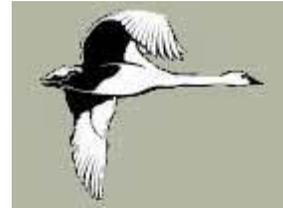


The Trumpeter (2001)

Eco-poetry

Viktor Postnikov



Viktor I. Postnikov is a researcher and poetry translator, born in St. Petersburg, Russia (1949). After receiving PhD in Electrical Engineering, from Kiev Polytechnic he worked extensively as a scientist and educator in the energy field. Chernobyl, however, put an end to his technical career and brought him into the environmentalist camp. He began translating authors of spiritual dimensions such as Whitman, Tagore, Basho. He also translates Russian spiritual poetry into English. Now, his interests extend to deep ecology and Eastern philosophies.

The world has but one soul.

- Goethe

What is Eco-Poetry?

My favourite verses and passages, the ones that I have occasionally collected over the years, have finally led me to the idea of writing this little essay. It is by no means a comprehensive academic writing, “a study”—rather, some poetic vision that I have constructed for myself and would love to share with others. What I want to do is to convey the sacred feeling of unity with nature expressed by different poets throughout the ages and across the continents; a feeling that keeps us all together irrespective of nationalities, races, cultures, or religions. “*The world has but one soul*”—these words of the great Goethe, taken as an epigraph, are now echoing in the east and west with new vigour and hope, for never in history were humans in such a vital need of spiritual unity.

Eco-poetry renders this unity to the world. It can be best described as an intuitive attempt to harmonize oneself with the world, a “talk with God,” enacted through nature. It is expressed in a multitude of ways such as poetry and literature, painting and art, philosophy and music, and through many other spiritual “techniques,” which assist individuals to develop spirituality and to overcome their daily routine of survival. To be more precise, it is God who speaks to us through nature; and at such moments, when we are becoming vaguely aware of his existence, we try to “respond” by expressing our feelings through poetry. Such a “response” overrides our personal or cultural differences and communicates in a universal language. This is why we understand and love the poetical works of the great masters of yore, who thrived in varied backgrounds, and hear them as if they were addressing us personally. Indeed, at that time, we hear the greatest of all poets.

Many of us do not believe in God. We may have our own ideals or imaginations. Yet gradually, as a collective human consciousness evolves, we may learn to recognize the chasm that separates us from the universal well-being. Then, eco-poetry will come out from the abode of poets and artists, and establish itself as a natural way of human behaviour: each expression becoming spontaneous and beautiful. Life itself will ultimately become poetry in its broadest sense.

Philosophies

The philosophies underlying eco-poetry find their origins in time immemorial when our forefathers, in Tagore's words, "lived their lives in this inconceivable glorious universe departing with a sense of wonder in their eyes and devotion still intact," when "every touch of the universe struck a chord in their heart-lute producing chanting melodies that were always new."¹ Gradually, as civilizations evolved, this feeling of wonder decayed and was substituted by "rational" theories and religions. However, the repercussions of the old unity with the world are still heard in many philosophies and spiritual ways, particularly, in the philosophy of Zen-Buddhism, which allows the possibility of gradual or sudden "enlightenment," i.e., purification of mind and merging with all creation.

It was probably the Japanese, who developed Zen philosophy that was created to induce the long-lost spontaneity and feeling of beauty, who came closest to eco-poetry.²

When you attain enlightenment, the borders between the internal and external worlds vanish, and you experience "initial" consciousness. Now, you are free, bound neither by your body nor thoughts. You observe all things at once, without attachment to them; being imposed on circumstances—not depending on them. Your nature is pure, thoughts come and go, leaving no traces. This is called *prajnya-samadhi* in sanskrit. This is not an absentmindedness as one might think, on the contrary, it is an ultimate alertness, which we cannot experience in an ordinary state of consciousness due to the impurities imposed by *indryas* (sensuous images of Psyche).

Techniques

Although east and west have created different patterns of eco-poetry throughout the ages, they join in some common "techniques" that distinguish this type of poetry from the rest, namely: (1) feeling of enchantment, (2) emphasis on spiritual, rather than sensuous, (3) simplicity, and spontaneity, (4) philosophical depth, (5) rhythm, "attuned" to eternity. To master such qualities, many philosophical schools are offering their methods, including physical and mental exercises (or practices), meditation, poetry, painting, martial arts, etc. (e.g., Rinzai, or Soto schools in Japan). In shamanic cultures, special types of singing or dancing are practiced in order to invoke spiritual communion. Even in our Western world, when we are doing physical exercises, such as swimming, or skiing, we can sometimes attain this state of unconscious spontaneity and unity with creation. Even a walk in the forest, or observation of a work of art, may induce this state of wholeness, or dhyana, in some of us, who are especially receptive to beauty.

Patriarchs of Eco-Poetry

Basho

Eco-poetry originated apparently in ancient China, in the Tan period (618-907), then reached its acme in Japanese "haiku"—extremely short poems (17 syllables), destined to induce the feeling of sadness ("sabi"), or beauty and mystery of the world. The masters of haiku intended to catch, in T.S. Eliot's words "the interception of timeless with time . . .", a secret meaning of nature and human life. Matsuo Basho (1644–1694), a patriarch of Zen-poetry, used "sabi" to "peep into non-being" by converging the subject into nearly nothing:

A raven, silent
on a bare branch . . .
An Autumn evening!

D.T. Suzuki comments on this haiku: "Here, there is great Beyond in a still raven, sitting on a branch. All things emerge from the mysterious abyss, and through each thing you

can peep into it. No need to compose a hundred-line poem to express a feeling born out of that piercing. Once this feeling reaches its apogee, we hush, because no words can ever express it. Even 17 syllables are too many. Japanese masters of Zen, in compliance with Tao,³ are trying to express their feelings with as few words, or paint strokes, as possible. When the expression is too rich, no place for suggestion is left. In suggestion lays the mystery of Japanese art.”⁴ The feeling of *sabi* impregnates the haiku—a constant feeling of illusion of being, its fleetingness, and its beauty. All personal attachments are removed, and that’s why the sadness is more akin to wisdom than anguish. In other words, *sabi* is a union with “not-I”.

Basho bequeathed to his disciples, “Raise your heart! After *satori*—the highest level of enlightenment, awakening—is experienced, return to the mundane world.” *Satori*, says Suzuki, is “like an everyday experience, only two inches above the ground.” The very common things may lead to the enlightenment: a crab, crawling on a foot; raven, hushed on a tree branch; splash of water caused by a frog’s leap. In the instance of *satori*, the mind lightens, the soul is flung open to the world, and all is seen in its uniqueness: flower in its floweriness, tree in its treeness . . .

Whitman

In contrast to Japanese, almost non-existent verse, Walt Whitman (1819–1892), the great American poet, produces a torrent of words, with a spontaneity not unlike Zen masters. He is not converging, but rather expanding his poetry, having no limits, no norms. His *Leaves of Grass* collection⁵ stands unrivalled in the expression of freedom and richness of being—a masterpiece of eco-poetry created in the West. The inner rhythm of his verse is being born out of the endless vistas that Whitman unfolds before us; the eternal questions that he poses suggestively appeal to our consciousness, not unlike the Zen koans:⁶

A child said *What is grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is anymore than he.
I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of a hopeful green stuff
woven.
Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and a rememberancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner’s name some way in the corners, that we
May see and remark, and say *Whose ?*

From “Song of Myself” (*Leaves of Grass*)

He reveres every creature on earth, every life manifestation, and acknowledges their superiority over the artificial human artifacts. The following lines, from the same poem, may well serve as a hymn to all supporters of deep ecology:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and an egg of the
wren,
The tree-toad is a chef-d’oeuvre for the highest,
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,
And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,
And the cow crunching with depressed head surpasses any statue,
And a mouse is a miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.

He does not despise humans, however. Whitman tracks down all the pangs of evolution that ultimately resulted in man’s creation, from times immemorial, and in this praise to a man and a woman, surprisingly, we hear no arrogance based on human exclusiveness, as he asserts the innate kinship existing between the universe and human beings:

Immense have been the preparations for me,
Faithful and friendly the arms that have helped me.
Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen,
For room to me stars kept aside in their own rings,
They sent influences to look after what was to hold me.
Before I was born out of my mother generations guided me,
My embryo has never been torpid, nothing could overlay it.
For it the nebula cohered it to an orb,
The long slow strata piled to rest it on,
Vast vegetables gave its sustenance,
Monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths and Deposited it with
care.
All forces have been steadily employ'd to complete and delight me,
Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul.

“Song of Myself” (*Leaves of Grass*)

I deliberately cited this long piece of Whitman to show that his philosophy of unity between humans and the universe is quite opposed to anthropocentrism, or even Christianity, both putting humans at the top of creation.

Tagore

A profound impact on eco-poetry in the world, and particularly in Asia, has been made by *Rabindranath Tagore* (1861–1941) Indian thinker, writer and a musician. His legacy is enormous in terms of language (Bengali), and the imagery and passion that he had for life. By overcoming the constant struggle, he discovers life as God’s greatest gift of love. That is why he says: “the greenness of the grass is the divine poetry, man’s form is the God’s lyric.”² Some of his chef-d’ouvres were written in perfect English and translated into many languages, namely: “Gitanjali” (Song Offerings) (1912), “Gardener” (1913), “Birds of Passage” and other collections.

Let me quote some of his verses (masterly translated from Bengali by Indu Dutt), which parallel Whitman’s idea of unity, as he reverts directly to God:³

As I look round the world,
A memory comes to my life:
I seem to find in everything
The union of you and me in limitless forms.
Agelessly I have lingered in the abode of skies,
I have forgotten much of it,
In the light that twinkles from star to star,
You and I must have swung together.
Looking at the grass-covered quivering earth
In the new light of the harvest month,
I search my soul
And the joy overwhelms my heart:
I seem to know this unuttered speech.
In the heart of the mute earth
An emotion is ever alive.
On this soil of teeming life,
You and I must have spent endless time.
In the golden light of autumn
We have trembled on so many blades of grass.
.....
Millions of years ago when the first dawn
Appeared on this earth,

Did you not take the spark of the sun's rays
To weave it into my life?
Who knows how I came to be on that particular morn,
What form you gave me, hidden from my knowledge
To blossom forth?
O you ageless one, from time before memory,
You have been moulding me anew throughout the ages.
Abiding by me ever, you shall remain with me always.

Tagore, who seeks more personal relations with God than Whitman (an astonishing blend of Christianity and Upanishads!), still, according to Buddhist tradition, feels the same empathy to every object and every creature. He thus comments on his poem:

I feel that from time before time through strange forgotten conditions I have been evolved by Him arriving at my present state of expression. The great memory of those series of existences running through the universal strain, sustained by Him, lies within me in unconsciousness. That is why I can feel an old bond of unity with creepers and trees, birds and beasts of this world. That is why this vastly mysterious and immense universe does not appear terrifying or unfriendly.

Tagore's philosophy of religion is indeed universal for it encompasses the elements of all major world religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Zen and Taoism. It is meant, in his words, "to realize the relationship of perfect love between the Supreme Soul and the soul of all created beings."²

Goethe

Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832) the German poet, who, undoubtedly, is the most "ecological" amongst European poets, and also the most "scientific" in the Western sense. "I compare Earth"—he said on account of his barometrical observations of the earth's atmosphere—"with an enormous living thing, which constantly inhales and exhales."¹⁰ He was just as unfathomed as the earth itself. His nature—as compared to Basho, Whitman, Tagore—is pro-active, searching, creative. In social life he did not recognize those demonic¹¹ laws that reign in the universe. He does not accept French revolution and holds (generally speaking) a reactionary loyalist side. His motivation? Violence is contrary to nature. The dispute on the origin of species meant much more to him than social upheavals. "To know nature is to feel the divine breathing; every scientific discovery is simultaneously a religious event." The discord between the knowledge and faith that beleaguers the heart of modern man was unknown to Goethe: he was the first (and, probably, the last) man to succeed in resolving this dichotomy. "I was always confident in that the world could not have been sustained, were it not simple"—one of the profound insights of Goethe. The simplicity of the world is a wondrous, mysterious, and divine thing. "We all are strolling amongst mysteries; the highest that humans may attain in apprehending the world is the feeling of wonder" (Erstaunen). This affiliates him to the poets cited above. He also believed in immortality of spirit, as a derivative of nature, since the latter is immortal: "Never, at no circumstances, there may be annihilation of spiritual forces in nature; for nature never wastes its treasures so thoughtlessly . . ."

A myriad of generations in the West were fascinated by his scope of thought, and, of course, his major poem—Faust—becomes the climax of all his strivings where he gives the long-awaited answer to beleaguered humanity. Surprisingly, this answer is in striking harmony with contemporary environmental movement (but, paradoxically, contradicts Goethe's social conformism!). His reference to "rotten mud" is, of course, allegorical and relates to human vices. Here is the last monologue of Faust,¹² where we find two lines of Goethe's "final wisdom":

Faust

Up to the hills the slough ascends,
The rotten mud is thick and stinking;
To drain away this deadly stock
Is my concluding task!
I will create a vast, new land
Where everyone could work unhindered,
Where herds and people will rejoice
And heavens blossom in the wheat field.
While yonder there the seas enrage
Behind protective walls; we'll mend
Each minute flaw, each small disorder.
I am devoted to this thought!
My years have not been spent in vain
For I can see the final wisdom:
*He's only worth a life on Earth -
who perseveres each passing day
to liberate the folks and land.*¹³
Then I would say:
The moment, stay!
The ages would not have the strengths
To wipe away my footsteps trodden.
Forerunning this amazing moment,
I have the blessing of the day.

World'S Eco-Poets

Powerful sources of eco-poetry are contained in the creative work of many of the world's poets. We may notice a variety of directions, genres, and forms. Indeed, poetry is as diverse as life itself; whence it derives the non-withering power and lively interest. Goethe compared the history of civilization to a grandiose fugue, in which each nation, by turns, has its own distinctive voice. To maintain the beauty of this human symphony, each voice must have its own timbre and sound. And we hear humble, almost Japanese, verses of Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) and pensive poems of Robert Frost (1874–1963); aphoristic poems of William Blake (1757–1827) and lyrical poetry of William Wordsworth (1770–1850); mystic essays of Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949), and deeply ecological verses of Fyodor Tyutchev (1803–1873), to name just a few of those classics who have intertwined their colours and sounds into the universal fabric of eco-poetry. Many indigenous cultures have cultivated their own eco-poets that the outside world is simply unaware of, but despite difference in cultures, all eco-poets speak the same language—and that is, of course, the universal language of nature, as another Japanese master, Kobayasi Issa, once said:

No aliens in this world!
We all are brothers
Under the cherry blossom trees . . .

They will always be our teachers, our beacons in this turbulent world, so there's no reason to be downhearted, really.

Will Beauty Save the World ?

What is beauty? Has it a universal measure? And what is it that Dostoyevsky meant when he said "Beauty will save the world?" I think eco-poetry, to some extent answers these questions, and offers an opportunity for humanity "to come to its senses."

To begin with, beauty is not a human “invention,” it exists already. It is a universal law that we are only now beginning to grasp (for humanity is at its pre-mature stage). And it cannot be perceived through mere contemplation, or logic, or language. I can only emphasize that it is the wholeness that we lack. All cultural strivings collectively experienced are only a bleak approximation to it; our self-willed, anthropocentric civilization has created a synthetic beauty, expressing itself in artificial “things,” or “products,” where limited “function” and “fashion” ousted the primordial criteria of beauty. The aesthetics (and ethics) have been developed during centuries, such ethics are essentially a human-centered bias. Even Oscar Wilde, the genius artist with an exquisite mind, was very wary about nature and perceived beauty only in inorganic materialism. We can readily see similar trends today in the “beautification” of virtual reality and of cyberspace. Having not understood nature, and consequently not seemingly capable of coping with it, mankind has imagined itself into the type of world that we suppose we may easily manipulate and tame.

Let’s hope, however, that humans are not altogether insensitive creatures (for they are the product of nature, after all). Maybe an impending ecological catastrophe, in one way or other, will remind us of the poetry that we are all liable to lose.

It is for the union of you and me
that there is light in the sky.
it is for the union of you and me
that the earth is decked in dusky green.

It is for the union of you and me
that night sits motionless
with the world in her arms;
dawn appears opening the eastern door
with sweet murmurs in her voice.

The boat of hope sails along on the currents of
Eternity towards that union,
Flowers of the ages are being gathered together
For its welcoming ritual.

From R.Tagore’s *Our Universe*

References

- Dutt, Indu (trans.) 1980. *A Tagore Testament*. Jaico Books.
- Barret, W. (ed.) 1956. *Suzuki, D.T. Zen Buddhism. Selected Writings*. New York.
- Murphy, F. (ed.) 1977. *Walt Whitman. The Complete Poems*. Penguin Books.
- Sytin, I.D. (ed.) 1914. *D.S. Merezhkovsky, Complete Writings, vol. VII (Vetchnye Sputniki)* Moscow: (in Russian).
- Grigorieva, T. 1993. *Born by Japan’s Beauty* Moscow: Iskusstvo. (in Russian).
- Tagore. R. 1980. *Our Universe*. (Indu Dutt trans). Jaico Books.
- T.H. Johnson (ed.) 1955. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Ueda, M. 1970. *Matsuo Basho*. New York, NY.

St. John, Donald P. 1992. "Whitman's Ecological Spirituality." *The Trumpeter*: Vol. 9-3.

Endnotes

1. Dutt, Indu (trans.) 1980. *A Tagore Testament*. Jaico Books.

2. After this essay had been completed, the author had an opportunity to read the beautiful book on Buddhist environmentalism Dharma Rain (Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft, eds. Shambala 2000) which may serve as an example of merging Buddhist living traditions with modern environmentalism.

3. Barret, W. (ed.) 1956. *Suzuki, D.T. Zen Buddhism. Selected Writings*. New York.

4. Tao, or "The Way" - central philosophical category of Taoism, meaning the axis of the Universe, the dynamic balance between the extremes. Taoism is very wary about logical discourse and hinges on the spontaneity of nature.

5. Murphy, F. (ed.) 1977. *Walt Whitman. The Complete Poems*. Penguin Books.

6. Koans - nonsensical riddles, used by Zen masters to enlighten the disciples.

7. Here and further, quotations from Grigorieva, T. 1993. *Born by Japan's Beauty*. Moscow: Iskusstvo. (in Russian).

8. Dutt, Indu (trans.) 1980. *A Tagore Testament*. Jaico Books.

9. Ibid.

10. My translation from the Russian edition: *Goethe, J.W., Selected Works*. 1950. Moscow.

11. From daimon - God , in specifically Goethean, ancient sense.

12. My translation from the Russian edition: *Goethe, J.W., Selected Works*. 1950. Moscow.

13. Emphasis mine.

Copyright retained by author(s)

Click [here](#) to return to the contents page.