

## **‘To Instruct our Wand’ring Thought’: Nature as Tutor in an Age of Revolution**

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***Abstract:** How do artists detect, respond to, and cope with tectonic shifts, whether political or technological, in the societies in which they live—and go on to produce works of innovation, significance and lasting beauty? This article will consider two such creators, the poet Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, and the painter Thomas Gainsborough, living at either end of a 100-year period that would include the “Bloodless Revolution,” of James II’s court, the Revolutionary War in North America, and the upending effects of the Industrial Revolution, concluding one year before the French Revolution. Finch (1661-1720) wrote poetry praised for its sensitivity, technical excellence, and range of subject matter by such literary giants as Pope and Wordsworth. Gainsborough (1727–1788), besides his many commissioned portraits, was credited with co-originating the 18th century British school of landscape painting as well as co-founding the Royal Academy. Both Finch and Gainsborough relied on natural elements in their most personal work to express psychological realities and transcendent values. By considering specifically Finch’s ‘Nocturnal Reverie’(1713) and Gainsborough’s *The Painter’s Daughters Chasing a Butterfly* (1756) one can better understand the power these artists found in the natural world to address ideas of peace, hope, and human freedom in an age of upheaval.*

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The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Britain were years of tremendous growth in the fields of commerce, technology, and science, but were roiled with the arrivals and departures through exile or death of multiple sovereigns, with insurrections at home and revolutions abroad. London endured plague and the Great Fire in 1666. Yet, one cultural critic, when writing about the end of the eighteenth century in Britain noted, ‘before the political revolutions of America and France had taken effect, a far deeper and more catastrophic transformation was already underway: [...] the

Industrial Revolution'.<sup>1</sup> Even as Britain expanded her empire through exploration and commercial ties, the landscape at home and all it contained, both wild and cultivated, was being revalued. Historian Keith Thomas explains that the ability to derive pleasure from scenes of relative desolation represented a major change in human perception,<sup>2</sup> a perception found more readily among those who were not personally engaged in earning their living from the land. 'The new taste for wild nature was therefore not an intuitive affair,' he concludes, but one based on education and sophistication.<sup>3</sup>

This article will take a slightly different view based on the observation that artists working in most eras and places have shown an intuitive receptivity to the wonder and beauty of the natural world. The discussion will consider works by two accomplished British artists whose lives bridge the years 1661 to 1788. 'Nocturnal Reverie' (1713), a meditative poem by Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea will be compared to the painting 'The Artist's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly,' an innovative double-portrait by Thomas Gainsborough. For both poem and portrait, the language of 'wild nature' is essential to the structure, content, and theme of each work. By making use of natural elements to manifest their creative visions, both artists draw on a legacy as old as artmaking itself.

Anne Finch, (1661- 1720) spent much of her adult life on the estate of Eastwell Park in Kent which she and her husband inherited from a younger relative in 1712. The natural beauty of the estate was deeply appreciated by the poet and would inspire much in her creative work.<sup>4</sup> Yet, prior to this, Finch had moved in high social circles, serving as Maid of Honour to Mary of Modena, the wife of James Stuart, Duke of York where she had met and married Captain Heneage Finch, a Gentleman of the Bedchamber, in 1684. When James Stuart succeeded his brother Charles as King, the couple was poised near the epicenter of national power. However, James's Catholic rule became

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Clark, 'The Smile of Reason,' in *Civilization: A Personal View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p.260.

<sup>2</sup> Keith Thomas, 'Cultivation or Wilderness?', *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500 – 1800* (London, Allen Lane, 1983), p. 264.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas, p. 265.

<sup>4</sup> David Fairer and Christine Gerrard, 'Anne Finch', in *Eighteenth-Century Poetry, An Annotated Anthology*, ed. by David Fairer and Christine Gerrard, 3rd edn (Oxford: Blackwell Wiley), p. 22.

increasingly unstable, and he was forced into exile and replaced by his brother-in-law, the Protestant William of Orange. The Finches, still loyal to James, could no longer remain at court. Colonel Finch refused the oath of allegiance, risking fines and imprisonment. The couple subsequently endured a period of uprootedness, essentially homeless. In 1690, Colonel Finch was arrested and imprisoned as a Jacobite, only to have the case later dropped.<sup>5</sup>

These tumultuous professional and personal events would colour the years at Eastwell Park, which for some might have seemed anticlimactic.<sup>6</sup> The emerging poet, however, used the relative solitude to reflect on events and issues of the day, distilling their meanings into her poems. Finch published her own volume of work, *Miscellany Poems* (1713), containing such poems as ‘The Spleen’ (1701), ‘Upon the Hurricane’ (1704), ‘The Tree’ (1713), and ‘To the Nightingale’ (1713). Her work appeared also in other collections such as *Poems by Eminent Ladies* (1755). At a time when female poets were active but not always respected, Finch’s husband encouraged her writing, and she engaged the attention of such important contemporaries as Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift.<sup>7</sup>

Carefully observed natural imagery abounds in Finch’s poems, and yet the natural references are not ends in themselves, but generally used to further a comment or reflection on human affairs. For example, ‘Upon the Hurricane’ (1704) takes as its starting point a tempest that brought havoc to Southern Britain during the night of November 26, 1703 with much destruction of property and loss of life. The poem was printed with a paraphrase of Psalm 148,<sup>8</sup> and appears to interpret the storm as a supernatural judgement on the various listed sins of the nation.<sup>9</sup> Other poems, gentler in tone, such as ‘The Tree’ (1713) and ‘To the Nightingale’ (1713) take their starting point from the

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<sup>5</sup> Fairer and Gerrard, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Huber, Alexander, ‘Anne Finch (née Kingsmill), countess of Winchilsea’, *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*, 06 Jan 2022 ( v1.6 (Winter 2021/22)). <<https://www.eighteenthcenturypoetry.org/authors/pers00268.shtml>> [accessed 15 February 2022]

<sup>8</sup> ‘[...]You lightning and hail, snow and clouds,/storm winds that fulfill his command;’ Psalm 148.

<sup>9</sup> Finch, ‘Upon the Hurricane,’ in *Eighteenth-Century Poetry, An Annotated Anthology*, ed. by David Fairer and Christine Gerrard, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Oxford: Blackwell Wiley), p. 31, ll. 187 – 91.

natural world, but finish by drawing conclusions on the human condition, for example virtue ('The Tree,') and the poetic vocation ('To the Nightingale'). It is interesting to note, by way of contrast, that while Wordsworth would later praise Finch's poetry for its natural description, wishing to include 'Nocturnal Reverie' in his own anthology, he felt free to excise lines 17-20, containing social references, presumably to better suit his purposes.<sup>10</sup>

The painter Gainsborough was born in 1727, seven years after Finch's death. Unlike her, he was raised in the middle-class family of a wool manufacturer. His artistic talent was recognized early by his parents, and he was sent to London at the age of thirteen to apprentice with a silversmith. There, the French book illustrator Hubert Gravelot<sup>11</sup> taught him engraving, a skill that would give the talented boy a strong foundation in the draftsmanship essential to his later career. By 1745, at the age of 18, Gainsborough was competent enough to establish his own painting studio in London. A year later in 1746 he married Margaret Burr, the illegitimate daughter of the Duke of Beaufort. She brought to the marriage an annuity from her father, and Gainsborough expressed gratitude for the security this income provided during the early years of his marriage while he strove to establish a professional reputation. Like Finch, then, Gainsborough benefitted from early encouragement and financial support of family members as he honed his artistic vocation. Over the next eleven years, the family moved house several times, from London back to Ipswich and eventually to Bath where Gainsborough was able to establish a flourishing portrait studio patronised by the wealthy there to enjoy the amenities in the city. He remained in Bath for sixteen years, and it was here that his national reputation was established.

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<sup>10</sup> David Fairer and Christine Gerrard, "'A Nocturnal Reverie' Introductory Note', in *Eighteenth-Century Poetry, An Annotated Anthology*, ed. by David Fairer and Christine Gerrard, 3rd edn (Oxford: Blackwell Wiley), p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> John Hayes, 'Introduction', in *The Letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, ed. by John Hayes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). It was primarily through the French Gravelot that Rococo design entered Britain; Gainsborough would have been exposed to the avant-garde through him.

Turning now to Finch's poem, 'A Nocturnal Reverie', the work is essentially a meditation on natural and human domains, and the poet's place between them. The poem is structured as a single elongated sentence of 50 lines, gathered in rhymed couplets and written in iambic pentameter.

In it, the poet wanders through the varied scenes afforded by a familiar landscape after nightfall. By invoking Shakespeare's phrase 'In such a night' from *The Merchant of Venice*, Act V,<sup>12</sup> the poet signals the mood:

In such a *Night*, when every louder wind  
Is to its distant Cavern safe confin'd;  
And only gentle *Zephyr* fans his Wings,  
And lonely *Philomel*, still waking, sings; (1- 4)

Darkness makes up the artistic 'ground' for the poet's musing; the mood is not anxious but calm. The gentle, airborne creatures mentioned in these lines, the ancient breeze, the solitary bird, confirm this tone while 'Lonely Philomel, still waking, sings' (4). Like Philomel/the nightingale, the solitary poet composes her verses after dark. Finch's classical references are in keeping with the aesthetic taste of the era, but also lend stability and gravitas to the poem.

The poem next signals a shift in perspective with a series of inversions:

When in some River, overhung with Green,  
The waving Moon and trembling Leaves are seen; (9 -10)

The poet looks down into the river to discover the uppermost leaves on trees and beyond them the celestial moon. In effect, changing one's stature or posture alters one's perspective: to stand differently is to perceive differently. Moreover, this new perception is transformed under very different

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<sup>12</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*.

light: 'Scatter'd Glow-worms,' the smallest of lights, '...watch their Hour to shine' (17-18).<sup>13</sup> 'Freshened grass'—the lowliest of plants— '... now bears itself upright' (11). 'Odors, which declined repelling day/ Through temp'rate air uninterrupted stray' (21-22). In effect, a second, parallel world of the lowly and hidden finds the freedom to emerge and is detected by the senses of the poet, responded to with emotion and fully appreciated with the reason.

Rhythm, also, plays a role in the structure of the poem. The iambic pentameter gives a slow, regular cadence, the rhythm of walking. To underscore this, Finch incorporates images of a succession of domestic animals wandering in this restful twilight: 'the loosed horse... Comes slowly grazing' (29-30), 'the nibbling sheep at large pursue their food/ And unmolested kine rechew the cud' (33-34). The musing poet expresses an affinity with these animals grazing and ruminating under the summer moon.

In lines 35 – 38 the poet returns to images of birds living near the habitations of men, finding their voices only after the tumult of the day's work has ended.

When Curlews cry beneath the Village-walls,  
And to her straggling Brood the Partridge calls;  
Their shortliv'd Jubilee the Creatures keep,  
Which but endures, whilst Tyrant-Man do's sleep: (35 - 38)

Lowly creatures enjoy their brief respite, free from the harassment of masters and predators for a time.

The poem concludes by connecting what the poet senses, — sees, hears, smells and touches-- with what she feels: a "sedate content the spirit feels, / And no fierce light disturbs, whilst it reveals"

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<sup>13</sup> *Lympyrus noctiluca*, the European glow-worm, is active May through September. Only the female of the species emits sustained light after nightfall through bioluminescence. Wordsworth called them 'earthborn stars'.

(39-40). The varied beauty of the natural world acts on the poet's senses. These sensations call forth the emotional response of deep peace. This peace in turn permits intuitive insight to take hold of the poet's meditative soul. These 'silent musings' have as their object truths received, 'too high for syllables to speak' (42). At such a moment, the poet 'Joys in th' inferior world, and thinks it like her own' (46). The affinity for night's creatures gives the poet a new language for her interior light, a light that realigns her human values and aspirations with something more profound and true—and ultimately more gratifying-- than worldly pursuits that cost so much and seldom satisfy.

Turning next to Gainsborough's painting, a comparison to Finch's poem reveals the painter has followed a similar program. To begin, just as Finch's poem is meditative, or revelatory of the poet's inner life, Gainsborough's portrait is a personal, not commissioned, work, which affords him the opportunity to experiment with visual ideas in a way a society portrait would not. In fact, this painting is Gainsborough's first full-sized double-portrait; he will go on to repeat the scale and composition many times. And because the subjects are his own children, he is free to 'pose' them however he wishes—and he chooses to show them engaged in a most childlike activity, and in a natural setting.

The painting is composed in vertical format and depicts two young girls running down a path just wide enough for the pair in pursuit of a white butterfly. The picture is divided into foreground, a murky mid-ground of woods and brush, and a background composed of sky and tree canopies, a reliable backdrop for many subsequent portraits. Gainsborough locates the visual interest in the compressed foreground. The girls are shown from the front, running forward. They are looking, however, to their right where a butterfly, known as the Small White, clearly marked, has alighted on a thistle. The younger girl's right hand reaches out to grasp the butterfly, her apron floating behind her. Her left hand is firmly clasped by her older sister who is keeping pace with her.



Figure 1. Thomas Gainsborough, *The Painter's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly*, 1756, oil on canvas, 113.5 x 105 cm National Gallery, London.

As with Finch's poem, contrasts of light and darkness play important roles in this painting. Overall, most of the painting is dark in value. However, light from the upper left-hand corner of the painting illuminates the children's faces, hands and garments—and the butterfly they chase. This strong visual contrast throws into high relief the young ages of the girls and their innocence.

Moreover, just as Finch's poem takes notice of the movements of various natural beings, posture and gesture is likewise meaningful in this painting. The younger girl strains toward the butterfly she has sighted and hopes to catch. Her body follows her sight. Poised on the thistle bloom, the creature is motionless, tempting. The older girl grasps her sister by the hand. She has kept pace with her, but her body leans away toward the right side of the painting as if to draw her back or at least slow her headlong rush. The younger girl is heedless of her clothing; the older girl holds her apron over her shoulder, perhaps to make it easier to run, or to save it from stains and snags.

Like Finch's economical but elegant word choice, Gainsborough's confident brushwork is applied in different ways to direct the viewer's gaze. The children's garments, feet and surrounding landscape appear to have been briskly painted, suggesting energy and movement. Yet textures are never compromised in this rapid brushwork: clouds, sky, leaves, stone, underbrush, aprons, leather shoes all remain distinctive in the way they move and reflect light. However, the girls' heads, faces, shoulders and hands, are highly finished, inviting the eye to pause.

Gainsborough, the consummate portrait artist, offers two faces that are similar but not identical. Just as important, the expressions are in keeping with the psychology of each child, natural and believable. The younger girl's expression is both eager and anxious. Is she worried the butterfly will elude her grasp, or is she afraid of the thistle? Her plaintive expression is unposed and natural, completely convincing. Her older sister's expression is more nuanced and could be read as a mixture of amusement, exasperation and even wonder. Clara Davarpanah<sup>14</sup> has interpreted her gaze as being directed beyond the butterfly to something or someone beyond the picture, adding another layer to the child's awareness.

The painting's various formal elements can be seen as derived from the physical qualities of the Small White.<sup>15</sup> By composing the pictorial elements this way, the butterfly becomes intrinsic to the composition, not merely a prop, suggesting metaphysical connections between the ethereal creature and the painter's daughters. Gainsborough accomplishes this through colour, composition, and visual movement.

First, by choosing the Small White (*Pieris rapae*) butterfly he establishes the painting's colour palette. The Small White, when at rest as it is in this painting, exhibits two wings that are very similar but not identical in coloration: the upper wing is pale white, the lower wing is pale yellow.

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<sup>14</sup> Clara Davarpanah, 'The Painter's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly', *Ten-Minute Talks* < <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/thomas-gainsborough-the-painters-daughters-chasing-a-butterfly> > [accessed 1 Feb 2022].

<sup>15</sup> Davarpanah.

Gainsborough repeats the same colour scheme in the girls' dresses.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the butterfly's dark spotted markings which contrast with the white of the upper wings are echoed by the girls' dark expressive eyes set against their pale skin.

Second, the upper and lower parts of the butterfly wing are attached with a slight overlap. Gainsborough echoes this structure in the clasped hands of the sisters who lean away from each other. They, too, are separate but very closely attached psychologically.

Third, Gainsborough's use of light, bright colour from one edge of the painting to the other invites the eye to travel across the picture plane from the butterfly to the younger child's outstretched arm, up her shoulder to her earnest face, then down her left arm to the hand held tightly by her sister. The eye then travels up to the older child's face where its luminosity and sweetness invite contemplation before traveling across to the raised arm and the pale apron she keeps over her left shoulder. By directing this movement of the eye with its down again--up again movement Gainsborough visually mimics the flight of the Small White as it floats, alights, and flutters away.

Thus, in these two highly personal works, both poet and painter have turned to the natural world to provide images to convey meaning. Just as Finch's wandering poet is linked in various ways to the peaceable creatures of the night, so Gainsborough's young daughters are linked with that beautiful, fragile, and impermanent creature they chase, the butterfly.

A final mention should be made of the healing and renewing role the natural world appears to have played in the daily lives of Finch and Gainsborough. Though both artists enjoyed sustaining relationships throughout their lives, personal as well as professional, their engagement in human affairs demanded immersion in the politics and the competitions of the day. Finch had her early political difficulties and chronic health problems;<sup>17</sup> Gainsborough fought his battles with the Royal

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> David Fairer and Christine Gerrard, 'Headnote for "The Spleen"', in *Eighteenth-Century Poetry, An Annotated*

Academy, competed with Joshua Reynolds, fretted about money, and worried about his daughters. In an often-quoted fragment from one of Gainsborough's letters to confidant William Jackson the painter wrote:

I'm sick of portraits and wish very much to take my viol da gamba and walk off to some sweet village where I can paint landskips and enjoy the [...] end of life in quietness and ease.<sup>18</sup>

Finch expresses a similar thought in the conclusion to 'A Nocturnal Reverie':

In such a Night let Me abroad remain,  
Till Morning breaks, and All's confus'd again.  
Our Cares, our Toils, our Clamours are renew'd,  
Or Pleasures, seldom reach'd, again pursu'd. (43 – 50)

In a volatile century, artists occupied an important place in society's discourse, but to make significant art it was necessary to retreat into the privacy of perception and thought. For Finch, Gainsborough, and other British artists of the eighteenth century, the endangered native landscape provided inspiration, meaning, and respite. Their enduring artistic contributions are testimony to its value.

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*Anthology*, ed. by David Fairer and Christine Gerrard, 3rd edn (Oxford: Blackwell Wiley), p. 22-23.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Gainsborough, 'Letter 56', in *The Letters of Thomas Gainsborough Letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, ed. by Mary Woodall, 2nd rev. edn (London: Cupid Press, 1963), p. 115.

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