The earliest literary instance of the outworking of Christian feeling for the intrinsic beauty of Nature is normally found in the ‘Octavius’ of Minucius Felix, a rhetorician and advocate living at Rome at the beginning of the third century A.D. The religious discourse entitled the ‘Octavius’ is a spirited apologia for the new Faith against the aspersions of a pagan friend, Caecilius. The work consists of forty chapters, the first four of which serve as an introduction where Minucius describes the intensity of the joy he feels on the occasion of a visit to Rome from his lifelong friend Octavius, who, like himself, has become an adherent of the new creed. Octavius, Minucius and Caecilius set out on an excursion to the popular seaside resort of Ostia. An incident during the walk triggers off the subsequent discussion. The three friends seat themselves on the mole of Ostia with Minucius in the centre as arbiter for a formal debate on the claims of Christianity.

'It was vacation time, and that gave me a loose from my business at the bar; for it was the season after the summer’s heat, when Autumn promised fair and put on the face of temperate. We set out, therefore, in the morning early, and as we were walking upon the sea-shore, and a kindly breeze fanned and refreshed our limbs, and the yielding sand softly submitted to our feet and made it delicious travelling, Caecilius on a sudden espied the statue of Serapis, and according to the vulgar mode of superstition, raised his hand to his mouth and paid his adoration in kisses. Upon which Octavius, addressing himself to me, said, — "It is not well done, my brother Marcus, thus to leave your inseparable companion in the depth of vulgar darkness, and to suffer him, in so clear a day, to stumble upon stones; stones, indeed, of figure and anointed with oil and crowned; but stones, however, still they are; — for you cannot but be sensible that your permitting so foul an error in your friend redounds no less to your disgrace than his.” This discourse of his held us through half the city; and now we began to find ourselves upon the free and open shore. There the gently washing waves had spread the extremest sands in the order of an artificial walk; and as the sea always expresses some roughness in the looks, even when the winds are still, although he did not roll in foam and angry surges to the shore, yet were we much delighted, as we walked upon the edges of the water, to see the crispy, frizzling waves glide in snaky folds, one while playing against our feet, and again retreating and lost in the devouring ocean. Softly, then, and calmly as the sea about us, we travelled on and kept upon the brim of the gently declining shore, beguiling the way with our stories'.

There follows a vignette of some boys playing 'ducks and drakes'. 2 ‘The game is to choose from the shore a flat sherd, one smoothed by the friction of the waves, to catch hold of the sherd by the flat side, and then bending forward and stooping, to send it spinning as far as one can on the top of the waves, so that the missile either skims the surface of the sea and swims on its way, gliding forward with a gentle impulse; or else shaves the tops of the waves, glancing and jumping as it takes its successive leaps. The boy won, whose sherd went furthest, and made most hops.’3

Of the literary character of this dialogue Dean Milman wrote: ‘Perhaps no late work, either Pagan or Christian, reminds us of the golden days of Latin prose so much as the Octavius of Minucius Felix’.4 Ernest Renan, an impeccable judge of style, called it ‘the pearl of apologetic literature’, a judgment to which it is difficult not to subscribe, so happily is it written.5

Minucius appears to have been a contemporary of the great African Father Tertullian6, the most important and original ecclesiastical author in Latin with the possible exception of Augustine. In his hands Latin became a marvellously concise weapon of sarcasm and irony, and all who read him in the original cannot but admire his technical brilliance. In his treatise De Resurrectione Carnis – On the Resurrection of the Flesh – he rightly insists on the necessity of a bodily resurrection as absolutely essential for the realisation of the Christian hope.7 The splendid chapter of Bishop Pearson (1613-1688) in his Exposition of the Creed (alas! now little read!) in which the annual quickening of Nature is adduced as a witness to the eternal resurrection owes much of its force and appeal to the cogency of the old African Father.

‘And assuredly He who made is able to remake; just as it is much more to make than to remake; to make a beginning than to restore a beginning, so also you must believe that the restoration of flesh is easier than its creation. Look now also at the very examples of the divine power. Day dies into night and is everywhere buried by darkness. The glory of the universe is shrouded in gloom, everything is blackened. All things are bemeaned, silenced, paralysed,8 everywhere there is a stoppage of work. Thus is the loss of light mourned.4 And yet back it comes to life for the whole world with its outfit, with its dowry, with the sun, being whole and unimpaired, putting to death its own slayer which is night,

2. It was called by the Greeks ἐποστμακωμός.
8. Triple alliteration, sordent, silent, stupent. Is ‘become dull, dumb, dazed’ tolerable?
9. Lux -- lugetur. ‘The light is lamented.’
tearing open its own burial place which is darkness, appearing an heir to itself, until night also come to life again, it being likewise accompanied by its own equipment. For the rays of the stars which the morning light had put out are re-ignited; the absent constellations, too, which a difference in season had removed, are brought back; the mirror-like moons also, which the progress of the month had worn away, are repaired. Winters and summers, springs and autumns come back again in their courses with their strength, characteristics and fruits. Nay more, even the earth gets its training from the sky: the clothing of the trees after they have been stript, the colouring of the flowers anew, the spreading again of the grass, the display of the identical seeds that have been wasted, and the fact that this does not happen till they have been wasted. A wondrous plan! It is first a cheat, then a preserver; it kills that it may give back; it destroys that it may keep; it corrupts that it may renew; it first breaks that it may actually enlarge. Since it restores them in a more fertile and cultivated state than they were when they were destroyed, destruction may truly be said to have meant increase, harm profit, and loss gain. Let me say it once for all. Every creation is subject to recurrence. Everything you meet had a previous existence: whatever you have lost will come again. Everything comes a second time: things return to a settled position when they have gone away, all things begin when they have ceased to be. They are brought to an end in order that they may come into being:¹⁰ nothing is lost except that it may be recovered. All this revolving of things, therefore, is evidence of the resurrection of the dead.¹¹

Tertullian’s style normally combines inexhaustible vigour, burning rhetoric and biting satire. This makes all the more effective as argument the tranquil queries of the termination of Adversus Marcionem, Book I chapter 12, his opus magnum against Gnostic intransigency. He is at pains to demonstrate that the Maker of the world is identical with the Good, the Real, God, not with any so-called Demiurge or inferior god assigned the role of creation by Marcion. ‘It suits me well’, he remarks, ‘that substances higher in position and rank have more easily been taken for gods than thought worthy of God. Shall I be at a loss with lowly things? Can one little flower of the hedgerow — I say not the meadows — one little shell from any sea you like — I say not the Red Sea — one little moorcock’s feather — I say nothing of the peacock — permit you to judge the Creator a low-grade artificer?’¹²

¹⁰ Alliteration in finiuuntur, fiant.
¹² Ad humilia deficiam? Unus, opinor, de sepibus flosculus, non dico de pratis, una cuiuslibet maris conchula, non dico de rubro, una tetraonis pennula, taceo de pavo, sordidum artificem pronunstant ab creatorem?

In the fourth century A.D. the Asiatic province of Cappadocia produced three eminent theologians, Basil of Caesarea (c. 330-379), his friend Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389), and a younger brother of Basil, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c. 395). United by common interests of mind and spirit, each represents a different type of personality. In Basil we have the man of action, the ecclesiastical statesman and organiser. In Byzantine times Gregory of Nazianzus was termed the 'Christian Demosthenes'. Gregory of Nyssa, if less outstanding as a preacher, was a thinker and mystic of the first order. They stand in pointed contrast to the general character of their countrymen. In the letters of Isidore of Pelusium (died c. 450), the Cappadocians are stigmatised as a cowardly, servile and deceitful race.

'In the works of Basil and of the two Gregories', writes Schaff, 'occur pictures of nature such as we seek in vain in the heathen classics. . . . Socrates, as we learn from Plato, was of opinion that we can learn nothing from trees and fields, and hence he never took a walk; he was so bent on self-knowledge, as the true aim of all learning, that he regarded the whole study of nature as useless, because it did not tend to make men either more intelligent or more virtuous. The deeper sense of the beauty of nature is awakened by the religion of revelation alone, which teaches us to see everywhere in creation traces of the power, the wisdom, and the goodness of God. The book of Ruth, the book of Job, many Psalms, particularly the 104th, and the parables are without any parallel in Grecian or in Roman literature. . . .'

After finishing his studies at Athens, Basil returned to his native city of Caesarea in Cappadocia as a rhetorician. About 350 A.D. he travelled extensively in Syria, Palestine and Egypt to get an insight into monastic life, increasingly in vogue. His enthusiasm for this led to his distributing his property to the poor and withdrawing to a lonely romantic district in Pontus near the cloister in which his mother Emmelia with his brilliant sister Macrina and other pious and cultivated virgins, were living.

The fourteenth of Basil’s 223 letters was cherished by the great German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) as the specimen par excellence of Basil’s abilities in the portrayal of Nature. Of the spot which was entirely suited to his taste, and regarded indeed as a Divine guerdon catering for his every wish, he writes: ‘There is here a high mountain, covered with a thick forest, watered on its northerly side by cool and transparent streams. At its base is outstretched an evenly sloping plain, ever enriched by the moisture from the mountain. A forest of many-coloured and multifarious trees, a spontaneous growth surrounding the place, acts almost as a hedge to enclose it, so that even

Kalypso's isle, which Homer seems to have admired above all others for its beauty, is insignificant as compared with this. For it is, in fact, by no means far from being an island, since it is shut in on all sides by barriers. Two deep ravines break off abruptly on two sides, and on a third side, at the bottom of a cliff, the river which glides gently by forms a wall, being itself a continuous and impassable barrier; and since the mountain stretches along the fourth side, and is joined to the ravines through bending sides which take the shape of a crescent, the passes at the base are blocked off. However, there is one entrance here, and we are in control of it. Adjoining my dwelling is another neck of land, as it were, which supports at its summit a lofty ridge, so that from the former the plain below lies outspread before the eyes, and from the elevation we may gaze upon the encircling river, which in my mind at least furnishes no less pleasure than they receive who receive their first impression of the Strymon from Amphipolis. . . . 

As the river recoils from the rock it coils itself into a deep whirlpool, . . . providing the natives of the region with complete independence in regard to food, since it nourishes in its eddies an innumerable multitude of fish. . . . The highest praise, however, which I can give to the place is that . . . for me the most pleasant fruit it nourishes is tranquillity, not only because it is far removed from the disturbances of the city, but also because it attracts not even a wayfarer, except the guests who join me in hunting. For besides its other excellencies, it abounds in game, not those bears and wolves of yours; but it feeds herds of deer and wild goats, hares and animals like these.15

Basil's exegetical skill appears in his numerous homilies. The place of honour among these belongs to those delivered on the cosmogony of the opening chapters of Genesis — the Hexaemeron or narrative of the 'Six Days' of Creation in Genesis 1:1-26. When and where they were delivered is quite uncertain. They were preached as Lenten sermons at both morning and evening services extempore for the benefit of working folk. In early Christianity the Hexaemeron was the most celebrated and admired of Basil's compositions. Quasten declares that 'there is no work in late Greek literature which could be compared with these homilies in rhetorical beauty'.16 His passionate love of nature is consistently obvious. A gem from the text must suffice. In describing the mildness of the serene nights of Asia Minor he alludes to the stars as 'those eternal flowers of the heavens, raising the spirit of man from the visible to the Invisible'.

Gregory of Nyssa, Basil's brother, exhibits a similar delight in nature shot through in his case with a sentimental and partly melancholy vein. He sings the praise of the 'sacred Vanota, if I do not do the place injustice by giving it its local

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title'. In his XVth letter (to Adelphius the Lawyer) he summarily dismisses such famous names as Helicon, the Isles of the Blest, the Sicyonian plain, Peneus and Tempe as 'of no comparison with the loveliness that is to be found here. Why, what beauty is there in any of those places I have mentioned, such as Vanota can show of its own? For if one seeks for natural beauty in the place, it needs none of the adornments of art. . . . The gifts bestowed upon the spot by Nature who beautifies the earth with unstudied grace are such as these: below, the river Halys makes the place beautiful to look upon with its banks, and gleams like a golden ribbon through their deep purple, reddening his current with the soil he washes down. Above, a densely wooded mountain stretches with its long ridge covered at all points with the foliage of oaks . . . But the natural growth of wood, as it comes down the hillside, meets at the foot the planting of men's husbandry. . . . Gregory goes into ecstasies as he dilates on the loaded vine-clusters, the rose pergolas, the fish pond with fish coming to be fed by hand. 'Homer never saw “the apple with bright fruit”' as we have it here', he avers. ' . . . he never saw the pear whiter than new-polished ivory. And what can one say of the varieties of the peach, . . .?''

A strain of melancholy runs through Gregory of Nyssa. Humboldt combines several fragments in the following passage. 'When I see every rocky ridge, every valley, every plain, covered with new-grown grass; and then the variegated beauty of the trees, and at my feet the lilies doubly enriched by nature with sweet odours and gorgeous colours; when I view in the distance the sea, to which the changing cloud leads out — my soul is seized with sadness which is not without delight. And when in autumn fruits disappear, leaves fall, boughs stiffen, stripped of all their beauteous dress — we sink with the perpetual and regular vicissitude into the harmony of wonder-working nature. He who looks through this with the thoughtful eye of the soul, feels the littleness of man in the greatness of the universe.'

It is noteworthy that the Greek fathers placed the beauty of nature above that of works of art. Pagan associations and abuses tended to prejudice them against the latter.

17. Odyssey 7:115 μηλέωι υγιάδκαρποι.