PREFACE

There has been no systematic study of nature in English fiction. Although nature has been treated as a theme in English fiction before the Victorian period, it finds a more significant and realistic place in the novels of Emily and Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Meredith and Hardy. In the various studies of these novelists, only incidental references are made to the nature theme in their fiction. The references by the critics to the nature theme in the novels of Charlotte and Emily Brontë are limited to the romantic elements in their works. Nature in George Eliot is mainly recognised as a background and there has been no study of the treatment of her idea of nature in her fiction, although the impact of the contemporary scientific and philosophical ideas on her attitude to nature is generally recognised. Critics of Meredith have mainly studied nature in his poetry. In a detailed study of nature and society in the novels of Meredith, Norman Kelvin (A Troubled Eden) has presented an isolated study of Meredith's idea of nature, but he does not analyse nature in Meredith's fiction either in relation to the other Victorian novelists in particular or to the nature tradition in general. The significance of nature in Hardy is recognised by almost every author writing on him. But such studies are mainly concerned with Hardy's idea of nature in the abstract.
In *The Victorian Sage*, John Holloway has presented such a study of Hardy's idea of nature. J. W. Beach's exhaustive study (*The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry*) deals with nature in Hardy's fiction and poetry in relation to the 'disappearance' of the poetic concept of nature.

In this dissertation a systematic study of nature in five major Victorian novelists is presented. The principal object of this study is not only to define the novelists' ideas of nature but also to analyse the treatment of these ideas in their fiction. Besides, they are also seen in relation to the nature tradition in English literature in general and to each other and to their period in particular.

The first chapter is devoted to a brief survey of nature tradition with a special reference to the British authors of about four centuries. Section I of this chapter traces the dominant concepts of nature in the light of the intellectual and socio-religious background till the Romantic period. Section II is a survey of the causes that led to the reaction against the Romantic concept of nature; it also traces the tendencies that were responsible for the 'return to nature' in the Victorian period. A general survey of nature in English fiction before the Brontë sisters is presented in Section III, where it is shown that before them
nature has been a minor theme in English fiction. Chapter II 
deals with nature in Charlotte and Emily Brontë. In Section I 
of this chapter the causes of ambiguity in Charlotte's ideas 
of nature and their treatment in her fiction are analysed. 
It is also shown that she is a romantic with a difference. 
Section II of this chapter deals with the relationship between 
Emily's dual vision of life and her dual attitude to nature, 
which gives a unique character to her work. Chapter III 
deals with the impact of the contemporary scientific and 
intellectual ideas on George Eliot and their effect on her 
attitude to nature as also on her vision of life. Chapter IV 
is concerned with the impact of the idea of biological evolu-
tion on George Meredith and with how he discovered 'a golden 
mean' between the scientific and the romantic attitudes to 
nature and found in nature a solid basis not only for his 
optimism but also for a kind of spiritualism. Chapter V is 
a study of Hardy's changing attitude towards nature at different 
stages of his career as a novelist. In the concluding chapter 
of this study, an assessment of these five novelists' contri-
bution to nature in English fiction is made. It is concluded 
that their vision of life, their characters and stories were, 
more or less, affected by their ideas of, and their attitudes 
to nature. In the final analysis, an attempt is made to show 
that nature is a major and 'realistic' theme in the novels 
of the five writers studied in this dissertation.
My indebtedness to my supervisor, Dr. A. Datta, Professor and Head, Department of English, Gauhati University, is of various kinds. Besides giving academic guidance, he helped me through his continuous encouragement and sympathy in bringing this work to completion.

I am highly grateful to my colleague, Dr. Hiren Gohain, and Mr. R. K. Kutty, Head of the Department of Philosophy, Gauhati University, for their valuable suggestions. To Dr. S. Shankara Jois, I am especially obliged for his assistance in typing the thesis. Further, I am thankful to his wife, Mrs. Ambuja Jois, for her careful proofreading of the typescript.

I also thank the Gauhati University authorities for granting me financial assistance for the specific purpose of this study. To the Librarian and the staff of Gauhati and Calcutta Universities and the National Library, Calcutta, I am thankful for their help in providing me with the library facilities.

December, 1977

(B.J. Singh)