WORDSWORTH AS A RESTORER OF HUMAN DIGNITY

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ABSTRACT

Generally it is believed that Wordsworth was a poet of nature and that he was an escapist as he ran as hard as he could, towards the world of nature, to get away from the realities of life. But the fact is that Wordsworth was a poet of Humanity; he stood more for the real happiness and well being of man rather than observing rainbows and fields. He employs nature in his poems as a remedy to a diseased world and shows how nature heals, nurtures and restores the soul from the enervating effects of industrialism and materialism. Wordsworth was an environmentalist, Psychiatrist, educationist, in short a lover of mankind. This article intends to explore Wordsworth as a poet of Humanity who throughout his life fought for the betterment of Humanity.

Keywords: Humanity, human dignity, prose, poetry, Wordsworth

INTRODUCTION

The dictionary meaning of Humanism is “a philosophy based on liberal human values.” It is a philosophy which concentrates on human worth, dignity and freedom. It regards man as the crown and glory of creations, a point of view beautifully expressed by Shakespeare in his play Hamlet:

“What a piece of work is a man,
how noble in reason, how infinite in faculty,
In form and moving how express and admirable,
In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god-
the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals.”

Humanism is defined as the movement of educated people united by the interest in antiquity which was formed in the Renaissance mainly in Italy. It is understood as a special type of philosophical ideology, in the centre of which there is man as an individual with his goals and aspirations, with abilities and desires that are typical of his nature. It believes in improving man’s condition on this earth and focuses on the life in this world instead of otherworldly spiritual life. Humanists placed great emphasis upon the dignity of man. For the most part, it regards human
beings as social creatures who could create meaningful lives in association with other social beings.

Another important rule of Humanism is the return to origin. The Humanists held that the natural world has an order and that the origin of this order is God. As a creature endowed with soul, man can turn either towards worldliness or towards spirituality to identify oneself with God. Humanism can be also considered as naturalism (i.e. the belief that man is part of the world of nature).

DISCUSSIONS

The rules of Renaissance Humanism were inherited by the Romantics. Rousseau was one of the pioneers of the Romantic Movement. He was an important figure of the time. Like many Renaissance writers, he exalted the idea of goodness of humanity. He thought that the best education is virtually no education, instead one should discover oneself and one's world. He wanted man to get in touch with his feelings and experiences rather than just discovering objective truth. Extolling the noble savage, he believed that in a more natural environment, away from modern restraints, the inherent goodness of people would come out. Rousseau’s philosophy is “back to nature” which emphasizes to leave the restraints of civilization and find their naturally good selves. French people were very much inspired by Rousseau. They tried to develop a utopian State in which the good nature of people could develop freely. They raised the slogan “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”, referring to their quest for freedom without any restraints, the equality of everyone, and the brotherhood of mankind. The French revolutionaries wanted to remake the world.

Like Rousseau, the Romantics yearned to reclaim human freedom. Habits, values, rules and standards imposed by a civilization had to be abandoned because man is born free but everywhere he is in chains. The Romantics saw diversity and uniqueness in man. Discover yourself -- express yourself, cried the Romanists. The Romantics were rebels and they were subjective and extremely passionate about their tendency toward introspection. Rousseau’s autobiography “The Confessions” began with the following words, “I am commencing an undertaking, hitherto without precedent and which will never find an imitator. I desire to set before my fellows the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature, and that man myself. Myself alone! I know the feelings of my heart, and I know men. I am not made like any of those I have seen. I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. If I am not better, at least I am different.” (Cited in http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/lecture16a.html)

Romantics were liberals, conservatives, rationalists, idealists, Catholics, atheists, revolutionaries and reactionaries. They attacked the philosophers because they had turned man into a soulless thinking machine, they had demoted the individual by choking his imagination, sensitivity, feeling, spontaneity and freedom to death. The Romantics thought that the individual must
rediscover true freedom. Habits, rules, traditions and standards imposed by rational society must be lifted. Man must be liberated. The Romantics gave European culture an antidote to the excessive materialism of the time.

Shelley believed that man must be liberated. He thrived with a craving to unshackle mankind from the clutches of morbidity and lack of liberty. This lent to his poetry an elemental force, a vehemence as vigorous as that of the Wild West Wind. The poem puts across Shelley's spirit of liberty which is tempestuous and prevailing as the West Wind itself. The poet addresses the west wind and beckons his spirit to descend upon him and act through/his lips as the trumpet of a prophecy to the indifferent world. Shelley depicts the impact of the West wind on the dead leaves of autumn. They are driven by the west wind as ghosts fleeing from an enchanter. The wind forces them to their wintry bed where they will stay buried like a corpse till the clarion call of spring shall arouse them to a new life. It destroys the old decaying leaves. It scatters the seeds and thus preserves life. Likewise, the poet looks forward that the stagnant conventions die and make way for regeneration.

The theme of the “West Wind” is also sustained in Shelley’s poem “Queen Mab.” The poem illustrates Shelley’s wrath at economic injustice in the world. He thought that “there is no real wealth but the labour of man. Where there are mountains of gold and the valleys of silver, there is no grain of corn for the poor; no one comfort would be added to the human race. One man is enabled to heap to himself luxuries at the expense of the necessaries of his neighbour; a system admirably fitted to produce all the varieties of disease and crime. The poor are set to labour, not the food for which they famish: not the blankets for want of which their babes are frozen by the cold of their miserable hovels: not those comforts of civilization without which civilized man is far more miserable than the meanest savage...” (http://www.humanism-cotland.org.uk/what-is-humanism/essay-on-humanism-5.html).

Byron was a rebel poet. His Byronic hero is his mouth piece with regard to his intellectual capacity, self-respect, and hypersensitivity. He is "larger than life" and is usually isolated from society in exile of some kind. Byron’s characters wander desolate mountaintops, and are physically isolated from society. “Childe Harold” chose to "exile" himself and wander throughout Europe. Although Harold remained physically present in society and among people, he was not by any means "social." Often the Byronic hero is moody by nature or passionate about a particular issue. He also has emotional and intellectual capacities, which are superior to the average man. These heightened abilities force the Byronic hero to be arrogant, confident, abnormally sensitive, and extremely conscious of himself. In one form or another, he rejects the values and moral codes of society and because of this he is often unrepentant by society's standards. Often the Byronic hero is characterized by a guilty memory of some unnamed sexual crime. Due to these characteristics, the Byronic hero is often a figure of repulsion, as well as fascination. (http://www.umd.umich.edu/casl/hum/eng/classes/434/charweb/CHARACTE.htm)
Wordsworth thought that man is good by nature. He had faith in the grandeur and dignity of man, and the holiness of the heart, “grandeur in the beating of the heart.” But he felt that due to industrialization, life has become complicated and corrupted. Mankind is suffering and it has fallen from its paradise of innocence and bliss. Wordsworth, through his poetry, resolves to restore man to his original status and to restore his lost happiness, he raises the slogan of, “Back to Nature”; nature suggested peace, tranquility, calm, love, sacrifice, infinity and eternity. Wordsworth saw divinity in the Man who lived in the company of nature and led simple life. In the eighth Book of The Prelude, entitled ‘Retrospect-Love of Nature Leading to Love of Man, Wordsworth, describes his love for men who live in the pure company of nature and says:

“For me, when my affections first were led
From kindred, friends, and playmates, to partake
Love for the human creature’s absolute self,

That noticeable kindliness of heart

Sprang out of fountains, there abounding most,

Where sovereign nature dictated the tasks

And occupations which her beauty adorned,

And Shepherds were the men that pleased me first…

Wordsworth’s shepherd is a rustic who lives away from the corruptions of urban life. He idealizes shepherds because they are emblems of humanity. He praises their wisdom, strength, and kindness. He respects their ability to find brotherhood and joy in hard living. According to Peter v. Marinelli, the shepherd with whom Wordsworth is concerned ‘are not those whom Saturn ruled in the Latin wilds and who have left ‘even to us toiling in this late day,/ A bright tradition of the golden age’……….The Shepherds who play so significant a part in Wordsworth’s own spiritual development is rather a type whose rural ways and manners were the unluxuriant product of a life/ intent on little but substantial needs….‘(Marinelli, 1978).

Unlike the shepherds of antique tradition, they possess strong humanitarian sentiments. Wordsworth found Paradise within such men and through them he calls upon human soul to regain the lost paradise by practicing love and sacrifice. As Milton in “Paradise Lost” says, “Add virtue, patience, temperance, add love/ ….. but shalt possess / A paradise within thee, happier far.” (Book10,581-7)

Wordsworth respects human intellect and imagination. He sees a link between human soul and nature and urges “Let Nature be your teacher.” He focuses on nature's relation to man and man's relation to nature. Throughout his poetry, he showed his multi-faceted view of nature by
discussing this relationship. To him, nature is a source of education, comfort, moral guidance, and spirituality for man. Wordsworth felt that there is a lesson in every aspect of nature, even in the songs of birds and green meadows. In the company of nature, we rather have "a heart / that watches and receives" Observing and learning from nature with an open mind and heart and free emotions is the key to learning. Wordsworth says that he learned moral law from nature. He believed that this universe is pervaded by a ‘Great Mind’ and this great mind is shared by all human beings. Wordsworth says that those who become aware of the presence of the “Great Mind” can perceive the essence of things. Wordsworth says that nature nurses and purifies our animal sensibilities and feelings that we receive from our birth.

For Wordsworth nature is not ‘red in tooth and claw,’ rather it consoles the afflicted, make happy happier, teach young to think, and feel and become virtuous. Wordsworth found nature beneficial for mankind in many ways. He sees nature as refreshing when compared with the smoky cities of England. After being in the Big City and its troubles, Wordsworth went back to nature and found healing and restoration. Similarly Byron shares similar views in his poem Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage and says:

".........but the hum
Of human cities torture: I can see
Nothing to loathe in nature, save to be
A link reluctant in a fleshly chain,
Class’d among creatures, when the soul can flee,
And with the sky, the peak, the heaving plain
Of ocean, or the stars, mingle, and not in vain."

Wordsworth believed that nature is not alien to man rather there is a bond between nature and man. That is why people who live in the company of nature are happier and content.

In Lines “Written in Early Spring”, Wordsworth says:

“To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran.”

He notices that not just man but birds are also happy in the company of nature. In Lines Written in Early Spring, he says that everything they did was "a thrill of pleasure." Even the blooming bushes seem to have this same pleasure. No matter how melancholic someone feels, they can find comfort in nature. In "I wandered lonely as a cloud" Wordsworth, while feeling
melancholy, sees a multitude of yellow daffodils. He says that as they were "tossing their heads in a sprightly dance...A poet could not but be gay/In such a jocund company." The joy is intense, for the last line of the poem states that his heart "dances with the daffodils." No matter where he is, he can always think back to the daffodils and feel that same joy over and over again. Daffodils aren't the only mood-lifter he says, "My heart leaps up when I behold / A rainbow in the sky." He finds an inner peace in “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” as he looked around at the natural landscape, comparing it to a city that is "open unto the fields, and to the sky." This observation gives him "a calm so deep" - one that he never experienced before. By taking time to enjoy nature, man can receive peace and a tranquil break from his stressful life. Even more, when his life gets hectic or melancholic, he can recall the peaceful bliss of nature and feel refreshed and joyful. Nature can bring him comfort whether he is outdoors or indoors. In the “Solitary Reaper”, he showed man and nature in perfect harmony with each other. He shares his experience of a visit to Scotland where in the fields he passed by, a female who was reaping and singing a melodious song. Wordsworth describes the effects of the song in the following lines and says:

“Behold her, single in the fields,

Yon solitary Highland lass!

Reaping and singing by herself;

Stop here, or gently pass!

Alone she cuts and binds the grain,

And sings a melancholy strain;

O listen! For the Vale profound

Is overflowing with the sound.”

The beautiful valley was charged with the melodious song of the girl. Her song becomes expressive of a profound harmony between man and nature. Wordsworth was deeply interested in an interconnection between human mind and natural world. During his wanderings on the road, Wordsworth came in contact with the humblest human-beings. Their strength and energy surprised him. The power that inspired Wordsworth in tramps, beggars and outcasts was their feelings and the passion of their hearts, which, he found, were at their purest and simplest in humble and rustic life. He was the first poet who discovered that people who lead simple and frugal life are closer to nature, thus closer to God. They are more virtuous and humane. He was the first poet who made his readers feel that God lives within the hearts of simple men. The strength of their character is like the primal energies of nature and seems to spring from the same source. Wordsworth believes that inhumanity is not part of man’s essence; it is something
external to it. Man acquired it by keeping himself away from nature and he can regain his purity of heart by disengaging himself from the shackles of artificial life. According to Sarker,

“Wordsworth was keenly interested in the essence of
man, and believed that the essence of man was available
only in the ‘natural man’ who lived in the lap of nature,
without being tainted by the complexities and artificialities
of the feigning town folk.”(Sarker 2001:321)

The theme of Wordsworth’s poetry is simple human life, most according to nature and not monitored by the rules and limitations of the so called cultured society. John Butt in his book “Wordsworth: Selected Poetry and Prose” says:

“The young poet promises that he will speak of ‘moral
strength, and intellectual power’, …he told a friend
that if his writings were to last, it would be mainly
owing to this characteristic: ‘they will please for the single
cause, ‘that we have all of us one human heart.”(Butt,1969:9)

In The Excursion, he expresses his egalitarianism in these words:

“Alas! what differs more than man from man
And whence that difference? whence but from himself?
For see the universal race endowed
With the same upright form! The sun is fixed,
And the infinite magnificence of heaven
Fixed, within reach of every human eye;
....He whose soul
Ponders this true equality, may walk
The fields of earth with gratitude and hope;
Yet, in that meditation, will he find

Motive to sadder grief, as we have found;

Lamenting ancient virtues overthrown,

And for the injustice grieving, that hath made

So wide a difference between man and man.”

Wordsworth’s early poetry records his reaction to the impact of the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolutions on human life. It depicts the miseries of the lower class and the working class people, who suffered because of the inhuman behavior of the ruling classes. Wordsworth believed that any society that robs its people of humanity divests itself of its values. The Industrial Revolution desensitized English society of Wordsworth’s time. He believed that the progress of industrialization is destructive for contemporary culture. His poetry records the social impact of Britain’s economic shift and military interests; the end of cottage industry. His works portray a society where hardworking, humility, farming family, needing money, sends the son to work in the “dissolute city” where “evil courses” force him to flee overseas or a poor, rural family falls into hard times and the father resorts to selling himself into the military and never returns, and his family sinks into tragic circumstances. Wordsworth stood firm against the forces of the changing times that marginalize such persons, and he does not like what he sees: individuals removed from mainstream by an alienating and dominant ideology based on economic/military practices. In “The Female Vagrant”, he describes the female vagrant’s life, beginning with her childhood, living harmoniously in the Lake District with her father, a farmer and a fisherman. A new landowner ruins them by forfeiture of their fishing rights. The woman expressing her woe says, “… My happy father died…… And tears that flowed for ills which patience could not heal.”

Wordsworth was a humanist his poetry is socially and politically conscious. Purkis believes that “Wordsworth was a political apostate, his social interests will always remain as evidence of his humanity” (Purkis, 2003). As a critic of his age Wordsworth reveals the need for a radical change of heart and complete rejection of materialistic approach towards life. He believed in the innate goodness of man and was of the view that away from the corruptions of so called modern world the inherent goodness of people would come out. He urges mankind to leave artificial and mechanical life of urban society and find his naturally good self.

Wordsworth idealizes rustic society and announces that rustic man is his ideal. He praises the rustics for their wisdom, strength, kindness and simplicity and above all their ability to find love and joy in hard living. He believed that their life is a moral lesson and extols them in these words:
“I read, without design, the opinions, thoughts

Of those plain-living People, in a sense

Of love and knowledge; with another eye

I saw the quiet Woodman in the Woods,

The Shepherd on the Hills…” (Bk 4, 212-213)

Wordsworth believed that man’s moral sense is fully nurtured in the company of nature because there he is not confined in the false trappings of city life. In The Prelude Wordsworth invites men of city to the company of nature for edification of their moral sense. He feels that in a corrupt society men become perpetrator of evil. He urges mankind to struggle out of the grip of passivity and celebrate the human spirit that is within him by returning to the world of nature. Wordsworth idealizes Cumberland, in “The Prelude”, and writes:

“Beauteous the domain

Where to the sense of beauty first my heart

Was open’d, tract more exquisitely fair

Than is that Paradise of ten thousand Trees.”(Bk 8, 73-76)

Wordsworth received from nature mental, physical and spiritual education. Nature taught him the language of senses which helped in the development of his mind. Man has this spiritual power or moral sense from childhood but the mechanical life of city suppress this faculty, deeming it irrational or fantastic. He insisted that man should be sheltered from the pressures of such formal institutions and societies so as to avoid stunning of his good qualities. When Wordsworth goes out to experience nature, she in turn gives him inspiration, insight, education, and delight. It is a two way process, in which his mind grows and develops. He argues that nature humanizes his soul because nature is pervaded by a Divine Spirit. In “The Prelude” he says:

“Wisdom and Spirit of universe!

Thou Soul that art the Eternity of Thought!

That giv’st to forms and images a breath

And everlasting motion! Not in vain,

By day or star-light thus from my first dawn

Of childhood didst Thou intertwine for me
The passion that build up our human Soul,

Not with the mean and vulgar works of Man,

But with high objects, with enduring things,

With life and nature, purifying thus

The elements of feelings and of thought,

And sanctifying, by such discipline,

Both pain and fear, until we recognize

A grandeur in the beating of the heart.” (Bk1,401-414)

Wordsworth builds his ideal community in the lap of nature. Where men would live happily and enjoy life without the gross and outrageous stimulations of modern world. In The Prelude he presents his ideal community -his birthplace, the Lake District, where, “Man free, man working for himself, /Unwoo’d, unthought-of even, simplicity,/ And beauty, and inevitable grace…..” (Bk 8,104,110)

The people of Cockermouth persuaded their personal or social interests followed by a train of virtue. Cockermouth embodied a model of incorruptible society which represented best in man. Wordsworth’s ideal society is protected by nature. The steady mountains impart lasting grandeur to the place and the people, while the transitory things of the city life debase its population. Wordsworth is of the view that nature’s virtuous influence is capable of reviving sense of proportion and moderating the passion. For Wordsworth, moral values are essential in creating peace and harmony in any society. They promote positive and constructive conduct and discourage destructive behavior. Life in an immoral society is extremely difficult because human values are ridiculed. During his visit to the so called civilized world, Wordsworth discovered that man has become indifferent to his surroundings. In the materialistic world, everything is bought and sold for money, even the spiritual values are converted into cash. Pursuit of wealth prevails everywhere and man is completely ignorant of his spiritual side of existence. Wordsworth developed in himself a dislike for the atmosphere of indifference. He discovered that the trivialities of urban life can make man passive and weak. He disassociated himself from them.

But Wordsworth’s love for nature does not mean an escape from life. He is not against social activities and other relations which are essential for human identity. On the contrary, he was against passivity and indifference to the living conditions that surround man. He raised the slogan of back to nature because it taught him to love even the unassuming things that hold /A silent station in this beauteous world.’ In his poems he manifests a tendency to delete all artificialities that hinder fraternal love and promote love of mankind. For Wordsworth humanism
is based mainly on respect of man and realization of the position in this world. He raised the slogan of back to nature because it teaches how to love. His love for nature does not mean that he is against social activities and other relations which are essential for human identity. On contrary he manifests a tendency to delete all artificialities that hinder fraternal love and promote love of mankind. He declared in Book 10 of “The Prelude” that he always thought and struggled for human welfare whether in the city or in the village:

“For howso’er unsettled never once
Had I thought ill of humankind, or been
Indifferent to its welfare, but enflam’d
With thirst of a secure intelligence
And sick of other passions, I pursu’d
A higher nature, wished that Man should start
Out of the worm-like state in which he is,
And spread abroad the Wings of Liberty,
Lord of himself, in undisturbed delight.” (245-254)

CONCLUSION

Wordsworth taught his reader a new way of looking at life and nature. He reminds mankind that materialistic pursuits are not the most important things in life. The salvation of man lies in simple life; close to nature. Man must become what he once was. If man wants to regain his greatness he must return to nature – he must return to the essence of life. He believed that activity and the struggle against difficulties is real life; it is real freedom. Wordsworth’s ideal Man is an earthly god, a model of the combination of thought and action, instinct and reason. For him anything which makes Man weak and passive is evil. Wordsworth was inspired by a burning zeal to rescue mankind from his struggle against the forces of materialism and all that is evil in human life. In his works he discusses not the lost world of the past but the beautiful world of future. He thought that Man can create paradise on earth from his own efforts but only as the result of strengthening his own personality. Nature for Wordsworth is a source to unfold inner powers of mankind.
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