

'Nature': A Literary Find

Philosophy

John Middleton Murry, editor of the *Adelphi*, unearthed this remarkable double document from the files of the scientific periodical, *Nature*. He discovered that Huxley had translated Goethe's rhapsody and published it, as a *jeu d'esprit*, over his own name in the issue of November 4, 1869. This quotation is from *The Living Age*, which, in turn, reprinted it from the *Adelphi*.

'Nature! We are surrounded and embraced by her; powerless to separate ourselves from her, and powerless to penetrate beyond her.

'Without asking, or warning, she snatches us up into her circling dance, and whirls us on until we are tired, and drop from her arms.

'She is ever shaping new forms; what is, has never yet been; what has been, comes not again. Everything is new, and yet naught but the old.

'We live in her midst and know her not. She is incessantly speaking to us, but betrays not her secret. We constantly act upon her, and yet have no power over her.

'The one thing she seems to aim at is Individuality; yet she cares nothing for individuals. She is always building up and destroying; but her workshop is inaccessible.

'Her life is in her children; but where is the mother? She is the only artist; working up the most uniform material into utter opposites; arriving, without a trace of effort, at perfection, at the most exact precision, though always veiled under a certain softness.

'Each of her works has an essence of its own; each of her phenomena a special characterization: and yet their diversity is in unity.

'She performs a play; we know not whether she sees it herself, and yet she acts for us, the lookers-on.

'Incessant life, development, and movement are in her, but she advances not. She changes forever and ever, and rests not a moment. Quietude is inconceivable to her, and she has laid her curse upon rest. She is firm. Her steps are measured, her exceptions rare, her laws unchangeable.

'She has always thought, and always thinks; though not as a man, but as Nature. She broods over an all-comprehending idea, which no searching can find out.

'Mankind dwell in her and she in them. With all men she plays a game for love, and rejoices the more they win. With many her moves are so hidden that the game is over before they know it.

'That which is most unnatural is

still Nature; the stupidest Philistinism has a touch of her genius. Whoso cannot see her everywhere, sees her nowhere rightly.

'She loves herself, and her innumerable eyes and affections are fixed upon herself. She has divided herself that she may be her own delight. She causes an endless succession of new capacities for enjoyment to spring up, that her insatiable sympathy may be assuaged.

'She rejoices in illusion. Whoso destroys it in himself and others, him she punishes with the sternest tyranny. Whoso follows her in faith, him she takes as a child to her bosom.

'Her children are numberless. To none is she altogether miserly; but she has her favorites, on whom she squanders much, and for whom she makes great sacrifices. Over greatness she spreads her shield.

'She tosses her creatures out of nothingness, and tells them not whence they came, nor whither they go. It is their business to run, she knows the road.

'Her mechanism has few springs—but they never wear out, are always active and manifold.

'The spectacle of Nature is always new, for she is always renewing the spectators. Life is her most exquisite invention; and death her expert contrivance to get plenty of life.

'She wraps man in darkness, and makes him forever long for light. She creates him dependent upon the earth, dull and heavy; and yet is always shaking him until he attempts to soar above it.

'She creates needs because she loves action. Wondrous that she produces all this action so easily! Every need is a benefit, swiftly satisfied, swiftly renewed. Every fresh want is a new source of pleasure, but she soon reaches an equilibrium. . . .

'We obey her laws even when we rebel against them; we work with her even when we desire to work against her.

'She makes every gift a benefit by causing us to want it. She delays, that we may desire her; she hastens, that we may not weary of her.

'She has neither language nor discourse; but she creates tongues and hearts, by which she feels and speaks.

'Her crown is love. Through love alone dare we come near her. She separates all existences, and all tend

to intermingle. She has isolated all things in order that all may approach one another. She holds a couple of draughts from the cup of love to be fair payment for the pains of a lifetime.

'She is all things. She rewards herself and punishes herself; is her own joy and her own misery. She is rough and tender, lovely and hateful, powerless and omnipotent. She is an eternal present. Past and future are known to her. The present is her eternity. She is beneficent. I praise her and all her works. She is silent and wise.

'No explanation is wrung from her; no present won from her, which she does not give freely. She is cunning, but for good ends, and it is best not to notice her tricks.

'She is complete, but never finished. As she works now, so can she always work. Everyone sees her in his own fashion. She hides under a thousand names and phrases, and is always the same. She has brought me here and will also lead me away. I trust her. She may scold me, but she will not hate her work. It was not I who spoke of her. No! What is false and what is true, she has spoken it all. The fault, the merit, is all hers.'

So far Goethe.

When my friend, the editor of *Nature*, asked me to write an opening article for his first number, there came into my mind this wonderful rhapsody on 'Nature,' which has been a delight to me from youth up. It seemed to me that no more fitting preface could be put before a Journal, which aims to mirror the progress of that fashioning by Nature of a picture of herself, in the mind of man, which we call the progress of Science.

A translation, to be worth anything, should reproduce the words, the sense, and the form of the original. But when that original is Goethe's it is hard indeed to obtain this ideal; harder still, perhaps, to know whether one has reached it, or only added another to the long list of those who have tried to put the great German poet into English, and failed.

Supposing, however, that critical judges are satisfied with the translation as such, there lies beyond them the chance of another reckoning with the British public. (Turn to page 264)

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Nature—Continued

who dislike what they call 'Pantheism' almost as much as I do, and who will certainly find this essay of the poet's terribly Pantheistic. In fact, Goethe himself almost admits that it is so. In a curious explanatory letter, addressed to Chancellor von Müller, under date May 26, 1828, he writes:—

This essay was sent to me a short time ago from amongst the papers of the ever-honored Duchess Anna Amelia; it is written by a well-known hand, of which I was accustomed to avail myself in my affairs, in the year 1780, or thereabouts.

I do not exactly remember having written these reflections, but they very well agree with the ideas which had at that time become developed in my mind. I might term the degree of insight which I had then attained, a comparative one, which was trying to express its tendency towards a not yet attained superlative.

There is an obvious inclination to a sort of Pantheism, to the conception of an unfathomable, unconditional, humorously self-contradictory Being, underlying the phenomena of Nature; and it may pass as a jest, with a bitter truth in it.

Goethe says that about the date of this composition of 'Nature' he was chiefly occupied with comparative anatomy; and, in 1786, he gave himself incredible trouble to get other people to take an interest in his discovery that man has an intermaxillary bone. After that he went on to the metamorphosis of plants, and to the theory of the skull, and at length had the pleasure of seeing his work taken up by the German naturalists. The letter ends thus:—

If we consider the high achievements by which all the phenomena of Nature have been linked together in the human mind; and then, once more, thoughtfully peruse the above essay, from which we started, we shall not without a smile, compare that comparative, as I called it, with the superlative we have now reached, and rejoice in the progress of fifty years.

Forty years have passed since these words were written, and we look again, 'not without a smile,' on Goethe's superlative. But the road which led from his comparative to his superlative has been diligently followed, until the notions which represented Goethe's superlative are now the common places of science—and we have a super-superlative of our own.

When another half-century has passed, curious readers of the back numbers of *Nature* will probably look on *our* best, 'not without a smile'; and it may be that long after the theories of the philosophers whose achievements are recorded in these pages are obsolete the vision of the poet will remain as a truthful and efficient symbol of the wonder and mystery of Nature.

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