

Nature as the Source for and Emblem of Religious Issue in Gaybi Sunullah, Yunus Emre, Theodore Roethke and Robert Penn Warren

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Nature always permeated literature throughout the world, and in some periods of time a great emphasis was given on a religious meaning through nature or natural elements like trees, fruits, animals, or universe in general. Even in the holy texts, natural symbols are used to carry out religious meanings and teachings to the believers. David L. Jeffrey states that “tree has been used since early classical times to suggest genealogical relationships. The tree appears in Scripture to depict the destiny of an individual (e.g., Nebuchadnezzar in Dan. 4), to show the relationship between races (Rom. 11: 17-25), and to describe the progress of life (Ps. 1; Jer. 17:8). Wisdom, “the fruits of righteousness,” “a desire fulfilled,” and “a wholesome tongue” are all likened to a “tree of life” in the book of Proverbs (3:18, 11:30, 13:12:15:4). Spiritual fruitfulness is compared to that of a tree which brings forth good fruit.” The story of Adam and Eve with the forbidden tree is similar in the Bible (Gen. 2:17; 3:3-7, Gen. 2:9; 3:22, Rev. 2: 7, 22:2) and the Quran (Al-Araf: 19-25 and Ta Ha: 120-1). By eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were banished by God from Eden into the world. James I. McClintock states that “nature writing in America has always been religious and quasi-religious.” He continues that “all the important studies on the subgenre conclude that nature writing is in the end concerned not only with fact but with fundamental spiritual and aesthetic truth” . This is true of works by Thoreau, Emerson, Dickinson, Annie Dillard, John Muir, Charles Wright, Robert Penn Warren, etc. who are known for their writings on the reflections of the relationship of God and nature or universe. For instance, Henry David Thoreau sees nature as “the poem of creation” in “Walden” and Ralph Waldo Emerson in “Nature” says “in the woods, we return to reason and faith”. Following in the footsteps of some American transcendentalists, Theodore Roethke reflects that a spiritual force in life links all what God created. Like the poems of Roethke, those of Robert Penn Warren work inside a moral framework that invokes nature as the source for and emblem of religious questions. The similar transcendental aspects of nature were illuminated by Sufis in Turkey several centuries before the Western poets appeared in the canon. Among these Anatolian Sufis, Gaybi Sunullah and Yunus Emre, like Roethke, reflected their beliefs in God through metaphors and symbols of nature. This study aims to trace the transcendental aspects of nature in the poems of Theodore Roethke, Robert Penn Warren, Gaybi Sunullah and Yunus Emre, and to show human being’s need for nature to express themselves

regardless the differences both in country and century. Their poetry becomes a record of their individual efforts to understand what nature might mean for human experience and what it might offer and mirror about God. There are similarities and differences in their approaches to nature and ways of metaphor using. While Sunullah and Emre commented extensively on the theological relationships of trees and fruits with doctrinal meanings, and extrapolated from them a set of symbols which embodied the basic Islamic doctrines, Warren and Roethke describe similar relationship with nature in personal way. Their writings reflect the mental and emotional journey merging with nature and their poems seem to assert nature is the teacher. In the verses of Sufi poets, one observes the same sort of journey that leads a way to God with the whole range of existence that also metaphorically teaches.

THE POEMS INTERPRETED

In Anatolian Sufi literature, it is a tradition to write the truth symbolically and metaphorically. In fact, it already exists in Koran, and the Sufis follow the same method and strongly avoid contradicting the divine wisdom behind the metaphoric verses of the Koran (Nasr Ebu Zeyd, 1999). Nature and some elements in nature are used as symbols. Gaybi Sunullah's verses show the impact of his religious traditions and writes tree and fruit metaphors to define universe. Here nature is expressed as a teacher that instructs people to. In his qasida "Keşfü'l Gita", he envisions the universe as a tree which is a part of nature, and says:

The word for and the meaning of the universe is You; it was made of your word

It is like a tree, and your word spares life.

And he continues:

So, cognize this: the ground of the universe tree is the empyrean,

The seven heavens are its shin, and the dwelling-place of God is its claw.

The branches of the tree are thought to be four elements (air, water, earth and fire) in the universe. Similarly, four elements are believed to be found in human beings, as well. They help to compose people's good manners. It is called ahlāt-ı erba'a, which means blood (dem), bile (safra), secretion (sevda), and mucus (balgam). These should be in balance for human beings to be good mannered. Gaybi uses these elements in his following line:

Fire, air, water and earth became the patterns of our manners

For Gaybi, like many other Sufi poets, nature teaches the holy fact that the whole range of existence is indeed God itself. The main purpose of God's creation of universe is believed for human beings. Pointing out this widely accepted belief of Sufis, Gaybi states:

What seems as universe to you
 Indeed is God,
 God is One for sure
 Don't ever think God is more than one.
 This universe is a tree
 Adam is its fruit
 The purpose is the fruit
 Don't think that it is the tree
 (Sana alem görünen
 Hakikatte Allah'tır!
 Allah birdir vallahi
 Sanmaki birkaç ola!
 Bu sözlerin meali
 Kişi kendin bilmektir
 Kendi kendin bilene
 Hakikat mi'rac ola!)

In Sufism, human being is very important. The universe itself and everything in universe is put under his/her order. For instance, in Ibrahim Hakki Marifetname, it is stressed that "the earth and the sky is the shelter and the blanket of human being and the whole mines, minerals, plants and animals are his servants." Another Sufi Sa'd Ud Din Mahmud Shabistari, in his The Secret Rose Garden, uses the metaphor of kernel of almond tree. It gives way to see the comparison of the believer who completed the process of wisdom within the infinite circuit of existence in universe and the almond kernel:

As the kernel of an almond is spoilt utterly
 If it is plucked from its husk while unripe,
 So error in the path of the pilgrim
 Spoils the kernel of his soul.
 When the knower is divinely illumined,

The kernel ripens, bursts the husk,
And departs, returning no more.
But another retains the husk,
Though shining as a bright sun,
And makes another circuit.
From water and earth springs up into a tree,
Whose high branches are lifted up to heaven;
Then from the seed of this tree
A hundredfold are brought forth.
Like the growth of a seed into the line of a tree,
From point comes a line, then a circle;
When the circuit of this circle is complete,
Then the last is joined to the first.

(Badem hamken kabuğunu kırarsan bozulur gider.

Fakat oldu mu kabuğunu kırar, içini çıkarırsan bozulmaz,
elbette kabuksuz daha iyidir.

Şeriat kabuktur, hakikat iç... bu ikisinin arası da tarikattır.

Yolcu da yolda şeriata riayet etmezse bozulur. Fakat erişti,
oldu mu kabuksuz daha aladır, daha güzeldir.

Kişi, hakikata erişti mi oldu demektir, artık onun kabuğu
yarılır, kırılır.

Varlığı, bu alemde karar edemez.. bu alemde çıkar gider,
bir daha geri gelmez.

Fakat bir kere daha kabuğa bürünür de güneş gibi parlar;
alemi parlatırsa bu sefer bir devir daha yapar.

Tohum gibi..Tohum da suyla, toprakla öyle bir ağaç kesilir ki
dalı yedinci kat gökü de aşar;

Aynı tohum bir kere daha belirir.. Tanrı'nın takdiriyle bire
yüz verir.

Bir noktaya benzeyen tohum kemale erişince çizgiye benzer
bir ağaç olur.

Bu suretle noktayken çizgi şekline bürünür, çizgiyken yine
nokta olarak ikinci bir devre başlar.

Yolcu, bu dairede kemal sahibi olunca yine son noktaya
varır.)

Like Shabistari, Gaybi states:

All people in appearance are either a ripe or unripe fruit.

Those in the appearance of unripe fruit are the sinners while the unripe ones are saints

(Mivedür suretde cümle kimi puhte kimi ham

Ham olanlar eşkiyadur pühte olan evliya)

The saints are like the ripe fruits from whose kernels young trees grow with numerous fruits on their branches and from the kernels of these young fruits, another tree is grown. The new tree will have fruits. This is called as the theory of rotation emphasized in their Sufi writings while it is rooted in Quran in Bakara: 156, “Inna lillahi ve inna ileyhi raciun” (we come from You and we will return to You). Gaybi Sunullah follows this theory of rotation and uses a tree metaphor to illustrate harmonious circuit in the universe. The theory of rotation depicted in the Sufi verses reveals a similarity in Roethke’s “Cuttings”. It illustrates the same harmonious circuit in the universe with “rebirth”, which is believed as the Christian resurrection: “What saint strained so much, / Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?”

Beside this similarity, their way of writings seems to be different. Unlike the Sufi poets, Roethke expresses in a personal way:

I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,

In my veins, in my bones I feel it, -

The small waters seeping upward,

The tight grains parting at last.

When sprouts break out,

Slippery as fish,

I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet.

Yunus Emre believes that all creatures in nature know and name God; and they all prove God’s existence. The following verses illustrate this belief within an earthly and heavenly description. The rivers and the nightingales call God’s name in their every single movement, since they are able to exist and move only with the God’s will. He uses rivers and nightingales as a mean for this purpose. He begins to see God in nature.

The rivers of that Heaven

Flow, calling the name of God

The nightingales of Islam have soared,
 singing the name of God
 (Şol cennetin ırmakları
 Akar Allah deyü deyü
 Çıkmış İslam bülbülleri
 Öter Allah deyü deyü)

When he sees a tree, he says:

Its pillars are of golden
 And its leaves are of silver.
 (Altundandır direkleri
 Gümüştedir yaprakları.)

With these lines, he emphasizes the beauty and the great value of the tree, which seems to be a special tree in Heaven called the Tübâ tree, that is supposed to have roots are up in the air while its branches are down on the ground. He uses the precious metals to point out its place for him. Even this tree calls God's name while its branches spread out:

While spreading out its branches
 Its branches call the name of Allah
 (Uzandıkça budakları
 Biter Allah deyü deyü)

His most famous verses with the plum tree indicate how strongly he attaches nature with the religious belief: I climbed the branch of a plum tree, and I ate grapes there / The owner of the garden asks why you eat my walnut (Çıktım erik dalına anda yedim üzümü/ Bostan ıssı kakıdı der ne yersin kozumu). At the first literal reading, these lines may seem weird; grapes are not the fruit of the plum tree, and what's more, they are called as the walnut by the owner. They need a figurative reading. Niyazi Mısri's interpretation reveals that nature teaches those who seek for God. He asserts that fruits are only found in their trees; one will certainly fail if he looks for grapes in the plum tree. It is useless. Therefore, one should know where to look for what he needs. For the fruits, Mısri states that the tree of deeds has fruits like the trees in nature. Here, the plum, the grape and the walnut mean the Sharia, the Tariqa and the Truth. The outer skin of the plum not the seed is edible. It resembles to one's visible deeds. The plum is used as a metaphor for the Sharia. The grape, on the other hand, is wholly edible and there are many benefits for one's health in grapes; it is one's inward deeds. The

last fruit is the walnut which is a metaphor to mean the Truth; there is nothing to be left in it. It is one of the healthiest fruits.

The Truth in Yunus Emre's verses is in the drink form:
 The drink sent down from Truth, we drank it, thank God,
 And we sailed over the Ocean of Power, thank God .
 We became a trickle and grew into a fountain; we gathered
 together and became a river,
 We flowed into the sea and then we overflowed, thank God.
 (Hak'tan gelen şerbeti içtik elhamdülillah
 Şol kudret denizini geçtik elhamdülillah
 Derildük pınar olduk, irkildük ırmağ olduk
 Aktuk denize dolduk, taşduk elhamdülillah.)

The drink in the above line is actually the sherbet which is a Middle Eastern drink but what Emre means is the divine love. God created the universe with a single word 'Be' (Kun). In the very beginning all souls answered 'yes' to God's question "Am I your God?". These firstly created souls drank the sherbet which is the divine love. When the universe was created by God, every single creature in the whole range of existence came into being. So, by saying "We became a trickle and grew into a fountain; we gathered together and became a river; /we flowed into the sea and then we overflowed", Emre repeats this belief. He resembles every creature and every soul to a drop/ a trickle that gradually gathers together and accumulates in big numbers who believes in and loves God. The sea is the universe that reflects God's eternal power. At this point, it recalls the transcendentalism which "proposed the view that each object could be viewed as a miniature version of the entire universe"

Contemplating upon the verses of Sunullah, Emre and Robert Penn Warren, we come to realize that these poets share similar transcendental aspects of nature through symbols and metaphors. Warren uses narrative and metaphorical language to pose (and occasionally begin to answer) essentially religious questions about life, death, and the idea of God. Regardless of the geographical, religious, cultural and chronological distances among them, the nature is the great teacher, the repository of knowledge that people can read and nature and human beings are connected. Warren in "Masts at Dawn" reflects a natural and personal relationship with the divine. It touches on the bodily manifestation of God in nature : "...We must try / to love so well the world that we may believe, in the end, in God." Here the world is

described as the reflection of God. To love the world means to believe in and love God. For those who have inward eyes, the world is the soul. Like Sufism, Warren does not point any external religious authority or institution to believe in God but he simply leads us to the world, nature in order to believe God without any mediator. This is a universal truth.

Warren's other poem "A Way to Love God" reveals a reflection of the truth, as the title suggests. He asserts that nature is a teacher to tell all you need to know about God:

Here is the shadow of truth, for only the shadow is true.

And the line where the incoming swell from the sunset
Pacific

First leans and staggers to break will tell all you need to
know

Like Yunus Emre who uses "the Ocean of Power" for God's eternal power, Warren writes for those who have an inward eye that they can see God's power the ocean bottom below with the above lines. Later he says "everything seems an echo of something", pointing out a transcendental truth like Yunus Emre. That "something" is God's reflection in the universe.

In this comparison, Emre's and Sunullah's use of tree metaphor and Warren's poem "Trying to Tell You Something" seem to be alike. They use the trees as a metaphor for nature itself and reflect nature as the transcendental source of one's knowledge of God. In this poem, the ancient oak tree "is trying to tell you something." It is the knowledge of God that people can reach through their senses. However, the Sufis' poems seem to have more complicated metaphors than Warren's, thus they require a special interpretation.

Another example will illustrate Warren's use of the leaf metaphor. In the poem titled "The Last Metaphor" he describes leaves blown away in the autumn: "The wind had blown the leaves away and left/The lonely hills and on the hills the trees;/ One fellow came out with his mortal miseries / And said to himself: 'I go where brown leaves drift'". The image of the blowing away leaves seems to express a warning to find one's inner self and to seek reconciliation with nature and with God: "Thinking that when the leaves no more abide / The stiff trees rear not up in strength and pride / But lift unto the gradual dark in prayer".

The idea of God seems to be a question in Warren's mind concerning why God allows us to suffer. Nature in "Evening Hawk" is represented by the hawk. The natural world is marked by the grim and violent struggle for survival. In this respect Warren returns to a naturalistic model for the indifferent physical world. He hears earth

grind, history drip as humanity struggles for a tenuous survival, alone in an utterly detached universe. Unlike human beings, the hawk “Who knows neither Time nor error” climbs at last light, a symbol of the timeless and relative permanence of the natural cycle . Although in “Stargazing” stars seem to be a symbol of reality that represents for a love of God, Warren questions the existence of a just and merciful God. He talks about the indifference of nature to God by saying God and stars (nature) are separated. The similar concept is depicted in “Interlude of Summer” where the season is represented as a symbol of nature’s indifference.

Like them, Theodore Roethke, as Francis E. Skipp states, is a transcendental poet who sought God in nature and aimed at transcending the chaos of experience in a quest for oneness with the cosmos. In “The Waking”, Roethke uses metaphors to express his wonder if God is waiting for him when he dies. His metaphor is seen in the line “Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?” drawing a picture of God without mentioning God by name. Roethke uses another natural element which is a worm in his understanding life and God. He is like a worm that tries to interpret a great tree. He chooses the leaf as the speaker of the poem figuratively talking about self-knowledge through various learning on the phenomenon of life with waking and sleeping. Waking is considered as our mortality while sleep is seen as the idea of immortality. These two conflicting phenomena may point out the harmony in life and an unseen plan in the universe that one cannot easily figure out but “Great Nature” can teach us all we need to know. Roethke suggests the readers to “take the lively air,/and, lovely, learn by going where to go.”

Generally speaking, his poetry reflects that within all of life there is an animating spiritual force by which all creatures and things are linked. He also writes the need to achieve a union with God through natural elements beside his quest for identity. He describes the spiritual process by which he intermingles with nature. He does not feel easy with people but nature even a single flower would be enough to make him happy. Thus, through natural elements he seeks to express painful emotions in his inner life. Seeing nature as the realm of spiritual truth, Roethke examines his emotions within nature. In “Unfold! Unfold!” he says “At first the visible obscures: /Go where light is”. Being a mystical poet, he tries to show “deep in their roots, all flowers keep the light”. That light will “enact a mystical effort at union with a natural wholeness that in Roethke’s work is at once fully human consciousness and consciousness of God.”

Roethke’s quest for God is asserted in “The Long Alley”: “There’s no filth on a plateau of cinders. / This smoke’s from the glory of God.” His greatest effort of this sort can be observed in “Meditations of an Old Woman.” The old woman, the speaker of the poem, talks about what it is

people seek and eventually says “To try to become like God/Is far from becoming God”. In understanding she seeks, worms, weeds, wind, seeds, larks and birds play an important role as sources.

Interpreting the verses of Sunullah, Emre, Roethke and Warren, we come to realize that these poets share similar transcendental aspects of nature through symbols and metaphors. The love of God and the reflection of God in nature are shared themes that they use symbols to represent for. Their poetry becomes a record of their individual efforts to understand what nature might mean for human experience and what it might offer and mirror about God. There are similarities and differences in their approaches to nature and ways of metaphor using. While Sunullah and Emre commented extensively on the theological relationships of trees and fruits with doctrinal meanings, and extrapolated from them a set of symbols which embodied the basic Islamic doctrines, Warren and Roethke describe similar relationship with nature in personal way. Sunullah and Emre do not express personal feelings and their poems require more figurative reading. Warren uses narrative and metaphorical language to pose essentially religious questions about life, death, and the idea of God and the indifference of nature to God. Roethke, on the other hand, reveals similar approach to God but he seeks God in nature and finds a way in a quest for oneness with the cosmos. Like Emre, he reflects that there is an animating spiritual force by which all creatures and things are linked. Unlike Warren, he writes the need to achieve a union with God through natural elements beside his quest for identity. Like the Sufi poets, he describes the spiritual process by which he intermingles with nature. The only difference is that the Sufi poets do not openly express the process and their writings are not addressed to a personal achievement like his. This paper is an attempt to contribute to the literature field in revealing the fact that regardless of the geographical, religious, cultural and chronological distances among the poets, nature is the great teacher, the repository of knowledge that people can read, and nature and human beings are connected, and the American poets interpreted in this study hold the traces of Sufism and the transcendental aspects of nature as depicted by Emre and Sunullah. Their poems reflect that human being's eternal need for nature both for their survival and for their emotional satisfaction in expressing themselves.

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