WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

SACRED EARTH: METAPHYSICAL POETRY AND THE ADVANCE OF SCIENCE

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THOMAS WARTON shared with his sometime friend Samuel Johnson the true critic's unwillingness to compromise his judgement for the sake of a theory. The two great *ciceroni* of English poetry earn their authority by their sureness in distinguishing the writing which still has life from the mere curiosities of literature. Yet Johnson's regard for Shakespeare never persuaded him that the proper business of art might be other than the embodiment of general moral truths. Warton followed out more rigorously his sense of the imaginative power of medieval and Elizabethan writings. He held to his touchstone of imagination, even when his antiquarian enthusiasms carried him counter to the conviction he shared with his age that the centuries before the civilizing of manners were ignorant, superstitious, rude. We find him taking what may strike us as an oddly ambivalent attitude to the writers of earlier periods. Irrational they undoubtedly were; and yet the general amendment of such disorderliness in the present age has resulted in an impoverishment of art.

Warton essays the paradox that the very extravagances of those primitive times were favourable to poetry, whereas the advantages which accompanied the advancement of science have tamed imagination. Habits of reason and orderly enquiry, civil harmony, the regulation of conduct, domestic ease, all these advances benefit mankind in themselves; but they have also brought grievous loss, which may even outweigh the gain:

> Erudition was made to act upon genius. Fancy was weakened by reflection and philosophy. The fashion of treating every thing scientifically, applied speculation and theory to the arts of writing. Judgment was advanced above imagination, and rules of criticism were established. The brave eccentricities of original genius, and the daring hardiness of native thought, were intimidated by metaphysical

sentiments of perfection and refinement. Setting aside the consideration of the more solid advantages, which are obvious, and are not the distinct object of our contemplation at present, the lover of true poetry will ask, what have we gained by this revolution? It may be answered, much good sense, good taste, and good criticism. But, in the mean time, we have lost a set of manners, and a system of machinery, more suitable to the purposes of poetry, than those which have been adopted in their place. We have parted with extravagancies that are above propriety, with incredibilities that are more acceptable than truth, and with fictions that are more valuable than reality.[1]

Warton's formulation is suggestive in its counterposing of imagination and reason. Yet my immediate concern is his strong hunch, which Johnson does not share, that what he calls 'the fashion of treating everything scientifically' may actually inhibit some powerful and coherent forms of thinking.

He is notably ill at ease with his post-Augustan presumption of the barbarity of Chaucer's mind, not to say Spenser's. Hence he tries the bold surmise that the writing may have life and authority not just in spite of its prescientific origins but because of them. I mean to follow out his intuition that art may give substance to belief; though I shall argue that the thinking which made English metaphysical poetry distinctive is anything but ignorant and barbarous, even if Warton might have deemed it superstitious. It is central to my argument that this kind of thinking had a local currency, though it was far from confined to poets. Indeed we might start in the pulpit with a Jacobean savant who prescribed a way of encountering the world, not by formal definition but by his ingenious discovery of final truth in the most down-to-earth circumstances. Our example may as well turn upon a familiar circumstance, which happens to be appropriate to the season.

On Tuesday 5 November 1616 Bishop Lancelot Andrewes preached his annual Gunpowder Treason sermon before the King at Whitehall, as he had done since the first anniversary of the discovery of the plot. Both the Bishop and King James himself, as well as many present, were among the intended victims of the plot and would not have been there at all in 1616 had it succeeded. On this occasion Andrewes took what seems on the face of it a capriciously remote text from Isaiah 37: 'the children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth'. His sermon is entirely built on the conceit that the Gunpowder Plot was a failed birth, which he bears out wittily by the elaboration of corres-

[1] Thomas Warton, *The History of English Poetry from the Eleventh to the Seventeenth Century* (1774–81), 1870, section xxxvi, p. 627.

pondences between the two predicaments in the teeth of the apparent unlikeness, and unlikeliness. This process is carried through quite openly and even (so to say) on the hoof, with a sense of real revelation as more and more points of likeness disclose themselves to his mind:

> The more I think of it, the more points of correspondence do offer themselves to me, of a birth and coming to a birth, and that in every degree: 1. The vessels first give forth themselves, as so many embryos; 2. the vault as the womb, wherein they lay so long; 3. they that conceived this device were the mothers, clear; 4. the fathers were the fathers, as they delight to be called, though oft little more than boys—but here right fathers, in that they persuaded it might be, why not?—might be lawful, nay meritorious then: so it was they that did animate, give a soul, as it were, to the treason; 5. the conception was, when the powder as the seed was conveyed in; 6. the articulation, the couching of them in order just as they should stand; 7. the covering of them with wood and faggots, as the drawing a skin over them; 8. the *Venerunt ad partum*, when all was now ready, train and all; 9. the midwife, he that was found with the match about him for the purpose; 10. and *partus*, the birth should have been upon the giving fire. If the fire had come to the powder, the children had come to the birth, *inclusivè*, had been born. But *Non erant vires*, which I turn, there was no fire given; and so, *partus* they wanted, as God would.[1]

A clinching justification of his witty use of the text is an intricate play on the terms of the Vulgate version, which he sustains throughout the sermon, making the most of any incidental correspondences of letters, sounds, ideas:

> This *pariendi* was indeed *pereundi*, the bringing forth a quantity of powder, the perishing of a whole parliament. They were not, but put case they had come forth, (it is well we are in case to put this case) certainly they had been Benonis, "Sons of sorrow," to this whole land, Ichabods right; our glory had been gone clean. For what a face of a commonwealth had here been left? *Exclusivè* they came *ad partum*; if *inclusivè* they had, their *inclusivè* had been our *exclusivè*. We had been shot off, and that out of this life and this world every one, *Venerunt*, if they had come *ad partum*; if they *ad partum*, we *ad perniciem*. *Non erant vires*; if there had, these *vires* had been *virus* to us, and their *pariendi* our *pereundi*. If those children had not been lost, many fathers had been lost; many children had lost their fathers, and many wives their husbands. There had been a great birth of orphans and widows brought forth at once. What manner of birth should this have been, first in itself, then to us?[2]

[1] Lancelot Andrewes, *Ninety-Six Sermons*, Oxford, 1841, iv. 347. Andrewes' sermons are quoted throughout from this edition save where its text is less clear than that of the edition of 1629.

[2] Ibid., p. 353.

On the face of it all this ingenuity may seem to do little more than bear out the dismissive presumption of eighteenth-century commentators that the essential flippancy of Court life in the decades before the Civil War is shown in the way Court preachers played with words and conceits. Yet Andrewes was not a flippant man, and the occasion decidedly did not call for flippancy. We must ask ourselves why he is so concerned to make an abortive birth of the Gunpowder Plot, or at least, why he needs to labour the identity so.

Andrewes' own justification of his method cannot be in doubt, since it is implicit throughout his sermon. He finds in the very fortuities of the Gunpowder Plot not only an instance or fulfilment of the prescription in Isaiah 37 but the manifestation of a mystery. He had set out the ground of such a reading of occurrences in the world when he spoke of the nature of a sacrament in a Christmas Day sermon preached in the same place to a like audience some nine years earlier:

> It doth manifestly represent, it doth mystically impart what it representeth. There is in it even by the very institution both a manifestation, and that visibly to set before us this flesh; and a mystical communication to infeoffe us in it or make us partakers of it. For the elements; what can be more properly fit to represent unto us the union with our nature, than things that do unite themselves to our nature?[1]

Andrewes, in sum, simply carries through in events they had all experienced his understanding that we inhabit a creation in which 'Truth shall bud out of the earth',[2] and 'all things answer one another, first and last'.[3] Such unlikely contingencies as the thwarting of a plot to blow up the king in Parliament may discover the divine presence.

This last-second failure of the plot affords a particularly telling manifestation of God's providence. We see the providential disposition of King James's affairs as it were by negative or contrary instance, in which God frustrates a devilish birth at the moment of its fruition. The events of that November night in 1605 simply re-enacted a timeless pattern, revealing God's peculiar design in the very narrowness of the escape. Andrewes finds an Old Testament prototype in the catastrophic frustration of Sennacherib's first assault on Judah, and a powerful historical confirmation in the destruction of the Armada in '88. All these

[1] Ibid., i. 43.
[2] Ibid., p. 175.
[3] Mark Frank, *Sermons* (1672), Oxford, 1849, ii. 131.

instances disclose the character of God's working in human affairs in the way they reverse our normal estimation of success or failure. What the participants experience as danger or disaster may actually be a proof of saving grace, the occasion of a triumph; once that is realized, then dismay on the instant turns to joy. More than that, God's nature reveals itself in quite unlikely circumstances which may even strike us as a bizarre embodiment of pure spirit. Indeed the very incongruity of the physical presence with the divine attributes it incarnates marks its sacramental status.

Andrewes quite pointedly controverts such refined conceits as the neoplatonic cult of beauty, which starts in the premise that even the most spiritualized worldly appearances only shadow a higher reality, or offer the first steps towards it. By contrast, he understands that the divine nature conjoins itself with the earthiest material elements to work in the world, however we mistake it at first. We discover spiritual truth not by turning away from a world of illusion altogether, or by leaving sense behind in our aspiration towards a higher meaning, but by understanding physical events better in their own right, piercing into them as Andrewes himself tellingly describes the process of coming to comprehend Christ's Passion.[1]

'The Passion is a piece of perspective.'[2] To grasp the true nature of happenings in the world we must take a double perspective of them, or even a triple perspective when we consider our own condition and posture in the face of inevitable death and judgement. When he meditates on Christ's Passion Andrewes shows why we may need to see the same event in quite opposite ways:

> Two pieces therefore He maketh choice of, and but two, and presenteth Him to our eye in two forms only: By the cross He is Author; by the throne He is Finisher of our faith. As Man on the cross, Author; as God on the Throne, Finisher.[3]

Then he goes on to contrast the corresponding properties of the two conditions, a regal crown and a crown of thorns, an imperial robe and a body covered in blood, and so on. We shall think of some places in Donne:

> Could I behold those hands which span the poles,
> And turn all spheres at once, pierced with those holes?
> Could I behold that endless height which is

[1] *Ninety-Six Sermons*, ii. 178.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., p. 163.

Zenith to us, and to our antipodes,
Humbled below us? or that blood which is
The seat of all our souls, if not of his,
Made dirt of dust, or that flesh which was worn,
By God, for his apparel, ragged, and torn?

'Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward,' ll. 21–8

Look Lord, and find both Adams met in me;
As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face,
May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace.

So, in his purple wrapped, receive me Lord,
By these his thorns give me his other crown;

'Hymn to God my God, in my Sickness,' ll. 23–7

It would undoubtedly be piffling to speculate whether Andrewes influenced Donne or vice versa. We need to acknowledge the bond of a shared understanding, a common vision which is inherently witty because it requires us to discover quite precise points of correspondence between conditions which seem radically unlike each other, and even represent quite opposite orders of being.

In the 1616 Gunpowder Treason sermon Andrewes shows how God's providence may bring good ends out of bad human intentions when he points to the contrary issue of the failed birth in a new and triumphant birth of prayers, thanksgiving, praises, understanding. This new birth must be properly human, manifesting itself in flesh and blood no less than in the spirit, good works as well as spiritual renewal. The implicit yet proving antitype of a right birth—the countertype of the failed diabolic birth—is the nativity of Christ in a cattle trough, the event which definitively conjoins human nature with divine being. This conjunction presents the absolute manifestation of God's involvement in the life of nature, and authenticates our expectation that the most unlikely looking human contingencies may embody divine presence and purpose, which will manifest themselves in the physical character of the events themselves. How exquisitely George Herbert follows out this insight!

At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth
Of theeves and murderers: there I him espied,
Who straight, *Your suit is granted*, said, and died.

'Redemption', ll. 12–14

Verbum caro factum est. The Vulgate version of the proclamation in St John shapes Andrewes' ontology. For him the key to history is the continual conjoining and reconciling in complete union of two

opposite natures, and two opposite roles. Quite dissimilar states of being are made one, unlike elements interfused without changing their own essential nature; as the material bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, while none the less remaining bread and wine.

Andrewes' understanding of what happens in the Eucharist, his insistence that a sacrament actually re-enacts a sacrifice, takes him right to the storm centre of Reformation theology; but that is not my interest here. We might simply note the distinctiveness of the idea that the consubstantial union of manhood and divinity in Christ authenticates an interfusion of sense and spirit in human nature, as in the natural creation altogether. It is not neoplatonic, or Augustinian, or Calvinist, and the closest antecedent I can find for it is English, Sir Thomas More.[1] More's descendant John Donne expresses this conviction forcibly and repeatedly as a defining article of his own Anglican persuasion;[2] the English metaphysical poets all follow out its consequences in their own ways. These consequences do concern us now.

The presumption was that God's entry into full humanity manifests in a quite particular sense the presence of the divine in human history. It offers absolute warrant that human contingencies may not only shadow but actually incarnate timeless truths, even sacramentally re-enact Christ's life and sacrifice. We need scarcely remind ourselves what Marvell's poetry gains by its intermingling of the sensible here-and-now with the circumstances of the Fall and Christ's Atonement:

> When for the thorns with which I long, too long,
> With many a piercing wound,
> My Saviour's head have crowned,
> I seek with garlands to redress that wrong:
> Through every garden, every mead,
> I gather flowers (my fruits are only flowers),
> Dismantling all the fragrant towers
> That once adorned my shepherdess's head.
>
> And now when I have summed up all my store,
> Thinking (so I myself deceive)
> So rich a chaplet thence to weave
> As never yet the King of Glory wore:
> Alas, I find the serpent old

[1] *A Treatise Upon the Passion*, 1534, in G. E. Haupt (ed.), *The Complete Works of Sir Thomas More*, xiii (New Haven, 1976), 105–52 *passim*.

[2] See my essay 'No Man is a Contradiction', *John Donne Journal*, 1 (1982), 21–38; and ch. 3 of *The Metaphysics of Love* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 187–220.

That, twining in his speckled breast,
About the flowers disguised does fold,
With wreaths of fame and interest.

'The Coronet', ll. 1–16

Yet human history itself is just part of a larger order. The commingling of spirit with sense, heaven with earth, is taken for a peculiarly intimate assurance of the sacred life of the natural creation itself. Truth lies incubating as a seed underground, then springs forth from the earth as Andrewes preaches.[1] 'His work to this day [is] to continue and uphold in their being all that He hath made to be.'[2] We have the highest sanction to seek the vitalizing presence of the divine spirit in the very conduct of natural life; as Henry Vaughan does:

Walk with thy fellow-creatures: note the *hush*
And *whispers* amongst them. There's not a *Spring*,
Or *Leafe* but hath his *Morning-hymn*; Each *Bush*
And *Oak* doth know *I AM*; canst thou not sing?

'Rules and Lessons', ll. 13–16

Vaughan's *Silex Scintillans*, 1650 to 1655, is largely the record of an attempt to discover God in natural processes, which the poet simply takes for hieroglyphic manifestations of sacred life. Other poets, such as George Herbert, feel in their senses their involvement in the processes of fallen nature, yet must will their acceptance of the consequences:

I made a posie, while the day ran by:
Here will I smell my remnant out, and tie
My life within this band.
But Time did becken to the flowers, and they
By noon most cunningly did steal away,
And wither'd in my hand.

My hand was next to them, and then my heart:
I took, without more thinking, in good part
Times gentle admonition:
Who did so sweetly deaths sad taste convey,
Making my minde to smell my fatall day;
Yet sugring the suspicion.

Farewell deare flowers, sweetly your time ye spent,
Fit, while ye liv'd, for smell or ornament,
And after death for cures.
I follow straight without complaints or grief,

[1] *Ninety-Six Sermons*, i. 186 in particular.
[2] Ibid., p. 110.

Since if my sent be good, I care not if
It be as short as yours.
'Life'

Herbert's poem powerfully reminds us that true metaphysical wit is not theology, or rhetoric, but a way of experiencing; of which, by the way, I take Andrewes' sermons to be an illuminating doctrinal substantiation rather than a cause. The wit is inherent in the vision because it effects an ambiguous apprehension of our natural being in the world, continually trying the present experience against a larger prospect of time or questioning what our senses affirm. Wit is the means of putting at issue our own involvement in a natural order which always fails our desires yet intimates a providence in its working:

Aske me no more where Jove bestowes,
When June is past, the fading rose:
For in your beauties orient deepe,
These flowers as in their causes, sleepe.
Carew, 'A Song'

Such writing is peculiarly poignant in the way it simultaneously realizes opposed motives, balancing the intense momentary delight against a yearning for an order beyond change. Indeed the sense of present awareness seems so acute just because the divided impulse itself puts it immediately in question:

Cloris, it is not in our power
To say how long our love will last,
It may be we within this hour
May lose those joys we now may taste;
The blessed that immortal be
From change in love are only free.
Etherege, 'To a Lady, Asking Him
How Long He Would Love Her'

The apprehension together of vivid life and mortality—bright hair about the bone and all that—is simply one of the more dramatic expressions of a double awareness which haunts all these poets with the ephemeralness of their own ardours. Sceptical self-mockery, an ironic poise, offers another way of holding in balance quite opposite possibilities of our being. Some poets tried to resolve their quarrel with their own disposition by pursuing the sacred processes of uncorrupted nature into rural seclusion. But then by the middle of the seventeenth century other accounts of human nature and of natural processes too were drifting in from France

and Italy; and it may be that such modes of experience as the metaphysical poets enact express themselves most intensely when they are already coming in question. What seems certain is that these modes could not survive the quite distinctive metaphysical understanding which engendered them. Metaphysical poetry follows out in various ways that local expectation of the vital presence of the divine creator in the natural order, and in human nature. The revival of interest in it from the time of the Oxford Movement on perhaps helps us to locate our own disquiets.

It is a commonplace that Descartes, rather than Galileo or Newton, framed the mechanistic model of the universe which came to dominate European thinking from the middle of the seventeenth century on. Descartes' disjoining of mind from body, spirit from sense, is also a separation of God from the creation if not a dispensing with God in effect, as Pascal thought.[1] The Cartesian account of human nature led straight to Locke's separation of ideas from things. For Locke ideas are archetypes of the mind's own making which conform only to themselves, so that disagreements about moral ideas are simply differences about the proper use of the words by which we choose to name them, and may be resolved by a dictionary.[2] The basic unit of meaning is the word; and the yoking together of heterogeneous ideas is a wholly arbitrary procedure, which becomes possible only when words are used corruptly.

The dualism of Descartes, and Locke's exploitation of it, quite denied a way of thinking which started in the presumption that mind and body, spirit and sense, are wholly interdependent in our nature. For the English metaphysical writers human nature epitomizes a universe which works as a living organism and manifests sacred purpose in all its processes. Their conception of a natural order in which spiritual and material natures continually interwork led them to assume that effective ideas are not discrete mental objects but complex interrelationships between seemingly (if not actually) unlike orders of being. Such ideas cannot be developed in mere successions of words, but are to be comprehended in the whole sentence, or poem. Descartes and Locke now fathered a conception of nature which negated these assumptions at every point; and it is a matter of record that metaphysical poetry could not be properly grasped again while it held sole sway. Coleridge is no mere chance rediscoverer of Donne.

[1] *Pensées*, ii. 77.

[2] I am indebted to my colleague Antony Palmer for helpful discussion of Locke's arguments in particular.

In fact the idea of nature which shaped metaphysical poetry did not survive the 1650s, save as aberration and whimsy. I shall instance a notorious controversy of the 1680s and after, in which Newton and John Ray joined among others. This centred precisely on the geological evidence of God's operations in the Creation and the Deluge.

A real index to what was happening in English intellectual life in the late seventeenth century is the quiet assimilation of Christian dogma to the laws of natural science. That process accompanied the assumption that God's providence works through natural laws; and it brought among other consequences the tacit abandonment of a sacramental ministry in favour of a homiletic mission, whose incumbents took their charge to be the prescribing of general principles of conduct.

The tendency is blatant in a very curious work published in two parts in 1681 and 1689 with the suggestive title of *Telluris Theoria Sacra, The Sacred Theory of the Earth.* This essay by the Cambridge divine Thomas Burnet, who became Master of the Charterhouse in 1685, provoked a bustle of contention in its day which embroiled some leading scientists.[1] It comes before us now as at once a dinosaur and a portent. We might take it for the very last attempt to explain the earth's present state as a stage in an apocalyptic process; but it is also one of the earliest attempts to make the Mosaic account of creation conform to natural laws.

Burnet offers us a startlingly unorthodox way of handling the myth of the Creation and Fall. He sets out to prove by scientific evidence that the world was created perfect but is now ruined,

[1] I am much indebted to my colleague Professor Frank Hodson for his generous help with this curious episode.

The first part of Burnet's *Telluris Theoria Sacra* was published in Latin in 1681, in two books, *De Diluvio* and *Paradiso.* An English version followed in 1684. The later part of the work was published in 1689 in two books, *De Conflagratione Mundi* and *De Novis Coelis et Nova Terra.* An English translation of the whole work appeared in 1689. Burnet later added *A Review of the Theory of the Earth, and of its Proofs*, 1690. Editions of the work were still appearing in the 1720s, some years after the author's death; a sixth edition, published in 1726, included Burnet's reply to his chief opponents.

A later work in Latin, *Archaeologiae Philosophicae*, 1692, cost Burnet his ecclesiastical office because of its uncompromising denial of the literal sense of Genesis. He declined to publish some other essays in a rationalized faith, *De Fide* and *De Statu mortuorum et resurgentium*; but they came out both in Latin and in English translation long after his death.

The only text of the *Sacred Theory* readily available is the Centaur Press facsimile of the 1690/1 edition, published in 1965 with an introduction by Basil Willey. I give page references to this edition.

reduced to chaotic disorder through sin. His chief evidence for this assumption is the present state of the earth. The irregularity and confusion of the physical world as we now find it even extends beyond external appearance to the areas within the earth's surface, and to the regions under the seas.

Burnet essays a geological account of the state of paradisal perfection. He supposes that as the earth settled down after its formation from chaos it produced a thick crust over its entire surface, a mixture of earth and oily liquid, which was perfectly smooth and regular. This flawless regularity constituted the condition of paradise, and paradise extended over the whole earth. Burnet argues that while the earth was in this state it enjoyed perpetual equinox because it was in a 'right posture' to the sun. Moreover it remained properly watered, despite the absence of mountains and seas, by the condensation at the Poles of vapours which arose through the earth's crust and their subsequent precipitation towards the Equator. All in all, Burnet claims that this world of perfect geometrical symmetry constituted a true golden age in which men lived long lives in peace and innocence.

The cataclysm which ruined this Eden, and produced the present disorderly state of the world, was the Flood. Burnet is quite categorical that a general Flood occurred; but he finds the Mosaic account of it scientifically inadequate, having no more worth than a popular exposition. For one thing, he claims, forty days and forty nights of rain simply would not have produced enough water to drown the entire earth.

Hence a more scientific explanation of the Flood is needed. Burnet posits a gradual drying and shrinking of the earth's crust throughout the patriarchal period, and the opening up of cracks in the surface. Then by weight of accumulated sin, as he supposes, parts of the crust collapsed and fell inwards upon the waters below, forcing them out over the earth: 'the fountains of the great deep were opened'. The abatement of the force of the convulsion, and the subsidence of the waters, left the world as we now see it, with the collapsed portions constituting the ocean beds and the heaped-up bits the hills and mountains. It goes without saying that all symmetry and order are now quite lost; and they will not be recovered until a new apocalypse restores them.

In the second part of the *Sacred Theory*, 1689, Burnet shows how the world is to be destroyed by fire, which will likewise have natural causes. This general conflagration will be precipitated by an eruption of all volcanoes at once, augmented by fiery meteors

from above. Fire will break out first at Rome, as the seat of Antichrist, but it may be expected to rage with particular heat in England just because there is so much coal in the ground there. After the fire there must follow a new precipitation of elements which will reproduce the condition of the paradisal earth. This will bring in the thousand-year reign of Christ and his Saints, and the final overthrow of Satan; then the earth itself will become a fixed star.

The striking thing about Burnet's thinking is his implicit assumption that these divine events must operate by the scientific laws of matter, and display God's providence in their working. Thus the world was ruined by the agency of natural causes; yet these causes were themselves set in motion by the loss of innocence and the weight of sin. God's providence itself works by natural means through the ordinary course of nature, 'the regular effects' of 'second causes'. Indeed our best evidence of God's wisdom is that he works through his own regular ordinances. Divine Providence shows its highest art in the way it brings spiritual and moral determinations into consonance with the order of natural events:

> it is no detraction from Divine Providence, that the course of Nature is exact and regular, and that even in its greatest changes and revolutions it should still conspire and be prepar'd to answer the ends and purposes of the Divine Will in reference to the *Moral* World. This seems to me to be the great Art of Divine Providence, so to adjust the two Worlds, Humane and Natural, Material and Intellectual, as seeing through the possibilities and futuritions of each, according to the first state and circumstances he puts them under, they should all along correspond and fit one another, and especially in their great Crises and Periods.[1]

In fact Burnet does also notionally allow for the extra-ordinary working of God's providence in the 'greater Scenes' and 'greater revolutions of Nature'. But in practice he continually offers scientific explanations of difficulties raised by the Mosaic account, and by his account also, when it fails to answer the 'strict and physical nature of things'. Thus he already has his solution to those hoary old geological puzzles, the marine fossils found on mountain tops, and the stratified evidence of the earth's antiquity. All such present phenomena are simply signs of ruin, the arbitrary residue of the Deluge. He also poses himself some practical questions. How did Noah's progeny spread after the Flood? How was America peopled? Have other planets been subject to the

[1] *Sacred Theory*, p. 89.

same processes as ours? He replies that perhaps each continent had its Noah's Ark, and Moses told us only of the particular Ark which concerns our own part of the world. Moreover, other planets may well have had their own floods, brought on by their own original sins.

Yet Burnet's most revealing answer was made in his later reviews of the controversy, to critics who found his theory at odds with the Mosaic account of the Creation.[1] He avers that Moses did not 'Philosophize or Astronomize in that description' but offered 'a narration suited to the capacity of the people, and not to the strict and physical nature of things'. Moses 'must be so interpreted', in sum, 'as not to . . . be repugnant to clear and uncontested Science.'[2] As he explains in the *Preface* to the *Sacred Theory* itself:

> 'Tis a dangerous thing to ingage the authority of Scripture in disputes about the Natural World, in opposition to Reason; lest Time, which brings all things to light, should discover that to be evidently false which we had made Scripture to assert:

And he adds at once: 'We are not to suppose that any truth concerning the Natural World can be an Enemy to Religion.'[3] Presumably the test of all truths concerning the natural world would be that they conform to reason.

Some of Burnet's commentators and critics accuse him of a blasphemously inappropriate application of scientific criteria to revealed truth; others dismiss him as far more fanciful than scientific.[4] Argument chiefly centred on his account of the Deluge. This was generally denied, and various other geophysical hypotheses were offered instead. Whiston, for example, notoriously ascribed the Flood to the influence of a comet which

[1] *Review of the Theory of the Earth*, 1690, in *Sacred Theory*, pp. 381–412; *Archaeologiae Philosophicae*, 1692, chs. viii and ix, pp. 297–329 *passim*; *De Statu*, 1720, last part *passim*; *A Re-Survey of the Mosaic System of the Creation*, 1728, *passim*.

[2] *Sacred Theory*, pp. 407–8.

[3] Ibid., p. 16.

[4] The commentators whose views I summarize here are Isaac Newton, *c.* 1680; Bishop Herbert Croft, 1685; Erasmus Warren, 1690; John Ray, 1691–2; John Beaumont, 1693; John Woodward, 1695; William Whiston, 1696 and 1698; John Keill, 1698. Keill stood out against the impulse to seek natural causes of Old Testament events, dismissing Burnet's theory as unnecessary because it nowhere proved that the Deluge 'might not have been brought upon the earth by the Almighty power of God' (*An Examination of Dr. Burnet's Theory of the Earth: with some remarks on Mr. Whiston's new Theory of the Earth* (1698), 1734, p. 26.

then came too near the earth.[1] Such rival speculations scarcely signify in themselves. What matters is that so many of these commentators fully accepted the need for scientific explanations of Christian cosmology, and simply differed in the causes they ascribed.

Almost all Burnet's critics deny that the earth was created perfectly smooth. In fact one finds pretty general agreement that the present variety of landscapes is itself both necessary to life and extremely pleasing; and some of these commentators evidently assume that the earth was created more or less as we now find it, requiring only our regulation to bring it back to a state akin to Eden. They are moving towards a tacit abandonment of the idea of a primitive cataclysm in favour of an acceptance of what we have, as the outcome of a long evolution of civilized order. 'Whatever is, is right', or can be made right at least:

> See Pan with Flocks, with Fruits Pomona crown'd,
> Here blushing Flora paints th'enamel'd Ground,
> Here Ceres' Gifts in waving Prospect stand,
> And nodding tempt the joyful Reaper's Hand,
> Rich Industry sits smiling on the Plains
> And Peace and Plenty tell, a STUART reigns.
>
> Alexander Pope, *Windsor Forest*, ll. 37–42
> (first part, 1704)

Pope's lines precisely mirror a creation which is ordered by regular physical laws and harmoniously manageable by mind. A mere fifty years separates them from Vaughan's *Silex Scintillans*. But then you may feel the want of metaphysical sentience much more intimately in eighteenth-century renderings of metaphysical poems. Here is a version of Herbert's 'Life', written about 1737. I withold for the moment the doubtful reassurance of the author's name:

> I Pluck'd this Morn these beauteous Flow'rs
> Emblem of my fleeting Hours;
> 'Tis thus, said I, my Life-time flies,
> So it blooms, and so it dies.
> And, Lo! how soon they steal away
> Wither'd e'er the Noon of Day.
> Adieu! well-pleas'd, my End I see,
> Gently taught Philosophy:
> Fragrance and Ornament alive,

[1] William Whiston, *A New Theory of the Earth*, 1696, *passim*, but especially pp. 357–8, and *A Vindication of the New Theory of the Earth*, 1698, Preface and *passim*.

Physick after Death they give,
Let me throughout my little Stay
Be as useful, and as gay:
My Close as early let me meet,
So my Odour be as Sweet!

The author was John Wesley, who cherished Herbert's poetry and really meant to help it out here. So we need not be surprised to find that another eighteenth-century scholar-poet, the Warton whose memory we honour this evening, devoted many pages of commentary to the poetry of John Hall yet dismissed Hall's contemporary Donne in half a sentence. For all his antiquarian receptiveness and reclamatory zeal Thomas Warton seems indifferent to the metaphysical consequence of writers from Dante on. Andrewes, George Herbert, Vaughan, Marvell are not as much as noticed in his work as far as I can discover; and there is nothing to suggest that the unwritten fourth volume of the *History of English Poetry* would have made anything of them. My overall concern has been to show how we come to differ so drastically from a mind of such generous literary taste and synoptic power. If we allow that literary judgement cannot take an absolute ground it may be because we see what order of perception comes in question when we quarrel with a man of Warton's calibre.