



“A Stir among the Leaves”: Nature Poetry of E B Browning

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Love for nature is rooted in the mind of man from the primitive times. In fact poetry itself, perhaps the earliest form of literature, is the child of nature because it was the beauty and majesty of nature that inspired the primitive man to express his sense of wonder and awe through poetry. In English poetry also, nature has been a recurrent theme since its inception in one form or the other. As regards the 19th century, it marked a significant chapter in the history of English nature poetry. It was so because it had “its roots deep in the religious and scientific movements” of the times (Warren Beach, 3).

E.B. Browning’s handling of nature theme is more akin to the romantics than to the Victorians. The chief romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron treat nature as one of their favorite themes but in their own on different ways. For Wordsworth, nature is the guide, guardian and moral anchor which, through law and impulse, helps in the integrated development of an individual, Coleridge’s attitude towards nature, more particularly in the early phase of his poetic career, is similar to that of Wordsworth, though in his later poetry there is a discernible departure from the Wordsworthian concept. For Keats, nature is simply lovable in her own right, irrespective of her moral significance. He is content to express her many faceted beauties sensuously. In Shelley’s nature poetry there is a depiction of the wild and vast aspects of nature. While Wordsworth loved the static, calm and quiet modes of nature, Shelly was drawn towards her dynamic aspects such as the moving winds, onrushing torrents, floating clouds, etc. In Byron’s nature poetry there is no meditative music, little sense of mystery, but a very lively sense of wonder and delight in the energizing glories of nature.

Thus their individual responses to nature may vary, the remarkable point common to nearly all these romantic poets is their sensitiveness to the beauteous forms of nature and their disposition to refer to nature in extravagantly honorific terms”(Beach,12). This means that by and large these poets did not merely depict the aesthetic charm of nature, but also evolved the metaphysical concept of universal nature, particularly Wordsworth. In the Victorian poetry there is a “marked falling off” of the romantic enthusiasm for nature. This is borne out by a chronological analysis of E.B. Browning poems also, as the theme of nature is more recurrent in her earlier poetry in comparison with her later output. Her poetic span which covers the romantic and a good part of the Victorian era ---her first poem was published in 1820 and the last in

1861-- shows this transition clearly.

E.B. Browning spent her childhood in Herefordshire in the quiet company of nature. Her house named 'Hope End' with its mimic domes and minarets "stood embowered in a grove of gnarled oaks like an Eastern Palace set in the rural fields of England" (Rosalie Mander,3) . The sweet solitude of the place left an indelible impression upon the young Elizabeth Barrett's mind. Rosalie Mander points out that at the age of fifteen years ,her sensitive nature seemed to have delved deeply into the exquisite romance of the scenes in which she lived (3). In her poems again and again she recreates these scenes of quietude and bliss.

One characteristic common to her early poems based on the theme of nature is that there is the personification of nature. In this category can be included poems like "Tempest", "Sea-side Meditation". (1833), "Night and the Merry Man," 'Earth and her Praisers" (1838). In the poem "Tempest" night has been portrayed as 'Aethiopian Queen.' In "Sea-Side Meditation" the poet describes how " The summer's hand/Hath shaken pleasant freshness over.....the hills and valleys" (*Poetical Works*,65). In the same poem there is a personification of sea :

Like a spent warrior hanging in the sun
His glittering arms, and meditating death;
Or whether thy wild visage gath'reth shades,
What time thou marshall'st forth thy waves who hold
A covenant of storms, then roar and wind
Under the racking rocks; as martyrs lie
Wheel-bound; and dying, utter lofty words!(65)

In the poem, "Earth and her Praisers." Earth has been personified as a mother who has grown old. She is shown in conversation with human beings who are veritably her children:

Sweet children, I am old !ye, every one,
Do keep me from a portion of my Sun.
Give praise in change for brightness !
That I may shake my hills in infiniteness of
Breezy laughter, as in youthful mirth
To hear Earth's sons and daughters praises Earth. (247)

In her attitude to nature E.B. Browning resembles Wordsworth to a considerable extent. As in the case of latter, to her also nature provides a calm and quiet resting place, away from the madding crowd: "I have found a grassy niche / Hallowed in a sea-side hill" (247). As if to heighten the peaceful impact of nature, she juxtaposes it with the picture of " the great humanity which beats/Its life along the stony streets" (245). How effectively the vicious circle of city-life has been depicted in the following lines:

The brothels shriek, and the Newgate laughs
The hum upon 'Change, and the organ's grinding
The grinder face being nevertheless
Dry and vacant of even woe.(246)

When the Barrett family moved from 'Hope End' to 74, Gloucester Place, London, Mr. Edward Moulton Barrett presented to his daughter Elizabeth a pair of doves. It was much appreciated by her, since it reminded her of the open countryside and the vast blue expanse of sky that she had left behind. In her letter to Miss Mitford she wrote that in the doves' voice she seemed to hear the waters and waving leaves: "A dove's voice gives me more delight than a nightingale's---than even a nightingale's--- And voice and eyes and plumage to together-so beautiful and soft and calm. Is not all calmness in this working, grieving restless world, a solemn thing?" (Betty Miller,10).

This gift inspired her to compose a poem "My Doves" (1832). In this poem, city is compared to a prison where there is only suffocation. Coming from the open countryside, the poet could scarcely adjust herself to the monster of concrete, that was London. She complained that London had everything in it except the waving trees! She felt cabined and confined here. She wrote:

We lived at Sidmouth for two years, and I who always from my first childhood loved the coast with ...unconscious enthusiasm, liked Sidmouth very much and disliked the thought of being finally in London. It would be difficult to find fit words for the feelings of depression with which the first week of our living in London abounded to me. There was a sense of impossibility that I could ever live on so. The narrowness of the streets....the want of horizon..pressed through my senses to my soul...(Betty Miller,10)

For E B Browning, nature has a moral power, which has an ability to make man noble and good. In the poem "My Doves" she implores the doves to teach her:

So teach ye me the wisest part,
My little Doves! to move
Along the city-ways with heart
Assured by holy love
And vocal with such songs as own
A fountain to the world unknown. (260)

In other poems like "A Lay of the Early Rose", "Patience Taught by Nature". etc. the same theme, viz. the edifying power of nature has been dwelt upon. This unique capacity of nature to inculcate positive values in the character of an individual has been manifested elaborately in E B Browning's epic-novel *Aurora-Leigh*. In Book One, the poet describes how nature acts as a foster-mother to the little girl Aurora who lost her mother at a very tender age:

I felt a mother want about the world
And still went seeking like a bleating lamb
Left out at night in shutting up the fold
As restless as a nest deserted bird... (375)

Another important character of *Aurora Leigh* is Marian who returns to lap of nature again and again as "the trapped hare getting free/Returns to his form"(423). The idea of instinctive learning implied in the lines that people "certainly felt bettered unaware/Emerging from the social smut of towns/To wipe their feet clean on the mountain-turf" (424) ---is in keeping with the tradition of Romantic poets, particularly

that of Wordsworth, who were deeply influenced by Rousseau's clarion call of 'return to nature'. In the poetry of E.B. Browning also, this concept of return to nature and glorification of nature can be traced to some extent. Her attitude toward nature closely follows that of Wordsworth; the only difference is that she has no systematic philosophy of nature in the sense in which Wordsworth has. The latter has clearly spelt out the respective stages in his love towards nature in *Tintern Abbey*; the method of nature's education through law and impulse in the *Lucy* poems, through pleasure and fear in *The Prelude*. In *The Prelude* Book I Wordsworth speaks of the 'unconscious intercourse' between man and nature and how this communion with nature yields pleasure : "I held unconscious intercourse/With the eternal beauty, drinking in/A pure organic pleasure from the liven plain/of waters coloured by the steady clouds"(589-92).

Some of the nature poems of E B Browning are remarkable for sheer pictorial quality. She was always inspired by the loveliness and beauty of nature. With the fresh wonder and excitement of a child, her heart responded to the sights, sounds, colours and tones of nature. In *Aurora Leigh* the description of Aurora's countryside house in England is remarkable for its train of nature imagery. Aurora recalls that there was a lush green lawn sweeping broadly round the house: "it went trickling through the shrubberies in a stream/of tender turf, and wore and lost itself/Among the acacias" (383). Over them one could see the irregular line of elms by the deep lane, which "stopped the ground and dammed the overflow of arbutus and laurel." (383). Commenting on the superb landscape painting E.B. Browning, Hugh Walker aptly comments that few have dealt more justly and appreciatively than Mrs. Browning with the English landscape. (264)

A significant aspect of E.B. Browning's nature poetry is that quite often she looks at nature retrospectively. It is nature down the memory lane, as it were. Much in Wordsworthian vein, it is the feeling of joy associated with the objects of nature that is recollected in tranquillity in her poems. For example, Aurora loves to delve deep in her childhood memories, especially those pertaining to the tender and charming scenes of her dear motherland Italy. "The Deserted Garden" and "Hector in the Garden" are other important poems dealing with the theme of nature in retrospective vein. There is a yearning for the lost bliss of childhood when all nature was simply a thing of joy, unadulterated by the "graver thoughts" of a grown up :

Friends, blame me not ! A narrow ken
Has childhood 'twixt the sun and sword
We draw the moral afterward –
We fell the gladness then. (259)

"Hector in the Garden" also rests on the recollections of the romance of childhood when the poet spent her years "like flowers and bees/In betwixt the country trees." The beauty of nature just after rainfall is delineated in the following lines :

Underneath the chestnuts dripping
Through the grasses wet and fair
Straight I sought my garden ground

With the laurel on the mound
And the pear tree over sweeping
A side-shadow of green air. (261)

This scene gave instinctive pleasure to the child. The words “I was gladdened unaware” in the poem may justifiably be compared with Wordsworth’s second stage in his love for nature, as described in his famous poem *Tintern Abbey*, when his love for nature, though past the initial stage of only animal pleasure, was still unmixed with any thought, “. . . a feeling and a love/That had no need of a remoter charm,/By thought supplied nor any interest /unborrowed from the eye”(84 -86).

Nature has also been viewed on a symbolic plane by E.B. Browning notably in poems like “Irreparableness”, “A Dead Rose”, etc. In the former lyric, the withered nosegays symbolize mutability. The spectacle of faded flowers fills the poet with gloom as it reminds her of her own mortality :

But now I look upon my flowers, decay
Has met them in my hands more fatally
Because more warmly clasped-and sobs are free
To come instead of songs . . . (329)

But such instances are only few. On the whole she looks at nature as a creative and regenerating force, as is elaborately shown in *Aurora Leigh*. Whenever Aurora feels totally frustrated in the hostile company of her autocratic and callous aunt, it is beautiful nature which revives her faith : “. . . at last, I wakened, opened wide/The window and my soul and let the airs/And outdoor sights sweep gradual gospels in/Regenerating what I was”(384) . The joy in the company of nature is so tempting that before the household could stir, the young Aurora quietly but quickly slips out of the “sleepy house and escape/As a soul from the body, out of doors/Glide through the shrubberies, drop into the lane/And wander on the hills an hour or two...” (383) .She finds the principle of love operating in the whole of nature, which makes her live at peace with herself and not feel sullen :

Then life calls to us
In some transformed, apocalyptic voice
Above us, or below us, or around
Perhaps we name it Nature’s voice, or Love’s
Tricking ourselves, because we are more ashamed
To own our compensations than our griefs (384)

These lines are comparable to Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey*, wherein he says about nature “. . . ‘tis her privilege/Through all the years of this our life, to lead/From joy to joy; for she can so inform/The mind . . . so impress/With quietness and beauty” (122-126).

E. B. Browning is not only an adept landscape painter but also a visionary who dreams of an ideal relationship between man and nature. In “An Island” which

expresses her Utopian dream, she compares man with nature and finds the latter infinitely nobler. For “man’s veering heart and careless eyes/ Nature has steadfast sympathies” (243). According to her the human heart is full of monstrous thoughts but nature never betrays. This again is comparable to Wordsworth’s lines in *Tintern Abbey* : “ . . . and this prayer I make/Knowing that nature never did betray/The heart that loved her.”(120-122).

In a “Sea-side Walk” also the inseparable bonds between man and nature are affirmed. The following lines clearly bear it out:

O solemn-beating heart
Of nature ! I have knowledge that thou art
Bound unto man’s by cords he cannot sever
And, what time they are slackened by him ever
So to attest his own supernal part
Still runneth thy vibrations fast and strong
The slackened cord along (249)

Nature sometimes turns into a mystic garden for the poet. Then she strikes us as a romantic mystic poet in love with nature in all its colourful variety and awesome mystery. She not only depicts a scene sensuously but also quite often looks at it to realize some invisible power. In ‘A Sea-side Meditation’, for example, she says that human beings usually fail to see what is behind these palpable scenes and slights of Nature:

Behold ! All sights and sounds
In air, and sea, and earth, and underneath
All fresh, all life, all ends are mysteries
.
We hide our sight
In artificial nature from the true
And throw sensation’s veil associative
On God’s creation, man’s intelligence .(63)

In “The Soul’s Travelling” the poet describes how the stony streets of London, the hoarse noise of weary tradesman oppress her heart and on soul’s wings she is transported to the mystic world of nature where she can immerse herself in “meditation’s fullest length.” At this time her body is motionless but her soul is totally awake : “My body which yet hears no sound/For now another sound, another/vision my soul’s senses have” (246).

The last significant aspect of E B Browning’s nature poetry is its deeply religious quality.. In many of her nature poems there is inevitably either an allusion to or an

invocation of God, which substantiates Fairchild's contention that in her poetry there is a struggle between the pagan and Christian elements.. In "A Sea-Side Meditation" there is a reference to the apocryphal scroll towards the end. In the poem "The Earth" which in the beginning looks like hymn in the praise of bounteous Earth, there is a drift towards the end, when the poet portrays the vision of saints on whose holy souls the memory of sin shall rise like ghosts:

And on their lips shall lie the name of earth
In paleness and silentness; until
Each looking at his brother face to face
And bursting into sudden happy tears
(The only tears undried) shall murmur – 'Christ ! (67)

Thus it is evident that E.B. Browning deals with the theme of nature in a variety of contexts. In some poems, nature serves as a background against which human action unfolds itself, whereas in other poems nature itself is in the forefront. Man, Nature and God are the three focal points of her nature vision. Nature has been viewed by her as a retreat from the strife and conflicts of the maddening world. To her it is a vehicle of transcendence from human limitations, of union with the cosmic soul.

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