

## DEMOCRATIC TREATMENT IN WORDSWORTH'S POETRY

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William Wordsworth was a pioneer of romanticism in English poetry and ranks as one of the greatest lyric poets in the history of English literature. He was born on April 7, 1770, in Cockermouth, Cumberland, a small quiet market town in northwest England, on the edge of the Lake District. From the very beginning he was associated with that region which he loved more than any other, and except for brief sojourns in Britain, Germany, and Italy, he never left his beloved Lake Country. He died in 1850 and was buried at Grasmere, Westmoreland. William Wordsworth was one of the key figures in Romantic Movement. Generally Wordsworth was renowned as a poet of Nature. But through this paper I want to expose and through light on the poems in which the poet has delineated the democratic treatment. Since, the poet had lived the age of French Revolution. The age left a great impact on the mental horizon of the poet. Thus, through his personal experience the poet has depicted the problems of the common man. *In a democracy the poor will have more power than the rich, because they are more of them, and will of the majority is supreme” Aristotle 1*

Democracy is a system that has long been associated with protection of the rights of common men and women, from worker's rights and civil rights to protection of the common poor men against the powerful elite. Wordsworth is using such a incidents and language which have emotional approach to all human beings. In 1788, for the first time Wordsworth made a visit to London and went to Penrith. In 1791 he went to France. Notably, poet made both trips in the thick of the French Revolution. Wordsworth met with Michel Beaupuy, at Orleans, a sergeant of the Infantry, which was engaged in fighting for the cause of the French monarchy. Beaupuy instilled in the poet the teachings of the Rousseau, the English one, William Godwin and the French philosopher and he became a revolutionary mentor of the poet. Initially, Republican arguments did not convince Wordsworth but the former exposed the poverty and the cruelty of the aristocrats through the horrible tales of the ordinary French men women and their children. The turning point came when they were passing through a village that they saw a poor girl holding a cow with a string that Beaupuy exclaimed, ‘T’ is against that/ that we are fighting; I with him believed/ That a benignant spirit was abroad.” (The Prelude, ix, 517-519).<sup>2</sup> It is then that Wordsworth became a staunch devotee of the Revolution.

In fact, Wordsworth was offering himself as a leader of the Girondins (Hutchinson, ‘Chronological Table’, xxiv). This sympathy for the republican movement was reinforced when he fell in love with Marie Anne vallon. Wordsworth returned to England in 1793 with his heart full of sympathy for the poor and the unfortunate, and while he went on visits to Bath, Bristol and Tintern Abbey, he also went to France again in October that year. Declaration of war by England against France, shocked Wordsworth and he described the effect of the Reign of Terror

upon him in The Prelude Book X. In France, the men, who, for their desperate ends,/ Had plucked up mercy by the roots were glad of this new enemy... (331-333).<sup>3</sup> But this could not move the poet away from his firm faith in the cause of the betterment of humanity, as can be seen, again, in the tenth Book of The Prelude, Then was the truth received in the my heart,/ That, under heaviest sorrow earth can bring, (464-465).<sup>4</sup>

Despite the blood of thousands of people, the French Revolution had in the end established a Republic and Wordsworth was hopeful to improve the miserable conditions of human lot. After all, it had firmly planted the seeds of a just and classless society for posterity and it proved to be a major inspiration for the successful revolutions of the twentieth century. Wordsworth was profoundly influenced by its humanitarian ideals and there should not be no doubts that Rousseau and the French Revolution were the major impetus on the mind of the poet who wrote the humanistic poems of the Lyrical Ballads.

Having come back from France Wordsworth found that the English politicians such as Burke and Pitt were against France and favoured the war with France. The Bishop of Llandaff, Richard Watson who was earlier a supporter of France later became a reactionary and attacked France in his writings. Wordsworth wrote a letter to him attacking his views, the letter was never published. In this letter Wordsworth summarizes his Republican views; he is against all kinds of religious institutions, private labour and private property, advocates laws that would improve the living conditions of the peasants and the workers, and wants to dispense with all kinds of titles that makes the English society the most unequal one in the world. He writes:

“...What! have you so little knowledge of the nature of man as to be ignorant, that a time of revolution is not the season of true Liberty. Alais! the obstinacy & perversion of men is such that she is too often obliged to borrow the very arms of Despotism in order to overthrow him, and in order to reign in peace must establish herself by violence. She deploras such stern necessity, but the safety of the people, her supreme law, is her consolation”.<sup>5</sup>

Wordsworth has chosen objects from ordinary life and his characters can be found in every village. Wordsworth’s 1800 Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, which declared his choice of subject for his poems, and offered reasons for his decision:

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language;.....because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and from the necessary character and rural occupations, are more easily comprehend, and are more durable and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature”.<sup>6</sup>

Wordsworth’s poetry depicts the natural passions of human beings in such a way that relate to both nature and human nature. He advocates that by using commonplace and common language, he can provide link between the mores and manners of moral life and nature. As Wordsworth writes, " because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature" .<sup>7</sup> We see the connection between man's natural state and democracy, much like we see the link between nature and human beings in Wordsworth's poetry.

Poet's democratic attitude and his experiences of French Revolution strengthened and developed his convictions. While stay in France, Wordsworth began work on the first extended poetic efforts of his maturity, Descriptive Sketches, which was published in 1793, after the appearance of a poem written at Cambridge, An Evening Walk (1793). Due to financial crisis, he left France in early December 1792 before Annette Vallon gave birth to his child Caroline. Back in England, the young radical cast about for a suitable career. His democratic sympathies aroused and he seems to work out and justify his changing political and social ideas, ideas that had begun to develop the process of poetic composition. The poet in Wordsworth was beginning to dominate the democrat, and the poet found a political philosophy based on power, violence, and reason.

In the "Essay on Morals" poet associates himself with the relationship between writing and political justice, and, though he had explicitly rejected Edmund Burke's philosophy in his scorching "Letter to the Bishop of Landoff," he seems to develop a Burkean idea of community. The French Revolution opened his eyes and made him realize the dignity of the common and it taught the poet that every human being was intrinsically great and capable of infinite development. He began life with the most ardent hope for the moral regeneration of mankind but he had to renounce it reluctantly due to the excesses of French Revolution. But the poet set himself to examine the facts for himself. Poet was appealing over the heads of connoisseurs and poets to the fundamental sympathies of human heart. He is 'a man speaking to men,' as he makes clear in the celebrated letter to John Wilson of June 1802. Wilson then an undergraduate at Glasgow, had written to Wordsworth praising Lyrical Ballads with the exception of The Idiot Boy; which he thought would not please, William Wordsworth's reply was 'please whom? Or What? I answer from within

"By stripping our own hearts naked, and by looking out of ourselves towards men who lead the simplest lives, and those most according to Nature, men who have never known false refinements, wayward and artificial desires, effeminate ways of thinking and feeling."<sup>8</sup>

Many were given to man, chiefly to the feelings of man. He aspired to become a philosophical poet, whose ultimate theme was not only Nature but also the heart of man. Wordsworth's temper was essentially democratic. He had lived in a democratic society; at Cambridge also he found a democratic atmosphere. As he says in The Prelude

..... Of a Republic, where all stood thus far  
Upon equal ground; that we were brothers all  
In honour as in one community,  
Scholars and gentlemen. ( 226-229) 9

The real source of Wordsworth's reverence for man lies in his reverence for Nature. He perceives that the rich are burdened with mean cares but the simple man, though he is under the stress of penury and labour, is noble and joyous as he lets nature lead him and exalt him. Wordsworth expresses this feeling in these lovely lines in the conclusion of the 'Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle':

Love had he found in huts where poor men lie;  
His daily teachers had been woods and rills,  
The silence which is in the starry sky,  
The sleep that is among the lonely hills. 10

The Prelude, Books VIII, XI, XIII) traces the growth of his love, sympathy and admiration for man. Wordsworth's vision of man in his boyhood was deeply woven up with his love of Nature. He would often see the two in a vast frame of things melting into each other. The first vision of man in The Prelude (Book VIII) bears witness to this sense of harmony, when on a

day of mist and fog, he saw the figure of a shepherd among the mountains. In this book, at several places Wordsworth dwells upon the three vital reasons for ‘first human love’, his admiration, even reverence, for the primitive country- folk. The vision of man against nature’s grandeur evokes in *The Prelude* some lofty lines where the poet feels a sudden ‘bursting forth of sympathy, inspiring and inspired’, as he realizes ‘the vital pulse’ of ‘one Being in all things’ gaining its crowning manifestation in man.

‘.....In the Midst stood Man,  
Outwardly, inwardly contemplated,  
As, of all visible nature’s crown, though born  
Of dust, and kindered to the worm. ( *The Prelude* VIII, 485-88) 11

Wordsworth’s humanism had taken a color from Rousseau. The special nobility of man is therefore only to be looked for ‘in huts where poor men lie’. From *The Borderers* to *The Excursion*, a sense of human spirit is communicated. *The Borderers* is precisely an attempt to present a similar crisis to that through which Wordsworth passed:

There was a plot  
A hideous plot against the soul of man,  
A man by pain and thought compelled to live,  
Yet loathing life.’ 12

Failure political events of French Revolution depressed Wordsworth, as he had some high hopes but it filled him with despair. When he came out of depression, he got a new vision. As he states in *The Prelude* XIII,

I found  
Once more in Man an object of delight,  
Of pure imagination, and of love;  
And, as the horizon of my mind enlarged,  
Again I took the intellectual eye  
For my instructor, studious more to see  
Great truth, (48-54) 13

In his poem, ‘*Thorn*’ Wordsworth stress on the phrase ‘O misery’ shows the permanence and universal pervasiveness of grief. Pain and pleasure are the two aspects of the life as the flowers and thorns are the product of the same juice. Explaining it in a ‘*Letter to Stir George Beaumont*’ (Sep.1806) Wordsworth writes that “*The Picture of the Thorn* has been ten days under our roof. It has pleased us greatly; and the more it is looked at, the more it pleases”<sup>14</sup>. As Wordsworth quoted from his own as yet unpublished tragedy, *In The Borderers*:

‘Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark  
And shares the nature of infinity” (III, V-64-65) 15

This proves the point that suffering is endless and has its own significance in the world. Suffering has obscure and dark nature, apparently it seems striking against man but its real nature is to intensify and strengthen goodness of the heart. When a person suffers or sees someone suffering he inculcates some kind of goodness in himself. As Shakespeare, in *The Tempest* speaks through Miranda that “O! I have suffered/ With those that I saw suffer”<sup>16</sup>. Wordsworth is not immune to the existence of evil in the world. He does admit that evil and goodness are inextricably mingled.

During his stay in France at the time of French Revolution Wordsworth seems to hear a cry ‘*Sleep no more*’ (*The Prelude* X:87) <sup>17</sup> and finds himself in a world which is ‘*Defence less as a wood where tigers roam*’ (*The Prelude* X:93)<sup>18</sup> Shakespearian expression of ‘sleep no

more' reminds Wordsworth of evil in the world and he realizes that he is living in a world wherein the destructive forces are at work and evil-doer cause loss of peace. Wordsworth is not disappointed and heartbroken to realize the existence of evil. But here he takes it as a positive thing that enhances the character of man in the world. As he grew up in years he began to look at evil as an imperfection like Socrates who asserts in Plato's Dialogue that "Evil, O Glaucon, will not vanish from the earth. How should, if it is the name of imperfection through whose defeat the perfect types acquire their value".<sup>19</sup> Man is glorified for the establishment of new values and the elimination of the old values and traditions which have degenerated into evil. The essence of human character lies in the replacement of old values by the new ones as Wordsworth in a 'Letter written Isabella Fenwick' (Mar 24, 1839) writes that "there are qualities enough in human nature to account for the preference of new to old"<sup>20</sup> Wordsworth does not believe in the theory that ends justify the means but to his value structure, the means are equally important. The early nineteenth century was a period of rapid change and industrialization, but like his contemporaries, Blake and Coleridge Wordsworth was often dismayed by what he saw and he sought solace in the grandeur and beauty of nature. Poet offered both a beautiful picture of nature and illustrated the healing power of nature on the spirit of man.

In the poem, My Heart Leaps Up, Poet illustrates the importance of childhood that becomes a theme throughout his poetry. Wordsworth includes the passages of great hope, optimism and joy in his poetry through his famous poem 'Daffodils,' However Wordsworth's life was on many occasions touched by tragedy. His sorrows and awareness of humanity's varied sufferings inevitably led to passages where the beauty of nature contrasted with the fate of man. In this poem Wordsworth suggests that man's inhumanity appears even darker when compared to the pristine beauty and purity of nature that Wordsworth moved through. In his early years Wordsworth was a genuinely radical poet and he was greatly influenced by the American and French Revolution and the new ideas of democracy prevalent in the world.

We see that Wordsworth feel the plight of those common people who are poor, and living the life under the stress of poverty and labour and this thing can be seen in his poetical work. Through his poetry he exposed the problems of the common people, he emphasizes for the rights of common men and says that poetry should also be written in same language which is prevalent among them. He advocates for the labour and oppressed so that they can also get reverence in the society and live a respectful life. Poet depicts phenomena of French Revolution and grief of the people who lived life during French Revolution. Generally it is seen that nature is the main theme of the Wordsworth's poetry but poet has given a special attention to man also. He discuss for the betterment of humanity, simplicity, liberty and opposes violence, exploitation and private labour. Thus we see that bitter experiences of French Revolution and plight of labour made Wordsworth a reformer and an instinctive democrat.

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