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Nature and Mysticism in Wordsworth's and Whitman's poetry

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Abstract

Nature and natural phenomena always inspire scientists, saints, poets and philosophers throughout civilizations to introspect. Among the great western poets Wordsworth from England and Walt Whitman from America stand most close to nature than anyone else. This article tries to compare these great poets of nature. If for Wordsworth nature is a teacher, for Whitman nature is a preacher. Wordsworth broods over nature being close to it but not part of it. Wordsworth often contemplates nature. Whitman worships. But both the poets lived with nature through their poetic expressions. But being in different spaces made them a little different. These poets were preoccupied with the themes of spirit, nature, immortality, mysticism and similar things. Although they wrote about more than two hundred years ago, their ideals are as relevant today as they were in their times. Observing the crisis of these times, the only hope to free ourselves from its ill effects is to seek shelter in their ideals. They have the power to free man from the disillusionment with the present times. Their poetry can never become obsolete. That is the reason why I pursued this article, to show how they are relevant in our times.

Keywords- *Nature, Whitman, Wordsworth, Mysticism, Immortality*

Race, milieu and moment, proclaimed, a French Scholar Hippolyte Taine in his introductory chapter of his history of English Literature published in 1863. The poet is the product of his space and time. He is most responsive and impulsive of his environment because of curious insight and restless spirit of enquiry. It is this aspect of his character that makes him a poet. This influence of environment is the reason why poets of different spaces and times are similar in majority of characters. Among the vast number of groups of poets sharing similar aspects; none can deny the closeness of the literary legends who laid their stamps on the annals of literature for ages and ages to come, namely William Wordsworth and Walt Whitman. Both poets, more or less, were the products of their own worlds and times of

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similar situations. Both the poets were live witness to the greatest turbulent times of world history. Wordsworth witnessed the French revolution that shook the whole world. Other witnessed the greatest lessons ever witnessed in history of world civilization for the cause of equalitarian and unified society in the form of American Civil War. Both were witnessing the rapid transformation of rural societies into urban infrastructure due to industrialization. Both lived with the nature with the religious zeal, were active participants in the political causes, worked to redress the evil effects of the great revolutions. Whitman nursed the wounded soldiers from both sides. When French revolution was going uncontrolled like a rampant horse making people disillusioned with slogans of liberty, equality and fraternity Wordsworth came as a rescue to withhold its evil dimensions. In short it can be said that no two poets are as comparable as these legends of Western Civilization.

Still we can't keep aside some of the distinctions between them. Wordsworth witnessed revolution in his very young age and Whitman was mature enough when he witnessed the American Civil War. This aspect of observation and then its expression is conspicuous in their works. As both poets were the great patrons of nature still we can find out some distinct qualities of them in relation to nature, Wordsworth was in veneration with nature, Whitman's ecstasy is felt in his every poem. If for word worth nature was a great teacher for Whitman nature was a preacher. Wordsworth separated his self from nature in his contemplation on nature, Whitman rejoiced in nature as a part of it. Wordsworth worshipped Whitman rejoiced nature in fit of ecstasy. If Wordsworth says

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of a man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

Whitman Says

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you reckon'd the earth much?
Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?
Have you felt you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?
Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems...

Wordsworth venerated and worshipped nature, worry beading through his reminiscences. It seems that he was humming nature through his heart. The visions of nature were reverberating through this soul and spirit. He got ecstatic to say about his reminiscence of nature thus:

For oft when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood
They flash upon my inward eye

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That is the bliss of solitude.

These lines remind us that Wordsworth's intimacy with nature was the only thing that he loved in his solitude. Simply he was in love with nature. For him nature was not just it is. He proclaimed that nature was the greatest philosopher. Nature has so much to teach mankind, it is the hub of knowledge and understanding. Nature has lessons for mankind at every step. Humility, patience, selfless and unbiased service, contentment for being what you are, are the core teaching of nature. Enlightenment is to seek from nature what it teaches, as he says:

Come forth into the light of things,
Let nature be your teacher.

Apart from being a universal teacher, Wordsworth considers nature also to be a great educator. In this sense he can be compared with Rabindra Nath Tagore. As he says in his poem *Tables Turned*:

Book! 'tis a dull and endless strife;
Come, here the woodland linnel,
There is more of wisdom in it.
And hark! How blithe the thorn sings
He, too is no mean preacher.

In his letter to his sister Dorothy he tells, "nature never did betray the heart that loved her". At the first stage of evolution of his thought Wordsworth found pleasure in roaming about in the midst of nature. He wandered about wherever nature led him. His wanderings in the midst of nature are described by him as glad animal movement" and the joy he enjoyed in the midst of nature is called a coarse pleasure. In prelude 1 he says:

Oh, many a time, have I a five year child,
In a small mill - race revered from his stream
Made one long bathing of a summer's day,
Basked in the sun and plunged and basked again.

Then he says:

Had sun abroad in wantonness to sport.
A naked savage, in thunder shower.

At the second stage nature was purely physical, sensual and aesthetic. The picturesque - nature i.e. mountains, multicolored and multi-fragrant flowers and noisy waterfalls and murmuring streams haunted him thoughtlessly like a passion. In "Tintern Abbey" he says:

..... The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountains and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colors and their forms, were then to me,
An appetite; and feeling, and a love,

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That had no need of a remote charm

At the final stage Wordsworth's love for nature attained a spiritual and intellectual model and he realized nature's role as a guardian. He now becomes thoughtful as he now sees the sufferings of mankind as he heard the still sad music of humanity. In the "Immortality Ode" he says:

To me the meanest flower that blows can give

Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

He now as a pantheist found a latent but significant, spiritual communication and communion between man and nature. He realizes the lining presence of nature in all objects of nature.

Walt Whitman's poetry is living force, full of vital energy. The thoughts are full of reverberating ecstatic energy. He speaks about nature as a part of it. The reader is as important as the poem and the writer. In his "Song of Myself" he celebrates and rejoices nature as a pagan priest. He says:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul

I learn and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, formed from this soil, the air,

Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parent the same,

I, now thirty seven years old in perfect health begin,

Hoping to cease not till death.

Here we confirm to this pantheistic regard of poet's self with the nature. He is enchanted by the sheer unity of his soul and self with every aspect of nature. He believes nature to be a living soul, Christ Personified, Allah ordained, the Brahma specified and the 'over soul' transcendentalized. As against it Wordsworth passively and soberly yet passionately venerates nature. Whitman expresses actively and with great vehemence. Estranged with the sheer diversity of singularity and invites the reader to actively participate in his veneration of nature as a preacher. Inviting his reader he says next:

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left)

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.

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Here he projects the pragmatic notion of education; to educate ourselves, with our own introspection. Whitman has a dynamic sense of the species and its changes, so it is a challenge to speak to all the human differences between people. "I resist anything better than my own diversity," he says, because this voice can sing from any part of the country or the population. Whitman had a grasp better than Thoreau and his contemporary naturalists of the said nature and the human community. His friend John Burroughs has an exceptional essay that shows how walking out of our homes, we extend ourselves into nature as far as we range in our habit. Thoreau celebrated at the end of his life how the plant reaches itself out in the dispersal of its seeds.

Here we infer that both were dedicated naturalist poets. In today's world their poetry is all that can get stand on the stage of eco-criticism. Ecocriticism is baseless and empty without acknowledging the contribution of these two legends. They were conscious of nature and natural environment when world was blinded by the rapid industrial development.

Shamsi Farzana writes about Whitman's poetry, "His poems on nature show the harmony in nature that has a halo of mysticism. An ideal poet, he believed that he is the poet of man first then of nature and finally of the God. These elements are united by the poet's harmonious missionary power. He intuitively comprehends the great mysteries of life, birth, death, and resurrection and play, the part of a priest and a prophet for mankind."

Like Persian poet Whitman refers to the images of the sea as the primeval source of life in which man seeks to be submerged in order to be immortal. Their source of love is presented by boundless images of the sea. For them this is the love that gives humankind an immortal soul. As he says:

Bathe me O God in thee, mounting to thee,
I and my soul to range in range of thee.

O Thou transcendent
Nameless, fiber and breath
Light of the light, shedding forth universes thou centre of them
Though mightier centre of true, the good, the loving,
Thou moral, spiritual fountain - affections sources – then reservoir,
(O pensive soul of me – O thirst unsatisfied waitest not there?
Waitest not haply for us somewhere there the comrade perfect)

Theme of immortality of spirit is the major preoccupation with Wordsworth. He regards spirit as being the indestructible part of existence. Whether it is her LUCY who dies at an infant age 'he finds her soul spirit roaming over the vales and moors of the woodlands or his own self in Prelude, the spirit is immortal. In Prelude Book 1 he writes:

Dust as we are, the immortal spirits grows
Like harmony in music; there is a dark

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Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements; makes them cling together
In one society.

These verses take us to the spiritual wisdom of the east and we assume that Wordsworth was acquainted with eastern philosophy. It directly reflects that he believed in the immortality of spirit in us. Referring to the triviality of material body, he remains concerned with the spiritual dimension of self. Like a Sufi Saint he long for the union with the eternal being and writes:

Wisdom and spirit to the universe
Thou soul that art the eternity of thought
That givest to forms and images a breath

Wanderers, solitary travelers are the speakers of Wordsworth's poems who experience and speak of the vastness and beauty of natural world. Moving from place to place allows the wanderer to make discoveries about his self, allowing him to transcend his present circumstances. I wandered lonely as a cloud, I travelled among unknown men, refer to his quest for the adventures through mysterious lands.

Death and afterlife are the major preoccupations of Whitman's poetry after his mystical aspirations. These themes are found in his major poems in addition to his three elegiac compositions "As I Ebb'd with the ocean of life," "Out of the cradle endlessly Rocking", "When Lilacs last in the Dooryard Bloomed."

The astounding aspect of Whitman's poetry is that we can't find the dead so lively and full of energy in his poetry anywhere else. He reconnects them with the living and finds resurrection in death. In his celebrated poem, Ashes of Soldiers he writes:

Faces so pale with wondrous eyes,
Very dear, gather closer yet,
Draw close, but speak not.

....

Sweet are the blooming cheeks of the living – sweet are the musical voices sounding,

But sweet, ah sweet are the dead with their silent eyes..

Walt Whitman considers man and spirit as the major themes of his verse. He addresses the God as the original source of love in his "Passage to India". For Whitman, the human spirit is holy inside as well as outside. The divinity of human nature is beyond all religions. Whitman also in section 1024 of "song myself" calls himself a kosmos and divine:

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,
Divine and inside and out, and I make holy whatever
I touch or am touched from,
The scent of those arm pits aroma five than prayer,

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Whitman also seeks his appointed “rendezvous” with his “Lord”, the great comrade”, in these lines of “Song of Myself”

My rendezvous is appointed, it is certain,
The lord will be there and wait till I come on perfect terms,
The great comrade, the lover true of whom I pine will be there.

Whitman, like the Persian Sufi Poets, sees God in the “faces of men and women”. The American poet sees something of God, each moment, everywhere. Therefore, he is not curious about him. He clearly chants his vision of God:

And I say to mankind, be not curious about God
For I who am curious about each am not
Curious about God,
(No array of terms can say how much I am
At peace about God and about death)
I hear and behold God in every object, yet
Understand God not in the least.

On conclusion it is worthwhile to mention that those poets are spiritually obsessive and inquisitive about the epistemological notions of the existence. Two legends of western civilization have given their searching analysis to nature and its mystical implications on human civilization. No other poet can imitate the standards of romantic veneration of nature and natural phenomena as have done by Wordsworth and Whitman. Their poetry is the foundation of spiritual alleviation as well as eco-criticism. No one has venerated and versified nature as they have. Both were active in the preventing the ill effects of wars and revolutions during their times. Modern civilization is so much in need of such personalities to remove its maladies which dark to its core.

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