

The Sublime and Beautiful in Nature

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Abstract

There exists an intrinsic relationship between man and nature; at times as an observer and at other times as a participant in its various processes. Man can never exist by detaching himself from the natural world. Today human beings have forgotten that they are interconnected and interdependent. Assuming they are the lords of creation, they subjugated the earth, plundered nature and exploited fellow human beings. The mysteries that lie hidden in nature can be observed when the human world is inserted as a participant in the various nuances of the universe. By thus implanting oneself, man experiences here on earth, a taste for the life beyond. Human beings will then experience their place in nature as part of a complex web of life. Nature provides man with the zest for life, unburdening and freeing his mind to greater realities.

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There is something to be found “in Nature” that many people feel they need. Edward Abbey in the first chapter of his book, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*, gives man

some of the most memorable statements of the urge to know reality, to grasp something more substantial than flights of imagination. He writes:

“I am here not only to evade for a while the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront, immediately and directly if it’s possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us. I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description. To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself. I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-human world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate. Paradox and bedrock.” (Abbey 7)

There always existed a unique bond between literature and the natural world. Many poets and literary artists have found through literature a means to give expression to their creative impulse by taking nature as their subject matter. Literature stands as a living example of man’s never ending relationship with the natural world.

On the contrary, for well over three centuries, human beings have been attempting to separate themselves from the organic processes of the natural world. By separating themselves from a larger inclusion in Nature and the Universe they have proceeded to deepen the chasm of alienation of themselves from nature. Man began to distance himself from nature from the time that he began to exercise a control over rather than participate and collaborate in the processes of nature. The technological interventions are experienced as contributing to the change in the

lifestyle of humankind which has resulted in global health crisis, extinction of flora and fauna and deforestation for the sake of human habitat thereby changing the very climate of the planet earth.

There exists an intrinsic relationship between man and nature; at times as an observer and at other times as a participant in its various processes. Man can never exist by detaching himself from the natural world. Human beings have forgotten that they are interconnected and interdependent. Assuming they are the lords of creation, they subjugated the earth, plundered nature and exploited fellow human beings. The mysteries that lie hidden in nature can be observed when the human world is inserted as a participant in the various nuances of the universe. By thus implanting oneself, man experiences here on earth, a taste for the life beyond. Human beings will then experience their place in nature as part of a complex web of life. Nature provides man with the zest for life, unburdening and freeing his mind to greater realities.

The development of human society has led to an inequality and slavery which are far more disadvantageous to man than his earlier state. Jean Jacques Rousseau writes in his book, *The Social Contract and Discourse*:

“From the moment one man began to stand in need of the help of another; from the moment it appeared advantageous to any one man to have enough provisions for two, equality disappeared, property was introduced, work became indispensable, and vast forests became smiling fields, which man had to water with the sweat of his brow, and where slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate and grow up with the crops.”
(Rousseau 83)

In today's highly technological world human beings are victims of psychological pressures. In virtually every industrialized country, there is what is described an epidemic of depression. There is an innate need in human beings to be greedy and desirous of acquiring and possessing more than is needed. What men need today is replace their quantitative consumerism with a qualitative lifestyle. Al Gore writes in the magazine Resurgence:

“This crisis is bringing us an opportunity to experience what few generations in history ever have the privilege of knowing: a generational mission; the exhilaration of a compelling moral purpose; a shared and unifying cause; the thrill of being forced by circumstances to put aside the pettiness and conflict that so often stifle the restless human need for transcendence; the opportunity to rise. When we do rise, it will fill our spirits and bind us together. Those who are now suffocating in cynicism and despair will be able to breathe freely. Those who are now suffering from a loss of meaning in their lives will find hope. When we rise, we will experience an epiphany as we discover that this crisis is not really about politics at all. It is a moral and spiritual challenge.” (Al Gore 65)

‘People who live in the industrial world have become locked into themselves’, says Thomas Berry in Resurgence. ‘They find it near to impossible to relate to the outer world. As a result of the mechanical lifestyle, men have lost reverence and a sense of mystery of the world around them. They cannot harmonize themselves to the rhythm of the surrounding world, the voices of the entire range of natural phenomena. The forests seem to exist, out there, only for such imaginative sentimentalists such as poets and painters. The forests are there primarily for exploitation. The existence of a tree is seen by man only for its utilitarian purpose. In such a

scenario it is challenging to accept that trees, too, have rights to exist in their habitat. Human beings too have rights within the larger context of the Earth Community. If man's rights are sacred, he must accept that the rights of other beings also are sacred.' (Berry 10)

William Wordsworth and Robert Frost are examples of poets who were primarily concerned with the human-self-in-nature, revealing, then, the nature of self. For both these poets, what mattered was not simply nature but the individual mind and life in nature. Sometimes that mind was God's, sometimes a human's, sometimes both. As Marion Montgomery puts it, "[Frost's] best poetry is concerned with the drama of man in nature, whereas Wordsworth is generally best when emotionally displaying the panorama of the natural world." (Montgomery 138) For Frost, the drama is individual and psychological; he does not confront the actual relationship of humanity to nature. It is simply not an issue. Rather, he explores, with cunning craft and terrific insight, the relationship of the personal mind - - and soul - - to the exterior world. He is a poet of inner weather. Frost is a common humanist: what this transplanted New Englander discovers in "The Wood-Pile" is "at the center of the forest [in contrast to Wordsworth]... not an image of the spirit immanent in man and nature, but a symbol of the strictly human spirit and its ability to rise above the physical sphere" (Lynen 144). Lynen puts Frost's ultimate attitude bluntly: "The only meaning one can find in nature is that imposed upon it by the human mind." (Ibid 145)

William Wordsworth set forth a tradition of environmental consciousness and fought a single-handed crusade against the brutal attack on nature in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. His poetry, letters, pamphlets and other prose works created sensitivity to ecological issues in his period. Wordsworth is considered the first exemplar of ecocritical writing or Oikopoetics ('oikos' which means home or hearth and stresses on an environmental approach to

literature) with his concern for the preservation of traditional rural ways of life. The American poet, Robert Frost like Wordsworth, draws most of his metaphors from nature and studies them in relation to man.

In his “Preface to Lyrical Ballads,” Wordsworth defines the subject of his poetry as such:

“Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more elementary feelings; and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended; and are more durable; and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.” (Hayden 433)

Speaking on the bounds that nature itself sets on the excesses of human exploitation and mismanagement, Rachel Carson is quoted in the *Lost Woods: The Discovered Writing of Rachel Carson*:

“It was pleasant to believe, for example, that much of Nature was forever beyond the tempering reach of man – he might level the forests and dam the streams, but the clouds and the rain and the wind were God’s....

It was comforting to suppose that the stream of life would flow on through time in whatever course that God had appointed for it – without interference by one of the drops of the stream – man.”

And again,

“I still feel there is a case to be made for my old belief that as man approaches the “new heaven and the new earth” – or the space-age universe, if you will, he must do so with humility rather than arrogance... And along with humility I think there is still a place for wonder.” (Carson 167, 163)

It is easy to see how much damage human beings can do - - they need only survey the condition of planet. But it is harder to see how much good they can do. Men need to look into themselves, to the dictates of their morality. Human beings are holding in their hands not only the health of the endangered planet but their own future as civilized species. ‘History highlights man’s limitless capacity for cruelty and devastation and mutual destruction. People have hated each other for many reasons, and they have expressed that hatred in many ingenious ways. Man’s awareness of this history should highlight, with equal brilliance, his powers to nurture and heal and create.’ (Gelbsspan 193)

Having the will and the inventive brain to back it up, people ‘can’ make the conscious choice to follow nature’s lead in living their lives. What is required is that people must see nature with a different set of eyes as something beneficial and not as something to be exploited. It is the change of heart in man which will enable him to experience the richness of nature and on which he depends.

In line with this thought, Robert Frost reaches a special kind of source when he comes to the cool spring in “Directive”. According to Kathryn Gibbs Harris, this kind of source has a unique tie with place; it represents the special fruitfulness of the natural world itself. “At this spring the poet’s exploration of place reaches a mature fulfillment in that he comes to his most

intimate contact with the physical world; he comes closest to the source of life on earth at this origin of life-sustaining water.... At this moment alongside the water, the poet is graced with a sense of wholeness with himself, with nature. This wholeness becomes his holiness by redeeming him from his initial confusion from the emptiness he had felt, from the ‘universal cataract of death’ which he sees flowing past him among the “graveyard marble sculpture” of this farmyard. The poet promises wholeness here in the cool, uncertain world of nature which persistently refuses to be domesticated or mythologized” (42-43). In this environment where details have faded and essences remain, the poet withdraws from his outer edges to come to terms with his inner self. Frost refers to this impulse in an interview:

“I think a person has to be withdrawn into himself to gather inspiration so that he is somebody when he comes out again among folks... He learns that he’s got to be almost wastefully alone.” (Lathem 76)

It is a known fact that nature has a healing quality. Taking time to smell the roses or meditating on the snow covered mountains and hills or gazing at a wild flower while strolling by a meandering stream – all have an exhilarating effect on the human psyche. Nature can aid in facilitating an awareness of the self thereby promoting healing. Time spent outside with nature is a source of revival and regeneration. It not only gives inspiration to the creative mind of the artist and the poet but anyone who spends quality time watching the sun set or strolling in the moonlit night, breathing in the freshness of the air out in nature, experiences an overall wellbeing of his mind and body.

There are numerous ordinary, reaffirming and renewing experiences which man benefits from nature. While the birth of man on earth is accompanied with growth and leads to maturity and death, so also nature has its own way of renewing itself through a process of growth, decay

and death. Nature has its own way of restoring itself, of re-creating life. It is only, but, apt to see nature becoming a place of refuge for man's difficult times. When man feels weighed down by the stresses of life, he can take refuge in the wilderness for his physical and mental restoration. Nature, while refreshing, clears one's mind of destructive thoughts. The clarity of mind brings relief from mental ailments and helps discover newer insights to the questions' life poses to man.

Hectic and busy lives seem to be the norm and a major part of today's world. People are found multi-tasking and rushing with varied chores of life. Drawing deadlines have become the benchmark of the day. Because of the speed with which life moves on, a lot of stress gets accumulated. Stress is not healthy; in fact, it causes serious health problems. Sometimes, people just need to get away from the stresses of life, do something different and just relax. This may involve doing away with work for a day, going to the beach or some other place, getting a massage, or anything else to escape the stressor. Very few people realize that there is something usually not far away that can relieve stress – Nature. For many people, nature is the number one way to relax.

Wordsworth, in his poem "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey", sees the landscape but connects it to the silence of the sky:

"Once again

Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,

That on a wild secluded scene impress

Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect

The landscape with the quiet of the sky."

(Hutchinson 131)

Wordsworth is an eco-poet par excellence. He saw nature as something which exists on its own terms. Nature does not need man for its existence; rather, it is man who needs nature for his existence and for the continuity of the human race.

Wordsworth saw himself as an involved participant in the world that surrounds him and kept an interactive bond with the natural objects. This sense of interaction between man and nature is seen in Wordsworth's retrospect of his childhood experiences in "The Prelude". For instance, in Book I of this poem Wordsworth depicts the experience of his bathing in the river Derwent and sporting along its bank:

“When, having left his mountains, to the towers
Of Cockermouth that beauteous river came,
Behind my father's house he passed, close by
Along the margin of our terrace walk.
He was a playmate whom we dearly loved:
Oh, many a time have I, a five years' child,
A naked boy, in one delightful rill,
A little mill-race, severed from his stream,
Made one long bathing of a summer's day,
Basked in the sun, and plunged, and basked again,
Alternate, all a summer's day, or coursed
Over the sandy fields, leaping through groves
Of yellow grunsel; or, when crag and hill,
The woods, and distant skiddaw's lofty height,
Were bronzed with a deep radiance, stood alone

Beneath the sky, as if I had been born
On Indian plains, and from my mother's hut
Had run abroad in wantonness to sport,
A naked savage, in the thunder-shower." (Prelude, I, 286-304)

In his experience in nature, the boy Wordsworth was not a stranger to the places that surround him, and regarded the natural objects such as rivers, hills, streams, and mountains as his companions or playmates. There are also other childhood experiences such as the snaring of the woodcock, the climbing for raven's egg, and the stolen boat episode that also show his intimate relation with the natural world. Besides this sense of participation in nature, Wordsworth is also concerned with the relations between human community and the natural world. He shows his deep concerns in many poems such as, "The Female Vagabond," "Michael," and "The Last of the Flock."

In most of Frost's "nature poems" the human speaker stands as a spectator who is making something of the scene. True, he may feel a connection with it, ranging anywhere from observing, to forming analogies, to feeling a pull so strong or an identity so close that he fears it. "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" reveals modern man's indifference and detachment from nature. The poem reveals humanity's materialistic relationship with nature. The "woods" and the "frozen lake", is described as impersonal and inanimate objects that exist for ownership and pleasure of viewing.

Frost's words and poetic descriptions work to impose a unique image and feeling in the reader; the poem is full of subtle dichotomies that create tensions. The poem prompts the unnamed speaker to push on, and gives the reader a sense of conclusion. Although clear signs of separation between the speaker and nature exist, through the silence and in action of the speaker

a symbiotic relationship and ecological unity with nature is perceived possible for humanity. Yet for this to occur, the “promises” one makes for the future must include a greater understanding and appreciation of man’s relationship with, and responsibility toward nature.

As humanity continues to journey on, questions arise as to how nature is supposed to be regarded. How are we to “progress” and simultaneously preserve ecological harmony with nature? Frost’s poem, specifically in how we read its tempo and structure, partially answers these questions. It is smooth and free flowing, due to the colloquial tone of voice which Frost uses thereby creating a feeling of ease and peaceful serenity. It is as if the speaker is somehow absorbing the moment of just being in nature. In these momentary pauses of reflection, Frost shows how man reconnects with nature. In these moments, humanity comes to understand that he, like every other creature, is a part of this eco-system, and with conscious awareness of this fact, one can begin to work towards a “promising” relationship of balanced needs – both of humanity’s and nature’s.

It is an intellectual truth that human beings come from the soil, live through it in proportion to the care they invest in it, and finally return to it. Through over-familiarity and over-intellectualizing, men have forgotten what it is to experience the earth directly. Not everyone will appreciate romping barefoot through the fields in order to gain a fresh appreciation of the Earth. Only when one can experience the Earth as vividly and directly as freshly bare feet recognize a dewy morning can one establish a valid relationship with the soil from which one grows.

Walking naked, vulnerable feet over places grown overly familiar is a start. For most human beings recognizing their own power to choose is the point where they begin to choose towards a better world. “As people throw up barriers between them and raw nature, taking off ones shoes may be the act that most readily reminds one of what they really are. They are not in

a relationship with the Earth: they are the Earth. It is us.” (Cawood 43) “Walking is the great adventure, the first meditation, a practice of heartiness and soul primary to humankind. Walking is the exact balance of spirit and humility. Out walking, one notices ecology on the level where it counts.” (Snyder 61) To be surrounded by such a splendid beauty is a delight and a privilege.

Poems such as William Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” and Robert Frost’s “Birches”, infused with the love of nature and flush with her beauties, spark the kind of “imaginative engagement” that, as Slovic argues, is “the first step toward active concern” (365). It is not just enough to feel sentimental about nature or to argue the fact whether human beings are in the midst of an ecological crisis; but, to find one’s way back into nature through enlightenment and motivation.

Modern life has become ugly. The wellsprings of creativity have become tarnished with sterility and falsity. Something has died in the human soul; that, man’s collective consciousness no longer soars, but wallows in swamps of mediocrity. Mankind cannot say they were not warned; the voices of the poets and artists were as eloquent as they were unheeded; warning man that the prize of industrialized anarchy would be the destruction of humankind. Time has already exposed the deep fissures in man’s relationship with the Almighty, fellow humans and the earth. Satish Kumar in the magazine Resurgence says, “Scientists can point out the facts, but only poets can create a new culture.” (Kumar 3)

Throughout history, it has been poets, philosophers, religious leaders, and revolutionaries who have asked human beings to re-examine their values, their relationships, their purposes and the way they live. Literature deals with the true interests of humanity, its recurring problems and the deep joys and fears of the human heart. Technology can become outdated but not literature. Unlike technology, literature deals with human emotions which are profound and universally

felt. Though the twenty-first century has seen an expansion in information technology, yet literature has its perennial relevance in the hearts of mankind.

Ecological critics have questioned the very purpose of imaginative literature in an age when the environmental crisis is on the rise. For example, Jonathan Bate in his book *The Song of the Earth*, enquires: “What are poets for?” (243). Likewise, James C. McKusick asks: “Should poetry be engaged with social and political issues, or should it offer merely a pleasant diversion?” (199) In the face of impending doom of our planetary ecosystem, James C. McKusick says, “What is needed is not a quick technological fix.” “Poetry can lead to the interrogation of fundamental ethical values” (200) and Jonathan Bate argues, “The business of literature is to work upon consciousness” (23). Poetry is an objective that requires human ingenuity, human warmth and imagination. It is man’s imagination that has created the world he lives in and it is only by thinking imaginatively that he will resolve his critical situation. Ultimately, it is up to man to re-imagine his world.

Poetry moves man in ways that prose cannot. Poetry can transport man to new and unexpected ways of experiencing life. Reading poems by previous generation poets are not simply ways of escaping from reality, they have a meaningful relevance in today’s world. They help man to go to the far edges of familiar territory, and so take him to the fringes of an understanding of the unknown, of the other. (The quality of this experience is in proportion to ones capacity to ‘read’ the poets). In another sense, man’s response to poetry is in proportion to the quality of his connection with the natural world. As the North American poet Mary Oliver observes, “It is obvious that the literature of our world cannot be read – felt as well as understood – without a familiarity with the natural world” (Strickland 18). Reading and listening to poetry, then, can among other things sharpen and deepen man’s appreciation of nature.

Poems do not become obsolete, but speak to each generation in a way that persists in being new. In doing so, they help man to understand his interdependence with the countless and constantly changing ideas and systems that give shape to the world; man's transience; his need to listen deeper; to listen differently. After all, what poetry does is simple: they move humanity. Poetry alone may not save man, but at least it can encourage him to tread softly.

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