The Uses of Nature and Art

Livelier than life

The concept of nature in Shakespeare often invokes the concept of art, generally contrastingly, and no more so among Shakespeare's tragedies than in Timon. This theme is developed not merely in the sense of a contrast between human skill, the most general meaning of "art" in Shakespeare's time, and the workings of nature, but art also figures in the predominant modern sense of the visual arts. This is a meaning it took in the Renaissance only accidentally, when, for instance, a painter spoke of his professional skill. A large part of the opening scene is devoted to a discussion between the poet and the painter about the works they are going to present to Timon, and the painter claims superiority for his art. This incident touches on a famous issue of Renaissance criticism, the parallel between poetry and painting as the humanists had drawn it by elaborating the Horatian phrase of ut pictura poesis, "poetry is like painting." Even before the hero appears on the scene, we are given his image mirrored by the sister arts of poetry and painting. Timon does not merely parallel these arts; it integrates them, together with music, in the masque performed at the banquet. This kind of practical demonstration of ut pictura poesis was becoming the fashion at King James's court, a fashion that Shakespeare put to his own uses in Timon and in The Tempest, the two dramas in which the art-nature theme is strongest, with The Winter's Tale as a possible rival.
Shakespeare nowhere else engaged so explicitly in art criticism as he did in Timon. This matter is dealt with in the peculiar vision of this play; it is not decorative but woven into the dramatic structure and the thematic texture. Shakespeare made much of the poet and the painter's being, by the nature of their arts, illusionists; and this introduces the theme of appearance and reality, as W. M. Merchant has noted. In some manner, this theme runs through all Shakespeare's dramas, implicit as it is in the very nature of his dramatic art, but in Timon appearance and reality are probed from a particular perspective that encompasses questions on the nature of art and the nature of man and reveals the strange ironies that arise in their interplay. The immoralists parade the moral purposes of their art; theirs is not, we feel, a "true" art. The art we can admire aesthetically is Timon's nihilistic rhetoric, but we cannot do so without moral reservation, although this reservation is of a kind different from that we have toward the artists' products. The play leaves us with vexing feelings about the uses to which men put art, uses that parallel their perversion of nature. The art-nature dialectic contributes very much to the pervasive pessimism.

The discussion of art and poetry in the first scene is carried on in a climate of gross flattery and deception. The very terminology reflects this climate by semantic ambiguities that unfortunately are mostly lost in modern usage (we are still aware of the ambiguity in "artful"). In Shakespeare's time, even the simple term "art" carried the now obsolete meanings of craftiness, cunning, and deceit. Timon later makes these meanings explicit when he says to the poet, "Thou art even natural in thine art" (5.1.84), that is, he calls the poet a born as well as a practiced deceiver. The art that nature makes cannot be better than that nature itself. "Artificial," which is generally pejorative in critical terminology now, meant "of art" as well as "deceitful." Therefore, for Shakespeare's audience, the poet's praise of the painting had an intriguing semantic ambiguity: "It tutors nature; artificial strife / Lives in these touches, livelier than life" (1.1.37-38). The painter may be striving to surpass nature by his art, but he is also engaged in a crafty enterprise—or so at least somebody alert to the two artists' duplicity would understand it. Even the painter's preceding remark, specious in its modesty, that the painting is a "pretty mocking of the life" (35) is subject to an ironic reading: it presents a good likeness, yet it is also a fraud of some sort. Here and later, aesthetic criteria are in conflict with moral ones. Being livelier than life is praise as art criticism; it indicates that the portrait has not only the vividness that makes it a
faithful rendering of the sitter's outside but also brings out his mental qualities—the painting has=enargia,= the humanists would have said.\textsuperscript{3} If we may believe the poet, the portrait of Timon does indeed have this, since it conveys an impression of Timon's gracefulness and imaginative power. But there was still an old prejudice about imitating nature closely and, in the process, making art triumph over nature. In Spenser's Bower of Bliss, nature is imitated and surpassed by an art designed to entrap man in sensuality and sin. An art that "tutors" nature, as the poet says the painting does, could raise a moral problem. In Timon this is a general problem; it goes quite beyond the two artists and their products.

The strategy of the artists is obvious: to impress the philanthropist that he is a huge and overpowering figure of benevolence so that they can more easily strip him of his money. All the interlocutors of the first scene, with the exception of Apemantus, are engaged in this con art. In view of the role that cosmic rhetoric later plays in Timon's misanthropic diatribes, it is interesting to note how the first scene of Timon is saturated with an artificial language of cosmic compliments. The painter, it is true, lightly touches on the decay-of-nature theme that Timon will develop powerfully later; but this offhand remark serves merely as a springboard for an outrageous compliment by the poet, who elevates Timon into a universal personality whose magic of bounty rises above the world's impermanence. All the sycophants around Timon participate in this deception, and they invoke all the elements of nature to emblazon it. Like the earth, Timon is awarded a magnetic field that attracts all spirits by the magic of his bounty (1.1.6–7). He is given an unending supply of air: he is so incomparably "breath'd" as to promise an "untirable and continuate goodness" (10–12). The pearl offered to him is luminous by its "water" (18), and poetry burns for him in a "gentle flame" (23).

In contrast to Timon, Apemantus sees from the beginning the reality behind appearances; he considers art not esthetically but morally:

Tim. Wrought he not well that painted it [the portrait]?

Apem. He wrought better that made the painter, and yet he's but a filthy piece of work.

(1.1.197–99)

And, as to poets, Apemantus makes most of their lying—shades of Plato. The truest poetry is the most feigning, as Touchstone once said. In his misanthropic phase, Timon will imitate the Apemantian irony when he mutters about the painter, "Excellent workman, thou canst not paint a man so bad as is thyself" (5.1.30–31), and will say to him:
Thou draw'st a counterfeit
Best in all Athens: th'art indeed the best;
Thou counterfeit'st most lively.

(79–81)

The poet's "fiction" lends itself to the same irony: "Why, thy verse swells with stuff so fine and smooth / That thou art even natural in thine art" (83–84).

This latter phrase raises a question about man's natural condition. It appears to the misanthropic Timon that it is natural for these artists to deceive, just as it is natural for man to be evil. Earlier he saw in art proof of man's innate innocence: painting revealed for him the natural man, the good man unspoiled by the dishonorable traffic of the world (1.1.160–63). Shakespeare raises thus some vexing questions about man, nature, and art: is man innately good or evil, and is art a varnishing or an essentializing endeavor? Shakespeare wisely does not stay for an answer, but the play comes down strongly on man's degradation, whether by nature or by traffic or by both, and it shows that in a degraded world art is perverted too.

As to the specific relationship between the artists and their art, the play seems to be saying that it is difficult to disentangle the one from the other, the substance from the embellishment, the deception from the truth. The allegory is wrapped in a large compliment to Timon:

His large fortune,
Upon his good and gracious nature hanging,
Subdues and properties to his love and tendance
All sorts of hearts. . . .

(1.1.56–59)

The poem eulogizes Timon for having the gifts of nature, grace, and fortune—everything a man can have—and warns him of the vicissitudes of fortune; but if we look at the quoted lines more closely we can also extract a different, ironic meaning: Timon's fortune is insecurely attached to him because he is giving it away in his great good nature. The thrust of the allegory is that of a warning against reversal of fortune; yet painter and poet are included among "all conditions, all natures" that pay tribute to the fickle goddess and to Timon, at least as long as he has her favor.

The poet, the more articulate of the two, is the more odious deceiver. His public remarks on his poetic inspiration are obscurantist because he poses as a creative genius of the most Wildean sort. He enters "rapt . . . in some work, some dedication / To the great lord." He coyly calls his allegorical poem "a thing slipp'd idly from me" and speaks of the "gentle flame"
of his inspiration (1.1.19–25). It is impossible to reconcile his statement on his imagination moving in “a wide sea of wax” with his calling it also an “eagle flight” (45–50). Although a phrase or so went wrong with the text of the passage, this contradiction and the tortured inflation of the language show clearly enough that the poet is merely pretending. To his brother-in-spirit, he reveals a simpler spring of his creativity in simple language: “Then do we sin against our own estate, / When we may profit meet, and come too late” (5.1.40–41). The profit of which he speaks ironically points up his signal perversion of the Horatian demand of aut prodesse that Aristotle and the Renaissance humanists thought was the poet’s function.

The artistic prelude of Timon, in which a discussion of poetry and art exposes the commercial prostitution, turns on a triad of values whose places were often discussed in the Renaissance: Nature, Art, and Fortune. The two former were generally looked upon as forming a defensive alliance against the fickleness of the latter. One of Alciati’s emblems, for instance, showed Art (Mercury) as the helper of Nature (ars naturam adjuvans) in rejecting the advances of Fortune (adversus vim fortunae est ars facta). Perversely, the poet subordinates himself to Fortune in her attack on Nature and thus violates the Renaissance triad, changing it from a harmonious relationship into a subversive hierarchy: Art above Nature, Fortune above Art.

Before pursuing the subject of the artists’ subservience to Fortune further, we may take another look at the poet’s claim that the painter’s “artificial strife” imitates nature. This phrase may be interpreted not only as meaning “strife of art with nature” but also, according to Johnson’s suggestion, as referring to the contrast of colors in the painting. This second meaning, disregarded or rejected by modern commentators, is very much in accord with Renaissance notions of the imitation of nature by art. The contrast of colors was looked upon as one of the creative tensions that, like that of the elements, produced harmony and stability, the discordia concors by which art imitated nature. To quote from John Norden’s Vicissitudo rerum (1600):

All arts have discords, yet in unity
Concording as in music; high and low,
Long and short, these compose the harmony.
The painter does by contraries forth show
By lively hand what nature doth bestow
By colors: white, black, red, green, and blue;
These contraries depaint right Nature’s hue.

The two artists’ “artificial strife,” the imitation of nature under the aegis of fortune, does not produce this discordia concors. It contributes to the disharmony of society.
This, I think, is the significance of what would otherwise be an odd topical concern of Shakespeare with a contemporary quarrel of the practitioners of different arts, particularly of poetry and painting, for supremacy, the paragone.7 The quarrel is reflected in the painter’s insistence that painting more vividly than poetry depicts the adversity of fortune:

’Tis common.
A thousand moral paintings I can show
That shall demonstrate these quick blows of Fortune’s
More pregnantly than words.

(1.1.91–94)

Shakespeare evidently knew about the rivalry between poets and painters concerning which of their respective arts was superior in the imitation of reality, although the paragone seems not to have been waged in England—somehow he knew about all major intellectual and artistic currents. The humanists had given poetry the prize, but Leonardo in his Paragone emphasized the superiority of the eye above the ear and consequently protested that painting ranks above poetry:

And if you, oh poet, tell a story with your pen, the painter with his brush can tell it more easily, with simpler completeness, and so that it is less tedious to follow. . . . Though the poet is as free to invent as the painter, his fictions do not give so great a satisfaction to men as painting, for though poetry is able to describe forms, actions, and places in words, the painter employs the exact images of the forms and represents them as they are. Now tell me which comes nearer to the actual man; the name of the man or the image of man. . . . And if a poet should say: I will write a story which signifies great things, the painter can do likewise, for even so Apelles painted the Calumny.8

At first sight, the painter’s claim for his art seems to be not unlike Leonardo’s, a claim ratified by Timon when he says that the penciled figures are even what they give out to be and that they depict natural, that is, ideal man—Leonardo speaks of “the image of man.” But poet and painter are not in competition about the first rank of the arts in the imitation of nature; they belong to the society at the base of Fortune’s hill that competes for gold. As much as we are tempted to mention the two artists in one breath, they are not Concordia personified: and if their art can be said to imitate nature, it is not the ideal nature of harmony and proportion but one that has lost these qualities. There is indeed talk in the play about “bonds”—a word that elsewhere in Shakespeare signifies the integration of man into the world order—but these are financial bonds. Only for Timon do human bonds matter, and even he is obsessed with the idea that gold threads run through their fabric: “To build his fortune I will strain a little, / For ’tis a bond in men,” he says when endowing his servant (1.1.146–
More even than the strain the gift puts on Timon's wealth, we feel here the strain in his belief that he can tie the parasites to him by feelings of gratitude. This idyllic delusion is rudely shattered when he is beset by "clamorous demands of debt, broken bonds" (2.2.43)—the dissonances become audible. The very speech of Timon's senatorial friends suggests them when they answer his request for aid with "hard fractions"—broken rhythms that are superbly imitated by the steward (2.2.208–17). And the collapse of Timon's house leaves his servants mere "broken implements" (4.2.16). These images conjure up the picture of the fragmented world as the pessimistic moralists of Shakespeare's time saw it, the world that, in Barckley's phrase, resembled "a chain rent in pieces, whose links are many lost and broken that they will hardly hang together." These images conjure up the picture of the fragmented world as the pessimistic moralists of Shakespeare's time saw it, the world that, in Barckley's phrase, resembled "a chain rent in pieces, whose links are many lost and broken that they will hardly hang together."9 The concord of nature has been broken by an ingratitude that Timon conceives as monstrous. Ancient and Renaissance ethics were here on his side. "Nothing does more unknit and pluck asunder the concord of mankind than that vice," said Seneca in an Elizabethan translation of De beneficiis, still a fundamental book on giving and liberality in Shakespeare's time.10 Flattery and pursuit of fortune constitute now "the world's soul," (3.2.65)—the stranger's comment gives a strongly pessimistic twist to the old idea of the anima mundi.11 It is a topsy-turvy world in which those rejected by Fortune fall downward, head over heels. The Athenians dance to Fortune's tune—emblematic fashion12—and they value and revalue as they perceive these strains. Timon's friends, who first adore him as a wealthy man, reject him when they discover him to be a pauper. His invitation for the banquet makes them think that he still has money, and they come once more to pay him tribute; but his behavior convinces them that they were right before and that he is merely a mad pauper. Yet the senators, who abandoned Timon in need, would fain have his help later when besieged by Alcibiades. The dance-of-fortune motif is highlighted by the two banquets. At the first, art once more communicates a truth different from what it is designed for. Timon's masque ends in a dance, interpreted by Apemantus as symbolizing the quick changes brought about by fortune: "I should fear those that dance before me now! Would one day stamp upon me" (1.2.139–40). Timon, however, still spins his euphoric dream to the accompaniment of lutes and oboes. Not until the demands for repayment have reached a fortissimo does he perceive the disharmonies around him. The trumpet sound with which he has the second banquet opened signals his awakening to the harsh realities. He produces now his own Apemantian anti-masque when he knocks his guests and they fall over each other as they seek to recover their
jewels, coats, and hats. Before the overturn of all order becomes Timon's constant theme, he glaringly exposes the disorder that reigns in Athens.

Banquets that reveal social disorder occur elsewhere in Shakespeare's later plays. In Macbeth, Banquo's ghost with his gory locks creates havoc at Macbeth's celebration of kingship. In the banquet of The Tempest, which most resembles that of Timon, Ariel under the direction of Prospero first serves and then snatches away a banquet from the hungry Neapolitans. The banquets both in The Tempest and in Timon are, in a sense, banquets of art (and Prospero's, being served in nature, offers a clear nature-art contrast) since they are designed by their creators to make meaning visible. In both, social disturbers are mocked; in both, the hosts play, as it were, Fortune. But The Tempest, as I shall note later, has some significant differences from Timon in its art-nature-fortune associations.

That art, nature, and fortune are central to the thematic movement of Timon has been well recognized in an engaging essay by Paul Rheyer. Rheyer rightly places Timon in the context of the later Renaissance, when, as he says, the assurance about the proper placement of nature and fortune in the scheme of things was losing itself "in the night of the times." Not only Shakespeare but contemporary moralists and satirists believed that this was happening. In Timon, Shakespeare gave his heroes two contrasting careers, one of fortune and one of nature. The Timon who is Fortune's darling, Rheyer says, is spoiled by her gifts; although theoretically he knows that man tries to conceal his true feelings, he is naive about his friends and accepts their facade as their true essence, incapable of understanding how much fortune and gold have denatured them. Only when he turns toward nature in the wood does he gauge these perversions. He realizes now that being favored by fortune is enough to make a man forget all human obligations, reverse his relationship to others, and disregard all inherent merits and priorities: "all's obliquy," i.e., all is oblique. Ingratitude flourishes because fortune and nature are not assigned to their separate spheres but have become inseparable: "Not nature, / To whom all sores lay siege, / can bear great fortune, / But by contempt of nature" (4.3. 6–8). Timon's plunge into nature teaches him also that there exists a nature outside of man that is not affected by the corrupting society and that enjoins a contempt for fortune. He prefers this sane and unadulterated, yet rough and rude, environment to the company of man. His turn away from fortune and toward this harsh but unspoiled nature is symbolized by his choosing his grave at the seaside, where it is visited each day by the tumultuous flood.  

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This analysis is fine as far as it goes, but it describes primarily the Apemantian influence on the misanthropic Timon's attitude toward nature. Reyher himself indicates that there is a further turn when he notes a "more original" strain in Timon's rhetoric that is evidenced in his encouragement to the robbers to steal and plunder because the sun, the moon, and the sea are also wholesale thieves. Timon does not merely experience the harshness of nature but feels empathetic with it, feels one with this nature. He undergoes, as it were, a seasonal change. At the outset, it appears to him to be summer in his life; but the steward warns of a coming change when his friends will abandon him: "one cloud of winter show'rs, / These flies are couch'd" (2.2.175–76). When the senators refuse to come to his aid, they answer his plea for help with the excuse that they are "at fall" (2.2.209) —"fall" was then used in England for the autumn as it is now in America, and this is surely one meaning here. When it is "deepest winter" in Timon's purse (3.4.15), he realizes what "summer birds" his friends are (3.6.30–31). He views the nature into which he withdraws as a winter landscape: those who "numberless upon me stuck, / Do on the oak, have with one winter's brush / Fell from their boughs (4.3.265–67). His rhetoric of wrath that calls on nature and the elements to undertake his revenge is a counterblast to the storm created in his life by men who have left him "open, bare" (267–68). After participating unknowingly in a dance of fortune and symbolizing it first unwittingly in the device of his masque, then consciously in the mock banquet, he asks nature to perform its own dance of destruction.

Although Timon is not a philosopher and no clear line in his thought is discernible, we can see a general hardening of his feeling that nature is potentially so cruel that it can be invoked to destroy man. It is for this purpose that Timon in his different way also "tutors nature," becoming an artist of destructive and nihilistic rhetoric—of course, it is ultimately the creator of Timon, Shakespeare, who is the real artist. Nobody before or since has ever drawn up such awe-inspiring rhetoric, and the question arises regarding what resources Shakespeare drew on for this art. None of the dramatic antecedents has anything like it. The curse of destruction in tragedy, it is true, has a tradition.14 There are characters in Senecan tragedy who in anguish or in anger call for the overthrow and ruin of the whole universe; but these are isolated and fairly simple outcries that lack the scope of Timon's curses and his repertory of diatribes. Lear, of course, goes through a nihilistic stage when he feels part of nature's destructive impulses as does Timon and calls on the lightning: "Strike flat the thick roundity of the world! / Crack
nature's moulds, all germains spill at once / That makes ungrateful man!" (3.2.6–9). But again this is a passing, if impressive, phase.

Shakespeare's success in the rhetoric of cosmic destruction, I believe, derives to a large degree from his skillful adaptation of Christian pessimistic traditions of nature and their incorporation into the cosmic curses conventional in tragedy. Harold Wilson is on the right track when he notes that in Timon "Shakespeare has chosen to write his contemptus mundi without affording any ground of reconciliation or compromise in the explicit context of the play itself". Wilson adds that it is idle to speculate from what motive or out of what mood of personal bitterness Shakespeare did so. Shakespeare's motives need not concern us here except for the artistic need to deepen Timon's misanthropy into the strongest pessimism imaginable. Wilson is certainly correct in seeing an analogy between Timon's rhetoric and the contemptus mundi; it was from this tradition and the allied idea of nature's decay that Shakespeare drew the substance of Timon's tirades.

Shakespeare, of course, had to make some changes when adapting this Christian tradition to the pagan milieu of his play. He could not have his Timon ascribe the malignancy of nature to man's fall and continuing sin in Christian theological terms, although he could have him hint at a causal connection between man's degradation and nature's severity. Similarly he could not explicitly make Timon see nature's unkindness to man as the result of God's punishment; but again, he could hint at such a connection. The contemptus mundi described the elements as the executors of the wrath of God against sinful man, and analogously Timon appeals to their destructive power against wicked Athens. Already Timon's first soliloquy outside Athens, when he addresses the walls, implies that he attributes to the four elements this function: the earth is to swallow the wall, youth to drown itself in riot, breath to infect breath, and a contagious fever to sear the Athenians (4.1.1 / ff.). In Timon's next soliloquy, when he has stationed himself in nature, he calls more explicitly on these elements:

O blessed breeding sun, draw from the earth  
Rotten humidity; below thy sister's orb  
Inflict the air!  

(4.3.1–3)

At least once Timon hints that this deterioration of nature is to happen in analogy to God's use of nature against sinful man. He thus admonishes Alcibiades to become the Athenians' Nemesis:
Be as a planetary plague, when Jove
Will o'er some high-vic'd city hang his poison
In the sick air.

(4.3.110–12)

The role envisaged for Jove here somewhat contradicts the usual passive one Timon attributes to the "perpetual-sober" gods, and resembles that of the Christian God of Wrath. As Boaistuau, for instance, pointed out, God could use war for the punishment of mankind, and He could make the air, so indispensable for human life, into man's poisoner. Timon's next notable soliloquy, which addresses the nourishing earth and demands that it engender poisons and beasts noxious to man (4.3.179–94), is analogous to arguments on the potential role of the elements as instruments of divine vengeance. Shakespeare may well have adapted it from Boaistuau. (See the Source Appendix.)

Besides apostrophizing the elements, Timon's soliloquies call on the cosmic bodies to bring about man's destruction. And here the literature of the decay of nature, which allied itself with the nature pessimism of the contemptus mundi, provided the pattern. Timon's call for the sun to leave its course and infect the air of the sublunary zone drew substance from the fear that the ordered courses of the celestial bodies were weakening. Even some of Galileo's discoveries seemed to be pointing to the decay of the solar system, as the apocalyptic preachers were not slow in discovering. Thus Thomas Gardiner warned in the Doomsday Book (1606) that "the constitution of the celestial orbs is weakened, the sun not so many spaces different from us as it was wont to be. . . ." What were conceived as warnings in this literature become fervent wishes in Timon's rhetoric. To Shakespeare's audience, they must have seemed far from impossible of eventual fulfillment.

The greatest, most original, and fiercest of the speeches in which Timon parallels nature's destructiveness with human wickedness is his sermon to the bandits:

I'll example you with thievery:
The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction
Rob the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief,
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun:
The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves
The moon into salt tears; the earth's a thief,
That feeds and breeds by a composture stol'n
From gen'ral excrement; each thing's a thief.

(4.3.438–45)

For Shakespeare's audience, aware of how these cosmic relationships were supposed to work, the speech had an added
fascination. Each of the cosmic bodies and elements was supposed not only to take something from another but also to give to some other in return and thus produce a cosmic concordia—the reciprocity was analogous to the free borrowing and lending that cemented the stable society according to old-fashioned humanism. From this point of view, Timon might appear to be merely ignorant or willful. But we must see this speech against the background of the decay-of-nature ideas that drew the proper working of the natural harmonies into doubt. Further, we must consider it in the context of feelings inspired by the economic crisis that was dissolving societal bonds. Both developments made the old commonplace of the harmony of nature appear outdated. Writers even could poke fun at it, as did Sir William Cornwallis when he spun a lengthy analogy between man’s commercial activity and the operation of sun, moon, stars, and earth; everybody acted now, he said, as if “without debt and loan the fabric of the world will be disjointed and fall asunder into its first chaos.”

Timon sees this activity as a one-way street, as exploitation and robbery; and so indeed it must have appeared to many of Shakespeare’s contemporaries. The kinetic metaphors of robbing, snatching, and surging in Timon’s speech vividly convey the impression of a violent disruption of order and decency. Timon projects this societal degeneration onto the universe in a monomaniac obsession with the denaturing, that is, humanizing, of nature.

Besides drawing on the elements and the celestial bodies, Timon’s rhetoric of nature outdoes Apemantian pessimism in denying that animals are better than men and in seeing them as participating in the general corruption. The conventional misanthropic position has always been to disparage man in favor of the animals or at least some animals, such as Swift’s rational and temperate horses. Apemantus similarly prefers animals to men. Timon accepts this idea at least initially upon turning misanthrope: “Timon will to the woods, where he shall find / Th’ unkindest beast more kinder than mankind” (4.1.35–36). By the time he comes to debate Apemantus, his hatred of man has become so ingrained and his view of life’s malignancy so obsessive that he sees no kindness any longer anywhere, not even in the animal world. The distance he has traveled shows when he exposes the sentimental core in the cynic’s position. He asks Apemantus the loaded question: “Wouldst thou have thyself fall in the confusion of men, and remain a beast with the beasts?” (4.3.325–26). When Apemantus answers affirmatively, Timon proves that animals are engaged in the same war of everybody against everybody else as are men: “If thou wert the lion, the fox would beguile thee; if thou wert the lamb, the
fox would eat thee . . ." (329 ff.). So far this is perhaps not too unusual a statement; but Timon gives it a unique turn when he sees this enmity not merely as setting one species against another or one individual animal against another but as pitting each particular creature against itself: "If thou wert the ass, thy dulness would torment thee . . . if thou wert the wolf, thy greediness would afflict thee . . .; wert thou the unicorn, pride and wrath would confound thee and make thine own self the conquest of thy fury . . ." (333 ff). This goes quite beyond the preachers' saying that "every creature since sin entered into the world is become an enemy to another like enemies in war."19 And it even goes beyond what Hobbes was to say later when he saw this general hostility as the natural state, no longer worrying about any human sin that might have created it. There are deeper fissures than these in Timon's discordant universe and they leave nothing sane and whole. The animal world appears to him now humanized, that is, stripped of all that is benevolent, just as man has become beastly. The misanthrope's pessimistic view takes wing from the Renaissance traditions.

Timon's tutoring of nature for self-destruction is a gigantic enterprise, but it is also utterly useless. In his own way, as Swigg notes, Timon, like the poet and painter, is better in promising than in performing.20 His lack of effect on the world's uses is highlighted by the last nature image he creates, his seaside grave visited by the flood. He cannot control the symbolism with which he seeks to make it a denunciation of, and separation from, mankind. The lash of the turbulent surge, by which he seeks to symbolize the force of his hatred of mankind, is artfully tamed in Alcibiades' "rich conceit" of Neptune's tears: the powerful flood image becomes translated into mythological embroidery.

If the world does not take Timon's misanthropic message seriously, neither does it really pity him. The "droplets" that Alcibiades describes as falling from "niggard nature" are a "brains' flow" rather than an effusion of the heart. We are reminded of the real tears, the few touches of a benevolent nature in the play, when Timon wept for friendship's sake and the steward for the folly of his master. The eyes of Timon's exploiters were dry then, and there are no real tears now for the stilling of the breath whose very epitaph is a curse. The rich and mighty will not look on Timon's work and despair.

It is tempting to contrast the vanity of Timon's destructive and nihilistic art with the success of Prospero's optimistic and life-affirming one. Prospero, we might say, translates his
vision into reality because he works with a benevolent na­
ture; Timon, attempting to whip nature into malignancy, ends in a solitary grave, his message disregarded by the world. Yet, this comparison is unilluminating for several reasons. First, it uses “art” in two different meanings, those of Prospero’s powerful magic and Timon’s nihilistic rhetoric. Nobody really assumes that Timon could bring off his desire to destroy man and nature. Second, the comparison exaggerates the gap between Timon’s failure and Prospero’s success. Prospero knows that supernatural powers are not man’s to wield and that cloud-capped towers do not last forever: he goes back to Milan with the intention of giving every third thought to his grave. Fortune is not brought irrevocably under the control of art, since the possibility of Prospero’s failing again as a ruler is not excluded. Third, the comparison is inappropriate because the worlds of the two plays are entirely different. Athens is not Prospero’s magic isle: we cannot transfer Timon to the isle or Prospero to Athens. Had Shakespeare been a philosopher, the contrast between the world of The Tempest and that of Timon might have been a flaw in his system; as an artist he could create without contradicting himself two such worlds, the one animated by a benevolent nature, the other doomed by a malignant one. We may perhaps take these two visions together as expressing Shakespeare’s hopes and fears for mankind and perceive the one world as a Utopia, the other as a warning.

It should be said also that, unsuccessful as Timon is in persuading Athens, he triumphs as a verbal artist. He, not the mediocre poet nor the flattering painter, is the true artist of the play, and he soars in eagle flight, even though this is a flight into nihilism and madness. If Timon does not succeed in speeding up the world’s conflicts and bringing about an apocalypse, at least he conjures up the picture of a world that deserves such an apocalypse: a world of deceit, discord, chaos, and deadly illness. In this sense, he accomplishes what many Renaissance moralists and satirists who no longer touch us tried to do, and he succeeds because of his, or rather, Shakespeare’s art.