INTRODUCTION

As we all know each of the romantic poets of the early 19th century has to his credit both long and short poems whose prominent quality is lyricism of a higher order. On almost every individual poet quite a good number of full length studies have appeared offering illuminating and critical comments on the various aspects of his poetry. An amazing lacuna, however, exists in respect of their sonnets. No attempt however, has been made to study these sonnets either as individual contributions or as manifestations of a common outlook. Almost all the romantic poets tried their hands at the sonnet form but Wordsworth surpasses them all in sheer bulk as well as in variety of subject matter and treatment. An attempt has been made in this thesis to study these sonnets in the context of his other poetic works, in the context of the tradition of sonnet writing, and also as a type of lyric poetry existing in its own right.

I have followed the chronological method in my work where ever possible because all his sonnets are not dated with precision and many remain undated. Their subject matter also overlaps and their boundaries are vague. I have divided the whole thesis into eight chapters. The scheme of chapter-division is as follows:

CHAPTER-I

THE SONNET AND WORDSWORTH

Sonnet, a lyric poem of 14 lines and Italian in origin, was transplanted into England by Wyatt and Surrey who practised
it and experimented with it till it underwent a process of radical modification in the hands of Shakespeare in the 16th century. But Milton in the 17th century practised the Italian pattern and Wordsworth in the 19th century followed the example of Milton. Though Wordsworth was considerably influenced by Milton in his sonnets, yet, in fact, he acknowledged a greater debt than he actually owed.

CHAPTER II

THE THEME OF LIBERTY AND THE SONNETS DEDICATED TO LIBERTY AND INDEPENDENCE

The first group of sonnets under this head was born of the poet's observations and reflections concerning the military adventures of Napoleon. The notes sounded in these sonnets are shame for England's weakness and vices, love for her and pride in her past, oppressive fear of the menace of Napoleon and heroic reaction, ardour for freedom of other nations and sympathy for the heroes who died for the cause of freedom. The second group of sonnets was written on the progress of war against Napoleon. Wordsworth praises the valour of the fighting nations and their courageous people encouraging them to fight against injustice believing in their final victory.

CHAPTER III

THE RIVER DUDDON

In this series of 33 sonnets the poet traces the origin and progress of the river Duddon. This description of the river
is symbolic in character. Wordsworth likens the course of the river to the career of a writer. In following the river the poet follows the life of an individual and the life of the nation. The river is also a symbol of man's spirit as it emerges from the unknown, runs its earthly course, and merges again with the eternal.

CHAPTER - IV

ECCLESIASTICAL SONNETS

This series of 132 sonnets follows the Duddon Series and is complex in nature. Wordsworth divides the series in three parts. He undertakes to trace the history of the church of England from the introduction of Christianity into Britain down to his own times. Though his sonnets are a versified chronicle, they have their social significance. They have a 'message' for Britain. The monastic life though abused has its positive value. The clergy have a responsibility towards the nation which they should fulfil. Christianity is a civilizing agent and therefore should have a place in the individual life as well as national life.

CHAPTER - V

SONNETS WRITTEN DURING THE TOURS

Wordsworth was very fond of travel and during the tours he wrote sonnets. Part I deals with sonnets written during the continental tour of 1820. Part II deals with sonnets written
during the revisit of Yarrow in the Autumn of 1831. Part III deals with sonnets composed during the tour in the summer of 1833. Part IV includes the sonnets written during the Italian tour of 1837. I have studied all these groups with a view to judging the growth of Wordsworth's mind.

CHAPTER - VI
SONNETS UPON THE PUNISHMENT OF DEATH

The series of 14 sonnets was suggested by the discussions in Parliament and elsewhere on the subject of the Punishment of Death. The abolition of the death penalty by the Parliament created fears in the mind of Wordsworth and it was in opposition to it that Wordsworth wrote this series. The poet is of the view that the guilty should not go unpunished, because if the guilty goes scot free, 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. 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.

CHAPTER - VII
MISCELLANEOUS SONNETS

In this chapter are included all sonnets under this head and a few others which are scattered over in other series where they do not form part of the main body of verses or sonnets. I have put them thematically and chronologically for a study under
imagery and technique in the sonnets of Wordsworth

A study of the sonnets of Wordsworth shows that symbols, metaphors and similes cross and recross. A greater number of images are from nature and a lesser number from man made structure. Natural images for him include forest, trees, meadows, flowers, birds, insects, stars, mountains and water. Among the man made structures are ruined castle, palace, church and chapels. In rhyme pattern he extends the practice of Milton and like his master divides the sonnet into octave and sestet but again like his master lets his cadence fall anywhere in the sonnet and he justifies it. He thinks of unity not of a solid structure but of a liquid form.

CONCLUSION

Wordsworth wrote 523 sonnets over a period of 50 years. It is a common place of criticism that after the 'Great decade' Wordsworth lost his poetic power but a study of his sonnets shows that it never completely deserted him, though it had declined. Apart from the period when he was at the acme of his poetic powers, we get glimpses of that power in some sonnets of the later period. In them there is profundity of thought and flow
of language. Such sonnets are a few in number. A study of his sonnets shows that they are not autobiographical in the sense in which the sonnets of Shakespeare are. Wordsworth as a sonnet writer exercised a great influence over the sonnet writers of early Victorian period. Considered in the perspective of history, it can be said that Wordsworth took up the sonnet where Milton left off, and made it more roomy and flexible for purposes of self-expression. He further enlarged its scope by treating of a greater variety of subjects, of both permanent and ephemeral value. In respect of technique, he took greater freedom, almost behaving like a libertine, violating the conventional rhyme pattern rather wilfully to suit his requirements. As a whole, leaving sonnets of inferior quality we have a sizable residue where the poet is capable of rising to great heights and imparting the touch of the master to his work. In the history of the English sonnet Wordsworth's place is, therefore, secure.