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Theodore Spencer

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## CHAPTER I

## MAN IN NATURE: THE OPTIMISTIC THEORY

## I

The first thing that impresses anyone living in the twentieth century who tries to put himself into Shakespeare's intellectual background is the remarkable unanimity with which all serious thinkers, at least on the popular level, express themselves about man's nature and his place in the world. In the sixteenth century the combined elements of Aristotelianism, Platonism, Neo-Platonism, Stoicism, and Christianity were almost indistinguishably woven into a pattern which was universally agreed upon, and which, in its main outlines, was the same as that of the Middle Ages. New ideas, such as those which the men of the early Renaissance discovered through their reading of Plato, were treated either as additions to the accepted picture or as fresh ways of interpreting the one universal truth about which there was no question. If there was dispute, as of course there was, it was about details; people were concerned as to *how* Christ manifested himself through the Eucharist; they did not ask whether or not he did so at all. They did not doubt the importance of reason in the process of knowledge; they discussed *what* specific functions reason could perform. They did not question the existence of kingship, though they might be violently anxious about *who* should be king. There was an eternal law, a general order—in the universe, in the ranks of created beings, in the institution of government—and it was the business of thoughtful men to discover it and describe it so that through knowledge of it they could fulfill the end for which God had made them.

That end—no matter how often it might be forgotten in the

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pursuit of ambition or the dazzle of earthly pleasure—was also universally agreed upon: man was made in order to know and love God. “The soul was made for an end, and good, and therefore for a better than itself, therefore for God, therefore to enjoy union with him.”<sup>1</sup> To enjoy this union man must, as far as his ability goes, have knowledge of God, and for this purpose God has given man two books, the Bible, and the book “of the universal order of things or nature.”<sup>2</sup> Sir Walter Raleigh begins his *History of the World* by saying that though God cannot be corporeally perceived, yet “by His own word, and by this visible world, is God perceived of men; which is also the understood language of the almighty, vouchsafed to all his creatures, whose hieroglyphical characters are the unnumbered stars, the sun and moon, written on the large volumes of the firmament: written also on the earth and the seas, by the letters of all those living creatures, and plants, which inhabit and reside therein. Therefore said that learned Cusanus, *Mundus universus nihil aliud est, quam Deus explicatus.*”<sup>3</sup> “The universal world is nothing but the setting forth of God,” and if, to use Marlowe’s words, our souls

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hooker, quoted Perry Miller, *The New England Mind*, New York, 1939, p. 3. Hooker was preaching in Connecticut, in the next century, but his words are merely echoes of the whole tradition, from Augustine and Aquinas down.

<sup>2</sup> Montaigne, Preface to his translation (1569) of Ramón Sabunde’s *Natural Theology* (circa 1425), ed. A. Armaingaud, 1932, p. ix. Since Sabunde’s explains the second of these books, says Montaigne, his work is more important than the Bible. Dante also speaks of the universe as a book, which, in his final vision, he at last comprehends (*Par.*, xxxiii, 85–86). La Primaudaye, *French Academy*, English trans., 1618 (6th ed.), p. 333, writes of the book of nature as a witness of God, and du Bartas begins his *Divine Weeks* with the same image (Sylvester’s trans., ed. 1613, p. 6):

The World’s a Book in Folio, printed all  
With God’s great works in letters Capital:  
Each Creature is a Page; and each Effect  
A fair Character, void of all defect.

Cf. *Antony and Cleopatra*, i, 2, 10: *Soothsayer*: In nature’s infinite book of secrecy/A little I can read.

<sup>3</sup> *Works*, ed. Oldys and Birch, London, 1829, ch. i, sect. 1, vol. II, p. 3.

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can comprehend  
 The wondrous architecture of the world,

we may then have some knowledge of the divine architect who planned so marvelous a structure.<sup>4</sup>

Nearly every sixteenth-century writer speaks in the same fashion; to know God one must know His works; by knowing His works one learns the nature of man, for whom those works were made; by learning the nature of man one learns the end for which man was made, which is the knowledge of God. This universal belief is well expressed by a French writer named Pierre de la Primaudaye who in 1577 (his work was translated into English in 1586 and went through several editions) wrote a huge book—a kind of summary of universal knowledge—which goes by the name of *The French Academy*. La Primaudaye begins as follows: “When I direct my sight . . . unto the heavens, and with the wings of contemplation behold their wonderful greatness, their terrible motions, being contrary and without ceasing, the lively brightness, rare beauty and incomparable force of the Sun and Moon, their unchangeable course, one while cause of light, and by and by after of darkness, the infinite number of goodly stars, and of so many other celestial signs: and from this excellent and constant order of all these things, as one ravished and amazed, when I withdraw my spirit lower into the elementary region, to admire and wonder at the situation and spreading of the earth amidst the waters, both of them making one round mass or lump, which in the midst of this great firmament occupieth the room but of a prick or tittle

<sup>4</sup> Marlowe, *I Tamburlaine*, ii, 7. The image of God as an architect is extremely common. Sabunde uses it (ch. 3, Montaigne’s trans.); it is frequent in du Bartas, *op. cit.*, pp. 7, 102, 156, etc.; it is used by Romei, *Courtier’s Academy*, trans. I. K., 1598, p. 26, and by many other writers who describe what Danaeus calls *The Wonderful Workmanship of the World* (trans. T. T., 1578). Danaeus is interesting as belonging to the tradition which tries to combine the two books and describe, as he says on his title-page, the “Form, knowledge, and use of all things created” from evidence “specially gathered out of the Fountains of holy Scripture.”

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in respect thereof: besides, when I acknowledge in this earth and water as many sundry and most beautiful plants, and kinds of earthy and watery creatures, as there are grains of sand on the sea banks: and when I delight myself in the variety of minerals and precious stones, considering the form, quality, and virtue of each of these things: briefly, when I admire . . . so many wonderful works under the cope of heaven I cannot marvel enough at the excellency of Man, for whom all these things were created, and are maintained and preserved in their being and moving, by one and the same divine providence always like unto itself.”<sup>5</sup>

Writers under the influence of Neo-Platonism emphasized the same thing, in even more glowing language. Annibale Romei, in his *Courtier's Academy* (1546—translated into English in 1598), speaks of man in the most exalted terms: “This heavenly creature whom we call man, was compounded of soul and body, the which body, having to be the harbor of a most fair and immortal soul, was created . . . most exquisite, with his eyes toward heaven, and was placed in the midst of the world to the end that as in an ample theater, he might behold and contemplate the works of the great God, and the Beauty of the whole world: as also there was granted unto him a perfect tongue and speech, that enflamed with love divine, and replenished with admiration, he might praise, and with words extol divine beauty.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ed. cit., bk. i, ch. 1. The sixteenth-century writers on these matters are never tired of exclaiming, as Cicero had exclaimed (*De Nat. Deor.*, II, xxxix, 98 ff.) over the beauty of the world, and particularly of the heavens. Robert Recorde, for example, speaks of the heavens as “the chief spectacle of all [God’s] divine works,” and urges his reader to “look upward to the heavens, as nature hath taught him, and not like a beast go poring on the ground.” (*Castle of Knowledge*, 1556, preface to the reader.)

<sup>6</sup> English trans. (1598), p. 16. The Renaissance writers were fond of pointing out that man was the only animal who stood erect, and was therefore formed to look at the heavens. They derived the idea from Plato, *Timaeus*, 90A, though no doubt it became embedded in the tradition partly because of its use by Ovid, *Met.* I,

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Passages like these embody certain fundamental assumptions which every thoughtful Elizabethan took for granted. The first is this: man is not something by himself; he is, as Ramón Sabunde says, “a piece of the order of things,”<sup>7</sup> he is the *nexus et naturae vinculum*,<sup>8</sup> the knot and chain of nature; it is impossible to think of him apart from the rest of creation, for just as man was made for the service of God, so was the rest of creation, including the heavens, made for the service of man,<sup>9</sup> provided man fulfilled his own proper function. Thus, even though the earth he lives on is no bigger than a point, and—as one astronomer says—“in comparison to the whole world beareth no greater view, than a mustard corn on Malvern Hills, or a drop of water in the Ocean sea,”<sup>10</sup> nevertheless man’s role is the most important in the universe. To play it properly he must know both himself and the environment apart from which he cannot

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76–86, and by Macrobius, *Com. in Somn. Scip.*, I, xiv. It is also mentioned by Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, bk. ii. See the dedicatory letter to the King by Louis Le Roy in his French translation of the *Phaedo* and the tenth book of the *Republic* (1553): he repeats the tradition by saying that the immortal soul was placed in the head, the highest part of the body, thus raising man toward the heavens, “son semblable.”

<sup>7</sup> Montaigne’s trans., ed. cit., ch. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Godfrey Goodman, *The Fall of Man, or the Corruption of Nature, etc.*, 1616, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* The belief that the world was made for man was a commonplace even in classical times; see Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, I, iv, 11, and IV, iii, 3 ff., Cicero, *Tusc. Disp.*, I, 28, 68–70, *De Nat. Deor.*, II, 39, 98 ff., and II, 62, 154 ff. The sixteenth-century repetitions of the idea are too numerous to list. But see Richard Hooker, *Laws of Eccl. Pol.*, I, ii, 2; du Bartas, *op. cit.*, p. 156 (God, as an architect, says du Bartas, built this “All-theater” for him who can “admire with due respect Th’ admired Art of such an Architect”); Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Book Named the Governor*, I, i, London, 1907, p. 6, etc., etc.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Recorde, *op. cit.*, p. 5. As Professor Lovejoy and others have pointed out, we are inclined to forget that the relatively minute size of the earth was a commonplace of Ptolemaic cosmology. See Macrobius, *op. cit.*, I, xvi (“The earth, of which the entirety is hardly a point, if compared with the vastness of heaven.”), Chaucer, *Troilus*, v, 1815; *House of Fame*, 906; du Bartas, *op. cit.*, p. 72; Cardinal Bellarmine, *Ascent of the Mind to God*, tr. J. B., gent., Douai, 1616, II, i, etc.

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properly be conceived. In other words—and this is the second assumption—he must understand the universal *order* of which he is so essential a part, and which makes the structure of the world, of living beings, and of society, a single unity created by the hand of God.

For order is behind everything. It is order, says Sir Thomas Elyot, “which in things as well natural as supernatural hath ever had such a pre-eminence, that thereby the incomprehensible majesty of God, as it were by a bright leme [gleam] of a torch or candle, is declared to the blind inhabitants of this world.”<sup>11</sup> And Elyot continues, in a famous panegyric, to praise the order in the heavens, the order in the four elements, the order in plants, the order in animals, and finally, the order in the “estate of mankind, for whose use all the said creatures were ordained of God.” This order reveals the interdependence of everything, the essential unity of creation. As Richard Hooker says, “We see the whole world and each part thereof so compacted, that as long as each thing performeth only that work which is natural unto it, it thereby preserveth both other things and also itself.”<sup>12</sup>

Over this order, this unity, rules Nature. To quote Hooker again, “Obedience of creatures unto the law of Nature is the stay of the whole world.”<sup>13</sup> Nature is God’s deputy,<sup>14</sup> just as, according to Spenser, order is Nature’s sergeant;<sup>15</sup> and Nature’s law can be discovered in both of the books, the book of the Scriptures, and the book of the world, which God has given to man.<sup>16</sup>

Nature rules over three domains, each of which is a reflection

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, I, i.

<sup>12</sup> *Laws of Eccl. Pol.*, I, ix, 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, I, iii, 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, I, iii, 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Faerie Queene*, VII, vii, 4.

<sup>16</sup> For an account of Scripture as natural law see Hooker, *op. cit.*, I, xii, 1 (quoting Gratian); cf. A. J. Carlyle, *History of Medieval Political Theory in the West*, London, 1928, II, ii, 3, p. 103.

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of the others, since they are all parts of the same ordered unity. She rules over the cosmos—the universal world; she rules over the world of created objects on earth; and she rules over the world of human government, of man in society. It is only necessary to learn what her rules are—“Those rules of old discovered, not devis’d”—in order to lead a wise and rational life.

The first domain, that of the created universe, is an enormous sphere, containing the vast area of the heavens with the point-sized earth as their center—as Aristotle and Ptolemy had described it. This domain is divided into two highly unequal parts. In the middle, stationary and fixed, is the relatively minute, if extremely important, world of the four elements—earth, water, air and fire, and the various mixtures of them which, in the form of minerals, plants, animals and men, inhabit the round and stationary globe. Earth is the lowest of the elements—water comes next; surrounding them both is air, and above air is fire, the most refined of the four.<sup>17</sup> This is the sublunary world, the world beneath the moon, on which the second or celestial part of the universe exercises a considerable influence, and for whose chief creation, man, it had in fact been made. This celestial part consists of eight concentric spheres above the element of fire: that of the moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and the fixed stars.<sup>18</sup> These spheres are bodies, with definite edges, and since their circumferences are of different sizes,

<sup>17</sup> Medieval and Renaissance cosmographers always seem rather embarrassed about the element of fire. It had, as an element, to have a separate place; it could not be under the earth, because it was lighter than earth, and only heavy things fell to the center; so there was only one place for it, above the air, even though it could not be seen. Few writers try to explain it; even Dante, who explains everything else, has practically nothing to say about the element of fire. Bacon denies that there is any such thing. The second failing of the human mind, he says, is to see more “equality and uniformity” in nature than there really is: men have “feigned an element of fire, to keep square with earth, water, and air.” (*Advancement of Learning*, bk. ii.)

<sup>18</sup> Sometimes another sphere, the crystalline, was added. See Milton, *Par. Lost*, iii, 481–85.

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getting larger the further away they are from the earth, they move at different speeds as they revolve from east to west around it. Hence they rub against one another, and the friction between each produces a musical note—the music of the spheres.<sup>19</sup>

Each one of the spheres is governed by an angelic intelligence, just as the human body is governed by the soul, but since these intelligences are immaterial, and the stuff of which the spheres are made is superior to anything constructed out of the four elements, the celestial domain of the cosmos is of a higher quality than that of the first which is below it. That is why it is so profitable for man to contemplate it, for, as we shall see, there is an element in man himself which has an affinity with its purity and with the immaterial intelligences by which it is controlled.

The heavens are bounded by the *Primum Mobile*, the first mover, the outer rim of the created universe. It makes a complete revolution every twenty-four hours from west to east, and by doing so, sets the eight spheres below it whirling in the opposite direction. It is the direct cause of all heavenly movement, and—since the planetary spheres have so great an influence on the earth—the indirect cause of all earthly movement as well; it is the circumference of the circle of which the earth is the center.

Outside it is a third realm, with which Nature has nothing to do. This is the *Empyrean* heaven, eternal and infinite, the abode of God, and, after the Last Judgment, the dwelling of the blessed.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Not all authorities agreed on this, for though the music was generally supposed to exist, there were various theories about its production. Some writers denied it entirely. For example, Palingenius, in his popular handbook, *The Zodiac of Life* (circa 1528; trans. Barnaby Googe, 1588 [3rd ed.], p. 212), says that since the spheres are solid bodies, “most thick and great,” they all revolve in the same direction, perfectly smoothly, so that there is no cause for friction, and hence there is no music.

<sup>20</sup> Many Renaissance writers, largely under the influence of Neo-Platonism, ar-



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The world of Nature had been created, according to general opinion, at no very great distance in the past: in fact the six days of its creation had started one Sunday in August or September, 5284 years before the birth of Shakespeare.<sup>21</sup> Nor was it to last very long after that event. Life on earth, it was widely believed, had been planned to exist (as a result of Adam's fall) for only six thousand years, and it was to be exterminated, at the end of that period, by the fires of the Last Judgment. The souls of the damned were to be bound thereafter eternally in hell, in the center of the globe, and the souls of the saved were to be in eternal bliss in the Empyrean heaven. The structure of Nature—the earth and the planets—was to remain, but purified and cleansed. For throughout eternity the surface of the earth was to be as smooth as a crystal ball, the spheres were to stop revolving, and the stationary planets were to shine seven times more brightly on the lifeless earth than they had shone on sinful man. The whole marvelous mechanism was to be fixed forever as a monument to its creator, brilliant, empty, and alone.<sup>22</sup>

For the time being, however, the world was neither empty

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ranged the Empyrean heaven into various hierarchies of intellectual beings. Spencer, in his usual dreamy fashion, gives an account of these hierarchies in his *Hymn to Heavenly Beauty*, an account that is similar to those given by Ficino, Pico, and others. (See Josephine W. Bennett, "Spenser's Venus and the Goddess Nature of the Cantos of Mutabilitie," *Studies in Philology*, XXX [1933], 160–193. Also Miss L. Winstanley's edition of the *Four Hymnes*, Cambridge, 1907.) But these somewhat rarefied speculations did not affect the average man, like Shakespeare, and they did not become part of the general belief.

<sup>21</sup> Danaeus, *op. cit.*, ch. 34. He argues that the world was created in the autumn equinox, since autumn is a fruitful and productive time. There was not yet complete agreement on this matter. That had to wait for Bishop Ussher in the next century. Lipsius (*De Constantia*, I, xvi), writing in 1584, says that the world was then 5500 years old. Shakespeare writing, presumably, ten years later, knew about all this. He says of Cupid that he "hath been five thousand years a boy" (*Love's Labour's Lost*, v, 2, 11); that is, Cupid had existed since the creation of the world.

<sup>22</sup> See *Cursor Mundi* (xiv cent.), ed. R. Morris, E. E. T. S., 1877, vv. 23654 ff. Also Sir David Lyndsay, "Ane Dialog betuix Experience and ane Courtier," *Works*, ed. D. Laing, Edinburgh, 1879, iii, 132 ff.

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nor motionless. It was a vast theater in which man could sit to contemplate what the divine architect had made for him. In it everything had its function, from the humblest mineral and plant to the most splendid constellation, and for each created thing the function was the same; it existed to work for man. Aristotle's statement that "God and nature create nothing that has not its use,"<sup>23</sup> had been a commonplace for centuries, and had been applied to the accepted position of man in the universe. Hence the importance, for example, of astrology. "I'll ne'er believe," says Sylvester, translating du Bartas' *Divine Weeks* (the popularity of which in Shakespeare's day it is difficult to over-estimate):

I'll ne'er believe that the Arch-Architect  
 With all these Fires the Heav'nly Arches deck't  
 Only for Show, and with these glistering shields  
 T'amaze poor Shepherds watching in the fields.  
 I'll ne'er believe that the least Flower that pranks  
 Our garden borders, or the Common banks,  
 And the least stone that in her warming Lap  
 Our kind Nurse Earth doth covetously wrap,  
 Hath some peculiar virtue of its own;  
 And that the glorious Stars of Heav'n have none.<sup>24</sup>

The entire structure was knit together for a single purpose.

## 2

From one point of view, Nature's second domain, the sublunary world of the elements, may be considered, as we have seen, as part of the cosmological picture, but it has such obvious rules of its own that it may more properly be thought of by itself. It is the domain of living creatures, and it is arranged in what the sixteenth century, following Aristotle and the Middle Ages, thought of as a hierarchy of souls. At the bottom are objects

<sup>23</sup> *De Caelo*, Oxford trans. (J. L. Stocks), i, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Ed. cit., pp. 102-103.