CHAPTER - V

ARNOLO ON WORDSWORTH
Arnold in his essay on Wordsworth has given him a high place, among the English poets. While Shakespeare and Milton remain duly recognized abroad, Arnold's essay probably aimed at making Wordsworth simpler that is to say that Arnold's essay on Wordsworth, was intended to show that Wordsworth was as great if not greater, at a time when, Wordsworth's greatness had not been recognized. Through this essay Arnold did more than anything else to enlarge Wordsworth's reputation and secure him a place as a popularly recognized English Classic.

Wordsworth was, for Arnold, truly an object of veneration throughout his career. His critical evaluation of Wordsworth in verse is found in Memorial Verses, in Fraser's Magazine published in 1850 and the youth of Nature first published in 1852. Arnold's deep gratitude to Wordsworth is felt in these lines:

But where will Europe's latter hour
Again find Wordsworth's healing power?

In this early criticism in Verse, Wordsworth is presented as a priest of nature with a special gift i.e., in 'his ability
to revive and stimulate the emotion and recall to us 'the joy in the simple primary affections' and duties - the joy in the widest commonalty spread. Swinburne felt that "these verses at once praise and judge the great poet (Wordsworth) then newly dead, better than any words of other men."¹

T.S. Eliot is emphatic, when he says that "there is no poetry, which Arnold experienced more deeply than that of Wordsworth; the lines (from "Memorial verses") are not so much a criticism of Wordsworth as a testimony of what Wordsworth had done for him."²

In the hierarchy of English poets, Arnold assigns to Wordsworth, the third rank placing him immediately after Shakespeare and Milton. It is noteworthy also to find Arnold making further claims for Wordsworth's position among the greatest European poets, by saying that although several of them have evidently gifts and excellences to which Wordsworth, can make no pretention, in real poetical achievement, it seems

¹Swinburne Mr. Arnold's New Poems (Fortnightly Review, VIII) 1867), p. 426.

indubitable that to Wordsworth .... belong the palm. 3

If we take the chief poetical names of the continent, with the exception of Goethe, it seems to him that Wordsworth to his credit has a body of poetical works, which will wear better than any one of theirs. Arnold finds Wordsworth's superiority to lie in the ample body of powerful and significant work, which remains after every deduction has been made. Arnold concludes that Wordsworth's entire work need not be studied.

According to him Wordsworth is enjoyed better, understood better - only in selections since he feels strongly that Wordsworth's reputation has suffered from the inner mixture of the best poems with the inferior ones. Arnold's contention is that if Wordsworth has produced work of first rate excellence, he also produced work which is almost dull and inferior.

It is necessary, therefore, to relieve Wordsworth, of a great deal of poetical baggage, which encumbers him. 4

Arnold's presumption, as is well-known, that a selection had to be made. If his supreme greatness after Shakespeare,

Moliere, Milton, Goethe, but before all the rest since Dante, has to be apparent, a judicious selection of his poems need to be made. It is probable that Arnold's elegant little volume of selections (1879) in the *Golden Treasury* gives only accentuated and revived interest in Wordsworth's poetry that had lagged after his death.

But Arnold was not aware of one fact i.e., the more selective one is, the more one pares away the dead wood in his works, the smaller he emerges in poetic stature. The point has been made by Arthur Hugh Clough in his lecture on the poetry of Wordsworth. Surprisingly, the so-called bad poems are somehow an essential part of Wordsworth's greatness. For instance, many passages which are felt to be long and boring sketches in *The Prelude* cannot be avoided. "The prelude" without them would be smaller in terms of quality as well as length. These are indispensible devices to follow the saga of selfhood. Bateson's interpretation of the two voices in Wordsworth namely, 'the bleat of the half witted sheep is anticlimax to the roar of the mountain torrent', is not completely true. In Wordsworth's case the two voices

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turn out to be complementary instead of being contradictory or antithetical. A.C. Bradley rightly called Wordsworth's most characteristic poem Resolution and Independence 'the most Wordsworthian of Wordsworth's poems and the best test of ability to understand him.'

While he was talking thus, the lonely place
The old man's shape, and speech, all troubled me.

The leech gather is created in the particular aspect, which Wordsworth emphasizes from (actual) stone and imaginary sea-beast so as to construct an intermediate image which is neither (but also both) and also the old man not all alive or dead, a remarkable example of the mysterious workings of imagination and its creativity. It also negates the belief that it is 'mere poetry' and strengthens our understanding of the visionary in sublime; the mystic, the 'sense of something beyond sense' in Wordsworth's poetry.

Arnold's critique of Wordsworth's intermittent inspiration is as follows:

"To give aright what he wishes to give, to interpret, and render successfully, is not Wordsworth's own command ... here is the part of this Muse the inspiration, the God ..."

In Wordsworth's case the accident.... of aspiration is of peculiar importance. No poet perhaps is evidently filled with a new and sacred energy, when the inspiration is upon him; no poet when it fails him, is so left weak as is a breaking wave.\(^5\) This serves not as compliment. There is no doubt considerable work that is dull flat and uninspiring, but it must be emphasized in Coleridge's terminology that poems such as Lines written a few miles, From Tintern Abbey, Ode on intimations of Immortality, parts of the prelude, Lucy Series, the Michael; Resolution and Independence, reveal the balance and reconciliation of opposite and discordant qualities. This is precisely what Coleridge mentioned as the fusion of the objective and subjective elements - the union of deep feeling with profound thoughts.

Arnold then proceeds to analyse the qualities in which the power and worth of Wordsworth's best poetry consists. He imputes Wordsworth's superiority to his significant proposition that 'the most essential part of poetic greatness consists in the noble and profound application of ideas to life under

the conditions fixed by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. Wordsworth's chief merit over the other poets rests in his dealing with life wholly and powerfully.

Speaking about Wordsworth's plain style, Arnold, ascribes the uniqueness of it to the profound sincerity with which he feels the subject and the natural quality of the subject itself. Arnold says "But Wordsworth's poetry when he is at his best, is inevitable as Nature herself. It might seem that Nature not only gave him the matter for his poem, but wrote his poem for him."6

Arnold reveals his inability to explain the special attributes of Wordsworthian style. When he goes on to say that "Wordsworth has no style .... no assured poetic style of his own, like Milton when he seeks to have a style he falls into ponderosity and pomposity ... Yet magical as is that power, which Wordsworth has not, of assured and possessed poetic style he has something equivalent for it."7

Arnold here seems to suggest that Wordsworth's greatness is owing to inspiration and to sincerity rather than to a mastery of his medium.

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6Ibid., p. 307.

7Ibid., p. 307-308.
Arnold eulogises Wordsworth in the following lines:

"Nature herself seems I say to take the pen out of his hand, and to write for him with her own bare, sheer, penetrating power."

Here Arnold appears to be unaware of the way Nature responded to Wordsworth or the way Wordsworth loved Nature. Arnold does not go beyond what he says in the above lines.

As Douglas Bush points out "even a direct heir of Wordsworth, and a poet who in his 'Cradle was breathed on by the rural pen' can now seldom feel himself wedded to a goodly universe, as a part of a total unity and harmony that nourishes life and joy, a word for which Wordsworth and Coleridge had the special and profound sense of oneness with the cosmic whole."

In *Harmony with Nature* (a sonnet) Arnold seems to discredit Wordsworth's Nature philosophy

"Man must begin know this where Nature ends. Nature and man can never be fast friends."

Certainly, Arnold is capable of loving the scenic beauty and outdoor activity, he can at times hear 'Nature Voice'.

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8Ibid., p. 309.

but such 'moments seem rather to reveal the poet's transcendental longings rather give Nature a benign Wordsworthian reality.\footnote{Matthew Arnold, \textit{Essays in Criticism} (London, 1964), p. 307.} and Arnold never possessed the kind of spiritual relationship with nature that became an important aspect of Wordsworth's poetic career.

Arnold failed to grasp Wordsworth's optimistic strain, the principal aspect of Wordsworth's poetry that Wordsworth's poetry may be characterised by gloom and harshness of life but 'consistently returned to the power of joy that lay beyond.'

\textit{Not without hope, we suffer and mourn.}

Arnold next expresses the view that "Wordsworth's poetry is great because of the extraordinary power with which Wordsworth feels and experiences the joy offered to us in Nature, the joy offered to us the simple primary affections and duties."\footnote{Matthew Arnold, \textit{Essays in Criticism} (London, 1964), p. 307.} Wordsworth brings us the message of joy in widest commonality spread. Several objections have been raised to these statements of Arnolds. The first of these objections is whether Arnold overlooked the piquancy and pathos of many of Wordsworth's poems or he is implying that piquancy and pathos of these poems is a source of joy to us because of
their Cathartic effect. Eliot has a different kind of objection against Arnold's statement 'simple and primary affections and duties.' To him Arnold appears to be erring by placing the emphasis on the poet's feelings rather than on his poetry.

Though Arnold is conscious of Wordsworth's capacity to 'deal with life as whole', his limited understanding of Wordsworth appears to lie in his mistaken notion that joy is a mere passive state of mind or mere feeling. He appears to be blind to the fact that joy is something to be associated with the power and activities of harmonious spirit, and with religion. "The power of religion is proportionate to its ability to engage the wholeman, to make its moral truth not merely known but felt and loved."13 Arnold's essay on Wordsworth, also brought into focus the most controversial issue, the Problem of Wordsworth's Philosophy.

Issuing a warning that "we must be on our guard against the Wordsworthians if we want to secure, for Wordsworth due rank as a poet, because Wordsworthians, are apt to praise

him for the wrong things, and to lay far too much stress on what they call his philosophy. Arnold rejects Wordsworth's philosophy. Central to his Wordsworth criticism is the remark, "His poetry is real, his philosophy. So far, at best as it may put on the form and habit of a 'Scientific system of thought' and the more that it puts them on - is the illusion. Perhaps we may one day learn to make this proposition general, and to say: poetry is the reality. Philosophy, the illusion. But in Wordsworth's case we cannot do him justice until we dismiss his journal philosophy."  

Arnold's categorical rejection of Wordsworth's philosophy is found not only in his prose criticism but also in his verse. In his poem The Youth of Nature Arnold speaks of Nature's mockery at man's utterly futile efforts to deduce or derive a philosophy from Nature:

Race after race, man after man,
Have thought that my secret was theirs
Have dream'd that I lived for them,
That they were any glory and joy.

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15 Ibid., p. 304.
They are dust, they are chang'd
they are gone
I remain.

(The Youth of Nature 129-134)

Arnold undervalues Wordsworth's formal philosophy, in the interests of a proper understanding of Wordsworth's true poetical merits, as expressed by a few critics. But this is not so. Many critics notably, Eliot, found fault with Arnold's rejection of Wordsworth's philosophy. This, they found to be subversive and contradictory to the romantic ideology. Philosophy could be interpreted to mean in a wider sense; reflection or meditation and the fundamentals of life, not merely as Arnold thought, to refer to a set of beliefs and rules. Arnold posits a contradiction in terms when he rejects the formal philosophy of Wordsworth, while still endorsing a view that Wordsworth's poetry has 'moral profundity.'

Eliot finds it quite meaningless and disagrees with Arnold's view that a writer's work could be judged while leaving wholly all things which form the very basis of his poetry. Eliot asks "if one dismisses Wordsworth's interests and beliefs, just how much, I wonder, remains."
When Wordsworth himself misquoted Aristotle and said that poetry is the most philosophical, of all writings, he did not mean, certainly that poetry philosophizes. He only believed that poetry can show the world more fully, than philosophy. To this extent philosophy in Wordsworth's poems is not to be taken to mean as mere abstract philosophy or as something divorced from the poetic truth or opposed to the very nature of poetry. It is nothing far from the term moral in Arnoldean sense.

Arnold lacked the sensibility to respond to the mystical dimension of Wordsworth's poetry. Hence he tries to spurn Wordsworth's ideas, because he considers too often 'spun into a tissue of elevated but abstract verbiage'. It is believed that based on such a premise, Arnold also feels Wordsworth's poetry deficient in intellectual culture, and in his awareness of modern situation. But it is not proper to dismiss, the mystical strain, summarily for 'without it Wordsworth is not Wordsworth'. 'The spiritual world is itself the sensible world more fully apprehended.' All differences between the world of events and objects and the world of intuition, vanish in Wordsworthian poetic ideology.

Wordsworth has learnt to look on Nature, and is able to hear the 'still sad music of humanity'. This experience
of nature is qualitatively varied and is capable of giving him joy as well as a deeper edification.

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused.

The belief that Wordsworth constructed out of his experiences was a belief in the capacity of the mind to cooperate with this active universe (the visible world) - Wordsworth felt that mechanical materialism had substituted a universe of death for that which moves with light and life, instinct, actual, divine, and true) to contribute something of its own to it in perceiving it, and not as sensationalism taught merely to receive, passively impressions from within.

'The objects of Nature are not objects per se' but are looked upon as media - through which the ultimate principle manifests itself.

In the words of Dean Church "Wordsworth was first and foremost a philosophical thinker, a man whose intention and purpose it was to think out for himself faithfully, and seriously, the questions concerning man and nature and human life." Arnold, unfortunately loses sight of the apocalyptic passages of The Prelude, the platonic idea of the pre existence of the
soul, the transmutation and transformation of the sense experience into integrated, organic transcendent self-as revealed through the great ode, Tintern Abbey.

It is regrettable that Arnold makes sweeping conclusions about Wordsworth's ethical and moral considerations as mere philosophy, without even trying to understand the deeper significance of Wordsworth's experiences concerning many matters such as the relationship between man and Nature, the social and moral obligation between individual and Society as illustrated and developed in poems like Resolution and independence, Excursion and Michael. In this context it is worth considering A.C. Bradley's views about Wordsworth's mysticism; in the words of Bradley, "However much Wordsworth was the poet of small and humble things and the poet who saw his ideal realised not in Utopia, but here and now before his eyes, he was, quite as much, what some would call a mystic."\(^16\)

He further says —

"He apprehended all things, natural and human, as the expression of something which, while manifested in them, immeasurably transcended them. We may even believe the poet's mysticism to be moonshine; but it is certain that to

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neglect or throw into the shade this aspect of his poetry is neither to take Wordsworth as he really was nor to judge his poetry truly, .... Arnold wished to make Wordsworth more popular; and so he was tempted to represent Wordsworth's poetry as much more simple and unambitious than it really was."17

"He was also annoyed by attempts to formulate a systematic Wordsworthian philosophy; ... having himself but little turn for philosophy, he was disposed to regard it as illusory."18

A.C. Bradley traces the mystic element with particular reference to the poems, To the Cuckoo, and The prelude (xii). He draws our attention to Wordsworth's address to the Cuckoo as "O blithe new comes". He says "It stands near and beyond the boundary .... It seems to come from a mere voice, an invisible thing, a mystery ... is the expression through sense of something beyond sense".19

Commenting on the mystic element as found in certain passages in The Prelude Bradley remarks, about the description of the crag that "everything here is natural but every-

17 Ibid., p. 127.
18 Ibid., p. 127.
19 Ibid., p. 131.
thing is apocalyptic.  

The wind and sleety rain,
And all the business of the elements,
The single sheep, and the one blasted tree
And the bleak music from that old stone wall,
The voice of wood and water, and the mist
That on the line of each of those two roads
Advanced in such indisputable shapes*

(Prelude XII)

20Ibid., p. 134.