

RETHINKING ON SOME OF WILLIAM BLAKE'S POEMS BASED ON THE EDUCATIONAL THEORIES OF JOHN JACQUE ROUSSEAU

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Abstract

A time of revolutionary movement was enough for men of philosophy to codify educational disciplines. Philosophers discussing about education, child and nature paved the way for some of William Blake's poems, *songs of Innocence*, to flourish. This essay plans to explore some traces of Rousseau's discourse in *Emile* and approaches toward child in William Blake's poems.

Keywords: Child, Education, Nature, Emile, Noble Savage, Innocence

"Happy is the child who has help in discovering this new world" John Locke

1 INTRODUCTION

Blank slate or the well-known tabula rasa, a term for the child's mind, untouched and pure, ready to be molded by any mighty man, carries a purpose for Locke's educational discipline. John Locke (1632-1734) defending the non-existing inherent ideas of a new born, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, put it forward that a man is shaped by his external perception. A man with an exercised reason and mind is the one who acquires a rational faculty. Child has natural instinct, inclination, and the initial senses, but it is nothing compared with principles of knowledge. To form child's natural tendencies and the instruction of mind is an educational definition for Locke. And two important terms for a pupil's guidance in educational purpose is Curiosity and liberty.

Curiosity leads a child seek for knowledge, a tool to unveil ignorance. Liberty is a fundamental idea of education in Locke's theory. Liberty, for Locke, does not have a total sense of freedom and lack of restraint; it cast independence and comes from the will power of children. For instance a game comes out of desire and a child finds pleasure in its freedom. While turning it to duty he would suffer and there will be no joy and volition. And besides, Locke believes that State of nature is poor. It is a mixture of good and bad and a man must rely on the social systems to be protected. He's view is close to Thomas Hobbes notion of individual and government.

John Jacque Rousseau (1712-1778) and John Lock both theorizing modern social contract and supporting reason and freedom for societies, as living in the same era and believing in two diverse method of education. John Locke's method was a push for John Jacque Rousseau to establish his own method; Rousseau supposes man far from civilization is a pure creature despite the time he is manipulated by anything except nature. He believes that a child should rely on his own reasoning for an acceptable education. Unlike Locke, Rousseau finds social norms as restrictions and believes that a man can be trained by his own freedom and naturalistic education. Rousseau did not use the term of Noble Savage but what is mirroring his ideology is the essence of Noble Savage.

Regarding Noble Savage, Rousseau describes that a proper education in early childhood is depending on minimizing the civilization obstacles of man and his closeness to nature, “everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Maker of the world but degenerates once it gets into the hands of man” (EM: 11). Rousseau’s educational ideas came to limelight in 1761 with the publication of *Emile*, seminal work on education (John). In *Emile, or On Education* a treatise on education and on man which Rousseau declared as best and important of his writings, he does not rely on civilization rather than the reason in the child himself. And as Locke did, relying on social expectations, Rousseau defends naturalistic education.

Rousseau concerns education as an evil, he however sees it as an essential evil; Thus, “things would be worse without this education” (1975:5). Furthermore, it should be noted that the term nature stands for that which is good. In this way, natural education aims at establishing in the child the process that leads to his admission into society or to reconcile the natural with the social training. Again, the concepts of nature should also be interpreted as a positive one.

The Noble Savage must tackle with a life different to others; to live according to nature is to live in accordance with the rational principle of the universe (Rousseau,1975:250). Man’s proper study is that of his relation to his environment. So long as he only knows that environment through his physical nature, he should study himself in relation to things: this is the business of childhood; when he begins to be aware of his moral nature, he should study himself in relation to his fellow men: this is the business of his whole life (1975:175). However, he concludes “Let us lay it down as incontrovertible rule that the first impulses of nature are always right; there is no original sin in the human heart, the how and why of the entrance of every vice can be traced to environmental influence” (56). The significance of nature is dominant as a first and foremost educational approach.

Eighteenth century, the time of innovation of Childhood beginning by Lock and Rousseau treatises, William Blake’s poetry (1757-1827) after all in a broad term is entangled with the notion of child extracted from Rousseau’s viewpoint toward educational discipline. Before Blake there were many poems, prose and hymns for the use of children. Not all of them were designed for the youngsters as one of the authors –John Wesley- said if children understand what we wrote they will no longer will be as children. In this case William Blake believed that a text must be evident and also vivid to a child. In London the market of children books were growing and it was the time that Blake’s production of *Songs of Innocence* was influenced by it.

2. SONGS OF INNOCENCE

In *The Nurse’s Song* we hear voices of children playing in the nature. The first stanza gives us a sense of joy and pleasure. A nurse (as we are told by the title that the speaker is a nurse) with love and satisfaction is following their cheerful voice and laughter. Night comes. It ends the day and so does the play. As day turns to twilight, she asks children to “leave off play”; either it is too late for playing or there is no safety in the dark. Children are innocent and unaware of threats and therefore it is a duty for an adult, and basically who is responsible, to take care of them. And the time the nurse advices them to come, they ask for playing more for “in the sky, the little birds fly/ And the hills are all cover’d with sheep”. It is also twilight and there’s a little light. She is probably justified, “Well well go & play till the light fades away”. The little children leap, shout and laugh and their voice echo the hills.

Rousseau believes that education needs three sources to be well done: “from nature, from men, or from things” (EM: 11). In the poem we see children playing freely. They are in the nature. And a supervisor is taking care of them. One step forward, we understand that children are seeing themselves the same with bird and sheep. As long as bird and sheep are in the hill they can play too! Children see themselves not far from nature. And the time the nurse is making their joy more, her inner feelings becomes identical with them. It is significant that she is not overshadowing their freedom. Children, nature, nurse become one. Rousseau discusses that these three must “coincide and lead to a common goal” if we seek a proper education (EM: 11). And it is noticeable that love and tranquility are keys for educating a child (as it is seen in the attitude of the nurse).

The Lamb is fundamentally considered for analysis of two kinds of reader; adult and child. The child is talking to a lamb and asking him who made you. In general children always look for the source of origin: mother, father where are we coming from? Who made us? Now this child is asking the lamb’s origin. The creator of lamb must be someone like the lamb itself. The one who resembles the child and the lamb. Moreover, the creator of both must be the same, “Little Lamb I’ll tell thee!/He is called by thy name, /For he calls himself a Lamb: /He is meek & he is mild, /He became a little child: /I a child & thou a lamb, /We are called by his name”. He starts a dialogue with the lamb and it ends with blessings, “Little Lamb God bless thee“. Nature is leading the child to find his answers which like a river takes him to see the ocean; God.

In *Emile*, Rousseau mentions restrictions and habits; “So long as there is no change in conditions and inclinations due to habits, however unnatural, remain unchanged, but immediately the restraint is removed the habit vanishes and nature reasserts itself” (EM: 12). Child, talking with and blessing the lamb, is portraying a little man free and cheerful, thinking with his own reason and logic. Naturalistic learning is Rousseau’s point; a man follows his own nature and he may encounter with his inclinations; they are natural and a child-grown-man with reasoning, minds his natural inclinations. Thereby they are capable to ignore the ills of society. At the end, poem demonstrates that the world is positive –there is no dark or gloomy imagery.

The second pastoral poem, *The Shepherd*, besides its religious connotations, illustrates another vision. The shepherd is watchful of the lambs because they are innocent. And the lambs are at peace for they know their guardian is close to them. This world of poem shows some traces of threats. Existence of danger is predictable but as long as they are close to shepherd nothing can harm them, “He is watchful while they are in peace, for they know when their Shepherd is nigh”. He treats the herd fine, “his tongue shall be filled with praise”. Here again the features of nature and man to help an innocent creature to grow is apparent.

Rousseau in the middle of nature and society doesn’t become frustrated; when there is a conflict happening between nature and society one has to decide between “making a man or making a citizen” (EM: 13). And what he decides is that “first and foremost, he will be a man” (EM: 15). The poem, *The Little Boy Lost*, has controversial images according to Rousseau’s debate in *Emile*. A boy at night is following his father and is scared of night. Nature is decent, according to Blake, however, at night it becomes misgiving. “The night was dark, no father was there;/The child was wet with dew;/The mire was/deep, & the child did weep,/And away the vapour flew”. And boy must run fast to heed his father, “Father! father! where are you going?/O do not walk so fast./Speak, father, speak to your little boy,/Or else I shall be lost”. The little boy is in between, nature and civilization. The portrayal of Blake is severe; a man one day understands that he is left alone and what he has entirely has is himself alone. Civilization might not be a proper accompany and, moreover, nature has its perils and mysteries.

3. CONCLUSION

The 18th century was the era of development for children’s literature as a genre. Gradually books of poetry belonging to children increased. William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*, collection of verse for children, was written and focused on educational disciplines. Child up bringing either by nature or civilization were discussed by Rousseau and Lock and as a matter of fact influenced Blake’s perception of the young. The four poems of Songs of Innocence, *The Nurse’s Song*, *The Lamb*, *The Shepherd* and *The Little Boy*, by showing the joint or conflict of man with nature, its supervision or contradictory features compared with society, could show some similar elements with *Emile*, or *On Education*. A child in process of understanding and maturity is the basic theme of these poems. Noble Savage and Innocence are parallel in child-centeredness. They strongly advocate learning by discovery which ultimately makes room for care-taking as well as educating (John).

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