stated most clearly by Concordet.
their philosophy of nature was so somber that even Goethe found it gloomy. On the English side of the channel the world picture was not painted in such black colours. Priestley could still assume the existence both of God and of a beneficent nature. Nevertheless, he too placed man in a framework of natural necessity and materialism. Indeed, both he and William Godwin carried the rationalistic conclusions of deism to their logical and impracticable limit. Priestley saw Providence and reason working together toward man's inevitable perfectibility. And Godwin believed that with reason as its sole guide and abstract Good as its only end mankind must be victorious in its search for truth; necessity, the law of causation governing the universe was for Godwin man's assurance of this triumph. Nature with Godwin had gone as far into the abstract and potential as reason could take her. After Godwin pure deductive reason could no longer be the means of ascertaining either man's true morality or his method of progress in nature. Some theory closer to actual life was needed.

Reactions against the interpretation of nature by deductive reasoning

The other important concepts of nature in the eighteenth century had their origin mainly in reaction against the interpretation of nature through the mechanistic operation of reason. Though the exponents of these philosophies of reaction did not question the facts of Newtonian science, they did

1 Willey, op. cit., p.168.
2 Ibid., p.218.
3 Willey, The Eighteenth Century Background, p.239.
criticize the conventional explanation of those facts. The idealists, for example, particularly Bishop Berkeley and Hegel, regarded the laws of nature as mere "'rules or methods observed in the productions (sic) of natural effects' "\(^2\). As an alternative to deistic mechanism Berkeley proposed an *anima mundi*,\(^3\) an intellectual spirit which could assume both material and non-material form and which governed nature for God. (Berkeley's *anima mundi*, one will note, was not very different from the "plastic nature" assumed by the neoplatonists, Cudworth and More.) Hegel's philosophy was even more platonic and idealistic than that of Berkeley. Hegel did not recognize either nature or man as material; he saw nature as a manifestation of pure thought and man as essential intelligence incarnate.\(^4\)

Idealism, however, had few followers in the eighteenth century. What was more destructive to the deistic philosophy was the negative criticism of David Hume. Hume turned to the empiricism which had constituted Locke's fundamental difference from the deists and constructed a natural religion upon man's experience of nature through his feelings. Hume still accepted the orderly conception of nature revealed by Newton, but he believed that experience, not reason, was the means of corroborating scientific fact. His compromise with science

---

1 cf. Chapter 2, p.46.
3 Ibid., p.71.
represented a watershed between deism and Kant, between the combination of Nature and Reason and that of Nature and feeling. \(^1\)

Kant also was concerned with the failure, as he saw it, of the deists to justify religion on a truly rational basis that agreed with the facts of nature and with man's feelings (or intuition). He, therefore, presented in his *Critique of Pure Reason* his subject-object distinction\(^2\), which gave to science the investigation of natural phenomena that could be explained by objective fact, and which justified the use of faith in that domain where science could neither prove nor disprove what the intuition apprehended. Kant's transcendentalism thus separated the world of material nature from moral man, their union being apparent for Kant only in the God who transcended them.

What in Kant most concerns the changing concept of nature is the importance he gave back to the intuitional interpretation of nature. This emphasis on intuition was not new - Shaftesbury and the pre-romantic poets (Thomson, Akenside, the Warton brothers, and so on) had hinted at its importance - but the weight of philosophy behind Kant's intuitive view gave new strength to this reaction against deism. It was Kant, probably more than anyone else, who made possible both the popularity of Rousseau's natural man, the man of passion and feeling, and the great success of the romantic idea of man's returning to nature through obedience to his instincts and not to his reason.

\(^1\) Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background*, p.111.  
Another blow to the natural religion of the deists came through the eighteenth-century study of natural history. Eighteenth-century biologists did not refute the principles of plenitude and continuity that the deists had read into the chain-of-being concept first brought into prominence by Locke and Leibniz. But, because of paleontological discoveries, they did begin to wonder about the missing "links" and to question the stability of the links of which something was already known. Kant\(^1\) and other investigators showed that, if one acknowledged the time required for evolution in the cosmos, it was a logical assumption that the chain was being completed only in infinite time. This idea, combined with the general idea of progress that was displacing the "nothing new under the sun" concept of the early part of the century, began to alter the chain of being to a program of endless Becoming\(^2\). For the first time since the Greeks, nature was being regarded as an organism; and for the first time in history she was being seen as an actual and historical record of the universe and of man.

Confusion at the end of the century

The movements "back to nature" through reason and through feeling created at the end of the century a confused situation. In theory the conflict was between the conception of an abstract and potential nature and that of an actual and historical nature. But in practice the distinction was not so clear-cut. The scientists, for instance, could do little with the idea of

\(^1\) cf. Chapter 2, p. 35
\(^2\) cf. Chapter 2, pp. 35–36
nature as an organism because they were still trying to fit her evolutionary manifestations into the Newtonian picture. Erasmus Darwin and Lamarck, to name two of the eighteenth-century forerunners of Charles Darwin, were obliged to assume that conscious or instinctive desire both brought about variations in species and evolved new species, for these scientists could find no naturalistic explanation of change or progress in Newton's mathematical conclusions. Because they were labouring under the eighteenth-century delusion that free will and necessity could be easily reconciled, they could not see, as Malthus\(^1\) (in reaction to Godwin) saw, the inherent contradictions in their theories.

Another source of confusion was the mode of operation of natural law in society. Was it to be the law of Eden or that of Europe? No one was quite sure, although almost every intelligent person agreed that the "noble savage", happy though he might be, was not as civilized or as progressive as a European. Besides, the French Revolution, which the followers of reason had hailed as the passport to a natural state of affairs, had shown that civilized institutions were perhaps better than the "natural" state of anarchy extolled by Godwin. And yet, because nature was generally viewed as a liberating principle, the moral nexus remained, even though the "noble savage" was transformed into an English peasant.

The religious picture was even more unbalanced than either the scientific or the moral one. Was God immanent in

---

an organic nature and in man, as the transcendentalists and the romantics believed, or was he the Creator apart from his machine, as the deists, Paley, and the science of the eighteenth century all agreed? On the answer to this question rested the peace of mind of the people of the first half of the nineteenth century. But there was no definite answer. As a consequence, the nineteenth century inherited a confused mixture of scientific fact, philosophical speculation, and religious controversy.

Nature - Nineteenth Century

[Nature in the romantic period]

Romanticism, in revolt against reason and a mechanistic philosophy of nature, attempted to achieve a basic unity of the physical and spiritual elements in nature and man. One idea which the romantic poets all had in common was that it was possible to see in the real world a manifestation of the spiritual force behind or in nature. When they were looking with delight at the beauteous forms in wild nature or when they noticed the noble qualities in man that were inspired by nature's beauty, they all agreed that nature's loveliness gave hints of moral and benevolent qualities, no matter whether they saw nature as the Deity or merely as His unintelligent agent.

Goethe's nature religion\(^1\) was possibly the most balanced and consistent of all the romantic ideas of nature. For him nature was the intelligent God who only appeared to be

\(^1\) see Beach, Concept of Nature, pp.276-291 (also see Chapters 2 and 4).
indifferent to man. Therefore, man's duty in life was to labour toward a mystical conception of the oneness of life, death, change, nature, man, and God. Goethe's pantheism was founded on a balance of freedom and law, change and permanence, science and religion, that permitted him the luxury of joy in an actual nature possessing all the sanity attributed to her by eighteenth-century rationalism.

Coleridge, following Kant, could not see nature as Goethe did. Nature was for him the *natura naturata*, that is, a material expression of the *natura naturans*, the active and benevolent God transcending nature. Nature was the "not-me" that operated according to a cause-and-effect law; for Coleridge the true view of the universe was only possible through the recognition of the "I am". In other words, Coleridge interpreted the evolutionary scale of being as a dynamic life process existing only in the minds of men and in the mind of God. He had no faith in an objective study of the material world, for he believed that scientific investigation dealt with the part and neglected the whole. The apprehension of the whole, of the active principle moulding material nature and spiritual man was the prime endeavour which convinced Coleridge that the dualism inherent in his philosophy was only apparent. Yet he, like Shelley in the last years of his life, could embrace only a surface naturalism, for he could not conceive of man's all-important mind being derived from an unconscious, unintelligent power like nature.

1 Beach, *Concept of Nature*, p.326.
I have treated of Goethe and Coleridge in order to indicate the extremes in nature philosophy among the romantics and to point out the breadth of Wordsworth's concept of nature. For Wordsworth compounded a natural religion from both pante­
eism and transcendentalism. In his early life Wordsworth saw nature as something divine; her beauty, providential law, benevolence, and unity constituted proof for him, as it did for Goethe, that man, merely by letting nature play upon his senses, could obtain the moral force and spiritual inspiration he needed to live a good life. Following Hartley, Locke, and Rousseau, Wordsworth felt that nature developed man's character through the pleasurable sensations she aroused in him. This sensuous communion with nature, especially wild nature, was for the early Wordsworth the only way in which man might return to his natural state of virtue and benevolence. But after 1800 Wordsworth began to doubt the divinity of nature, for he realized the difficulty of reconciling man's divine mind and spirit with a nature that was, after all, not the Creator of man. Man's creative mind, which gave him dominance over nature, had to be united with God. Therefore, the later Wordsworth turned more and more toward transcendentalism. But he never completely forsook his pantheistic doctrine. Nature, which to Wordsworth did not reveal the cruel aspect that many Victorians saw in her, was still a refining and purifying influence insofar as man's morality was concerned. His Ode to Duty

1 Beach, Concept of Nature, p.180.
2 Beach, Concept of Nature, p.31.
indicates that he was still able to conceive of nature as an ethical norm, for in this poem he identifies moral and physical law in words that are reminiscent both of Goethe's joy in a benevolent nature and of Coleridge's belief in an absolute morality:

Stern Lawgiver! yet thou dost wear
The Godhead's most benignant grace;
Nor know we anything so fair
As is the smile upon thy face:
Flowers laugh before thee on their beds
And fragrance in thy footing treads;
Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong;
And the most ancient heavens, through thee,
are fresh and strong.

*(Ode to Duty*, 11. 50-58)

Wordsworth, ignoring contemporary scientific discoveries, was able, as were most of the romantic poets, to achieve a balance between delight in nature's beauty and faith in man's ethical progress.

**Nature in the Victorian period**

Because the Victorians were swept up in the full flood of scientific progress, it was no longer possible for them to regard nature in the general way the romantics had looked at her. Progress¹, "the central and most characteristic belief of the nineteenth century"² was making itself all too evident in every phase of Victorian life. It was generally believed that, through the efforts of the individual man exercising his

¹ *Ideas and Beliefs of The Victorians*, London, Sylvan Press, 1949, p.33 - Progress for the Victorians was "a belief in the steady, cumulative and inevitable expansion of human awareness and power- material, intellectual, spiritual".
² Ibid., p.33.
free will to the limit, mankind had reached a high point in human development. And yet the Victorians were faced with the dire economic conditions of the Industrial Revolution, the poverty that the laissez-faire economists conceived to be a law of nature. The intellectuals, most of whom were up in arms over the "condition of England", had to realize that progress as they conceived it seemed to be inimical to the belief in a benevolent nature that was their heritage both from the eighteenth century and from the romantics. These leaders of Victorian thought therefore came to the conclusion that ethics was their prime concern. Whether or not nature could be fitted into the ethical scheme depended upon the ability of each individual poet, scientist, or philosopher to formulate a philosophy consistent with his ethical ideal, his religious beliefs, his temperament, his recognition of scientific fact, or a combination of all these matters.

For example, men like August Comte and John Stuart Mill believed that ethical progress was possible only if society was founded upon nature's law of universal causation. Society for them was everything, and nature was but the ethical balance of pleasure and pain; their only God was a Humanity which progressed according to a law of self-preservation that tended toward the "greatest good of the greatest number". Thomas Carlyle, on the other hand, believed that ethical progress could take place only through either a Calvinistic renunciation of self that would develop a moral sense of nature's essential goodness and spirituality or the strong rule of a man like Napoleon who would maintain an order of nature that identified
right and might.

Other Victorians adopted the belief of Matthew Arnold that man could progress only if he adhered to a stoical pantheism and recognized the humanizing effect of culture. Arnold, who saw no purpose in nature, suggested that man should transcend her by allowing his higher moral self to lift him into a better realm than this world of nature that contained both good and evil. Arnold saw the value of nature's order as a moral example for restless man, but he condemned her materialistic law.

But these men were not dealing with progress in the light of the evolutionary concept that, interpreted in historical terms, seemed to assure man's progressive development. Early in the century the late eighteenth-century concepts of time and history had been ratified by the discoveries in geology, astronomy and paleontology. And even though the religious fundamentalists opposed the idea of man being the end-product of a progress that had involved hundreds of millions of years, science had its way. Nature therefore became an entity of vast proportions in both space and time. Yet for a time the scientists agreed both that man's mind and morality were not subject to the laws of physical development and that nature might still be seen as benevolent, since the incompleteness of the geological record could uphold eighteenth-century ideas of plenitude.

Darwin's *On The Origin of Species*, however, wrought havoc with both these beliefs, for the scientist's theory

---

3 cf. Chapter 2, pp.40 and 49.
struck both at the idea of a divine nature and at the concept of progress. But the Victorians in general did not at first realize the implications of Darwin's refusal to recognize progress. What they did react against was his theory that mind was a result of natural selection and that there was no evidence in nature to justify faith in a divinity of any sort, either in nature or outside her. The evolutionary scientists had made of nature "a temporary phase of a process of incessant change"\textsuperscript{1}, but most Victorians had to have assurance of something permanent in nature or outside her. Although they finally accepted Darwinism in its essentials, they kept up a search for something more.

Hence in the last thirty years of the century many of the old religious faiths gave way to a concern for ethical standards. Some Victorians tried to reconcile moral progress with nature, but most of this group found it difficult to assume any benevolence in her. Others scorned nature and turned to God for ethical guidance. A third group based their morality on an agnostic faith in humanism; they, like those who turned to God, acknowledged the necessity for man to fight against "cruel" nature. And still others, like Hardy, took refuge in a meliorism that assumed a blind, immanent will controlling the universe according to chance. Hardy could see no evidence for any belief in purpose, design, providence, harmony, or benevolence in nature. His only hope for the world was that consciousness, which he saw in man, might someday

enter into this blind force and thus bring some sort of unity and harmony into the universe.

This, then, was the changing climate in which Tennyson and Meredith moved. Tennyson, in particular, saw during his lifetime a transition from the eighteenth-century belief in a divine, ordered nature to an agnostic stoicism or an atheistic despair that placed man in opposition to nature, the only visible evidence of his existence. Meredith, born nineteen years after Tennyson, was not influenced by many of the eighteenth-century ideas, but, because he had close affiliations with romanticism, he also viewed the general change from a strong faith in nature to an emphasis on ethical man. My concern in the following chapters will be to indicate how this general pattern of action and reaction in the nineteenth century both affected the growth of the concepts of nature and tested the strength of the mature convictions of these two poets.
Tennyson's temperament - his controlling genius

Alfred Tennyson was throughout his life a very sensitive person, a man with an inordinate aversion to physical or mental pain. This extreme sensitivity was not without good cause, for, though he was almost always in good physical health, Tennyson did pass through a period of great mental strain during his most impressionable years, that is, between 1824 and 1832, the years of his adolescence and early manhood. In 1824 his father, because of financial worries (for which Tennyson as one of eleven children was partly responsible), turned to drink as an escape. But liquor made his condition worse; he became subject to "paroxysms of violence" that inspired his whole household, particularly the already sensitive Alfred, with shame, grief, and terror. The scenes that resulted from his father's black moods often troubled Tennyson so greatly that he longed for death. As Charles Tennyson tells us:

It was particularly unfortunate that Alfred, with his sensitive and imaginative temperament, should have been exposed to such influences during the years of adolescence. This exaggerated in him the family tendency toward melancholy and depression, the "black-bloodedness" of the Tennysons, which was to affect him all his life.

The domestic trouble begun by the father's illness did not, moreover, end there. Two particular incidents, among

2 Ibid., p.48.
3 Ibid., p.48.
4 Ibid., p.48.
others, that left their mark on Tennyson's nervous temperament are the following: first, the rustication from Cambridge of his brother Frederick, which, because it had a disastrous effect on his father's physical health, plunged Alfred into a state of depression and hypochondria; and secondly, the extreme financial distress of the family in 1831 that indirectly caused a mental breakdown in Alfred's brother Edward and an addiction to opium in another brother, Charles.

All this domestic affliction, I believe, accentuated the natural moodiness of the young poet to a point where temperament controlled him. That is, the ideas and beliefs of Tennyson came to depend for their strength of conviction on the state of the poet's mood of the moment. Yet Tennyson's intellect struggled to subdue his governing genie; it strove unsuccessfully to find an Aladdin's lamp from which it could first rub the dust of pain and doubt and then command the objectionable genie to be gone. For Tennyson believed that it was his mission in life to supply an intellectually acceptable solution to the problems raised by science and religion, to uphold human dignity and personality in the face of the facts of change and process in the world. Therefore, it is fair to assume both that the poet's idea of nature was strongly influenced by any facts or ideas that tended to give unity to the attempted compromise and that the concept of nature resulting from his acquired knowledge or faith (or both) was always relative to or dependent

2 Ibid., p. 128.
upon the poet's mood.

Aesthetic-scientific influences on Tennyson's concept of Nature

Tennyson in the 1870's made the following remark to Carlyle:

In my old age I should like to get away from all this tumult and turmoil of civilization and live on the top of a tropical mountain! I should at least like to see the splendours of the Brazilian forests before I die. 

Did the poet mean by this statement that he had not been able to appreciate the beauties of European scenery, and that only as a "noble savage" could he have an aesthetic appreciation of nature? Certainly one may easily find imagery in his poetry which indicates a feeling for beauty; but seldom is there the "sense of something deeply interfused" that was Wordsworth's characteristic aesthetic reaction. What accounts for this basic difference in nature appreciation between Tennyson and the romantic poet?

Part of the answer to this last question lies in Tennyson's early environment. Somersby, Lincolnshire, as Harold Nicolson tells us, presented a constant contrast to the sensitive


2 cf. Wordsworth's comment on Tennyson (c. 1842-50): He is apparently "not much in sympathy with what I should myself most value in my attempts, viz. the spirituality with which I have endeavoured to invest the material universe, and the moral relations under which I have wished to exhibit its most ordinary appearances." - "Wordsworth Grows Old", The Times Literary Supplement, April 21, 1950, p.238.
Tennyson, a contrast between the gentler beauties of nature as seen in the trees, the flowers, the gardens - in general, the domesticated growth that Tennyson beheld in the small Rectory garden - and the harsher kind of scenery - the gloomy wolds, the stark plowland, the flattened counties, and the distant, thundering sea. The young Tennyson took a keen interest in both these aspects of nature. But, because of his temperamental predilection for scientific knowledge, he observed with satisfaction those beauties which were explicable and viewed with awe those that he found mysterious. It is true that he was able to advise his brother Fred, who was shy of going to a dinner party, to "think of Herschel's great star patches, and you will soon get over all that." Yet, when he later realized the implications of the real mysteries - "Time, life and 'finite-infinite' space" - or when he felt the vastness of the heavens, the strangeness of this cosmic beauty sometimes must have repelled him. Thus even his intuition would have driven him to seek the beauties of nature which had in them no awe-inspiring mystery. Wordsworth had been able to construct a natural theology upon the pleasure to be derived from the beauty of an orderly Nature, but how could Tennyson have done likewise? Nature for the Victorian poet was too often strange and alien, sometimes even evil.

3 Ibid., Vol.I, p.316.  
Tennyson's remark in 1839 that he was "not so able as in old years to commune alone with Nature"\(^1\) signified that even at the age of thirty he was unable to get from nature the spiritual pleasure that a Wordsworthian "solitary" would have experienced. What Tennyson had observed in nature had apparently cast a shadow over his early love of natural beauty that could be dispelled only through Tennyson's full knowledge of the function and the "raison d'être" of the natural object being considered. The emotional inspiration from the star, from the tree, from the flower, did not, it seems, matter so much to Tennyson after 1840 as the statistics concerning the place of the star in the ordered cosmos, the growth rate of the tree, and the exact colour of the flower.\(^2\)

Besides, this scientific aestheticism was what the Victorians wanted. Since many of them were amateur naturalists, nothing delighted them more than "to be provided with their own familiar thoughts in a form which would appear tremendous".\(^3\) Scores of Tennyson's readers even went to the trouble of writing to the press to comment upon the exactness of the Laureate's observation of 'Nature'—of birds, of flowers, of the sea, the wind, the trees. These critics were not interested in "the intrinsic reality of the emotion presented" but in "external accuracy of presentation".\(^4\) Tennyson, himself a lover of fact, was not deaf to their praise or criticism.

---

2 See footnote on previous page (Wordsworth's comment on Tennyson).  
It is reasonable then to conclude that Tennyson's aesthetic view of nature was influenced by the impact of early environment and this favourable criticism in such a way that this view came more and more to express scientific rather than aesthetic appreciation. However, in spite of this reasoned conclusion, one must remember that Tennyson was something of a romantic. Therefore, it is to be expected that expressions of his aesthetic conception of nature sometimes transcend mere accuracy. A composite picture of his aesthetic idea of nature will require some balancing of romantic feeling for and scientific observation of nature. The tropical mountain and the Brazilian forests represent the longing of the romantic to slip the bonds of scientific exactitude.

Scientific influences on Tennyson's concept of nature

In Under the Microscope (1872) one finds the following statement:

We live in an age when not to be scientific is to be nothing; the man untrained in science...is but a pitiable and worthless pretender in the sight of professors to whom natural science is not a mean but an end.1

Swinburne, it is true, made this remark in a satirical vein; nevertheless, it does express the general Victorian faith in science. Tennyson, as a representative Victorian, would have agreed - and this statement seems to apply throughout his lifetime - that the facts of science were to be trusted. "Science indeed in his opinion was one of the main forces

tending to disperse the superstition that still darkens the world". As Professor Sidgwick stated in an appraisal of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*:

> [for Tennyson] the physical world is always the world as known to us through physical science; the scientific view of it dominates his thoughts about it; and his general acceptance of this view is real and sincere, even when he utters the intensest feeling of its inadequacy to satisfy our deepest needs.

Which of the physical sciences had the greatest effect on Tennyson's idea of nature? I think it is a logical assumption that physics and chemistry had little influence. These two sciences (physics especially) were based on complicated mathematical formulae mainly derived from Newtonian calculus. Moreover, they were controlled by deterministic natural laws which had little to do with man's place in nature, and hence had only an indirect effect on the Victorian compromise between science and religion. The rule of law which was of interest to Tennyson was the rule of progress; "progress" was the catalyst which he thought would accelerate the union of fact and faith. Because astronomy, geology, palaeontology, and biology all seemed to support this belief in "progress" through their increasing emphasis on evolution, it was natural that an amateur scientist like Tennyson should turn to these sciences with great interest.

**Scientific influences (Pre-Cambridge)**

Some of Tennyson's evolutionary ideas had their origin

---

in the Somersby period of his life. The Memoir tells us that Tennyson read in his father's library books by Burke, Goldsmith, and Buffon. Each of these men doubtless contributed something to Tennyson's evolutionary views. In Burke the young poet would have seen the conception of nature as "the funded wisdom of the ages", as the possession of a human society that was slowly evolving toward perfection. The idea of nature as actual and historical was a scientific concept in Burke which would have impressed Tennyson.

In Goldsmith too was this idea of gradation, this time in the realm of biology. If Tennyson read Goldsmith's popular edition of natural history, he may have noticed a suggestion of the inadmissibility of fixed species; Goldsmith had contended that the divisions between species were arbitrarily fixed by man, not by nature.

But, whether or not Tennyson found a hint as to the possible mutability of species in Goldsmith, he certainly encountered it in Buffon's Histoire Naturelle, which traced the growth of nature from the formation of earth to man. Yet Buffon's views must have confused the young Tennyson, for, unlike Linnaeus, the great naturalist had insisted on classifying man apart from the apes. Furthermore, Buffon had

1 Ibid., Vol. I, p.16.
wavered between two positions: first, the belief that, because of imperceptible gradation, there were no fixed species, and second, because of the infertility of hybrids, the assertion that species were "objective and fundamental realities".

The awakening of Tennyson's interest in astronomy was certainly contemporaneous with that in biology, if not of earlier date. From William Herschel's writings, which he and his brother Frederick at least knew at second hand, Tennyson would have learned of the nebular hypothesis of Laplace (or of Kant, as Thomas Huxley showed). In this hypothesis was evidence of cosmic evolution (in the origin and development of solar systems) taking place in an infinite space-time universe. Tennyson must have wondered even in the 1820's if there was any possible connection between this evolution in the cosmos and the progressive development of earth's creatures.

It is also likely that during this period of his life the poet was subjected to certain general eighteenth-century scientific ideas. The principle of plenitude, for example, would have fitted in very readily with his astronomical knowledge. What supposition would have seemed more reasonable to Tennyson than that of the other planets being peopled? We know that Tennyson later held this assumption to be truth, for he objected to William Whewell's contention (in his book, *Plurality of Worlds*) that only this earth was populated. And

1 Lovejoy, op.cit., p.230.
along with this belief in the *plenum formarum* Tennyson no doubt accepted some conception of a chain of being. No reputable scientific discovery by 1826 would have led him to doubt either of these tenets.

Hence from his reading and observation Tennyson in all probability had formulated the following "scientific" concept of nature by the time he entered Cambridge: an infinity of worlds progressing very slowly in infinite time and space toward a state of perfection, this cosmic progression being paralleled by the slow development of inorganic and organic life on earth (within a fixed chain of being, between the links of which the gradation is almost imperceptible) toward another kind of perfection.

**Scientific influences (Cambridge)**

The scientific influences on Tennyson's concept of nature during the Cambridge years tended to add to, to verify, and to consolidate the vague belief in science and in evolution that he had held to in the seclusion of Somersby. For instance, William Whewell, the master of Trinity for whom Tennyson had a great respect,¹ increased the young poet's interest in astronomy and geology. Whewell, who was a college friend of Sir John Herschel and who later became a friend of Lyell,² no doubt both clarified the theories of the two Herschels for his student and excited his interest in the great geologist. Whewell also would

---

have strengthened Tennyson's idea of a general law of progress working with no interference in the material world.\(^1\)

The "apostles", that group of intellectuals into which Tennyson and Arthur Hallam were introduced in 1829,\(^2\) also had some influence on Tennyson's concept of nature. Tennyson admittedly was not a very good "apostle"; he read very little in the many books on metaphysics that the apostles discussed. But he did attend their meetings, and so one may assume that he assimilated some of their ideas. The problem then is to extract the relevant scientific notions from the welter of "philosophy" gathered by the "apostles" from Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Butler, Hume, Bentham, Descartes, Kant, Goethe, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Shelley, and Keats.\(^3,4\) Of these I believe one may discount, because of the little effect they would have had on the scientific framework Tennyson had already constructed, the following: Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Coleridge, Shakespeare, and Keats.

Descartes and Hume were very likely the source of the "scientific method" of the apostles, that is, a reaching through a veil of doubt toward a faith they hoped would be behind the veil. And from Shelley and Kant the apostles doubtless drew evidence for faith in science and in an immutable law of

---

1. See quotation from Whewell's Bridgewater Treatise, opposite title page in Darwin, *On The Origin of Species*, London, Ward, Lock, & Co. Ltd., 1901. - "But with regard to the material world, we can at least go so far as this - we can perceive that events are brought about not by insulated interpositions of Divine power, exerted in each particular case, but by the establishment of general laws."


3. Ibid., p.73

progress. From Shelley, too, the apostles and Tennyson may have borrowed a belief in the physical alliance of man with nature as explored and interpreted by science.\(^1\)

But it seems to me that of all these figures Kant had the greatest effect on Tennyson's concept of nature. It is quite possible that the apostles, who regarded Kant as one of their deities, read his *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte*. If they did, they provided Tennyson with another, and very important, evolutionary idea, namely, the "temporalized chain of being" theory (as A. O. Lovejoy terms it). From his theory of infinite cosmic evolution Kant had decided that "continuous development and progressive diversification [was] the supreme law of nature".\(^2\) This law for him applied to all life, organic and inorganic, cosmic and earth-bound. Thus Kant saw the chain of being as something "perpetually self-expansive".\(^3\) Kant postulated fixed species, but at least his theory did permit infinite development within each link of the chain.

Of course, Tennyson could have found a somewhat similar temporalization of the chain of being in Wordsworth, who got it from Leibniz. Or he may have obtained the concept from Henry Hallam, who later in the '30's suggested that the chain was a plan existing in the Divine mind and working out only in the whole course of history.\(^4\) The temporalized chain of being had, in fact, been adhered to in some form or other by

---

1 Beach, *Concept of Nature*, p.241.
3 loc cit.
many of the men familiar with science from 1750 on. Still Kant's theory possessed a unity that would have appealed to Tennyson. Perhaps Hallam's theory was merely the historian's restatement of Tennyson's interpretation of Kant. Such an interpretation certainly fitted in with the scientific knowledge Tennyson had in 1830, for it was vague enough to admit of an evolutionary metamorphosis, which only God could understand, from one step on the ladder of being to the next (and higher) one. Tennyson would have seen affirmation of this theory in the discoveries by Von Baer (and others) of the successive resemblance of the human embryo (during development) to fully developed embryos of lower organisms. That Tennyson knew of the Von Baer discovery seems apparent from his presentation of it in outline to Arthur Hallam during college years.

Another "evolutionary" concept of Tennyson's which took form in college discussion is that of cruelty in nature (or the "survival of the fittest", as Darwin later expressed it). Cruelty in nature had been recognized as early as the seventeenth century - Tennyson would have found the late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century view in Bishop Butler - but up to the end of the eighteenth century it had received sanction from the principle of plenitude. By Tennyson's Cambridge days, however, plenitude was not so universally obvious; therefore,

1 Hallam Tennyson, Memoir, Vol. I, p. 44. "My father seems to have propounded in some college discussion the theory, that the development of the human body might possibly be traced from the radiated, vermicular, molluscous, and vertebrate organisms."

for many thinkers it could no longer excuse the unaccountable waste in nature.

Tennyson, through his reading and through the Cambridge discussions of the writings of Goethe, Adam Smith and Bentham, was made aware of the scientific fact of waste in nature, for these men had all noted it; Goethe had even recognized this waste as an apparent evil. Moreover, in 1830 this cruel waste must have impressed Tennyson, for it was manifest in the fallible operations of the Industrial Revolution, the explanation of which Tennyson undoubtedly found in Malthus's *Essay on Population* (1798), which supplied a vast amount of historical evidence to show that waste, sickness, and premature death were inevitable because of necessity, that "all-pervading law of nature" which dictated that population unchecked increases in geometrical ratio, while subsistence increases only in arithmetical ratio. Only Tennyson's belief in the temporalized chain of being could have offset the disquieting effect of the fact of cruelty in nature. This evil was certainly enough to cause Tennyson at this time to disagree with Paley's argument that the design of the universe proved the existence of God. The phenomena of the universe were for Tennyson, from Cambridge days onward, no proof of a Supreme Being. As he remarked in 1833 on observing some creatures under a microscope:

1 Beach, *Concept of Nature*, p.276.
Strange that these wonders should draw some men to God and repel others. No more reason in one than in the other.  

Scientific influences (Post-Cambridge, 1831-1859)

Tennyson had, therefore, formed his main ideas of evolution before he left Cambridge. Yet his interest in the ever-increasing discoveries of science was unabated. Geology was for him in this period particularly fascinating. In 1837 he read Lyell's *Principles of Geology* with great interest. Before reading Lyell, he had most likely attached himself to the catastrophist school of Cuvier, for this view of Cuvier's was the dominant one even among scientists up to 1859. But after reading the *Principles* ... he doubtless changed his affiliations. There is no evidence to indicate exactly when Tennyson swung to the side of Lyell and the Uniformitarians, but I am inclined to believe that it was soon after 1837. The idea of applying present causes of change (erosion, deposition, raising and lowering of land masses) to explain geological change throughout all time fitted better than catastrophism did into Tennyson's belief in slow, uninterrupted evolution.

Besides, the other evolutionary concepts in Lyell agreed quite well with Tennyson's theory. For example, Lyell, after examining and condemning Lamarck's hypothesis, made the following statement:

---

2 Ibid., Vol. I, p.162.
it appears that species have a real existence in nature; and that each was endowed, at the time of its creation, with the attributes and organization by which it is now distinguished.

And with this affirmation of fixed species Lyell coupled the idea of progressive development of organic life at successive geological periods. These two concepts must have seemed to Tennyson to support the "temporalized chain of being" concept. Lyell's recognition of the struggle for existence as "part of the regular and constant order of nature" and his emphasis on the infinity of geological time would also have produced a glow of agreement in the poet.

From 1837 to 1859, the years when he was regarded as the "champion of science", Tennyson maintained a constant interest in science and in scientists. It is very unlikely that during these years he changed his evolutionary ideas, for most of the eminent scientists - Lyell, Owen, Agassiz, Adam Sedgwick, Hugh Miller - held views which supported those of the poet. Perhaps he slightly altered his "evolution" to conform with Sedgwick's doctrine of progression, which postulated creative additions (not transmutation of species) to account for the appearance of new species in the rock record; but there is no reason to assume any other changes in Tennyson's belief. I believe that between 1840 and 1859 Tennyson held so firmly to the general scientific belief of the period that he could confidently say, after reading the advertisement on Chambers's Vestiges of

1 Sir Charles Lyell, Principles of Geology (1830), Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1853, p.666.
2 Ibid., p.678.
3 Lyell, Antiquity, p.396.
Creation (1844), that it seems to contain many speculations with which I have been familiar for years, and on which I have written more than one poem.  

Chambers, after all, was merely repeating Lamarck's theory in popular form. And had not Lyell apprised Tennyson of the lack of evidence for Lamarck's theory? The "speculations" in Chambers, not his "conclusions", were what Tennyson had written about.

Scientific Influence (Darwin and after)

Tennyson in 1859 read an early copy of Darwin's Origin of Species "with intense interest". Here was a theory backed by a multitude of facts, a theory which did not assume "progress" as self-evident, a theory which purported to explain all of life on the basis of the materialistic law of "natural selection" (which for Tennyson would have been synonymous with "cruelty in nature"). How could the Laureate fulfil his mission of reconciling these "indisputable" facts of science, which did not require the assumption that spirit existed, with religion? The following sentence near the end of Darwin's scientific treatise must have seemed particularly ominous to Tennyson:  

Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history.  

It is little wonder that, when Darwin visited him in 1868, Tennyson queried, "Your theory of Evolution does not make against Christianity?"  

2 Ibid., p.443.  
4 Ibid., p.375.  
Tennyson may not have read Thomas Huxley's essay, Man and The Lower Animals (1863), but he very probably did read Lyell's Antiquity of Man of the same year. In Lyell there was some cold comfort. The geologist pointed out that Darwin's theory could not be proven until the record of the rocks was perfected. The imperfect record, Lyell stated, if added to a faith in the fullness of the annals, could sustain belief in a creative force. Moreover, Lyell saw implications of progress in Darwin's theory of transmutation; in the evolutionary pattern from sensation to mind he saw "a picture of ever-increasing dominion of mind over matter".

But this respite for Tennyson was a short one. Darwin's Descent of Man was published in 1871. The scientist in this book provided facts that pointed "in the plainest manner to the conclusion that man is the co-descendant with other mammals of a common progenitor." And Darwin also discredited any assumptions that his evolutionary theory postulated the immortality of the soul. Tennyson's religious faith, unorthodox though it was, would not allow him to accept these materialistic implications. Still, as champion of science, he could not reject Darwin's well-founded theory. He had to compromise, and so he accepted Darwin's "evolution" as being "partially true" in a "modified form". After all, his friend Tyndall and many other notable scientists had accepted the theory. And it still was

1 Lyell, Antiquity, p.405.
2 Ibid., p.506.
possible to look to men like A.R. Wallace, co-discoverer of "Darwinism", for reassurance that man's mental faculties could not be accounted for by natural selection, and that, therefore, an intelligent agent must be assumed. But by 1880 there was reliable evidence to show that these supposedly great mental differences between man and the lower animals were non-existent. Though Tennyson in 1892 still was able to say that he believed that science would help us toward a higher conception of the law of the world and of the 'law behind the law', he must sometimes have wondered if science and religion were reconcilable, especially since "progress" was at that time being doubted by anthropologists and other men of science.

Religious, moral, and philosophical influences on Tennyson's concept of nature

The general concept of evolution (or progress) seems to have led Tennyson up two different paths. Progress as a law of the material world justified his faith in science. But what of religion? What of the progress of the spirit in this world and in the next one? Could the two ideas of progress be reconciled in such a way that the eighteenth-century belief in a universal nature (including man) was left intact? The early Wordsworth and some of the other Romantics had stated that everything physical and moral was explainable in

2 Huxley, Darwiniana, p.122.
3 Ibid., p.234.
terms of 'Nature'. Could Tennyson also believe, as the Deists and Pantheists did, that man should worship nature because in her operations was proof of a supernatural animating principle? In order to formulate Tennyson's concept of nature, I feel that these questions must be answered. Therefore, it is necessary to look at some of the religious, moral, and philosophical influences on Tennyson.

**Pre-Cambridge**

The temperament of the "black, unhappy mystic of the Lincolnshire wolds" was, as I have noted, a strong factor in determining Tennyson's early idea of nature. Intellectually and emotionally the incipient poet was more concerned about certain matters than most young men are. In general, he was afraid of all things related to "death, and sex, and God". Even this early in life he worried about the problems of Resurrection and the Immortality of the Soul, subjects which were always nearest his heart. Where could he find some logical answer to these questions? He could not embrace the Calvinistic doctrine of the "elect", which he might have taken from his aunt or from a study of Bunyan (whose books were in his father's library), for he regarded Calvinism as a superstitious, selfish belief. Nor was his father's rather weak Anglican faith of any help. It is a fair assumption that in

---

1 Beach, *Concept of Nature*, p.116.
those pre-Cambridge days Tennyson felt that the only intellectual resort was science. Knowledge of this world might allow him to peer behind the veil. Science, at least, would have constituted a source for optimism, for at that time it was not concerned with man's place in nature. The scientific knowledge Tennyson was imbibing perhaps caused him to doubt the account of Genesis, but it did not directly query the duality of man's nature or the immortality of man's spirit.

Cambridge

The apostles introduced Tennyson to the transcendental philosophies of Kant and his followers. Kant had no doubt impressed them not only with his trust in science (because science made knowledge possible) but also with his stress on moral obligation as the key to reality. Morality for Kant was a categorical imperative which, if viewed in terms of a highest good not realizable in this world, postulated individual immortality and God. Kant made only these two assumptions of a supernatural order. But just imagine Tennyson's reaction to Kant's philosophy! These two postulates were the bases of the poet's religion. Therefore, it is highly probable that Tennyson adopted this belief in an absolute morality, for he would have believed that Kant's theory allowed him to accept all the findings of science and still achieve a unity between

physical nature and "divine" morality. As Kant had stated, this compromise was possible through a joint appeal to the Reason (Vernunft), "the faculty by which first principles are apprehended", and to the Understanding (Verstand).

All subjective phenomena [said Kant] are finally referred to an abiding unity, which is the soul. All objective phenomena, conceived in their totality together constitute the world. And the synthesis of these two is the Being of Beings, the absolute reality; in other words, it is God.

Tennyson, who believed that the existence of a first cause was not deducible merely through observation of the "objective phenomena", was perhaps convinced even during the Cambridge years of the desirability of this Kantian synthesis. In any case, the influence of Kant on the poet does imply a growing dualism in Tennyson, a separation of nature (interpreted as the physical world understandable through science) and moral man.

In Goethe the poet would have found a philosophy somewhat similar to Kant's. Goethe also divorced man's spiritual nature from external nature and insisted that man's creative spirit did not evolve. But Goethe differed from Kant in that he believed that a synthesis of the two 'natures' constituted a universal nature, not the author of nature. Therefore, I doubt that Tennyson accepted Goethe's view; his emotional need

2 loc. cit.
3 Hallam Tennyson, Memoir, Vol. I, p.44 (or p.102).
4 Beach, Concept of Nature, p.283.
5 Ibid., p.277.
of a beneficent, personal God and a personal immortality would have turned him more toward Kant's transcendentalism than toward Goethe's pantheistic naturalism. Besides, Coleridge's transcendental views, which were on the lips of most Cambridge students during Tennyson's stay at college, supported Kant's theories. And a study of the poetry of Wordsworth written after 1800, especially his Ode, Intimations of Immortality, would also have impressed Tennyson with the idea that earth was weaning man away from his spiritual essence or, as Tennyson would have phrased it, his "divine morality".

Berkeley and Shelley would have lent further support to this transcendentalism with which Tennyson was being indoctrinated. Both these men had assumed that physical nature was secondary to the intellectual spirit (or principle) which governs the universe. Berkeley had also assumed that this spirit was a diffusion of the divine soul through the souls of men and that nature was alien to this soul or mind of man. And, in spite of Dr. Johnson's famous refutation of Berkeley's idealistic theory, Berkeley had recognized that this alien 'nature' really existed?

Does it seem curious that the apostles, who believed strongly in the findings of mechanistic science, should have

2 Beach, op.cit., p.152.
3,4 Beach, Concept of Nature, p.74 and p.246.
5 Ibid., p.87.
7 Ibid., p.7.
turned so completely towards a morality based on idealism? The reason is that they felt the need of a spiritual reaction against materialists like Bentham and James Mill, who, like August Comte later in the century, wanted to found society not on any theology or philosophy but on the truths of positive science alone. These utilitarians wanted to erect a "Goddess Humanity" that would supersede God and immortality or at least make the Supreme Being, as Lucretius had done, a remote, unconcerned god. Tennyson's very reaction to these materialists would have helped transcendentalism to gain a hold on his mind.

It is ironic, though, that the poet was faced in these years with the problem of evil, the fact of cruelty (or pain) in nature, which was the very matter the utilitarians were trying to deal with. Tennyson had always felt that the existence of evil was "the greatest difficulty". But the cold, materialistic solution was not for him an acceptable way out of the maze. Nor was the equally harsh suggestion that this evil was an attribute of a God of love. The only course left for Tennyson was to accept the view of Bishop Butler that the physical world was a place of trial and that it was man's duty to obey God's voice within him, that is, to freely obey the "divine morality" in order to bring about a final regularity, order and right. Tennyson, following Butler, would have said that man's lower nature (the fleshly part of him) was subject to evil - that evil somehow being part of

2 Gladstone, ed., Butler, p.66.
3 Ibid., p.13.
external nature - but that man's higher nature (his conscience) escaped evil in its march toward God.

All this mass of idealistic philosophy, however, must have seemed in 1831 a bit remote to the young poet leaving Cambridge. The mere presence of his friend, Arthur Hallam, was enough both to dispel his fears about life, death, and the life after death and to make the whole accumulated mass of metaphysics and science seem unreal. But Hallam's death in 1833 revived the poet's fears and his need for facts and theories to calm these fears.

Post-Cambridge

Hallam's death re-emphasized for Tennyson the cruelty which existed in nature. The physical death of a man of such promise was added confirmation of the existence of evil. Tennyson turned to science again in hopes that a satisfactory explanation was there. Yet by 1839 he could only say that the answer to the problem of good and evil lay in the hope of universal good\textsuperscript{1} and that morality in man at least made him greater than all animals\textsuperscript{2}.

His friendship with Carlyle during the 1840's seems to have been of help in allaying the poet's fears. Carlyle had the convictions that Tennyson lacked. Carlyle enforced the ideas that Tennyson had found in Kant and the idealists. The author of \textit{Sartor Resartus} recognized the order in nature; yet

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} H. Tennyson, \textit{Memoir}, Vol. I, p.170.
\item \textsuperscript{2} \textit{Memoir}, loc.cit.
\end{itemize}
he saw the hostility in it too, and he praised Tennyson for the "goodness" in the poems that presented the morality of man in opposition to external nature and to the "lower self" in man.

But the scientific and philosophical thought of the 1850's tended to shake Tennyson's faith in the divinity of morality, in the divinity of man's mind. If Tennyson read Herbert Spencer's *Psychology* in 1855 - as he no doubt did - he would not have been unduly disturbed by the idea that mind was but a particular aspect of life. (Spencer had not said that "life" was merely physical); but when Darwin first implied, and later definitely stated, that mind originated through natural selection, that mind was part of a materialistic evolutionary scheme, Tennyson must have raised all his religious and philosophical defences. As Beach says, the offense of Darwinian evolution for Tennyson was the explanation of the origin and nature of mind. It was because of this offense that Tennyson could accept "Darwinism" only in a modified form. The spirit (or mind) of man was not, for the Laureate, evolved from matter (though spirit might evolve according to a similar principle)

As he stated to Wilfrid Ward on the subject of the descent of man's body from the lower animals:

1 Beach, *Concept of Nature*, p.303.
4 Benn, *History of Rationalism*, passim.
5 Beach, *Concept of Nature*, p.431.
if it is true it helps to solve the mystery of man's dual nature ...
the spiritual nature is something superadded, but the brute nature is there and remains side by side with the other.  

Tennyson was profoundly shocked by the materialism of Darwin's theory and, indeed, by the materialism of science as a whole after 1859. He had to realize now that his philosophy had been sitting on a "spiritualistic" limb, through which it was cutting with a "materialistic" saw. His problem was whether he should grasp another branch or try to patch up the damaged one. It appears that he chose the first alternative, even though he contended to the end that he had temporarily resolved the science-religion dichotomy. Metaphysics, the Memoir tells us, began to engross Tennyson more and more after 1866, a metaphysics drawn from the idealist and transcendental philosophers. After 1867, as the following quotations indicate, the poet constantly affirmed the reality of spirit:

He talked about ... all-pervading Spirit being more understandable by him than matter.  

Matter [is] a greater mystery than mind.
What such a thing as a spirit is apart from God and man I have never been able to conceive. Spirit seems to me to be the reality of the world.

Spirit became for him something akin to divine morality, the essential characteristic of God and man. He still recognized matter as existing in 'Nature', but man's spirit was not for

---

1 Ward, "Talks with Tennyson", p.332.
him part of this 'Nature'. He seems, moreover, to have placed spirit above matter. "Progress" came to mean predominantly God or Spirit for him, as it had for Kant, to whose philosophy he was reintroduced by Jowett. In fact, it appears that in the 1860's he fashioned (or attempted to fashion) a Pantheistic belief of sorts stressing spirit and the all-importance of spiritual progress. That he did hold to such a philosophy for a time is demonstrated by his remark in 1863:

Darwinism, Man from Ape, would that really make any difference? ...Time is nothing ... are we all not part of Deity?  

Kant's philosophy seems to have been of further help to Tennyson at this time. Some of the poet's deepest expressions of faith are strikingly similar to those uttered by the philosopher one hundred years before:

the nobler nature does not pass from its individuality when it passes out of this life.  

I believe in God, not from what I see in Nature, but from what I find in man.  

This last quotation is an expression of the dualism one may expect to find in Tennyson's poetry: "Nature versus Man" or "Nature versus God". Tennyson, it seems, never agreed with any hypothesis that assigned more than man's flesh to the physical world; in fact, it is fair to assume that one will find in the poems written from Cambridge years on that 'nature' is used as a term identical with 'the world of matter'. The

poet apparently took little stock in natural religion; only in God could the divine part of man - his morality - and material nature be united. Therefore, what one may confidently expect to find in all but Tennyson's early poems is either a discussion of nature considered in general as the physical world or perhaps one of a universal nature seen in a moment of mystical apprehension as the Divine Idea; that is, nature seen as matter operating according to a universal, immutable law of change, but nevertheless hostile to moral man, who is embraced fully only by that other nature which is spirit or essence, which is God himself.

The distinction between these two 'natures' is not of course so clearly defined as I have indicated in this discussion of the various influences on the poet's concept of nature. Tennyson's temperament, let me repeat, was also one of the forces acting to produce each resultant idea of nature. One may anticipate that Tennyson's chameleon-like moods will at least explain his changeable attitude toward a 'nature' seen as the physical world interpreted by science; they will account in part for an optimistic acceptance of progress in the material world as well as for a pessimistic rejection of the implications arising from the evil evident in nature's operations. Indeed, it is logical to assume that, because of Tennyson's moodiness, his attitude toward this nature ran the gamut from optimism to pessimism. Hence a coherent exposition of the poet's concept of nature will require some recognition of his different moods.
TENNYSON'S CONCEPT OF NATURE AS SEEN IN HIS POETRY

Tennyson informs us in *The Two Voices* that his mission in life was

>'As far as might be, to carve out
Free space for every human doubt,
That the whole mind might orb about —

>'To search thro' all I felt or saw,
The springs of life, the depths of awe,
And reach the law within the law.' 1

These lines express the compromise 2 he hoped to achieve between 'nature' regarded as the physical world interpreted by science (and governed by the "outer" law) and some force controlling or controlled by the "inner" law. The purpose of this chapter will be to show both that this "force" was essentially supernatural and that 'nature' meant to Tennyson only the physical (or material) universe revealed by science.

Nature regarded as the physical world interpreted by science

[Objectivity concerning science, emotional reaction towards nature]

Tennyson, unlike Wordsworth and the other Romantic poets, made nature the handmaiden of science. The Victorian poet believed that man could love nature most when he, like Edwin Morris,

...knew the names,
Long learned names of agaric, moss and fern

---


2 cf. Chapter 2, p.54.(the apostles' method of approaching knowledge).
[and when he had]

...forged a thousand theories of the rocks. 1

In other words, Tennyson's love for nature was due to his scientific knowledge of her operations, not to any spiritual or emotional power nature had over him. Because science represented authority, Tennyson reacted against nature rather than against her interpreter. Nature, not science, was a mistress of questionable fidelity; therefore, the temperamental poet gave free rein to his suspicions of her. As long as she kept within the bounds of law, he approved of her. But when her actions could be questioned he lapsed into moods of mere acceptance or pessimism.

An optimistic Tennyson looking at nature

Tennyson saw reason for optimism in the orderly manifestations of nature, namely, law, progress, and evolution, three principles which for him were almost synonymous. For Tennyson law in nature was the law of progress; and progress in nature was possible only within an evolutionary, temporalized chain of being.

In Tennyson's poetry are many allusions to the fixed law of the universe. For example, an early poem, On A Mourner, expresses confidence in nature's law being the external indication of God's law:

Nature, so far as in her lies,
Imitates God, and turns her face
To every land beneath the skies,
Counts nothing that she meets with base,
But lives and loves in every place;

1 Edwin Morris, I, p.298.
And murmurs of a deeper voice
Going before to some far shrine,
Teach that sick heart the stronger choice,
Till all thy life one way incline
With one wide Will that closes thine.  

Tennyson does not attain to such praise of nature as semi-divine again, but he does reaffirm the necessity for man to obey the laws of nature. The recluse of The Palace of Art suffers because she tries to separate herself from nature and man, from the "one fix'd law" that controls "the hollow orb of moving Circumstance". And the village maid who marries the lord of Burleigh dies because she opposes nature's laws in trying to live a life she was not born to. Necessity is, for an optimistic Tennyson, part of nature's commendable order; "cursed"; he says, "be the sickly forms that err from honest Nature's rule!". Even during the gray moods of In Memoriam Tennyson is able to brighten his tone through contemplation of orderly law in nature:

The fame is quench'd that I foresaw,
The head hath miss'd an earthly wreath:
I curse not nature, no, nor death;
For nothing is that errs from law.

Through observing and imitating nature's laws, Tennyson tells us, man may slowly approach a state of true freedom. The follower of the vision, the gleam,

...like Nature, wouldst not mar
By changes all too fierce and fast

2 The Palace of Art, I, p. 184.
3 The Lord of Burleigh, II, p. 107.
4 Locksley Hall, II, p. 39.
5 In Memoriam, II, p. 107.
This order of Her Human Star,  
This heritage of the past. 1,2

The poet thus commends law in nature because of the progress implied in its operation. Progress, he believes, is good because it means constant change and progression in man and nature toward a future golden age. Hence in his optimistic eulogies of progress Tennyson avoids, in typical Victorian fashion, any specific reference to scientific discovery or to present conditions. He sees change and process as sources of optimism whenever he has a fixed eye on the millenium, when "the world" will show "like one great garden".3

His belief in progress, however, is based on man's actions than on nature's operations. Nature, he states, alters the physical part of man; but her law of change does not apply to man's soul:

For Nature also, cold and warm,  
And moist and dry, devising long,  
Thro' many agents making strong,  
Matures the individual form.

Meet is it changes should control  
Our being, lest we rust in ease.  
We all are changed by still degrees,  
All but the basis of the soul. 4

This soul of man, which is not subject to the process of physical nature, controls man's progress. Man may gain knowledge through the observation of nature's processes, but the purpose governing progress is something divine that exists in

---

1 Freedom, VI, p.338.  
2 cf. Chapter 2, (Burke's concept of nature as the gradual progress of society).  
3 The Poet, I, p.59.  
4 Love Thou Thy Land, I, p.245.
God and in the divine half of man:

Yet I doubt not thro' the ages one increasing purpose runs,
And the thoughts of men are widen'd with the progress of the suns. 1

Nature supplies the principle of change, but man (through God) provides the power to use this principle:

Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward let us range,
Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change. 2

Small wonder that Tennyson could be hopeful about progress in nature! For him nature really did not govern earthly progress; she but handed on the sceptre so that man might rule.

The same dichotomy between nature and man is present in Tennyson's idea of evolution. His general evolutionary beliefs, however, had firmer roots in science than his idea of progress had. Tennyson could see hope in evolution before 1859 because science sustained his trust in the temporalized chain of being.3

Oh yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill,
To pangs of nature, sins of will,
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;

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. 4

1 Locksley Hall, II, p.45.
2 Ibid., p.49.
Here is a belief, one may note, in the creative power of God, not in nature's evolution. Certainly the idea that nature had moulded man does appear in *The Two Voices*:

... 'When first the world began,
Young Nature thro' five cycles ran,
And in the sixth she moulded man.

'She gave him mind, the lordliest
Proportion, and, above the rest,
Dominion in the head and breast.'

But this Voice discards the eighteenth-century belief in divine nature in favour of a more general faith in a progress directed by God. Although Tennyson gives credit to nature, on the basis of Von Baer's embryological theory, for the part she has played in evolving man --

'Or if thro' lower lives I came --
Tho' all experience past became
Consolidate in mind and frame --

he can find no hope in this theory alone. His optimism is based on the conviction that man's spirit came from some Platonic realm outside nature.

The evolutionary principle in nature of which Tennyson particularly approves is the law of gradation. If man does not obey this law, if he should

Tumble Nature heel o'er head, and, yelling with
the yelling street,
Set the feet above the brain and swear the brain
is in the feet

then he will

---

1 *The Two Voices*, I, p.123.
4 *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After*, VI, p.291.
Bring the old dark ages back without the faith, without the hope, Break the State, the Church, the Throne, and roll their ruins down the slope. 1

But if man does obey this precept, then he may scale "the shining steps of Nature" 2 toward "the statelier Eden" 3 where the "crowning race of humankind" 4 will exist. In fact, Tennyson tells us, if man observes gradation a higher race may come into being after this human zenith is attained (a logical deduction from the temporalized chain of being theory). 5 Tennyson visualizes the chain of being as a kind of mural in which higher beings are depicted as evolving through the conquest of the lower elements within themselves:

... in the lowest [zone] beasts are slaying men, And in the second men are slaying beasts, And on the third are warriors, perfect men, And on the fourth are men with growing wings 6

This hope for a higher race also appears in In Memoriam, in a passage which, Tennyson states, refers to Goethe's phrase, "Von Aenderungen zu höheren Aenderungen" (from changes to higher changes): 7

I held it truth, with him who sings To one clear harp in divers tones, That men may rise on stepping-stones Of their dead selves to higher things.

The evolution of the human race and the future creation of a higher race thus was for Tennyson a matter of moral and

---

1 Ibid., p.291.
2 The Princess, IV, p.134.
3 Ibid., p.135.
4 Ibid., p.135.
5 cf. Chapter 2.
6 The Holy Grail, V, p.287.
7 Poems, III, p.225 (notes).
8 In Memoriam, III, p.41.
spiritual progress. Nature had shown man her law of gradation; now he should make use of his divine powers in order gradually to "work out the beast". Although man is bound physically in "the grades of life and light", he should

\[\text{Arise and fly} \]
\[\text{The reeling Faun, the sensual feast;}\]
\[\text{Move upward, working out the beast,} \]
\[\text{And let the ape and tiger die.} \]

The process, of course, will be gradual:

Where is one that, born of woman, altogether can escape
From the lower world within him, moods of tiger,
or of ape?
Man as yet is being made, and ere the crowning Age of Ages,
Shall not aeon after aeon pass and touch him into shape?

Still, the glory of God guarantees the final result:

All about him shadow still, but, while the races flower and fade,
Prophet-eyes may catch a glory slowly gaining on the shade,
Till the peoples all are one, and all their voices blend in choric
Hallelujah to the Maker 'It is finish'd. Man is made.'

In these last few quotations one may see Tennyson's general pattern of evolution from animal, to man, to the perfect man, and to a higher being. In all this progression the stress is on the future. Nevertheless, Tennyson, in facing the future, recognizes the links of the past and present, and thus is able to formulate a complete, optimistic, evolutionary scheme based on the temporalized chain of being. But one will note, in reading the following passages (which enunciate this

1 In Memoriam, III, p.80.
2 Ibid., p.166.
3 The Making of Man, VII, p.177.
4 Ibid., p.177.
scheme), that man's divine spirit, not nature's evolving matter, is always paramount for Tennyson.

Out of the deep, my child, out of the deep,
Where all that was to be, in all that was,
Whirl'd for a million aeons thro' the vast
Waste dawn of multitudinous eddying light --
Out of the deep, my child, out of the deep,
Thro' all this changing world of changeless law,
And every phase of ever-heightening life,
And nine long months of antenatal gloom,
With this last moon, this crescent -- her dark orb
Touch'd with earth's light -- thou comest, darling boy;

...and prophet of the perfect man;

Live, and be happy in thyself, and serve
This mortal race thy kin so well, that men
May bless thee as we bless thee, O young life
Breaking with laughter from the dark; and may
The fated channel where thy motion lives
Be prosperously shaped, and sway thy course
Along the years of haste and random youth
Unshatter'd; then full-current thro' full man;
And last in kindly curves, with gentlest fall,
By quiet fields, a slowly dying power,
To that last deep where we and thou are still.

Except for the brief nine month period when the foetus is passing through the various embryological stages, Tennyson gives nature no real control over this human being. Change in nature and nature's changeless law affect only the body, not the spirit which passes from "the great deep to the great deep", not the soul of man which is the vital element in the evolution of a race that will not be dominated by nature.

... star and system rolling past,
A soul shall draw from out the vast
And strike his being into bounds,

And, moved thro' life of lower phase,
Result in man, be born and think,
And act and love, a closer link
Betwixt us and the crowning race

1 De Profundis, VI, pp.177-8.
Of those that, eye to eye, shall look
On knowledge; under whose command
Is Earth and Earth's, and in their hand
Is Nature like an open book;

No longer half-akin to brute,
For all we thought and loved and did,
And hoped, and suffer'd, is but seed
Of what in them is flower and fruit;

Whereof the man, that with me trod
This planet, was a noble type
Appearing ere the times were ripe,
That friend of mine who lives in God,

That God, which ever lives and loves,
One God, one law, one element,
And one far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves.

This final cause and the progress leading to it are the true sources of Tennyson's joy in evolution. Man, he trusts, is moving away from nature by means of

Aeonian Evolution, swift or slow,
Thro' all the spheres -- an ever opening height,
An ever lessening earth --

Nature consequently receives no more than a rather suspicious recognition from a Tennyson praising the hopeful principles evident in orderly nature — law, progress, and evolution. Nature reveals commendable laws for man's edification; and she, as science has proven, has played a part in man's evolution. But, Tennyson constantly reminds us, man's spirit must, after noting nature's laws, first purge itself of the brutish qualities with which it has been burdened through nature's physical evolution, and then assert its superiority in order that further evolution may take place. Tennyson is optimistic about man's future state, not about

1 In Memoriam, III, pp.183-4.
2 The Ring, VII, p.38.
nature's present existence.

Calm acceptance of scientific fact and relative-objectivity concerning nature

It is worth noting that in his optimistic moods Tennyson deals with nature in a very general way and thus is able to extend scientific principles into religion. That is, he does not at these moments consider particular scientific discoveries which might conflict with his simple religious faith. It is true that the passage quoted from De Profundis contains many references to the world revealed by science; it refers to infinity of time, nature's law of necessity, the nebular hypothesis, the vastness of space, and man's physical embodiment in nature. But, as I said before, a hopeful Tennyson treats all these matters as incidental to all-important spirit. Only in a calm mood of acceptance can he look at nature in a relatively objective way, and even then he usually just faces the scientific fact and not its implications.

Tennyson in this mood of acceptance, when the actuality of the past and present occupies his thoughts somewhat more than the Reality of the future does, gives us his clearest picture of nature, a picture embracing his whole conception of evolution from cosmos to physical man. Let us ascertain whether or not the design of this more detailed representation of nature concurs with the broader outline we have already looked at.

Cosmic evolution, Tennyson believed, had to be studied

1 cf. Chapter 2, p. 45.
scientifically because it possibly could give man a hint of the law of nature he had to follow in order to, paradoxically, escape from nature's shackles. Besides, a study of astronomical evolution did not directly involve the position of man in nature. Therefore, Tennyson can use such speculations as the nebular hypothesis without trepidation:

'There sinks the nebulous star we call the Sun,
If that hypothesis of theirs be sound'  

And he is able to include this hypothesis in the overall progression from nebula to barbarous, or merely physical, man:

'This world was once a fluid haze of light,
Till toward the centre set the starry tides,
And edded into suns, that wheeling cast
The planets: then the monster, then the man;
Tattoo'd or woosed, winter-clad in skins,
Raw from the prime, and crushing down his mate;
As yet we find in barbarous isles, and here
Among the lowest.'

Tennyson's interest in astronomy was not confined merely to this hypothesis of cosmic evolution. His quest for unity in the world demanded a general knowledge of all the phenomena of the heavens. Therefore, one finds throughout his poetry constant reference to planets, stars, constellations, meteors and comets. It appears that Tennyson was particularly interested in those bodies of the universe that he could see with

---

1 cf. Chapter 2, p.32.
2 The Princess, IV, p.59.
3 Ibid., p.27.
4 For other references to the nebular hypothesis see In Memoriam, III, p.149 ("the shaping of a star") and In Memoriam, III, p.130 ("before the crimson circled star/Had fallen into her father's grave"). The poet explains the second quotation with the following note: "Before Venus, the evening star, had dipt into the sunset. The planets, according to Laplace, were evolved from the sun". (III, p.250).
the naked eye or with the aid of the small telescopes he had the opportunity to use.

Consequently, his view of nature in the cosmos is usually that of the empirical scientist, and he frequently qualifies his acceptance of authoritative discoveries. The moon, for instance, is perhaps "dead"; at least, the "new astronomy" so describes her state. Yet only when Tennyson relates this scientific fact to the whole principle of evolution does he admit the "deadness" of the moon. The nebular hypothesis, he realizes, demands dissolution as a necessary corollary to evolution in the cosmos; therefore, it is conceivable to him that the moon is dead:

Dead, but how her living glory lights the hall,
the dune, the grass!
Yet the moonlight is the sunlight \[i.e. \text{reflected}\]\text{sunlight}, and the sun himself will pass.

However, the poet does not always treat of the stars, planets, and constellations with scientific caution. In dealing with familiar cosmic landmarks like Mars, Venus, Saturn, and Hesper, Tennyson sometimes accepts philosophical speculation rather than scientific fact:

Venus near her! smiling downward at this earthlier earth of ours,
Closer on the Sun, perhaps a world of never fading flowers.

Hesper, whom the poet call'd the Bringer home of all good things.
All good things may move in Hesper, perfect peoples, perfect kings.

1 Locksley Hall Sixty Years After, VI, p.294.
2 Ibid., p.295.
Hesper--Venus -- were we native to that splendour
or in Mars,
We should see the Globe we groan in, fairest of
their evening stars. 1

and

And 'while the world runs round and round', I said,
'Reign thou apart, a quiet king,
Still as, while Saturn whirls, his stedfast shade
Sleeps on his luminous ring.' 2

These quotations illustrate more than Tennyson's astronomical
knowledge; they also indicate his predilection for viewing
the operations of nature at long range in space (as well as in
time). Because he could not see the defects in cosmical nature,
Tennyson was, as the above passages indicate, able to turn
loose his imagination on it - or perhaps one should say "fancy"
rather than "imagination". It is very difficult to divorce
Tennyson's wishful thinking from his acceptance of scientific
fact, to discuss his view of the actual world without incl­
uding the "Real" world of the far future, a world so distant
in space and time that the poet can imagine it existing on
some other planet that is also remote in space-time.3 What one
must keep in mind is that nature (cosmical or earthly) is not
part of Tennyson's "Real" world; nature is material, whereas
Reality is spiritual.

The poet brings us back to actuality in his discussions
of comets and meteors, for these phenomena demonstrate to him
that physical struggle is part of the evolutionary scheme.
Still Tennyson does not see evidence of cruelty in nature in
this cosmic struggle - a fair fight is quite acceptable to

1  Looksley Hall Sixty Years After, VI, p.295.
2  The Palace of Art, I, p.172.
3  His optimism here was probably a result of his faith
him. The meteor, though it "leaves a shining furrow", slides on its way in silence. And the comet, indicative of "war in heaven", does not imply war on earth.

Hence astronomical fact and observation did not unduly disturb the sensitive poet. Nor did the majority of geological and paleontological discoveries up to Darwin's time. Tennyson can talk with equanimity of man's physical precursors, for, as he states, "Nature brings not back the Mastodon".

He also is able to accept the fact, which was so destructive to orthodox religion, of the "old-world mammoth bulk'd in ice". And he can recognize the parallel between the development of the human foetus and the progression through nature's long evolution from monster to physical man (Von Baer's theory again):

A monstrous eft was of old the Lord and Master
of Earth,
For him did his high sun flame, and his river
billing ran,
And he felt himself in his force to be Nature's
crowning race.
As nine months go to the shaping an infant ripe
for his birth,
So many a million of ages have gone to the
making of man:
He now is first, but is he the last? Is he not too base?

The last line of this passage from Maud constitutes, one will notice, another unscientific condemnation of the brute qualities

---

1 see his poem Ulysses.
2 The Princess, IV, p.131.
3 Harold, IX, p.219.
4 The Epic, I, p.254.
5 The Princess, IV, p.88.
6 Maud, IV, pp.158-9.
with which nature has endowed man. Tennyson thus both acknowledges and deprecates nature's evolution.

But, in spite of this biased attitude towards material nature, the poet does find the geological theories of the method of nature's evolution acceptable. Cuvier's catastrophic hypothesis, for example, appears in a poem written in 1832, in which Tennyson imagines

... the surge
Of some new deluge from a thousand hills
[flinging]...leagues of roaring foam into the gorge
Below us, as far on as eye could see.  

In Memoriam, however, shows the effect of Lyell's uniformitarianism. In one section of this poem Tennyson makes no decision between Lyell and Cuvier:

They say,
The solid earth whereon we tread

In tracts of fluent heat began,
An grew to seeming-random forms,
The seeming prey of cyclic storms,
Till at the last arose the man.  

But in two other parts of the elegy Tennyson gives his vote to Lyell:

The sound of streams that swift or slow
Draw down Aonian hills, and sow
The dust of continents to be;

and

There rolls the deep where grew the tree.
O earth, what changes hast thou seen!
There where the long street roars, hath been
The stillness of the central sea.

---

1 Sonnet X, I, p.112.
3 In Memoriam, III, p.165. - The line "Seeming prey of cyclic storms", says Hallam Tennyson (III, p.261), means evolution 'by gradual self-development, or by sorrows and fierce strivings and calamities'.
4 In Memoriam III, p.74.
The hills are shadows, and they flow
From form to form, and nothing stands;
They melt like mist, the solid lands,
Like clouds they shape themselves and go.  1

And he voices an explicit approval of uniformitarianism in
the Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington (written in 1852):

the Giant Ages heave the hill
And break the shore, and evermore
Make and break, and work their will;  2

All these geological discoveries led Tennyson to the
unmistakable conclusion that man had some definite place in
nature's evolution. One discovers that, in the poems which
pre-date Darwinism, the poet is content to allow nature a
vague lease on man's blood:

He knows a baseness in his blood
At such strange war with something good,
He may not do the thing he would.  3

(Even this early Tennyson blamed nature for weaning man away
from God.) But in those poems written after 1859 he is more
specific. First, he admits that a "brute brain within the
man's" 4 exists; and, secondly, he accepts the popular misin-
terpretation of Darwin's theory, the erroneous idea that man
is directly descended from the apes:

We come from monkeys - prove it who can -
But here is a clue to the vices of man.  5

and

How is it that men have so little grace,
When a great man's found to be bad and base,

---

1 In Memoriam III, p.169.
3 The Two Voices, I, p.136.
4 Lucretius, II, p.199.
That they chuckle and chatter and mock?
We come from apes - and are far removed -
But rejoice when a bigger brother has proved
That he springs from the common stock.  

Yet one may observe that Tennyson's acceptance of man's descent, though it is specific, is not unqualified. Only man's body is bound by nature; his soul must claim its sovereignty over her.

If my body come from brutes, tho' somewhat finer than their own,
I am heir, and this my kingdom. Shall the royal voice be mute?
No, but if the rebel subject seek to drag me from the throne,
Hold the sceptre, Human Soul, and rule thy Province of the brute.  

Still this Leviathan, man's soul, should have a dispassionate regard for his subject nature if only for the reason that man's lower self is related to her:

Hold thou, my friend, no lesser life in scorn,
All Nature is the womb whence Man is born.  

Because nature is the mother of physical man, Tennyson grants us permission to admire her beauty, on condition that we be cognizant of Beauty's two sisters, Good and Knowledge:

1 Hallam Tennyson, Memoir, Vol. II, p.58, "By A Darwinian".
2 By An Evolutionist, VII, p.110.
4 One may remark a significant difference between the aesthetic appreciation of nature in Tennyson and that in Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth. When the three Romantic poets regarded the beauties of nature, they instinctively recognized a divine animating principle behind the outward loveliness. Keats felt with almost physical urgency the touch of vital truth in the beauty that "moves away the pall from our dark spirits", the beauty that is An endless fountain of immortal drink Pouring into us from the heavens brink. (Endymion, Book I )

Shelley also perceived a force working through natural beauty for the good of man; for Shelley this "plastic stress" was an intellectual power which swept

(cont. next page)
Beauty, Good, and Knowledge, are three sisters
That doat upon each other, friends to man,
Living together under the same roof,
And never can be sunder'd without tears.  

For example, in observing the chestnut, one should notice more than the beautiful colour of the nut itself. One should also add to his knowledge by marking how 

the shell
Divides threefold to show the fruit within:  

The most satisfying beauties are therefore those about which Tennyson can know something. He takes pleasure in differentiating between the "oat-grass and the sword-grass, and the bulrush in the pool". He is interested in the exact appearance of trees in their setting: 

through the dull sense world, compelling there,  
All new successions to the forms they wear;  
Torturing th' unwilling dross that checks its flight  
To its own likeness, as each mass may bear;  
And bursting in its beauty and its might  
From trees and beasts and men into the Heaven's light.  
(Adonais, Section XLIII)

And Wordsworth, discerning in nature's beauty  
A motion and a spirit that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought  
And rolls through all things,  
(...Tintern Abbey)

believed that  
One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.  
(The Tables Turned)

Tennyson, however, thought that man's morality and knowledge should inform his aesthetic appreciation, for Tennyson could not see in external nature any evidence for belief in a spiritual power. Even when he seemingly liberated beauty from morality and science (see pp.13-25 of this chapter), he still superimposed his religious faith upon his aestheticism in such a way that he was no longer communing with nature, but was escaping into a supernatural realm. As far as nature was concerned, "Good" and "Knowledge" were for the Victorian poet the privileged step-sisters of a Cinderella "Beauty" who had no fairy godmother to whom she might look for deliverance.  

1 To----, I, p.171.  
2 The Brook, II, p.149.  
3 New Year's Eve, I, p.197.
Enormous elm-tree-boles did stoop and lean
Upon the dusky brushwood underneath
Their broad curved branches, fledged with
clearest green,
New from its silken sheath.  

And he likes to exhibit his wide knowledge of nature's beauties:

Bring orchis, bring the foxglove spire,
The little speedwell's darling blue,
Deep tulips dash'd with fiery dew,
Laburnums, dropping-wells of fire.  

The harsher beauties in nature, those which are difficult because they do not tend to the good of man, do not impinge upon Tennyson's emotions when he is in a mood of calm acceptance. When he is in this mood he can recognize the contrast in nature only if it has been pressed by memory into an artistic mould:

Artist-like,
Ever retiring thou dost gaze
On the prime labour of thine early days:
No matter what the sketch might be;
Whether the high field on the bushless Pike,
Or even a sand-build ridge
Of heaped hills that mound the sea,
Overblown with murmurs harsh,
Or even a lowly cottage whence we see
Stretch's wide and wild the waste enormous marsh,
Where from the frequent bridge,
Like emblems of infinity,
The trenched waters run from sky to sky;
Or a garden bower'd close
With plaited alleys of the trailing rose,
Long alleys falling down to twilight grots,
Or opening upon level plots
Of crowned lilies, standing near
Purple-spiked lavender:

1 A Dream of Fair Women, I, p.216.
2 In Memoriam, III, p.116.
4 Ode To Memory, I, p.52.
One may conclude, then, that Tennyson in a mood when scientific fact and observation are acceptable attains to a measure of admiration for nature. He is able to concede that nature, through the operation of some law or principle (about which Tennyson is not explicit until after 1859, when he accepted Darwin's "natural selection" as the means of nature's evolution) has evolved physical man. He can also admire both the orderly operation of nature's evolution in cosmos and the beauty of an understandable nature on earth. But even when he is calmly appraising nature, Tennyson cannot be completely objective; he is always conscious of the duality existing between man's superior spirit and nature's matter.

**A pessimistic Tennyson condemning nature**

Tennyson in his pessimistic moods has to recognize the present actuality of nature; he has to face the implications of infinite space and time and of cruelty in nature. At such moments he realizes that a universe without bound proclaims the relative insignificance of man:

*The Two Voices, I, p. 123.*
A sad astrology, the boundless plan
That makes you [i.e. the stars] tyrants
in your iron skies,
Innumerable, pitiless, passionless eyes,
Cold fires, yet with power to burn and brand
His nothingness into man.  

Nature becomes even more pitiless for Tennyson when he
is aware that both "Astronomy and Geology", chief interpreters
of nature, are "terrible muses"; astronomy because it unveils
infinite space, and geology because it reveals infinite time.
Man can have little hope of attaining to perfection if he
recognizes the infinite time required to ascend the ladder of
being:

Forerun thy peers, thy time, and let
Thy feet, milleniums hence, be set
In midst of knowledge, dream'd not yet.

'Thou hast not gain'd a real height,
Nor ar'though nearer to the light,
Because the scale is infinite.

The golden age of the future is then but a foolish dream of
something that does not exist this side of heaven:

'Ah, folly, for it lies so far away,
Not in our time, nor in our children's time,
'Tis like the second world to us that live;
'Twere all as one to fix our hopes on Heaven
As on this vision of the golden year.'

This "secular abyss to come" is, in fact, evil, for it rep-
resents "the war of Time against the soul of man".

Consequently, Tennyson regards the vastness of the
physical world as a monster antagonistic to man, a phantom

1 Maud, IV, p.192.
3 The Two Voices, I, p.126.
5 In Memoriam, III, p.110.
that even Tennyson's faith in the immortality of soul cannot dispel. The poem that best expresses Tennyson's awe and fear of this spectre is *Vastness*. Tennyson in this poem compares all the activities of man with the infinities of time and space; then he says:

What is it all, if we all of us end but in being our own corpse - coffins at last, Swallow'd in Vastness, lost in Silence, drown'd in the deeps of a meaningless Past?

What but a murmur of gnats in the gloom, or a moment's anger of bees in their hive? -

§ § §

Peace, let it be! for I loved him, and love him for ever: the dead are not dead but alive. 1

Whatever one may say of the relative strengths of doubt and faith in this passage, he must admit that nature, responsible for awesome vastness, does not emerge unscathed from this struggle between science and religion.

Nature, indeed, is for a pessimistic Tennyson not merely antagonistic, but also cruel. Nature exhibits such waste 2 that the poet cannot conceive of her being benevolent. The individual creature does not matter to a nature that is evolving types:

It spake, moreover, in my mind: 'Tho' thou wert scatter'd to the wind, Yet is there plenty of the kind.' 3

Although Tennyson in *In Memoriam* imputes his condemnation of nature to his "lying" sorrow, one feels that he trusts his

---

1 *Vastness*, VII, pp.34-5.
2 cf. Chapter 2, pp.36-37 -- Tennyson, though he saw plenitude in the cosmos, could not see it in "earthly" nature.
3 *The Two Voices*, I, p.123.
sorrow more than he trusts wasteful nature:

0 Sorrow, cruel fellowship,
0 Priestess in the vaults of Death,
0 sweet and bitter in a breath,
What whispers from thy lying lip?

'The stars', she whispers, 'blindly run;  
A web is wov'n across the sky;  
From out waste places comes a cry,  
And murmurs from the dying sun:

'And all the phantom, Nature, stands --  
With all the music in her tone,  
A hollow echo of my own, --  
A hollow form with empty hands.'

And shall I take a thing so blind,  
Embrace her as my natural good;  
Or crush her, like a vice of blood,  
Upon the threshold of the mind? 1

This blind nature, Tennyson tells us in the same poem, is so prodigal that she seems to be in opposition to a God of love who cares for the individual life:

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;

That I, considering everywhere  
Her secret meaning in her deeds,  
And finding that of fifty seeds  
She often brings but one to bear,

I falter where I firmly trod... 2

Moreover, nature is not even careful of the type. There is no evidence of plenitude in the geological record:

'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.' And he, shall he,

1 In Memoriam, III; p.43.
2 In Memoriam; p.92.
Man, her last work, who seem'd so fair,
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,
Who roll'd the psalm to wintry skies,
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,
Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law --
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed --

Who loved, who suffer'd countless ills,
Who battled for the True, the Just,
Be blown about the desert dust,
Or seal'd within the iron hills?

No More? A monster then, a dream,
A discord. Dragons of the prime,
That tare each other in their slime,
Were mellow music match'd with him. 1

Hostile nature, in other words, knows nothing of the spiritual life. Man, therefore, can either accept her blind rule and the finality of death or "faintly trust the larger hope" 2, the hope that his immortal soul and the souls of the whole human race will be saved. Because Tennyson chooses the latter alternative, he makes cruel nature and moral man irreconcilable foes. Even the misanthropic hero of Maud 3 shows concern over the harsh struggle that takes place in nature:

For nature is one with rapine, a harm no preacher can heal;
The Mayfly is torn by the swallow, the swallow spear'd by the shrike,
And the whole little wood where I sit is a world of plunder and prey. 4

Cruelty in nature, an animistic interpretation of the scientific fact upon which Darwin 5 built his "evolution", thus

1 In Memoriam, pp.92-3.
2 In Memoriam III, p.92.
4 Maud, IV, p.158.
5 cf. Chapter 2,
provides for Tennyson no evidence of progress or evolution. It is an "evil star" from whose influence moral man should free himself.

Besides, Tennyson states, there is no real hope for evolution through the actions of a nature that is not only cruel but "dying". The poet anticipates in In Memoriam the later scientific recognition of Carnot's second law of thermodynamics, one of the conclusions of which was that the universe was running down.

Contemplate all this work of Time,
The giant labouring in his youth;
Nor dream of human love and truth;
As dying Nature's earth and lime; 2

And in The Epilogue to The Charge of the Heavy Brigade Tennyson declares this belief more emphatically:

Earth passes, all is lost
In what they prophesy, our wise men,
Sun-flame or sunless frost,
And deed and song alike are swept
Away, and all in vain
As far as man can see, except
The man himself remain:

Tennyson had spoken in his youth of a wise 'Nature' that would provide a place of rest for men, who was sick of Time:

Then let wise Nature work her will,
And on my clay her darnel grow; 4

But this was only a boyhood expression of an eighteenth-century idea. Tennyson could not retain this belief once he realized the existence of a cruel, dying nature. Nor could he any longer see godlike features in nature:

---

1 Love Thou Thy Land, I, p.246.
2 In Memoriam, III, p.164.
3 The Epilogue to The Charge of The Heavy Brigade, VI, p.314.
4 My Life is Full of Weary Days, I, p.102.
I found him not in world or sun,  
Or eagle's wing, or insect's eye;  
Tennyson's prescription of looking to the bright future became,  
therefore, a desperate remedy when he looked directly at the  
cruelty, blindness, and vastness of nature. Platitudes like  
For all's well that ends well,  
Whirl, and follow the Sun!  
could give no consolation to a Tennyson facing nature in its  
present actuality.

**Attempted Pantheism**

Before 1859 Tennyson thought that he had achieved a  
workable compromise between science and religion, a compro- 
mise which permitted nature a subordinate place in the overall  
plan of God, the plan that separated moral man from the quest- /ionable activities of nature. Darwin's theory, however, was  
a severe blow to Tennyson's faith, for the scientist put man  
right back into the natural scene. Darwin's conclusions forced  
the poet to seek refuge in the only sanctuary open to him,  
namely, Pantheism. But Pantheism meant interpreting the uni- 
verse through the observed course of nature, not through the soul  
of man. Hence Tennyson was faced with an impasse. How could  
he regard material nature as reality when he believed that  
spirit in man and in an immanent God was the real, the unchan- 
ging?  

5. cf. Chapter 2.
Nevertheless, he made an attempt to embrace Pantheism. Let us look at a demonstration of his inevitable failure, a poem called *The Higher Pantheism*. Tennyson opens his poem by inquiring if physical nature is not a vision of God:

The sun, the moon, the stars, the seas, the hills and the plains --
Are not these, O Soul, the vision of Him who reigns?

But then he admits that the appearance of nature is no manifestation of God's existence:

Is not the Vision He? tho' He be not that which He seems?
Dreams are true while they last, and do we not live in dreams?

Moreover, Tennyson continues, physical nature is a symbol of the soul's division from God:

Earth, these solid stars, this weight of body and limb,
Are they not sign and symbol of thy division from Him?

The material world, he then postulates, is incomprehensible because of man's separation from God. Yet, he goes on, is God not everything except man's individual and immortal spirit?

Dark is the world to thee: thyself art the reason why;
For is He not all but that which has power to feel 'I am I'?

Man's duty, therefore, is to try to see God in nature, even though he cannot do so.

Glory about thee, without thee; and thou fulfilllest thy doom
Making Him broken gleams, and a stifled splendour and gloom.

---

And how may man fulfil this duty? --by allowing his individual spirit to commune in a mystical way with an immanent, personal God who is not discernible in nature.

Speak to Him thou for he hears, and Spirit with Spirit can meet --
Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet.

Then Tennyson makes a valiant effort to reconcile God with the only aspect of nature with which compromise was possible, that is, the orderly law of the universe. Yet here he fails completely. For he cannot convince himself that an identity exists between God and the law of nature. Certainly he is able to say that God is law.

God is law, say the wise; O Soul, and let us rejoice,
For if He thunder by law the thunder is yet His voice.

But he cannot complete the identity. If law is God, then man is, for Tennyson, completely bound by nature's necessity, bound by a law that makes no provision for the perpetuation of human personality and moral responsibility; and Tennyson cannot believe that these absolutes do not exist. Beside, he objects, how can man state that law is God or that there is no God at all, when all man sees is the appearance of things?

Law is God, say some: no God at all, says the fool;
For all we have power to see is a straight staff bent in a pool;

---
1 His belief that man evolves only through the exercise of his divine morality, his conscience that communes with God,# allows him to make this statement.
# cf. Chapter 2 (Butler).
And the ear of man cannot hear, and the eye
of man cannot see;
But if we could see and hear, this Vision,
were it not He?

Tennyson thus concludes a circular argument which begins and
ends with the same question: if man could see proof of God in
nature, would nature not be God?

Because the poet cannot accept a blending of man's
spirit into a general soul,¹ and because he will relinquish
neither his faith in man's absolute morality nor his suspicion
of a physical nature that is not at all godlike in her oper-
ations, his "Higher Pantheism" is merely a form of words that
expresses a definite monotheism. Tennyson is able to see
spirit, the Reality, only in a personal God and in individual
man,³ not in nature, even though he wishes he could have faith
in the pantheistic solution:

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower -- but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

¹ cf. Chapter 2, p.46—Tennyson's emotional need for a
personal immortality made it impossible for him to accept
Goethe's pantheistic naturalism.

² cf. Benn, The History of English Rationalism in the
Nineteenth Century, Vol.II, p.300 -- "Now, what Tennyson calls
the Higher Pantheism is an endeavour to turn God from a First
Cause into an ultimate substance of things, while preserving
human personality and moral responsibility intact. But pan-
theism, whether Hindoo or German, had always treated the mod-
ifications of our inner consciousness, feelings, thoughts,
and wishes, as no less phenomenal than the sensible appear-
ances we call matter; and God, conceived as substance, is
just as much the reality of the one as of the other. For this
reason it cannot, as I have said, leave human personality as
a thing in itself, existing by the side of God. Mysticism
also holds to the All-One, not to a big One plus a little one."

³ cf. Chapter 2, p.57.

⁴ "Flower in the crannied wall", II, p.292.
Mystical apprehension of "supernature"

Pantheism was not feasible for Tennyson because it was based on a philosophy incompatible with his religious faith. But mysticism, if we can so call it in Tennyson's case, did furnish a synthesis that temporarily satisfied the poet, for this mysticism resulted from his intense emotional need. At rare moments Tennyson was able, by means of his concentration on intuitive convictions -- the existence of an immanent God of love, the reality of spirit and spiritual progress, and the certainty of personal immortality -- to have a mystical experience of sorts, in the course of which he could feel the essential unity and order of life, death, and the after-life. But this experience had no real connection with nature. Tennyson's personal mysticism may be compared with mathematics; each is a game that yields conclusions completely dependent upon the premises. Because Tennyson's premises are supernatural, the conclusions about nature which come out of his trance state are also supernatural; their emphasis is upon the spirit of God and man, not on the materiality of nature. In his trance Tennyson feels the hand of God, not the grip of nature, upon him:

And what I am beheld again
What is, and no man understands;
And out of darkness came the hands
That reach thro' nature, moulding men. 2

1 cf. Kant's influence - Chapter 2. But the emotional need, not the philosophical dialectic, produced Tennyson's trance state.
2 In Memoriam, III, p.171.
At such moments Tennyson does not recognize nature as actual. He feels rather that, when he is "whirled up and rapt into the Great Soul", he sees the whole, timeless plan of God:

A hunger seized my heart; I read
Of that glad year which once had been,
In those fall'n leaves which kept their green,
The noble letter of the dead:

And strangely on the silence broke
The silent-speaking words, and strange
Was love's dumb cry defying change
To test his worth; and strangely spoke

The faith, the vigour bold to dwell
On doubts that drive the coward back,
And keen thro' wordy snares to track
Suggestion to her inmost cell.

So word by word, and line by line,
The dead man touch'd me from the past,
And all at once it seem'd at last
The living soul was flash'd on mine,

And mine in this was wound, and whirl'd
About empyreal heights of thought
And came on that which is, and caught
The deep pulsations of the world,

Aeonian music measuring out
The steps of Time -- the shocks of Chance --
The blows of Death. At length my trance
Was cancell'd, stricken thro' with doubt.

When he apprehends this plan during the trance, Tennyson is able to see nature as spiritual harmony. But he is then looking at an ideal nature of the past, present, and future, not at the actual nature of the present. Harold Nicolson, I believe, is in error when he says that Tennyson had a "sense of the spirituality of nature". The poet, whenever he refers to nature as spiritual, is really speaking of a "supernature".

1 Poems, III, p.252(Notes).
2 In Memoriam, III, pp.136-37.
4 Nicolson, Tennyson, p.278.
Other Escapes into a "supernature"

In order to complete the record of Tennyson's idea of nature, that is, to show that nature meant for the poet only the material world, it is necessary to treat of several other escapes sometimes resorted to by Tennyson. Although these evasions, of which I shall discuss three, have affinities with mysticism, they do not occur when the poet is in the trance state; therefore they require separate treatment.

The first flight away from actuality is one which is closely related to Tennyson's transcendental views. When the poet looks at nature in the springtime, he is able to believe that God's immanence is manifest in the life renewing itself:

Once more the Heavenly Power
Makes all things new,
And domes the red-plow'd hills
With loving blue;
The blackbirds have their wills,
The thrrostles too.

Opens a door in Heaven
From skies of glass
A Jacob's ladder falls
On greening grass
And o'er the mountain walls
Young angels pass.

And he can feel a supernatural touch in the "ambrosial air" that brings peace.

Sweet after showers, ambrosial air,
That rollest from the gorgeous gloom
Of evening over brake and bloom
And meadow, slowly breathing bare

The round of space, and rapt below
Thro' all the dewy-tassell'd wood,
And shadowing down the horned flood
In ripples, fan my brows and blow

1 Early Spring, VI, p.324.
The fever from my cheek, and sigh
The full new life that feeds thy breath
Throughout my frame, till Doubt and Death,
Ill brethren, let the fancy fly

From belt to belt of crimson seas
On leagues of odour streaming far,
To where in yonder orient star
A hundred spirits whisper 'Peace'

His occasional retreat into a romantic primitivism is likewise an expression of his longing for an ideal nature. For example, because he had never visited the tropics, he could imagine a perfect, though unreal, nature existing there;

By peaks that flamed, or, all in shade,
Gloom'd the low coast and quivering brine
With ashy rains, that spreading made
Fantastic plume or sable pine;
By sands and steaming flats, and floods
Of mighty mouth, we scudded fast,
And hills and scarlet-mingled woods
Glow'd for a moment as we past.

and

A mountain islet pointed and peak'd;
Waves on a diamond shingle dash,
Cataract brooks to the ocean run,
Fairily-delicate palaces shine
Mixt with myrtle and clad with vine,
And overstream'd and silvery-streak'd
With many a rivulet high against the Sun
The facets of the glorious mountain flash,
Above the valleys of palm and pine.

Of course, Tennyson characteristically spurns a flight of this sort because it is unbecoming to moral man, who must suffer the discipline of actual nature.

But he does not condemn another kind of escape, namely the idealizing of nature through the eyes of love, for pure love was to him of Supernatural origin. Tennyson's descriptions

---

1 In Memoriam, III, pp.124-25.
2 The Voyage, II, p.110.
3 The Islet, II, pp.276-77.
of the valley and hills in Oenone are not designed for the edification or moral improvement of his readers, but are unrestrainedly devoted to capturing the beauty of Cauteretz, that sacred valley through which Tennyson and Arthur Hallam journeyed together.

There lies a vale in Ida, lovelier
Than all the valleys of Ionian hills.
The swimming vapour slopes athwart the glen,
Puts forth an arm, and creeps from pine to pine,
And loiters, slowly drawn. On either hand
The lawns and meadow-ledges midway down
Hang rich in flowers, and far below them roars
The long brook falling thro' the clov'n ravine
In cataract after cataract to the sea.

And "Come into the garden, Maud", the lyrical refrain of Maud's lover, presents a similar view of an ideal nature, a nature which bears a supernatural imprint because it is the personification of man's divine love. The stress in both these passages is on the spirit of man, not on physical nature.

All these rare and short-lived escapes -- Pantheism, mysticism, immanentism, romantic primitivism, transformation of nature through love's eyes -- must be recognized as leaps into a "supernature" that has little resemblance to nature herself. Nature, in spite of all the poet's attempts to arrive at a fuller comprehension of her, remains for Tennyson primarily the physical world revealed by science.

1 Oenone, I, p.158.
2 cf. Chapter 2, wherein was a speculation that Tennyson's romanticism or mysticism might permit a "natural supernaturalism".
Nature in Tennyson: Summary

Tennyson's acceptance of scientific fact in interpreting nature forced him, as science became increasingly materialistic, into a more and more definite dualism. God and man could not be reconciled with material nature except on the basis of law. Therefore, while this law of uninterrupted progress or evolution in nature indicated an understandable order in the universe, Tennyson admired nature; gradual change in the cosmos, on earth, and in man's body were necessary parts of a unified evolutionary pattern. As long as the poet was able to view the general principles of evolution from a distance or with an eye to the future, he could relate immutable law in nature to God's law, the force controlling nature. But when he realized -- and this realization came early in his life -- that nature's order did not conform with his ideas of an absolute morality and of a beneficent God, the compromise, no matter how strongly Tennyson protested to the contrary, was not possible. When he judged nature, through the authority of science, as the actual, nineteenth-century, physical world, he had to conclude that her blind wastefulness and her awesome vastness not only were detrimental to his belief in man's divine spirit but were irreconcilable with the omnipotence and benevolence of the

1 The Ancient Sage, VI, p.201.
2 cf. Hallam Tennyson, Memoir, Vol.II, p.171 for Tennyson's reference to the definitions of "nature", "natural" and "supernatural" given by Reverend F.D. Maurice in a paper read to the metaphysical society. Both Maurice and Tennyson liked these Coleridgean definitions because they harmonized the "uniformity of the material world" and the "freedom of the spiritual world".
Creator. Actual nature was for the poet, from 1833 on, antagonistic to man. After Hallam's death nature became for Tennyson a "distressful necessity"¹ which would lead man's spirit away from God, and even away from further progress (since nature was dying). Therefore Tennyson, well before 1859, took progress out of nature's hands and presented it to moral man² and to God. Moral man, Tennyson believed after 1842, had a specific duty. He was, first, to observe the general principles by means of which nature had evolved to her limit (physical man) and, secondly, to exercise his divine Free Will, his "highest Human Nature"⁴ which was not bound by nature's laws, in order to ensure the future evolution of the human race and of a higher race of spiritual beings that would control wasteful nature. Tennyson's study of the physical world, which he had begun with the purpose of establishing nature's evolution as proof of the world plan of God, thus became a task dedicated to the future release of man from the physical bonds of nature in opposition to both God and man. And the more knowledge the poet accumulated, the more distinct this dualistic attitude became. Because Darwinism demonstrated that nature had evolved her creatures not just by means of adaptation but by the very waste Tennyson had deprecated, Tennyson was compelled to widen the breach between flesh and spirit, sense and soul, evil and

¹ Beach, Concept of Nature, p.428.
² Spedding's comment on Tennyson's 1842 volumes(Memoir, Vol.I, p.190) is interesting: "Moral and spiritual traits of character are more dwelt upon, in place of external scenery and circumstance".
³ cf. Chapter 2.
⁴ Locksley Hall Sixty Years After, VI, p.304.
⁵ Will, II, p.267 and The Voyage, II, p.112.
good. After 1859 the Laureate could justify life only by assuming that man's immortal spirit was merely banished into material nature for a short period of discipline:

... O dear Spirit half-lost
In thine own shadow and this fleshly sign
That thou art thou -- who wailest being born
And banish'd into mystery, and the pain
Of this divisible-indivisible world
Among the numerable-innumerable
Sun, sun, and sun, thro' finite-infinite space
In finite-infinite Time -- our mortal veil
And shatter'd phantom of that infinite One,
Who made thee unconceivably Thyself
Out of His whole World-self and all in all --
Live thou! and of the grain and husk, the grape
And ivyberry, choose; and still depart
From death to death thro' life and life, and find
Nearer and ever nearer Him, who wrought
Not Matter, nor the finite-infinite,
But this main-miracle, that thou art thou,
With power on thine own act and on the world.

Tennyson, looking upon nature as actual and material, had to admit that he could not believe that God would create "a thing so blind". Yet, on the other hand, he had to recognize the duality of man's being: the physical man in nature, the spiritual man separated from nature. His final position concerning nature was an unhappy one, for it was based on a belief in a universe operating according to fixed, materialistic laws which Tennyson, as champion of science, had to accept as true but which, because of his faith in the Reality of man's spirit, he likewise had to assume to be false for man.

O Purblind race of miserable men,
How many among us at this very hour
Do forge a life-long trouble for ourselves,
By taking true for false, or false for true;
Here, thro' the feeble twilingt of this world
Groping, how many, until we pass and reach
That other, where we see as we are seen!

3 De Profundis, VI, p.179.
4 Geraint and Enid, V, p.119.
MEREDITH'S CONCEPT OF NATURE

His peculiarity was an apt common-sense, which rested upon a cheerful disposition, and took delight in uniform habitual activity. That he should labour incessantly was his first and most necessary care; that he regarded everything else as secondary, - this kept up his comfortable state of mind; and I must reckon him before many others in the class of those who are called practical unconscious philosophers. 1

My purpose in this chapter will be twofold: first, to indicate the derivation and the evolution of George Meredith's philosophy and to ascertain why his idea of nature remained constant in its essentials while it embraced Darwinism and the new morality arising from Darwinism, and second, to determine Meredith's mature concept of nature. In pursuing this plan, I shall deal chiefly with Meredith's poetry, for I, like Trevelyan, believe that "Mr. Meredith's religion, philosophy, and ethics, which inspire and illuminate his novels, are expressed more fully and in more exact terms in his poems". 2

Chrysalis Period - up to 1859

It is very difficult to come to a hard-and-fast conclusion concerning the formative influences on Meredith's concept of nature, for Meredith was extremely reticent about his private life. The biographers and essayists who have commented on Meredith's idea of nature invariably have had to

speculate about the origin of his beliefs. Tennyson has been named as the inspiration of the sentimental spiritualism in Meredith's early nature poems; Mary (Peacock Nicolls) Meredith has been given credit for his belief in the spirituality of love and for his courageous outlook on life; the Moravian brothers of Neuwied and Thomas Love Peacock have been suggested as possible sources of Meredith's altruism; R.H. Horne has been mentioned as the wellspring of the poet's embryonic nature philosophy; and even Shelley, James Thomson, and August Comte have received their due for influencing Meredith in these early years of his life. All these hypotheses, it is true, are supported by the idea of nature that one finds in Meredith's poems. However, it seems to me that if one takes all these suggestions into account he must assume that Meredith's philosophy of nature was a patched-up conception. There is no evidence in Meredith's poetry to justify that assumption. The relative consistency of the poet's concept of nature should, I believe, lead one to the more logical conclusion that Meredith relied on one source of wisdom, one coherent philosophy of life into which all the disturbing facts and theories of nineteenth-century science could be fitted. I contend that this chief oracle was Goethe.

I do not say that Goethe's influence was particularly

2 Ibid., p.185.
4 Ibid., p.11.
5 James Thomson, writer of *The Seasons*.
strong in this first chrysalis period - Wordsworth, "the voice of great Nature"\(^1\) obviously had a very marked effect on the youthful Meredith - but I do believe that Goethe was the fount of wisdom at which Meredith refreshed his philosophy throughout all his formative years. As J.W. Beach says: "Goethe's idea of 'Try to understand thyself, and to understand nature ...' is the theme of Meredith in all his writings, prose and verse"\(^2\).

In his letters Meredith frequently recognizes the effect on him of this realistic Goethian approach to nature. He tells us that, of the influences forming his philosophy, Goethe's influence was "the most enduring". And he praises Goethe's faith in the unity of the real and the ideal, Goethe's belief that the ideal must be based upon the real:

Between realism and idealism there is no natural conflict. This completes that...I hold the man who gives a plain wall of fact higher in esteem than one who is constantly shuffling the clouds .... Does not all science (the mammoth balloon, to wit) tell us that when we forsake earth, we reach up to a frosty, inimical Inane? For my part I love and cling to earth, as the one piece of God's handiwork which we possess. I admit that we can refashion; but of earth must be the material. \(^5\)

But these comparisons of the two poets are of too general a nature. In our examination of Meredith's early poetry, let us

---

3 Letters, II, p.578 - footnotes to quotations from Meredith's letters also refer to the Memorial Edition of his works.
4 The "real" for Meredith corresponds to what Tennyson sees as the "actual". Similarly the "ideal" for Meredith is the "Real" for Tennyson.
look for specific ideas on nature that closely parallel those of the German poet.

**Acceptance of a beneficent, motherly nature**

In this period of his youth, physical strength, and vitality Meredith could discern no defect or evil in nature. His acceptance of the beneficent Mother is complete and unqualified. Accept, he tells us, nature in her "beauty and wisdom, gentleness, joyance, and kindness!" If you would be free and if you would learn about the world, Meredith prescribes in words reminiscent both of Goethe and of Wordsworth, then resign yourselves to the mentorship of great Nature:

The voice of nature is abroad
This night; she fills the air with balm;
Her mystery is o'er the land;
And who that hears her now and yields
His being to her yearning tones,
And seats his soul upon her wings,
And broadens o'er the wind-swept world
With her, will gather in the flight
More knowledge of her secret, more
Delight in her beneficence,
Than hours of musing, or the lore
That lives with men could ever give!

Such resignation requires no thought, but just a sensuous communion with all nature:

1 *Pastorals*, I, p.82.
2 Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, John Oxenford, translator, London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1930, p.157. -- Goethe's idea of freedom is close to Meredith's resignation --"Freedom consists not in refusing to recognize anything above us, but in respecting something which is above us; for, by respecting it, we raise ourselves to it, and, by our very acknowledgment, prove that we bear within ourselves what is higher, and are worthy to be on a level with it".
3 *South-West Wind in The Woodland*, I, p.45.
For every elemental power
Is kindred to our hearts, and once
Acknowledged, wedded, once embraced,
Once taken to the unfettered sense,
Once clasped into the naked life,
The union is eternal. 1

This union with nature through resigned acceptance of her rule
is a sure road to contentment:

A thing of Nature am I now,
Abroad, without a sense or feeling
Born not of her bosom;
Content with all her truths and fates;
Ev'n as yon strip of grass that bows
Above the new-born violet bloom
And sings with wood and field. 2

But it is not knowledge, or union, or contentment which makes
Meredith's surrender to nature convincing. It is first, his
transport of youthful joy, nature's chief inspiration for man:

Oh! do not say that this will ever cease; -
This joy of woods and fields;
This youth that nature yields,
Will never speak to me in vain, tho' soundly rapt in peace. 3

and second, his trust that this joy is no dream, no trick of
nature's: 4

No disenchantment follows here,
For nature's inspiration moves
The dream which she herself fulfils;
And he whose heart, like valley warmth,
Steams up with joy at scenes like this
Shall never be forlorn. 5

1 South-West Wind in The Woodland, I, p.45.
2 Pastorals, I, p.78.
3 Song, I, p.116.
4 cf. Goethe ("Truth and Poetry", Vol.1, p.186) -
"Surely there is no more beautiful adoration of the Deity than that which needs no image, but which springs up in our bosom merely from the intercourse with nature."
5 Pastorals, I, p.75.
The scheme of nature

[Nature's law]

This joyful acceptance of a beneficent nature permits Meredith in this early period to take nature's sombre law of change, of constant alternation of life and death, and to see in it a scheme which, though vague, contains no inherent contradictions. To avoid inconsistency he, like Goethe, bases his scheme upon nature's immutable law that cannot be read as an anthropomorphic reflection of man's changeable feeling:

Tho' all thy great emotions like a sea,
Against her stony immortality,
Shatter themselves unheeded and amazed.

Yet Meredith sees death as prophetic of more life; he believes that death is the means of producing life. Therefore, he envies the changing seasons, especially Winter, because through their frequent death they sustain new life:

O Winter! I'd live that life of thine,
With a frosty brow and an icicle tongue,
And never a song my whole life long,
Were such delicious burial mine!
To die and buried, and so remain
A wandering brook in April's train,
Fixing my dying eyes for aye
On the dawning brows of maiden May.

And he sees in the snowdrop's short life span something good, an example for man. The death of the snowdrop is not to be

1 cf. Goethe (Eckermann, Conversations, p.191) - "I have always avoided contradictions, have striven to dispel the doubts within me, and have uttered only the results I have discovered."
2 cf. Goethe on natural catastrophes (Eckermann, Conversations, p.75) - "Nature goes her own way...and all that to us seems an exception is really according to order".
3 To Alex. Smith, The 'Glasgow Poet', I, p.164.
4 The Death of Winter, I, p.20.
be mourned, for it is prophetic of the birth of the rose.  
Meredith thus makes of death both a sacrifice and a service to 
future generations.

Nevertheless, the poet realizes that death's blow brings 
grief to the living. But he has a way out of this dilemma too. 
His philosophy, based on nature's law, is not vanquished by 
sorrow as was that of the philosopher in *Rasselas*, for Meredith, 
like Wordsworth, can look to nature as healer and teacher in 
adversity. Look for prophetic sight, he says, to the light of 
the stars; see the trusting love the flowers have for nature; 
understand the prophecy of life in the snowdrop; then realize 
how you are a bud sprung from the dead stem of him for whom 
you grieve. In other words, give way to your grief for a 
moment, and then perceive that your sorrow is proof of a 
motherly love because it is so closely akin to joy in the 
fecundity and beauty of nature.

Meredith thus approves of nature's prodigality, for he 
sees in it both a manifestation of nature's concern for more 
and more life and a proof of the law that unites all created 
beings.

Now all Nature is alive, 
Bird and beetle, man and mole; 
Bee-like goes the human hive, 
Lark-like sings the soaring soul: 
Hearty faith and honest cheer 
Welcome in the sweet o' the year.  

2 cf. Goethe (*Eckermann, Conversations*, p.294) - "The 
Divinity works in the living, not in the dead; in the becoming 
and changing, not in the become and fixed." 
4 *Sorrows and Joys*, I, pp.86-87. 
5 *The Sweet O' The Year*, I, p.127.
Beauty, too, he connects with this law of change upon which he bases his concept of nature. Transient, changing beauty is a source of pleasure to him because it illustrates nature's benevolent rule:

Beauty renews itself in many ways:
The flower is fading while the new bud blows;

And the beauty which he most appreciates is that which reveals contrasts, especially contrasting light and darkness, for in scenes of this sort nature is symbolically demonstrating to man how inseparable are life and death. The month of July, for example, is one of Meredith's favourite months because it reveals a pattern of colour ranging from the bright greens and blues to the blackness of "rolling glooms":

I welcome thee with thy fierce love,
Gloom below and gleam above.

But Meredith's great joy is the dawn, for in the sunrise he sees exemplified the warmth of new life - life naturally had a stronger appeal to his cheerful temperament than did the death that made life possible. He frequently attributes godlike

---

1 cf. Goethe (Eckermann, Conversations, p.169) concerning the law of change - "a great law, which pervades all nature and on which all life and all the joy of life depend. This... is the case not only with our other senses, but also with our higher spiritual nature".

2 cf. Keats's Ode On a Grecian Urn. Meredith, unlike Keats, does not worry about the relative permanence or transience of beauty. Beauty is, in fact, more "truthful" for Meredith when it is transient, for non-permanence amongst nature's creations is the best evidence for the permanence of Nature and her law.

3 Pictures of The Rhine, I, p.120.

4 July, I, p.97.

5 cf. Goethe (Eckermann, Conversations, p.422) - "If I am asked whether it is in my nature to revere the Sun, I... say - certainly. For he is...a manifestation of the highest Being, and indeed the most powerful that we children of earth are allowed to behold. I adore in him the light and the productive power of God; by which we all live, move, and have our being - we, and all the plants and animals with us."
qualities to the sun:

that throning bosom
Where all earth is warmed, -

How barren should I be were I
Without above that loving splendour
Shedding light and warmth!

And he greets happily the reawakening of life and light with each dawn:

now the sun
In saffron clothes the warming atmosphere;
The sky lifts up her white veil like a nun,
And looks upon the landscape blue and clear; -
The lark is up; the hills, the vines in sight;
The river broadens with his waking bliss
And throws up islands to behold the light;
Voices begin to rise, all hues to kiss;-
Was ever such a happy morn as this!
Birds sing, we shout, flowers breathe, trees
shine with one delight!

Amid all this life and beauty the active poet found no time to worry about the problem of immortality. Personal immortality for man would have been inconsistent with his idea of the oneness of nature. Moreover, nature's law of alternating life and death gave Meredith no reason to assume that he had an individual and immortal soul. No doubt he, like Goethe, saw "more and more distinctly, that it is better to avoid all thought of the immense and incomprehensible".\(^4\) Juggling Jerry expresses Meredith's unconcern with the matter:

May-be - for none see in that black hollow -
It's just a place where we're held in pawn,
And, when the Great Juggler makes as to swallow,
It's just the sword-trick --

---

1 Daphne, I, p.59.
2 Pastorals, I, p.80.
3 Pictures of The Rhine, I, p.121.
5 Juggling Jerry, I, p.137.
Yet Meredith does hint at his later belief that our immor-
tality lies in our bequeathing knowledge and vigour to the
future generation. He notes that the nightingale does not
heed the death around it when it is engaged with its progeny:

The waves of fern may fade and burn,
The grasses may fall, the flowers and all,
And the pine-smells o'er the oak dells
Float on their drowsy and odorous wings,
But thou wilt do nothing but coo,
Brimming the nest with thy brooding breast,
'Midst that young throng of future song,
Round whom the Future sings.  

And he praises a Glasgow poet's attempt to achieve fame through
his work; for Meredith feels sure that "to noble impulse Nature
puts no ban".

**Man's place in nature's scheme**

Man, for Meredith, has no alternative but to accept
nature's benevolent law. And if he should live an unnatural
life, then he must expect to pay the consequences. It is
possible, Meredith states, for man to transgress and still be
accepted back by the great Mother; but for him who has strayed
too far from nature, as did Sir Austin Feverel, the punishment
is terrible. Even the innocents, Lucy and Richard, who are

---

1 Both the general ideas of progress and the fact of
change in nature could have implanted this idea in Meredith's
mind.
2 *To A Nightingale*, I, p.123.
3 cf. Goethe (Eckermann, *Conversations*, p.45) - "This
preoccupation with immortality is for people...who have nothing
to do. But an able man, who has something regular to do here,
and must toil and struggle and produce day by day, leaves the
future world to itself, and is active and useful in this".
(Carlyle's doctrine of work, sterner than Goethe's idea, would
also have influenced Meredith in the writing of this poem.)
4 *To Alex. Smith, The 'Glasgow Poet'*; I, p.164.
5 see *London by Lamplight*, I, p.70.
caught in the toils of Sir Austin's "system", must suffer for his sin against nature. Lucy dies, and Richard, we are told at the end of the novel, faces a futile, virtually lifeless existence.

What, then, is Meredith's early prescription (beyond mere acceptance of nature) for the happy life? First, man must recognize the importance of his sensations, his most immediate tie with nature. Meredith agrees with Goethe\(^1\) that any neglect of the senses produces an unnatural state of affairs. "Honest passion", the English poet tells us, "can be safer than conscious wisdom"\(^2\), for nature approves of passion as the first and necessary step towards a purer love:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Great Pan in his covert} \\
&\text{Beheld the rare glistening,} \\
&\text{The cry of the love hurt,} \\
&\text{The sigh and the kiss} \\
&\text{Of the latest close mingling:} \\
&\text{But love, thought he, listening,} \\
&\text{Will not do a dove hurt,} \\
&\text{I know, -- and a tingling,} \\
&\text{Latent with bliss,} \\
&\text{Prickt thro' him, I wis,} \\
&\text{For the Nymph he was singling.} \quad 3
\end{align*}
\]

The cultivation of man's brain is a second matter with which Meredith wants man to concern himself. But the poet would not have man stress this development to the exclusion of his senses. Though Meredith is not in complete accord with

---

1 cf. Goethe ("Truth and Poetry", Vol. I, p.503) - "The separation of the sensual from the moral, which in the complicated, cultivated world sunders the feelings of love and desire, produces...an exaggeration which can lead to no good."
3 The Pape of Aurora, I, p.41
Lady Blandish's condemnation of science, he does see the danger of ignoring life in order to pursue an idea based upon a purely scientific theory. "Men's thoughts", he feels, "must borrow [from nature] rather than bestow."

But the poet wishes man to be more than a selfish creature driven by his passions. Go out to nature, he suggests to the egoist, and experience the cleansing effect of her storms; then you will be at one with nature's creatures and with man in

The ebb and flow of Nature's tide;
A self-forgetful sympathy.

This altruistic tendency operative among the animals (especially the birds), Meredith opines, is something which man would do well to emulate, for it shows that the basic meaning of nature for man is the future brotherhood of the human race. Meredith thus gives to nature an ethical as well as a creative meaning, though he admits that altruism is not immediately apparent in nature's law but only in the actions of her creatures.

1 Meredith, Richard Feverel, p. 588-9.
2 cf. Goethe (Eckermann, Conversations, p. 349) - "Napoleon affords an example of the danger of elevating oneself to the Absolute and sacrificing everything to the carrying out of an idea."
3 Pastorals, I, p. 78.
4 Meredith, Richard Feverel, pp. 556-58.
5 The Two Blackbirds, I, p. 95.
6 cf. Goethe on altruism in birds (Eckermann, Conversations, p. 412) - "Did not God inspire the bird with this all-powerful love for its young, and did not similar impulses pervade all animate nature, the world could not subsist. But this is the divine energy everywhere diffused, and divine love everywhere active."
7 The Olive Branch, I, p. 13.
8 Albert Schweitzer, Goethe, London, Adam and Charles Black, 1949, p. 72 - "Goethe believes... that God, who is identical with Nature, by means of what for us is an unfathomable mystery, is not only creative force but also ethical will."
The finest manifestation for Meredith of both ethical will and creative force is love, for love has in it both spiritual and earthly qualities - creative power in its passion and ethical will in its purified essence. For the poet love attains to the proportions of a law of nature, the law which man may see behind her outward law of life and death. Love is something beyond philosophy, beyond science; it is the "supersensual spring of the ripe senses into passion". Love of nature and of man or woman is for Meredith the surest road to the vital spirit behind nature's outward dress, to the spirit which man must recognize if he would be in happy accord with a nature which, heathenish, reaches at her best to the footstool of the Highest. She is not all dust, but a living portion of the spheres. In aspiration it is our error to despise her, forgetting that through Nature only can we ascend.

The benevolent spirit of living nature recognizes this "aspiring love" as a reflection of her own essential being; consequently, the marriage of true lovers also means the wedding of both with nature's spirit:

1 Meredith, Richard Feverel, p.194.
2 Meredith's passionate love for Mary (Peacock) Nicolls was probably the chief reason for his placing love in such a pre-eminent position at this time.
3 cf. Goethe ("Truth and Poetry", Vol. I, p.470) - "I sought to free myself from all that was foreign to me, to regard the external with love, and to allow all beings, from man downwards, as low as they were comprehensible to act upon me, each after its own kind. Thus arose a wonderful affinity with the single objects of nature, and a hearty concord, a harmony with the whole."
4 Meredith, Richard Feverel, p.240.
And thus in me, and thus in me, they said,
Earth's mists did with the sweet new spirit wed. 1

The voice of nature's spirit, which is so distinct if one approaches nature in the right way, exists for Meredith not just in man and woman, but in the wind, particularly the South-West wind, and in the songs of birds, especially the skylarks. The "low-pervading breeze" brings to the poet "a whisper from the stars ..."

like the strings
Of a silver harp swept by a spirit's hand
In some strange glimmering land,
'Mid gushing springs,
And glistenings
Of waters and of planets, wild and grand! 3

But the South-West wind is nature's clearest voice, telling, like the sun, of nature's physical and spiritual life - "All warmth, all sweetness, comes with the South-West" 4 says Richard Feverel to his friend Ripton. And the skylark 5 too speaks of life in joyous tones so similar to those of nature exulting in her creations that Meredith imagines an identity existing:

O Skylark! I see thee and call thee joy!
Thy wings bear thee up to the breast of the dawn;
I see thee no more, but thy song is still
The tongue of the heavens to me! 6

1 Song, I, p.50.
2 cf. Goethe's remark concerning the productive powers of nature - "Such powers lie in the water, and particularly in the atmosphere. The fresh air of the open country is our proper element; it is as if the breath of God were there wafted immediately to men and a divine power exerted its influence".
3 Twilight Music, I, p.34.
4 Meredith, Richard Feverel, p.304.
5 cf. Shelley's Ode To A Skylark - Meredith's spirit in nature differs from Shelley's Intellectual Beauty in that it is more vital, more alive.
6 To:A Skylark, I, p.64.
It is interesting to note that this creed of Meredith's, though it includes spirit, is of Earth, not of the universe. Meredith obviously found it very difficult to bring the cosmos into the close inter-relationship of nature and man. In fact, he even shied away from the immenseness and incomprehensibility of mountains, for high mountains appeared to "reach up to a frosty, inimical Inane". Meredith did not, like Wordsworth, want to be caught in the dualism that transcendentalism fostered; but his impression on viewing mountain heights almost forced him into this trap. His view of the Alps in 1861 aroused the fears he had entertained in writing one of his 1851 poems:

O Mountain! hid from peak to base,
And image of the awful power
With which the secret of all things,
That stoops from heaven to garment earth,
Can speak to any human soul,
When once the earthly limits lose
Their pointed heights and sharpened lines,
And measureless immensity
Is palpable to sense and sight.

Yet his whole philosophy of nature even in 1851 would have confirmed, as it did in 1861, his faith in Earth; transcendentalism was not for him:

Our great error has been (the error of all religion, as I fancy) to raise a spiritual system in antagonism to Nature. What though yonder Alp does touch the Heavens?

1 Letters, I, p.33 - "My first sight of the Alps has raised odd feelings. Here at last seems something more than earth, and visible, if not tangible. They have the whiteness, the silence, the beauty and mystery of thoughts seldom unveiled within us, but which conquer Earth when once they are. In fact they have made my creed tremble. - only for a time."
2 "Swathed round in mist and crown'd with cloud", I, p.92.
3 Letters, I, p.33.
Nature philosophy in Meredith before 1859: Summary

It is apparent that Meredith's pre-Darwinian philosophy of nature is not a unified concept. For Meredith in this period stresses "blood" rather than "brain" or "spirit". That is, his emphasis is upon the physical union of man with all nature and upon man's complete acceptance of nature and her law. Like Wordsworth, Meredith sees nature as Healer and Revealer, but his sheer passionate delight in nature's beauty and fecundity is a pagan adoration different from the "high ethereal love with which Wordsworth regarded nature". Meredith's attitude really brings him closer to Goethe than to Wordsworth, for it emphasizes man's physical activity and joy in nature rather than his passive acceptance of her benevolence.

Yet Meredith does lay the groundwork for the intellectual and spiritual components of his mature philosophy. There is nothing in Meredith's early writings to indicate a belief in a struggle which will evolve, in turn, brain and spirit from the merely sensual part of man. But the poet does imply that he would enjoy a battle with nature and with himself; Richard Feverel's exultation when he is battling the elements is evidence that Meredith would fight courageously in the ranks of the fittest to make possible man's progress toward altruistic spirit. Moreover, that he does see in nature's law of change

2 cf. Goethe ("Truth and Poetry", p.234) - "A man remains of consequence, not so far as he leaves something behind him, but so far as he acts and enjoys, and rouses others to action and enjoyment."
a hint of evolution is apparent from an observation he made in the *Monthly Observer* (c.1850):

> The universe...is but a succession of links, and we are all united in nobility and gentleness and love.  

His concept of spirit is not very clear, it is true. But is it ever distinctly defined in his poetry? One can at least state that, following Goethe, Meredith conceived of spirit as something which was part of Earth. Meredith's early poetry does not justify J.W. Cunliffe's statement that the poet "took over Wordsworth's transcendental view of nature". Archibald Strong's distinction between Meredith and Wordsworth is more to the point:

> To Wordsworth Nature gave intimations of something that transcended her and was not herself.  
> To Meredith she bore no message but that written plain on her face for all to read.

Transcendentalism would have introduced an unwanted contradiction into Meredith's philosophy of nature, for, though he had not formulated his complete concept of nature by 1859, he had erected, mainly on a Goethian base, a consistent framework that contained all the elements of which his final concept consisted. The impetus from Darwinism was all that was needed to quicken his seemingly diverse ideas into one coherent, unified conception.

---

**First Impact of Darwinism (1859-1871)**

Lionel Stevenson makes the following statement about the effect of Darwinism on Meredith:

George Meredith had little perception of the idea [evolution] till the scientists announced it; but thereafter he devoted himself to it unstintingly. When he became acquainted with Darwinism, his philosophic system developed promptly and completely; so the stages of its growth cannot be chronicled...the evolutionary interpretation of the universe...determined his whole outlook.  

Mr. Stevenson, I believe, puts the matter too bluntly. The very fact that Meredith does not mention Darwin in his letters indicates to me that the scientist's theory had the effect of unifying Meredith's philosophy, not of adding something of import to it. This unification, moreover, was not immediate; it is calling the sincerity of Meredith into question to say that, when he suddenly discovered Darwin, he quickly developed a philosophy from Darwin's theory without giving one scrap of credit to its originator. Meredith, as we have seen, had had before 1859 an intuitive apprehension of evolution, though not of natural selection; therefore, is it not likely that he, like his mentor Goethe, saw in the theory merely a verification of his intuition?

Mr. Stevenson is also in error when he states that the stages of the growth of Meredith's philosophy of nature cannot be chronicled. For, although Meredith made no direct reference

---

1 Stevenson, *Darwin Among The Poets*, pp.183-84.
to Darwin's theory during this period between Darwin's two publications, there is demonstrable evidence in his poetry of a cautious assimilation of these latest ideas of evolution into the poet's creed. Darwinism placed Meredith in closer contact with the real; but it did not alter his Goethian belief in the necessity for a consistent balance of the real and ideal worlds. Hence during the 1860's the poet was critical of both groups of extremists that resulted from the conflict over Darwinian evolution, namely, the materialists, who ignored spirit, and the religious reactionaries, who postulated personal immortality and miracles as "opiates" for the painful strife of this world. In opposition to materialistic tenets he advanced "his doctrine of communion with nature and reliance on her power to heal and sustain". And he preached the realistic acceptance of suffering and of nature's stern laws to those who would take the drugs offered by the priesthood:

Could France accept the fables of her priests,
Who blest her banners in this game of beasts,
And now bid hope that heaven will intercede
To violate its laws in her sore need,
She would find comfort in their opiates:
Mother of Reason! can she cheat the Fates? 4

Meredith evidently saw too much of the "dragon" of self in both the materialistic concept of "self-preservation" and the orthodox religious belief in individual immortality and divine

1 See London by Lamplight, I, pp.68-72 and the poem attributed to Disyer Sandoe (Richard Feverel, pp.80-81) for Meredith's condemnation of mammon and materialism.
2 See also Martin's Puzzle, I, pp.261-2 for Meredith's condemnation of the "Tea-doctrine" preached by the parsons.
3 Stevenson, Darwin Among The Poets, p.193.
4 France, III, p.145.
intervention. However, his agnosticism was not so definite as
Spencer's or Huxley's. To those Victorians who insisted on
retaining a belief in the existence of God Meredith repeated
his earlier advice (which now happened to agree in part with
Darwin's assumptions): if there is any God, you may find him
only through a reverent and loving study of Earth:

She can lead us, only she,
Unto God's footstool, whither she reaches:
Loved, enjoyed, her gifts must be,
Reverenced the truth she teaches,
Ere a man may hope that he
Ever can attain the glee
Of things without a destiny!

Like Goethe, Meredith thus saw God as the spirit both behind
and in nature, as the spirit man would see in nature and in
himself (as part of nature) if he lived close to her. Nature,
God, and man were for Meredith all parts of an essential unity.

A stronger emphasis on "Earth"

One influence of Darwinism is discernible in the poet's
firm affirmation of his earlier belief that the real world of
which man could have knowledge was "Earth". Earth, not the
universe, was the place where Meredith could see nature's laws

1 Ode To The Spirit of Earth in Autumn, I, p.259.
in immediate connection with nature, and owns and loves it as
his work, seemed to him the proper God."
3 cf. Goethe (Eckermann, Conversations, p.391) - The
Deity "is Reason, is Understanding itself. Therewith are all
creatures penetrated; and man has so much of it that he can
recognize parts of the highest".
4 Goethe no doubt had provided Meredith with the idea that
man must keep close to earth - "Man is born, not to solve the
problems of the universe, but to find out where the problem
applies, and then to restrain himself within the limits of the
comprehensible." (Eckermann, Conversations, p.120.)
being put into effect. Hence one finds that in the poems written after 1859 the poet stresses more strongly than before his faith in earthly nature. Earth\(^1\) takes over the vital role of the "Great Mother" who achieves her own growth through the alternate life and death of her children:

Earth, the mother of all,
Moves on her stedfast way,
Gathering, flinging, sowing.
Mortals, we live in her day,
She in her children is growing. \(^2\)

And, lest one might think her cruel in her self-existence, Meredith reminds him that man's only visible friend is a vital, truly beneficent, Mother Earth:

There is a curtain o'er us.
For once, good souls, we'll not pretend
To be aught better than her who bore us,
And is our only visible friend.
Hark to her laughter! who laughs like this,
Can she be dead or rooted in pain?
She has been slain by the narrow brain,
But for us who love her she lives again.
Can she die? O, take her kiss! \(^3\)

Therefore, man should look not above, but to Earth's stern law of development for confirmation of nature's love and spirit:

I know that since the hour of birth,
Rooted in earth,
I have looked above,
In joy and in grief,
With eyes of belief,
For love.
A mother trains us so.
But the love I saw was a fitful thing;
I looked on the sun
That clouds or is blinding aglow:
And the love around had more of wing
Than substance, and of spirit none.

1 Meredith's association with Swinburne in the 1860's also would have influenced Meredith in this shift from nature to Earth.
2 Ode To The Spirit of Earth in Autumn, I, p.259.
3 Ode To The Spirit of Earth in Autumn, I, pp.256-7.
Then looked I on the green earth we are rooted in,
Whereof we grow,
And nothing of love it said,
But gave me warnings of sin,
And lessons of patience let fall,
And told how pain was bred,
And wherefore I was weak,
And of good and evil at strife,
And the struggle upward of all,
And my choice of the glory of life:
Was love farther to seek?

In other words, abiding love is to be seen and attained through the exercise of fortitude in man's struggle to advance. Here is a note of Darwinism. Yet Meredith accepts this struggle calmly. Earth, the lasting, the vital, knows no loss or desolation; and man, by attributing cruelty to her whose law of life and death is truly a law of sacrifice and love, becomes a creature of hopes and fears who cannot enjoy life. Meredith, who feels that no justification is necessary for man's existence, is in favour of living life to the full:

Life thoroughly lived is a fact in the brain,
While eyes are left for seeing.

Look to Earth's other creatures if you would live a happy life, advises Meredith; observe the animals who rejoice in the good things of life, avoid pain as best they can, and hunger not for certainties:

Sweet as Eden is the air,
And Eden-sweet the ray.
No Paradise is lost for them
That foot by branching root and stem,
And lightly with the woodland share
The change of night and day.

1 In The Woods, Vol. 27 (Memorial Edition), pp.275-76.
2 Ode To The Spirit of Earth in Autumn, I, pp.259-60.
3 Ode To The Spirit of Earth In Autumn, I, p.259.
Here all things say
'We know not,' even as I.
'We brood, we strive to sky,
We gaze upon decay,
We wot of life through death.
We are patient: what is dumb
We question not, nor ask
The hidden to unmask,
The distant to draw near.'

And this the woodland saith:
'I know not hope nor fear:
I take whate'er shall come;
I raise my head to all things fair,
From foul I turn away.'
Sweet as Eden is the air,
And Eden-sweet the ray.

This counsel appears at first glance to be identical with the quantitative pleasure-pain formula of the Benthamites. But it is not; a qualitative distinction is implied in the phrase, "we strive to sky". Mere Benthamism requires little fortitude, Meredith would say; it demands only a recognition of the law of change. What makes courage necessary is the realization that struggle is part of nature's law. Because Meredith feels that morally and physically man is impelled to seek something higher than himself, he believes that cheerful struggle is the finest manifestation of the free will that is nature's chief gift to man. If man freely accepts the necessity of contention, then he has a chance for happiness. But if he ignores nature's imperative, he will be miserable. Two facts, then, must man acknowledge: first, the law of change, the law of life and death so well exemplified by the pine tree quietly dropping its non-fertilized seed, and second, the struggle for improvement, symbolized for Meredith by the turbulent wind above

the pine, the race of life which also drops its dead while it
exalts its living:  

A wind sways the pines,
   And below
Not a breath of wild air:
All still as the mosses that glow
On the flooring and over the lines
Of the roots here and there.
The pine-tree drops its dead:
They are quiet as under the sea.
   Overhead, overhead,
Rushes life in a race,
As the clouds the clouds chase:
And we go,
And we drop like the fruits of the tree,
   Even we,
   Even so.  

It is almost a superhuman task for man looking at the
present to admit that his immediate reward for carrying on the
struggle is death. Yet Meredith prays to nature for the
courage to accept this fact and to live, exempt from Time as
nature is, in the joyous moment that reveals to him the bright
future of the race:

Great Mother Nature! teach me, like thee,
To kiss the season and shun regrets.
And am I more than the mother who bore,
Mock me not with thy harmony!
Teach me to blot regrets,
Great Mother! me inspire
With faith that forward sets
But feeds the living fire,
Faith that never frets
For vagueness in the form.

1 cf. Goethe on "nature" (Sir Charles Sherrington, Goethe
on Nature and on Science, Cambridge, University Press, 1949,
pp.37-8--quoted from Ges.Werke, xxx, p.313) -- "We are in her
and she in us. Unasked and unwarned we are caught up by her
into the whirl of her dance. She carries us along until we
are tired and drop from her arms - she herself is tireless".
Meredith's idea has more of a Darwinian tinge than has Goethe's;
yet the parallel is obvious.
2 In The Woods (later Dirge in Woods), Vol. 27, p.278.
In life, O keep me warm!
For, what is human grief?
And what do men desire?
Teach me to feel myself the tree,
And not the withered leaf.
Fixed am I and await the dark to-be!

A developing ethical theory based on evolution

It will be remembered that Meredith, during his early life, gave the accolade of the "fittest" to the lover because of the altruistic tendencies shown by this chosen creature of nature. But recognition of the scientific fact of struggle and Meredith's own disastrous marriage indicated to the poet the need for a readjustment of his ethical values and for a new definition of the fittest. He began to see more clearly than before that a practicable morality had to be based both on the reason evolved from man's fight for betterment and on the instincts that formed the closest link between man and nature. Like Goethe, he now conceived the fittest to be those men who developed all sides of their natures; the healthy competition to which such men were subject gave them more chance of achieving the balance of reason and instinct than an easy life did.

Meredith, of course, realized that pain and suffering

1 Ode To The Spirit of Earth in Autumn, I, p.258.
2 cf. Goethe (Eckermann, Conversations, p.59) - "it is in conflict with natures opposed to his own that a man must collect his strength to fight his way through; and thus all our different sides are brought out and developed so that we soon feel ourselves a match for every foe."
3 Meredith believes that the hard life of the gipsy children is more "fruitful" than is that of the indolent children of wealthy parents - see The Orchard and the Heath, II, p.90-91.
often resulted from the struggle of life. The suffering of innocents was one of the incomprehensibles that he had to accept as a matter of faith; faith in the wholeness and essential goodness of nature's plan was for Meredith the only acceptable answer to this problem. But the poet could explain the more general kind of suffering in a way consistent with reason. Nature's law of results and consequences could account for most of the tragedy in life: Meredith tells us in his poem, Modern Love, that, if man cannot conform to nature, then he must "take the hap of all [his] deeds"; as far as nature is concerned, the struggle is good; man's unwise action, not any cruelty in nature, causes pain.

It is with the implicit acceptance of nature's law that Meredith discusses man's morality. And, in accordance with Darwin's suggestion that man's intellect is the latest result of evolution, Meredith now casts a disparaging look upon the passions. Certainly he would not have the sensual part of man destroyed:

Oh, Raphael! when men the Fiend do fight,  
They conquer not upon such easy terms.  
Half-serpent in the struggle grow these worms.  
And does he grow half human, all is right.  

But he wants man to be aware of the essential falseness and the danger of passion per se:

1 see Martin's Puzzle, I, p.264.  
3 This changed outlook may have had more to do with his broken marriage than with Darwinism. Nevertheless, the parallel with Darwin is there.  
4 Modern Love, I, p.213.
I see no sin:
The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot!
We are betrayed by what is false within. 1

For the selfish instinct of passion always threatens to develop into sentimentalism, and sentimentalism is a sin, for it opposes nature. In words that bring to mind Tennyson's 2 Maud 3 Meredith attacks the sentimentalist 4 for letting the "scaly dragon of self" frighten him away from the reality of nature's struggle:

Hawk or shrike has done this deed
Of downy feathers, a cruel sight.
Sweet sentimentalist, intercede
With Providence: it is not right!

Complain, revolt; say heaven is wrong,
Say nature is vile, that can allow
The innocent to be torn, the strong
To tower and govern - witness how! 5

In reaction against the selfishness of the passions and of sentimentalism Meredith calls for the antidote mind, for he sees that man's progress must be made through the "march of mind". But mere brain power is not enough for Meredith. What he wants is "the strenuous mind in quest", an active mind closely

1 Modern Love, I, p. 223.
2 cf. Meredith's letter to the Reverend Jessopp (Letters p. 165) - "I'm a little sick of Tennysonian green tea. I don't think Byron wholesome - exactly, but a drop or so - Eh? And he doesn't give limp, lackadaisical fishermen, and pander to the depraved sentimentalism of our drawing rooms."
3 cf. Chapter 3, p. 77.
4 cf. Goethe (Oxenford, "Annals", Vol. II, p. 195) - Goethe states that he had in him a "cross-grained humour... to hoot everything sentimental, and half-despairingly to cleave to inevitable reality".
6 Lines To A Friend Visiting America, II, p. 4.
linked with a strong body. Too much brain is unacceptable; high philosophy is not "ordered for the world's increase".1 Hence Meredith's strong men, the fittest, are men with powerful minds and bodies who, on a fulcrum of altruism, balance the teetering senses (the driving force of progress) with the reason (the driver). An interesting short poem that stresses the desirability of this mean in almost Darwinian terminology is To J. M., written in 1867.

Let Fate or Insufficiency provide
Mean ends for men who what they are would be:
Penned in their narrow day no change they see
Save one which strikes the blow to brutes and pride.
Our faith is ours and comes not on a tide:
And whether Earth's great offspring, by decree,
Must rot if they abjure rapacity,
Not argument but effort shall decide.
They number many heads in that hard flock:
Trim swordsmen they push forth: yet try thy steel.
Thou, fighting for poor humankind, wilt feel
The strength of Roland in thy wrist to hew
A chasm sheer into the barrier rock,
And bring the army of the faithful through. 2

That Meredith has developed a strong faith in this workable compromise is evident from the general tone of the letters written in this period:

Hitherto human Nature has marched through the conflict of extremes. With the general growth of reason, it will be possible to choose a path mid-way. 3

True strength is thus not power but balance, and it may be won only through communion with nature. Love of woman, says a disillusioned Meredith, seems to achieve a synthesis between the senses and the mind, but such love is not always trustworthy.

1 Modern Love, I, p.211.
3 Letters, I, p.67.
A complete acceptance and love of nature is a surer road to strength:

Lo, Strength is of the plain root—Virtues born:  
Strength shall ye gain by service, prove in scorn,  
Train by endurance, by devotion shape.  
Strength is not won by miracle or rape.  
It is the offspring of the modest years,  
The gift of sire to son, thro' those firm laws  
Which we name Gods; which are the righteous cause,  
The cause of man, and manhood's ministers.  

This strength which is the product of struggle and selfless love is for Meredith the balance that produces altruism.

A new gospel of energy founded on calm, reasoned acceptance  
Meredith's faith in Earth in this second period thus was founded upon a closer view of reality than was that of his early years, for he had added a Darwinian concept of struggle to his basic, joyful acceptance of nature. This addition to or clarification of his earlier philosophy demanded a calmer, more reasoned acceptance of a nature that apparently contained both good and evil. A cheerful recognition of struggle required that Meredith should draw upon the springs of fortitude and not just upon a naturally happy disposition. Hence during these years from 1859 to 1871 he recommended both a joyful delight in the goodness of life and an active obedience of nature's law of development through contention:

Live with the world. No cloister. No languor.  
Play your part. Fill the day. Ponder well and loiter not. Let laughter brace you. Exist in

2 France, III, p.145.
everyday communion with Nature. Nature bids you make all; only be sure you learn how to do without. 2

Activity is the keynote of this gospel of energy. Life is transient, Meredith tells us, because transience is part of nature's law. Therefore, one should live strenuously and for the moment. It is foolish sentimentality to live in a golden past, as some lovers do:

Yet seek they with Time's laughing things to wed:
Who will be promponed on some pallid day
To lift the hueless flower and show that dead,
Even such, and by this token, is their youth. 3

One should not barter present joy for the hopes and fears inspired by the spectre of Time that sooner or later disillusion the sentimentalists.

Yet Meredith, personally rejoicing only in the moment, does have hope for the future of the human race. If man, living fully, will take strength from the struggle and then act in a truly moral manner, he will, Meredith feels certain, ensure the strength of his progeny. For, in living in this active, righteous way, man is following nature:

You teach me a fine lesson, my old boy!
I've looked on my superiors for too long,
And small has been my profit as my joy.
You've done the right while I've denounced the wrong.

Prosper me later! 4

1 cf. Goethe on nature (Eckermann, Conversations, p.294) - "The man incapable of appreciating her she despises; and only to the apt, the pure, and the true does she resign herself, and reveal her secrets." This idea of nature resigning herself to man is a note which was not in Meredith's early poetry and which he probably took from Goethe when he began to formulate his idea of ethical evolution.
2 Sencourt, Meredith, p.105 (quoted from Lord Morley's Reminiscences).
3 Time and Sentiment, II, p.11.
4 The Old Chartist, I, p.162.
Thus Meredith suggests that the man with a true love of life and labour has only two ethical concerns: living a well-balanced, full life, and leaving good soil for his seed. In these two ideas lies Meredith's whole concept of immortality:

The lover of life knows his labour divine
And therein is at peace.
The lust after life craves a touch and a sign
That the life shall increase.

The lust after life in the chills of its lust
Claims a passport of death.
The lover of life sees the flame in our dust
And a gift in our breath.  

One may observe that Meredith's idea of nature of this period differed from that of the first period only in the matter of man's ethical progress through struggle. Because Swinburne during the 1860's had awakened in Meredith an enthusiasm not just for Earth but for progress and humanity, he doubtless saw a necessity for defining the "fittest" in terms consistent with Darwinism. Yet it is significant that Meredith, in laying new stress on ethics, did not greatly alter his fundamental philosophy of nature. Nor did he at this time publish a complete expression of the doctrine of ethical evolution that formed the basis of his later philosophy. Meredith obviously was not attempting to found a new concept of nature on Darwinism; he was trying merely to ascertain whether or not the scientist's ideas would fit into the pantheism he had taken from Goethe.

The process of combining Goethian ideas of change and Darwinian ideas of evolution was going on in this second period, but the

1 In The Woods, Vol. 27, p.278.
2 Sassoon, Meredith, p.87.
result of the integration was not to appear in Meredith's poetry until after the publication of The Descent of Man.

Meredith's mature concept of nature

[Ethical Evolution]

Although, as William Chislett informs us, Meredith adopted a scientific and positivistic attitude toward nature, he was, unlike the typical Victorian, no amateur scientist. It is true that he had a good knowledge of natural history; but it appears that of biology, astronomy and geology he knew very little. He himself admitted that a scientific treatise even in popularized form was usually unintelligible to him. It is fair to assume, therefore, that Meredith received the Darwinian ideas of evolution only after they had passed through several hands. And he, I believe, preferred this sifting process, which provided him with just the general concept, to the factual presentation in such books as On The Origin of Species and The Descent of Man; for a broad view of knowledge was compatible with his philosophy. Meredith, as is evident from his characterization of Sir Willoughby Patterne as a devotee of science, did not trust the materialistic side of science, for he saw in it a supporter of egotism. Science had to be humanized,

1 Wm. Chislett, George Meredith, a Study and an Appraisal, Boston, Richard G. Badger, 1925, p.213.
3 cf. Goethe (Eckermann, Conversations, p.66)- "As soon as anybody belongs to a certain narrow creed in science, every unprejudiced and true perception is gone."
4 see The Egoist, I, p.26 (Memorial Edition).
that is, it had to be "given moral, ethical and philosophical interpretation" before it possessed any value for Meredith.

Hence one finds in Meredith's writings very few references to the physical evolution of the animals and man. In The Egoist the phrases "survival of the fittest" and "natural selection" are used in passing; and in The Woods of Westermain appears a general idea of evolution from "mud to mind":

where old-eyed oxen chew
Speculation with the cud,
Read their pool of vision through,
Back to hours when mind was mud;
Nigh the knot, which did untwine
Timelessly to drowsy suns;
Seeing Earth a slimy spine,
Heaven a space for winging tons. 3

But, though Meredith apparently accepts Darwinism 4 because it gives support to his earlier beliefs in change and progress, mind and what is beyond mind are to him more important than the preceding evolutionary stages. For mind, mirroring soul, shows man, if he but read Earth aright, the beneficence, the vitality and the unity of nature. Knowledge of the "breaking of the types" does not disturb the mind that perceives Earth's love, loves her in return, and strives toward the ethical Good:

Numbers in council, awake
To love me more than things of my lap,
Love me; and to let the types break,
Men be grass, rocks, rivers, all flow;

2 The Egoist, I, p.45 (Memorial Edition) and II, pp.75-6.
3 The Woods of Westermain, II, p.35.
4 Meredith had no reason for not accepting the general view after 1880 that evolution was an historical fact as far as the animal world was concerned.
All save the dream sink alike:
To the source of my vital in sap;
Their battle, their loss, their ache,
For my pledge of vitality know.
The dream is the thought in the ghost;
The thought sent flying for food;
Eyeless, but sprung of an aim
Supernal of Reason, to find
The great Over-Reason we name
Beneficence: mind seeking mind.
Dream of the blossom of Good...

Here, then are the assumptions (consistent with his ideas of
the earlier periods) upon which Meredith bases his belief in
an ethical evolution: first, an acceptance of a benevolent Earth, and second, a faith in an ethic corresponding with na-
ture's true morality that is evolving in man through present struggle and the dream of a future Good. Man, Meredith asserts, must see benevolence in nature or he can never evolve ethically:

Count Nature devilish, and accept for doom
The chasm between our passions and our wits!

This ethical progress is for Meredith not a result of
nature's necessity but of man's free will. By assuming that
man has free will, Meredith is able partly to reconcile tragic life and the possibility of retrogression in man's development with nature's essential perfection. For this hypothesis gives man the choice to progress in harmony with nature and her law of change or to suffer and perish through opposition to her.

1 A Faith on Trial, II, pp.258-59.
2 Meredith was not at one with Thomas Huxley in assum-
ing benevolence in nature, for Huxley was convinced that
"the apparent paradox that ethical nature, while born of cosmic nature, is necessarily at enmity with its parent... is a truth". (Thomas Huxley, Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays, London, Macmillan and Co., 1895, viii).
3 The Sage Enamoured, III, p.25.
For he is in the lists
Contentious with the elements, whose dower
First sprang him; for swift vultures to devour
If he desists.

His breath of instant thirst
Is warning of a creature matched with strife,
To meet it as a bride, or let fall life
On life's accursed. 1

Yet in spite of his acknowledgment of possible retrogression and of nature's consequent scorn of man Meredith has faith in man's ability to evolve. For, like Goethe, he believes that morality is not merely a utilitarian balance, but an inner necessity that urges nature's highest creature to attain the altruistic ideal. Though he pictures man's path to progress as a zigzag course made by a drunkard, 3 Meredith has confidence in a general forward movement because he is of the firm opinion that man's free will is lighted by an inner moral beacon which burns more and more brightly with each step of man's advance:

'Tis that in each recovery he preserves,
Between his upper and his nether wit,
Sense of his march ahead, more brightly lit;
He less the shaken thing of lusts and nerves;
With such a grasp upon his brute as tells
Of wisdom from that vile relapsing spun.
A Sun goes down in wasted fire, a Sun
Resplendent springs, to faith refreshed compels. 4

Meredith is not, however, satisfied with man's trial-and-error movement forward, for this method assures both an unbalanced present existence for individual man and constant misery for the stumbling mass of mankind. Because the poet feels that this scheme of things is unsatisfactory, he conceives

1 Earth and Man, II, p.92.
2 Schweitzer, Goethe, p.79.
3 The World's Advance, II, p.17.
4 The Test of Manhood, III, p.207.
it to be his duty to give some direction to man's ethical progress. First realize, he tells us, that men are still brutish -

men are still

The three-parts brute which smothers the divine

and then concern yourself with achieving a proper balance between the two existing members ("blood" and "brain") of the evolutionary Triad in order to bring the third ("spirit") into existence. This is the ethical lyre upon the strings of which Meredith plays endlessly. Let us try to catch the burden of his melody and to see how it applies to his concept of nature.

The lowest of the three rungs on his evolutionary ladder is "blood", at the nethermost end of which is egotism. Egotism represents for Meredith the primitive force (which we all have in us) of mere self-preservation, the force that resists nature's law of change and enslaves man in bonds of selfishness. As Mrs. Sturge Henderson phrases it: "Egotism is to Meredith what Original Sin was to our forefathers, an initial condition common to all and only to be outgrown by much prayer and fasting." Meredith finds egotism inimical to moral progress, for he sees that anything built on this selfish foundation perishes, as did Attila's "Empire built of scorn".

---

1 Il y a Cent Ans, III, p.260.
2 Goethe probably had some influence on Meredith's conception of the Triad. See Eckermann, Conversations, pp.295-6, wherein Goethe praises Kant's Critique of Pure Reason and then goes on to say, "but the circle is not yet complete. Now, some able man should write the Critique of the Senses and Understanding of Man". Was Meredith aspiring to be Goethe's "able man"?
3 The Egoist, I, p.40.
5 The Nuptials of Attila, II, p.179.
Therefore, he recommends that man purge himself of this lowest element of self that obscures the view of nature's Eden:

But that the senses still
Usurp the station of their issue mind,
He would have burst the chrysalis of the blind:
As yet he will;
As yet he will, she prays,
Yet will when his distempered devil of Self;-
The glutton for her fruits, the wily elf
In shifting rays;-
That captain of the scorned;
The coveter of life in soul and shell,
The fratricide, the thief, the infidel,
The hoofed and horned;-
He singularly doomed
To what he execrates and writhes to shun;-
When fire has passed him vapour to the sun,
And sun relumed,
Then shall the horrid pall
Be lifted ...

But the poet does not suggest that self be stricken from man's being because of its egotistical quality; for out of self has evolved brain, and from the union of blood and brain will arise spirit. What man must do is "forge ... curbs" for the "scaly Dragon-fowl" of self, curbs that will deprive him of his ruthlessness but not of his useful force. That is, man must learn that the best part of "blood" is not egotism but sensation, nature's milk for man. If he utilizes this strong sensuous link with all nature, then man will, Meredith assures him, achieve the humility that shall rid him of undesirable egotism:

1 Earth and Man, II, pp. 97-8.
3 Hence "blood" for Meredith is essentially instinct, which, though it depends upon the actions of self, has no element of egotism in it.
Glad of more, till you reject
Your proud title of elect,
Perilous even here while few
Roam the arched greenwood with you. 1

Yet the acceptance of this blood-brotherhood represents only the first step in the direction of ethical evolution. Evolutionary progress for Meredith, as for Darwin, must involve struggle. For the poet, however, the fight is not to be waged against nature or her creatures. He believes, rather, that the main struggle takes place in each individual man; the struggle is not one for existence, but one to maintain a present ethical mean that will insure an even progress into the future. Meredith admits that nature does give man a kick as well as a kiss.2 Yet he feels that this would be only a gentle war between nature and man if man but realized that his and nature's real enemy is self. If man would accept nature's law and would struggle to achieve a moral balance, then suffering need not be the necessary prologue to the growth of mind and spirit that it has been in the past:

'Tis not in men to recognize the need
Before they clash in hosts, in hosts they bleed.
Then may sharp suffering their nature grind;
Of rabble passions grow the chieftain mind. 4

This struggle for balance, even for those who see nature rightly, is not an easy fight. In fact, it requires great mental fortitude to steer the sensitive self, which is so easily overwhelmed by the temptations of pleasure and the

2 A Stave of Roving Tim, II, p.4.
4 Foresight and Patience, III, p.96.
pangs of pain, in a mid-course between the Huntress and the Persuader, the "Powers of Nature" to whom man must pay homage:

Ah, what a sweat of anguish in that strife
To hold them fast conjoined within him still;
Submissive to his will
Along the road of life!

Nevertheless, this important battle of life, if it is carried on in close contact with humanity, is essentially good and sweet. For it is bringing mankind ever closer to nature and her vital spirit through the evolution of brain and more brain:

Contention is the vital force,
Whence pluck they brain, her prize of gifts,
Sky of the senses! on which height,
Not disconnected, yet released,
They see how spirit comes to light,
Through conquest of the inner beast,
Which Measure tames to movement sane,
In harmony with what is fair.

And brain, Meredith feels, is ample return for the bitter struggle that produces it, for brain mirrors Earth's spirit and gives voice to nature:

Never is Earth misread by brain:
That is the welling of her, there
The mirror: with one step beyond,
For likewise is it voice;

Moreover, strong brain is "the station for the flight of soul"; through its strength it brings about a balance of blood and

---

1 The Test of Manhood, III, p.201.
2 Meredith lays great stress on the "numbers", "Reality's flower" (A Faith On Trial, p.253).
3 see The Day of The Daughter of Hades, II, p.60.
4 "Brain" is for Meredith man's reason. It is the intelligence in action, not just the physical organism.
5 Hard Weather, II, p.213.
6 Ibid., p.213.
7 Ibid., p.214.
brain which gives its possessor a vision of future spirit, the altruistic ideal:

But when the mind, the cherishable mind,
The multitude's grave shepherd, took full flight,
Himself as mirror raised among his kind
He saw, and first of brotherhood had sight;
Knew that his force to fly, his will to see,
His heart enlarged beyond its ribbed domain;
Had come of many a grip in mastery;
Which held conjoined the hostile rival twain,
And of his bosom made him lord, to keep
The starry roof of his unruffled frame
Awake to earth, to heaven, and plumb the deep
Below, above, aye with a wistful aim. 1

Brain, in fact, makes Earth both a debtor to man and, if he obeys her laws, a servant to him. 2 Earth and man, thus mutually dependent upon one another, are, Meredith opines, not enemies but lovers:

Breath which is the spirit's bath
In the old Beginnings find,
And endow them with a mind,
Seed for seedling, swathe for swathe,
That gives Nature to us, this
Give we her, and so we kiss. 3

It is apparent, then, that Meredith's "doctrine of the mean" involves joyous acceptance of nature's law as well as calm recognition of man's struggle. 4 His fittest, those who possess strong brain, are therefore not just utilitarians who quantitatively balance pleasure and pain for the "greatest good of the greatest number"; their way of life embodies a

1 The Test of Manhood, III, p.203.
2 Ibid., p.204.
3 Nature and Life, II, p.239.
4 This "balance" is similar to that achieved by Goethe after reading Spinoza. Goethe, relating how he added Spinoza's disinterested calmness to his own active enthusiasm says: "mind and heart, understanding and sense, sought each other with an eager affinity binding together the most different natures" (Goethe, "Truth and Poetry", Vol.II, p.26).
more comprehensive mean. Primarily, Meredith's chosen few
have a selfless love of both nature and man and of the labour\(^1\)
they must do. Love for them is "the greatest exemplar of the
spiritual value of earthly things"\(^2\). Secondly, they feel that
they are duty bound to mix with the "numbers" and to help the
weak, not just because benevolence is pleasurable but because
only through such altruism shall the individual (and hence the
race) evolve to spirit.

If that thou hast the gift of strength, then know
Thy part is to uplift the trodden low;
Else in the giant's grasp until the end
A hopeless wrestler shall thy soul contend. 3

Thirdly, they live their lives in "high strenuousness", not
in sensuality, even if a preponderance of pleasure is the
immediate result of the latter course. 4 Fourthly, they believe
that the "right reason" they possess requires of them cheerful
patience and foresight rather than a purely scientific outlook
that leads to despair. 5 And lastly, they, like Meredith, accept
death as being good for the progress of the race, even though
it means the sacrifice of the individual. Melampus, who is
usually accused of being a Wordsworthian creation of Meredith's,
is, I believe, a good representative of this elite group, for
he is aware of spirit through the music of "measure" (the vital

\(^{1}\) Carlyle's work doctrine no doubt had some influence
on Meredith's belief in incessant activity.

\(^{2}\) Trevelyan, The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith,
p.85.


\(^{4}\) Sencourt, Meredith, p.286.

\(^{5}\) Meredith was strongly in favour of punishing Oscar
Wilde for his sensuality. (Sencourt, Meredith, p.286).

\(^{6}\) Foresight and Patience, III, p.92.

\(^{7}\) see Sassoon, Meredith, pp.166-67.
balance again); he loves nature and man; he recognizes nature's law; and he wishes to help man in his struggle for present happiness and future progress.\(^1\)

It is from the activity of such men that Meredith derives his faith in the practicability of the Triad. For he sees in their actions visible proof that only through the proper exercise of all his faculties can man now perceive and later realize the life of the spirit:

I have written always with the perception that there is no life but of the spirit; that the concrete is really the shadowy; yet that the way to the spiritual life lies in the complete unfolding of the creature, not in the nipping of his passions. An outrage to Nature helps to extinguish his light. To the flourishing of the spirit, then, through the healthy exercise of the senses. \(^2\)

Spirit, then, which is discernible now by those who have the "rapture of the forward view", the intuition to see altruism arising from what at present merely appears to be a struggle for self-preservation, is the soul of living nature. It is "God, the known"; it is the vital, permanent life, the essential unity of nature that will be part of man's real life when he has perfected through struggle the balance of his faculties. And it is achievable on Earth, not in any unknown realm beyond:

\[
\text{grasp} \\
\text{Very sap of the vital in this:} \\
\text{That from flesh unto spirit man grows} \\
\text{Even here on the sod under sun:} \quad (4)
\]

\(^1\) see Melampus, II, p.79ff. 
\(^2\) Letters, II, p.409. 
\(^3\) The Test of Manhood, III, p.204. 
\(^4\) A Faith on Trial, II, p.255.
But this idea of spirit is still rather vague. Therefore, one must turn for further enlightenment to a poem of Meredith's that attempts to explain his conception of spirit in a more empirical way. That poem is *A Faith on Trial*. In the opening stanzas Meredith is describing how his wife's impending death has been a great blow to his philosophy. Because there is no will to fight left in him, he cannot at first conceive of spirit in a nature that seems so cruel. He is a slave of egotism:

> I champed the sensations that make  
> Of a ruffled philosophy rags.  
> For them was no meaning too blunt,  
> Nor aspect too cutting of steel.  
> This Earth of the beautiful breasts,  
> Shining up in all colours aflame,  
> To them had a visage of hags:  

But suddenly a revelation strikes despair from the poet's mind and restores to him his sensuous link with nature. He sees the wild-cherry tree, a spiritual symbol of his and Marie's love and a symbol also of nature's law of alternating life and death:

> I knew it: with her my own  
> Had hailed it pure of the pure;  
> Out beacon yearly:  
>
> I gazed, unaware  
> How a shaft of the blossoming tree  
> Was shot from the yew-wood's core.  
> I stood to the touch of a key  
> Turned in a fast-shut door.  

After this awakening the poet watches some children innocently delighting in sensuous pleasures. This simple sacrament, following upon that represented by the wild cherry, renews his faith in nature's beneficence and unity, and he is able to catch once

---

1 *A Faith on Trial*, II, p.246.  
more a fleeting glimpse of spirit:

A flash through the mist, mere breath,
Breath on a buckler of steel.  \(^1\)

But, more important, he gains from this insight fresh faith in the goodness of the ethical struggle, in the present strength of reason, and in the future reality of spirit.

\textit{A Faith on Trial} demonstrates the inability of despair to destroy Meredith's philosophy of nature, for even grief inspires in him an intuitive belief that eternity is accessible in the reality of the creative moment. That is, the experience described in this poem shows that for Meredith eternity (or immortality) exists in a timeless concatenation of fertile, balanced moments. Continuous labour and struggle leading up to these instants are, of course, seen as contributors to immortality. But the "spot of time" resulting from grief or struggle represents the nearest approach to nature and to ethical evolution in harmony with nature, for such moments are both the clearest mirrors of spirit and the highest points on the graph of evolution toward spirit. Personal immortality, Meredith feels, is unimportant in the light and joy of the intuitive moment when "Time is both father and son".\(^2\) For the poet believes that if one lives fully in the inspired instant that embraces all time, in the "idea" that is immortal spirit,\(^3\) then he is living in his offspring as nature does. This kind of spirit, the "vital air" wafted from one ethically creative

\begin{itemize}
\item \(^1\) \textit{A Faith on Trial}, p.251.
\item \(^2\) \textit{The Empty Purse}, III, p.48.
\item \(^3\) \textit{Letters}, II, pp.361-2.
\item \(^4\) \textit{Earth and Man}, II, p.98.
\end{itemize}
moment to the next, constitutes the finest immortality:

Spirits, whose memory is our vital air,
Through the great love of Earth they had: lo, these,
Like beams that throw the path on tossing seas,
Can bid us feel we keep them in the ghost,
Partakers of a strife they joyed to share.  

Nevertheless, labour done with the good of the future race in
mind also achieves for man an immortality of sorts. This immor-
tality consists in the effect of man's beneficial actions upon
his offspring:

Enough if we have winked to sun,
Have sped the plough a season;
There is a soul for labour done,
Endureth fixed as reason.  

Because not all men can perceive the importance of the moment,
Meredith allows the plodders, the strivers who conform as best
they can to nature's law, a subordinate place in the future
oneness of spirit in nature and man. But to those who neither
struggle nor further the course of ethical evolution, he pro-
mises no immortality of any sort.

Nature in Meredith: Natural religion

Meredith's natural religion is based upon his faith in
the timeless identity of the real and the ideal, the proof of
which he sees in the process of ethical evolution. This belief
allows him to recognize present struggle and suffering as
necessary realities that lead to the ideal. He admits that

1 To A Friend Lost, III, p.265.
2 cf. Goethe (Eckermann, Conversations, p.287) - "To me
   the eternal existence of my soul is proved from my idea of
   activity; if I work on incessantly till my death, nature is
   bound to give me another form of existence when the present
   one can no longer sustain my spirit."
3 The Question Whither, II, p.236.
acceptance of these hard conditions is difficult, but he sees their essential goodness in the desirable end they ensure:

Accept, she says; it is not hard
In woods; but she in towns
Repeats, accept; and have we wept,
And have we quailed with fears,
Or shrunk with horrors, sure reward
We have whom knowledge crowns;
Who see in mould the rose unfold,
The soul through blood and tears. 1

Therefore, Meredith accepts and trusts nature, not in spite of, but because of the struggle man has to carry on within himself. This struggle, when it is considered along with nature's sane order and transient beauty, even inspires in the poet a feeling of love and filial affection for nature. Though to others nature might seem a slayer, Meredith can love her and endure the present because of the bright future.

For love we Earth, then serve we all;
Her mystic secret then is ours.
We fall, or view our treasures fall,
Unclouded as beholds her flowers

Earth, from a night of frosty wreck,
Enrobed in morning's mounted fire,
When lowly, with a broken neck,
The crocus lays her cheek to mire. 2

Man's struggle to achieve the mean is thus strong proof for the poet of the beneficence behind nature's law of necessity, for he believes that this strife will gradually unfold for man a vision of Earth as the "mother of truth", as the

Relentless quencher of lies;
Eternal in thought; discerned
In thought mid-ferry between
The Life and the Death, which are one,
As our breath in or out joy or teen. 3

1 Outer and Inner, II, p.238.
2 Thrush in February, II, p.225.
3 A Faith on Trial, II, p.255.
In other words, though Meredith admits that nature's law is 1
"unalterable" and severe, he can see her essential spirit behind
the "stern exact":

The spirit served by her is seen
Through Law; perusing love will show. 3

And, seeing spirit behind outer law, Meredith can make of life
and death an act of nature's love:

Love took my hand when hidden stood the sun
To fling his robe on shoulder-heights of snow.
Then said: There lie they, Life and Death in one.
Whichever is, the other is, but know,
It is thy craving self that thou dost see,
Not in them seeing me. 4

Hence it is with eyes of love, not a slide-rule of science,
that Meredith checks nature's external measurements. Minute
details interest him because they are the expression of the
ideal love, sanity, and unity of nature:

Open hither, open hence,
Scarce a bramble weaves a fence,
Where the strawberry runs red,
With white star-flower overhead;
Cumbered by dry twig and cone,
Shredded husks of seedlings flown,
Mine of mole and spotted flint: 5

Taking cognizance of both the real and ideal features
of accessible Earth, Meredith finds nothing enigmatic or
questionable in her. It is nonsense, the poet states, to
look beyond her or to try to read the inaccessible into her,
as do those who cry for the "opiate boon":

1 Lucifer in Starlight, II, p.12.
2 cf. Goethe (Eckermann, Conversations, p.294)"nature
understands no jesting; she is always true, always serious,
always severe; she is always right, and the errors and faults
are always those of man".
3 The Thrush in February, II, p.225.
4 Hymn to Colour, II, p.262.
5 The Woods of Westermain, II, p.34.
They see not above or below;
Farthest are they from my soul,' 
Earth whispers: 'they scarce have the thirst, 
'Except to unriddle a rune; 
'And I spin none; only show, 
'Would humanity soar from its worst, 
'Winged above darkness and dole, 
'How flesh unto spirit must grow. 
'Spirit raves not for a goal.  

That is, because nature neither tells us of nor shows us anything beyond spirit, any questions like "whither?" or "whence?" not only are a waste of time but are frowned upon by nature, for these vain, selfish queries are the cries of unfaith which slow nature's and man's complementary tides of evolution. 

Earth heeds them not:

He may entreat, aspire, 
He may despair, and she has never heed. 
She drinking his warm sweat will soothe his need, 
Not his desire. 

And man, if he would assume his high place in nature, should also question not; his work is the important thing: 

Then let our trust be firm in Good, 
Though we be of the fasting; 
Our questions are a mortal brood, 
Our work is everlasting. 
We children of Beneficence 
Are in its being sharers; 
And Whither vainer sounds than Whence, 
For word with such wayfarers. 

Another aspect of the real and ideal in nature is Meredith's Comic Spirit, a conception no doubt derived from

1 A Faith on Trial, II, pp. 256-7. 
2 cf. Goethe ("Truth and Poetry", II, p. 168) - "all we can do in the light car of our destiny is 'in cool self-possession to hold the reins with a firm hand,' and to guide the wheels, now to the left, now to the right, avoiding a stone here, a precipice there'. We don't know whither or whence."
3 Earth and Man, II, p. 94. 
4 The Question Whither, II, p. 236.
Molière. Meredith, in spite of the combined joy and fortitude that allowed him to see the oneness of all nature; saw only too clearly that life was still a tragic tangle that even the strong men were not unravelling. Hence the Comic Spirit became a necessary adjunct to the poet's philosophy of nature, for tragedy was inconsistent with his faith in progress; since nobleness was man's end, he had to look upon life as a joke. Meredith's Comic Spirit, the power of criticism that permitted the poet to view present existence in a way that was consistent with future joy, was the ether that allowed the reason to strike through the mist of the present with a light that reflected back the future sun of spirit.

This "keynote of the wise", Meredith's fortitude, his faith in the evolutionary strength of the vital moment, and his sheer physical joy in the presence of nature were therefore all contributory to the poet's recognition of the identity in nature of the objective and the subjective worlds. The philosophy resulting from a balance of these four elements constituted the essential source of his mature acceptance of Earth's aim, her beneficence, and her basic spirit; for he was able to build on the foundation of laughter, struggle, and evolution a concept of nature that both dealt consistently with the world about him and gave hope of progress into the future. For example, he saw Earth's "goal of goals" as both a satis-

---

2 Sencourt, Meredith, p.207.
3 cf. Youth In Age, III, p.261 - Meredith retained his youthful joy to the end.
factory present life for the fittest and a speeding of the race toward the perfectly balanced life of blood, brain and spirit now enjoyed by the best men. This aim was such real proof of love behind nature's law that Meredith could believe that nature's beneficence was applicable not only to Earth but also by analogy to the cosmos. Yet it is significant that the poet very seldom spoke of the universe; it was for him one of the incomprehensibles with which man should not concern himself.

Spirit, however, was palpable to Meredith, for it was closely connected with the real world. Spirit existed in man (if he could but see it) and in nature; pure spirit, the essential life of nature, was the only God in which Meredith could believe. But this God represented the ultimate ideal to which man could never attain without relinquishing his claim to humanity; therefore, Meredith, like Goethe, found that he could speak of God only as a rather vague, pantheistic deity that was equivalent to the vital, creative soul of Earth.

There was, however, one chief difference between Goethe's God and Meredith's: Meredith's Supreme Being was as much an outcome of the poet's concept of ethical evolution as of Goethian pantheism. God for Meredith became the third member of the Triad

1 Meditation Under Stars, II, p.266.
2 cf. Goethe ("Annals", II, p.405) - "The very basis of my existence is that God is in Nature and Nature in God."
3 cf. Goethe (Eckermann, Conversations, p.389) - "Let people serve Him who gives to the beast his fodder, and to man meat and drink as much as he can enjoy. But I worship Him who has infused into the world such a power of production that, when only the millionth part of it comes to life, the world swarms with creatures to such a degree that war, pestilence, fire, and water cannot prevail against them. That is my God!"
as well as the living spirit in nature; God was the abstract morality towards which man was progressing:

From the pagan divinity to the Christian, I see an advanced conception, and the nearer we get to a general belief in the Abstract Deity - i.e. the more and more abstract, the nearer are men to a comprehension of the principles (morality, virtue, etc.) than which we require nothing further to govern us. 1

And yet both these definitions of God had been in Meredith's mind during the formative years when Goethe's influence was so strong. Meredith had merely used Darwinism to make more definite the ethical implications of Goethe's philosophy. God remained the spirit of nature whether Meredith approached Him by way of Goethian naturalism or evolution, because Meredith's faith in the oneness of the real and the ideal worlds made the two conceptions of God identical with one another.

It is reasonable to conclude then that this Goethian idea of Earth's unity was the Meredithian belief that stood firm in the face of all the conflicting thought (Darwinism included) of the Victorian period. Meredith could always believe in nature's beneficent spirit, the divine "Over-Reason" which was God, either through a happy faith in an ethical evolution that involved stoical recognition of struggle or through a courageous acceptance of nature's stern law of necessity behind which the poet could discern joy, sacrifice and love; for both approaches were consistent with his view of the real and ideal worlds as a basic identity, as a fundamental example of the mean which he and Goethe saw in every phase of nature's completeness.

1 Letters, I, p.171.
A COMPARISON OF THE CONCEPTS OF NATURE IN TENNYSON AND MEREDITH THAT INCLUDES AN ESTIMATE OF THE RELATIVE MODERNITY OF THEIR PHILOSOPHIES

General approaches to nature

One basic difference between the concepts of nature of these two men arises from their dissimilar temperaments. Both poets were sensitive, but their sensitivity led them in almost opposite directions. Whereas Tennyson, because of an unhappy early life, suffered acute melancholia that manifested itself in his over-emphasizing the painful elements of this life, Meredith was always able to draw from the springs of an ever-present joy a fortitude that allowed him to face pain cheerfully. These emotional attitudes are important, for upon them depended the approaches of the two poets to nature. Tennyson's faith in the ability of reason and scientific knowledge to reveal nature's truths originated from his emotional need rather than from a characteristically Victorian belief in the power of science to enlarge man's empire. And Meredith's acceptance of nature's benevolence came from an unquestioning delight that permitted him to impose upon scientific fact an ethical superstructure founded on intuition. Certainly it must be kept in mind that Meredith was born nineteen years after Tennyson and that he, unlike Tennyson, who was caught in the materialistic trap finally sprung by Darwin, was writing most of his poetry during the period when it was the fashion to deal with the ethical implications of Darwinism rather than with the scientific facts of evolution. The fact
remains, however, that both poets had determined their approaches to nature before 1859 and that temperament was the chief determinant.

Tennyson did not realize until too late that his utilitarian reaction to nature was inconsistent with scientific attitude and scientific knowledge, with the eternal questioning that provided him with seeming truths about the individual parts of nature. These "truths" that replaced one enigma with a hundred painful riddles led Tennyson farther and farther away from a conception of the whole that his emotions demanded. It may be that his view of nature was closer to fact than was Meredith's; but it was philosophically very unsatisfactory, for feeling continually hampered Tennyson's attempt at any sort of a synthesis. Meredith, avoiding contradictory facts and questioning not the whence, the why, and the wherefore of life, was both more scientific and more philosophical than Tennyson, for his integration of the whole was aided rather than hindered by his emotion. It seems rather ironic that Tennyson, approaching nature by way of reason and science, was obliged to take refuge in a religious faith based on feeling, whereas Meredith, appealing initially to emotion for an interpretation of nature, was able to arrive at an intuitive rationalism, a faith embracing reason and science.

The law of nature

Both poets admitted the immutability of nature's law of change. But Tennyson divided that law into two parts. The law of gradation in nature was, he conceded, a good law, for
it indicated a commendable order and sanity. It gave no evidence of unity in nature because it was only part of nature's necessity, but it provided for Tennyson, as it provided for Arnold, a moral example for man. However, this half of nature's law was incompatible with the other half, that which had control over life and death and which for Tennyson lacked any semblance of moral order. The struggle for existence, the unwarranted suffering, and the waste in nature all seemed cruel to Tennyson. He had to conclude that the law which effected these cruelties on a cosmic scale was immoral. Hence he could allow nature's necessity a hold only on the physical part of man; he had to divide his "temporalized chain of being" into two chains, one subject to nature's necessary laws and the other functioning according to the morality of man and God. Because nature's law evinced moral evil as well as moral example, Tennyson could see neither joy in necessity nor beneficence in nature.

Meredith, on the other hand, felt that only in necessity, the one law of beneficent nature, could man discern true joy:

Doth man divide divine Necessity
From Joy, between the Queen of Beauty's breasts
A sword is driven; for those most glorious twain
Present her. 1

Meredith saw no waste in this nature whose law of alternating life and death gave visions of the "springing To-be" 2, for this law was for Meredith evidence of an underlying morality in nature that accorded with man's ethical nature. Because the

1 With the Persuader, III, p.198.
ideas of waste, cruelty, and struggle for existence all contradicted the morality, order, and sanity of nature, Meredith abjured them. And, though he recognized both the apparent evil in unmerited suffering and the vastness of the cosmos, he could feel that these matters were irrelevant to the principle of love behind Earth's outer law. It was not Meredith's policy, as I have said before, to go beyond the comprehensible. Yet to term him an unseeing optimist would be to assume that he did not consider all the implications of evolution and Darwinism. His writings belie this assumption. It seems to me that what he saw more clearly than any of the other intellectuals of his day was that nature's primary law was not self-preservation but cooperation.

Let us now compare Tennyson's and Meredith's ideas concerning law. That they both conceived of law in nature is immediately evident. But Meredith believed in a law of change that manifested both the creative and the regulative functions of nature, whereas Tennyson saw nothing of creativity in or behind nature's necessity, which for him was merely a mechanical law that possessed no element of the vitalism present in Meredith's concept. Where Meredith intuitively apprehended the activity of nature through observing the workings of law, Tennyson discerned only a lifeless pattern; spirit, the only life, was not for Tennyson part of nature. Consequently, Tennyson could personify nature only when she was a reflection of his own mood, but Meredith's moods usually originated from

1 cf. *In Memoriam*, III, pp.42,51,56,62,69, etc.
a sympathetic contact with the moods of nature.

**Man's place in nature**

Tennyson and Meredith both believed that the future progress of the world depended upon the actions of man himself and not upon nature's law; they were at one in stressing an ethical progress. But Meredith's idea of ethical progress agreed with his concept of nature's evolution, whereas Tennyson's faith in progress was founded upon a belief that man's absolute spirit could gradually free man's body from its physical bondage in nature. Moral man, for Tennyson, was born with a divine, not a natural urge:

> Follow the deer? follow the Christ, the King, Live pure, speak true, right wrong, follow the Kind - Else, wherefore born?"  

That is, Meredith conceived of a gradual progress toward a perfect co-ordination of the human faculties of blood, brain, and spirit, but Tennyson hoped for a spiritual progress that would result in a world of soul completely freed from sense. Where Meredith's monism demanded a Triad rooted in earth and subject to nature's change, conflict and selection, Tennyson's religion required a duality that recognized both the present subjection of body to nature's necessity and the freedom of permanent spirit from nature. Hence, though both poets gave the torch of progress to man, Tennyson saw it as a means of escaping from nature, while Meredith regarded it as a sacred flame given to man by the Mother so that he might run the race

---

of life in harmony with her law of evolution. Tennyson, con-
sidering the struggle for existence an immoral principle of
self-preservation, could not allow it to have any effect on
man's immortal spirit; but Meredith, seeing in struggle a means
to altruism and co-operation, applied his ethical interpretation
of the Darwinian principle to the evolution of spirit.

Yet, though Tennyson condemned the principle of self-
preservation because it was not conducive to the development of
the race, his emotional need forced him to apply it to man's
spirit, in particular to his own individual spirit. He was thus
faced with a contradiction: for him, as for Meredith, egotism
was opposed to the desirable progress of the race; yet his idea
of immortality demanded an egotistical assumption, for Tennyson
believed that only the assurance of personal immortality made
life worth living:

The thought of working for the human race is not
incentive enough to virtue if man is not immortal.
The whole race will be extinct, probably, in a
few thousand years. 1

Meredith, however, did not let an inconsistency of this sort
unsettle his philosophy. One need compare only two poems, In
Memoriam and A Faith on Trial to note this fundamental diff-
erence between the philosophies of the two poets. These poems
both deal with the problem of immortality, but the former
declares that a faint trust of the larger hope of personal
immortality is the only answer to the question of reunion with
the beloved Hallam, while the latter emphasizes a turning to

1 Ward, "Talks with Tennyson", p.331.
earth for comfort and wisdom, and for signs that indicate the fullness of Marie's life, the contribution to the race that constitutes her only immortality. Thus immortality for Tennyson had nothing to do with either the progress of the race or nature. Certainly Meredith's idea of immortality seems to be a philosophy for martyrs, but it is not nearly as inconceivable and illogical as Archibald Strong would have us believe:

It is surely impossible to conceive of permanent Spirit divorced from permanent personality. Either there is no immortality, or universal, single, and permanent spirit, or there is some kind of immortality in which the individual has actual part.

Strong obviously has a "Tennysonian" bias that makes him incapable of recognizing in Meredith's philosophy of nature a strong, intuitive conviction of the oneness of means and end. The sacrifice of the individual was, for Meredith, a good means leading to a good end. And, no matter how unacceptable Meredith's view may be, this strong religious faith, coupled with his philosophical consistency, should convince one that his concept of immortality is both conceivable and logical.

The attitudes of the two poets toward progress and immortality thus determined in a large measure their ideas of man's place in nature. Tennyson, discerning no progress and no promise of man's permanence in the scheme of nature, had to conclude that man's position in an infinite space-time universe was one of insignificance. Man regained importance only when Tennyson visualized him as reaching out away from nature and

1 Strong, Wordsworth and Meredith, p.174.
toward the divine. Tennyson's explanation of the tragic tangle of life was that man was too much in nature. Meredith, however, arrived at very different conclusions. Believing in the creative evolution of man, Meredith placed mankind at the top of nature's scale; for Meredith the ethical man reaching toward nature became her highest miracle. And, unlike Tennyson, Meredith saw in present tragic life a proof that man in general was not close enough to Earth.

A general comparison of their philosophies of and attitudes toward nature

It is interesting to observe that the temperaments of Tennyson and Meredith caused them to base their concepts of nature upon different philosophies. Though both poets were on common ground in a search for the Urbild, they turned to philosophers that approached this unity from different directions; Meredith found a mentor in Goethe; Tennyson favoured Kant. What is of interest in these choices is that the naturalism of the two nineteenth-century poets survived or perished according to the choice made. Meredith's adoption of Goethe's philosophy permitted him to believe in a naturalism similar (except for its Darwinian elements) to that of the English Romantic poets, but without the transcendentalism that caused most of the Romantics of the nineteenth century to veer away from complete naturalism. Through Goethe Meredith came to see the world as a vital entity engaged in an active process of Becoming. He, like Goethe, saw the "Earth-spirit" in a semi-mystical way as the essential life-force. Because for him, as for Goethe, all was of Earth, Meredith
could embrace Darwinism as part of his unified natural religion.

But Tennyson, adhering to the transcendental faith of Kant, was forced into a dualism far more definite than that of Wordsworth, of Coleridge, or of Shelley. Had Tennyson lived in the eighteenth century, when scientific knowledge was close to the general ideas of philosophy, he doubtless would have believed in natural religion, as Kant did. But, living in the nineteenth century and trying to follow the teachings of Kant, he could not achieve the synthesis between the "objective" and "subjective" worlds. The failure of Tennyson's naturalism was largely the result of his inability to reconcile the two worlds of Being and Becoming in the face of scientific discovery that ignored a philosophy of Being.

As might be expected, Tennyson's dualistic attitude made his general idea of nature antithetical at almost every point to Meredith's. Where Meredith saw nature's essence as a vital, permanent spirit informing matter, Tennyson viewed her as merely the transient summation of material existences. The latter, looking upon nature according to his scientific prejudice, found that she offered only a dissecting analysis of material experience; science allowed her no ethical function.

1 It is possible, I realize, to carry too far an hypothesis such as this one paralleling the philosophies of Kant and Tennyson and those of Goethe and Meredith. Nevertheless, the parallels are interesting. They do explain, in part at least, Tennyson's dualism and Meredith's monism.

2 Even Herbert Spencer, following the scientific precepts of the eighteenth century, believed that science and religion could not be reconciled unless the existence of a transcendental absolute was assumed. (Herbert Spencer, *First Principles*, London, Williams and Norgate, 1875, ix-preface.)
and no truly creative role, and it made of her a will-less, unthinking, non-purposive force. Regarding her again from a religious viewpoint, Tennyson saw in her cruel, materialistic struggle something antagonistic to both God and man that had to be borne only because it was a discipline for man's spirit, the true reality. Meredith, on the other hand, could discern in nature the complete and vital synthesis of material and spiritual life. An intelligent, benevolent, and purposive nature combined, for Meredith, all the ethical and creative urges that existed in man and nature's other creatures. She represented for Meredith essential humanity, whereas she exemplified for Tennyson crass materiality.

It is apparent, then, that Meredith conceived of nature as an organic whole that included an external nature and the inner nature of man in a natural framework of positive goodness. Yet the completeness of his philosophy does not indicate a facile optimism. Certainly Meredith would not have concurred with Huxley's agnostic attitude toward nature:

The majority of us, I apprehend, profess neither pessimism nor optimism. We hold that the world is neither so good, nor so bad as it conceivably might be.

The poet would have said, rather, that this was the best of all possible worlds and that man must adjust himself to its

1 T.H. Huxley, Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays, p.78.
2 cf. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (fifth edition) definition of "optimism" - 1. Philos. a. The doctrine that the world is the best possible world. b. The doctrine that reality is essentially good. c. The doctrine that the good of life overbalances the pain and evil of it. 2. An inclination to put the most favorable construction upon actions and happenings, or anticipate the best possible outcome. ("Pessimism" is defined as the reverse of "optimism").
order if he would achieve happiness. But he would not have assumed, as did many American adherents of "Couéism" during the 1920's, that the juice of the California orange and the constant reiteration of the philosophy of inevitable betterment would bring about a golden age. Meredith's was an optimism founded upon the principles of restraint and balance that have been part of man's cultural inheritance since they were first propounded by the early Greeks.

Tennyson's philosophy, however, exhibited neither of these Greek virtues. Because he had set for himself the task of reconciling nineteenth-century science and religion according to eighteenth-century principles, he was forced into a dualism that destroyed any possibility of a balanced view of nature. His faith in science reacted against his religious beliefs to produce an unfavourable conception of an external nature which had no control over the inner, spiritual man and in which pain and evil were so evident that they overbalanced any goodness that might be seen in nature's order. Although Tennyson could sometimes be optimistic about spirit in man and God, he could not be other than pessimistic about a nature which, according to the findings of science, seemed to establish the meaninglessness of existence and striving; for he, unlike Meredith, was not able to put nature above science, to see in nature an altruistic tendency that belied the self-preservation principle that science attributed to her. Whether one considers the dictionary definitions of pessimism or the
definition of modern pessimism suggested by G.M. Trevelyan, he will see that Tennyson, insofar as nature was concerned, was a complete pessimist. Nature was for Tennyson but the first act of a complicated play, an act which gave no hint of God's noble plan and which led man to despair of any dénouement following this present misery and pain:

Act first, this Earth, a stage so gloom'd with woe
You all but sicken at the shifting scenes.
And yet be patient. Our Playwright may show
In some fifth Act what this wild Drama means.  

Parallels between modern thought and the concepts of nature of Tennyson and Meredith

The past forty or fifty years have witnessed a gradual breakdown of the philosophical concept of nature, with the result that today nature is viewed merely as the background for man's activities. Man in society is the chief concern in 1950, and nature is relegated to a minor position; poets may appreciate the beauty of external scenery, but no longer do they in general personify nature as goddess or as devil. Moreover, the mass of mankind today have bowed to the scientific thesis that providence, purpose and progress cannot be regarded, if they be believed in at all, as resulting from any inherent tendency in nature. Progress, in particular, has been given

1 G.M. Trevelyan, The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith, p.139 - "Nature, it is said [by these pessimists] is wholly alien to us, and hostile to our endeavour after the ideal; that endeavour resides [for them] in the heart of man alone."

2 The Play, VII, p.117.

3 Aldous Huxley, "Wordsworth in the Tropics", Do What You Will Essays, London, Chatto & Windus, 1929, pp.113-129-Huxley suggests that civilized man visit the tropics. The natives there, Huxley states, still apprehend nature as alien and inhuman, that is, as a devil(or devils) representing a constant threat to man.

4 Beach, Concept of Nature, p.547.
a social, rather than a natural, status. Though scientists still recognize a biological progress, they agree that the idea of human progress, which contains the implication of right direction for man but not necessarily for earth or the universe, is not analogous with that of biological improvement. Science has torn away all the props of the nineteenth-century concept of nature.

That this loss of faith in nature concurs in many ways with Tennyson's disbelief in her does not mean that Tennyson's ideas are modern. For the modern world has no nature philosophy, whereas Tennyson, even in the act of condemning nature, admitted her existence for him. And his condemnation of her was due to a transcendental and personal approach that is not in harmony with the realistic, humanistic, and social outlook of today. Tennyson still remains for us the typical Victorian, interested in science and in nature but afraid of the effect of his knowledge upon his religious beliefs. It is to Meredith's philosophy that one must turn for modern ideas, for his natural religion came much closer than did Tennyson's somewhat medieval faith to the modern concept of religion as a social product.

One idea of Meredith's that deserves particular mention because of its modernness is his belief in the existence of an altruistic ideal in society, whether that society be composed of human beings or of other creatures. His regard

---

1 Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians, p.185.
2 Ibid., p.184.
for values rather than for things, for altruism rather than for egotism, for co-operation rather than for self-preservation, is in complete harmony with some of the most advanced ideas of biologists today. Although his faith in the "strong" man tended to obscure this sociological ideal, Meredith was among the first to realize the prime importance to evolution of co-operation among the "numbers"; his belief that co-operation and the love born of this basic urge constitute the primary principle of biological and social evolution is now a recognized theory among many distinguished biologists. And what Meredith intuitively apprehended is now regarded by many scientists as fact: that the world of man is doomed unless its government is taken out of the hands of the self-interested men and given in trust to the "men of understanding and humility, whose guiding principle is love".

Meredith's belief that this altruistic tendency in man is equivalent to nature's purposive and benevolent spirit is not at present, as I have stated, part of our general philosophy. Nevertheless, I believe that this fundamental doctrine of naturalism will come into its own again before the end of this twentieth century. For, although we are so

---

1 Tennyson also desired the same altruistic end; but, because he believed it was attainable only by supernatural means that transcended sociological and biological fact, his idea of altruism is not comparable with the modern interpretation.

concerned at this moment with both the rehabilitation following two world wars and the preparation for an impending war, we are even now beginning to realize that a new synthesis, a new unity of all life, is being formulated by the greatest thinker of our century, Albert Einstein. Most of us laymen have at least a vague comprehension of one of the basic tenets of Einstein's theory, that is, that the world is best explained in terms of energy, not matter. When we can recognize the implications of atomic energy rather than the destructive aspects of the atomic bomb, then our poets may again see the world (as Goethe and Meredith saw it, and Tennyson wished to see it) as a vital unity embracing all inorganic and organic life.
I. BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES


II. TENNYSON

a) Works


b) Biographical and Critical

1) Books


Lang, Andrew, Alfred Tennyson, Edinburgh, William Blackwood and Sons, 1904.


2) Periodical Essays and Literary Publications

Cooper, A. B. "Tennyson, the formative influences of his first twenty years", The Bookman (London), October, 1909, pp.20-30.


Paden, W. D., "Tennyson in Egypt", University of Kansas Publications, Humanistic Studies No.27, 1942.


III MEREDITH

a) Works


b) Biographical and Critical

1) Books


Chislett, Wm., George Meredith, A Study and An Appraisal, Boston, Richard G. Badger, 1925.


2) Periodical Essays and Literary Publications


Holbeach, H., "This Year's Song-Crop", Fraser's Magazine, Vol. 44 (July-December, 1851), pp.616-634.


IV OTHER REFERENCES CONSULTED

a) Books


b) Periodical Essays and Literary Publications


