

Negotiating Environmental Ethics in the Writings of Rousseau and Wordsworth

Mongolsing Rongphar¹, Professor Bishnu Charan Dash²

¹Guest Faculty Department of English Assam University: Diphu Campus Karbi Anglong, Assam

²Department of English Assam University, Diphu Campus Karbi Anglong, Assam

ABSTRACT: Ethics is usually defined as the ‘science of character’ that shapes human conduct, character and personality. Environmental Ethics on the other hand is foregrounded upon the moral relationship of the human world on the one hand and the natural world/environment on the other. In the backdrop of the galloping growth of civilization, science, industry and technology, the global environment has been decidedly threatened by deforestation, desertification, environmental pollutions of all types and above all a violent assault on nature and environment. In the light of the above discussion, the present paper purports to analyze the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth’s eco-sensibility and environmental consciousness which was profoundly influenced by the French Philosopher Rousseau’s principle of Environmental Ethics as postulated in his *First Discourse on Inequality* and the novel *Emile*. An analysis of Wordsworth’s selected poems like ‘Tintern Abbey’, ‘Lucy Poems’, ‘Michael’, ‘Old Cumberland Beggar’ etc reveals that Wordsworth, Like Rousseau, interrogates the ‘Social man’ and the ‘economic man’ and makes a powerful plea for nourishing the pristine purity of the natural man so as to vindicate an eco-centric approach to nature and environment rather than an anthropocentric vision of destruction and exploitation of nature for gross gratification of materialistic desires.

Keywords: Ecocentric, Anthropocentric, Natural man, Environmental Ethics, Environmental Consciousness, Pristine Purity.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ethics is a branch of philosophy based on values, and derived from the Greek root ‘ethica’ which comes closer to ‘ethos’. It points to custom, habits or habitual conduct on man. As moral philosophy, it is defined as the science of character and conduct. Environmental ethics on the other hand is associated with issues and principles pertaining to the moral relationship between human world and its environment. Of late, environmentalists all over the world realized that with the rapid advancement of civilization and galloping growth of science, technology, industry and commerce, global environment has been decidedly threatened by pollution, population explosion, deforestation, violence and cruelty on Nature. A polluted environment not only affects our health of both body and mind, but endangers the future of mankind too. Under the circumstances, value based environmental education can go a long way to remind each and every human being of his/her obligations and responsibilities toward the natural world. One must realize that nature nourishes the human world like a kind mother by providing all the resources for leading a beautiful life and one therefore, should respect and protect her in return. Respect for nature and understanding of the fundamentals of environmental ethics can help create conducive atmosphere of involvement and a sense of togetherness between man and environment. Keeping this objective in view, the present paper is designed to discover how nature and the fundamentals of environment were adulated by Rousseau and Wordsworth in their poetry and philosophy.

Environment is as such viewed in various ways by different people. A Goudie (1984), for example maintains that environment is the representative of physical components of the earth wherein human beings play an important role. The holistic approach formulated by Jan Smuts and Harrison Browns entails that environment is an interlocked and inseparable whole and that it is constituted by the interacting systems of physical (abiotic), biological (biotic) and cultural elements that are interlinked individually as well as collectively in myriads ways. Whereas the physical elements embodying space, water, climate, soil, rocks and minerals determine the variable character of the human habitat, biological elements, accommodating plants, animals and man constitute floral and faunal environments. Cultural elements involving economic, social and political implications are essentially man-made features which go into the making of cultural milieu. It is the interaction among these environmental conditions that produces a ‘physical man’, a ‘social man’ and an ‘economic man’. The ‘physical man’ is obviously bent on air, water, land and food and releases waste into the ecosystem, whereas the ‘social man’ forms social institutions and organizations and formulates laws and

principles. Lastly, the 'economic man' tends to utilize the environmental resources with his skills and technologies. So long as this utilization is in harmony with the natural environment, the ecosystem continues normally. But the irony is that with the march of civilization large scale deforestation, desertification, population explosion, environmental pollution of all types together with global warming have posed formidable threats to the healthy working of the ecosystem. As a result, several environmental problems have cropped up and hence the importances of environmental ethics and value-based environmental education have become unavoidable to overcome the crisis.

In the hoary past, the environment of early man embodied the abiotic and biotic elements only because he was connected with land, air, Water, plants and animals. Obviously, the man-nature relationship was then determined by what the environmentalist called "wilderness ethics". This primordial ethics encompasses the thought that man and nature should be in perfect harmony. But, unfortunately this harmony was hampered when the 'economic man' invaded nature for realizing profit out of nature. In other words nature/natural environment was ruthlessly exploited for utilitarian purpose. The idea is strongly reminiscent of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, wherein the protagonist establishes himself as a 'colonial man' and an 'independent-economic-man' (*homo economicus*) by making use of Nature for his personal gain. Before the emergence of the 'economic man', 'social man' and 'cultural man', the earth was full of wild natural resources, and the physical environment was in 'natural state' and the early man enjoyed a state of natural simplicity. With the growth of civilization the natural world was converted into farms and colonies, cities and towns and socio-economic establishments. The Industrial Revolution and the two devastating World Wars have shattered the immaculate man-nature relationship and in the novels of Charles Dickens's (*Bleak House, Hard Times etc*), the ills and wounds of industrialization have been poignantly brought to the fore. This sordid state of affairs is caused precisely by the economic man who, well-equipped with superior technology, continued and still continues to exploit and assault nature and environment. Among the romantics, Rousseau, the French philosopher and Wordsworth, the English poet of nature, expounded the theory of 'Natural man' and 'Noble savage' which corresponds to the ethics of wilderness.

Rousseau, the champion of freedom in French Revolution (1779), holds that the perfectibility of man, his freedom and happiness all depend on a clear understanding of the laws of nature. It is because of limited perspective and inadequate knowledge that human beings act contrary to their nature by, establishing a 'social order' that violates their basic nature. Rousseau's primary objective was, therefore, to find a social order whose laws were in great harmony with the fundamental laws of Nature. Therefore, he postulates the concept of man in a state of Nature imbibing the pristine qualities of primitivism and noble savage. He argues that a 'social man' doing violence to Nature and harm to 'natural man' should really know something about the 'natural man' and one can understand a 'natural man' only when one lives outside the complex and materialistic society. This obviously points to Rousseau's clarion call to 'return to the lap of Nature'. Rousseau's ecological stance can be aptly vindicated on the basis of an analysis of his *First Discourse (The Discourse on the Sciences and Arts, 1750)* and his novel *Emile (1762)*. In these two texts Rousseau argues that the complex go of civilization has gradually contaminated the natural man/the noble savage who originally symbolizes humanities innate goodness – a state of naturalness. As long as the noble savage or the natural man resides in the state of nature the bond of man with nature remains intact. Rousseau attacks humanities recourse to science and technologies which compromises the balance between biotic and abiotic elements, which constitutes a sound ecosystem. With the establishment of organized modern society the natural man is metamorphosed into a 'political man', a 'social man', and an 'economic man' and becomes somewhat artificial on being driven by unnatural impulses. Obviously then, the artificial man gradually alienate himself from the natural world and natural gift of simplicity, innocence, and civility in order to nourish cruelty and hostility, jealousy and envy, contempt and malice to dominate environment on the one hand and the human on the other. In book IV of his novel *Emile* under the section professor of faith, Rousseau's student starts with his spiritual education intimately bound to the natural environment which finally establishes him as an idealize natural man, uncorrupted by modern society (*Emile* 437-8). As an exponent of criticism Rousseau brought to the fore the dichotomy between a natural man and a complex man through the difference between amour propre and amour de soi –the former bedevils humanity by his complexity and the latter stance for self preservation of human goodness. Rousseau maintains that amour propre facilitates man's vanity and insatiable greed which is responsible for the crisis in man-nature relationship. To be precise, Rousseau's emphasis on naturalness and innate human goodness formulated a solid basis for environmental ethics which exercise tremendous influence on his poetical son William Wordsworth and also on the champion of 'Deep Ecology' and 'Romantic Ecology'- Arne Naes and Jonathan Bate respectively.

Rousseau's concept of man in the state of Nature is a hypothetical construct, a heuristic device, which divests man, at least theoretically, of his social and cultural aspects. But, he believes that the concept of natural man can serve as a yardstick to measure the degree of repression imposed by a specific society. The natural man is defined as 'simpleton' divested of what he has acquired in society- socially, economically and culturally.

Though it is somewhat difficult, if not impossible, to attain this state, Rousseau suggests that one can observe animals in their natural habitat to gain insight into natural behavior uninfluenced by society. At the same time, one can study primitive people, the noble savage—their serene smile, coyness, rustic simplicity, natural beauty, unsophisticated dress and speech and above all their pristine purity and immaculate joy in mind, heart and soul. The more one tends to become a ‘social man’, the greater is the degree of selfishness one experiences from moment to moment. Exploitation looms large and then discriminations and inequalities come about. The state of ‘social man’ is incompatible with ‘natural man’ in the sense that the former deforms, pollutes and bedevils the qualities of the latter. In the society of inequals, ‘social contract’ is based on selfishness and mutual need and even greed. Rousseau writes:

You need me, for I am rich and you are poor. Let us therefore make a contract with one another.” (Cassirer, 1951). Such a contract is absurd and devoid of an ethical foundation and therefore Rousseau points to the ‘State of Nature’ which needs the ‘natural man’ whose desires are purely physical—food, a mate and rest. In that state, harmony is achieved between his internal nature and external Nature and the internal nature remains self-content (tripta) and hence, the question of war, greed for power and materialistic accomplishment at the cost of natural world and destructive passions like jealousy, malice and revenge do not arise at all. No doubt, the ‘natural man’ is solitary and egoistic but unlike the ‘social man’ he is not a victim of robbery, domination, exploitation and war which is a social institution. In the state of Nature, men are in many respects like other animals and do not get traditional form of education, but pure education from Nature, their greatest teacher. Rousseau was thus a naturalist, an environmentalist and a primitivist.

William Wordsworth imbibed in his poetry the Rousseauistic spirit of ‘natural man’, ‘noble savage’, ‘return to Nature; and man in the state of Nature’. Of all the English Romantic poets, Wordsworth was an ardent devotee and a high-priest of Nature for whom she is a goddess, a kind mother, a healing balm, a friend, philosopher and guide, and a guardian of all our moral being. Wordsworth’s pantheistic belief is that the same divine spirit rolls through all things, both animate and inanimate, in nature. Therefore, Wordsworth glorifies the setting sun, the hills and the dales, the rivers and rivulets— all with divine alacrity in his *Tintern Abbey*:

*Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round oceans, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things and objects of all thought,
And roll through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and all of all that we behold
From this green earth. (100-109)*

Time and again, Wordsworth insists on giving up the mechanical and spirit throttling civilization in favour of the untainted company of nature. Wordsworth’s love for the ‘light of setting sun’, ‘round ocean’, ‘living air’, ‘blue sky’, ‘meadows’, ‘mountains’, ‘woods’, and the ‘green earth’ as a whole establishes him as a poet of pastoral landscape on the one hand and environmental consciousness on the other. It is the condemnation of the complexities of civilization that prompted Wordsworth to idealize peasants and rustics, residents of moors and heaths, and in his Preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), he boldly proclaims that poetry should deal with humble and rustic life and that the language of poetry should be essentially the language of the common man—the shepherds, the peasants and rustics. And the result is that Wordsworth produced poems on rustics like ‘The Solitary Reaper’, ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’, ‘Simon Lee’, ‘Leech Gatherer’, ‘Michael’ and ‘Lucy Poems’. Following Rousseau, Wordsworth condemned the ‘social man’ and subscribed to the French philosopher’s concept of primitivism and belief in the essential goodness of natural man. Like Rousseau, he can be rightly regarded as an environmentalist and a teacher of environmental ethics. Wordsworth, himself says that, he is not anything else if not a teacher, and as a teacher, he has called upon mankind to love and protect nature and environment. In his poem ‘*Tintern Abbey*’, he boldly pronounces his teaching that, ‘Nature never did betray The heart that loved her’ (127-128). Moreover, in ‘*Lucy Poems*’, we are told how Lucy was born and brought up by nature herself:

*“Three years she grew in sun and shower,
Then Nature said, ‘A lovelier flower
On earth was never sown;
This Child I to myself will take;
She shall be mine, and I will make
A lady of My own”.* (Lucy Poems IV L-1-6)

Wordsworth teaches us the most valuable environmental ethical lesson that human beings should live in communion with nature and that they should learn, like Lucy, the lessons of patience, kindness, goodness,

tolerance and natural simplicity from the sights and sounds and objects of nature. Here it is important to note that behind the philosophy of the education of Lucy by her greatest teacher nature, there lies the direct influence of Rousseau's novel *Emile*.

Wordsworth believes in spontaneous feelings and natural flow of emotion is evident from his theoretical formulation that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling. Jonathan Bate, in his book *Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) and *The Song of the Earth* (2000) has satisfactorily characterized Wordsworth as an environmentalist keeping close watch on pure air, weather, and climatic condition that constitutes a healthy ecosystem. Bate emphasizes Wordsworth's love for the 'green world' and applies his theory of Romantic Ecology by emphasizing Wordsworth's pastoral imagination, pastoral language and rustic characters which is evident from the celebration of ordinary characters such as a 'Leech Gatherer', a 'Solitary Reaper', an 'Idiot Boy', a 'Cumberland Beggar', a ruin shepherd, and sufferer in the pastoral world like Michael and Simon Lee (REWET 25). In 'Michael' for instance, Wordsworth portrays the rustic life of a shepherd of 80 years old who is rooted to the Green Earth of Grasmere, toiling the soil and living a life of plainness and simplicity along with his wife Isabella and son Luke. Viewed from the standpoint of Rousseau's eco-philosophy, Wordsworth's Michael signifies such cardinal components of environmental ethics as love for pastoral landscape, tenacity, patience, tolerance and love of the animal world, which is strongly reminiscent of Greg Garrard's contention that animal studies constitutes a significant aspect of Eco-critical discourse. (Ecocriticism, 2003. 5)

Wordsworth's emphasis on season, clear sky, pollution free environment can be aptly located in a host of poems such as 'The Daffodils', lines written in Early Spring', 'The Rainbow', 'To a Butterfly', 'The Solitary Reaper', 'The Lucy Poems', 'Tintern Abbey' and 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'. Even in a small poem like 'This Lime Tree', 'Bower My Prison' reveals Wordsworth's environmental consciousness which is evident from the poet's desire to transport his physical being into a serene and pollution free landscape. In his philosophical poem 'Intimations: Of Immortality' Wordsworth emphasizes the pristine, purity and primeval innocence of a child as against the artificiality and complexities of the modern man. Like the Lucy poem, Wordsworth's pastoral poem Michael can be taken as an ideal model of environmental ethics on the ground that like Lucy growing up in the lap of nature with spontaneous energy and 'vital feelings' of love, sympathy and delight. Michael is pictured as a self-sufficient natural man, reared in the lap of nature without any greed for materialistic accomplishment. Both Lucy and Michael and for that matter Cumberland Beggar represent a life of simplicity experienced in close communion with nature and pristine landscape/environment which is strongly reminiscent of Rousseau's concept of the natural man/noble savage who stands for a modest life of simplicity and contentment.

An analysis of selected poems of William Wordsworth in the light of Rousseau's Eco-Philosophy/Environmental Ethics reveals that under the profound influence of Rousseau Wordsworth characterized the natural man/noble savage with emphasis on primitivism, rustic simplicity, purity of pastoral landscape, conducive environmental condition and the essential goodness of man which was vitiated by the 'social man' and the 'economic man' in the backdrop of the complex and complicated go of civilization. At the same time, Wordsworth's eco-sensibility and environmental consciousness were largely shaped by Rousseau's idea of environmental Ethics with emphasis on the lessons of patience and goodness, tolerance and kindness, nourishment of rustic simplicity and naturalness and above all an eco-centric appreciation of nature and environment rather than the anthropocentric mindset of destroying and hegemonizing nature.

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