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**The Temple of Nature, or, the
Origin of Society A Poem, with
Philosophical Notes**

Erasmus Darwin

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THE
TEMPLE OF NATURE;
OR, THE
ORIGIN OF SOCIETY.

T. Bensley, Printer, Bolt Court, Fleet Street, London.

THE
TEMPLE OF NATURE;
OR, THE
ORIGIN OF SOCIETY:

A POEM,
WITH PHILOSOPHICAL NOTES.

BY

ERASMUS DARWIN, M.D. F.R.S.

AUTHOR OF THE BOTANIC GARDEN, OF ZONOMIA, AND
OF PHYTOLOGIA.

Unde hominum pecudumque genus, vitæque volantum,
Et quæ marmoreo fert monstra sub æquore pontus?
Igneus est illis vigor, & cælestis origo.

Virg. Æn. VI. 728.

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1803.

PREFACE.

The Poem, which is here offered to the Public, does not pretend to instruct by deep researches of reasoning; its aim is simply to amuse by bringing distinctly to the imagination the beautiful and sublime images of the operations of Nature in the order, as the Author believes, in which the progressive course of time presented them.

The Deities of Egypt, and afterwards of Greece, and Rome, were derived from men famous in those early times, as in the ages of hunting, pasturage, and agriculture. The histories of some of their actions recorded in Scripture, or celebrated in the heathen mythology, are introduced, as the Author hopes, without impropriety into his account of those remote periods of human society.

In the Eleusinian mysteries the philosophy of the works of Nature, with the origin and progress of society, are believed to have been taught by allegoric scenery explained by the Hierophant to the initiated, which gave rise to the machinery of the following Poem.

Priory near Derby,
Jan. 1, 1802.

**(p. 001) ORIGIN OF SOCIETY.
CANTO I.
PRODUCTION OF LIFE.**

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**(p. 003) CANTO I.
PRODUCTION OF LIFE.**

I. By firm immutable immortal laws
Impress'd on Nature by the Great First Cause,
Say, Muse! how rose from elemental strife
Organic forms, and kindled into life;
How Love and Sympathy with potent charm
Warm the cold heart, the lifted hand disarm;
Allure with pleasures, and alarm with pains,
And bind Society in golden chains.

Four past eventful Ages then recite,
 And give the fifth, new-born of Time, to light; 10
 The silken tissue of their joys disclose,
 Swell with deep chords the murmur of their woes;
 (p. 004) Their laws, their labours, and their loves proclaim,
 And chant their virtues to the trump of Fame.
 Immortal Love! who ere the morn of Time,
 On wings outstretch'd, o'er Chaos hung sublime;
 Warm'd into life the bursting egg of Night,
 And gave young Nature to admiring Light! —
 You! whose wide arms, in soft embraces hurl'd
 Round the vast frame, connect the whirling world! 20
 Whether immers'd in day, the Sun your throne,
 You gird the planets in your silver zone;
 Or warm, descending on ethereal wing,
 The Earth's cold bosom with the beams of spring;
 Press drop to drop, to atom atom bind,
 Link sex to sex, or rivet mind to mind;
 Attend my song! — With rosy lips rehearse,
 And with your polish'd arrows write my verse! —
 So shall my lines soft-rolling eyes engage,
 And snow-white fingers turn the volant page; 30
 (p. 005) The smiles of Beauty all my toils repay,
 And youths and virgins chant the living lay.
 II. Where Eden's sacred bowers triumphant sprung,
 By angels guarded, and by prophets sung,
 Wav'd o'er the east in purple pride unfurl'd,
 And rock'd the golden cradle of the World;
 (p. 006) Four sparkling currents lav'd with wandering tides
 Their velvet avenues, and flowery sides;
 On sun-bright lawns unclad the Graces stray'd,
 And guiltless Cupids haunted every glade; 40
 Till the fair Bride, forbidden shades among,
 Heard unalarm'd the Tempter's serpent-tongue;
 Eyed the sweet fruit, the mandate disobey'd,
 And her fond Lord with sweeter smiles betray'd.
 Conscious awhile with throbbing heart he strove,
 Spread his wide arms, and barter'd life for love! —
 Now rocks on rocks, in savage grandeur roll'd,

Steep above steep, the blasted plains infold;
 The incumbent crags eternal tempest shrouds,
 And livid light'nings cleave the lambent clouds; 50
 (p. 007) Round the firm base loud-howling whirlwinds blow,
 And sands in burning eddies dance below.
 Hence ye profane! — the warring winds exclude
 Unhallow'd throngs, that press with footstep rude;
 But court the Muse's train with milder skies,
 And call with softer voice the good and wise.
 — Charm'd at her touch the opening wall divides,
 And rocks of crystal form the polish'd sides;
 Through the bright arch the Loves and Graces tread,
 Innocuous thunders murmuring o'er their head; 60
 Pair after pair, and tittering, as they pass,
 View their fair features in the walls of glass;
 Leave with impatient step the circling bourn,
 And hear behind the closing rocks return.
 Here, high in air, unconscious of the storm.
 Thy temple, Nature, rears it's mystic form;
 From earth to heav'n, unwrought by mortal toil,
 Towers the vast fabric on the desert soil;
 (p. 008) O'er many a league the ponderous domes extend.
 And deep in earth the ribbed vaults descend; 70
 A thousand jasper steps with circling sweep
 Lead the slow votary up the winding steep;
 Ten thousand piers, now join'd and now aloof,
 Bear on their branching arms the fretted roof.
 Unnumber'd ailes connect unnumber'd halls,
 And sacred symbols crowd the pictur'd walls;
 With pencil rude forgotten days design,
 And arts, or empires, live in every line.
 (p. 009) While chain'd reluctant on the marble ground,
 Indignant Time reclines, by Sculpture bound; 80
 And sternly bending o'er a scroll unroll'd,
 Inscribes the future with his style of gold.
 — So erst, when Proteus on the briny shore,
 New forms assum'd of eagle, pard, or boar;
 The wise Atrides bound in sea-weed thongs
 The changeful god amid his scaly throngs;

Till in deep tones his opening lips at last
 Reluctant told the future and the past.
 Here o'er piazza'd courts, and long arcades,
 The bowers of Pleasure root their waving shades; 90
 Shed o'er the pansied moss a checker'd gloom,
 Bend with new fruits, with flow'rs successive bloom.
 (p. 010) Pleas'd, their light limbs on beds of roses press'd,
 In slight undress recumbent Beauties rest;
 On tiptoe steps surrounding Graces move,
 And gay Desires expand their wings above.
 Here young Dione arms her quiver'd Loves,
 Schools her bright Nymphs, and practises her doves;
 Calls round her laughing eyes in playful turns,
 The glance that lightens, and the smile that burns; 100
 Her dimpling cheeks with transient blushes dies,
 Heaves her white bosom with seductive sighs;
 Or moulds with rosy lips the magic words,
 That bind the heart in adamantine cords.
 Behind in twilight gloom with scowling mien
 The demon Pain, convokes his court unseen;
 Whips, fetters, flames, pourtray'd on sculptur'd stone,
 In dread festoons, adorn his ebon throne;
 Each side a cohort of diseases stands,
 And shudd'ring Fever leads the ghastly bands; 110
 (p. 011) O'er all Despair expands his raven wings,
 And guilt-stain'd Conscience darts a thousand stings.
 Deep-whelm'd beneath, in vast sepulchral caves,
 Oblivion dwells amid unlabell'd graves;
 The storied tomb, the laurell'd bust o'erturns,
 And shakes their ashes from the mould'ring urns. —
 No vernal zephyr breathes, no sunbeams cheer,
 Nor song, nor simper, ever enters here;
 O'er the green floor, and round the dew-damp wall,
 The slimy snail, and bloated lizard crawl; 120
 While on white heaps of intermingled bones
 The muse of Melancholy sits and moans;
 Showers her cold tears o'er Beauty's early wreck,
 Spreads her pale arms, and bends her marble neck.

So in rude rocks, beside the Ægean wave,
 Trophonius scoop'd his sorrow-sacred cave;
 (p. 012) Unbarr'd to pilgrim feet the brazen door,
 And the sad sage returning smil'd no more.
 Shrin'd in the midst majestic Nature stands,
 Extends o'er earth and sea her hundred hands; 130
 Tower upon tower her beamy forehead crests,
 And births unnumber'd milk her hundred breasts;
 Drawn round her brows a lucid veil depends,
 O'er her fine waist the purpled woof descends;
 Her stately limbs the gather'd folds surround,
 And spread their golden selvage on the ground.
 From this first altar fam'd Eleusis stole
 Her secret symbols and her mystic scroll;
 (p. 013) With pious fraud in after ages rear'd
 Her gorgeous temple, and the gods rever'd. 140
 —First in dim pomp before the astonish'd throng,
 Silence, and Night, and Chaos, stalk'd along;
 Dread scenes of Death, in nodding sables dress'd,
 Froze the broad eye, and thrill'd the unbreathing breast.
 Then the young Spring, with winged Zephyr, leads
 The queen of Beauty to the blossom'd meads;
 (p. 014) Charm'd in her train admiring Hymen moves,
 And tiptoe Graces hand in hand with Loves.
 Next, while on pausing step the masked mimes
 Enact the triumphs of forgotten times, 150
 Conceal from vulgar throngs the mystic truth,
 Or charm with Wisdom's lore the initiate youth;
 Each shifting scene, some patriot hero trod,
 Some sainted beauty, or some saviour god.
 III. Now rose in purple pomp the breezy dawn,
 And crimson dew-drops trembled on the lawn;
 Blaz'd high in air the temple's golden vanes,
 And dancing shadows veer'd upon the plains. —
 Long trains of virgins from the sacred grove,
 Pair after pair, in bright procession move, 160
 With flower-fill'd baskets round the altar throng,
 Or swing their censers, as they wind along.
 The fair Urania leads the blushing bands,

Presents their offerings with unsullied hands;
 (p. 015) Pleas'd to their dazzled eyes in part unshrouds
 The goddess-form; — the rest is hid in clouds.
 "Priestess of Nature! while with pious awe
 Thy votary bends, the mystic veil withdraw;
 Charm after charm, succession bright, display,
 And give the Goddess to adoring day! 170
 So kneeling realms shall own the Power divine,
 And heaven and earth pour incense on her shrine.
 "Oh grant the Muse with pausing step to press
 Each sun-bright avenue, and green recess;
 Led by thy hand survey the trophied walls,
 The statued galleries, and the pictur'd halls;
 (p. 016) Scan the proud pyramid, and arch sublime,
 Earth-canker'd urn, medallion green with time,
 Stern busts of Gods, with helmed heroes mix'd,
 And Beauty's radiant forms, that smile betwixt. 180
 "Waked by thy voice, transmuted by thy wand,
 Their lips shall open, and their arms expand;
 The love-lost lady, and the warrior slain,
 Leap from their tombs, and sigh or fight again.
 — So when ill-fated Orpheus tuned to woe
 His potent lyre, and sought the realms below;
 Charm'd into life unreal forms respir'd,
 And list'ning shades the dulcet notes admir'd. —
 "Love led the Sage through Death's tremendous porch,
 Cheer'd with his smile, and lighted with his torch; — 190
 (p. 017) Hell's triple Dog his playful jaws expands,
 Fawns round the God, and licks his baby hands;
 In wondering groups the shadowy nations throng,
 And sigh or simper, as he steps along;
 Sad swains, and nymphs forlorn, on Lethe's brink,
 Hug their past sorrows, and refuse to drink;
 Night's dazzled Empress feels the golden flame
 Play round her breast, and melt her frozen frame;
 Charms with soft words, and sooths with amorous wiles,
 Her iron-hearted Lord, — and Pluto smiles. — 200
 His trembling Bride the Bard triumphant led
 From the pale mansions of the astonish'd dead;

Gave the fair phantom to admiring light,—
 Ah, soon again to tread irremeable night!"
 IV. Her snow-white arm, indulgent to my song,
 Waves the fair Hierophant, and moves along. —
 (p. 018) High plumes, that bending shade her amber hair,
 Nod, as she steps, their silver leaves in air;
 Bright chains of pearl, with golden buckles brac'd,
 Clasp her white neck, and zone her slender waist; 210
 Thin folds of silk in soft meanders wind
 Down her fine form, and undulate behind;
 The purple border, on the pavement roll'd,
 Swells in the gale, and spreads its fringe of gold.
 "First, if you can, celestial Guide! disclose
 From what fair fountain mortal life arose,
 Whence the fine nerve to move and feel assign'd,
 Contractile fibre, and ethereal mind:
 "How Love and Sympathy the bosom warm,
 Allure with pleasure, and with pain alarm, 220
 With soft affections weave the social plan,
 And charm the listening Savage into Man."
 (p. 019) "God the First cause! —in this terrene abode
 Young Nature lisps, she is the child of God.
 From embryon births her changeful forms improve,
 Grow, as they live, and strengthen as they move.
 "Ere Time began, from flaming Chaos hurl'd
 Rose the bright spheres, which form the circling world;
 (p. 020) Earths from each sun with quick explosions burst,
 And second planets issued from the first. 230
 Then, whilst the sea at their coeval birth,
 Surge over surge, involv'd the shoreless earth;
 Nurs'd by warm sun-beams in primeval caves
 Organic Life began beneath the waves.
 "First Heat from chemic dissolution springs,
 And gives to matter its eccentric wings;
 (p. 021) With strong Repulsion parts the exploding mass,
 Melts into lymph, or kindles into gas.
 Attraction next, as earth or air subsides,
 The ponderous atoms from the light divides, 240
 Approaching parts with quick embrace combines,

Swells into spheres, and lengthens into lines.
 Last, as fine goads the gluten-threads excite,
 Cords grapple cords, and webs with webs unite;
 And quick Contraction with ethereal flame
 Lights into life the fibre-woven frame. —
 (p. 022) Hence without parent by spontaneous birth
 Rise the first specks of animated earth;
 From Nature's womb the plant or insect swims,
 And buds or breathes, with microscopic limbs. 250
 "In earth, sea, air, around, below, above,
 Life's subtle woof in Nature's loom is wove;
 (p. 023) Points glued to points a living line extends,
 Touch'd by some goad approach the bending ends;
 Rings join to rings, and irritated tubes
 Clasp with young lips the nutrient globes or cubes;
 And urged by appetencies new select,
 Imbibe, retain, digest, secrete, eject.
 In branching cones the living web expands,
 Lymphatic ducts, and convoluted glands; 260
 Aortal tubes propel the nascent blood,
 And lengthening veins absorb the reflux flood;
 Leaves, lungs, and gills, the vital ether breathe
 On earth's green surface, or the waves beneath.
 (p. 024) So Life's first powers arrest the winds and floods,
 To bones convert them, or to shells, or woods;
 Stretch the vast beds of argil, lime, and sand,
 And from diminish'd oceans form the land!
 "Next the long nerves unite their silver train,
 And young Sensation permeates the brain; 270
 Through each new sense the keen emotions dart,
 Flush the young cheek, and swell the throbbing heart.
 (p. 025) From pain and pleasure quick Volitions rise,
 Lift the strong arm, or point the inquiring eyes;
 With Reason's light bewilder'd Man direct,
 And right and wrong with balance nice detect.
 Last in thick swarms Associations spring,
 Thoughts join to thoughts, to motions motions cling;
 Whence in long trains of catenation flow
 Imagined joy, and voluntary woe. 280

"So, view'd through crystal spheres in drops saline,
 Quick-shooting salts in chemic forms combine;
 Or Mucor-stems, a vegetative tribe,
 Spread their fine roots, the tremulous wave imbibe.
 Next to our wondering eyes the focus brings
 Self-moving lines, and animated rings;
 (p. 026) First Monas moves, an unconnected point,
 Plays round the drop without a limb or joint;
 Then Vibrio waves, with capillary eels,
 And Vorticella whirls her living wheels; 290
 While insect Proteus sports with changeful form
 Through the bright tide, a globe, a cube, a worm.
 Last o'er the field the Mite enormous swims,
 Swells his red heart, and writhes his giant limbs.
 V. "Organic Lifebeneath the shoreless waves
 Was born and nurs'd in Ocean's pearly caves;
 (p. 027)First forms minute, unseen by spheric glass,
 Move on the mud, or pierce the watery mass;
 These, as successive generations bloom,
 New powers acquire, and larger limbs assume; 300
 Whence countless groups of vegetation spring,
 And breathing realms of fin, and feet, and wing.
 "Thus the tall Oak, the giant of the wood,
 Which bears Britannia's thunders on the flood;
 The Whale, unmeasured monster of the main,
 The lordly Lion, monarch of the plain,
 The Eagle soaring in the realms of air,
 Whose eye undazzled drinks the solar glare,
 (p. 028) Imperious man, who rules the bestial crowd,
 Of language, reason, and reflection proud, 310
 With brow erect who scorns this earthy sod,
 And styles himself the image of his God;
 Arose from rudiments of form and sense,
 An embryon point, or microscopic ens!
 "Now in vast shoals beneath the brineless tide,
 On earth's firm crust testaceous tribes reside;
 Age after age expands the peopled plain,
 The tenants perish, but their cells remain;

Whence coral walls and sparry hills ascend
 From pole to pole, and round the line extend. 320
 (p. 029) "Next when imprison'd fires in central caves
 Burst the firm earth, and drank the headlong waves;
 And, as new airs with dread explosion swell,
 Form'd lava-isles, and continents of shell;
 Pil'd rocks on rocks, on mountains mountains raised,
 And high in heaven the first volcanoes blazed;
 In countless swarms an insect-myrriad moves
 From sea-fan gardens, and from coral groves;
 (p. 030) Leaves the cold caverns of the deep, and creeps
 On shelving shores, or climbs on rocky steeps. 330
 As in dry air the sea-born stranger roves,
 Each muscle quickens, and each sense improves;
 Cold gills aquatic form respiring lungs,
 And sounds aerial flow from slimy tongues.
 "So Trapa rooted in pellucid tides,
 In countless threads her breathing leaves divides,
 (p. 031) Waves her bright tresses in the watery mass,
 And drinks with gelid gills the vital gas;
 Then broader leaves in shadowy files advance,
 Spread o'er the crystal flood their green expanse; 340
 And, as in air the adherent dew exhales,
 Court the warm sun, and breathe ethereal gales.
 "So still the Tadpole cleaves the watery vale
 With balanc'd fins, and undulating tail;
 (p. 032) New lungs and limbs proclaim his second birth,
 Breathe the dry air, and bound upon the earth.
 So from deep lakes the dread Musquito springs,
 Drinks the soft breeze, and dries his tender wings,
 In twinkling squadrons cuts his airy way,
 Dips his red trunk in blood, and man his prey. 350
 "So still the Diodons, amphibious tribe,
 With two-fold lungs the sea or air imbibe;
 (p. 033) Allied to fish, the lizard cleaves the flood
 With one-cell'd heart, and dark frigescent blood;
 Half-reasoning Beavers long-unbreathing dart
 Through Erie's waves with perforated heart;
 With gills and lungs respiring Lampreys steer,

Kiss the rude rocks, and suck till they adhere;
 The lazy Remora's inhaling lips,
 Hung on the keel, retard the struggling ships; 360
 With gills pulmonic breathes the enormous Whale,
 And spouts aquatic columns to the gale;
 Sports on the shining wave at noontide hours,
 And shifting rainbows crest the rising showers.
 "So erst, ere rose the science to record
 In letter'd syllables the volant word;
 (p. 034) Whence chemic arts, disclosed in pictured lines,
 Liv'd to mankind by hieroglyphic signs;
 And clustering stars, pourtray'd on mimic spheres,
 Assumed the forms of lions, bulls, and bears; 370
 —So erst, as Egypt's rude designs explain,
 Rose young Dione from the shoreless main;
 Type of organic Nature! source of bliss!
 Emerging Beauty from the vast abyss!
 Sublime on Chaos borne, the Goddess stood,
 And smiled enchantment on the troubled flood;
 (p. 035) The warring elements to peace restored,
 And young Reflection wondered and adored."
 Now paused the Nymph, — The Muse responsive cries,
 Sweet admiration sparkling in her eyes, 380
 "Drawn by your pencil, by your hand unfurl'd,
 Bright shines the tablet of the dawning world;
 Amazed the Sea's prolific depths I view,
 And Venus rising from the waves in You!
 "Still Nature's births enclosed in egg or seed
 From the tall forest to the lowly weed,
 Her beaux and beauties, butterflies and worms,
 Rise from aquatic to aerial forms.
 Thus in the womb the nascent infant laves
 Its natant form in the circumfluent waves; 390
 With perforated heart unbreathing swims,
 Awakes and stretches all its recent limbs;
 (p. 036) With gills placental seeks the arterial flood,
 And drinks pure ether from its Mother's blood.
 Erewhile the landed Stranger bursts his way,
 From the warm wave emerging into day;

Feels the chill blast, and piercing light, and tries
 His tender lungs, and rolls his dazzled eyes;
 Gives to the passing gale his curling hair,
 And steps a dry inhabitant of air. 400
 "Creative Nile, as taught in ancient song,
 So charm'd to life his animated throng;
 O'er his wide realms the slow-subsiding flood
 Left the rich treasures of organic mud;
 (p. 037) While with quick growth young Vegetation yields
 Her blushing orchards, and her waving fields;
 Pomona's hand replenish'd Plenty's horn,
 And Ceres laugh'd amid her seas of corn. —
 Bird, beast, and reptile, spring from sudden birth,
 Raise their new forms, half-animal, half-earth; 410
 The roaring lion shakes his tawny mane,
 His struggling limbs still rooted in the plain;
 With flapping wings assurgent eagles toil
 To rend their talons from the adhesive soil;
 The impatient serpent lifts his crested head,
 And drags his train unfinish'd from the bed. —
 As Warmth and Moisture blend their magic spells,
 And brood with mingling wings the slimy dells;
 (p. 038) Contractile earths in sentient forms arrange,
 And Life triumphant stays their chemic change." 420
 Then hand in hand along the waving glades
 The virgin Sisters pass beneath the shades;
 Ascend the winding steps with pausing march,
 And seek the Portico's susurrant arch;
 Whose sculptur'd architrave on columns borne
 Drinks the first blushes of the rising morn,
 Whose fretted roof an ample shield displays,
 And guards the Beauties from meridian rays.
 While on light step enamour'd Zephyr springs,
 And fans their glowing features with his wings, 430
 Imbibes the fragrance of the vernal flowers,
 And speeds with kisses sweet the dancing Hours.
 (p. 039) Urania, leaning with unstudied grace,
 Rests her white elbow on a column's base;
 Awhile reflecting takes her silent stand,

Her fair cheek press'd upon her lily hand;
Then, as awaking from ideal trance,
On the smooth floor her pausing steps advance,
Waves high her arm, upturns her lucid eyes,
Marks the wide scenes of ocean, earth, and skies; 440
And leads, meandering as it rolls along
Through Nature's walks, the shining stream of Song.
First her sweet voice in plaintive accents chains
The Muse's ear with fascinating strains;
Reverts awhile to elemental strife,
The change of form, and brevity of life;
Then tells how potent Love with torch sublime
Relights the glimmering lamp, and conquers Time.
— The polish'd walls reflect her rosy smiles,
And sweet-ton'd echoes talk along the ailes. 450

END OF CANTO I.

