

Echo of the Eco-Poet: Tables Turned by William Wordsworth

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Abstract

Climate change is real, and the responses of various writers to the ecological changes have been documented in their works since the beginning of the industrialization and its impact on the environment. The romantic poets were the ones to celebrate nature, ecology, and nature-human relationship; they also in their own way subverted the capitalist interests by celebrating nature which the capitalists were fast eroding. Wordsworth in his poetry, which is often termed as didactic, advocated a case for nature. In his poems we find a clear cut distinction between the city and country life. The objective of the paper is to re establish the relevance of Wordsworth's poetry in the modern context by re reading of Wordsworth as eco poet. In the light of the present day climate change crisis, there is a dire need to shift the pedagogy from teaching of Wordsworth as a nature poet to teaching of Wordsworth as Eco poet. The first part of the paper focuses on the historical perspective of romantic poetry and how it gets connected with eco-poetry, Part II establishes Wordsworth as eco poet and part three discusses the poem The Tables Turned in detail, part four is the conclusion.

Keywords: Eco Poetry, Poetry And Ecology, Romantic Poets, Wordsworth, Eco Criticism.

Romanticism and Ecology

In the wake of the climate change crisis of the present times, the relevance of understanding the literature that integrates the human beings in their environment has become imperative. Poetry like all literature is a response to the life. It is an expression of the experiences of a

generation recorded in words, images, metaphors and figures of speech. Poets, since the beginning have been recording these experiences in different genres of poetry. Human-nature relationship is an intrinsic relationship, a relationship of mutual

dependence, but with the advent of industrialization, this relationship underwent a change and the process of alienation started. Humans began to sever their ties with the nature and started 'othering' the nature and environment by indiscriminately destroying the habitats and ecosystems, in order to establish their own capitalist colonies.

Romantic era marked the beginning of the industrialization of England. The shift from agrarian to the industrial society and the change from sylvan beauty to industrial murk has been recorded by many a poet and writer in their works. The past two centuries have witnessed the most drastic changes not only in terms of human life but also in terms of environment. The anthropocentric point of view of life has brought the humans to a point of total annihilation. When the industrial society had begun to develop in England, Wordsworth had recognized the monstrous designs and foreseen the shadows that it would cast centuries later. The felling of trees in the Industrial England, the shrinking of forests, changes in the way of life, and the scientific and inquisitive nature of humans had begun to trouble Wordsworth when in his poetry he made loud and clear statements.

Why has this Romantic poetry suddenly become so important for the post modern era? The answer lies in the statement made by Karl Kroeber in the essay 'The Relevance and irrelevance of Romanticism',

"I am seriously concerned with the relevance of Romantic literature. I should like to propose, however, that true relevance equates with unpopularity. As Socrates defines love as desire for what we do not possess, so I suggest that those qualities which our culture lacks are those which are truly relevant." [Kroeber, 297]

What is it that our culture truly lacks today? The answer is written on the wall, the world today is facing a climate crisis, and we are on the brink of annihilation not only of our civilization but of the planet as a whole. The crisis is looming large and the destruction is coming our way faster than we can imagine. It is this 'lack' of environmental security that forces us to go back to the romantics in order to discover the first responses to the changes that have cumulatively brought us to this catastrophe. On a close scrutiny we discover that there is an expression of an apparent manifestation of a burgeoning ecological consciousness. The romantics express their concern by directly questioning the economic and industrial progress and seek restoration of the pristine nature and harmonious human-nature relationship.

"The romantic vision is characterized by painful and melancholic conviction that in modern reality something precious has been lost, at the level of both individuals and humanity at large; certain essential human

values have been alienated.” [Michael Lowy and Robert Sayre, p21]

This constant echo of ‘loss’ is born out of an insecurity and understanding that the industrial progress and the consequent alienation might irreversibly and irrevocably erode and eradicate both the pristine landscape of the countryside and the language and local community. Romantic literature continuously subverts all that is modern and progressive while emphasizing the interdependence of human and nature.

“We can no longer conceive of nature as a bucolic idyll, a type of Christian resurrection, a rational exemplar of God’s harmonious design, a romantic refuge from urban factories, an indifferent or hostile Darwinian menace, or an echoing hollow filled by post structural language theory. What we need is sustainable poetry, a poetry that does not allow the degradation of ecosystems, dynamic and potentially self regulating feedback systems. These ecosystems sustain every moment of our lives, and, because they have been so bruised by humans, we cannot naturalize them into benign backdrops of human preoccupations or reduce them to nonexistence by an excessive focus on language in our literary traditions.” [Scigaj, 5] What Scigaj envisages here, has it already been done by the Romantics? For Romantics in general and Wordsworth in particular, Nature and ecology was never a backdrop.

Nature for Wordsworth was a living entity that very much participated in the life of humans. In fact he did not see Nature as something different from humans but in the later years he wrote that the ‘World is Too Much with Us’. “Wordsworth's *Excursion* (1814) contains an impassioned plea for protection of the rural landscape from the spread of industry.” (Lysaght, 75) The proto-ecological awareness was not the natural outgrowth of the liberal revolutionary fervor but a reaction to the corrosion and erosion of the values that integrated the humans with their environment. With Wordsworth emerged a sensibility of ‘green’ romanticism that forces us to take a serious note of a proto-ecological perspective that emerges from Wordsworth’s Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* and the poems.

Eco-poetry and Wordsworth

Jonathan Bate explains that Wordsworth's mission for the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) is "eco-poetic," since it suggests that "when we commune with those forms [of nature] we live with a particular intensity, and conversely that our lives are diminished when technology and industrialization alienate us from those forms" (Song 245). Wordsworth's poetry reviews the impact of liberal individualism which was the result of enlightenment and illumination and social mobility from agrarian society to industrial society on the society and

environment on the whole. Lyrical Ballads presents to us a host of characters who are disoriented and grotesque, detached from their homes they project haunting image that disturbs. In the book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Lawrence Buell gives an idea about what primarily constitutes an environmental work:

- 1) The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
- 2) The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
- 3) Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation.
- 4) Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text (7-8).

Characteristics of eco-poetry essentially involve the elements that seek to establish a fair balance of human-nature relationship and preservation of the natural ecosystem in opposition to mechanical exploitation. It reviews the human maltreatment of nature and ecology. It has emerged as a means of representing poetry with an emphatic ecological message. It primarily deals with an array of significant ideas about relationships between the humans and the relationships

between humans and ecology and their eco-spheres. It is certainly not poetry plainly about nature and ecology but it is poetry fundamentally about environmental crisis and an exploration for means to use language for better appreciation or understanding of the interconnectedness of human-ecology and mind-matter relations. The eco-critics re-read literary works from an eco-centric point of view, with a particular emphasis on the representation of the natural world. They also "extend the range of literary-critical practice by placing a new emphasis on relevant 'factual' writing, especially reflective topographical material such as essays, travels writing, memoirs and regional literature" (Barry, 2002, p.264).

The Tables Turned

In the poem *The Tables Turned*, Wordsworth comes upfront to criticize the impact of industrialization on human mental, emotional and even physical health. He is very emphatic in establishing the role of nature as an integral component of human existence. He also strongly expresses his angst at the human folly of having ostracized themselves from the nature, and he clarifies that the result is only blatant destruction. He begins by calling out to humans in a very urgent tone

‘Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books’

Books here become not a source of knowledge but a source of human misery, as in the next line he goes on to say, 'Or surely you'll grow double'. This is the first impact of industrialization: obesity is the direct fallout of a lazy industrial society. Kristina Killgrove, a senior scientist working in the field of bio-archaeology in a report titled 'Industrial Revolution Caused Rise In Cancer, Obesity, And Arthritis, Archaeologists Suggest' gives a detailed account of how the scientists studying under the Rosemary Green Grant awarded by City of London Archaeological Trusts tried to understand the impact of industrial revolution on human health in particular on the origins of Cancer and Obesity. Museum of London curator of human osteology, Jelena Bekvalac launched a three year project with Gaynor Western and radiologist Mark Framer to analyze and digitally document over 2,500 skeletons from 18 archaeological sites in the U.K. The results have been alarming as lots of health issues date back to transition period what Historians term as early modern period. Beginning from 1760s in England manufacturing became mechanized. Water, steam, coal, wood and wind powered machines replaced lot of handiwork, education became imperative and the simultaneous development of age of enlightenment lead people to seek knowledge and wisdom from books. In a single line, Wordsworth has prophesized the impact of industrialization. We hear that echo of the

eco-poet down the centuries. Having made a bold statement, he goes on to make another clarion call to the straying human.

'Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;

Why all this toil and trouble?'

He implores the humans to get up and stand up for themselves, and 'clear the looks'. The phrase has an ambivalent meaning, clearing the looks means waking up to the situation and it also means to feel fresh, and in both the cases the implication is that by staying away from nature, the human beings have on one hand gone into a slumber and on the other hand harmed themselves.

Entire day has been spent in the vain pursuit of bookish knowledge and the beauty of nature which can have a freshening and embalming effect on the human mind and body. The Sun is 'above the mountain's head,' and spreading 'A freshening lustre mellow' and has spread through all the green fields, 'His first sweet evening yellow. A lot of mental health and physical health researches lay emphasis on green spaces and hold the experience of nature helps to restore the mind from the mental fatigue of work or studies. Wordsworth as an eco-poet presents to us the integrated nature of ecology and the studies which have been carried out mainly in the twenty first century as an awakening response to the climate change speak of the intergenerational impact of industrialization.

Wordsworth calls books a 'dull strife' and pleads the one indulging in books to come forth in the fold of nature and pay attention to myriad scenes and voices of nature which are integral to evolution of human mind. "Researchers at Brighton and Sussex Medical School (BSMS) found that playing 'natural sounds' affected the bodily systems that control the flight-or-fright and rest-digest autonomic nervous systems, with associated effects in the resting activity of the brain." [2]

Besides the issue of ill health, there is an important issue regarding the moral and spiritual health as well. By giving themselves up to the education system that totally fed the needs of an industrial society, the humans have not only harmed themselves physically and mentally but also morally and spiritually. In fact all the aspects of human health are integrated and one affects the other. 'Books have their limitations, as a medium of moral, ethical and spiritual instruction they obstruct physical and mental wellbeing which comes from the life lead in close proximity of nature. Besides this reason, Wordsworth also projected the educational role of nature, through his Lucy poems and poems like Tintern Abbey and Ode to Intimations of Immortality. He raised the slogan 'Let Nature be thy teacher' and presented nature as his 'friend, philosopher and guide'. Romantic period witnessed an upsurge of changing values and moralities. The age of

enlightenment, industrialization, the new learning, revolutionary ideas and the changing values brought about an evident change in the education system as well. Apprenticeship, skill development along with some religious learning was the order of the previous times but with advent of industrialization, every system that held the society together was falling apart. Education changed spaces from hands on apprenticeship and Sunday masses to schools and institutions that taught philosophy besides other things. Intellectual movement of the early eighteenth century called illumination or enlightenment was unable to liberate the individual despite its adherence to a strong sense of individualism. It was although a new development in the field of human thought, with its liberalism and focus on individual capacity, it kind of turned into a new type of formalism with its skepticism, rationalism and materialistic attitude. Rejecting the ideals of Puritanism as hypocrisy enlightenment revealed religion as superstition and became openly opposed to religious values. Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire and French Encyclopedia writers interpreted life from this angle. The purpose of enlightenment was to free the human mind from the shackles of religious absolutism. Intellect of the human was seen as the highest ability, and freedom of thought was the highest ideal. But despite its all good intentions, enlightenment though succeeded in severing the anchor of religious morality but it failed to hinge the humans to

an internal system of values and morality. As a result artificiality, sham culture of a society that believed in all types of projected behaviours developed. This society rejected simplicity as vulgarity and spontaneity as irrationality, thus plugging indigenous cultures out as heathen and unwanted, severing the urban industrial human from their roots. It was against this education that Wordsworth gave a clarion call for an integrated naturalistic learning that kept humans grounded to their reality of being an integral part of nature. 'Come, hear the woodland linnet,' the song of the bird brings sweetness to the life. 'How sweet his music! on my life, There's more of wisdom in it.'

The wisdom of nature that Wordsworth often speaks of is the same experiential joy that Shelley talks about in "Ode to the Skylark". The happiness with which these birds sing, make one wonder about the 'strife' that one undergoes as human. The 'blitheness' of the thrush is the result of an attitude that Nature takes care of everyone and it is quite in opposition to anthropocentric view of life where humans control everything.

And hark! how blithe the thrush sings!

He, too, is no mean preacher:

Come forth into the light of things,

Let Nature be your teacher

The bird is not writing a scripture and preaching but preaching by a way of example, here the learning is more intuitive and experiential in nature than instructive or attaining knowledge through reading. When he calls forth his friend or the reader into 'light of things' he is definitely reproaching the humans for having fallen into the darkness of self-centeredness and selfishness, even to the extent of self destruction. This self centeredness has brought us all to the point of total annihilation not only of our life but to the life of entire planet, because we forgot that in the destruction of nature lays our own destruction.

She has a world of ready wealth,

Our minds and hearts to bless-

Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,

Truth breathed by cheerfulness

Health and happiness are two main concerns of the humans and both can be attained by attending to Nature and being close to her. The use of the word wealth is very interesting as the chief goal of industrialization is increasing the wealth, Wordsworth here presents a counter discourse for wealth, wealth cannot be measured in terms of the paper currency or gold bullion but the wealth that nature gives is beyond us. Nature 'blesses' our minds and hearts, and gives us health, that makes us happy. Entire human life

is lost in the pursuit of happiness but here Nature is holding it out for us. It is a call to return to our own primal self. Robert Pogue Harrison characterizes Wordsworth's poetry as advocating an aspiration "to run as the great countercurrent of history back towards the sources of simplicity and happiness.

One impulse from a vernal wood

May teach you more of man,

Of moral evil and of good,

Than all the sages can

It is not only the knowledge but wisdom too that nature can bestow. One 'impulse' another word that refers to spontaneity from 'vernal' wood, the spring has the capacity to teach us about the continuity of life, something that sages have been telling us since times immemorial. There is more wisdom in nature's phenomenon than our scriptures. Perhaps, we have failed to interpret meanings from the scriptures because we have been severed from nature. The ecological system that has made humans wise has been destroyed and even if we continue to read scriptures, we cannot make anything out of them because the system that created or perpetuated that wisdom has been destroyed. The ecology of culture, the eco-system, the ecosphere in which that wisdom evolved has been destroyed. Celebrating the 'lore' that nature brings, he chides the intellect and calls

it 'meddling'. Human curiosity has done a great harm. We have lost the patience and we murder to dissect. We mis-shape the 'beauteous' forms. Wordsworth is disdainful of all the ugly things that humans do under garb of research and innovation.

Enough of Science and of Art;

Close up those barren leaves;

Come forth, and bring with you a heart

That watches and receives.

He wants the education to put an end to all the learning that compels the humans to kill nature, whether humans do it in the name of Arts or Science, whatever is done against nature is harmful. All the human learning is baseless, and useless. He calls books 'barren' leaves because they are dead leaves, literally as well. He implores humans to approach nature with an open heart that perceives and receives what nature has to offer. Kate Rigby suggests that Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads "sought to renovate both the language of poetry and the vision of the land in light of indigenous traditions" (55).

Conclusion

Traditionally, *The Tables Turned* has been interpreted merely as a nature poem, in which Wordsworth's persona or the poet dominates and the nature serves the poet but the eco-critical analyses of the poem shows us that

how this poem falls into the category of eco-poetry as it goes beyond traditional nature poetry and takes on conspicuously contemporary issues, recognizing and emphasizing the interdependence of all life on earth chiding the inquisitive mind as murderous; celebrates the wildness of nature and laments the human irresponsibility in making constant attempts to tame and plunder nature. The poem reflects upon the dangers that lurk; bemoans the moral, spiritual and physical impoverishment of the modern world ruled by technology, driven by self interest and false idea of richness. This poem seeks to dissolve the borders between the disjointed and isolated human mind and the natural world, it seeks to put an end to the apparent human made conflict between human interests and the “interests” of nature.

The various depictions of the ecological aspects of Wordsworth's poetry - as an evaluation of impacts of technology and industrialization; as an attempt to draw attention to the idea of simplicity, or as a subtle suggestion for preservation of indigenous tradition, language and culture, make Wordsworth more relevant in the modern classrooms where innovative solutions to the big climate change are being sought. The wisdom so intensely and vehemently communicated by Wordsworth in his prose and poetry is something that the world needs to pay heed to. Romanticism is

the essential dot in the literary history from which to consider the links, as industry was beginning to get established and the destructive effect on the eco-systems of the same modern ideology of wealth was becoming visible marking the foundation of the anthropocene.

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