

## INTRODUCTION

*Natural History, the Theology of Nature,  
and the Novel*

Early Victorian natural history, with its persistent natural theological orientation, is a realist discourse: it seeks to make our experience of the world understandable in terms of a system whereby the explanation and the phenomena look very much alike. God's world and our view of the world come to coincide. This contrasts with modern science, which has no expectation that our view of the world must be closely coincident with how the world works. While we have long associated realism with the secular or agnostic, not conducive to the imaginative realms of either the supernatural or theology, there is a realist genre in early nineteenth-century England that is highly theological: popular natural histories informed by natural theology. The natural histories that come out of the natural theological tradition are, I argue, a mode of English realism, cognate with what Raymond Williams refers to as the "traditional novel of country and provincial life," and one too-much neglected considering natural history's popularity alongside the novel.<sup>1</sup>

Here I explore the way in which what I call the "reverent empiricism" of a strain of English natural history – from Gilbert White to Philip Henry Gosse – conceives of observation and description as a kind of devotion or act of reverence. I focus on the published texts of field naturalists, or those who had direct contact with nature, rather than closet naturalists; many of these naturalists were inspired by White, not least Charles Darwin, who famously wrote "from reading White's *Selborne* I took much pleasure in watching the habits of birds and even made notes on this subject. In my simplicity I remember wondering why every gentleman did not become an ornithologist."<sup>2</sup> We tend now to be more familiar with the naturalists from the period who traveled so expansively – Joseph Banks, Alexander von Humboldt, Alfred Russell Wallace, Charles Darwin in his *Beagle* days, and, later in the nineteenth century, Mary Kingsley and Marianne North – rather than the many naturalists whose observations focused on Great Britain, and whose natural histories of the commonplace form the core

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of this study. These popular natural historians and popularizers of natural history looked to White's example, with his local and repetitive observations of commonplace nature, as a model of the reverent naturalist. For their part, readers of Victorian natural history quickly become familiar with the pairing of empirical description with tones of awe, delight, and reverence; for example, how a natural creature known as *Sipunculus bernhardus* "builds up a wall of sand-atoms, cemented by a glue of its own secreting, across the shell-aperture, leaving only a small central orifice," which produces in the observer a kind of ecstatic admiration for nature that would seem wholly Romantic if it wasn't also so explicitly theistic: "thus we discern the infinite and inexhaustible resources of the Divine Wisdom in contrivances which have for their object the preservation, sustentation, and comfort of worms so obscure and humble as these. Discerning, let us adore!"<sup>3</sup>

This book will show how British natural history writing in this period blended scientific observation with rhetoric that in some instances was overtly religious and others more generally Romantic. The popular natural historian Rev. J. G. Wood urged his readers to look on the abhorrent in nature (rats, snakes, spiders, and toads) with "a more reverent eye," while G. H. Lewes in *Seaside Studies* (1856) asserted that "in direct contact with nature we not only learn reverence by having our own insignificance forced on us, but we learn more and more appreciate the Infinity on all sides."<sup>4</sup> The orientation toward the natural world evidenced by the narrative might best be described as *reverent*: the natural world is clearly venerated as exalted and superior, such that heightened attention to it seems a natural function of that respect. I argue that natural history writing in the period is "literary," that it is "reverent," and that the practices and representational strategies of natural history (and the kind of long, detailed descriptive passages that ensue) are closely connected to the method of the English provincial novel. Natural history is a subject, and naturalists appear as characters in some of the novels under discussion here, though my argument is less concerned with the thematic representation of natural history in the provincial novel than the impress of it at the level of form.

This book explores the ways in which the particularities of these natural-theologically informed natural histories share with the novel of English provincial realism what I call "reverent form." This is an argument, in some ways, against our understanding of the Victorian novel as increasingly secular, and on behalf of a theological heritage that persists far longer than we have been wont to believe, and in forms that complicate easy divisions between sacred and secular kinds

of texts.<sup>5</sup> The connection between the novel and a theological understanding of nature, and the way in which the novel may express what Max Weber might understand as theology in altered form, is a concern of this book.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in the *form* of English provincial realism we can trace the persistence of a religious worldview, even as the themes of those novels seem resoundingly secular.<sup>7</sup>

Historically, novel theorists have wanted to see the genre of the novel as part of secular epistemology: the novel has been called “the one secular genre,” and described by Georg Lukács as “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God.”<sup>8</sup> Until Michael McKeon’s *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740*, which describes a more plural sense of where the novel derives its tropes, languages, forms, and epistemology, Ian Watt’s *Rise of the Novel* influentially held that the novel’s development was entwined with and reflected capitalism’s new secular individual.<sup>9</sup> McKeon’s intervention crucially supplements the traditional account of the novel as purely secular in origin and epistemology, but nevertheless much discussion of nineteenth-century literature continues to be predicated on a separation of religious and secular culture. The literary practice of realism in the nineteenth century has been especially associated with secular epistemology. As Francis Gorman writes in reference to Thomas Hardy, “realism as a literary practice in the nineteenth century is habitually a discourse of the agnostic because it conceives itself with the empirically knowable; romance readily makes way for the theological, because it admits to its textures the non-empirical, the extraordinary, the supernatural, the possibilities of what might be beyond the globe.”<sup>10</sup> It has become an almost reflexive move to separate realism from romance along the lines of the empirical versus the theological, without considering the ways in which various nineteenth-century genres collapse theological and empirical ways of observing.

It is a central thesis of this book that English provincial realism is not exclusively a discourse of secular empiricism, that realism’s concern with the observed world does not mean that it is antagonistic to a theologically inflected world view. Many early nineteenth-century natural histories read the natural world for its spiritual significance as well as empirically, and so we need to be cautious about reflexively separating realism from romance along the lines of the empirical versus the theological (especially without considering the ways in which certain kinds of nineteenth-century genres collapse theological and empirical ways of observing). As I argue throughout, the twin reverence for minute details and for the commonplace in popular natural histories finds its cognate expression in literary realism, which, like natural history, focuses on, and indeed shows reverence for, the

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quotidian or commonplace thing and event: the *divine commonplace* of my title.

*The Divine in the Commonplace* seeks to peel back our twenty-first-century vantage point that generally presumes the “two-language” rule between science and theology: we acknowledge that each works within separate domains of knowledge, and in general attempt no sustained connection between the observable world and the Christian narrative of God’s creation of that world. Not so the first half of the nineteenth century, when natural theology in England continued to have purchase in observational science; the term “scientist” was coined in 1833 by William Whewell, author of one of the natural-theology-based treatises in *The Bridgewater Treatises* as well as *The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences* (1840).<sup>11</sup> My book elaborates upon and measures the impact within various literary modes of what John Hedley Brooke and Geoffrey Cantor have described as the “peculiar resilience of natural theology” into the Victorian era, a resilience that they identify as particularly prominent in Britain; the persistence of natural theology in varied forms into at least the middle of the nineteenth century reflected the twining of piety with the Enlightenment goal of the pursuit of science.<sup>12</sup>

As Jonathan Topham’s extensive work on nineteenth-century natural theology has shown, there were multiple natural theologies in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> For many nineteenth-century English naturalists and their audiences, observing nature and describing it was a reverential practice, and supportive of (though not a definitive proof of) the generally held belief that nature was God’s creation. As Frank Turner has shown, early Victorian natural science and Christian theology were not at odds with each other, and it was possible for the “gentlemen of science” to follow their clerical as well as scientific callings; many were founders in the 1830s of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.<sup>14</sup> A sincere empiricism sat comfortably with a certainty that nothing observers could find in nature would contradict their religious faith. It is this, perhaps, that ultimately betrays natural theologians and contributes to our modern sense of the incompatibility of natural theology with science. But realist empiricism was perfectly compatible with scientific investigation deep into the nineteenth century, especially if the evidence discovered did not contradict religion.

That most nineteenth-century naturalists saw the observation of nature not as proof of God’s existence but as a reverential practice is to make a formal distinction between traditional natural theology, which argued that demonstrative proof of God’s existence could be achieved by studying

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nature, and what John Hedley Brooke terms the *theology of nature*.<sup>15</sup> Brooke's term, which I borrow liberally in this book, captures the historical character, rather than the philosophical orientation, of arguments from design, for his term acknowledges the philosophical inroads and emergent scientific challenges made to teleological arguments about design by the later eighteenth century. The *theology of nature* expresses the idea that, at least through the mid-nineteenth century, there continued to be a broader, if fuzzier, vernacular consensus about nature as divinely created. This is not the same as a pure natural theological argument that saw in nature demonstrable proof of God's existence, but rather a more general belief that the wonder of nature suggested a divine origin. Natural historians working in this vein, and readers of their work, may not have been looking for proof of God's existence per se, but rather empirical evidence that illustrated their already-present religious sensibility and faith.

Rather than thinking of natural theology as obsolete, then, in the first half of century and even somewhat beyond, it is a central claim of this book that the *theology of nature* persists in such a way that it has significant rhetorical impact in a host of literary forms: natural histories, the sketch, aesthetic treatises, and the novel – especially, as I claim, English provincial realism. Drawing upon the extensive work of John Hedley Brooke, Geoffrey Cantor, and Jonathan Topham, I am making a revisionary case about British nineteenth-century literary realism in suggesting that the argument from scientific naturalism to realist empiricism in the first half of the century has been overstated, without enough attention directed toward the tradition of natural history writing.

William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802) was a late articulation in a long trajectory of the design argument over its two centuries of prominence expressive of a view of nature that emanated from natural philosophers such as John Ray, William Derham, Isaac Newton, and Robert Boyle, but which originated in the theological distinction classically drawn by Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) between “natural” and “revealed” religion.<sup>16</sup> What we call natural religion refers to a theological system made without reference to revelation, which expressed man's ability to comprehend certain truths about God from nature alone. By the time of the Royal Society and the flowering of British empiricism, the natural world was read for both its physical aspects and its religious significance. By the early nineteenth century natural theology had changed, but, despite the intellectual critique and philosophical challenges of David Hume and Immanuel Kant, arguments from design did not become obsolete.<sup>17</sup> This is in part because, as Colin Jager persuasively shows, “natural theology

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during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries accommodated a range of political and social opinions along a broad spectrum of intellectual elites,” such that we need to focus on “those things that may have accounted for its influence and power despite the kinds of intellectual critique in which the enlightenment was so well versed.”<sup>18</sup> Natural theologies were able to survive deep into the nineteenth century because they were often expressed in what Brooke and Cantor characterize as modest ways: “qualified” natural theological arguments, “despite the bad press they have today, had a long career because they were not overstated.”<sup>19</sup>

Another way of understanding the persistence of natural theology into the nineteenth century is that it did so in altered form; natural theology transforms from a proof to what we might think of as a kind of affective scientific argument. Natural histories that reflect a subtle “theology of nature” do not purport to comprehend God or truths about God from nature alone – rather, they employ what Jonathan Topham calls a “discourse of design”: a natural theology that has as its a priori principle the truth of Christian revelation.<sup>20</sup> The study of nature becomes a kind of awe-inspiring celebration of a pre-established faith, not a means necessarily to establish proof of God’s existence; rather, as William Whewell wrote in a sermon from 1827, scientific pursuits could “feed and elevate . . . devotion when it exists.”<sup>21</sup> The early nineteenth-century scientific treatises known as *The Bridgewater Treatises* (1833–1836), which referenced design while maintaining a high scientific standard and content, were deliberate attempts to shore up natural theological argument. Expressions of orthodox science – treatises that George Levine has characterized as “a last-ditch resistance to the secularization of science and knowledge” – *The Bridgewater Treatises* were an elite expression of a persistent desire to see God in nature (*Darwin and the Novelists*, 56). And yet these best-selling texts were hardly alone, nor were they the “epitome of a moribund theology”; otherwise, as Brooke and Cantor provocatively ask, “why were so many natural theology texts on the lists of best-sellers?” (*Reconstructing Nature*, 156, 177).

*The Divine in the Commonplace* draws upon, but is not a history of, natural theology; neither is it a consideration of contemporary theological arguments about natural religion, nor a prehistory to the so-called “intelligent design” movement of the present moment.<sup>22</sup> The idea that nature reveals eternal truths has, of course, roots not only in philosophical and theological argument, but also in classic pastoral and Hebrew and Christian scripture. These touchstones of natural theology verge on commonplaces; often cited are Psalm 19 – “the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 19:1) – and Paul’s

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Letter to the Romans – “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Rom 1: 20).<sup>23</sup> And most are familiar with the lines in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, in which Duke Senior says: “And this our life, exempt from public haunt,/Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,/Sermons in stones, and good in everything.”<sup>24</sup> British Victorians, steeped as they were in a still-vibrant religious culture, certainly would have known these commonplace affirmations that the “book of nature” should be read by reverent observers.

*The Divine in the Commonplace* situates the English provincial realist novel within a broad culture of natural historical writing – a culture that Pearl Brilmeyer has noted is “more central to the Victorian period than is sometimes recognized in literary studies.”<sup>25</sup> As Bernard Lightman’s deep work in *Victorian Popularizers of Science* (2007) demonstrates, popularizers of science often outsold scientific naturalists: the Rev. John George Wood’s *Common Objects of the Country* (1858), a popular natural history informed by natural theology, had sold 64,000 copies ten years from its initial date of publication, while Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) ten years later had sold only 10,000 copies (Lightman, 492). Marrying empiricism to a widespread belief in the divine origin of nature, many of these natural histories were best-selling texts, both in monograph form and in the penny periodical press. As David Elliston Allen established in *The Naturalist in Britain*, there was a hungry new publishing market for the genre of natural history from the 1820s on. Countless readers of natural history read about the wonders around them both in periodical and monograph form, part of a broad popularization of science that included natural history lectures for the middle class and those sponsored by workingmen’s institutes, as well as the now well-known natural history fads of the first half of the century: fern collecting, fossil hunting, seashore study, and aquaria building.<sup>26</sup> Natural histories also became one of the preferred genres of railroad fiction, sold side-by-side with novels at the booksellers on the railway platform, in keeping with the way in which inexpensive railway travel, even to the remote coasts of Wales and Cornwall, made natural history a popular pastime for the middle classes.<sup>27</sup> As Anne Secord’s fascinating research on artisan botanists has established, natural history was not only the purview of the leisured; the working class also participated in the pursuit of knowledge in the natural sciences, a reality reflected in Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel *Mary Barton* (1848), where Job Leigh is both working-class and an amateur naturalist.<sup>28</sup>

To the extent that we can understand how a natural theological worldview affected not only the perception of nature but also the *representation*

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of nature, this book will take seriously reverent natural histories as aesthetic as well as scientific objects. As Ralph O'Connor persuasively claims in *The Earth on Show* (2007), “nineteenth-century scientific writing demands to be taken seriously as imaginative literature.”<sup>29</sup> The archive of British natural history from the first half of the nineteenth century is vast. Instead of skimming the surface of many natural histories, I focus on a discrete set of reverent natural histories to make formalist as well as thematic claims about the genre; my focus is a rich subgenre of the broader category of Victorian natural history: the seashore natural history.

The historical parameters of the English novel of provincial realism that I trace in this book are represented by Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1815) and Anthony Trollope’s *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1867), but just as relevant to this historical bookending is the 1813 edition of White’s *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, roughly contemporaneous with *Emma*, and the first comprehensive edition that ushered into being what P. G. M. Foster characterized as White’s “considerable and growing reputation.”<sup>30</sup> I read Jane Austen’s *Emma* as a predecessor to the provincial realist novels clustered in the 1850s and ’60s: Charles Kingsley’s *Two Years Ago* (1857),<sup>31</sup> George Eliot’s *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857) and *Adam Bede* (1859), and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863) and *Wives and Daughters* (1866). The example of Trollope, whose English provincial novels rarely (if ever) describe the natural world but which are suffused with attention to the quotidian human world, offers a fascinating counterpart to reverent form, which I will address in the Epilogue.

In considering these reverent natural histories alongside the novel of English provincial realism I do not mean to deny important differences, both generic and aesthetic, between science and literature, between popular nonfiction and fiction, between the subjects of the natural world and the social world of humans. There is a robust and complex conversation that occurs in the philosophy of science and poststructuralist literary theory around whether we can or should distinguish science from literature.<sup>32</sup> Here, I hope to make the more specific point that the genres I am engaging in this book are especially compelling examples of the way in which fiction and nonfiction alike are based in a mimetic ideal in the early Victorian moment, with description a value central to both epistemological projects as well as the aesthetics of each genre. Indeed, there are suggestive commonalities between English realism, a tradition that George Levine justly calls an “affable and moderate tradition . . . it belongs, almost provincially, to a ‘middling’ condition,” and natural histories that are likewise invested not in the exotic or sublime parts of nature, but in the middling



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commonplace nature of field, tide-pool, and ditch.<sup>33</sup> One of the central claims of this book is that in attending to the surface realities of natural history we can better understand affinities between natural historical and fictional narrative.<sup>34</sup>

In the chapters to come, I read closely several forms of nineteenth-century naturalist writing, beginning with Gilbert White's *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (1789). White's is the establishing natural history for this book, in no small part because it became a classic of natural history, what David Allen has described as "the one literary classic, universally acknowledged, that the subject in all its years of existence has so far managed to produce and (apart from the *Origin of Species*) its one native sacred text" (Allen, 44). Between 1830 and 1900, "over 100 editions were published (a record comparable to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*)."<sup>35</sup> White's natural history, despite its eighteenth-century epistolary form, becomes the canonical text referenced by other nineteenth-century natural histories. His observational model – habitual, limited in its geographic scope, and oriented toward commonplace nature – is establishing of the norms of popular natural historical narrative in the first half of the nineteenth century. I pair White with the popular sketches of his near neighbor Mary Russell Mitford, compiled as *Our Village: Sketches of Rural Life and Scenery* (1824–1832). In so doing, I argue that we should understand Mitford's sketches not only as a social history of village life, but as an unacknowledged natural history – as (what Bernard Lightman calls) an "indigenous science": a kind of scientific writing produced by popular culture (*Victorian Popularizers of Science*, 14). I see Mitford's sketches as generically akin to recognized natural histories such as Mary Roberts' *The Annals of My Village: Being a Calendar of Nature* (1831), and consider them an exemplary and particularly compelling transitional genre between the nonfiction genre of natural history and the fictional genre of literary realism.

This book engages the broad spectrum of texts informed by the theology of nature and attends to formal commonalities among genres as varied as natural histories, sketch narratives, and novels of English provincial realism. A primary aim of *The Divine in the Commonplace* is to pay due attention to natural histories informed by traditional ways of observing nature – that is, through a natural theological lens – not only by way of attending to a somewhat neglected literary history, but also to engage the genre aesthetically and formally. My contribution builds on a robust scholarly bedrock of work by historians of science and literary scholars, and has three aims: first, to make an implicit argument for the literariness

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of reverent natural history, and its necessary place within the canon of Victorian nonfiction prose; second, to show that the method of English provincial realism is closely connected to the practices of natural history – not just due to their common root in philosophical empiricism, but also in their “reverence” for the commonplace as precious and truth-bearing; and third, to demonstrate that this presents a more religiously oriented root in the history of the novel than has generally been recognized. This study not only offers new ways of thinking about the novel of English provincial realism, but also new ways of seeing natural histories as themselves a literary enterprise shaped by narrative and imaginative representational strategies. I want to insist upon the literariness of early nineteenth-century narrative natural history, and to make the somewhat polemical claim that narrative fiction influenced the writing of natural history. Although it would be a mistake to assert a blunt and oversimplified claim of influence between natural history and the realist novel, I understand the two genres as more interconnected than previously thought, especially insofar as both contribute substantially to the serious portrayal of the ordinary that is part of a long continuum of the representation of reality.<sup>36</sup> I argue that reverent natural history, paraliterary sketches, and literary realism should be read as modes of English realism, each of which contribute to a broad democratizing force in representing ordinary experience and things.

### Reverent Natural Histories

This book proposes to examine the formal practices of natural histories informed by natural theology, taking in a broader swathe of writers to include popular natural history writers and women naturalists, as well as the clergyman-naturalist who had been at the heart of British science since the seventeenth century. When the lens of science is broadened to include a wider community of inquirers beyond the most expert or socially sanctioned, then these texts, as Aileen Fyfe suggests, will “produce a rather different picture of the relationship between science and religion in the nineteenth century.”<sup>37</sup> Earlier accounts had concentrated on the scientific elite, a now-familiar story of how the scientific (or evolutionary) naturalists displaced the “gentlemen of science,” predominantly Oxbridge-educated Anglicans who controlled traditional scientific sites in the first half of the century; in these formulations, natural theology was displaced by a methodology that rules out causes not present in empirically observed nature (i.e. God).<sup>38</sup> More recent scholarship in the wake of Adrian Desmond’s groundbreaking *Politics of Evolution* (1989) has contributed