CHAPTER 3

Evolution of Wordsworth as Poet

One impulse from a vernal wood.
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil, and of good;
Than all the sages can!

- Wordsworth's 'The Tables Turned'

The doctrines represented by the intellectual life of Europe between 1770 and 1850 as also the literary works produced during the period is known as romanticism. Men who produced the literary writings were known as Romantics.

The Romantic movement was a reaction to the neo-classical age of Reason. Romanticism happened to be a new way of viewing man and his relationship to the environment. Rousseau is called the father of Romanticism. He was one of the first to criticise the stultification of the age of Reason. He pointed out that proliferation of culture had done more to harm men than to benefit them. He advocated natural ways for restoring the soul to man. He stressed for naturalness in education, religion and simplicity in government.

The guiding principle of the Romantic revolt was humanism. It taught individualism and freedom of action. In the world of arts it
brought freedom from the long-established rules and the unabashed expression of temperament.

3.1 THE PRE-WORDSWORTH LITERARY SCENE

In the days of Dryden and Pope, English poetry had much of artificiality. It had intellectual wit. Dryden's poetry had some traces of the Elizabethan genius in it. Pope was a great admirer of Dryden and by virtue of his satiric style and mastery of couplet form, he had developed a close relationship with Dryden. The lyrical element in poetry which was so effective in the Elizabethan time had almost died in Pope's era. Similarly, the enthusiasm and glow of the Elizabethan age was to vanish from the writings of the period. The general tendency of these writers was to emphasize intellect rather than imagination. They attempted to suppress emotion and enthusiasm and preferred precision to impassioned manner of writing. Pope's 'Essay on Criticism' contains many critical maxims such as 'A little learning is a dangerous thing' or 'To err is human, to forgive divine'. His 'Essay on Man' also abounds in many quotable 'quotes' such as --

Know then thyself; presume not God to scan

The proper study of Mankind is Man.

The French Revolution:

The French Revolution of 1789 revived democratic spirit of the English people. It supported the natural rights of man and asserted a doctrine 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' - the doctrine of the French
Revolution. Adam Smith's book titled 'Wealth of Nations' 'which upheld the rights of the labour class, and Paine's book 'Rights of Man' voicing outrages against the oppression of humanity by institutions in England, had great influence upon English people. The main idea of the French Revolution that there was only one country, the country of Mankind and only one nation, the nation of Humanity influenced the poetry of England. Rousseau's call 'Return to Nature' held that the true happiness of man consisted in a simple life in accordance with Nature. Rousseau inspired others with this conception of his. This conception, rather passion, became one of the vital spirits of English poetry. The English poets who dealt with urban life, men and manners, customs and conventions hitherto now returned to Nature. Life in the company of Nature away from the city life became their passion in poetic expressions. This was a tremendous change in the thematic attitude of poets. Under such circumstances, with his basically republican cult, William Wordsworth a great Romantic poet, emerged at the literary scene of England.

3.2 THE EARLY PERIOD:

Wordsworth stayed in France from November 1791 to December 1792. Wordsworth's ingrained spirit of revolt and his sympathy for the poor and the meek made him a determined revolutionist. In this context, Edward Dowden observes:

"As a concrete historical movement the Revolution could not justify itself to his conscience; all the more desperately for a time he clung to republican theories; but the intellect divorced from imagination and the
vital movements of admiration, hope and love served with Wordsworth but to make all faiths dubious....

Violence including death penalty to priests in France had an adverse impression on William Wordsworth's mind. The excesses committed by the reigning politicians had almost made him despondent. Influenced by a republican named Beaupuy, Wordsworth started affirming his belief in man's freedom. At Blois in France, Wordsworth fell in love with Annette Vallon. They did not marry but she did bear him a daughter.

After his return to England Wordsworth passed some months in wandering and his first work, 'An Evening Walk' was published in 1793. In 'An Evening Walk, ' which is written in the style of 'flash-back', the effects of the twilight, the sun and the stars, the birds such as the woodcocks are narrated:

Where twilight gleans endear my Esthwait's shore,
And memory of departed pleasures, more.
Fair scenes everwhile I taught, a happy child,
The echoes of your rocks my carols wild:
The spirit sought not then in cherished sadness,
A cloudy substitute for failing gladness
In youths keen eye the livelong day was bright,
The sun at morning, and the stars at night,
Alike, when first the bittern's hollow bill
Was heard, or woodcocks roamed the moonlight hill.

(The Evening Walk II: 11-20)²

This 378 line poem reveals the poet's impressionistic mind and his inclination to pen his aimless wanderings in the country-side. The poem, though it received a cool reception, contains Wordsworth's fascination for the 'changing landscape' during sunset, and also reflects his rich diction:

How pleasant, as the sun declines, to view

The spacious landscape change in form and hue!

Here vanish, as in mist, before a flood

Of bright obscurity, hill, lawn and wood;

There, objects, by the searching beams betrayed,

Come forth, and here retire in purple shade;

In 1795, Wordsworth composed 'Guilt and Sorrow' at Racedown in England. He was living with his sister Dorothy. The poem is an attack on the prevalent social order. It reflects influence of Godwin.

A tragedy titled 'The Borderers' too was written during this period. It is a poetic play based on problems of criminal psychology. Though the tragedy was attacked as 'unactable,' it should be looked at as Wordsworth's endeavour to experiment attempt a major to write literary form, that too on a theme relating to as complex a topic as 'psychology.'
'The Ruined Cottage,' is a poem about Margaret and her pitiful story full of poverty and ruin. The story is told by a narrator from an unbiased angle. There are, in the poem, many remarks on Nature which reflect Wordsworth's respect and love for Nature. For instance.

...... But he had felt the power

Of Nature and already was prepared,

By his intense conceptions, to receive

Deeply the lesson deep of love which he,

Whom Nature, by whatever means, has taught

To feel intensely, cannot but receive.

The poem is objectively written. It is evident that whatever may be the theme and treatment, Wordsworth cannot restrain himself from portraying various aspects of Nature.

3.3 THE PROMINENT PERIOD:

Most of Wordsworth's well known poems have been written during the ten years between 1797 and 1807. A volume of poems under 'The Lyrical Ballads' was published in 1798. At this point of time Wordsworth's prowess as a poet was at its peak, which is evident in the Lyrical Ballads. Many commendable poems such as 'Lines Written in Early Spring', 'Fountain', 'Michael', 'The Tables Turned' and 'Lines Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey' are included in the volume. This volume of poems became popular very shortly and in 1800 second edition was
published with his a Preface. The third edition came out in the year 1802. The preface contains Wordsworth's views on poetry and poetic diction. These views, or to be precise Wordsworth's theory of poetry, became an important part of English Criticism. "Poetry", he says, "...is the breath and finer spirit of knowledge, the impassioned expression that is the countenance of all science". According to Wordsworth, the language of poetry should be "a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation". He further adds:

"It may be safely affirmed that there neither is

nor can be any essential difference between

the language of prose and metrical composition."

Thus Wordsworth propounded that poetry for common people should not be mere far-fetched images. It should be in a language as simple as prose. The Preface became a symbol and an instrument of romantic revolt. In other words, the Preface is an unofficial manifesto of the Romantic movement. Wordsworth's 'Preface' is a significant contribution to English Romantic Criticism.

It is a fact that Wordsworth was not successful in putting his theory of poetic diction into practice. In this connexion, Sir Walter Raleigh observes:

It has been argued that when he (Wordsworth) writes well, he breaks his own rules and when he writes ill, it has been
implied, he keeps them. But the fact is, he hardly ever observes his own rules and, the poems in which he most nearly observes them are often among his best.  

Wordsworth's friend Coleridge has also criticised Wordsworth's not adhering to his theory in many of his poems.

At the end of the year 1798, Wordsworth, Dorothy and Coleridge visited Germany. When Dorothy and William were staying at Goslar, William composed 'Ruth', 'Lucy Gray' and a few other poems. It was in Germany that Wordsworth began his long autobiographical poem "The Prelude" (around the early days of 1799). The poem has been given a subtitle, 'Growth of a poet's Mind'. Some part of the advertisement which is prefixed to the first edition of 1850 is worth-quoting:

"Several years ago, when the Author retired to his native mountains with the hope of being enabled to construct a literary work that might live, it was a reasonable thing that he should take a review of his own mind and examine how far Nature and Education had Qualified him for such an employment."

"That work, addressed to a dear friend most distinguished for his knowledge and genius and to whom the author's intellect is deeply indebted, has been long finished, and the result of the investigation which gave rise to it, was a determination to compose a philosophical poem containing views on Man, Nature and Society and to be entitled the Recluse as having for its principal subject the sensations and opinions of
a poet living in retirement."

"The friend to whom the present Poem is addressed was the late Samuel Taylor Coleridge who was resident in Malta for the restoration of his health when greater part of it was composed........."

'The Prelude' was finished in the year 1805 but was published after Wordsworth's death in 1850. The long poem could be divided into three sections - 1) Books 1 to 8 which give description of the poet's boyhood and youth. 2) Books 9 to 11 depict Wordsworth's experiences in France and London. 3) Books 12 to 14 contain the poet's philosophic and they are metaphysical in tone.

'The Prelude' is in blank verse. The poem records Wordsworth's past and reveals its philosophical significance. Nature and human society are related with the poet's experience. Sometimes the narrative becomes loose and at times dull also. Delinking and diffusion of the contents is also a problem for the reader. Repetition of description of poet's experience also occurs at times, and hampers the interest of the reader.

'The Prelude' shows Wordsworth's imaginative bent of his mind. To him, Nature has a cosmic order and its two manifestations are the material world and the moral world. During his youthful days, Wordsworth describes Nature's physical beauties, but at a matured stage we find him asserting the significance of the universal spirit which pervades the forms in Nature. This change or rather transition in the
poet's mind, has been narrated in 'The Prelude'. In this sense poem's the sub title 'Growth of the poet's mind' is quite appropriate and fitting. In the poem the poet consistently makes an examination of the experiences he got in his life. For instance, in 'Book I', he writes:

Recorded: to the open fields I told
A prophecy: poetic numbers came
Spontaneously to clothe in priestly robe
A renovated spirit singled out,
Such hope was mine, for holy services.
My own voice cheered me and far more the mind's.
Internal echo of the imperfect sound,
To both I listened, drawing from them both
A cheerful confidence in things to come. (ll 50-58)

The sights and sounds of fields and also the 'internal echo,' of the poet's own voice cheers the poet and help him increase his confidence in some forthcoming things in life.

In 'Book II', also, the poet tells the reader about the delight he experienced when he was in contact with the melodious birds, the breeze and fountains, the rising and the setting sun. It was a peculiar experience wherein a light flowed from his mind:

An auxiliar light,

Came from my mind, which on the setting sun,
Bestowed new splendours, the melodious birds
The fluttering breezes, fountains that ran on
Murmuring so sweetly in themselves, obeyed  
A like dominion and the midnight storm  
Grew darker in the presence of my eyc :  
Hence my obeisance, my devotio hence  
And hence my transport. (ll 368-375)

Wordsworth glorifies the human mind. He is of the opinion that the human mind could interpret the universe in a meaningful manner. In Book XII Wordsworth writes:

This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks  
Among these passages of the life that give  
Profoundest knowledge to what point and how,  
The mind is lord and master outward sense .  
The obedient servant of her will.

Thus Wordsworth's own subtitle 'Growth of a poet's mind' is quite compact, precise and apt description of the contents of the poem. As Helen Derbishire, puts it -- 'The Prelude is a spiritual autobiography, the most interesting in our language.'

The poem as opined by F.W.Bateson, is 'a subjective autobiography'. Wordsworth himself has subtitled the poem as 'An Autobiographical Poem'. In it the poet has given an account of his wanderings during childhood and school days, his time at Cambridge, his journey to the Alps, his residence in London and in France. In Book VIII Wordsworth describes his love for Nature and subsequently for mankind. He tells us how Nature and its manifestations inspired him for poetic
composition and how she shaped his mental make-up. Sometimes Wordsworth tends to forget Coleridge and gets inclined to write solely and about himself. The Ninth Book describes the poet's stay in France. In XI the description is continued. In X and XII we come across a book titled 'Imagination' and 'Taste'. They tell us about some events in his early life. Many cliché-like lines which reveal Wordsworth's philosophy regarding Nature, are found. Lines such as --

O Nature! Thou hast fed

My lofty speculations and in thee

For this uneasy heart of ours, I find

A never-failing principle of joy and purest passion

Or

Make ceaseless music that composed my thoughts

To more than infant softness, giving me

Amid the fretful dwellings of mankind

A foretaste, a dim earnest of the calm

That Nature breathes among the hills and groves.

...........................................I at this time

Saw blessings spread around me like a sea.

Thus while the days flew by and years passed on

From Nature and her over flowing soul

I had received so much, that all my thoughts
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........................................I at this time

Saw blessings spread around me like a sea.

Thus while the days flew by and years passed on
From Nature and her ever flowing soul
I had received so much, that all my thoughts
Were steeped in feeling.

Structurally 'The Prelude' is peculiar in the sense that sometimes it resembles an epistle or verse-letter popular during the 18th century. At other time it is similar to an epic. But it cannot be called a true epic since 'The Prelude' has no real story. Similarly its action occurs in the mind of the poet and not in the outside world.

According to Graham Hough, The Prelude is 'one of the greatest reflective poems in the English language.' The remark is apt. But the reflection in the poem has very much centred on the poet's personal thoughts and events in his life. The generalistion and philosophising is found sparsely. As Bateson observes of 'The Prelude' - "It is written, as it were, from the inside outwards." The observation is appropriate.

After 'The Prelude' Wordsworth published Poems in Two Volumes (1807). The publication has such poems as 'The Ode to Duty', 'Resolution and Independence' 'The Immortality Ode' 'The Affliction of Margaret', 'The Daffodils', 'To the Daisy' etc.

The poems like 'Daffodils', 'To a Daisy,' are pure lyrics of Wordsworth. However the poem Resolution and Independence and others reveal the poet's realization about the loss of joy. The Immortality Ode, 'Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by Picture of Peele Castle' clearly lament the loss of the spontaneous joy hitherto experienced by the poet. To quote Moorman's views --
The leech gatherer in Resolution and Independence is of personal importance in the life of Wordsworth because it shows that he was still, in spite of the loss of his vision of the glory of Nature lamented in the Ode, capable of passing into the visionary state when deeply moved by human encounters. The great significance which the old man came to have for him was the result of the accumulated fears and hopes of his creative years.

Yet it was in the end a simple moral experience.

He felt himself rebuked, admonished and cheered.\(^5\)

This observation is appropriate in the sense that the poet's low spirits got revived and rejuvenated by his close association with the leech-gatherer and this was a welcome personal experience for Wordsworth at that crucial point of time. Wordsworth decides to think of the leech gather as a source of inspiration in his future life too.

\[\text{I could have laughed myself to scorn to find} \]

\[\text{In that decrepit Man so firm a mind} \]

\[\text{'God' said I 'be my help and stay secure,} \]

\[\text{I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!} \]

(II : 137-140)
The 'Ode on Intimations of Immortality' is also a very famous poem of Wordsworth. The poem expresses the idea of pre-existence. The poet depicts visionary experiences of his childhood and also the fading of man's vision as he gets matured in age. The immortal nature of human spirit is underlined in this poem.

Apart from the theme of the poem the form is also quite commendable. The pindaric ode form employed by Wordsworth here for the first time is very inartificial. The stanzas have their own rhyme-scheme and arrangement of lines are as per the poet's convenience. As Graham Hough observes:

'Wordsworth handles this difficult scheme magnificently and the poem has a sustained lyric splendour of which we have hardly any example in his works. '

Helen Derbishire is also all praise for the poet when she comments upon the 'Ode'. She writes:

'As a piece of poetic art no poem of Wordsworth stands up better to critical inspection. The thing is a triumph. The metrical form deserves close analysis no less than the imagery. He had never tried such a metre before, and he takes to it like a duck to water'.

The lines such as --

The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness
And not in utter nakedness
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.

are philosophical and reflective. Wordsworth's philosophy of childhood and the newborn's essential linkage with God has been poetically revealed.

In other poems in this book such as Daffodils and 'To the Daisy' we find the poet's receptive Romantic mind. With the thought of the golden daffodils his heart is filled with pleasure and by looking at the Daisy (a cheerful flower at the morn) his spirits become 'glad'. Wordsworth reveals the influence of these marvellous forms of Nature upon his mind through these memorable lyrics.

3.4 THE PERIOD OF DECLINE:

Wordsworth had begun to experience a decline in his power of poetic creation. The important poems of the period are 'The Excursion; 'Laodamia', 'Dion', 'Composed on an Evening of Extraordinary Splendour and Beauty'. The Excursion, a poem composed between 1809 and 1813 and published in 1814 comprises nine Books.

In the first Book, the poet's meeting with a friend (the
wanderer) is described. The Wanderer's education, some events in his life are narrated. The book has rich poetic diction and detailed information about Nature also in this book. For example Wordsworth tells us that the wanderer:

.............................. learned

In oft - recurring hours of sober thought
To look on Nature with a humble heart

(ll 240-241)

and also that

Still uppermost
Nature was at his heart as of he felt,
Though yet he knew not how, a wasting power .
In all things that from her sweet influence

Might tend to wean him

(ll 264-267)

Regarding the kind nature and reverential personality of the Wanderer, the poet writes:

And surely never did there live on earth
A man of kindlier nature

(ll 414-415)

In Book II we come across the Wanderer's friend the
Solitary and his apartment in the mountaneous region. The description of a captivating spectacle upon the mountains near Solitary's house is quite Wordsworthy --

Oh, 'twas an unimaginable sight!

Clouds mists, streams watery rocks and emerald turf.

Clouds of all tincture, rock and sapphire sky

Confused commingled, mutually inflamed,

Molten together and composing thus

Each lost in each that marvellous array

Of temple, palace, citadel and huge

Fantastic pomp of structure without name.

That which I saw was the revealed abode

Of Spirits in beatitude:

In Book III the conversation between Wander and solitary informs us about the solitary's past- his dejection roused by the French Revolution, his disappointment during the visit to America, and his consequent mental depression and shaken confidence in the virtuous nature of Man.

In Book IV, the Wanderer gives a lengthy discourse to the Solitary. In it he tells him how to commune with Nature. He says:
For the Man

Who in this spirits communes with the forms

Of Nature, who with understanding heart

Both knows and loves such objects as excite

No morbid passions, no disquietude,

No vengeance, no hatred - needs must feel

The joy of that pure principle of love

So deeply that, unsatisfied with aught

Less pure and exquisite, he can not choose

But seek for objects of a kindred love.

In fellow-natures and a kindred joy.

The discourse ends with Wanderer's insistence on a union of
the imagination, understanding, affections and reason. The discourse is
didactic.

In the remaining Books we read the Wanderer's assertion
that the noblest seat of the principle pervading the Universe is 'the
human soul'. The conversation concludes with a sincere gratitude to the
Almighty.
'The Excursion' is thus a very long poem revealing Wordsworth's thoughts 'On Man, on Nature and on Human Life' as he himself has written in his Preface to the 1814 edition. Sometimes the poem becomes extremely dull. Herbert Read is right when he remarks --

"Poetry has two modes of beauty: the dramatic or visual, the verbal or aural, the highest poetry unites both, great poetry can be sustained on one of them. Wordsworth, in the Excursion, perseveres in neither".7

Laodamia (1814) is Wordsworth's attempt of composing a poem of myth. It is the consequence of Wordsworth's re-reading of Virgil and reflects somewhat classic style. The attempt is genuine but the effect is not highly impressive. After 1814, Wordsworth wrote a few more poems but barring a few sonnets, they are sometimes repetitive of previously composed themes or show his waning poetic power.

Wordsworth's peak point in poetic career was the period between 1797 and 1807 during which he composed great poems like 'The Immortality Ode', 'Tintern Abbey', 'Lines written in Early Spring', The Lucy Poems etc. They reveal his philosophic thoughts and views on Nature and Human life. Thus we have noted that the peak point of Wordsworth's poetic career was the period from 1797 to 1807. It is
mostly through the poems of this period that William Wordsworth is known and enjoyed by posterity.

Conclusion:

Wordsworth's poetic career shows a graph which reaches its peak during the Prominent Period of his career. The early period lacks the characteristics which are revealed through the compositions of his prominent period. The French Revolution influenced him in the sense that he ingrained a spirit of sympathy for the poor and the meek. This is reflected in many of Wordsworth's famous poems.

The final years of Wordsworth's poetry show a significant decline. But on the whole Wordsworth's 'worth' in the field of Romantic poetry as a pioneer of the Romantic poets remains indisputable.
References

1. Dowden, Edward, 'Studies in Literature 1789-1877,' Trubner & Co. Ltd./London p. 11


3. Raleigh, Walter, 'Wordsworth'


7. Read Herbert, 'Wordsworth', Faber & Faber / London, 1949 p. 156