

A Treasury of Nature

ILLUSTRATED POETRY,
PROSE, AND PRAISE

Leland Ryken

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Some Scripture texts presented in the literary readings have been reformatted.

Some of the explications within this volume incorporate material from Leland Ryken's previous titles *40 Favorite Hymns on the Christian Life*; *40 Favorite Hymns of the Christian Faith*; and *A Treasury of Thanksgiving*—all of which are published by P&R Publishing.

Cover art is taken from Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875), *The Eel Gatherers*, 1860/1865, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. www.nga.gov.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ryken, Leland, editor.

Title: A treasury of nature : illustrated poetry, prose, and praise /
Leland Ryken.

Description: Phillipsburg, New Jersey : P&R Publishing, 2024. | Includes index. | Summary: "Calvin, Spurgeon, and Luther appear alongside Wordsworth, Twain, and Emerson in a vibrant celebration of God's creation. Ryken joins great works of poetry, hymnody, prose, and art with accessible literary analysis"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024010252 | ISBN 9798887790305 (paperback) | ISBN 9798887790312 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Nature--Literary collections. | Christian literature. | LCGFT: Poetry. | Hymn texts. | Creative nonfiction.

Classification: LCC PN6071.N3 T74 2024 | DDC 820.8/036--dc23/eng/20240326
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024010252>

Dedicated to readers of my books
over the past half century



Vincent van Gogh, *Oleanders*, ca. 1888





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Birds, ca. 1840

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Dish with rocks, flowers, and birds (Japanese), 1710-1830



Introduction

THE UNIFYING ELEMENT OF THIS ANTHOLOGY is its subject matter. All its selections and accompanying visuals take nature for their content. As the entries unfold, they have the effect of turning a prism in the light as they illuminate more and more facets of nature.

By giving us selections by diverse authors spanning many centuries and writing in numerous genres, this anthology presents a similar kaleidoscope of literary forms. Until recently, such a book would have also been called an anthology of nature writing, but that designation now denotes expository or informational writing about the natural environment. Most of this is propagandistic prose whose purpose is to advance the cause of earth keeping. By contrast, the entries in this anthology meet the three criteria that allow us to identify them as works of literature.

The literary author's first task is to present some aspect of human experience for our contemplation. Teachers of literature and writing commonly tell their students that literature *shows* rather than *tells*. To "show" is to present a subject so concretely that readers vicariously experience it in their imaginations. To "tell" is to explain a subject abstractly and as a set of ideas. Whereas expository prose tells us *about* a subject, a literary text *presents* the subject. None of the entries in this anthology develops a thesis about nature the way an informational essay would. The authors do, indeed, hope to persuade us of certain things regarding nature and prompt us to action, but their approach is literary rather than expository.

Part of this approach involves a specific technique that sets off literary writing about nature from literature as a whole. This distinctive feature is the author as a prominent presence in the text. For example, many nature poems begin by placing their speaker in a landscape—so many that there is a book on English Romanticism titled *Poets in the Landscape*. And even when the author or speaker is not situated in a scene of nature, we as readers *are* so situated by virtue of the author's descriptions.

Nature authors are not content simply to assert the truth about nature; they also make themselves, and therefore us, participants in an implied action. As we read the entries in this anthology, we repeatedly feel as though we are accompanying their authors on an excursion into nature. This is partly explicable by the authors' literary impulse to render a subject so concretely that we vicariously experience in our imaginations the events they are describing. By helping us to experience nature, the authors gain credibility regarding their assertions about nature. We intuitively understand that the content of each passage grows out of the experience of an actual person. The literature of nature, be it poetry or prose, uses the author as evidential proof.

The literary author's second task is to offer an interpretation of the experiences that he or she has placed before readers for contemplation. For this reason, texts that record a moment or scene in nature, and no more than that, have been omitted from this anthology. As delightful as such bits and pieces are, they are insubstantial. Great literature prompts us to think about a subject as well as to vicariously experience it. Further, because this anthology is devotional in intention, its entries either espouse a Christian view of nature or express a viewpoint that is consonant with Christianity and easily nudged in that direction by the commentary that accompanies the selections.

The literary author's third task is to imbue a text with artistic form and beauty for our enjoyment and aesthetic enrichment. All the entries in this anthology flaunt their writers' verbal artistry and literary craftsmanship. We might note in passing that of all the poems in the Old Testament book of Psalms, those on nature are among the most dense with poetic technique. It is easy to see why the literature of nature is characterized by pronounced artistry: nature itself is a work of art. It readily encourages authors to draw on their full literary resources and skill.

As we read the entries in this anthology, we are helped by taking a trip back in time to the contemplative exercises of the Middle Ages. These exercises began with "composing the scene": imagining oneself as present at an event in the Bible. One then subjected the scene to analysis with the goal of understanding it fully. Finally, one reached closure, usually either by turning to God in prayer or by codifying what today we call an action plan or statement of resolve to act.

This three-part paradigm is universal throughout poetry and poetic prose. Entry after entry of this anthology begins by placing its speaker, and



therefore us as well, in a natural setting. Thus placed, we accompany the speaker in analyzing the meaning of what we observe or experience. The lyric texts display one of two tendencies: they are either reflective (meaning that they enact a thought process) or affective or emotional (meaning that they display a set of feelings). Each poem or prose passage then concludes with an explicit or implied action plan for us. The selections within this anthology often present these three elements of observation, analysis, and resolution in a fluid manner instead of a three-part sequence, but we can arrange our reading experience of all of them according to this paradigm.



Léon Richet, *The Spring*, 1882



What does nature literature add to our lives? Four things. First, such literature often gives us new experiences of nature, taking us to places and showing us plants and landscapes that we ourselves have not encountered. We can therefore read this anthology as a travelogue to the unknown.

Yet many entries in this anthology give expression to experiences of nature that are familiar and beloved to us. In these cases, the author serves as our representative by expressing what we too have experienced, thought, and felt—and with the added bonus of expressing it better than we can. The authors give shape to our own treasured experiences of nature, reminding us of them and enabling us to celebrate them. By giving us a mental itinerary of scenes we plan to visit or suggesting adjustments we can make to our lifestyles, they help us to enhance our own contact with nature.

Third, even when experiences that we read about themselves are familiar, literature presents them in a new and striking way. For example, just as we experience a bowl of fruit on a table in a fresh way when we see it portrayed in a still life painting, literary authors likewise compel our attention and expand our insight into familiar experiences through their writing. When the psalmist depicts God as giving “snow like wool” and scattering “frost like ashes” (Ps. 147:16), we look at snow and frost in a different way.

Joris Hoefnagel, *A Tiger, a Lynx, and a Jaguar(?); A Pair of Bohemian Waxwings, a Shelduck(?), and a Brant Goose with a Ginger Plant*, ca. 1575/1580

For Christians, a fourth gift we receive from immersing ourselves in literary depictions of nature is an informed and biblical view of nature. Of all the subjects that currently require a well-thought-out and defensible Christian viewpoint, nature surely ranks in the top tier. It is often neglected among Christians and from the pulpit. We cannot afford to be ignorant about such an important subject, and this anthology will help to broaden our understanding.

The overall goal of this anthology is to enable nature to be all that it can be in our lives. God created nature to bless us. He does not wish us to neglect such a great gift. Under this overall goal, the individual entries and their accompanying explications serve a range of purposes. One is to celebrate certain features of nature. Another is to set our affections or emotions in right tune (to borrow John Milton's delightful phrase). A note of exhortation is also prominent—one that encourages us to do better. A plausible order of festivities is first to read an entry, then to study its commentary and devotional note, and finally to reread the text in light of any new understanding gained.

Nature literature, as already hinted, tends to be *super* literature. The artistry of nature has a way of bringing out the best from authors who write about it. The visuals that accompany the verbal fireworks in this anthology offer the proverbial “two for the price of one.” ■





God Visits the Earth

PSALM 65:5–13

By awesome deeds you answer us with righteousness,
O God of our salvation,
the hope of all the ends of the earth
and of the farthest seas;

the one who by his strength established the mountains,
being girded with might;
who stills the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
the tumult of the peoples,
so that those who dwell at the ends of the earth
are in awe at your signs.

You make the going out of the morning and the evening
to shout for joy.
You visit the earth and water it;
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide their grain,
for so you have prepared it.
You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.

You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with abundance.
The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy. ■

William Turner of Oxford, *Dawn in the Valley*, 1832

EXPRESSED AS A PRAYER TO GOD, this psalm has nearly everything we expect in a nature poem. Reinforcing the premise that nature is solidly theocentric, the controlling idea is asserted in the middle of the poem: *You visit the earth*. The poem presents nature as both the scene of God's visitation and the evidence of it.

The poem is organized into four units, which are printed above as stanzas. The first is an exalted four-line invocation to God. Even though its focus is on *our salvation* rather than on nature, it nonetheless introduces the latter with the imagery of *the earth* and *the farthest seas*.

As the poem shifts to focus on nature in its second stanza, it continues to evidence the spirit of the sublime that has dominated its invocation. We move in a world of *mountains* established by God's *strength* and *might*, of *roaring . . . seas*, and of people *at the ends of the earth* who are *in awe* at God's *signs*. God here visits the earth as a transcendent deity who controls the cosmos and reins in its *tumult*.

The main business of this nature poem comes to the fore as its third stanza shifts from the sublime to the picturesque. Pictures of gentle action in smaller spheres now dominate. In *Reflections on the Psalms*, C. S. Lewis observes that in Old Testament times, nearly everyone lived on the land, not in cities. Thus, for them, "what we call 'the country' is simply the world." The psalmists spend little time on landscape in their poetry, he claims, and instead "give us . . . the very feel of weather—weather . . . enjoyed almost as a vegetable might be supposed to enjoy it."

Who can doubt that this is true? In this third stanza, the poet gives us a close-up picture of rain falling on cropland. Anyone who has lived on a farm can resonate with the deep inner feeling of relief and gratitude when crops are watered and drought averted. A spirit of hope and anticipation prevails in this stanza, expressed especially in the phrases *you provide their grain* and *blessing its growth*. This is a summer stanza through and through.

The poem's fourth stanza moves to autumn harvest and fulfillment. It strikes its keynote within its opening line: *You crown the year with your bounty*. This stanza gains its effects with a common technique of nature poetry: namely, personification—treating inanimate features of nature as though they are people. Personification expresses a close kinship between people and nature. Here various features of nature are portrayed as people who are dressing for a celebration.

The strength of this poem's metaphor—nature is a visit from God—makes it the ideal portal through which to enter this anthology. In a sense,

all the selections in this anthology are variations on this theme. God created nature, and he sustains it moment by moment. We ourselves can profitably think about how our experience of nature might be rectified and enriched if we viewed it as our own visit from God. ■

For all its tone of celebration, Psalm 65 contains an implied exhortation as well. In Luke 19:44, Jesus warns about the judgment God will bring against people who **did not know the time of [their] visitation.** Responding appropriately to nature is one way of preparing ourselves for the second coming of our God.



Jean-François Millet, *Haystacks: Autumn*, ca. 1874

A detailed microscopic image of plant tissue, likely a leaf cross-section, showing a complex network of green and yellowish cells with prominent blue and purple vascular structures. The image has a high-contrast, almost ethereal quality.

God's Presence in Nature

MARTIN LUTHER (1483–1546)

THE POWER OF GOD . . . is uncircumscribed and immeasurable, beyond and above all that is or may be. On the other hand, it must be essentially present at all places, even in the tiniest tree leaf. The reason is this: It is God who creates, effects, and preserves all things through his almighty power and right hand, as our Creed confesses. For he dispatches no officials or angels when he creates or preserves something, but all this is the work of his divine power itself. If he is to create or preserve it, however, he must be present and must make and preserve his creation both in its innermost and outermost aspects. Therefore, indeed, he himself must be present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being, on all sides, through and through, below and above, before and behind, so that nothing can be more truly present and within all creatures than God himself with his power. . . .

God has found the way whereby his own divine nature can be wholly and entirely in all creatures and in every single individual being, more deeply, more inwardly, more present than the creature is to itself, and yet on



MARTIN LUTHER, A LEADER OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION, was so linked to the study and pulpit that his enthusiasm for nature may be surprising. Luther's response to seeing luxuriant fields of wheat is entirely typical of him: "O Lord, . . . all in and around thee are miracles. Thy voice causes to spring out of the earth, and out of the sand of the desert, these beautiful plants, these green blades, which so rejoice the eye."

This entry from Luther is one of the most important ones in this anthology, but in order to see why this is the case, we need to place his claims into the context of historical thought about God and nature. A key doctrine within Christian theology is that God is both transcendent (separate from the created order) and immanent (present within the natural

previous: Karl Gaff, *Canadian Pond Weed Leaf Tip*, 2021
this page: John La Farge, *Nocturne*, ca. 1885

order). The primary thrust of this passage is to assert God's immanence. The energy with which Luther makes this point may seem repetitious, but Luther's zeal in hammering the point home is entirely warranted. A single-minded focus on salvation history leads many to neglect and disparage nature. When we recognize this, we see that Luther's assertions can serve as a corrective to a narrow view of God and his work.

Yet it is also possible to overshoot the mark in regard to God's immanence. Ancient mythology deified nature, and so has the Romantic movement of the last two centuries. The heresy particular to Romanticism is called pantheism, which *equates* God, people, and nature. Such a view puts forth the objects of nature as themselves divine. A close reading of Luther's discussion in this passage shows how careful he is to show that (1) God is *present in* nature, but no more, and (2) God is *beyond and above all that is or may be*.

If one purpose of his passage is thus to correct error and heresy, another is doxological—devoted to praising God. The passage conveys this particularly through the synonyms that it heaps up—it describes God as *present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being, on all sides, and through, below and above, before and behind*. Luther does not simply assert God's immanence; he is enraptured by it. We can also relish his characteristic touch of imaginative realism when he asserts that God is *not sleeping on a pillow in heaven*.

Our takeaway from this passage follows the same contour as our analysis: we can use it to lead us to think clearly about the doctrines of God's transcendence and immanence, to steer clear of the aberration of pantheism, and to render praise to God, who *wants to be praised for nourishing and cherishing . . . all creatures*. ■



Like Luther, the Christ hymn in Colossians 1 asserts that Christ is both transcendent over nature and immanent in it: ☒By him all things were created, in heaven and on earth. . . . And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together☒(vv. 16☒17).

Bird on her nest (Japan), 1800s



Canticle of the Creatures

FRANCIS OF ASSISI (CA. 1184–1226)

Most high, all powerful, all good, Lord!
All praise is yours, all glory, all honor,
And all blessing.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that you have made,
And first my lord Brother Sun,
Who brings the day and the light you give to us through him.
How beautiful he is, how radiant in all his splendor!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Moon and Stars;
In the heavens you made them bright,
And precious, and fair.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
Whether serene or stormy, all the weather's moods,
By which you nourish all that you have made.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Water,
So useful, lowly, precious, and pure.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
Through whom you brighten up the night.
How beautiful he is, how playful, full of power and strength.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Earth, our mother,
Who feeds and governs us, and who produces
Varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give him thanks. ■

WE NEED TO START OUR ANALYSIS of this poem with a biographical fact: its author was a famous lover of nature. Francis of Assisi was an Italian monk of the early thirteenth century—the founder of the famous Franciscan order. His sense of kinship with animals became legendary in his own lifetime, and he is especially associated with birds. He called the creatures his brothers and sisters, and he exhorted them to praise God. All of this alerts us to the fact that his famous poem about creation was not just a poetic exercise but a codification of what the author practiced in his everyday life.

The first thing we notice about the poem is its simplicity. Its individual stanzas are brief, easily recognized units. Except for its enclosing first and last stanzas, each stanza follows the same format, beginning with an ascription of praise that is addressed to God as a prayer and repeated verbatim. The poem catalogs the familiar forces of nature in a manner that a child can easily follow, and to call the sun and moon brother and sister is something we might expect in a book for little children.

But there is actually a great deal of complexity at work below its simple surface, and our best entry into this depth is to dispel some common misconceptions and misrepresentations that surround the poem. First, the title most commonly attached to it, “Canticle of the Sun,” is simply incorrect. Only one of its stanzas is about the sun; the rest of the poem is about other creatures of the cosmos. Second, the poem is not, as sometimes claimed, an imitation of Psalm 148. Like that psalm, it is a poem of praise that moves through the realms of nature from the sky to the earth. Psalm 148 is an extended doxology (a command to praise) that is addressed to created beings through a figure of speech known as apostrophe (an address delivered to something inanimate as though it were a person). By contrast, Francis of Assisi addresses his poem to God. Additionally, while this canticle shares *part* of the catalog of creation that Psalm 148 also presents, Francis is also working with a tradition built around the four elements: wind, water, fire, and earth.

The poem has the same overall effect that we find in the familiar psalms of praise—namely, one of exalting God for his work of creation. But as we look at the poem more closely, we see that this overall *effect* is the only thing it shares with those praise psalms. The psalms command fellow believers to praise God for creation, but Francis of Assisi does not command anyone. Instead he expresses a *wish* that God be praised—and



not by people but by agents of nature. This wish for God be to praised also carries an implicit declaration that he is worthy of such praise. Even more surprising, Francis pictures God being praised not *for* creation but *through* it. This leads us to wonder what he means.

Three final aspects of the poem round out our admiration of it. The rhetorical technique of repetition is in full force both in its repetition of the line *All praise be yours, my Lord* and in its pattern of describing each creature that it names. Second, the poet's skill can be seen in the way he ascribes appropriate qualities to the various creatures that he names—light to the sun, for example, and fluctuating serenity and storminess to the wind. Finally, most striking of all is that familial imagery that he ascribes to the elements of nature by calling them *Brother* and *Sister*.

Our takeaway from this poem comes when we allow it to prompt us to analyze how God can be praised *through* or by means of creation as well as what implications result from viewing the elements of nature as our brothers and sisters. ■

☒**Canticle of the Creatures**☒ expresses a prayer or wish for God to be praised through his creation. The Bible gives us pictures of that wish actually coming to pass. An example is Isaiah 55:12: ☒The mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.☒

Jean☒Baptiste☒Camille Corot,
The Eel Gatherers, 1860/1865

For the Beauty of the Earth

FOLLIOTT S. PIERPOINT (1835–1917)

For the beauty of the earth,
For the glory of the skies,
For the love which from our birth
Over and around us lies,
 Lord of all to thee we raise
 This our hymn of grateful praise.

For the beauty of each hour
Of the day and of the night,
Hill and vale and tree and flow'r,
Sun and moon and stars of light.
 Lord of all to thee we raise
 This our hymn of grateful praise.

For each perfect gift of thine
To our race so freely given,
Graces human and divine,
Flowers of earth, and buds of heaven:
 Lord of all to thee we raise
 This our hymn of grateful praise. ■

Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight*, 1835



FOLLIOTT PIERPOINT WAS A NATURE POET as well as a hymnwriter. “For the Beauty of the Earth” was inspired when the twenty-nine-year-old took a springtime walk on the hills surrounding his native city of Bath, England. Overwhelmed by the beauty of his surroundings, Pierpoint sat down in the midst of the landscape and composed a poem that, surprisingly, was first published as an eight-stanza Communion hymn. Eventually it became a familiar Thanksgiving hymn as later editors printed the stanzas that suited their purpose. Here we have selected three stanzas with the conventions of nature poetry in mind.

We will understand these conventions more readily if we take a brief excursion into the history of ideas about what constitutes nature. Starting at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a movement known as Romanticism conditioned people to think of nature as opposed to human civilization. Before that, people had viewed themselves as being part of nature. Psalm 148 provides a good illustration of this by placing people in the realm of nature alongside the hills and birds. In such a view, human emotions toward family and friends are natural and therefore part of “nature.”

Pierpoint’s poem expresses this older view in its opening stanza, which places before us three categories of nature: (1) the earth on which we live, (2) the sky above us, and (3) the human community of which we are a part. The second stanza then narrows its focus to non-human nature by picturing the panorama of the hourly and daily cycle, followed by a catalog of the elements that most readily enter our minds when the concept of nature is named: *hill, vale, tree, flower, sun, moon, stars*. The poet condenses what we often think of as nature poetry into just four lines.

In the third stanza, the poet moves from particular descriptions of nature to descriptions of all the things that we experience as part of God’s creation. At first we might even think this stanza is leaving nature behind, but nature does remain on its agenda, albeit metaphorically. The blessings that the poem has been rehearsing throughout are called *flowers* here (representing the most beautiful things we know on earth) and *buds* (foreshadowings of heavenly glories to come).

With its short lines and simple *ababcc* rhyme scheme, the poem can be easily grasped. Yet its syntax, or sentence structure, introduces a pleasing element of complexity. This can be attributed to two things. First, the lines do not follow the ordinary order of clauses in which a subject is stated first and then followed by a predicate (the verb and other elements that complete the sentence’s meaning). Instead, each stanza begins with a

subordinate clause that is introduced by the preposition *for*. This format is combined with a suspended sentence structure, in which the verb that completes the meaning is withheld for a long time—four whole lines, in fact. Tension builds up and is finally released in the refrain, which completes the thought of each stanza.

We can apply this poem by allowing it, despite its brevity, to make us aware of how pervasive nature is in our daily lives. Once it has, we can enthusiastically allow the praise of the refrain to become our prayer to God. ■

This poem puts into practice what Psalm 105:2 commands: ☒Sing to [God], sing praises to him; tell of all his wondrous works!☒



Richard Wilson, *Lake Albano*, 1762

It Is the First Mild Day of March

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770–1850)

It is the first mild day of March,
Each minute sweeter than before;
The redbreast sings from the tall larch
That stands beside our door.

There is a blessing in the air,
Which seems a sense of joy to yield
To the bare trees, and mountains bare,
And grass in the green field.

Love, now a universal birth,
From heart to heart is stealing,
From earth to man, from man to earth:
It is the hour of feeling.

One moment now may give us more
Than years of toiling reason:
Our minds shall drink at every pore
The spirit of the season.

Some silent laws our hearts will make,
Which they shall long obey:
We for the year to come may take
Our temper from today.

And from the blessed power that rolls
About, below, above,
We'll frame the measure of our souls:
They shall be tuned to love. ■



THE VERSION OF THE SEASONAL poem that appears here omits three stanzas from Wordsworth's original composition, in which the poet addresses his sister and invites her to spend a day with him soaking in all that springtime offers. These stanzas have not been included here because they detract from the universality of the poem, but one of their features still carries over—it remains a poem of invitation. We should read it as inviting us, and not simply Wordsworth's sister, to yield ourselves to nature.

The poem is organized according to a three-part contemplative paradigm that can be traced all the way back to the Middle Ages. Its first two stanzas compose the scene: they give us just enough description to activate our own memories of early springtime and engage our imaginations.

Once this appeal to our memory and imagination has set the scene, the poem's middle two stanzas subject the scene to analysis. Wordsworth emphasizes nature's ability to induce strong feelings in us. The moral and spiritual power of nature, and its healing effect on the human psyche, were Wordsworth's greatest poetic themes. In case we find ourselves resisting Wordsworth's exalted claims about nature, we should

remember that he is extending an invitation for us to give what he says a try—to *yield* to nature and find its *blessing* (stanza 2). We cannot legitimately object before doing so.

The poem's concluding pair of stanzas gives us an action plan. The religious language that the poem has kept latent up to this point now becomes dominant. Thus we read about *our hearts* making *silent laws* that *we shall long obey*, about *the blessed power that rolls about, below, above*, and about [*framing*] *the measure of our souls*. The poet proposes an encounter with nature in such a way that Christian readers can align his words with their faith. No suspicion should attach to Wordsworth's religious language in the last stanza, where he clearly avoids the pantheistic claim that the divine power of nature resides in nature.

So far this analysis has viewed the poem as a seasonal composition, a religious nature poem, and a poem of invitation. Two additional labels will fill out our picture of it. The poem has the character of a manifesto—one in which Wordsworth outlines what he believes nature stands ready to give us. He emphasizes three things: personal joy and wellbeing, a rich emotional life, and the ability to live a life of love. Finally, this work can be called a poem of rapture, since the poet gives full vent to the feelings he experiences when surrounded by nature. His implied claim is that we can share this rapture.

This poem has a double application: we can give its poet a sympathetic hearing as he makes his case for giving ourselves to nature, and we can take the further step of accepting the poem's invitation to see what encountering nature can do for us. ■

Wordsworth's invitation for us to open ourselves to the beneficial influences of nature finds the following parallel in Job 12:

But ask the beasts, and they will teach you;
the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you;
or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you. (vv. 7–8)

In [God's] hand is the life of every living thing
and the breath of all mankind. (v. 10)

Rembrandt Peale, *Rubens Peale*
with a *Geranium*, 1801