

Land Ethics in the Poetry of Robert Frost

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Abstract: The role of the poets, if Octavio Paz, the Mexican Nobel Laureate is to be believed, extends to “prevent the end of history”. In the trying times of ecological crisis, the present paper takes up an ecocritical perusal of the poetry of one of the most cherished poets of America, Robert Frost, in order to find out how effective literature, poetry in particular, remains in the face of changing times. Frost’s characters make a living out of nature. So, it is necessary to know what attitude guides their actions in their dealings with nature – “anthropocentric” or “biocentric”? Do the characters in his poetry show any sort of ethical responsibility to the nonhuman natural world? Can his poetry make any fruitful contribution in fields of environmental education or Environmental Ethics? The endeavour, on the whole, is to find out if his poetry propounds “an ecological vision” that can be helpful in preventing the impending apocalypse staring humanity in the face.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Biocentricism, Environmental Ethics, Land Ethics.

The poets... teach us that literature is an enormous, ever increasing, wonderfully diverse storehouse of creative and cooperative energy which can never be used up. It is like the gene-pool, like the best ecosystems. Literature is a true cornucopia, thanks to the continuous generosity of the poets, who generate this energy out of themselves, requiring and usually receiving very little in return over and above the feedback from the creative act itself. (William Rueckert 116)

There is no doubt about the relevance of literature in any age as there can be none about the “generosity of the poets.” Poets, as all writers and artists, are the keepers of the society’s conscience, giving voice to what is wrong and what is right in the society, chronicling it and holding up a mirror to the society when it goes astray. It is perhaps because of their role as conscience keepers that Ray Dasmann in *Planet in Peril* says that, “It is the business of those who direct the activities that will shape tomorrow’s world to think beyond today’s well-being and provide for tomorrow” (qtd. in Rueckert 105).

What necessitates the generosity of the poets today is the fact that humanity is on the verge of apocalypse or “ecological suicide,” as Rueckert calls it. What started as the destruction of nature, led by man’s paradoxical attitude toward nature, boomeranged on man and now has reached a point of no return. The varied reasons that have misled man in his perception of himself and

nature range from religious to philosophical to literary traditions within the Western culture. The time, however, now is not to ponder over the reasons that have led man toward his self-destruction, but, as Dana Phillips very wisely says, “Today’s cultural energy must be largely devoted to coping with the negative effects of yesterday’s; the symbols and successes of fifty years ago are often today’s environmental disasters, and may prove harder to repair or unmake than they were to create, hard as that may have been” (222).

So, in order to harness something positive from the cultural energy, we take refuge in literature and join hands with the ecocritics, most of whose efforts are directed towards evaluating “texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis” (Richard Kerridge 5). This paper analyses Robert Frost’s poetry with the intention of finding out if, as a response to the present environmental crisis, his poetry is coherent and useful. In Frost’s case it becomes all the more pertinent to find out whether his poetry reveals the right kind of relationship with nature or environment that the people can live by, as the characters in his poetry make a living out of land. Finally, the whole exercise is to find in his poetry a model towards a new “ecological vision.”

“In ecology,” William Rueckert has very rightly pointed out, “man’s tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate and exploit every natural thing” (113). The Western civilization is looking for a new ethics, “with responsibility for nature lying at its centre (ecocentric view)” and at the same time, “a more realistic philosophy,” which according to John Passmore, “is the only adequate foundation for effective ecological concern” (136, 141). Aldo Leopold’s “land ethics” has found some acceptance in environmental ethics as a more realistic philosophy of nature which is based on more practical conception of nature that takes into consideration the changed environment.

It is interesting to note, as Michael J. McDowell has asserted in his essay that Frost’s characters “conduct themselves according to a sort of unspoken land ethic” (97). Frost’s characters, like the gum gatherer in the poem by the same name, find it immoral to take from nature more than “necessary for immediate, personal need” (McDowell 97). McDowell finds in Frost’s poetry that his characters are fully aware that it is “the scale on which human beings go against nature [that] makes all the difference in the world” and moderation in their dealings with nature seems to be the right way to live, as it is in “New Hampshire” (98), the people cannot think of things like “Diamonds/And apples in commercial quantities”; “It never could have happened in New Hampshire.” They can’t even think of their own gold in “commercial quantities” and there is:

Just enough gold to make the engagement rings
And marriage rings for those who owned the farm.
What gold more innocent could one have asked for? (162, 113-115)

Greed has no place in Frost's poetic world. In the "Christmas Trees," when a stranger from the city comes to the owner's (of the Christmas trees) door to buy his "young fir balsams," the person is amazed because he hadn't thought of his woods, which he calls "my woods," as "Christmas trees." He was not tempted, even for a moment, to sell them because it would have left the landscape of that place barren. He knew the importance of those trees for that place

To sell them off their feet to go in cars
And leave the slope behind the house all bare,
Where the sun shines now no warmer than the moon. (17-19)

The trees act as a shield from the direct heat of the sun and balance its warmth. He lets the stranger have a look at his trees but he is determined from the very beginning that the stranger should not expect that he is going to let him have them. His determination becomes stronger when the stranger puts the worth of his thousand trees at thirty dollars

...thirty dollars seemed so small beside
The extent of pasture I should strip... (47-48)

The person seems to be guided by his duty towards maintaining the harmony of that place by not falling into the trap of commercialization. It is difficult for an outsider to comprehend the ethics of a place.

Frost's poems show that not to succumb to one's greed assists in maintaining a harmonious relation with nature. One of the speakers in "Blueberries" finds Patterson to be quite selfish for hoarding all the blueberries for himself and his large Loren family. However, the other speaker finds Patterson working in compliance with nature and it is right, too:

...It's a nice way to live,
Just taking what nature is willing to give,
Not forcing her hand with harrow and plow. (54-56)

Lorens consider it their sole right to pick berries from that place and the speaker justifies their behavior. The speaker "won't complain" because, according to the ethics of the land they live in, it is wrong to transgress into the fields of others; boundaries ought to be maintained.

According to the ethics of the place, to claim other's property might be wrong, but the traveller in "Unharvested," earnestly wishes

May something go always unharvested!
May much stay out of our stated plan,
Apples and something forgotten and left,
So smelling their sweetness would be no theft. (11-14)

He was tempted to deviate from his “routine road” by “a scent of ripeness from over a wall” and he stopped before an apple tree “that had eased itself of its summer load, / and of all but its trivial foliage free.” The apples in “one circle of solid red” showed the bounty of the harvest for the owner. Therefore, the traveller feels “smelling their sweetness would be no theft.” The apples, thus, became a source of pleasure for people other than their owner.

To Leopold, it is human instinct to appreciate natural beauty. While making his famous statement, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise”, he has been urging his reader to take into account not just economics but what is ethically and aesthetically right as well (224-25). Some things are valued for their purpose other than the utilitarian aspects. The utilitarian streak of man can be corrected by making him realize that nature has its intrinsic value; it exists for purposes other than utility.

In the Introduction to *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold has written that “the land can survive the impact of mechanized man and man can reap from it the esthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture only when the humans see land as a community to which they belong and may begin to use it with love and respect” (viii). He found it “inconceivable ... that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land” (223). He proposed treatment of land as an extension of ethics. “All ethics,” according to Leopold, “so far revolved around a central premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts” and “[t]he land ethic,” according to him, “simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.... In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow members, and also respect for the community as such” (200).

The “our” and “ours” that Robert Frost has used in his poems in relation to his brooks, fields and place do not tell about his persona’s dominion over the place, rather it brings out the sense of community that his characters share with the objects in nature. His characters are particularly fond of their brooks and know the course that their brook would take. Take for instance, the speaker in the poem “Hyla Brook” who knows that by June the Hyla brook would have “run out of song and speed” and all that would remain of the brook would be “A brook to none but who remember long.” Still, the speaker feels “We love the things we love for what they are” because of the bond with them. (119)

In the autumn season all the wells in the place have dried up and the persona along with a group of his friends sets out “to seek the brook”; they need no excuse to draw water from the brook:

...because the fields were *ours*,
And by the brook *our* woods were there.
 (“Going for Water” 18, 7-8, emphasis added)

They lead a life of dependence on the entities of nature – the fields, the woods and obviously the brook. Because the speaker and his friends, all belong to the same place and are bound by the same values, they share the same experience:

Each laid on other a staying hand
To listen ere we dared to look,
And in the hush we joined to make
We heard, we knew we heard the brook. (18, 17-20)

They all could hear the brook and relate to it because as Philip Gerber writes, “Clear running water [was] emblematic of the life-gift of the natural world” for all of them (159). They all realized their dependence upon running water “not only for material subsistence” but it was also for all of them something “in nature we are from” and, therefore, they felt it their duty that “the woods-hidden brook” must be kept clear and flowing at all costs (Gerber 162). The couple in the poem “West-Running Brook” also realizes the importance of the brook in their life: “It is from that in water we were from / Long, long before we were from any creature” (40-41).

The characters in Frost’s poetry, in their dealing with their land, bring out the same qualities which Ray Dasmann has attributed to “ecosystem people,” the communities which have “the practical knowledge of the place they live in: those are communities ‘totally dependent, or largely so, on the animals and plants of a particular area,’ deeply accustomed to that area and in stable, sustainable relation to the local ecosystem” (qtd. in Kerridge 137). In Frost’s case, the other elements of nature like the brook, the mountains, the fields, etc., can also be added with whom the characters in his poetry share an intimate relationship.

The characters in Frost’s poetic world possess the wider conception of community, an attitude which is the proper content of Environmental Ethics. And this conception of community comes from the fact that they recognized their dependence on nature. In Frost’s note to F. S. Flint written in July, 1913, he asks Flint:

Did I reach you with the poems[?] . . . Did I give you the feeling of and for the independent-dependence of the kind of people I like to write about[?] (qtd.in. Sanders 74)

The people Frost wrote about led a life of dependence on their landscape. The characters in his poetry see themselves as members of the environmental community and appreciate their dependencies on natural elements.

The people are considerate towards the non-animate entities. They extend the same love and concern to their animals, which they domesticate for purposes other than merely earning money from them. Andrew Cohen in his essay “Dependent Relationships and the Moral Standing of Nonhuman Animals,” raises the sceptical issue whether dependent relationships among human beings and nonhuman animals can justify an animal’s moral standing and he is optimistic that “if

dependencies generate reasons for extending direct moral consideration, such reasons will admit of significant variations in scope and stringency” in the ethics that govern man’s relation with animals and which make man treat animals only as resources to be exploited (1).

In the poem, “The Housekeeper,” John’s dependence on cocks and hens is for monetary purposes: he earns his living by cock fighting. But even when he is offered good money for his cocks and hens, he is not willing to sell them

He never takes the money. If they’re worth
That much to sell, they’re worth as much to keep (140-141).

His dependence on cocks and hens for money might be a yardstick to justify his refusal to sell them. But his denial to sell them for more money and the way he has instructed the other people to treat his animals with care, speaks of the moral standing he accords to his animals. As claimed by the woman

... You don’t know what a gentle lot we are:
We wouldn’t hurt a hen! You ought to see us
Moving a flock of hens from place to place.
We are not allowed to take them upside down,
All we can hold together by the legs.
Two at a time’s the rule, one on each arm,
No matter how far and how many times
We have to go.(124-131)

John does not treat his domesticated animals as resources to be exploited but as a part of the community in which they have moral standing and consequently a moral value and, therefore have a right to be treated in a just way.

J. Baird Callicott thinks that “we do in fact have duties and obligations – implied by the essentially communitarian premises of the land ethic – to domesticate animals, as well as to wild fellow-members of the biotic community and to the biotic community as a whole” and, as members of what Mary Midgley calls the “mixed” community, “Farm animals, work animals, and pets have entered into a kind of implicit social contract with us which lately we have abrogated” (29). This might explain the unusual behaviour of the cow in the poem “The Cow in Apple Time.” The cow has, perhaps, been forsaken by its owner because “her udder shrivels and the milk goes dry” and now

She runs from tree to tree where lie and sweeten
The windfalls spiked with stubble and worm-eaten.
She leaves them bitten when she has to fly.
She bellows on a knoll against the sky. (7-10)

The owner has been mean, but this is not the way animals are usually treated in Frost's poetic world. In Frost's poetry, people consider domesticated farm animals as an essential part of the "mixed" community and this is demonstrated in the poem "The Runaway," in which a colt is out in the open while it is snowing. Being a domesticated animal the colt is not used to such weather:

I think the little fellow's afraid of the snow.
He isn't winter-broken. It isn't play
With the little fellow at all. He's running away.
I doubt if even his mother could tell him, 'Sakes,
It's only weather.' He'd think she didn't know! (9-13)

The people have deep concern for the domesticated animal

Whoever it is that leaves him out so late,
When other creatures have gone to stall and bin,
Ought to be told to come and take him in. (19-21)

The colt is out in the open in the winter and the people who look at him are angry at the owner who has let the colt out in such an inclement weather.

Even when the people inhabiting Frost's world are not dependent on animals or birds for whatsoever reason, they treat them with concern considering it their moral duty as revealed in the poem "The Exposed Nest." The speaker found the persona bent low in the poem. First, he thought that he was up to some new play. Then, he thought he was busy with his hay but he found that his real concern was

...a nest full of young birds on the ground
The cutter bar had just gone champing over
(Miraculously without tasting flesh)
And left defenseless to the heat and light.
You wanted to restore them to their right. (13-17)

Though they

...saw the risk we took in doing good,
But dared not spare to do the best we could
Though harm should come of it; so built the screen
You had begun, and given them back their shade.
All this to prove we cared. (27-31)

Val Plumwood has found that “special relationships with, care for, or empathy with particular aspects of nature as experiences rather than with nature as abstraction are essential to provide a depth and type of concern that is not otherwise possible.” “Care and responsibility for particular animals, trees, and rivers that are known well, loved, and appropriately connected to the self are,” according to her, “an important basis for acquiring a wider, more generalized concern”(7).

Thus, in Frost’s poetry, all the components of the environment are bound in a community. His poetic world is inhabited by the people who extend moral consideration to all animate as well as non-animate entities. They possess an ecological attitude which is conducive to fostering an ethical outlook towards nature. In their relationship with the environment, Frost’s characters are guided by their land ethic which can help conventional Western philosophy focus on the “broad human ethical responsibility to the nonhuman natural world” (Callicott 223). Frost’s poetry can be helpful in various fields of action such as environmental education, sustainable development and most importantly in environmental ethics. Thus, Robert Frost’s incessant role as a conscience-keeper for a whole generation of Americans, literature lovers, lovers of nature and now even for the custodians of planet Earth, stands irrefutable.

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