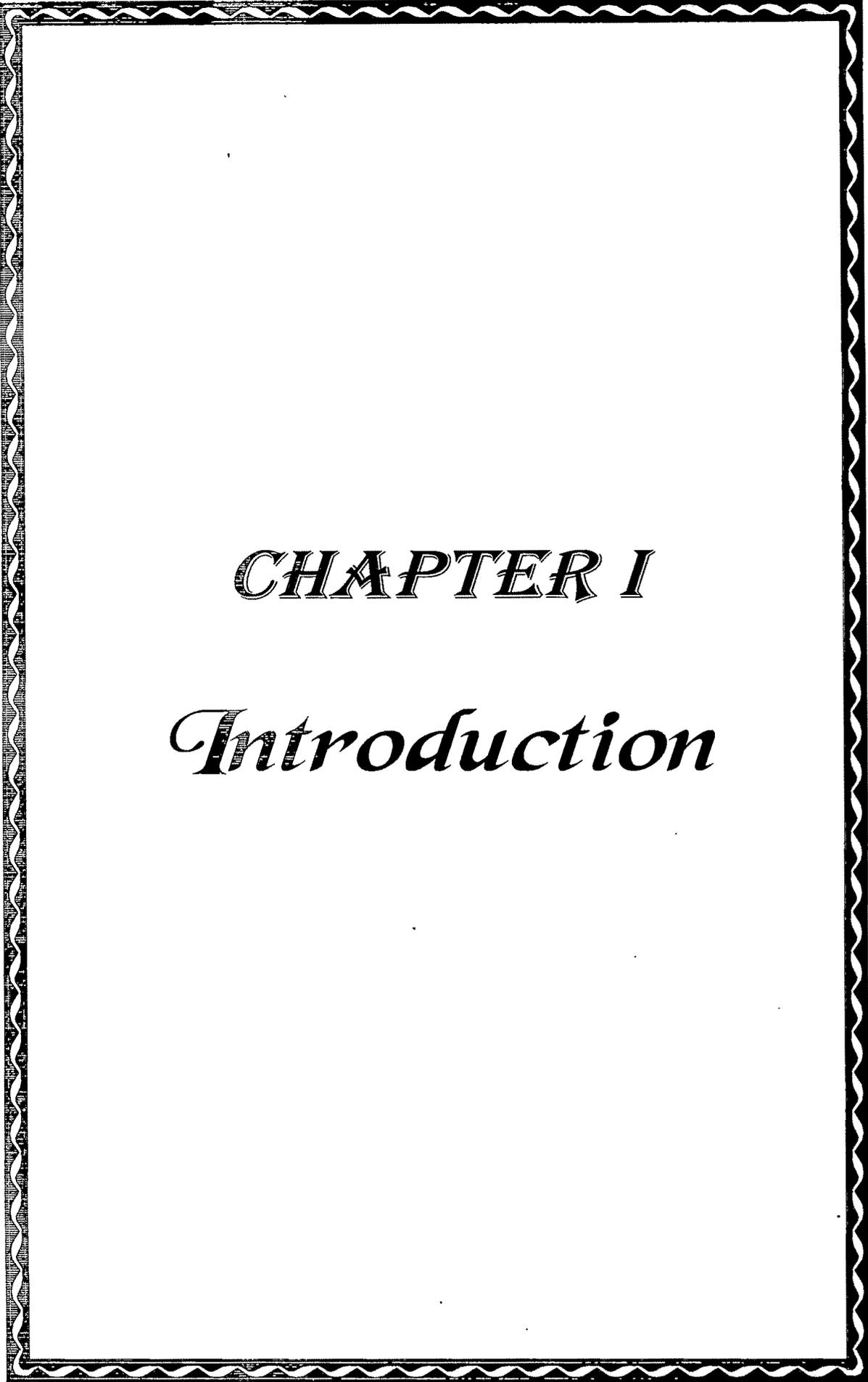


Humanism in
William Wordsworth's
Poetry



CHAPTER I

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

The history of English literature is marked with many kinds of movements which have undoubtedly influenced the poets, writers and other men of letters. Among such movements there is Renaissance in which we find new ideas very confidently bent to discover new things and newer world. Renaissance has gone very deep in the hearts of writers and we see that men of knowledge and erudition have started taking interest in the things which certainly are unimaginable. The definition of every thing has been meeting modifications and a tendency of the distancing of relationship was also found. There is the birth of individualism which is of greater importance due to the fact that an individual has some worth.

Besides this, there comes Humanism, which has been powerfully used by poets and writers of Romanticism. These poets attach deeper importance to the things which are present in an unknown world and also they have great love for nature and other objects living in her lap. The poets like P.B. Shelley, John Keats, S.T. Coleridge and William Wordsworth are the

poets of Romanticism who have soared high in the outer realms to describe some thing in a new way. The poetical corpus of William Wordsworth enables us to feel and establish him as a great poet of humanism.

William Wordsworth is the greatest poet of humanity in English Poetry. His poetic volumes are packed with striking passages on humanity. In fact he is a poet of man and human nature. His love for man leads him to see that man occupies the central place in the scheme of Nature. William Wordsworth's poetry carries us away from the suffocating atmosphere of cities into the outer world.

"Humanism has been taken into account as an attitude of mind attaching prime importance to man and human values, often regarded as the central theme of Renaissance civilization."¹

"Renaissance humanism is traceable to the 14th century Italian poet Petrarch, whose scholarship and enthusiasm for classic Latin writings gave great impetus to a movement that eventually spreads from Italy to all of Western Europe, the diffusion of humanism was facilitated by the universal use of Latin and by the invention of movable type, Although humanism

gradually becomes identified with classroom studies of the classics, it more properly embraced any attitude that exalted man's relationship to God, his free will, and his superiority over nature, philosophically humanism made man the measure of all things.² "Excitement over Latin sources touched off a widespread search for ancient documents that led in time to Greek and Hebrew studies, textual criticism and philology were born; the arts found patrons and flourished in conscious imitation of classical ideals and forms."³

In its return to antiquity, humanism found inspiration in man's personal quest for truth and goodness, confining systems of philosophy, religious dogmas, and abstract reasoning were shunned in favour of human values, though ceaseless efforts were made to relate Christian thought to the philosophies of the ancient world, seeds were likewise sown for the flowering of Reformation thought."⁴

In recent years the term humanism has often been used to refer to value systems that emphasize the personal worth of each individual but that do not include a belief in God, there is a certain segment of the Unitarian Universalist Association that is nontheistic and yet uses religious forms to promote distinctive

human values, in the same vein the 19th century French Positivist Auguste Comte established a nontheistic religion of humanity designed to promote social reform, the American Humanist Association publishes a quarterly magazine, the Humanist and propagates the humanist point of view.⁵

“In addition to these nontheistic humanism, there is some tendency among Christian theologians to refer to Christianity as humanistic, Karl Barth, a noted 20th century Swiss Protestant theologian, affirmed that there is no humanism without the Gospel, similarly, Roman catholic theologians have claimed that catholic Christianity is humanistic in that it emphasizes the uniqueness of man as a being created in the image of God”⁶

"During some thirty years, from 1490 until about 1520, when the religious quarrels begin, there is in England an efflorescence of humanism which is accomplished only by a few elect spirits, but pure serene, and full of hope, some young Englishmen are attracted to Italy by the desire to learn Greek, knowledge of which has been carried thither by refugees after the fall of constantinople to the Turks in 1453.⁷

William Wordsworth is a man who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, that are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delights to feel possibility of great joy and passions in the goings-on of the universe, and wants to create feelings where he does not find them.

It is by this train of thought that Wordsworth is greatly influenced and investigates the habits of the human mind. He understands the human agency which cooperates with external powers, and makes beauty and grandeur possible. He deeply investigates the qualities of human beings acquiring capacities and merits.

He further takes into account the beauty of mind of human beings thoroughly more beautiful than the earth which is a glorious creation of God. He also dwells upon the unchanging notions of human minds even in the time of havoc and terror. He has more seriously attached himself to the considerations of human minds which undoubtedly he finds made of divine qualities and appreciable elements.

Wordsworth does not dissect the human mind, he watches it at work, If he loves to trace the workings of the mind of a distracted woman, or of a careless happy child, or of a weak witted person, it is always with the same hope.

Thoughts of children, peasantry half witted human creatures, animals and birds these are nearer to earth than we give more companionable guidance to them, these spiritual directors submitted his heart in humble reverence and gratitude, he is fond of children and birds etc.

He listens to the Cuckoo with delight, for it reminds him of his school-days, and helps him to beget that golden time again, when the world seems an unsubstantial fairy place. Or he hears the mountain echo that reminds him the shouts of the cuckoo, and straightway thinks of the reverberations and intelligences that come to us.

He is attracted by the very indifference of children to the things on which they are brooding; he thinks that if children escape from discussion it is because they have a more direct access to the truth. Those who read to find fault may very easily quarrel with the address to the child in the ode –

"—thou Eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind;" ⁸

In his poem "We are Seven" it is the matter of fact simplicity of the little cottage girl, she refuses to share in his wonder at the mysteries of life and death, her refusal seems to him a marvellous thing. In vain he attempts to put the question : -

"Your run about, my little maid
Your limbs they are alive;
If two are in the church-yard laid
Then ye are only five." ⁹

The child finds no metaphysical difficulties in the fact of her own life.

There is random experiment in the "Anecdote for Fathers" when poet asks question with the little boy, he asks from little boy whether he wants to be at kilve, by the sea-shore, or here at Liswyn farm. The child replies that he prefers kilve. The boy seeking for help from the all-engrossing visible world, his eyes

catches a weather-cock, and he presents it, with ready tact and courtesy, to the poet : -

"At Kilve there was no weather-cock;

And that's the reason why." ¹⁰

In the poem that is called *Beggars* he appropriates and versifies an experience of his sister's, recorded in her *Journal*. The poet sees two ragged boys they are in the wildest high spirits, chasing a butterfly. They drop their sport, and are begging alms. In this way Wordsworth is always busy in having discourse with children, he has better fortune with the humble people whom he meets on the road or in the pastures. His observation of the peasantry who live on the land by their own labour yielded him the best and they are the finest part of his poetic harvest.

His method of research is like chemical investigator; he wants to isolate the elements of human life, he chooses for his experiment the complex forms of society known to him. His motives have been somewhat obscured by Coleridge's criticisms in the seventeenth chapter of the *Biographia Literaria*. The case

for the peasant's speech, he says, is not rendered. In a state of excitement the nature of a man's words, when he is strongly affected by joy, grief, or anger, must necessarily depend on the number and quality of the general truths, conceptions, and images, and of the words expressing them, with which his mind has been previously stored. He says the dalesman is not a peasantry but an aristocracy, their society is a society governed by strict and proud conventions, they are better educated and greater readers than men of equal rank elsewhere.

In his despondency, at the ill consequences of the French Revolution, Wordsworth turns away from the works of Man to seek and find comfort in the works of Nature. Nature carries him back with more composed and surer feelings to consider man once more-not man of the politicians, the statist, and the moralists, but the individual man-the man whom we behold with our own eyes. The individual man has already been found wanting, he is the dupe of passion, the victim of folly, frenzy, and presumption. Wordsworth resolves to reduce human life to its lowest terms, to see whether it is in itself a thing of worth. He wants to tell all the theorists and economists to those men who pass their lives under a weight of labour and hardship, battling

for a bare subsistence. He takes to the road, where, even now a hundred years and more after his initiation, any poet may find wealth of human passion enough to furnish him with his stock-in trade.

He comes to a sense of another world that is governed by fixed laws known as the world of external Nature; in man's essential character he finds spiritual dignity and in Nature he finds grace and power; the beatings of the heart of man is felt to obey same law that holds the star in their courses.

His chosen subjects are vagrants, beggars and pensioners among them he finds those qualities which gave Rome her empire in the ancient world, and those also which, in the mediaeval world drew people on pilgrimage.

There is an account of a night adventure near Windermere, during his college vacation, when Wordsworth was walking far to home on the road and meets a ghost which is the spirit of Solitude. It appears to him in the figure of a man, taller than the common stature, stiff and companionless with no dog or staff, leaning

against a milestone and looking ghastly in the moonlight. There is enough light to see that he is dressed like a soldier : -

“From his lips, ere long,
 Issued low muttered sounds, as if of pain
 or some uneasy thought; yet still his form
 Kept the same awful steadiness at his feet
 His shadow lay, and moved not .” 11

Wordsworth becomes courageous and address him to come.
 About that figure, he says –

“He Rose, and with a lean and wasted arm
 In measured gesture lifted to his head
 Returned my salutation; then resumed
 His station as before; and when I asked
 His history, the veteran, in reply,
 Was neither slow nor eager; but, unmoved,
 And with a quiet uncomplaining voice,

A stately air of mild indifference,
 He told in few plain words a soldier's tale-
 That in the Tropic Islands he had served,
 Whence he had landed scarcely three weeks past;
 That on his landing he had been dismissed,
 And now was travelling towards his native home." ¹²

Ghost gives his agreement to go with the poet to seek for shelter, and they walk on together :-

"Though weak his step and cautious, he appeared
 To travel without pain, and I beheld,
 With an astonishment but ill suppressed,
 His ghostly figure moving at my side." ¹³

They walk for a time, and Wordsworth asks him questions concerning his military experiences :-

"He all the while was in demeanour calm,
 Concise in answer; solem and sublime
 He might have seemed, but that in all he said
 There was a strange half-absence, as of one

knowing too well the importance of his theme,
 But feeling it no longer. Our discourse
 Soon ended, and together on we passed
 In silence through a wood gloomy and still.

 Up-turning, them, along an open field,

 We reached a cottage.”¹⁴

Here shelter is asked and obtained for the soldier, and the poet entreats him that in future he will not linger in the public highway, but will ask for help when he needs it : -

“At this reproof,
 With the same ghastly mildness in his look,
 He said, “My trust is in the God of Heaven,
 And in the eye of him who passes me.”¹⁵

When they part at the door the soldier expresses his thanks for the first time with a trace of feeling ; and the poet looks back at the cottage and stay for a time near it and goes on his way with a quiet heart to his own home.

The magic of this description is not wholly due to that romantic spirit of wonder which notices, for instance, the stillness of the soldier's shadow. There is a subtler element in it; the figure of the man is invested with an effect of romantic distance by Wordsworth's hesitating and delicate reverence for the personality of another.

The poem "Resolution and Independence" describes the interview with the old Leech gatherer, the meeting and the conversation takes place in September 1800 on the road at Grasmere, a few hundred yards from Dove Cottage. Wordsworth presents the scene in order to show the old man at his work and sets him among elemental powers akin to his majestic and indomitable spirit. The dejection, the sad fears and fancies that haunts the poet's thoughts, are no invention. In the year 1800 his means of subsistence are nearing an end; he devotes himself diligently to poetry without winning substantial recognition. He suggests his brother John who follow a practical profession, about the thought of self-reproach-

"My whole life have lived in pleasant thought,
As if life's business were a summer mood;

As if all needful things would come unsought
 To genial faith, still rich in genial good;
 But how can He expect that others should
 Build for him, sow for him, and at his call
 Love him, who for himself will take no heed at all"? ¹⁶

All these thoughts of poet are glad and confident in his youth, but it all leads to poverty and misery and madness. And by peculiar grace there appears to him the minister of consolation : -

"Beside a pool bare to the eye of heaven,
 I saw a Man before me unawares
 The oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs." ¹⁷

When the poet questions with that Leech-gatherer about his occupations, the old man tells him about his livelihood by roaming the moors and gathering leeches from the ponds. When these leeches are not easily found or found only in small quantities then that old man roams from moor to moor and pond to pond to find out and gather leeches -

"yet still I persevere, and find them where I may." ¹⁸

Wordsworth feels ashamed of himself for being unhappy to think of a life of poverty, illness and want in future. In an old man like the leech-gatherer can face hardships with such firm determination, the poet may also do so. He therefore, prays to God to be his help. He also decides to think of the leech-gatherer on the lonely moor, if and when fear of coming poverty, disease, pain, want, etc. ever grips him in future. To him, the leech-gatherer becomes a symbol of manly courage, firm determination, habitual hard work and diligence. The leech-gatherer over and above all bears elemental dignity and is fighting for existence.

The old Cumberland Beggar is like the leech-gatherer, a commissioner from Heaven, a kind of good angel, calling forth, wherever he passes, acts of human kindness, pity and love. He is far too old and frail to do anything for his living.

"Tis Nature's law

That none, the meanest of created things,

Or forms created the most vile and brute,

The dullest or most noxious, should exist

Divorced from good- a spirit and pulse of good,

A life and soul, to every mode of being

Inseparably linked." 19

Much more is the innocent and helpless life of the old man a means of good. The youngest and the most thoughtless pay respect to his feebleness. He keeps unselfishness alive and continues traditions of charity. The sight of him serves as a silent monitor to the prosperous, the robust, and the gay, touching them to thought and to a keener sense of thankfulness for what they enjoy.

All above sketches make it easier to understand Wordsworth's account of the way by which he presents his sympathy with humanity. He tells in the Prelude, nature holds long an exclusive place in his affections. When the feeling for humanity arouses in him by suffering, man is still subordinate to Nature, in this sense, he is always conceived in a larger setting, exhibits in close relations with a greater whole, and plays around by the emotions that it be- gets. From beginning to the end Wordsworth cannot bring himself to regard the network of human relationships as a thing to be study for its own sake. In crowding societies of men he finds : -

"the same perpetual flow
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
To one identity, by differences
That have no law, no meaning, and no end;" ²⁰

The distinction between Man and Nature, it has often been observed, is a fallacious distinction, not warranted by science. Man, as any one of the race, who studies science can explain is a part of Nature, not a separate Kingdom. The pride of knowledge may work a more complete alienation between Man and Nature than ever is effected by ignorance and superstition. It is by a great imaginative gift that Wordsworth sees man in his surroundings; his men are spirits of the Earth, wrought upon by the elements from which they are compounded. Hence in his descriptions of humanity there is a kind of magic purity; the influences of earth and sky are every where felt in human feature and character. The affinity between Man and Nature expresses itself in a hundred incidental comparisons. The poet when he sees the daffodils is wandering "lonely as a cloud".

Peter Bell also is a being compounds of elements; before he is the convert of Nature he is her child :—

"And tender sounds, yet you might see
 At once, that Peter Bell and she
 Had often been together,
 A savage wildness round him hung

As of a dweller out of doors;
 In his whole figure and his mien
 A savage character was seen
 Of mountain and of dreary moors.

.....

There was a hardness in his cheek,
 There was a hardness in his eye,
 As if the man had fixed his face,
 In many a solitary place,
 Against the wind and open sky!" ²¹

All the qualities and appearances of Nature find their counterpart in Man - the child who is bone of her bone, and who inherits her from and favour.

The imaginative fusion of Nature and Man is with Wordsworth so complete that he comes to see a affinity between the ordinances of Nature and the highest human virtues. The moral law, the law of love, and duty, and sacrifice, which works as a barrier between Man and the rest of creation - this also for Wordsworth, is the law of Nature. The life and sense which are given by God to us there he finds love.

The poem "Fidelity" is a tribute to the dog that watched for three months by its master's body in the wildest recesses of Helvellyn :—

"How nourished here through such long time
 He knows, who gave that love sublime;
 And gave that strength of feeling, great
 Above all human estimate!" ²²

To love and to be strong, this is the fulfilling of the law, for beast and man. The moral nature of man is not exhibited by Wordsworth in direct conflict with the hard laws of the material universe. The hardness of these laws gives to Man his most magnificent opportunities, and tests the highest of his resources; he is a worker in iron. The poet neither rebels nor protests against Fate, and it is this, perhaps- the sense of Fate - of the inexorable sequences of things, of the terrible chain than so often binds an awful end to some slight and trivial beginning. If wordsworth anticipates such an objection, he undermines, it and shattered it more completely than by writing the White Doe of Rylstone, or the Fate of the Nortons.

In that poem he summons all the powers of grief and anguish to do their worst on a single devoted soul. They spring to deliver their assault suddenly out of a midsummer of peace and happiness. The emblematic banner, fashioned by Emily Norton at her father's command, becomes an instrument of her direst woe. The hammer-blows of Fate follow one another in quick succession; none is spared and none softened. Wordsworth says, that it is attempted by the principal personages in *The White Doe* fails, so far as its object is external and substantial. So far as it is moral and spiritual it succeeds. The inevitable doom that falls on Richard Norton and his sons is foreseen and foretold to Emily by her brother Francis, who bids her take comfort in the thought that she is permitted to go with him to meet it, her eyes unblinded and her heart undeluded:—

“Hope nothing, I repeat, for we.
 Are doomed to perish utterly;
 Tis meet that thou with me divide
 The thought while I am by thy side,
 Acknowledging a grace in this,
 A comfort in the dark abyss,

.....

Weep, if that aid thee; but depend
 Upon no help of outward friend;
 Expouse thy doom at once, and cleave
 To fortitude without reprieve.”²³

And when the doom falls, the father and the sons who fight with him tries for treason and suffers an ignominious death, when Francis, the last and dearest of her brothers, attempts to bring the banner back to Bolton Abbey, is overtaken and slain, and Emily is left alone with her fate :—

“What mighty forest in its gloom
 Enfolds her ? – is a rifted tomb
 within the wilderness her seat?
 Some island which the wild waves beat-
 Is that the sufferer's last retreat?
 Or some aspiring rock, that shrouds
 Its perilous front in mists and clouds?
 High-climbing rock, low sunless dale,
 Sea, desert, what do these avail?
 Oh take her anguish and her fears
 Into a deep recess of years !”²⁴

She acts out her part; she suffers, and is strong and worthy of the grace of God; and so, even in life, is sainted, raised by the force of sorrow itself beyond the reach of any further disturbance of the soul :—

“The mighty sorrow hath been borne,
 And she is thoroughly forlorn:
 Her soul doth in itself stand fast,
 Sustained by memory of the past
 And strength of Reason; held above
 The infirmities of mortal love;
 Undaunted, lofty, calm, and stable,
 And awfully impenetrable.”²⁵

There is no lack here of the sense of Fate. That the poet addresses himself calmly to scale these dizzy cliffs of anguish, where the mortal senses reel, might almost seem too presumptuous an attempt for the powers of the human imagination. The White Doe, which wanders through the poem, a gracious presence, is the embodiment of the comfort that he finds in the continue gentle breathings of Nature and in the deep well – springs of his own soul.

The Character of the Happy Warrior owes something to the same inspiration, and is of a like temper. The warrior, by his profession, is brought into daily contact with the grimmest of facts and laws; it is his duty to make them subservient to the law for which he stands. He is one —

“Who, doomed to go in company with Pain,
And Fear, and Bloodshed, miserable train!
Turns his necessity to glorious gain;
In face of these doth exercise a power
Which is our human nature’s highest dower;
Controls them and subdues, transmutes, bereaves
Of their bad influence, and their good receives:
By objects, which might force the soul to abate
Her feeling, rendered more compassionate;
Is placable – because occasions rise
So often that demand such sacrifice;
More skilful in self knowledge, even more pure,
As tempted more; more able to endure,
As more exposed to suffering and distress;
Thence, also, more alive to tenderness.”²⁶

It is strange fortune, that makes Wordsworth the best Laureate of the warrior. Wordsworth follows his early leanings and takes the Army for his calling, he will have been an incomparable soldier. The White Doe is a warrior poem, greater, perhaps, than the poem explicitly devotes to the ideal soldier, as the virtues that it enshrines are rarer and more difficult. The Happy Warrior is not compelled throughout the whole of a long life to stand and wait, the crisis of action brings him the consummation of his happiness. He is a gentle and generous spirit—

“Whose powers shed round him in the common strife,
 Or mild concerns of ordinary life,
 A constant influence, a peculiar grace;
 But who, if he be called upon to face
 Some awful moment to which Heaven has joined
 Great issues, good or bad for human kind,
 Is happy as a Lover; and attired
 With sudden brightness, like a Man inspired;
 And through the heat of conflict keeps the law
 In calmness made, and sees what he foresaw.” 27

In both poems the happiness of clear vision, which enables man to be still the giver, not the stunned victim of a theft, is set high among human privileges.

The Ode to Duty, written earlier than these two poems, is in some sort an induction to them. It is in eternal law that humanity finds consolation and support, and life and joy. He tells in the Prelude that from early childhood Wordsworth chiefly esteems that love and beauty have an element of severity and terror. He returns to them, after a holiday of genial impulse, to find them greater and more commanding than before. The beauty that he reveals, more fully than other poets, is the beauty of the rocks; on this unshaken ground all graces that are not illusion must build. Flowers, and laughter, and fragrance – all that plays on the surface and fades in the air – are the offspring of the same unalterable law which disciplines the stars in their squadrons, and which, in human hearts, is the law of sanity and order, of faith and of peace.

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