The Joy of Elevated Thoughts

Chapter 2

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The powerful stream of time, which generally washes away the dissoluble fabrics of fame of many writers at the same time, consolidates the reputation of some greater writers. Wordsworth has been a cultural icon for the English-reading public for the last two centuries. Through the endless process of making and unmaking of what is essentially 'Wordsworthian', he has been unveiled as the true representative and a significant figure in English Poetry than a reclusive poet of nature. This is because of the manifold aspects of the poet as a patriot, a moralist, a religious teacher, a philosopher, a mystic and also a true romantic poet ever 'haunted and startled and waylaid by the slightest beauties of life.'

The importance of Wordsworth's philosophy and its implications in his poetic creed cannot be over estimated. 'Wordsworth is still necessary to us'\(^1\) has been the general mood prevailed among the critics and the reading public all these years. According to Kenneth R. Johnston, a Wordsworthian critic:

It had been Wordsworth's truth along with Keats's beauty that had carried most of the cultural respectability Romantic Literature reclaimed during the first decades of high
modernism. Thus the revival of Romanticism's fortune in our times has been, first and foremost a revivification of Wordsworth and ways of reading him.²

One of these ways is to approach the poet and his poems, rejecting his political and philosophical stand points. T.S.Eliot criticizes some modern tendencies in reading Wordsworth:

It has become commonplace to observe that Wordsworth's true greatness as a poet is independent of his opinions, of his theory of diction or of his nature-philosophy, and that it is found in his poems in which he has no ulterior motive whatever ...If we dismiss Wordsworth's interests and beliefs, just how much, I wonder, remains? To retain them, or to keep them in mind instead of deliberately extruding them in preparation for enjoying his poetry, is that not necessary to appreciate how great a poet Wordsworth really is?³

The poetry of William Wordsworth has stood the test of time all these hundred and fifty years since his death in 1850. He is considered as one of the greatest poets of World Literature. But during his lifetime he did not enjoy the due fame or at least he felt so. Even in the modern times no other poet has been so idolized and attacked at the same time. This is
one aspect of the paradox that has always been the hallmark of his poetic life. A true evaluation of the poet is yet to be attempted as F.R. Leavis observes:

...those who really read him today—who read him as they read contemporary Literature will agree that, in spite of the number of distinguished critics who have written on him, satisfactory statement is still something to be attempted. And to attempt it with any measure of success would be to revalue Wordsworth, to achieve a clearer insight and a fresh realization.⁴

Only true and great works of art can give us superior truth and higher reality. Wordsworth’s monumental poetical legacy rests on the philosophical disposition of his poetry. His moral approach is the most important thing manifested in his poetry. This brief chapter proceeds with the intention of bringing out the moral and ethical stand points of the great poet. So a discussion on his art and philosophy is of paramount importance.

Wordsworth’s poetry in general, has been interpreted as his autobiography. The theoretical discussions of the post-structuralist studies on language and subjectivity in literary works focus on the historical and material circumstances of individual writers as they attempt to define
themselves and their times through their works. Poetry of all great romantic poets are generally said to be autobiographical. But the adjective is quite distinctive in its meaning as it is used to denote a unique strategy of the romantic writers for self representation. Obviously for the same reason, the traditional notion of autobiography cannot account for their autobiographical works.

Scholars are of the opinion that all the poems of Wordsworth from “An Evening Walk” to The Prelude are essentially autobiographical. They record the history of the development of his poetic sensibility and consciousness. The life of no other artist has perhaps been so intermingled with his works. The impression that his spiritual development is what is manifest in his poetry strengthened since his strategies of self-representation included an address to his readership.

It has been said of Wordsworth that he fell in love with his childhood. He wanted to capture and define his childhood visions and experiences. These visions were clear and deep and recurred in his later life also. He attached great importance to these visions because, for him, they were the source of his poetic inspirations. This also helped his poetry to earn the ‘autobiographical’ label.

Only a few poets have told us more of their early lives. The Prelude gives a lot of information about the development of his poetic creed. He
had a forsaken and orphaned childhood spent in poverty. He was solitary, proud, self-critical and melancholic. Despite these set backs—poverty, lack of familial affection and security—he wanted to be a great somebody in life:

... his search for an identity had been accompanied by the conviction that he would somehow make sense of his life through the act of writing. There is no shortage of evidence from his letters that he cultivated the habit of living his life according to the literary precedents, first as an enthusiast for both the sublime and beautiful ... and later as a disciple of the cult of sensibility.\(^5\)

He led a solitary life in school and college. The pangs of poesy were beginning to afflict him even at that tender stage. In a letter to his friend William Matthews, he expresses his apprehensions about the defects of his writings and at the same time hopes that “an ardent wish to promote the welfare of mankind will preserve me from sinking under them.”\(^6\) He preserved this concern for the poor and the afflicted throughout his life, although his political stand point later changed from Republicanism to high Toryism.

Gradually, the adolescent enthusiasm of the poet began to make way for a serious commitment to poetry. And along with that, he began to
search for a readership of his own. Interesting changes were taking place in the literary scenario of the eighteenth century, when Wordsworth himself, was undergoing such a thorough transformation. An increase in the number of periodicals and other publications, emergence of a middle class reading public and growth of working class readers and writers were some of these.

In his journey to be the monarch of all he surveyed, many influences plied on him. It was William Taylor, the headmaster of Hawkshead Grammar School who introduced Wordsworth to contemporary poetry like that of James Beattie who wrote of nature and her benevolence. George Crabbe’s verse tales about the sufferings of the poor and the wretched influenced him. The moral seriousness and reflectiveness of William Cowper also attracted Wordsworth. Cowper’s love for liberty, order and domestic virtues also had its sway over him. Robert Burns imbued Wordsworth with his republicanism, radical opinions, rebellion against religious orthodoxy and sympathies with the common and erring humans. Wordsworth and Coleridge were, for some time, in close touch with the London Radical Intellectuals who stood for the great mass.

Wordsworth grew up in an age of science and reason, reigned by Sir Isaac Newton and others. He assimilated many of the ideals and ideas
of the century. In his description of how Nature formed his mental character, the influence of John Locke who defined the chief operation of human mind as reception of sensory impressions passively, is very clear. Wordsworth is also indebted to Jean Jacques Rousseau for his advanced views on education, on the healing power of nature and the superiority of child to man.

William Godwin, who put forward the idea of the perfectibility of man, also exercised an initial influence on the poet. Later he parted with most of Godwinian principles. He could not understand, for example, why Godwin rejected the noblest emotions like filial piety and gratitude. David Heartley's Association of Ideas attracted both Wordsworth and Coleridge. Wordsworth readily adapted this principle to explain how the memories of early childhood help man in later life. He believed that the childhood memories are to be treasured. The association of sense impression with moral ideas forms the basis on which The Prelude is constructed. According to Heartley, two impressions received simultaneously would be linked to each other and a stimulus that recalls one would recall the other also. Wordsworth was guided by this principle in the composition of "Tintern Abbey Lines" and many other poems.

But there is far more substance in his poetry than the influence of all these philosophers put together. He puts forward a new system of
philosophy envisaging Nature as a living universe in terms of organic and creative life. But a detailed discussion on his philosophical inclinations as such is beyond the scope of this study.

Wordsworth became completely disillusioned with Cambridge and hated examinations and competitions of all sorts. So he followed a unique pattern of study and read a lot. His first tour to France in 1790 resulted in “Descriptive Sketches.” Wordsworth was in France during the dawn of the new order and had sympathy with the revolutionaries as he had reflected later: “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive/ But to be young was very heaven!” (4-5)

During the period from 1790 to 1793 he was in great distress. The glory and excitement of the French Revolution did not last for him. He began to see the horrors of the revolution for himself. Moreover he felt guilty and sad about his passionate love affair with Marie Anne Vallon, which came to an abrupt halt. This tragic episode of his life recounted in “Vandracour and Julia”, clouded his thoughts and life for many years to come. It was at this time he identified poetry as his strong suit. “The Descriptive Sketches”, “An Evening Walk” and the sonnet, “Written in Very Early Youth” belong to this period. After the French Revolution, he experienced a shattering sense of despair and purposelessness; a sense of inward isolation from those ideals which were once dear to him.
This was a period of many currents and cross currents of feelings and emotions and thoughts in the poet’s mind. Yet there are evidences to assume that the creative urge was provided by the inward tension of the writer. In the eleventh book of The Prelude, Wordsworth tells the readers how, when his hopes of the real world were shattered completely, he took refuge in the realm of abstract thought. The depths of pessimism and dreariness that overpowered the poet can be discerned from The Prelude, and also from his dramatic work, “The Borderers”, where in he declares: “The world is poisoned at the heart.” The zealous reformer was knocked out of his perfectionist illusions and he lost his faith in the immediate social reforms as well. This was a period of gloom for him. The “Ruined Cottage” and “Guilt and Sorrow” bear testimony for this.

In 1795 Wordsworth settled in Racedown with the help of a legacy from a friend. There he spent his days in the company of Dorothy and Coleridge. This companionship was most productive and influential. It was the period of his spiritual and mental recovery. In 1797, they moved to Alfoxden, which was nearer to Coleridge’s residence. Their mutual influence and intimate relationship are part of history. Wordsworth got of to a flying start with the publication of the Lyrical Ballads though it attracted severe criticism at the same time. It was not at all surprising as the poems in the collection were strikingly and devastatingly new and
unconventional. Many critics discerned the genius of the poet and the originality of the poems at that time too.

Robert Southey declared the *Lyrical Ballads* a failure, not because of the diction but because of the uninteresting subject matter. Critics like Francis Jeffrey severely criticized the poet for the selection of characters like the idiot boy. Jeffrey was not the only one to ridicule the choice of dull and ordinary subject matter. But to the poet, the idiot and all other characters like the destitute woman and the discharged soldier were a divine revelation about human nature. Out of the bare, unpretentious and unpromising material of common life, Wordsworth was able to distill the pure and sane feelings of humanity:

The fascination that the simple, modest, commonplace things of life and nature had for Wordsworth is thus not a mere matter of sensibility. It had its root deep down in his sense of the utter strangeness of them all. He had found them out and their beauty and their healing power after having been a stranger to them for several dreary years.9

His conception of human nature can be traced "to a Miltonic conception of the nobility of man and to an understanding of charity that is ultimately rooted in The New Testament."10 Certainly he had some clear designs in writing these poems. He made no secret of his intention.
He boldly declared in a letter to Lady Beaumont: “There is scarcely one of my poems which do not aim to direct the attention to some moral sentiment, or to some general principle, or law of thought, or of our intellectual constitution.” But the treatment of the subject matter in these poems certainly enchanted the reading public. A greater number of critics also recognized and lauded the gift of Wordsworth in giving ‘charm of novelty to things of everyday’ as Coleridge has observed. In the ordinary sights and sounds around him, he uncovered hidden treasures of beauty and wonder.

In this epoch making work, the two poets neatly mapped out their respective provinces. While Coleridge effected “a willing suspension of disbelief”, Wordsworth was to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural by awakening the mind’s attention from lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before the readers. In short, as the popular saying goes, while Coleridge introduced the supernatural as natural, Wordsworth depicted Nature as having supernatural powers. It consisted of four poems by Coleridge and twenty by Wordsworth, quite characteristic of their creative output.

Wordsworth’s poetic life is, by general consent divided into three phases. The first phase extends up to 1793. This period of adolescent poetic fervour is marked by the sensual pleasures he derived from
frequenting the hills and vales. Even though the poems of this period are subjective, they show a propensity towards the values and principles he developed in later life.

The second stage, by rough calculation, is from 1793 to 1798. This was the most disturbed period in his life. The misery he saw around him wounded his heart. His ideals, failure of his plans, his disillusionment about the revolutionary ideals, especially the French Revolution and his separation with Anne and his daughter are some of the experiences that left indelible marks on his poetry. It was in this initial stage that a love of Nature first made its appearance in his poetical sensibility. This was much different from his later attitude to Nature, both in kind and level. It was a period of the senses. The poet was thrilled and enchanted by the sounds and scenes. His animal pleasures lost their charm and a passion for what is picturesque was developed:

I cannot paint

What then I was. The sounding cataract

Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,

The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,

Their colours and their forms, were then to me

An appetite; a feeling and a love. (75-80)
The dark period of both his personal life and themes follows immediately.

The third phase is from 1798 to 1815. But we know that the poet lived up to 1850 and continued to write good poetry to the very end. This division of time is prompted by the supposition that he had not written anything creative after 1815. As this contention is dealt with in detail elsewhere in this study there is no need of further deliberation on this point. It is the period of great poems like *The Prelude*, "Immortality Ode," "Tintern Abbey," "Michael" and "Ode to Duty." By this time the poet had overcome challenges of subjectivity completely. The Wordsworth seen here is with a sound philosophy and theory of poetic composition. Something like a life or beingness of Nature touched him. He discerned the mysterious, all pervading spirit of Nature:

And I have felt

A presence that disturbs me with joy

Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,

Whose dwelling place is the light of setting suns,

And the round ocean and the living air,

And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  (94-99)

The poet has begun to see into Nature. Nature has become a precious teacher and guide for him. This stage is generally perceived as that of
Pantheism because the poet refers to the time as: “Thence did I drink the visionary power; / And deem not profitless those fleeting moods/Of shadowy exultation.” (311-3) According to him the presence of this spirit in man and Nature enables man to have a better communion with Nature. Man is made wiser and purer:

... But with high objects, with enduring things-

With life and Nature-purifying thus

The elements of feeling and of thoughts

And sanctifying by such discipline,

Both pain and fear, until we recognize

A grandeur in the beatings of the heart. (409-14)

His conception of Nature advanced and developed as he grew up. The various stages through which his love of Nature was developed have been described in The Prelude and “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey.”

The decade 1797-1807 was of ‘plain living and high thinking’ for Wordsworth. All his great poems belong to this period. By this time he had settled in Lake District. He started writing “The Recluse”, a long philosophical poem, on the insistence of Coleridge. It was never completed. He wrote The Prelude and The Excursion as parts of this major work. Even though there are differences of opinion among critics
about the span of this creative period, everyone agrees that Wordworth’s poetry was in full bloom in those years. His youthful vigour, revolutionary outlook, passionate attack on the reactionary institutions like aristocracy and the church, courage and sense of independence made his poetry passionate and intimate. His poems of the period are acclaimed to be of great beauty and depth.

Wordsworth has composed 523 sonnets, which are categorized thematically. The main groups are the liberty group (68 sonnets), Independence and Order (14), The River Duddon (34), Ecclesiastical Sonnets (132), Memoirs of Tours (113), and Miscellaneous Sonnets (122). Of these, the sonnets on Duddon depict his spiritual development. The ‘river’ is a symbol of the course of his poetic career. His patriotism and passion for liberty have found voice in the Liberty group. The Ecclesiastical sonnets trace the history of the Church of England. In these sonnets, more often than not Wordsworth appears as a dull historian and chronicler. Sonnets written during the tours from 1820-1837 contain his memories of various places and experiences.

A study of his sonnets convinces us that his poetic power never deserted him as the popular contention is. It might have slackened considerably. His poetic energy is at its peak in “The World Is Too Much with Us”, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey”, “To
Milton" etc. Harmony, vigour and skill are the main epithets of his sonnets. Language is pure and effortless as the thought is. His sonnets are the vehicles of his ideas and ideals. His sociopolitical standpoints, beliefs and philosophy have found the best expression in his sonnets. Some critics are of the opinion that the sonnet form best suits his solitary and meditative temper. He reinstalled the Italian sonnet in English with Petrarchan rhyme scheme. But he was most careless about the structure of sonnets and often deviated from its strict rules and restrictions like limited number of rhymes. Often he broke the two tercetes into three couplets. He believed that sonnet has a divine vitality of its own. He wrote sonnets naturally and with perfect ease.

Life was not at all calm and comfortable for Wordsworth. Financial problems gave him constant worries. More over, the death of his brother John, the sinking of Coleridge and the political developments such as the rise of Napoleon fell on him heavily. Gradually he was resigned to the oppressing world. “Ode to Duty” and “Elegiac Stanzas” of 1805 bear testimony to a sad and slow change. The revolutionary withdrew and the reactionary set in. The rest of his life’s works are the poor and saddening efforts of a poet who had lost his heights. From the White Doe (1815) to “Yarrow Unvisited” (1835) all his later volumes are remarkable for their quality but lack the fire of imagination of the earlier works.
The discussion so far, traces the development of the poetic life of Wordsworth. Now what is left is to examine his poetry in detail to lay bare those aspects, which made him a great teacher of the humanity.

Wordsworth described himself as 'man talking to men.' He believed that poems alter persons. He set himself out for a crusade against corruption in Literature and life. In the “Preface" to the Lyrical Ballads (second edition), he declares that, his poetry that is prompted and regulated by meditation and that excite feelings has a function or purpose. If this is not so, he says, he does not wish to ascribe the title of a poet, because according to him:

But a great poet ought to do more than this; he ought, to a certain degree, to rectify men’s feelings, to give them new compositions of feelings, to render their feelings more sane, pure and permanent; in short, more consonant to Nature, that is, to eternal Nature, and the great moving spirit of things. He ought to travel before men occasionally as well as at their sides.\(^{16}\)

Both Wordsworth and Coleridge believed that poetry must have a bearing upon the real or desirable sympathies of mankind. Wordsworth never forsook his duty of guiding and consoling the destitute and the afflicted. The most important point in his doctrine is to ‘arouse the
sensual, vacant and vain' to magnanimity and 'to bind together by passion, and knowledge the vast empire of human society as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time.' At the same time he enjoyed the beauty and joy of poetic composition.

Often he has been designated as a philosopher or a philosophical thinker with an aim. Coleridge remarked that Wordsworth's poetry is his philosophy and that he is a feeling philosopher. But he was a consummate artist who put the interests of poetry before the interests of philosophy. So we may safely call him a philosophical poet rather than a philosopher or a philosophical thinker because, Wordsworth's philosophy, as Herbert Read has put it, was based on intuitions rather than on ratiocinations. F.R. Leavis says that the relation between systematic philosopher and poet in Wordsworth was very much external: "Even if Wordsworth had a philosophy, it is as a poet that he matters, and if we remember that even where he offers 'thought' the strength of what he gives is the poet's". This opinion might have welled up from the belief that a natural and inevitable contradiction exists between the poetic faculty and the faculty of philosophy.

But what kind of philosophy did Wordsworth put forward through his poetry? Many critics share the opinion that there is no vision in his poetry other than the vision of Nature. His poetry has its origin in the
consciousness of Nature and its pervading spirit. Yet J.S. Mill made a rather curious observation that Wordsworth is not a natural poet in the sense that Shelley is one. He says, “In Wordsworth, the poetry is almost always trying to enunciate a proposition, rather than express a feeling.”

Here all we can and need to say in defense of the poet are that his is a different kind of nature poetry, transcending such sensibilities that generate feelings like happiness or solace in the ‘lap’ of nature. To him Nature was something more than an entity, a place for solace or still an abstract idea. He says he was able to feel:

A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore I am still
A lover of meadows and the woods,
And mountains;

**The Prelude** and many other poems trace the growth of his mind. This mind is one with his poetical consciousness of Nature. It is so because, from his early childhood, Wordsworth received in his mind, impressions from Nature, which made him a poet. But he is equally a poet of Man and Humanity. He wrote:

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,

Than all these sages can... (21-4) ²¹

If Coleridge called Wordsworth a philosophic poet, Shelley designated him as the 'Poet of Nature.' Many poets, before and after Wordsworth had sung about the beauties of Nature, perhaps more sweetly than him. But no one saw Nature in its totality, as he did. No other poet was able to visualise Nature as a being of its own or as an organic universe. Again, no poet had tried to see into the nature of things to know how Nature is fitted into the Grand Design that is God. Thus Wordsworth stands unsurpassed as the greatest poet of Nature. Now this contention is to be further pursued to examine the didactic creed of the poet.

His imagination also was fed on the beauty of Nature. But he saw Nature as a being of its own, 'having a purpose of its own.' ²² He discerned the spirit of Nature and became its high priest:

Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!

Thou soul that art the eternity of thought,

That givest to forms and images a breath

And everlasting motion, not in vain. (401-4) ²³

He felt that this spirit of the universe was the eternity of thought. It gave form to everything. It purified his soul and cleansed all feelings and
thoughts. It disciplined every emotion of the poet. With a realization of the wisdom of the universe, anyone who loves nature can enjoy the same experience and feel one with its grandeur. Spirit and wisdom of Nature will purify men.

Walter Pater comments thus on the nature poetry of Wordsworth:

...that strange mystical sense of a life in natural things and of man’s life as a part of nature, drawing strength and colour and character from local influences, from the hills and streams and from natural sights and sounds ... that is the virtue, the active principle in Wordsworth’s poetry.”

To illustrate the point further, the case of the old man in “Michael” is before the readers. The life or the existence of the old man is conceived and strengthened by the mountains around him:

Those fields, those hills—what could they less? had laid
Strong hold on his affections, were to him
A pleasurable feeling of blind love,
The pleasure which there is no life itself. (74-77)

Poetry, according to Wordsworth incorporates the passions of men with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. “Its object is truth, not individual and local, but general and operative; not standing upon
external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion ... Poetry is the image of man and nature."^{26}

Wordsworth saw Nature as a poet magisterially transforming the landscape as if with an imaginative power. The ‘imaginative impressions’ from nature is the source of his poetry. Rene Wellek opines thus in this regard:

Imagination is here conceived as intellectual intuition, as a higher faculty of knowing, as reason ... which demands the association of love, the love of mankind and of God. On certain occasions, Wordsworth adopts the language of idealism and calls imagination ‘the faculty by which the poet conceives and produces ... individual forms in which are embodied universal ideas or abstractions.^{27}

Thus his concept of nature is closely and intimately associated with his poetic creed.

He depicted Man as part of Nature. Man and Nature are not mutually exclusive entities. Both are parts in a fuller context, which can be called again Nature or Universe. This was Godhead to the poet. Whether Wordsworth believed in God as prescribed by any religion or was an atheist is not certain to this date. But certainly he had a staunch faith in a Supreme Soul or Power that controls the entire universe, which
is one with Nature: 'Here might I pause and bend in reverence / To Nature....' (224-5) \(^{28}\) In fact his poetry itself is a bonafide record of his search for that power. As it has been made clear already, he contemplates a spirit of the universe or a Supreme Mind that is present in everything in the universe: “O’er the wide earth, on mountain and on plain,/ dwells in the affections and the soul of man / a Godhead ... (1-3) \(^{29}\) He believes that it is not different from Nature. It seems that he envisages this spirit as God Himself:

The being that is in the clouds and air,
That is in the green leaves among the groves,
Maintains a deep and reverential care

For the unoffending creatures whom he loves. (165-8) \(^{30}\)

It is generally agreed that the three core themes in Wordsworth’s poetry are Nature, Man and Spirit. Helen Darbishire is of the opinion that his themes or subject matter included everything connected to life:

Wordsworth’s vision of life took a wide sweep: it embraced the mind of man, the inner life of Nature where the mind of man meets it, the sphere of the elementary passions revealed in humble life, the world of high action in the national and international arena, and the personal world of passing things and lasting truths which his mind lived in from day to day.\(^{31}\)
Thus it becomes clear that Wordsworth was not an exclusive nature poet as he was not a poet of humanity alone. He was giving out valuable lessons through his poems that deal with Nature. He modestly declares that:

The moving accident is not my trade;
To freeze the blood I have no ready arts:
’Tis my delight, alone in summer shade,
To pipe a simple song for thinking hearts. (97-100)  

He sought to develop the sensibilities of the readers to make them purer, saner and better. What he prescribes as the function of the river can very well be applied to the poet himself: “to heal and to restore/ To soothe and cleanse, not madden and pollute!”

To him Nature is at the same time a refuge, a philosopher and guide, a soothing presence and a mysterious spirit. He claims that for all that he possessed, he is indebted to the bounty of Nature. It is the source of his words and thoughts. He says he is:

Well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart and soul
Of all my moral being. (107-11)
He considered it as his duty to rectify man’s feelings and to deliver the pure feelings in affinity with Nature. He negated the concept of man as the superior being in Nature, as propounded in the age of Reason. His moral principles consisted in knowledge of Man, Nature and Humanity. Man is a part of Nature who is to be benefited by it. He believed that there is a harmony to be achieved between the mind of man and Nature:

Let Nature be your teacher.

She has a world of ready wealth,

Our minds and hearts to bless-

Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,

Truth breathed by cheerfulness. (16-20)

His human beings fit well into Nature. Man becomes one with the powers in Nature, as seen in “To Toussaint l’Ouverture”

Thou hast left behind

Powers that will work for thee; air earth, and skies;

There’s not a breathing of the common wind

That will forget thee; thou hast great allies; (9-12)

Wordsworth sought the elixir to end human miseries through his poetry. His poetry, by being linked to Nature, acquires a new sensibility to sing of the human miseries forlorn and forgotten.

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made to man. (5-8)\textsuperscript{37},

The human soul may be the cosmic soul of the entire humanity. The poetic creed of our poet assumes definite didactic characteristics here.

He was the high priest of Nature and won moral consolation for the afflicted humanity as a true didactic poet would endeavour:

- Of Truth, Grandeur, Beauty, and Hope
- And melancholy, Fear subdued by Faith;
- Of blessed consolations in distress;
- Of moral strength, and intellectual power;
- Of joy in widest commonality spread; (767-71)\textsuperscript{38}

He sang of the great and permanent things that moved through human mind, consoling and liberating it. According to some critics, he put forward the idea of the motherhood of Nature and the brotherhood of men in Nature.

Under ‘nature’s holy plan,’ by observing the mystical ways in which the mind is ‘fitted’ to the external world as well as the world to the mind, one could discover a sufficient justification of God’s ways to men. ‘Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us.’ This was Emerson’s
cogent summary of the point Wordsworth made in a thousand ways throughout the course of his poetical career.\textsuperscript{39}

He weaved a complex philosophy around his concepts of man and Nature. According to him Nature is a great sage and guide to the humanity.

Myself will to my darling be
Both law and impulse and with me
The girl in rock and plain
In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,
Shall feel an overseeing power
To kindle or restrain. (7-12)\textsuperscript{40}

As a poet he was able to feel the soothing spirit of Nature: “Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!”\textsuperscript{41} The poet laments that men have become soulless and heartless slaves of wealth and that we are out of tune with Nature. But as a poet, he wanted to “Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn”\textsuperscript{42}

“The Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” declares his philosophic thoughts. He owed his allegiance to Nature because he gained from them,

\ldots ; that blessed mood

In which the burthen of the mystery
In which the beauty and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened: - that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on, -
Until the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things. (37-49)

It is a complete and composite manifesto of the poet regarding his vision of Nature.

In this poem Wordsworth speaks of a voice or a presence that will speak of ‘moral strength’ and ‘intellectual power’ and of blessed consolations in distress. In “Michael” we perceive his philosophy of Nature that leads to a love of mankind. In 1802, he composed some beautiful poems in amazing rapidity. “Rainbow”, “Ode on Intimations of Immortality”, “Beggar Women”, “To a Butterfly”, “Daffodils” etc. belong to this period. His love of Nature in its simple forms is expressed
through beautiful descriptions of simple objects of Nature such as rainbows and flowers.

He composed his "Ode on Intimations of Immortality" in a questioning mood. He wondered: "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" (56-7) Perhaps no other lines had been discussed as seriously as these with the possible exemption of the famous expression of Hamlet, "To be or not to be." The general contention is that it is a pitiable wail over the departure of his creative powers. Apart from the lamentation on the loss of poetic power, the deep undertones of the philosophies of Plato and Pythagoras are echoed. The fleeting nature of life and the decay of humanity are pictured here in dignified style and tone. Only Nature can communicate the vision of immortality which man has lost. Wordsworth was a great moralist. His sense of supremacy of the moral laws and his faith in conduct and duty made him a great teacher. In the early poems he propounded closeness to Nature as a remedy for the miseries of humanity. In the later poems like "Michael", "Laodamia", "To Milton" "Ode to Duty" etc. his exhortations take on the appearance of neoclassical ideals. In "Ode to Duty", one of his most didactic renderings, Wordsworth addresses duty:

. . . O Duty! If that name thou love

Who art a light to guide, a rod
To check the erring, and reprove;
Thou, who art victory and law
When empty terrors overawe;
From vain temptations dost set free;
And calm'st the weary strife of frail humanity! (2-8) \(^{45}\)

The tragedy of Michael is caused by the destruction of 'natural piety' without which life must lose much of its purpose and value.

In “Laodamia” the readers can find Wordsworth with a stoic view of human passions. He exhorts his heroin to exercise restraint:

And Thou though strong in love, art all too weak
In reason, in self-government too slow;

For this the passion to excess was driven—
That self might be annulled: \((140-8)\) \(^{46}\)

John Stuart Mill, the British philosopher and economist records that Wordsworth’s poetry served as a sort of medicine for him. He was able to discover the perennial sources of happiness and to remove the greater evils of life. Mill vouchsafes that it was “not mere outward beauty but states of feeling and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty” worked wonders for him. \(^{47}\)
The poetry of ‘human passions, human characters and human incidents’ ("Advertisement to LB") is identified as the poetry of human suffering by Wordsworth. He writes in The Recluse:

On man, on nature, and on human life,
Musing in solitude, I oft perceive
Fair trains of imagery before me rise,
Accompanied by feelings of delight
Pure, or with no unpleasing sadness mixed. 48

The influence of Rousseau and Robert Burns and the memory of vagrants so large in numbering his locality made Wordsworth portray wretched human beings like old and destitute people, beggars, abandoned women and simple and innocent people living in communion with Nature. But the poet, who is intensely interested in humanity, is not content with that. He wishes to teach man that his salvation lies in Nature. As it has been discussed already, Wordsworth firmly believes that man can attain humaneness only through the communion with nature. In The Prelude he gives his own experience:

From Nature and her overflowing soul
I had received so much, that all my thoughts
Were steeped in feeling; I was only then
Contented when with bliss ineffable
I felt the sentiment of Being spread
O’er all that moves and all that seemeth still; (397-402) 49

Man becomes man when he is purified by Nature. His moral sense and sensibility are refined by Nature. Wordsworth wanted man’s sensibility to be made live and fresh. Then only he will be able to view Nature and God and himself as part of a grand Design. This is the essence of what he wants to teach humanity by virtue of his being a poet. He has a clear-cut concept of a real or ideal human being: “And that unless above himself he can/Erect himself, how poor a thing is man!” (330-1) 50 Such an ideal human being lives in the lap of Nature, away from the corruptions of modern world. He shall possess the basic qualities needed for a virtuous life. His guiding force shall be his own conscience—a conscience perfected by Nature:

But above all, the victory is most sure
For him, who seeking faith by virtue,strive
To yield entire submission to the law
Of conscience-conscience reversed and obeyed
As God’s most intimate presence in the soul’
And his most perfect image in the world.(222-7) 51

The Prelude originally titled “The Growth of a Poet’s Mind” is an autobiographical poem, in the sense that it traces the development of the
poet's sensibilities, feelings and emotions. The significant events and impressions of his life that formed his philosophy are described in detail. The fulness of experience makes this work a modern epic. The dedication of the verse itself makes its didactic purpose clear: "this verse is dedicated to Nature's self/ And all things that teach us as Nature teaches" (230-1)\textsuperscript{52} In the course of the fourteen books, it examines the central concepts of his poetry-namely Man, Nature and Spirit-and their interrelationships. We come across several testimonials about the healing influence of Nature:

O Nature! Then hast fed
My lofty speculations; and in thee,
For these uneasy hearts of ours, I find
A never-failing principle of joy
Purest passion (447-51)\textsuperscript{53}

The Prelude is full of his experiences, which helped him develop insights about life, his vocation and Nature. It also gives information to the readers about the phases of his mental and spiritual development as well as personal life. These are imparted by the poet in the hope of educating the readers. In short, Wordsworth tries to teach humans through a detailed account of his own special, as the case may be, experiences.
For instance, when recalling the memory of a boy, he gives some advice regarding the upbringing of children, by wishing that,

Simplicity in habit, truth in speech,

Be these the daily strengtheners of their minds;

May books and Nature be their daily joy!

And knowledge rightly honoured with that name—

Knowledge not purchased by the loss of power! (421-5)\(^5\)

In book VIII, he tries to give a retrospect of his vocation and confesses that till that time Man was not there in his scheme. But now he comes to see and love man as a part of Nature. He declares that he “…shall continue evermore to make/Of the whole human race one brotherhood.” (86-7)\(^5\) He searches for the underlying causes of man’s problems and wonders why a few alone can be called ‘men’ in the true sense of the word? Bettering their lot is a self-assigned task for the poet. Promptly, he turns to Nature for a solution:

From Nature doth emotion come, and moods

Of calmness equally are Nature’s gifts:

This is her glory; these two attributes

Are sister horns that constitutes her strength (1-4)\(^5\)

Here the poet sees Nature as a well of inspiration that helps him develop emotions and feelings, making him a poet of humanity. He feels that he
gained much from Nature’s bounty. He preaches this for the entire humanity, too:

If virtue be indeed so hard to rear,
And intellectual strength so rare a boon—
I prized such walks still more, for there I found
Hope to my hope, and to my pleasure peace
And steadiness, and healing and repose
To every angry passion. (177-82)  

During this close intercourse with Nature, he comes across pure, untainted country folk who taught him many things. They present a picture entirely different from those centres of civilizations where “Love cannot be; nor does it thrive with ease/ Among the close and overcrowded haunts/ Of cities, where the human heart is sick,” (202-4). So we get acquainted with truth and goodness only in the lap of Nature. For this and other kinds of precious insights, he thanks God, for it is God who attunes our heart for his service. Nature is seen as God here by the poet. Nature had invested him with a special faculty to lead the humanity:

That Poets, even as Prophets, each with each
Connected in a mighty scheme of truth,
Have each his own peculiar faculty,
Heaven's gift, a sense that fits him to perceive

Objects unseen before, ... (301-5)\(^59\)

It is now explicit for him that, as a poet thus specially endowed, he can boldly guide mankind as Nature directs. He is also reminding other poets about their duty.

He believes that power that Nature wields over us can be attained by man also, but only by minds of higher order and that too through a communion with Nature. Wordsworth tells us that love is the real essence of life: "By love subsists/ All lasting grandeur, by pervading love; /That gone, we are as dust" (168-70).\(^60\) The lesson of love can be inculcated in the mind of man by Nature.

The closing lines of this grand poem serves as a manifesto of the poets creed.

....what we have loved,

Others will love, and we will teach them how;

Instruct them how the mind of man becomes

A thousand times more beautiful than the earth

On which he dwells, above the frame of things

(Which 'mid all revolution in the hopes

And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged)

In beauty exalted, as it is itself
Of quality and fabric more divine. (446-54)\textsuperscript{61}

Wordsworth is critical about the so-called sophisticated life and possesses a firm and deep-rooted distrust of life in cities away from Nature. Nor has he any esteem for the principles and ideologies that turn away from the sufferings of humanity. He scorns the social order and the economy: "Economists will tell you that the state/Thrives by the forfeiture—unfeeling thought/And false as monstrous! . . . (283-5).\textsuperscript{62} His egalitarian views often prompted the critics to assume that he was exaggerating the didactic elements in his poetry.

But it must not be forgotten that his earlier poems bear a revolutionary zeal. All the poems written between 1793 and 1798 deal with the darker sides of the human life. His eyes were fixed on the suffering of man and wanted to relieve him from his hardships. Those poems pose the need for equality among human beings. He took it upon himself to bring succor to them. S.K. Sarker, an Indian scholar in Wordsworth studies, believes with many others that Wordsworth who condemned the economic divide between the rich and the poor and stood for economic as well as social equality can be considered as a forerunner of Karl Marx. He also thinks of the possibility of Marx being influenced by Wordsworth when the former came to England in 1849. Anyway it is evident from his poems that Wordsworth was a critic of the treatment of
the humbler sections of the society by the industrial class. Here, Wordsworth anticipates the conflict which arose in the latter half of 19th century, between industrialization and the agrarian society. In The Excursion, the Wanderer laments the state of destitute children of the peasants:

This boy the fields produce:

..................................................

The sceptre of his sway; his country’s name,

Her equal rights, her churches and her schools –

What have they done for him? And, let me ask,

For tens of thousands uninformed as he?

In brief, what liberty of mind is here? 63

In “To Milton” he asks people to follow the puritanical ideals of nobility, simplicity and humbleness. Though not a prolix moralist, he is not ashamed to acclaim his moral principles. He believes that poetry alone can bring morality and wisdom for the benefit of humanity. His philosophy places poetry above philosophy. His aim is to be nobly poetical and deeply didactic. He proves that moral exhortations and aesthetic expressions would go together. The Preface and Appendix added in the 1802 edition of Lyrical Ballads has a set of propositions about the nature and criteria of poetry which were widely adopted by the
contemporary romanticists as well as even those who had no sympathy for them.

According to Wordsworth, poet is a man speaking to men, different from them not in kind but in degrees of sensibility and power of expression. He thought himself as the representative of human nature, because according to him the essential passions of the humanity are the same everywhere. A mad mother or an idiot boy thus became an appropriate subject of poetry for him as Achilles or Lear was to others. His characters like Michael, the Leech-gatherer, Solitary Reaper and Danish Boy have their existence in this elemental domain of humanity. The more he is in touch with the simple and primal feelings and passions the better his art is. Whatever may be the subject matter or form of poetry, its duty is to promote benign tendencies like love and human relationship. This is done by the purgation of finer feelings, not by a mere appeal to the intellect, however lofty and subtle that may be. His was a special blend of aesthetic and didactic approaches.

An oft-neglected feature of his poetry is the power of observation of the poet. In the opinion of Arthur Compton- Rickett, Wordsworth observed Nature to find out a particular attitude or principle that suited his need. Being a moralist he might have missed a great deal too. The Cumberland beggar or the leech-gatherer is a pathetic figure dignified by
the background of the touch and beauty of Nature. Even while propagating morals, he let his poetry run its course.

Whatever be the form he adopted - narrative, lyrical, elegiac or sonnet - his concentric method gives the poems a depth and intensity. This has helped the poet to emphasize his principles. The simple force and direct approach of the poems are also proved effective. His observations provide him with spiritual situations. The mood is inevitably meditative. Freshness and sweetness added by his genius and the skillful exploitation of the sense of sound render his poems a remarkable charm:

A voice so thrilling ne’er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides (13-6). 64

He cannot be called a dry moralist because he has disclosed for humanity a poetic vision of beauty and morality combined.

It is sad and disheartening to discuss the rather bleak years of his advanced life. With the publication of The Excursion critics like Matthew Arnold, Francis Jeffrey, Hazlitt, John Stuart Mill, and De Quincey pointed out that Wordsworth was forgetting that poetry was not so much a thing said as the way of saying it. Matthew Arnold wrote:
The Excursion and The Prelude, his poems of greatest bulk are by no means Wordsworth's best works. [ . . .] Work altogether inferior, work quite uninspired, flat and dull, is produced by him with evident unconsciousness of its defects, and he presents it to us with the same faith and seriousness as his best work.  

According to Francis Jeffrey, "It (The Excursion) is longer, weaker, and tamer, than any of Wordsworth's other production". Hazlitt is more severe: "He (Wordsworth) only sympathizes with those simple forms of feeling which mingle at once with his own identity . . . An intense intellectual egotism swallows up everything." With the later poems such as "Laodamia", there came the general verdict that not only his style became cold and stiff, but his sentiments became detached and aloof. The contention was that the poet in Wordsworth had died forty years before the death of the man. This does not seem to be true or wholesome. The poetic power never deserted him though there was a definite decline. His later poems and sonnets bear testimony to this fact. Anyway after 1815, he was not able to produce any work of merit. Herbert Read says in this connection, "The dying embers emit an occasional spark, but nothing that in any degree adds to the total impression of his genius."
Among the many reasons proposed for the apparent decline of his creativity, a notable one is that the poet failed when the man changed. As mentioned earlier his ideals and outlook underwent a total change towards the later years. Propagation of the values he believed was a part of his art. His poetic vision was a combination of beauty and morality. When his broad impulses were constricted and his inspiration was infected at source, his poetry degenerated.

In his later life, Nature ceased to be his constant companion and guide. The heart had gone out of his nature poetry. With that coincided the decline of his creativity. If he dwelt any more in the doctrine of Nature, it was because of the powerful influence he had experienced in his youth. His faith in Nature became mechanical and superfluous. The degeneration of his poetry coincided with this sad change.

He rejected and renounced whatever ideals and youthful passions he had once. He lauded whatever he had despised in youth. He turned to be a Tory who argued for order and discipline and wanted to curb the freedom. He became a staunch supporter of the Church. He abandoned his hitherto favourite subjects like the rustics and innocent country dwellers. He became insensitive, inflexible and unfeeling. He began to distrust the passions and untainted emotions of human heart. His advice is
"to control/Rebellious passion; for the Gods approve /The depth, and not the tumult, of the soul." 69

T.S.Eliot’s words will make this point clearer: “. . . it is Wordsworth’s social interest that inspires his novelty of form in verse, and backs up his explicit remarks upon poetic diction.” 70 Thus it is clear that his poetic power deserted him when he deserted his ideals and principles, which inspired his poetry. But at the same time his readers should bear in mind that he always felt deep sympathy for the common man even while opposing reforms.

The widespread belief that the more didactic Wordsworth grew, the less creative became his poetry, does not hold much water. Even in “Ode to Duty” he performs the duty of a teacher but didactic elements are not so tiresome. The readers cannot ignore the beauty of the following lines:

Serene will be our days and bright,
And happy will our nature be,
When love is an unerring light,
And joy its own security (17-20) 71

It is a fact that his poetry turned to deliberate preaching from subtler teaching. The later deterioration of his poetic power might have resulted in gross and dull moralizing.
There are many other factors pointed out by different scholars and critics. One is the tragic death of the poet’s brother Captain John Wordsworth. He was drowned with his ship on 5 February 1805. Those who support this theory point out that this devastating experience was a turning point in his life. The Wordsworth after this shock was never the same as before. In the “Elegiac Stanzas” written next year, he presents the rather pathetic statement that: “I have submitted to a new control: / A power is gone, which nothing can restore.” Herbert Read contributes this decline as the deadly work of remorse about his desertion of Annette. The other reasons pointed out are his disillusionment with the French Revolution and other ideals, troubles suffered mentally and too much toil.

It can safely be concluded that William Wordsworth is a great poet of Nature, humanity, childhood and rustic life. Whatever he found around him fit to sing, he sang it for his fellow beings. In spite of all the inconsistencies of his nature, he never deviated from what he believed his duty was: to be the teacher and guide to humanity. This he did most marvelously. Wordsworth wrote in a letter to Lady Beaumont, in 1807 about the aim and destiny of his poems:

to console the afflicted; to add sunshine to day-light, by making the happy happier; to teach the young and the gracious of every age to see, to think, and feel, and,
therefore, to become more actively and securely virtuous; this is their office, which I trust they will faithfully perform, long after we (that is, all that is mortal of us) are mouldered in our graves.\textsuperscript{73}

Now after all these years we know that his hopes were fulfilled and that his poems continue to attract readers. And he shall be read and esteemed by the generations to come also. For in the words of Coleridge, "... he will be admitted as the first and greatest philosophical poet, the only man who has effected a complete and constant synthesis of thought and feeling and combined them with poetical forms, with the music of pleasurable passion." \textsuperscript{74}

Certainly he is the greatest artist of English Literature, as Thomas De Quincey has put it: "... there is little competition to be apprehended by Wordsworth from anything that has appeared since the death of Shakespeare." \textsuperscript{75} He has been a teacher and guide to millions at a time of strife and confusion. He stood as a beacon of moral and ethical principles in the 18th century firmament. Shelley had sung of him thus:

\begin{quote}
Thou hast like a rock-built refuge stood
Above the blind and battling multitude;
In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
Songs consecrated to truth and liberty (9-12)\textsuperscript{76}
\end{quote}
This glowing tribute from another great poet of the age, who also was an avid social reformer, alone, would suffice to estimate the importance and contribution of William Wordsworth as a didactic poet. He was gratified by what he had done to the humanity. He was able to perform for the destitute and the downtrodden, what he wanted to do for them. He made use of his creativity and poetic faculty for the entire humanity. Marmaduke, the protagonist in “The Borderers” reminds of his creator, when he says:

I have loved

To be the friend and father of the oppressed.

A comforter of sorrow; - (634-5)\textsuperscript{77}
NOTES


8 Wordsworth, "The Borderers" 64.


14 Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book II 768.

15 Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book I 758.


19 Stephen Prickett 5.

20 Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" 243.


23 Wordsworth, The Prelude Book I , 758

24 Walter Pater, Essays on Literature and Art, ed. Jennifer Uglow


30 Wordsworth, “Hart-Leap Well’ Part II 238.


34 Wordsworth."Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” 243.

35 Wordsworth “The Tables Turned” 574.

36 Wordsworth, “To Toussaint l’Ouverture” 364.

37 Wordsworth, “Lines Written in Early Spring” 574.


40 Wordsworth, “Three years she grew in sun and shower” 218.

41 Wordsworth, “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802” 320.

42 Wordsworth, “The world is too much with us; late and soon” 307.

43 Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” 242.

45 Wordsworth, “Ode to Duty” 587.

46 Wordsworth, “Laodamia” 249.


49 Wordsworth, The Prelude Book II 769.

50 Wordsworth, The Excursion Book IV 956.

51 Wordsworth, The Excursion Book IV 954.

52 Wordsworth, The Prelude Book V 794.


54 Wordsworth, The Prelude Book V 798.

55 Wordsworth, The Prelude Book XII 873.


57 Wordsworth, The Prelude Book XIII 880.


60 Wordsworth, The Prelude Book XIV 887.


62 Wordsworth, The Excursion VIII 1040.

63 Wordsworth, The Excursion Book VIII 1043.
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Davies Hugh Sykes, 55.

Davies Hugh Sykes, 53.

