Chapter 6

Difference in approach between Wordsworth and other Romantics in the treatment of the common man.

Blake, Burns and Wordsworth form a trio of championship for the causes of the common man with their almost prodigal appreciation of, and feeling for, the essential conditions of the common people's lives which culminate in a sort of humanistic benevolence and philanthropy. A prophet in Blake speaks of the primal goodness of the common man by dwelling on the instincts of innocence inherent in him. Innocence, to Blake, is freeness from evils and malice and, accordingly, Blake sets his man in the context of purity and perfection which come into existence not as a reflection of environment but spring from innocence through a process of transformation. So, Blakean common man is a foster-child of divinity, an anthropomorphized image of the spirit of simplicity and aestheticism. But experience in life usurps something of the qualitative values of innocence, and torments the mystic security man enjoys within the framework of innocence by devastating the dreams associated with the elementary conditions of innocence. The function of the state of experience does not come to an end with the apparent supplantation of the state of innocence, but helps the growth of a superb mental form with its considerable capacity for vision to lift man from spatial limitation to the realm of spiritual liberation. So, Blake's common people are spiritual with the least affair in the physical world of existence. They are essentially common men but tend to incline in the direction to the state of becoming supermen.

On the contrary, a peasant in Burns controls and regulates to the greatest extent the thoughts and feelings of the poet in
in him. The peasant-Burns tells the stories of his 'men, their manners and their ways', which originate from his practical knowledge of, and acquaintance with, their affairs and the cross-currents of daily life. The peasant's common sense, power of introspection and sense of recognition enrich the poet's speculation and arguments, speculation of the general principles of human life and arguments of psycho-historical phenomena. The peasant's consideration of the conditions of human life within the atmosphere of simplicity and lucidity reflects itself into the literary activity of a sensitive and intelligent poet, who produces his common people within their justness and exactness without jeopardising the fundamental aspects of life and without philosophising or moralising on the state in which they exist to leave them in this dimension - the dimension of finitude and limitation. So they are the revelations of the beings of existence as they really are within and without -- 'the sons and daughters of labour and poverty'. They are neither lifted to the subliminal stage, nor put within the realm of transcendentalism, but are kept in the world of materialism as 'matters of the most serious nature'. They are individuals and distinctive characters of a class distinct and complete in itself, yet form the rudimentary parts of the cycle of the greater society. They are objects of reality - materialistic and matter-of-fact, documentation of coarse and rigorous aspects of earthly existence. Their attitude to life is positive as they acclimatise to the existent situation completely without the slightest pretext of provocation. They accept poverty and its eventualities in their entirety, but never become devoid of vitality consequent upon oppression of misery and hardship, rather indulge in labour in the professional sphere, delight in happiness and feel remorse in sorrows, and, in fine, consider
All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and entrances;

(As You Like It, Act. 3, scene i.)

thus all the common men and women of Burns remain as common people of the material universe with affairs consisting of matters only.

Now, Crabbe, a parson-poet, admirably portrays the simple, but varied figures of his common people with a new spirit of appreciation of the conditions of human life. The parson does possess the 'benevolence' of heart which develops in him a sagacious outlook and inspires the poet within with an exuberant feeling for the poor and the like. The characters of the poet depict a realistic picture of the common people who are no more than 'masses of flesh', but contain in themselves 'rare genius' to ensure survival in the world. The poet is contemptuous towards social and moral reforms, and sets his people in terms of the spirit of free-thought and individualism as elements of 'social criticism'. They are immune to the wounds and embarrassment in life, and receive the consequences of social disaster with calm passivity, yet maintain self-importance. Each of them is intensely personal with individual characteristics and creeds of life, yet socially is representative of a particular class. The poet's conception of them is so much delicate in thought and accurate in expression that they appear to be static figures with their natural tendency and temper and as the poet does not crave for escapism from realism the characters of the common people shine as portentous symbols of the elemental particularity assigned to each of them - they are horrible, yet not detestable; snobbish, yet free from vulgarity; self-conceited, yet not affected with egoism. The life is ugly, but not repulsive;
the demeanour coarse, but does not cause aversion or disgust. They are creatures of the inferior world, but are transferred through transformation into something unique and strange.

Wordsworth, on the other hand, is a man and a poet. "No one can be a good poet who is not first a good man." (1) So, he is first 'a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind'. This man in him with his keen perception of, and benevolent attitude to, the common people, inspires the poet within to realise 'the thing itself'. So, the characters of the low and humble people are not ordinary creation of poetic fancy, but are gleams of mystic intuition, and reveal the 'truth of things'. The 'truth' lies in the presentation of the figures in their exactness and justness with their natural characteristics - physically torn and worn in rags, psychologically afflicted and anguished, yet definite and distinct - definite in positional settlement, distinct with essential qualities. The method of presenting is also not simple, but involves a definite principle of metaphysics as its basis and the common men and women come into existence as flashes of beams of the materialistic interpretation of social anthropology with a ring of mysticism around them. They are quite natural within their justness and exactitude in lives with a leaning on supernaturalism, normal

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ed. John Cassner.
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within the elementary conditions of life, yet swing to and fro
and veer towards abnormalcy with their attitude and gesture. But,
notwithstanding this inclination towards supernaturalism and
assumption of abnormal psychology occasionally, they are as they
are common and ordinary within themselves, humble and low, with
their existent conditions of life and continue their existence
in the material world with the peculiar particularity assigned
to them.

Now, the cardinal difference between Wordsworth and other
Romantics in the treatment of the common man is the difference
of kind. Neither of them has accepted the essential conditions
of life as matters of presupposition. The characteristics of the
common people have sprung from their basic knowledge of the
origin, growth, development and ultimate cessation of existence
against the background of politico-economic and socio-religious
atmosphere. These Romantics and Wordsworth do possess the warmth
of feeling and sagacity of outlook towards the affairs of the
common people, and reveal them in their entirety from the
benevolence and compassion of their hearts. The concern of the
poets for these people is so intense that they appear to be the
products of their extreme views of life and consequently, their
attitudes to life appear to be defensive. These characters
contain in themselves shocking elements, and struggle for
maintenance of integrity and cohesion in the affairs of life in
the midst of uncongeniality and adversities. They are subject
to all earthly qualities of life - joys and sorrows, pains and
pleasures and, on all occasions, they engage themselves in a
perpetual fight against the existing orders for their existence
in the world which provides but a very little, or no scope for
them. Thus, primarily the common people of these poets are of the same colour and form. But the mode of their struggle for survival and their ultimate design in life make them distinctly different from each other. So, Blakean natural men, as the poet himself calls, engage in

Struggling through earth's melancholy,
Naked in air in shame and fear


to set themselves in 'repose' in heaven. The affairs of the natural world are of less importance to them as they always strive for spiritual salvation. They are more of spirit than of matters. But Wordsworth's common people, on the other hand, are basically men of this world despite occasional inclination to supernaturalism and struggle for their restoration in the world for the maintenance of their individual identity. To Blakean common people 'Infant Joy' is the supreme achievement in life, but the Wordsworthian characters look at the 'only dwelling on earth' with hearts 'in heaven'. The natural men of Blake indulge in the ideas of 'mutual forgiveness of each vice' in the subliminal stage far above the physical world to enter the realm of paradise. They are inorganic figures of the nonhuman world unlike Wordsworth's ordinary people who are organic in maintenance of a relation with the vegetative world with the affairs of mind and matter simultaneously. They are, of course, sometimes lifted to another dimension to make an addition of the sense of dignity to the conditions of their lives, but they remain as reflected images of realism. Now, comes the question of conflict: in Blake the
conflict is paradoxical whereas in Wordsworth the conflict involves the issue of restoration both mentally and physically; in Blake archaic, in Wordsworth positive. Unlike Blake, who understands the consequence of the conflict as supreme for the establishment of a relation between history and destiny, Wordsworth considers the conflict not as an isolated factor but as a process for human existence and also discovers the primal value only in the conflict apart from the effect whatsoever that may be. So, Wordsworthian common people are the people of fortitude of patience and endurance, and are concerned more with struggle than effects, while Blakean natural people strive vigorously to protect themselves from serious evils for achievement of eternal happiness. Their actions centre round the idea of saving themselves against the power and penalty of sin through divine blessings.

Now, an analytical comparison between Burns and Wordsworth in the treatment of common people evinces the prevalence of a difference of fundamentality. True it is that these two poets have dealt with rustic people, beggars, physically handicapped persons and humble people of various types and colours and the basic principles behind their treatment originate from a sense of compassion and feeling of humanism, but, on all occasions, the figures of these two poets have recourse to divergent processes for the accomplishment of finality in their lives. The rustics and farmers of Burns all indulge in their assignments with coalescent identification with their employments without producing any instinctual proliferation. They all end in themselves with little proviso for provisional provocation and exasperation for their sad lots and hardships. The interactions
between their impulse and humane temperament and the realities in life do not produce anything obscure and hidden. But the Wordsworthian shepherds and rustics, on the contrary, bring, as a consequence of their psychic make-up, a deeper sense of mystery, and signify something more than that which is ordinarily expressed with their thoughts and feelings, actions and movements. Their power of endurance and patience evoke a sense of mystery which reflects through a strange vibration -- the vibration of all-pervasion and diffusion.

The attitudes to beggars of these two poets are also dissimilar. The idea of begging fascinates Burns. He discovers the seeds of freedom and escapism in begging. Burns's beggars are beggars in the truest sense of the term with an anarchic view of life. As they are deprived of the primary amenities of life and the social force itself is detrimental to their survival in the universe, they are aptly in the mood of calling on the issue of their settlement in the world by protest or by any means which amount to revolt and contest -- revolt against the social order to renounce allegiance and contest against the normal order of human existence. But despite this spirit of challenge, they discover some sort of contentment in the conditions of their lives, and maintain their continuance with a rough type of jollity and merriment. The beggars of Wordsworth emit an essence of inner distinctive nature of difference both of degree and of kind. Like the beggars of Burns, they are all typical beggars but the humble people with their uncertain and disturbed stability not only manifest the distressingly bad conditions of their lives but also shake the universe by transferring the entire episode to another world -- the world
of thoughts and feelings. A sense of admonition pervades through the whole atmosphere and a disgraceful contempt is thrown on the system of civilisation. The gravity of the entire situation becomes so much intense and exceedingly acute that the physical wretchedness of the beggars is lost in the domain of humiliation which is thrust upon from another world. A finite matter assumes the shape of infinity. So, while Burns's beggars arouse a sense of pity and sympathy, the Wordsworthian beggars paralyse the critical faculty and fill the mind with shame by exposing the causes of their misery and the truth of life.

The treatment of the common people of other categories of these two poets also bears testimony to difference. The maimed soldier of Burns indulges in a spirit of brutal mirth despite the loss sustained by him in personal life and also in the ignominious profession resorted to by him for his survival. He finds pleasures in recapitulating his ancestral glory and the triumphant actions of his past career, but Wordsworth's discharged and victimised soldiers are quite different in tone and temperament. They neither consider the affairs of their past career as matters which can console them in the present atmosphere or can recompense the loss incurred by them, nor do they discover the seeds of glory to lessen their hardships in life. They reveal the picture of life in exactitude, and recourse to means for survival in conformity with their respective psychic origins: some resort to criminal acts, some rest in reliance on God. They are subtle and acute against the coarseness and roughness of Burns's soldier -- they spring from a sense of humanism against Burns's sense of pity and a feeling of affinity.
The characters of the common women of these two poets are also different. Burns has engaged himself more in the external affairs of his figures, viz. their physical beauty, movements, and activities than in the analysis of their psychological repercussion. These women remain far above the consequences of worldly conditions and their acceptance of life and its related phenomena causes no mental reverberation. But the course of life of the Wordsworthian common women flows in another direction. Their attitudes to life also agree to its terms, but they are not bereft of psychic reflections. The flux and re-flux of the mental phenomena of the characters, consequent upon the conditions of lives, bear a dimensional value and attribute a sense of astounding gravity to them. Thus Wordsworthian common women belong to the point of intrinsicsity while those of Burns are almost free from inner perplexities and disentanglement. The affairs of the lives of the female characters of Burns come to an end with the termination of the physical existence as they leave no idea of evoking any supramundane thought, while those of Wordsworth awaken in the mind a sense of surprise, horror, awe, sympathy, pity, in accordance with their actions and re-actions with the end of their concerns in the ephemeral world.

Now, the comparison in the treatment between Crabbe and Wordsworth also brings in a difference of vital importance. Crabbe's common people are of low and humble origin with quite common features. They are vivid, living, and distinct. Alike Burns's common people they are interested only in the affairs of the vegetative world, but unlike Burns's they are devoid of the vivacity and sprightliness of temper and behaviour. They look like marooned persons, fugitives put and left desolate in an island.
Wordsworthian common people, alike those of Crabbe, are also destitute and forlorn. Both the poets have revealed 'the horrid realities of poverty' and 'dereliction'. But while Crabbe has viewed only the ugly aspects of the essential conditions of life, and has never engaged himself in dissecting the subtlety of realism to unveil the psychological variations of his people, Wordsworth has not only indulged in the descriptions of the actualities of life but also has thrown electromagnetic rays to penetrate into the matters of their inner selves to formulate the principles of applied psychology, consequent on the eventuality of the cross-currents of the hardships of the physical world and its reaction in the mental horizon. So, Wordsworth's treatment is the history of psycho-anthropology or anthropological psychology and that of Crabbe's the social survey.

The probe thus carried through or to the end shows that the common people of these poets are all integration of something and all remain as indivisible units. These figures show that Blakean treatment is prophetism, and that of Burns is based on love and compassion. Crabbe's approach to life shows his negative aloofness, but Wordsworth 'is prepared to find insight and inspiration' in his common people to visualise a new system of life, and ultimately, inclines himself to prescribe a general principle of humanism to sympathise with the problems of life and the related conditions. The poet returns to words

Which speak of nothing more than what we are,

and,

Must hear Humanity in fields and groves
Pipe solitary anguish; or must hang
Brooding above the fierce confederate storm
Of sorrow, barricadoed evermore
and,

A gift of genuine insight; that my Song
With star-like virtue in its place may shine,
Shedding benignant influence, and secure,
Itself, from all malevolent effect
Of those mutations that extend their sway
Throughout the nether sphere/