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GRT REVISITING WORDSWORTH'S REFLECTIONS ON ART, LIFE AND NATURE

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Abstract:-Wordsworth is one of those great poets of the world, who have presented a 'criticism of life' through their poetry and taught people how to live. He is not a 'fitful singer of an idle day', instead his poetry has a mission of ennobling humanity that has fallen into the deep ditch of evils which have been brought about by excessive materialism, industrialization, urbanization, and man's alienation from nature. He leads people to the lap of nature, which is the 'guide, the guardian' of the human heart so that the alienation of man from nature could be eliminated. His poetry has healing power which cures the wounds inflicted upon humanity by the demons of war, imperialism and ignorance. Like a prophet, he still evokes in his readers a thousand feelings which are so pure and serene.

Keywords:*Art, Life, Nature, Criticism of life, Materialism, Industrialization, Alienation. Hope.*

INTRODUCTION

As a prophet of democracy and apostle of equality, liberty and fraternity, Wordsworth gives a message of hope and love, and teaches people to oppose tyranny, hatred, war, oppression, exploitation, injustice, etc. He is the champion of Have-Nots, and, like Rousseau, believes in the inner nobility of man. His poetry has a mission of ennobling humanity that has fallen into the deep ditch of evils that have been brought about by materialism, industrialization, urbanization, and alienation from nature. He leads people to the lap of nature, which is the 'guide, the guardian' of the human heart. His poetry has healing power which cures the wounds inflicted upon humanity by the demons of war, imperialism and ignorance.

Wordsworth was against such forces that tried to suppress true human spirit. His poetry spreads the message of equality of all, irrespective of caste, creed, religion and nationality. He is a true worshipper of liberty and freedom, and denounces slavery and bondage. He exhorts everyone to imbibe the spirit of universal brotherhood. He feels indignant at such laws and literature that create narrow walls of mistrust between man and man:

... 'what need of books?
Burn all the statutes and their shelves:
They stir us up against our Kind;
And worse, against ourselves.
(Wordsworth, *Rob Roy's Grave*, lines 21-24)

He is disgusted when he sees that a handful of writers are producing gross literature and trying to mislead the people:

... above all,
How books mislead us, seeking their reward
From judgments of the wealthy Few, who see
By artificial lights; how they debase
The Many for the pleasure of those Few;
Effeminately level down the truth
To certain general notions, for the sake

Of being understood at once, or else
Through want of better knowledge in the heads
That, framed them; flattering self-conceit with words,
That, while they most ambitiously set forth
Extrinsic differences, the outward marks
Whereby society has parted man
From man, neglect the universal heart.
(Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book XIII, lines 208-220)

Wordsworth was pained to see that the art of creative writing was being disgraced by those who, to suit the vulgar taste for melodrama and cheap display of passions, were writing 'extravagant stories' and thus pushing the greatest works of the greatest minds into the back of the stage. However, Wordsworth had firm belief in 'the inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind':

The invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of extravagant stories in verse. When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation, I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the feeble endeavour made in these volumes to counteract it; and reflecting upon the magnitude of the general evil, I should be oppressed with no dishonourable melancholy, had I not a deep impression of certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind, and likewise of certain powers in the great and permanent objects that act upon it, which are equally inherent and indestructible; and were not added to this impression a belief, that the time is approaching when the evil will be systematically opposed, by men of greater powers, and with far more distinguished success. (735)

William Wordsworth presents "a criticism of life" (Arnold 209) in his poetry so that his poetry may ennoble and sublimate humanity. He himself asserts in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* that his poetry is different from that of others at least in one respect—it has been written with a purpose:

From such verses the Poems in these volumes will be found distinguished at least by one mark of difference, that each of them has a worthy *purpose*. Not that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formally conceived; but habits of meditation have, I trust, so prompted and regulated my feelings, that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a *purpose*. (735)

William Wordsworth strongly believed in the democratic values not only in socio-political life but in literature also and, therefore, worked for the democratization of literature also. He brought poetry from the drawing rooms of the aristocratic classes to the common masses. Joel Pace finds similarity between the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* as both have focused on common man and woman:

Many of the underlying principles in the poems reflected the spirit of the city in which the *Declaration of Independence* had been penned and approved. *The Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* contained a political manifesto similar to that of the Declaration's political one. Accordingly, it buttressed its own revolution: it declared a break with the poetry of his aristocratic predecessors and a democratic focus on the common woman and man, who are entitled to unalienable rights. (232)

Wordsworth wanted himself to be regarded as a teacher or nothing. As stated earlier he wished to make his poetry a tonic for those who had lost faith in life and the capacity of humanity to ameliorate itself. Critics have accepted his purposeful poetry. W. J. Dawson remarks:

He was no fitful singer of an idle day; he believed he had a message to deliver, as truly as ever ancient seer or prophet had. For this reason Wordsworth fulfills, more perfectly than any other modern poet, the ideal conception of the Bard. According to some philologists, "minister" and "minstrel" spring from the same root, and convey the same idea. The true poet is the bard, the seer, the minister; he has a Divine anointing; he is a consecrated spirit, selected and commissioned for the performance of a Divine behest. (93)

Wordsworth has full faith in the bright future of poetry even in the age of science and technology. In spite of all the ravages caused by advancement in science and technology, Wordsworth is confident that poetry will continue to perform its mission of healing the wounds of humanity. He asserts:

Poetry is the first and last of knowledge—it is as immortal as the heart of man. If the labours of Men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions we habitually receive, the Poet will sleep no more than at present; he will be ready to follow the steps of Man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself. (738)

Wordsworth's poems still lead readers to higher consciousness and excite pure and ennobling emotions in them. W. J. Dawson asserts:

He excites in us many emotions, but they are always pure and ennobling emotions. Those who seek for coarse and violent excitement must not come to Wordsworth. (112)

The sensations which he excites are as pure as those excited by pure water. W. J. Dawson quotes F. W. Robertson:

The Rev. F. W. Robertson has truly observed that "in reading Wordsworth the sensation is as the sensation of the pure water drinker, whose palate is so refined that he can distinguish between rill and rill, river and river, fountain and fountain, as compared with the obtuser sensations of him who has destroyed the delicacy of his palate by grosser libations, and who can distinguish no difference between water and water, because to him all pure things are equally insipid". (112)

Wordsworth was disgusted with the materialism and urbanization of his age. People were busy accumulating wealth and material prosperity. It seemed as if they had sold their soul for physical pleasures. They had gone far away from nature that incites noble feelings in our heart.

Due to increasing urbanization and industrial revolution, nature was being destroyed. At such times, Wordsworth's indignation knew no limits. Like Thoreau, he lamented:

*'Meanwhile, at social Industry's command,
How quick, how vast an increase! From the germ
Of poor hamlet, rapidly produced
Here a huge town, continuous and compact,
Hiding the face of earth for leagues—and there,
Where not a habitation stood before,
Abodes of men irregularly massed
Like trees in forests,—spread through spacious tracts,
O'er which the smoke of unremitting fires
Hangs permanent, and plentiful as wreaths
Of vapour glittering in the morning sun.
(Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, Book VIII, lines 117-127)*

He vehemently opposed such moves as dared to destroy natural habitation for the sake of material progress. He condemns and denounces the government's attempt to destroy nature for the sake of laying a railway line:

Is then no nook of English ground secure
From rash assault? Schemes of retirement sown
In youth, and 'mid the busy world kept pure
As when their earliest flowers of hope were blown,
Must perish,—how can they this blight endure?
* * *
Speak, passing winds; ye torrents, with your strong
And constant voice, protest against the wrong.
(Wordsworth, *Miscellaneous Sonnets*, No. XLV)

As a prophet, he was conscious of various kinds of problems that were created by the new knowledge of science and technology. He emphasized that no knowledge of science could give us that 'bliss of solitude', which nature could provide. He, therefore, exhorts us to leave the books of science and cold rationality and return to nature:

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—
We murder to dissect.
Enough of Science and of Art;
Close up those barren leaves;
Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives.
(Wordsworth, *The Tables Turned*, lines 25-32)

To these worldly people who, under the satanic influence of materialism, are exhausting their energies in worldly pursuits that bring with themselves anxieties and worries, he speaks of 'unworldliness' and lofty purposes. W. J. Dawson remarks:

There is gravity and sweetness in Wordsworth's poems which could only spring from a noble nature, ruled by the daily vigilance of duty, and dedicated to the daily contemplation of lofty purposes. He makes us feel his entire remoteness from all sordid aims and debasing passions, and he calls us to a higher, a simpler, a serener life. He preaches to an age corrupted with sensationalism the joy that lies in natural emotions; to an age stung with the hunger for impossible ideals the attainable valour and nobility of homely life; to an age tormented by insatiable thirst for riches the old Divine lesson that "a man's life consisteth not in abundance of things which he possesseth". To the

worldly he speaks of unworldliness; to the perplexed, of trust, to the victims of vain perturbation and disquiet, of peace. (112-113)

Wordsworth teaches us to have simple desires and have communion with nature to ennoble our life. W. J. Dawson asserts:

But where Wordsworth differed from all other poets of his day was that he had a conscious ideal of what human life might be made, through simplicity of desire and communion with Nature, and he resolutely set himself to the fulfillment of his ideal. (103)

Due to his concern for preserving nature, as expressed in his poems, scientists got inspiration to study ecology minutely. Critics have established co-relation between his poems and Cultural Geography and Environment Science. Inspired by his poems on Nature, a large number of ecologists and environmentalists raised their voice against the use of 'axes and saws' in the USA, and the government had to accept their proposal. Joel Pace remarks: It is testimony to the power and success of Wordsworth's poetry that he became one of America's pre-eminent nineteenth century prophets and that he continues to be read widely in America today.

Modern Eco-critics have viewed the Lake District scenes captured in Wordsworth's poetry with their own form of 'green goggles'. Readings of Wordsworth that focus on historical context, the portrayal of race, class, and gender are among the critical lenses through which Wordsworth's poetry is currently being read. Each approach is indebted to nineteenth century's Wordsworth. (243)

In fact Wordsworth can also be called an ecological poet in the sense that he is concerned about humankind's relationship with the natural world. From this point of view, his *The Guide to the Lakes and Home at Grasmere* are important, for here he provides a visionary account of the benefits of living in communion with nature. Wordsworth feels the presence of divine spirit in Nature, and any act against Nature is deemed by him, to be an act against our own spirit. The next millennium may see the destruction of many species, the rapid clearing of the remaining twenty percent of the world's old-growth forests, the depletion of the ozone layer and many other environmental disasters. Thus, an ecological reading of Wordsworth provides pertinent information about the history of environmental thought which has shaped this planet and will continue to do so.

Wordsworth was shocked at the wide spread bloodshed during the Reign of Terror. It exerted a calamitous influence on Wordsworth in dashing his hopes of establishing a society based on the ideals propounded by Rousseau. But he never lost his faith in human nature. He thanks Nature and her benign influence on him in retaining 'A more than Roman confidence':

... if, in this time
Of dereliction and dismay, I yet
Despair not of our nature, but retain
A more than Roman confidence, a faith
That fails not, in all sorrow my support,
The blessing of my life; the gift is yours,
Ye winds and sounding cataracts! 'tis yours,
Ye mountains!, thine, O Nature! Thou hast fed
My lofty speculations; and in thee,
For this uneasy heart of ours, I find
A never-failing principle of joy
And purest passion.
(Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book II, lines 440-450)

Wordsworth saw one life throughout everything and felt 'the sentiment of Being' spread around. He says:

I felt the sentiment of Being spread
O'er all that moves and all that seemeth still;
O'er all that, lost beyond the reach of thought
And human knowledge, to the human eye
Invisible, yet liveth to the heart;
(Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book II, lines 401-405)

Wordsworth's personal experience of this widespread 'sentiment of Being' gives him confidence to assert that he does not despair 'of our nature'. He feels that mankind has the potential to reach a state of unity consciousness, where he can fully appreciate his own nature, the nature of the external world and the primary nature lying at the heart of other men. That is why Wordsworth refers to himself and to Coleridge as 'a Prophet':

Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak
A lasting inspiration, sanctified

By reason, blest by faith; 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 this 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.
(Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book XIV, lines 444-454)

Wordsworth breathes universal feelings of mercy and benevolence in his poetry. Through his poetry he binds together the vast empire of human society by expressing feelings of universal brotherhood. He strongly believes that poetry can unite whole humanity by binding us all with the thread of universal brotherhood: Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science. Emphatically may it be said of the Poet as Shakespeare hath said of man, ‘that he looks before and after.’ He is rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs; in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed; the poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it spread over the whole earth, and over all times. (Wordsworth 738)

J. R. Watson admires Wordsworth’s exploration of self and understanding of the problems of the society. He asserts that Wordsworth has remained true to his own definition of the poet. He remarks:
... he is the most far-seeing and large-minded of Romantic poets. He is the poet of grandeur and tenderness, the one who most lives up to his own definition of the poet, that definition of the poet in relation to his fellow human beings which is most needed in our own day: he is the ‘rock of defence for human nature’, an upholder and preserver, carrying with him relationship and love. (209-210)

Like Walt Whitman, Wordsworth is a poet of Have-Nots. He does not write for upper classes. He makes the humble men and women of Cumberland the subject of his poetry. He is like a ‘rock of defence’ for these unprivileged people. He brings a message of hope and love to these suffering masses. W. J. Dawson remarks:
He breathes consolation and encouragement into tired hearts and failing spirits. He is the apostle of peace, the minister of cleansing to this time. He has nothing new or startling to say: he sings of love and duty, of disciplined desires and purged and regulated passions but he speaks as one who has attained and knows the secret of perpetual content. (113)

He has firm faith in the inherent grandeur of all human life. W. J. Dawson further remarks:

What Burns did for the Scotch peasant, Wordsworth has done for the shepherds and the husbandmen of England. But he has done more than illustrate the virtues of a class: from the study of peasant life, set amid the splendour, and vivified by the influence of Nature, he attained a profound faith in man himself, and a reverent understanding of the inherent grandeur of all human life. (126)

There is a healing touch in Wordsworth’s poetry. Like a visionary and prophet, he relieves humanity of its afflictions. W. J. Dawson asserts:

We cannot explain the touch, but there it is: an unearthly and profoundly religious charm which breathes upon us in all the best poems of Wordsworth. It is, in truth, the voice of a great prophet, who speaks words which are for the healing of the nations. (114)

He is, actually, “a poet hidden in the light of thought” (Shelley, “To a Skylark” lines 36-37), a preserver of decent human values and a destroyer of social evils. As a visionary and critic of life, he sings of truth, grandeur, beauty, love and hope. He is true to his words:

Of Truth, of Grandeur, Beauty, Love, 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;
Of the Individual Mind that keeps her own
Inviolable retirement, subject there
To Conscience only, and the law supreme
Of that Intelligence which governs all—
I sing:--
(Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, lines 14-23)

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