

CHAPTER III

*French Revolution
and
Wordsworth*

French Revolution and William Wordsworth

The French Revolution has made a far reaching impact on the nature of English Poetry. William Wordsworth is lover of freedom so he is deeply influenced by the slogans of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity raised by the French people. William Wordsworth has heard the revolutionaries cry of liberty, equality and fraternity, when he has been a student at Cambridge in 1789. He has already heard of the tyranny of the French king Louis XVI and his court. In 1791 he goes to France with his friend Robert Jones, a Welsh man to have the first hand knowledge of the Revolution. For it has strengthened his faith in democracy, liberty, equality and his enthusiasm for the brotherhood of mankind. In France he visits the ruins of the Bastille and the Legislative Assembly. The most important effect of the French Revolution on Wordsworth is indirect. It induces him to set out an expedition to the Alps, so he landed at Calais on the eve of revolution -

"To land at Calais on the very eve."¹

This implies that though the desire to see the Alps will have been strong at any time the impulse is made irresistible by the light of glory streaming from that land of liberty through which the poet must go. William Wordsworth lands on Calais on July 13th, accompanied by a fellow Robert Jones. They set out the following day on a forced march, and complete 350 miles exactly in two weeks. They reach Savoy the beginning of August, and then spent six weeks exploring the mountains and lakes of that country of northern Italy and of Switzerland. Wordsworth is fully aware of the nature of the change that has been wrought in him, Wordsworth and his companion has been climbing up the Simplon pass. They become detach from their guide and has grown uncertain of their way - while in doubt - they meet a peasant and question him; from his answer they learn that they have crossed the Alps. Then comes this invocation:-

"Imagination - here the Power so called
 Through sad incompetence of human speech,
 That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss
 Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
 At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost;
 Halted without an effort to break through;

But to my conscious soul I now can say -
I recognise thy glory; in such strength
Of usurpation, when the light of sense
Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
The invisible world, doth Greatness make abode,
There harbours; whether we be young or old.
Our destiny, our being's heart and home,
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.
Under such banners militant, the soul
Seeks for no trophies, struggles for no spoils
That may attest her prowess, blest in thoughts
That are their own perfection and reward,
Strong in herself and in beatitude
That hides her, like the mighty flood of Nile."²

Wordsworth's mind is now thoroughly unsettled - by the events in France, after the fall of the Bastille, by his growing interest in the literature of republicanism, by his visit to France where he finds that there was friendly relation ship between people and their hearts were full of great delight.

Wordsworth comes with his companion in England in October 10th, 1791 and from November 1791 onward Wordsworth goes in France again for more than a year. He holds introduction to aristocratic society, but growing weary of conversation that busies itself with anything rather than the living interests of the day, he soon sees the acquaintance of the patriots. Now at last he comes to close quarters with the suffering that every where underlay the Revolution, and with the thoughts and designs of its friends, He forms a close friendship with Michael Beaupuy, an officer, nobly born, some fifteen years his senior, whose tenderaness, meekness, gallantry, and utter devotion to the cause of the people are celebrated in glowing language in The Preude -

"A band of military officers,
 Then stationed in the city, were the chief
 Of my associates: some of these wore swords
 That had been seasoned in the wars, and all
 were men well - born; the chivalry of France. ³

With Beaupuy he spends the early summer months of 1792, on the banks of the Loire. They talk of many things; of history and the heroes of the ancient states of philosophy and the regeneration of the people. In the everpresent consciousness that Beaupuy is pledging to serve the national cause with his life, Wordsworth feels that these questions have passed out of the domain of theory, that politics has suddenly become real and all - important. The miseries of the old order brings home to him in like fashion. He tells it in his own words: -

"And when we chanced
 One day to meet a hunger - bitten girl,
 Who crept along, fitting her languid gait

Unto a heifer's motion by a cord
Tied to her arm, and picking thus from the lane
Its sustenance, while the girl with pallid hands
Was busy knitting in a heartless mood
Of solitude, and at the sight my friend
In agitation said, "Tis against that
That we are fighting." I with him believed
That a benignant spirit was abroad
Which might not he withstood, that poverty
Abject as this would in a little time.
Be found no more, that we should see the earth
Unthwarted in her wish to recompense,
The meek the lowly, patient child of Toil,
All institutes for ever blotted out
That legalised exclusion, empty pomp
Abolished, sensual state and cruel power,
Whether by edict of the one or few;
And finally, as sum and crown of all,
Should see the People having a strong hand
In framing their own laws ; whence better days
To all mankind."⁴

Wordsworth is not quick at seizing an occasions for sentiment. The inner life of his thought and emotion is protected by a natural rampart of reserve and self - absorption from the lightened intrusions of pity and sympathy. He can look on the seething life of London with a glazed philosophic eye, and pain no more than the trumbling of so many marionettes. Once a scene or attitude of human life catches his attention and wakes his pity, the impression is deep and lasting. The picture haunts him when his eyes are shut; the drama possesses his heart and brain, and enacts itself over and over again with labour and suffering. He can not put it behind him without the promise of a satisfactory solution. So when he sees the girl with the heifer in the lane he clutches the more eagerly at the Revolutionary creed. He believes that a benignant spirit is abroad; and the September massacres are the comment of destiny on that belief. He expects to see the power of the one or few abolsh; and Napoleon arises to mock his expectations. He wants that poverty should be found no more; and some ten years later he meets the leech - gatherer at Grasmere. The length of the journey is a measure of Wordsworth's spiritual progress; in that later meeting he no longer indulges himself with large dreams of benefaction; humanity has risen in his esteem, and has become his teacher and consoler:-

"I could have laughed myself to scorn to find

In that decrepit Man so firm a mind.

" God", sai I, " be my help and stay secure;

I'll think of the Leech - gatherer on the lonely moor!"⁵

After the September massacres or the murder of king, he goes back in Paris alone, wandering about the city, imagining the furious scenes that has filled it so lately, studying in his attic - room, and agitating his mind so incessantly that his troubled dreams gains the force of hallucinations. Wordsworth sees the sights and to breathe in the atmosphere of revolutionary zeal. He visits the National Assembly and sees -

"-----the Revolutionary Power

Toss like a ship at anchor, rocked by storms."⁶

"-----coasted round and round the line

Of Tavern, Brothel, Gaming - house, and shop,

Great rendezvous of worst and best, the walk
 Of all who had a purpose, or had not;
 I stared and listened, with a stranger's ears,
 To Hawkers and Haranguers, hubbub wild!
 And hissing Factionists with ardent eyes,
 In Knots, or pairs, or single."⁷

Wordsworth proceeds to Orleans, where his first business is to seek cheap lodgings. He eventually finds in a house where he has 'two or three officers of the cavalry and a young gentleman of paris' as fellow lodgers. But in his search for lodgings he makes the acquaintance of a 'family which he finds very greeable, but whose terms were too dear. However, he is invited to spend his evenings there and this enables him to dispense with a master of French. About that family he is saying that is certain Paul Vallon and that in the same house is staying Paul's sister Annette, a vivacious young lady of twenty - five. In any case, it is certain that Wordsworth quickly makes the acquaintance of Annette Vallon, that he finds her a willing teacher of the French language. The natural thing happens; teacher and pupil falls in love with each other, and before many weeks have passed Annette, in Wordsworth's own elegant phrasing:-

"-----yet without name of wife

Carried about her for a secret grief,

The promise of a Mother."⁸

Annette is the daughter of a surgeon of Blois, but her father is dead, and her mother has married again. She is therefore somewhat unprotected. In the spring of 1792 Annette returns to her home in Blois, and thither Wordsworth follows her, to be near her. He stays in Blois about seven months. He is still there on September 3rd. Then, because her condition can no longer be disguised, and to avoid a scandal in her native city, Annette goes once more to Orleans, and Wordsworth goes with her - There, on December 15th, a daughter is born, and christened Anne Caroline Wordsworth. Paul Vallon stood god-father to the child, but Wordsworth himself has fled to Paris. He stays there by the end of October and remains there for about two months in fact, until he has news of his daughter's birth. Then he hastenes to England. Wordsworth is called the deceiver of Annette Vallon.

Wordsworth has written Vaudracour and Julia about April, 1804, this poem publishes in 1820. Vaudracour and Julia is

based on frustrated love. Vaudracour and Julia, who has grown up together in a small town in the heart of France, fall desperately in love with each other. Their union is opposed by Vaudracour's father, on the ground that one of the nobility cannot demean himself by marrying a maiden of no rank. The ecstatic nature of Vaudracour's love is described by Wordsworth in lines of unusually sensuous beauty:

"Earth liv'd in one great presence of the spring
Life turn'd the meanest of her implements
Before his eyes to price above all gold,
The house she dwelt in was a sainted shrine,
Her chamber window did surpass in glory
The portals of the East, all paradise
Could by the simple opening of a door
Let itself in upon him, pathways, walks,
Swarm'd with enchantment till his spirit sank
Beneath the burthen, overbless'd for life." ⁹

The lovers, Wordsworth goes on to relate, finally rebels against the unjust veto, either through effect of some delirious hour; or because the youth in his desperation:-

"Seeing so many bars betwixt himself
 And the dear haven where he wish'd to be
 In honourable wedlock with his love
 Without a certain knowledge of his own,
 Was inwardly prepared to turn aside
 From law and custom, and entrust himself
 To Nature for a happy end of all,"¹⁰

Nature responds in the usual way, and an illegitimate child is born to Julia. The rest of the poem is taken up with plots for concealments, stolen interviews, the tyranny of Vaudracour's father, a thousand fears and hopes, coming finally to a ridiculous conclusion, with Julia in a convent, and Vaudracour retiring with the child to a lodge deep in the forest. There, after a short time the child, 'by some mistake, or indiscretion of the father, died; and Vaudracour wastes his days in those solitary shades 'an imbecile mind.

The tale of Vaudracour and Julia differs in many details from the tale of Wordsworth and Annette, but the main feelings involve are the same; the same delirious passion, the same sense of frustration, the same atmosphere of intrigue and concealment, and then a forced parting and ' the stings of viperous remorse, trying their strength'. Wordsworth relates how during the course of the Revolutionary Terror his soul is sick:-

"Most melancholy at that time, O Friend!

Were my day - thoughts, my nights were miserable;

Through months, through years, long after the last beat

Of those atrocities, the hour of sleep

To me came rarely charged with natural gifts,

Such ghastly visions had I of despair

And tyranny, and implements of death;

And innocent victims sinking under fear,

 Before unjust Tribunals, with a voice

Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense,

Death - like, of treacherous deser'tion, felt

In the last place of refuge - my own soul."¹¹

The stings of viperous remorse, and this voice pleading, this death like sense of treacherous desertion feels in that last place of refuge. These phrases reveal, as surely as words can reveal, the inner processes of this man's life, the overwhelming nature of his passion for Annette, the torn and anguished heart which he brings back to England at the end of this year 1792.

There is war between France and England on February 1st, 1793. Wordsworth has been in England for about four weeks and now finds himself trapped, unable to return to Annette. There is a great love in heart of Wordsworth for France, because he is effected by the condition of people in France. When Great Britain declares war on the French Republic he suffers a shock, he says, that throughout of the pale of love, and soures and corrupts his feelings upwards to the sour when prayers for victory is offered up in the churches he sits silent among the congregation, and "fed on the day of vengeance yet to come". And, worse than this, the foothold of his sympathies n the other side is steadily being undermined. The best blood of France has been spilt on the scaffold, and among the victims are many of the chiefs whom he admires and has been willing to follow. The war for liberty is changed by its own success into a war for conquest, and the French appears as the oppressors of humbler peoples.

Wordsworth's sympathy with the Revolution has a widely different origin, and it is only by stress of weather and from the dire need of reinforcement for his faith, that he has driven into that harbour. He trusts to the event to vindicate his belief in the inherent purity and goodness of human nature and the event has failed him. The feelings and passions of men play him false, but the doctrine may yet be save if those feelings and passions can only be regard as "infirmities of nature, time and place," to be shake off by a regenerate humanity.

"The out break of war in 1793 greatly intensified the gloom. It was not merely that the poet's own country was in conflict with France. In 1793-4 the evil, for the poet, was war itself. The struggle which was then beginning, he writes in the 'Advertisement' to his poem *Guilt and Sorrow* and which many thought would be brought to a speedy close by the irresistible arms of Great Britain being added to those of the Allies, he goes on to assert that the poor more than other classes' are subject to the calamities' consequent upon war' *Guilt and Sorrow* enforces this truth and indicts the vices of the penal law."¹²

Guilt and Sorrow is finished in 1793-4. A temporary relief of political anxiety comes with the death of Robespierre in 1794, to be followed by a still darker period of philosophical despair. To this time belongs the composition of the Borderers; it not only expresses the poet's perplexities, but greatly relieve them. Before considering this tragedy, we must return for a time to *The Prelude*.

"Residence in England did little towards lightening Wordsworth's distress in the course of the Revolution. Indeed, there was now the added grief that his own country was at war with the champions of Liberty: the description of his divided loyalties is one of the most poignant passages of *The Prelude*. Foreign attacks favoured the extremists in France; 'beset' with foes the goaded land waxed mad."¹³ It is hard to believe that he is living in the civil order of his own country. He sees that the evils in France lay not in popular government as such, but are a legacy from generations of tyranny and ignorance—a reservoir of guilt. There is no taint of insular superiority in his attitude. He is not judging a nation: he is groping in the darkness which surrounds human society. But he knows the quality of his own mind, and it is with the courage of conviction that he dares to compare himself with the 'ancient Prophets, borne aloft in visions':

"So did a portion of that spirit fall
 On me uplifted from the vantage-ground
 Of pity and sorrow to a state of being
 That through the time's exceeding fierceness saw
 Glimpses of retribution, terrible,
 And in the order of sublime behests."¹⁴

And with a determination to draw strength from every possible source, he finds comfort in the records of those victims of the Terror who have given 'fair examples.

"Of fortitude and energy and love
 And human nature faithful to herself
 Under worst trials,-----¹⁵

The fall of Robespierre and the end of the Reign of Terror revives the hopes of an earlier time, but the relief is short lived. A few months later, the invasion of Holland by the French turns a war of self-defence into one of aggression Liberty, as

Wordsworth believes in it, is doomed. It is the final destruction of his hopes for man through revolutionary politics, and his mind is left in a dangerous state of vacuum.

His own explicit statement, it will be difficult to believe that a scheme of thought like that of the Political Justice can ever have established an ascendancy over his mind. In *The Prelude* he shows himself well aware to the weaknesses of a system which gives licence to fanatic zeal under the guise of sober reason and which flatters youthful pride of intellect by allowing it to hold itself superior to the shackles of custom and the claims of nature feeling.

He turns away from politics: it is only by low degrees that he wins his way out to poetry. His depression is not so great as to make him forswear all study; but he puts aside all branches of study that involve that element of disease and uncertainty, human nature and devotes himself to abstract science. A man puzzles his mind over problems of government and society, and distresses himself with too deep a sense of responsibility for the right conduct of the Universe, and falls into a morbid and irritable state. But he blest with a sound constitution, good

lungs, and equable heart, so that time works his cure, and he suddenly realises, with a sense of surprise, that the world is not so black as it has been painted in his imagination, that bread, after all, tastes sweet, that water quenches thirst, and that life is worth the living.

A system of Political thought not subject to the unpredictable ways of man, not depends upon national character, not bind up with the emotions, and therefore superior to pit, not find on creed or tradition not variable from one region to another - such is Wordsworth that craves for at this time; The hopes of men are to be 'abstracted out of his feelings' and 'fix'd thenceforth Forever in a purer element'. At the same time man is make arbiter of his political fate by dealing pragmatically with every situation on its merits, unhampered by principle.

For a man of Wordsworth's deep instinctive belief in the reality of goodness and justice the decision to judge questions of weight by some opportunistic standard will have been spiritual suicide. And this he at length discovers. The essential being of his soul.

His tragedy, the *Borderers*, is an introduction to his answer to these perplexities. The answer itself is the entire body of his subsequent poetry. But writing the tragedy, Wordsworth attains a degree of self-knowledge which, with the help of his sister Dorothy and of Coleridge, enables him to enter upon his characteristic work, marked, in Coleridge's words, by 'unity of interest' and 'homogeneity of character'. He writes an introductory essay, dealing with his observations of human nature during the French Revolution and these are the basis of the tragedy, *The Borderers*. The dramatic action is secondary, and the essence of the work lies in the ethical and psychological problems embodied in the two main characters. Oswald and Marmaduke. *The Borderers* is modelled on *Othello*: in both works an unscrupulous 'friend' aims at the total ruin of an unsuspecting benefactor. But whereas Shakespeare with consummate skill long diverts our enquiry as to Iago's motives, if any, the reasons for Oswald's plot to deceive Mortimer cry out for an answer, which is delayed until the fourth Act. Up to that point the action has no visible principle of cohesion. In the *Borderers*; Oswald himself upholds the view that action should be governed by pure calculation without regard to pity or the other natural emotions, and Marmaduke becomes his pupil.

Marmaduke is the leader of the Borderers a band dedicate to enforcing the elements of order on the confines of England and Scotland in the reign of Henry II. Oswald, who once owes his life to Marmaduke, exercises a strong influence upon him, but is distrusted by the rest of the Band. His attack on the happiness of his chief begins in the invention of a hideous calumny against the blind and aged Herbert - a former Crusader-father of Idonea, whom Marmaduke loves. Herbert, according to Oswald, is an impostor who abuses Idonea's trust to sell her to the lustful purposes of the vicious Lord Clifford. This tissue of lies is presented with manipulated 'evidence' cunningly devise to convince Marmaduke's mind. The chief has himself the enthusiasm and instability of revolutionary times: with good natural feelings, he is emancipated from tradition and highly amenable to 'reason'. In his contest with Oswald over the treatment due to Herbert for his 'villainy', Marmaduke at first upholds compassion as being to man' as natural as life', but at last, under the pressure of Oswald's 'evidence' goes to the extreme of ruthlessness:-

"Now for the corner-stone of my philosophy
 I would not give a denier for the man
 Who, on such provocation as this earth
 Yields, could not chuck his babe beneath the chin,
 And send it with a fillip to its grave. "16

This is the kind of 'transition in soul' known at times in the Revolutionary Tribunals of 1792-3, where the sacrifice of natural feeling to 'patriotism' is often greeted with rapturous applause.

Wordsworth's prefatory Essay on the Borderers brilliantly illuminates his conception of Oswald as a character of the Revolution. He is a young man of great intellectual powers yet without any solid principles of genuine benevolence. His master passions are pride and the love of distinction. He has deeply imbibed a spirit of enterprise in a tumultuous age. He goes into the world and is betrayed into a great crime----His feelings are interested in making him a moral sceptic, and as his scepticism increases he is raised in his own esteem ----- the recovery of his original importance and the

exhibition of his own powers are therefore in his mind almost identify with the extinction of those powerful feelings which attend the recollection of his guilt---. A short comparison of Oswald with Iago, in a course of criminal conduct every fresh step that we make appear a justification of the one which precedes it, it seems to bring again the moment of liberty and choice; it banishes the idea of repentance, and seems to set remorse at defiance.

Oswald has been betrayed, by a plot, into causing the death of an innocent man by exposing him with out help on a barren island. Marmaduke, by Oswald's contrivance, is beguiled into a similar crime: he abandons Herbert to the elements on a wild moor. It is the difference between the behaviour of the two men on realizing that they have done that constitutes, Oswald resolves to escape from the moral 'slavery' of remorse.

Marmaduke refuses to buy false freedom which leads to moral enslavement. He accepts the doom of expiation and becomes a wanderer over the earth, awaiting the release of death.

Wordsworth is called upon to accept his share of responsibility for the ruin of Annette Vallon's life. He does so, and thus resembles Marmaduke in his relation with Herbert. Now the original name for Marmaduke in the tragedy is 'Mortimer'. Oswald's unshakeable confidence reflects the stubborn spirit with which Wordsworth is to face the abuse of the reviewers:-

"I felt that merit has no surer test
 Than obloquy ; that, if we wish to serve
 The world in substance, not deceive by show,
 We must become obnoxious to its hate,"¹⁷

Mortimer stops short of repentance, that will be necessarily the work of time, but he submits to contrition. The action of the Borderers morally subordinates Oswald to Mortimer in the crucial contrast of their attitude to remorse, and by writing the tragedy Wordsworth releases himself from the terrific strain of the revolutionary years. Political and moral philosophy may continue to attract him, but only so far as they leave intact the supreme truth that Man's heart is a holy thing.

When king Louis XVI is executed in 1793 by revolutionaries, and that time a Reign of Terror is let loose in France these incidents, and the sufferings of the Victims give him a great shock. So Wordsworth withdraws himself from politics, and becomes the poet of man. The French Revolution build him into a Man; it added the enthusiasm of Man to the enthusiasm of Nature; it takes him away from contemplation of his own soul, to live in the hopes, to proclaim the faith, to seek the love of Mankind. French Revolution makes him the singer of simple life, of honest manners, of poverty and its sorrow and of the honour of humanity in all its ranks.

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