CHAPTER V

ROMANTIC ATTITUDE IN THE POETIC THEMES OF MILLAY - NATURE

(1)

Nature in the 19th Century British and American Poetry:

From time immemorial nature has been exerting a great influence on the mind of man. When scientific technology was in a seedling stage, then the forces of nature could not be comprehended by man. Because of the malign aspect of nature a fear -- or a sense of dreadful foreboding -- started gripping the human mind. The natural phenomena was considered super-human and nature an object of worship. Man realised that there was a greater force than the human beings and this power was manifested through Nature. Whatever natural calamity took place e.g., earthquakes, floods, famine etc., and could not be scientifically explained, was considered to be the wrath of God.

Nature held a very important place in the poetry of
the British Romantics. It was Wordsworth whose romanticism marks a shift in his return to Nature. Wordsworth was a high-priest at the shrine of Nature. Nature was his nurse and guide and it was through communion with Nature in a state of wise-passiveness that one could behold the transcendental reality. Wordsworth's love for nature gradually developed in three stages. In "Tintern Abbey," he writes that in his childhood Nature was a playground for his "glad animal movements." This later developed into an aesthetic passion which finally took a soberer hue and became a spiritual passion for Nature.

To the American Poets Cooper and Leatherstocking Nature was never God but a creation of God. Bryant's Nature poetry is merely an echo of Wordsworth.

To Keats Nature brought the delight of beauty—which was his prime pursuit. Many nineteenth Century American poets felt that nature had a great healing power. Henry David Thoreau from his early years loved a life of solitude which provided a congenial place for deep meditation. For him Nature provided peace through tranquility and not excitement for passion. Through communion with Nature Thoreau's imagination was sharpened and at times he had a glimpse of the transcendental reality. But these flashes
passed away too soon and did not leave any distinct picture on his mind.

Lowell expressed a desire to "melt into nature, to confuse body and soul and the outer world in spiritual union." This pantheistic attitude gives a romantic coloring to his poetry.

Whitman's love for nature also underwent three stages. First the sights of Nature produced wonder in him. Then, he reflected over these wonders in a state of reverie which later developed into a love for nature.

Now after summing up briefly the Nature poetry of British and American poetry, let us view in detail the similarities and differences between both and the contribution both made to English and American Romantic Movement.

Freneau in the poems like "The Wild Honey Suckel", and Alexander Wilson, the ornithologist, started a native tradition of Nature poetry which was given a proper shape by the famous American poet William Cullen Bryant.
Cooper said that Nature was a source of knowledge and wisdom which gave rise to peace of mind and joy. William Cullen Bryant considered Nature a symbol of the Almighty and felt that a devoted admirer could hold communion with it. In "Autumn Woods", Bryant observes:

Ah'twere a lot too blest
Forever in thy colored shades to stray;
Amid the kisses of the soft south west
To roam and dream for aye.2

This stanza is an illustration of the sensuousness of American Nature poetry though it lacks the passion of the British Romantics. The mystical conception of Nature as a divine revelation runs through the entire poem:

Grandeur, strength, and grace
Are here to speak of thee.3

The coincidence between Bryant's deistic conception and Wordsworth pantheistic mysticism is obvious:

... Thou art in the soft winds
That run along the summit of these trees
In music; thou art in the cooler breath
That from the inmost darkness of the place
Comes, scarcely felt; the barky trunks, the ground,
The fresh moist ground, are all instinct with thee.4

3 Ibid., p.80.
4 Ibid., p.80.
Foerster hears an echo of the Wordsworthian strain in Bryant's lines but he emphasizes the deeper difference of attitudes between them:

Although Wordsworth roused a thousand springs in Bryant's heart, giving the familiar Berkshire landscape a new glory, liberating his starved imagination and making him bold to call himself a poet, Bryant never repeated, unless in momentary glimpse the naturalistic mysticism of Wordsworth. Here and there a whole poem suggests the author of 'Three years she grew in sun and shower' and of 'To the Daisy'; and many poems express as Wordsworth expressed incomparably, the modern sense of the healing virtue of nature; but only a few lines and passages remind one of the author of 'Tintern Abbey', and even in them the resemblance is to the phrasing rather than to the actual meaning. His God is not in the landscape, nor in the creative mind of the poet. No one can read carefully 'A Forest Hymn' and Bryant's other poems of nature without perceiving that between him and Wordsworth, as between him and the deists, there is a great gulf fixed, without perceiving that, in the main, Bryant walks erect in the faith of his fathers.5

For Wordsworth Nature always has a benign aspect. When he had been thoroughly disillusioned by the French Revolution, he found real comfort and true peace in the lap of Nature.

To Whittier Nature provided a moral strength. In

"A Summer Pilgrimage," he observes:

To feel, from burdening cares and ills
The strong uplifting of the hills.\textsuperscript{6}

In the lap of Nature for Whittier:

Old cares grow light; aside I lay
The doubts and fears that troubled
The quiet of the happy day.
Within my soul is doubled.\textsuperscript{7}

Foerster points out the distinct Americanism in Whittier's attitude:

Nature, then, meant to Whittier a medicinal power, whose sovereign virtue was the sense of peace and uprightness that it imparted, and it meant further, in his contemplative hours, a source of analogies with the last mysteries of life. Much as he enjoyed the piny woods and vine-fringed river of his home country, he did not seek in nature an answer to his deepest questionings.\textsuperscript{8}

Despite a host of influences upon the American poets as diverse as German transcendental philosophy, British romanticism, Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophy, ancient Indian scriptures, the distinct American identity stands out clear in outline.


\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., p.165.

\textsuperscript{8} Foerster, \textit{Nature in American Literature}, pp.30-35.
Emerson felt that the individual soul, is a spark of the divine. If one listens to the dictates of his conscience, then one can never err in life. Emerson pondered on these truths in his solitary rambles in the midst of nature. The tranquillity of nature stirred his imagination and was congenial for deep meditation. This illumined his mind and gave rise to the realization that the individual soul is linked with the "Oversoul".

In his earlier years, Thoreau like Wordsworth led a life of glad animal movements and nature served as a playground for his animal activities. He went hunting, fishing, boating and swimming. Then his glad animal movements were not substituted by a spiritual love for nature but he felt intoxicated and exalted amidst nature. According to Thoreau Nature pacifies and not excites a certain passion.

Thoreau's imagination was kindled on rare occasions and he had momentary flashes of the vision of the transcendental reality. But these visions were very short-lived and did not have a lasting imprint on his mind. Thoreau felt that the smallest things in nature are inter-linked with our soul. "Each humblest plant, or weed, as we call it, stands then to express some thought or
mood of ours."

Lowell found a sensuous joy in nature. According to him Nature was a mirror which reflected our moods. He observes:

Let us mistake our longing for her love,
And mock with various echo of ourselves,
. . . What we call Nature, all outside ourselves,
Is but our own conceit of what we see,
Our own reaction upon what we feel;
The world's woman to our shifting mood,
Feeling with us, or making due pretence.

Here we can compare Lowell to Coleridge's approach to Nature. In *Dejection An Ode* Coleridge writes:

O Lady! We receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live;
Ours her wedding garment, ours her shroud.

(*Dejection An Ode, stanza IV*)

According to Coleridge our thoughts and moods are reflected in nature. If we are elated in mind then nature appears to us in all its glory and splendour. Our depressed moods reflect in nature and it appears as if a veil of gloom is cast over nature—and its uglier aspects come to light.

Whitman used the sea as a symbol of life—after—death.

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   Ibid., p. 169
The sea formed an inscrutable mystery for him. The fluidity and vastness of the sea seen in changeable and unpredictable moods gave rise to a mystery which was as deep as death and a life after that.

The natural phenomena awakened a sense of a wonder in him. He meditated on these wonders of nature and fell in a reverie. Out of this deep meditation sprang a love for nature.

Muir, the American poet felt that Nature expressed divine love but he did not have the Wordsworthian love for nature and was not laid asleep in body and became a "living soul", to see the ultimate reality. His love for nature was purely physical and sensuous, and in return the joy which he received from nature was also a pure sensation.

Wordsworth differs from other poets in his attitude towards Nature. For Wordsworth nature was not inanimate but endowed with a spirit which is the ultimate reality behind its various manifestations. The outward beauty is a visible symbol of the indwelling divine spirit. This is the deep-rooted faith of Wordsworth in "Nutting". He suggests:

Move along these shades,
In gentleness of heart; with gentle hands
Touch — for there is a spirit in the woods.

("Nutting" Lines 54-56)
Again in "Tintern Abbey" he feels a mysterious presence in
Nature:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbed me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts.

("Tintern Abbey", lines 93-96)

Wordsworth's spiritual love for nature is expressed in
these sublime lines in "Tintern Abbey":

That blessed mood,
In which the burden of mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lightened; — that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on, —
Until, the breath of corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we lay asleep
In body, and become a living soul;

("Tintern Abbey", lines 37-46)

(ii)

Nature and the Twentieth Century American Poetry up to
World War II:

Treatment of Nature in the Twentieth Century American
poetry records a marked departure from the transcendentalists
poetry of the last century. It further reinforces under the
influence of scientific realism, industrialism, general
ideas the naturalistic tendencies found in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. The Twentieth Century American poets do not seem to embrace any philosophy in their poetry; they are, however, in search of beauty, joy, peace, and wonder in nature—the very things missing from the contemporary life over which the shadows of the two World Wars loomed large. Robert Frost has closely linked man and nature. Robert P. Tristram Coffin's comments are illuminating:

I said it is hard to separate Frost's nature from human nature, his flowers and trees and apples from people even stubble-scarred apples from people. He insists constantly that he is not a nature poet. He calls himself the poet of the people. All nature is related to them. Not they to it, as in the way with Wordsworth. He deals with people in the state of nature best state of good nature.¹⁰

Frost does not philosophise nature, nor does he endow nature with a soul. He finds serene joy in the physical aspects of nature.

Willard Thorp highlights Frost's views on nature:

Nature no longer has transcendental meaning for him, but it does connote simplicity.

peace, beauty, wonder. But Frost is no
nature mystic. Nature is there beyond
the wall. The poet is listening, entranced,
to thrush music deep in the woods. 11

Lindsay also did not form any philosophy of nature,
His pictorial quality shines especially in his observation
of the natural phenomena like "frost-wrapped spring" and
"snow born waterfalls."

Sara Teasdale did not find any solace in nature and
for her nature was a detached and aloof spectator. Teasdale
states:

Earth takes her children's many
Sorrows calmly and stills
herself to sleep.

(In a Garden, "stanzas III)  

Rica Brenner comments on the influence of nature on her:

Nature gave her no lasting comfort,
Its beauty brought her joy, it is true
and an enrichment of the self. But
Nature she realised is completely
heedless of the individual; its concern
is only with the race, with vast forces.
What matters it to Nature that one
human being suffers . . . What would
it matter, indeed, should all mankind
not simply suffer but we wiped out? . . .
Nature is supremely indifferent, it
withdraws from - rather, it is completely
unaware of the cares of mankind. 12

11 Willard Thorp, American Writing in the Twentieth
12 Rica Brenner, Poets of Our Time (New York: Harcourt
(iii)

Nature in Edna Millay's Poetry:

From early childhood the beauty of nature had cast a great influence on Edna Millay. Like Wordsworth at first she also indulged in "glad animal movements" and nature served as a playground for her animal activities. The pleasure she derived from nature was a pure sensation and we can say a physical intoxication of her senses. Like Wordsworth who used to go for solitary rambles and relax amidst the beauty of nature Millay used to climb up the Megunticook to inhale the beauty and joy of nature. Jean Gould writes about this in *The Poet and her Book*:

Out of some mysterious impulse, like the sudden flight of birds, she pursued her way up the stony, steep mountain path, all alone in the dark. The surge of exultant youth pushed her on... The wonderful smell of balsam was like wine to her giddy senses; the secret joy of being the only one awake 'in all the world' was an added elixir. On top of Megunticook she would stretch out in an 'earth ecstatic' state of mind, waiting for the first golden banners of light to streak above the horizon. For joyous moments without and she would 'lie on a high cliff' until her elbows ached in order 'to see the sun come up over Penobscot Bay.'

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Vincent Sheean makes a very perceptive remark about her love for birds.

At every stage of cognition, specific, general, and abstract, she wanted to know about birds. She even felt her fancy drawn toward a purely mythological bird, the phoenix. . . . Her death, as I have said, came between the birds and the poets; the former she fed, the latter fed her, and she was on the stairs between them when her heart failed. In the physical rhythm of creation, by which the dust of a Caesar may nourish the roots of a bean flower, Edna subsisted literally—received sustenance and gave it—between the poet and the birds, birds and poets. This is not to say that her human affections were not strong, or that she was at all lacking in that passion which is the subject of a great part of her work, but rather in a quintessential sense that what set her apart from other women (or even from other poets) was a directness of translation between the two. 14

In a letter to Arthur Ficke, Millay had written:

Right here, and apropos of 'The Birds and Flowers of Hiroalige', which I love best of all, and with which I am drunk at this moment, right here let me say that you are the only person I know whose poems about flowers and birds and skies and things, filled as they are with your own so evident Earth—Ecstasy, quite satisfy my Earth—Ecstatic soul. The colours in that poem make me fairly stagger. And, oh, your wonderful birds! The pheasant with its 'snow-clogged feet', the 'wild geese

that rush across the moon', the Kingfisher
'over the reeds of the lagoon', the crane
under the sunset. 15

So we see the purely sensuous love for nature now
developed into a more sober and aesthetic passion and now
nature not only satisfied her senses but also stirred and
satisfied her soul.

At the age of nineteen a time had come in Milley's
life when she felt weighed down by the sorrow and misery
of life and thought that death alone could provide relief.
This is dealt in her poem Renascence, which abounds in
mystical utterances on nature. After imagining herself dead
Milley realises that she is missing the joy and beauty of
nature and longs to be back amidst nature. Her prayer is
answered and she is given a new birth. She is enraptured
by the beauty of the earth and her joy knows no bounds:

Ah up then from the ground sprang I
And hailed the earth with such a cry
As is not heard save from a man
Who has been dead, and lives again.
About the trees my arms I wound;
Like one gone mad I hugged the ground;
I raised my quivering arms on high;
I laughed and laughed into the sky.

(Renascence, Stanza Xxi)

15 Letters of Edna St. Vincent Milley, edited by Allan
Ross Macdougall, p.38.
Through this purely physical ecstasy in which, she revels on encountering the physical beauties of nature she discovers that under this physical manifestation there is an underlying soul or spirit which is the transcendental reality. The beauty and charm of the natural phenomena is merely an external symbol of that ultimate reality. But the poetic imagination penetrates the veil of the physical aspect of nature and beholds that "Soverel." Millay's rebirth has taken place - her imagination sharpened, her physical senses refined. It is through Nature - the Great Revelation, the Apocalypse takes place:

O God, I cried, no dark disguise
Can e'er thereafter hide from me
Thy radiant identity!
Thou canst not move across the grass
But my quick eyes will see Thee pass,
Nor speak, however, silently;
But my hushed voice will answer Thee.
I know the path that tells Thy way
Through the cool eve of every day;
God, I can push the grass apart
And lay my finger on Thy heart!

(Renascence, Stanza XXII)

In this mystical utterance we can compare her to Wordsworth who had said that man can behold the transcendental reality through communion with nature. Her immediate American predecessor here is Emerson. In "Nature" Emerson highlights the connection between matter and spirit:
Whence is matter? and wherto?—many truths arise to us out of the recesses of consciousness. We learn that the highest is present to the soul of man... that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; one and not compound it does not act upon us from without that is in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves; therefore that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old. 16

Millay's pictorial quality describing Nature parallels the British Romantic poetry. A Keatsian influence can be seen in the "Journey"

**Eager vines**
Go up the rocks and wait; flushed apple-trees Pause in their dance and break the ring for me; Din, shady wood-roads, redolent of fern And bayberry, that through sweet bevises thread Of round-faced roses, pink and petulant, Look back and beckon are they disappear, Only my heart, only my heart responds. 17

In "Elegy Before Death," the imagery which Millay has used is reminiscent of Keats:

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There will be rose and rhododendron
When you are dead and underground;
Still will be heard from white syringes
Heavy with bees, a sunny sound; 18

The epithets "heavy with bees" and "sunny sound" serve
the same purpose as "warm South" and "blushful
Hippocrate" in the following stanza of Ode to a
Nightingale:

O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrate,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth;

(‘Ode to a Nightingale’)
(‘Italics mine’)

The right adjectives are used to conjure up the
appropriate images before our eyes.

Edna Millay had a pantheistic vision of the Universe.
Her faith was that all objects of nature are linked by a
common soul. The course of nature follows a definite
cycle. Budding and growth are followed by decay which
is again followed by seeding and springing of new life.

James Gray comments on her pantheistic faith
in nature:

18 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p. 53.
Then at the close of the sonnet her pantheistic faith in the oneness and the continuity of nature reasserts itself. Real and reasuming to her are the harmony of opposites, the unity that may be resolved out of contradictions, and the inevitability of rebirth following decay. Beauty can be endured because the poet has been able to convince herself in the end that 'the budding and the falling leaf' are 'one and wonderful - not to be torn/Apart.'

Grays further suggests a fine blend of opposites in Milly's pantheistic spectrum:

A pantheistic vision of the oneness of all life - suffering, decaying yet surviving - suggests the line 'The tranquil blossom on the tortured stem'. Tranquility and torture; they, also, are 'one, and wonderful - not to be torn/Apart.' Not in nature, not in the music of Beethoven, not in the responsive intelligence of Edna St. Vincent Millay.'

...makes a subtle point in setting Milly's naturalistic attitude apart from the pessimists and the nihilists:

She may doubt the possibility of permanent and perfect love, she may question the

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20 Ibid., p.25.
justice on intelligence of human beings, she may be skeptical about traditional values and conventions, she may resent and defy death, but she had always felt an intense lyrical joy in life, and especially in its manifestation through nature. It was precisely this quality that was to distinguish her from the pessimistic, nihilistic, poets of her own period whose voices were beginning to be heard in an ever-increasing chorus.

It is nature which alone can provide peace and repose for the care-worn Millay. The tranquillising effect of nature serves as a balm to soothe her soul. In the poem "Journey", she expresses metaphorically that her whole life had been a search for loneliness and peace, but she had been disillusioned and her search had been futile. But now she feels the calm hand of nature soothing her tired soul and has discovered peace and beauty in nature:

Ah, could I lay me down in this long grass
And close my eyes, and let the quiet wind
Blow ever me - I am so tired, so tired
Of passing pleasant places! All my life,
Following care along the dusty road,
Have I looked back at loneliness and sighed;
Yet at my hand an unrelenting hand
Tugged ever, and, I passed. All my life long
Over my shoulder have I looked at peace;
And now I fain would lie in this long grass
And close my eyes.


\[22\] Millay, *Collected Lyrics*, p.51.
In *The Blue Flag in the Bog*, the narrator is the child who prefers the beautiful earth to the perfect heaven. The earth in spite of its sorrows holds a great fascination for the child. She remembers the natural beauty of the earth with great nostalgia. The perfect heaven provides everything for her but she is not at peace. She travels back to the once lovely earth which has been charred because of the great conflagration and searches for a keepsake which she will take back to heaven. Ultimately she finds a beautiful blue flower which she uproots to take with her. This blue flower symbolizes the earthly beauty and helps her to live in heaven;

All my heart became a tear,
All my soul became a tower,
Never loved I any thing
As I loved that tall blue flower, 23

She exulted in the beauty of nature and derived a lyrical ecstasy from it which made life worth living in spite of its misery and sorrow.

Milay’s later work reflects the changing imaginative horizon of poetry under the impact of naturalism and realism.

In the poem "The Return", Milay had given an objective colouring to nature and endowed it with impersonal

qualities. The poem shows nature as a detached observer:

Earth does not understand her child,
Whom from the loud gregarious town,
Returns, depleted and defiled,
To the still woods, to fling him down. 24

But such attitude towards nature in Milly, is very rare.

Just as Wordsworth's ambivalent naturalism wavered between idealism and realism (his philosophy is not facile
navism or philosophical idealism as established by
Stalleknecht, Charles E. Raven, A.N. Whitehead and others),
Milly's later poetry of nature wavers between idealism and
scientific realism marked by ambivalence. Let us understand
the point by a difference between a contemporary scientific
moon and the poetic moon. Poet, May Swenson, makes a
nice point:

My moon is not in the sky, but within my psyche. More or less subliminal, it orbits
within the psyche of every man, a symbol
both of the always-known and the never-to-
be-known. I do not try to land on that moon. 25


25 May Swenson, "The Experience of Poetry in a
Scientific Age," in Contemporary American Poetry. Voice of
America Forum Lectures Series (Madras: Higginbothams, 1967),
p. 109.
The explosion of the lunar myth in poetry by modern research in the outer space has already tended to mitigate drastically that pull or hypnotism exerted on man since primitive times. Swenson anticipates that only a Homo-mechanicus of the Robot age or a Frankenstein can cope up with the kind of thorough denudation of the symbolic myth. In his poem "Landing on the Moon" he writes:

Naked to the earth-beam we will be
who have arrived to map an apparition
who walk upon the forehead of a myth,
Can flesh rub with symbol? If our ball
be iron and not light, our earliest wish
eclipse's. Dare we land upon a dream?26