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Ecological Citizenship: Natural or Naturalized
(A Study of Denizens of Robert Frost's Poetic World)

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Abstract: *Topophilia is envisioned as a panacea by some ecocritics to counter the mounting degradation of environment. But does topophilia really guarantee environmental stewardship? Does love for a particular place come naturally to a person, who is natural citizen of a place or it can be acquired also? If yes, how? Is the way the natives look at a particular place different from that of the outsiders; and, therefore, is their treatment of it also dissimilar? Is it possible for the outsiders to acquire the "sense of place" and thus become the naturalized citizens of a place? These questions occupy the explorations in this paper while focusing on Robert Frost's poetry, in order to find out the "sense of place" the denizens of his poetic world have; and, if and how it makes them eligible for ecological citizenship.*

Keywords: *Ecological Citizenship, Environmental Citizenship, Environmental Ethics, Topophilia, Reinhabitation.*

"Place is more deeply a matter of belonging than of possession."
(Lawrence Buell, *Living in an Endangered World*, 78)

Initially unaware that a term such as 'Ecological Citizenship' exists, the paper was intended from the beginning to take the term in the moral sense because in the ecocritical circle, "ecological" has come to infer "moral." Even the terms 'natural' and 'naturalized,' used with reference to citizenship by birth and by willful adoption respectively, though taken from the political lexicon, lose all their association with the world political as the ecological 'word' and 'world' takes precedence. It is justified too because the two – political and the ecological – have time and again failed to work in tandem. The political world, in its efforts to address the environmental issues has seldom taken into consideration the fact that the problem humanity is facing is not just a "problem in ecology" but an "ecological problem" as well (see Passmore). To deal with the ecological problems there is a dire need to change the attitude of the people towards their environment, to make them more responsible towards environment, ethically. Most of the environmental policies of governments that work through "incentives and disincentives" to bring a change in environmental behaviour of the people, according to Andrew Dobson, work only at a superficial level; however, what is required in his opinion, is altering the underlying attitude of people towards environment which works at a deeper level than behaviour (278-79).

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Andrew Dobson is a theorist, to whom goes the credit of publicizing "environmental citizenship". In his book *Citizenship and the Environment* written in 2003, he had made a distinction between "environmental citizenship" and "ecological citizenship" and shown skepticism regarding ecological citizenship because environmental citizenship was "right-based" (106), whereas ecological citizenship was "virtue-based" (56). Though hopeful that "ecological citizens will make democracies more responsive to sustainability demands," Dobson found many "ideological difficulties in instantiating ecological citizenship in so called advanced, broadly, liberal-democratic societies" (Introduction 8, 6). However, in the Introduction to *Ecological Citizenship*, a book co-edited by him with Derek Bell in 2006, Dobson admitted to have created a confusion by distinguishing between environmental and ecological citizenship in 2003, and accepted the fact that "there is no determinate thing called environmental citizenship" (4) and "the relationship between environmental or ecological citizenship and the 2,000-year-old tradition of citizenship," though interesting, was still developing (7). By 2007, he had again begun to talk about environmental citizenship and ecological citizenship, but now in the same breath without drawing much distinction between the two as is evident in his paper "Environmental Citizenship: Towards Sustainable Development."

While talking about environmental citizenship, Dobson ("Environmental Citizenship," henceforth abbr. EC 2007) finds that it "involves the recognition that self-interested behavior will not always protect or sustain public good such as environment" and therefore, "in the broadest possible compass such citizenship will/can/may surely have something to do with the relationship between individuals and the common good." Knowing that "their private actions have public implications," it is the duty of the environmental citizen "to live sustainably so that other may live well." Therefore, they must "try to occupy an appropriate amount of environmental space" and leave as little carbon footprint on the earth as possible. What Dobson says till this point is true for both types of citizenships—environmental and ecological; but to ecological citizenship he adds one key component, that is, justice (283-84).

John Barry is another proponent of environmental citizenship for whom sympathy and humanity are the most important components for ecological citizenship which Dobson finds are "virtues appropriate to a Good Samaritan rather than Good Citizen". But there is a point at which both, Dobson's concept of ecological citizenship and Barry's concept, coincide. According to Dobson sustainable development requires "international," "intergenerational" and "interspecies" obligations (283), and Barry (EC 2007) also, when he talks about green social theory, expects from his ecological stewards obligation to the future generations, which is possible by "extending social theory beyond the nation-state and focusing on globalization; and finally, extending social theory beyond the species barrier" (314). Besides international and global perspective, Environmental citizenship (called by diverse names such as Green Citizenship and Ecological Stewardship also) would require re-orientation "to include non-humans as fellow members of society" (Barry 312) This process, of "integrating" with and "extending" to the non-human fellowship, would prepare the already responsible citizens to become ecological citizens; to establish the right kind of relationship with the environment. But what is the right kind of relationship with the environment in the ecological sense?

Among the several kinds of relationship possible between man and environment, F. Sparshott has suggested, "the only one that is really relevant to a discussion of man and environment is the relation of self to setting" (qtd. in Evernden 99). In "Poetry and Place," Wendell Berry has emphasized, "In the moral (the ecological) sense you cannot know what until you have learned where" (Qtd. in Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* 252-53,

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henceforth abbr. EI) and in "The Regional Motive," he has put the warning straight that "Without a complex knowledge of one's place, and without the faithfulness to one's place on which such knowledge depends, it is inevitable that the place will be used carelessly, and eventually destroyed" (68-69). While talking about the sense of belonging to a particular region and nation, Hagenbuchle also says that "without such roots there can be no sense of personal identity and self-respect, and without self-respect there can be no sense of respect for and commitment to others" (Qtd. in Senst Para 14). In fact, the evaluation of many "fictive and historical cases" which Buell undertook for his work, *Writing for an Endangered World*, made him point out that "an awakened sense of physical location and of belonging to some sort of place-based community have a great deal to do with activating environmental concern" (56).

But can this topophilia — which is envisioned as a panacea by a few ecocritics to counter the mounting degradation of environment — really invoke defensible and permanent attitude amongst its practitioners to meet the environmental challenge? Topophilia does not really guarantee the environmental stewardship that is required to address the environmental crisis in the present times and Buell warns also that "if we idealize the sense of place as a panacea for the dissatisfaction of modern uprootedness, we run almost as great a risk of cultural narcissism as when we accept the myth of place free, objective enquiry" (EI 253). Therefore, idealizing or idolizing a place is as bad as neglecting it. "What we require, then," according to Buell, "is neither disparagement nor celebration of place-sense but an account of those specific conditions under which it significantly furthers what Relph calls environmental humility, an awakened place awareness that is also mindful of its limitations and respectful that place molds as well as vice versa" (EI, 253). The awakened "sense of place," or "place awareness," which is the attachment to a place (despite its limitations) and respect for the place (that molds a person), will consequently determine how a person treats a place.

Therefore, it is essential for an ecologically oriented citizen to first have an awakened "sense of place". The "sense of place" has been found difficult to define even by persons like Wendell Berry, who credits his poetry to his Appalachian Kentucky farm and E.O. Wilson, too, who in his essay "The Right Place," concedes that "the sense of place is so deeply embedded, so instinctual, that no one will ever be able to bring it to full consciousness in all its nuanced complexity" (Qtd.in Buell, EI 255-256). Still, there are many factors that work behind the awakening of this "sense of place." An anthropologist-writer Richard Nelson says, "What makes a place special is the way it buries itself inside the heart, not whether it's flat or rugged, rich or austere, wet or arid, gentle or harsh, warm or cold, wild or tame. Every place, like every person, is elevated by the love and respect shown toward it, and by the way in which its bounty is received" (Qtd. in Love 234). Altman and Low, however, find that "…places are repositories and contexts within which interpersonal, community and cultural relationships occur, and it is to those social relationships, not just to place qua place, to which people are attached" (7). While carrying out their conceptual and empirical study on place attachment, Hidalgo and Hernandez arrived at the result that "social attachment is greater than physical attachment (Abstract 273). Therefore, it can be conceded that "sense of place" is the awareness of both the physical and social aspects of a place a person occupies.

Now, can this sense of place be acquired? — Yes, by belonging to a place. In "The Long-Legged House," an essay in which Wendell Berry presents the history of his attachment with his native place, he shows how a person can belong to a place. The place, according to him reveals its secrets to the human observer, but "The only condition is your being there and being watchful." This is the conclusion he reached in his poem "Being Watchful" where he confesses that "As soon as I felt a necessity to learn about the non-human world, / I wished to

learn about it in a hurry." However, he learnt that "the most important lesson that nature had to reach me: / that I could not learn about her in a hurry" because "The most important learning, that of experience,

> … comes in its own good time
> and in its own way to *the man who will go where it lives,*
> *and wait, and be ready,*
> *and watch*. [emphasis added]

To hurry, according to Berry, is "[u]seless" and "an obstruction"

> The thing is to be attentively present.
> To sit and wait is as important as to move.
> Patience is as valuable as industry.
> What is to be known is always there.

And the moment of revelation will finally come

> When it reveals itself to you, or when you come upon it,
> it is by chance.
> *The only condition is your being there and being*
> *watchful*. [emphasis added]

For Berry, awareness or "watchfulness" is an exalted state of mind which does lead to a "deepening sense of attachment" but along with it comes "an awareness that the man belongs to the place without the place belonging to the man"

> For humans to have a responsible relationship to the world, they must imagine their places in it. To have a place, to live and belong in a place, to live from a place without destroying it, we must imagine it. By imagination we see it illuminated by its own unique character and by our love for it. By imagination we recognize with sympathy the fellow members, human and nonhuman, with whom we share our place. By that local experience we see the need to grant a sort of preemptive sympathy to all the fellow members, the neighbours, with whom we share the world. ("It All Turns on Affection" 3)

This is what can be called ecological humility which can/ might be an answer to the anthropocentric attitude of man. However, the condition of "watchfulness" that Berry has mentioned is only in respect to the physical aspects of the environment. But it is not just through the watchfulness of the physical characteristics of a place that "sense of place" is heightened or awakened. "A place may seem quite simple until you start noticing things" Buell observes, and he is in consonance with Thoreau when he remarked that the "capabilities of the landscape within a circle of ten miles' radius, or the limits of an afternoon walk" will never "become quite familiar to you" even by the end of "the threescore years and ten of human life." (169). However, observation as well as observance of how the social, environmental and ethical life of that place works is equally important. How the people of a place forge their relationship with their environment plays a crucial role in their treatment of the place.

And when it comes to the treatment of a place, there definitely is a difference in the way how a native and an outsider look at a place and consequentially how they treat it:

> The tourist can grasp only the superficialities of a landscape, whereas a resident reacts to what has occurred. He sees a landscape not only as a collection of physical forms, but as the evidence of what has occurred there. To the tourist, the landscape is merely a façade, but to the resident it is "the outcome of how it got there and the outside of what goes on inside." The resident is, in short, a part of the place, just as the fish is the part of the territory. (Evernden 99)

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There is a difference in the outlook of each—the native and the outsider—toward the environment and, therefore, the treatment of environment by both is also different. Here, an example from Robert Frost's poem "Christmas Trees" is most appropriate, in which a stranger from the city comes to the owner of the Christmas trees to buy his "young fir balsams." The person is amazed because he had never thought of his trees in such a way, more so to sell them. The trees were important not only for him, but for that place too —

To sell them off their feet to go in cars
And leave the slope behind the house all bare,
Where the sun shines now no warmer than the moon. (106, 17-19)

He allowed the stranger have a look at his trees but he had decided beforehand that he would not sell his trees to him. And his resolve turns steelier when the stranger puts the worth of his thousand trees only at thirty dollars

...thirty dollars seemed so small beside
The extent of pasture I should strip... (107, 47-48)

The person, following the ethics of that place, was "guided by his duty towards maintaining the harmony of that place" and, therefore, "did not fall into the trap of commercialization." Unaware of the ethics of that place, it was difficult for the outsider to make a meaning out of it. However, the reader might be somewhat stunned when the owner confesses that

Yet more I'd hate to hold my trees, except
As others hold theirs or refuse for them,
Beyond the time of profitable growth-
The trial by market everything must come to. (106, 21-24)

McDowell here has a defensive that "even those who might scorn trade for its soiling effect must make a living" (99) and even viewed from the environmental point, it would not be advisable to hold the trees beyond the time of their profitable growth.

Moreover, for the people living in Frost's poetic world, the value of certain things in nature cannot be judged by its utility or economic potential; but some things, in their opinion, should be loved for themselves. This same view is propounded by environmental ethics. The stranger, being an outsider, did not know the value of the trees; he was a businessman and he was more concerned with the profits he would make by buying the trees for less and selling them in the city for more. Natives do not have the consumerist approach that the outsiders have. The owner, being the native of that place, knew the true worth of those trees. He wished he could lay one in a letter to his friends who would be buying those trees for more in the cities and if possible

...could send you one
In wishing you herewith a Merry Christmas. (107, 59-60)

The people of the poem "New Hampshire" too live by the ethic that

Just specimens is all New Hampshire has,
One each of everything as in a showcase,
Which naturally she doesn't care to sell. (161, 61-63)

These people, being the residents of that place, liked to maintain the ecological harmony of that place by not falling into the traps of commercialization. The outsiders to that environment may not be able to appreciate the ethics of these people for it is difficult for an outsider to comprehend the value of a place.

Therefore, the resident is the one "who is in an environment in which he belongs and is of necessity a part" but the one with a consumerist approach looks at the whole world as simply "fodder and feces," according to Sparshott, and, therefore, the outsider cannot think of a given

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environment in a way a resident does because he is "blind to all the aspects that make it an environment" (Qtd. in Neil Evernden 99). The outsider looks on the surrounding world as simply a set of resources to be utilized not thinking of it as an environment at all.

For Frost's characters nature has uses other than its utilitarian purpose or instrumental value. This is well represented by The Broken One in "The Self Seeker" for whom the orchids in his place

…seldom to be had
In bushels lots- doesn't come on the market. (97, 129-130)

Yet to "a discriminating appetite" as his, the Ram's Horn orchid is "better than farmer's beans." Its value cannot be counted in utilitarian terms, at least for "the broken man." When his friend, Willis urges him to demand higher compensation for his accident making him realize that

"But your flowers, man, you're selling out your flowers." (95, 66)

He tells his friend

"…I'm not selling those, I'm giving them;
They never earned me so much as one cent:
Money can't pay me for the loss of them. (95, 70-72)

Again, the friend urges him to reconsider "your flora of the valley" but he questions him back "you didn't think/ that was worth money to me?" because the orchids for him do not have the utilitarian value; they had a value even beyond the aesthetic one which the lawyer, who comes to pay him the compensation for his lost legs, does not realize. What "the broken man" has lost by losing his legs, with which he had run his "forty orchids down," is — he has lost contact with his orchids. Now he is an invalid and he knows the lawyer won't be able to comprehend the loss which he has faced because he (the lawyer) is an outsider, dead to the sensibility that he, Willis and even the little girl Anne possess as they belong to the same community.

Anne has learnt to behave in an ethically responsible way towards nature. She is aware of her duty towards the other denizens of nature as well taught to her by "the Broken One". That is why, she did not pluck all the Ram's Horn orchid (there were four or five) because she wished that "There should be some there next year" and, thus, "left the rest for seed" and for the backwoods woodchuck" as well, strongly believing that the woodchuck had equal right over the Ram's Horn orchid (The Self-Seeker, 97).

"The communal knowledge," according to Kerridge, "comes up from growing up, living, and working in a stable ecosystem. It is lost when social mobility carries a person away from their community and work" (136). Even the natives can become outsiders due to their distance and estrangement from the place and consequently from the culture and community they belonged to. The speaker's friend in "New Hampshire" committed the mistake of going against the ethics of that place: he was "the only person really soiled with trade / … in old New Hampshire" and "had just come back ashamed / From selling things in California" (160). He had become an outsider now:

His farm was "grounds," and not a farm at all;
His house among the local sheds and shanties
Rose like a factor's at a trading station. (160, 51-53)

He had "put forever out of mind / The hope of being, as we say, received" and thus "like a lone actor on a gloomy stage" he has built his house with

…a noble mansard roof with balls
On turrets, like Constantinople, deep
In woods some ten miles from a railroad station (160, 39-41)

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So, what is the future for these once-alienated citizens? In Buell's (2001) opinion, the hopeful reinhabitors "wounded by displacement and ecological illiteracy … must (re)learn what it means to be 'native' to a place" (84). What he says about alienated citizens can apply to the willing outsiders also who want to become the citizens of a place. The conditions for both, however, would be same:

> The reorientation process [orientation, in case of the outsiders] cannot simply be a solitary quest but must also involve participation in community both with fellow inhabitants in the present and with past generations, through absorption of history and legend. In short, reinhabitation presupposes long-term reciprocal engagement with a place's human and nonhuman environments and welcomes the prospect of one's identity being molded by this encounter. ("Reinhabiting the City", in *Writing for an Endangered World* 84)

Coined by bioregional thinkers Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann, in 1970s in their article titled "Reinhabiting California," the term "reinhabitation" is a core practice of environmental and social movement of bioregionalism, that refers to "learning to live in a place"—not just as passive occupants but with the deep awareness of one's place in one's ecosystem. A bioregion, in their opinion, "refers both to geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness to a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place" (36). So, both — the natives who have become outsiders by alienating themselves from their place and even the complete outsiders to a particular place — by adapting themselves to the natural environment of that place and by assimilating themselves into the culture and ethics of that place— can become natives through the process of "reinhabitation."

In the poem "Ax-Helve," Baptiste, though an outsider to the place (he is a French), discloses himself to be deeply rooted in place, and certainly more rooted than his neighbor who is the native. Baptiste, "though cast away for life with Yankees," passes on to his neighbor both an artefact (the finest of his ax-helves) and also the environmental awareness behind that artifact and thus, "helps root his neighbor more firmly in place—materially, imaginatively, and socially" (Ryden 310).

Same is the case with Layfayette, a collector who collects "a dollar at a time/ All round the country for the Weekly News, / Published in Bow" in the poem "Hundred Collars" who, unlike the professor, does not belong to that place but he almost knows "their [his clients'] farms as well as they do". In knowing their landscape as well as they did, Lafe has forged a relationship with their environment and also with them. He likes his work, business though it is. But he admits that better than that

> What I like best's the lay of different farms,
> Coming out on them from a stretch of woods,
> Or over a hill or round a sudden corner.
> I like to find folks getting out in spring,
> Raking the dooryard, working near the house.
> Later they get out further in the fields. (49, 124-129)

He is well conversant with each and every activity of those country people because he has observed them too closely. He has found that sometimes everything is shut except the barn and all the family is "away in some back meadow" because "[t]here's a hay load a-coming". Sometimes "they all get driven in" when

> The fields are stripped to lawn, the garden patches
> Stripped to bare ground, the maple trees
> To whips and poles. (49, 134-136)

Then there are times when there is nobody about yet the chimney "keeps up a good brisk smoking." Whenever the collector visits these people, he is welcomed by "all in a family row down to the youngest" and according to him they are as pleased to see him as he is pleased to see them because he doesn't want

> Anything they've not got. I never dun.
> ……..
> I go nowhere on purpose: I happen by. (50, 151-152)

And wherever he happens by, he is well received. He is accepted by the residents of the place and knows it as well as they did.

The way the world is perceived determines the way it is treated. This is perhaps what Lynn White, Jr. meant when he claimed that "what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them" (9). Frost's poetry reveals the relationship of the people, residing his poetic world, with their place. It brings out a contrast between the conception of the natives and the outsiders towards the environment. The way the natives look at their environment is different from that of the outsiders, and, therefore, their treatment of the environment is also different. His poetry additionally shows that even the outsiders can become natives by adapting themselves to the natural environment of a particular place and by assimilating themselves into the culture and ethics of a place; hence naturalized ecological citizenship is possible. Frost himself was a "transplanted New Englander" and after acquiring the sense of that place became one with that place. Finally, the people inhabiting Frost's poetic world possess a deep "sense of place"; they are the ones who are ecologically conscientious and ethically responsible towards the environment they live in. They are guided by Dobson's (EC 2007) "triumvirate of justice, fairness and obligation" (284), therefore, they can be acknowledged as the finest illustration of citizens who deserve to be called Ecological Citizens.

Note: All the quotes of Robert Frost's poetry are from *The Poetry of Robert Frost* edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Henry Holt and Company: New York, 1969.

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