CHAPTER VI

SONNETS UPON THE PUNISHMENT OF DEATH

The most concerted work of Wordsworth's last decade is his series of fourteen 'Sonnets upon the Punishment of Death' (1839-40) suggested by the discussions in Parliament and elsewhere on the subject of the Punishment of Death. A few years earlier the death penalty was removed from about two hundred offences and left it applicable only to high treason, murder and attempted murder, rape, arson with danger to life, piracies, burglaries, and robberies when aggravated by cruelty and violence, and some members had conscientious objections to the infliction of the death penalty for any crime and tried to exempt even murder. It was in opposition to this view, in the existing state of society, that the Sonnets were written. Alarmed at this dangerous trend towards laxity in public opinion, Wordsworth was compelled to think aloud in verse on the subject of the death penalty for murders, as his reviewer Taylor says:

"The main subject being a subject for deep feeling, large view, and high argumentation, is essentially a subject for poetry, and specially so in the hands of one who has been accustomed...to consider the sentiments and judgements which he utters in poetry with as deep a solicitude as to their justness as if it were delivered from the bench or pulpit".

Many critics have disparaged these sonnets because they are inspired by a contemporary political issue of topical value. They

often regret the side taken by Wordsworth on a highly controversial question. Prof. Harper writes:

"What does it matter, (Wordsworth) seems to say, whether life be long or short, happily or painfully ended, if the soul is fit for eternity."

This is a grotesque simplification of the poet's thought, for the poet hardly disregarded happiness and justice in the world seeing that the only important life is yet to come. The fact remains that Wordsworth's fundamental concern remained the individual soul as well as the soul of nations. The 'Sonnets Upon The Punishment Of Death' are a testimony to it. The series has given offence to humanitarians because they have not tried to investigate the arguments. Wordsworth's conclusions are not unmerciful, though his view of mercy is not the same as that of his critics who look upon death as unmerciful. In his letter to the Bishop of Landoff he had defended the right of the state to use violence in order to establish peace and right Government:

"(Liberty) deplores such stern necessity, but the safety of the people, her supreme law, is her consolation..... Political views are developed at the expense of moral ones; and the sweet emotions of compassion, evidently dangerous when traitors are to be punished, are too often altogether smothered."

The series follows the same argument that the guilty should not be shown mercy. 'The Nature's Law to feel tenderly even for the guilty should not be allowed to operate. The feeling of compassion, if

1. Prof. Harper: Wordsworth P. 442
allowed to influence judgement and our acts, will shake the faith of blameless people in law. To enforce the idea Wordsworth quotes an example of the Roman Consul who sacrificed his own sons for having betrayed the country. It was the sense of duty which overpowered the Consul's Love for the sons and it was this that calmed the agony of his heart. The poet is, then, reminded of many persons who courted death voluntarily for the guilt they had committed. Wordsworth cautions the law-givers to see the dangers ahead if the guilty goes unpunished and from his mind banished the fear of capital punishment. It would not only encourage the guilty to perpetrate more of such heinous acts and create a reign of terror and bloodshed in the streets, it would also tempt the waverer to indulge in these evil acts. It will debase the general mind, weaken the zest and love in the heart of man for life and disturb the peace of the state. Good rule depends on both love and fear. So the poet favours the retention of the right of the state to punish the guilty to the extent of imparting him the punishment of death. The aim of law is two-fold: first, to punish the guilty and secondly, to promote good and curb depravity. It is the fear of punishment that deters a man from going astray and haunts his walk or bed. Hence "She plants well measured terrors in the road of wrongful acts". He draws our attention to the function of the state:

What is a State? The wise behold in her
A Creature born of time, that keeps one eye
Fixed on the statutes of Eternity,
To which here judgments reverently defer.
Speaking through Law's dispassionate voice the State
Endues her conscience with external life.

1. Sonnet VIII
And being, to preclude or quell the strife
Of individual will, to elevate
The grovelling mind, the erring to recall,
And fortify the moral sense of all.
(Shorten IX)

He is very emphatic in his statement that in absence of the fear of
capital punishment from the heart of the guilty, crime will increase
and social order will be a mere dream. The 'wild sense of justice'
will prevail as it prevailed in former ages when "eye for eye, and
tooth for tooth"\(^1\) was an admitted precept. He continues to be in
favour of the capital punishment against the pleading of some persons
that a man or tribunal, howsoever wise and prudent may be to sift deed
and intent, has the right to pronounce capital punishment and remove
from the earthly sight the body which is the shrine of the immortal
spirit, and "is a gift/ So sacred and so informed with divine light" and

\[\text{----------'Eternity and Time',}\]
\[\text{They urge,'have interwoven claims and rights}\]
\[\text{Not to be jeopardised through foulest crimes}\]
\[\text{The sentence rule by mercy's heaven-born lights!}\]
\[\text{Even so; but measuring not by finite sense}\]
\[\text{Infinite Power, perfect Intelligence.}\]
(Shorten X)

Wordsworth's further arguments are also of more interest. The victim
of criminals after all deserves as much compassion as the criminal.
Wordsworth also views other punishments like life-long imprisonment
or transportation for life or forfeiture of property and thinks that

\[\text{1. Sonnet VII Before the world had passed her time of youth}\]
\[\text{XX Though to give timely warning and deter}\]
\[\text{X Our bodily life, some plead, that life the shrine}\]
they are not more humane than hanging. Death is not the greatest of evils\(^1\). Imprisonment for life is far more hopeless and cruel and so too is transportation for life\(^2\). The imprisonment may make the guilty penitent, assault his pride and make his eyes shed tears of salvation but it is capital punishment alone that will blast him for fresh offences. Thus to Wordsworth capital punishment seemed a proper weapon in the hands of a government which seeks to order and "To elevate/ The grovelling mind the erring to recall/And fortify the moral sense of all." (I)

1. Is Death, when evil against good has fought
With such fell mastery that a man may dare
By deeds the blackest purpose to lay bare—
Is Death, for one to that condition brought,—
For him, or any one, — the thing that ought
To be most dreaded?

(IV)

2. "See the Condemned alone within his cell
And prostrate at some moment when remorse
Stings to the quick, and, with resistless force,
Assaults the pride she strove in vain to quell.
Then mark him, him who could so long rebel,
The crime confessed, a kneeling Penitent
Before the Altar, where the Sacrament
Softens his heart, till from his eyes outwell
Tears of salvation"

(XII)

And again in sonnet No.XI he writes:

"Ah, think how one compelled for life to abide
Locked in a dungeon needs must eat the heart
Out of his own humanity, and part
With every hope that mutual cares provide;
And, should a less unnatural doom confide
In life-long exile on a savage coast,
Soon the relapsing penitent may boast
Of yet more heinous guilt, with fiercer pride."

(XI)
Wordsworth was well aware of the Christian law urging something more merciful than an 'eye for eye and tooth for tooth'\(^1\) but he well knew that law was given 'to keep vindictive thristings from the soul'\(^2\) and not to forbid the State to inflict a pain, making of social order a mere dream. So Wordsworth pleaded in favour of death penalty. He favoured drastic and sweeping changes in his earlier years when he was full of republican zeal about the year 1793 but this fervour for change faded into a prevailing dread of change which now influenced all his political views. A year before in "Ballot Box" in which the spirit of reform was seeking shelter for her nefarious schemes, he had called on St. George of England to frustrate her demand for a 'pindorian gift' worse than the Dragon he had struck down. Of the same lofty idealism he writes in "Blest Statesman" written in 1838 and which is not different from his "Happy Warrior" of 30 years before in spirit. This spirit of idealism at the end of the series, is in favour of patience and so he pleads for it foreseeing a time when capital punishment might no longer be needed. The following lines from the Sonnet "Conclusion" sum up his attitude to the death penalty:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{.........But hopeful signs abound;} \\
&\text{The social rights of man breathe purer air;} \\
&\text{Religion deepens her preventive care; to;} \\
&\text{Then, moved by needless fear of past abuse,} \\
&\text{Strike not from Law's firm hand that awful rod,} \\
&\text{But leave it thence to drop for lack of use;} \\
&\text{Oh, speed the blessed hour, Almighty God} \\
&\text{(Sonnet XIII)} \\
\end{align*}
\]

1. Sonnet VIII Fit retribution, by the moral code
2. Sonnet VII Before the world had past her time of youth
XIII conclusion
This view of Wordsworth is corroborated in the poem "Guilt and Sorrow" published in the same volume of 1842 and to which Bernard Groom draws our attention. The poem has a merciful ending: "his fate was pitied". That the sentence of death on the sailor in that poem should have been carried out is dismissed as an "intolerable thought" (Miscellaneous Sonnet Part II, XI and XII) Thus "it is nevertheless a not uninteresting illustration of Wordsworth's deeply conscientious and serious, though nervous and apprehensive, way of thinking about a great social question". Hartley Coleridge also rightly commented. "Is sonnet a very good vehicle wherein to exhibit the gallows? Yet these sonnets are more powerful than any thing else his later years have produced".

The series though not very distinguished as high poetry, for Wordsworth might have said all this forcibly in a prose pamphlet, is interesting to the modern reader as it deals with arguments which occupy the mind even today. It deals with the arguments with which we are very much familiar: Has the state the right to take life? Is the death of a criminal a greater evil than the relaxation of the moral code?

1. Bernard Groom: The unity of Wordsworth's poetry
2. Moorman: Wordsworth's later years (1808-1850) Late Harvest P. 533.