

## WORDSWORTH AS AN EGALITARIAN

Faria Saeed Khan

Department of English Literature,  
University of Balochistan,  
PAKISTAN.  
fariask@hotmail.com

### ABSTRACT

*Wordsworth was an egalitarian. His poems between 1793 and 1798 are concerned with the problems and sufferings of the humble and the down trodden people of his time. Wordsworth was deeply influenced by the repercussions of the Industrial Revolution, failure of the French Revolution, and by the views of his friend Beaupuy on social justice. This paper will study Wordsworth as an egalitarian poet.*

**Keywords:** Wordsworth, Egalitarian, Industrial Revolution

### INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth was born and raised in a rural environment; he was an egalitarian by nature. According to Sarker, 'Wordsworth's humanitarian zeal, and particularly his sympathy for the downtrodden and misfits of the society, his poems ...are concerned with social outcasts and misfits, whose natural goodness and purity are contrasted with the treatment they receive from an indifferent and inhuman social order....Wordsworth was aghast to see the difference among human beings in all the three areas of human life: social, economic and political....Wordsworth condemned the economic divide between the rich and the poor, and the social injustices done to the poor'(Sarker, 2003:334). Wordsworth's egalitarianism is reflected in his poem *The Excursion*, Wordsworth says:

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 behaviour 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. In his Preface to the Second Edition of *The Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth asserts that the rise of technology has blunt the mind "to a state of almost savage torpor." . Wordsworth's poetry of 1798 is a record of the social impact of the Industrial Revolution in Britain and the end of what might be called cottage industry. In his poems he narrates the miseries of the lower class people. A hard-working, humble, farming family, needing money, sends the son to work in the 'dissolute city' where 'evil courses' force him to flee overseas. Another rural family falls into hard times and the father resorts to selling himself into the military. He never returns, and his family is trapped in difficulties or the portrait of a 'discharged soldiers' who, after a stint in 'tropic isles,' struggles to make his way home. In these poems and many others like them, Wordsworth depicts the forces of the changing times that marginalize such persons, and feels concerned. In *The Female Vagrant* Wordsworth 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  
When sad distress reduced the children's meal;  
Thrice happy! That from him the grave did hide  
The empty loom, cold hearth, and silent wheel,  
And tears that flowed for ills which patience could not heal.

In *Goody Blake and Harry Gill*, Wordsworth narrates a true story of an old poverty stricken woman who, despite her hard work, cannot keep warm in winter. Wordsworth expresses her woe in these lines:

All day she spun in her poor dwelling,  
And then her three hours' work at night!  
Alas! 'twas hardly worth the telling,  
It would not pay for candle night.  
This woman dwelt in Dorsetshire  
Her hut was on a cold hill side,  
And in that country coals are dear,  
For they come far by wind and tide

Wordsworth started a literary campaign against the hardhearted laws such as the system of parish relief, which withheld benefits from poor men because they had some property. In *Last of the Flock*, a shepherd shares his plight with Wordsworth and says:

Ten children, Sir had I to feed,  
Hard labour in a time of need!  
My pride was tamed, and in our grief  
I of the parish ask'd relief  
They said I was a wealthy man;  
My sheep upon the mountain fed,  
And it was fit that thence I took  
Whereof to buy us bread:'

‘Do this; how can we give to you,’  
they cried, ‘what to the poor is due?’  
I sold my sheep as they had said,  
And brought my little children bread,  
And every week, and every day,  
My flock, it seemed to melt away.

The old economy seemed to be falling apart. Men and women faced the need to build new systems of discipline and order or reshape older systems. Wordsworth was concerned about the heartlessness of urban industrial society which generated new problems for the masses such as soulless industrialism, economic egoism, utilitarianism and materialism. Political economists were of the view that only those people who show profit are important and people who are poor and old or ill should be shut away because they are of no use to the society. In *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, Wordsworth rebukes such political economists. He believes that old men are not to be deemed useless no matter how feeble, purposeless and helpless. Wordsworth expresses his concern for the old and poor in these words:

But deem not this man Useless\_ Statesman! Ye  
Who are so restless in your wisdom, ye  
Who have a broom still ready in your hands?  
To rid the world of nuisances; ye proud,  
Heart swoln, while in your pride ye contemplate  
Your talents, power, or wisdom, deem him not  
A burthen of the earth!’ Tis Nature’s law  
That none, the meanest of created things,  
Of forms created the most vile and brute,  
The dullest or most noxious, should exist  
Divorced from good- a spirit and pulse of good,  
A life and soul, to every mode of being  
Inseparably linked. Then be assured  
That least of all can aught- that ever owed  
The heaven-regarding eye and front sublime  
What man is born to-sink, howe’er depressed?  
So low as to be scorned without sin;  
Without offence to God cast out of view;  
Like the dry remnant of a garden-flower  
Whose seeds are shed, or as an implement

Wordsworth’s poetry is socially and politically conscious. Purkis is of the view that ‘Wordsworth was a political apostate, his social interests will always remain as evidence of his humanity’ (Purkis, 2003:68). Wordsworth raised the slogan of ‘Equality’ among all human beings. The sight of the oppressed people distressed him. He was hurt to see that all men were not equal in enjoying privileges, though they were born equal. He differentiated men only on the basis of humanity. For him all distinctions and differences were superficial and artificial. He looked beyond all distinctions and felt the heart of man. In his poem *The Convict*, Wordsworth reveals that freedom is one of the primary laws of human nature. The

poem begins with beautiful description of dusk in which 'The glory of evening was spread through the west.' The mood of the poem changes as the poet enters the convict's cell. The poet explains that as he is free he is allowed to enjoy the beauties of nature but the convict's soul is restraint by the prison cell. Wordsworth in this poem compares the convict with the oppressed masses who are helpless in front of their monarchs and the ruling class. The injustice of the oppression is enhanced by the comparison of convict's situation with that of monarch. The convict's bones are consumed and his life blood is dried. He is unable to forget the mistakes of his past and pays for them dearly. This is contrasted with a monarch whose crimes are forgiven as 'All soothers of sense their soft virtue shall yield, And quietness pillow his head.' The hypocrisy of the cold and materialistic world is clear. The convict's 'life blood is dried' by his feeling of guilt in the imprisonment, while the monarch is soothed and any sense of guilt is forgotten. The convict's situation is a commentary on the monarchy and oppression of the poor. Like Wordsworth, Carlyle's in his works describes the period as Mechanical Age, reflecting his belief that machine is the dominant symbol of his era, one representing a profound change in both the physical and mental activities of the society. He discusses encroachment of materialistic thought into the spiritual aspects of life. He sets the stage for the social-problem novels of the mid-nineteenth century. Similarly Charles Dickens's realistic and ironic depictions of industrial towns in *Hard Times* underscored the deleterious effects of urbanization on the working class. Works by Benjamin Disraeli, Elizabeth Gaskell, the Brontë sisters, and W. M. Thackeray also presented accurate accounts of the industrialism of Victorian society. Friedrich Schiller argued that the machine was a threat to individual freedom and a destructive force on contemporary culture. Social critics such as Carlyle, John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, and Henry Adams examined the cultural changes that accompanied the machine; novelists like Charles Dickens provided a realistic treatment of modern working conditions

The sufferings and the oppression of the French people caused sorrow and concern in the heart of every sensitive soul in Europe. Wordsworth was one of the staunch supporters of the Revolution in France. He had a close experience with the Revolution of 1791. But the tragic aftermath of the Reign of Terror and Napoleonic wars cooled his revolutionary zeal. Even though he never accepted political or social oppression, in the eyes of the radicals he became known as a traitor. According to Walsh:

Wordsworth's radicalism was an attitude of mind...

By variety of circumstances- by an aversion to the aristocracy...

By the independent character of the small landholders amongst whom he had passed his early years; by his experiences in France and his tutelage at the hands of the soldier

Beaupuy... (Walsh, H.J, 1963:10)

Wordsworth viewed the outbreak of the French Revolution as a momentous event. It was a moment of great rejoicing for him. Wordsworth's revolutionary zeal was infused with his spirit of love for humanity. For him, it was a blessing to be alive on that occasion. Wordsworth, expresses his joy over the change and says,

'Oh! Pleasant exercise of hope and joy!' Pinion was of the view that:

Wordsworth's poems communicate some of

The romantic intoxication he experienced thirteen years earlier in France. Its tragic sequence of events is movingly

and more effectively narrated than some critics allow.’ (Pinion, 1984:34)

Wordsworth attacked the hypocrisies and cruelties of the ruling classes. He was in France during 1791-92. Captain Beaupuy became one of his closest friends in France.. According to Johnston:

Beaupuy was happy to meet an Englishman in Blois,  
especially one so ripe for the final states of conversion to  
the good cause..... Wordsworth was of roughly the same  
class and educational background made him all the more  
attractive to the busy young captain.(Johnston,1998:302)

Wordsworth idealized Beaupuy. In his company Wordsworth became an ardent republican. He says that his ‘heart was all given to people and his love was theirs.’ The two friends walked along the forest tracks. Beaupuy’s stories of the past wrongs of the rulers grieved the poet. Many sights of human sufferings in France due to poverty and political oppression made Wordsworth believe that the spirit of revolution was unconquerable. He saw listing of young patriots as they bade farewell to loved ones before posting to the frontiers. Wordsworth says:

.. Meantime, day by day, the roads  
Were crowded with the bravest Youth of France,  
And all the promptest of her Spirits, link’d  
In gallant Soldiership, and posting on  
To meet the War upon her Frontier Bounds.  
Yet at this very moment do tears start  
Into mine eyes;....(263-270)

Beaupuy discussed with Wordsworth all the important issues of the time. Pinion says:

His influence on Wordsworth never faded;  
.....he strengthened the poets belief in common  
man, ‘Man he loved as man,’ however mean and obscure;  
he believed in the nobility of his nature, a God  
given gift which made him capable of seeing  
clear truth and of building liberty.’ (Pinion, 1984:35)

When Britain declared war on the Republic Wordsworth felt disgusted. He hated the King’s policy for attacking the newly formed Republic. He was an true republican and in his sonnet *Dedicated to Liberty and Order* encouraging the revolutionaries, he writes:

People your chain are serving link by link  
Soon shall the rich be leveled down the poor  
Let us break forth in tempest now or never!  
Similarly in his poem, *Salisbury Plain*, he says:  
Heroes of Truth pursue your march, up tear  
Th' Oppressor's dungeon from its deepest base;  
High o'er the towers of Pride undaunted rear  
Resistless in your might the Herculean mace

Of Reason; let foul Error's monster race  
Dragged from their dens start at the light with pain  
And die; pursue your toils, till not a trace  
Be left on earth of Superstition's reign,  
Save that eternal pile which frowns on Sarum's plain.

In his poems he depicted gruesome war scenes. In *The Female Vagrant*, the vagrant woman narrates her tragic story and says:

All perished –all, in one remorseless year  
Husband and children! one by one, by sword  
And ravenous plague, all perished.

When the French Revolution passed into terror and power went into the hands of mob. The king was condemned to death and guillotined. First the royalist were beheaded then the moderate Girondins. More than thousand individuals were guillotined in forty- seven days. The insensitivity of the radicals disappointed the poet. He was frightened after witnessing the inhumanity of the mob.

In different prisons, churches, and convents, the mob amused themselves with their victims, and formed a mock Tribunal. Some idea of these infamous proceedings may be collected from the following barbarities exercised on the old Cardinal DE LA ROCHEFAUCAULD. His hands and feet were tied together; and the mob ordered him to acknowledge that during his whole life he had never believed in God, but had been a hypocrite. He made no answer. The mob then said, if you believe in God, we give him, the Virgin Mary or her bastard John, five minutes to release you; and so saying they cut him to pieces.

Other prisoners were asked what they did when they were last with their wives, mistresses, and such other indecent, vaunting expressions. Others again were asked what they thought their parents at Coblenz would say on hearing of their death, &c. Questions of this nature were particularly put to the women.

The mob ordered one of the Swiss solders to dress the hair of a young Swiss officer, a very handsome young man; and when it was done, they ordered him with a hand-saw to take off his head, and to be cautious not to spoil his headdress, saying it was too fine a head to put upon a pike, but to the best advantage. The soldier refused to obey, and was immediately cut to pieces; and two women sawed the officer's head from his body. He was not heard to make the least complaint, and it was near an hour before the head was quite off.

At the Place Dauphin, the mob had made a fire, and before it several men, women, and children were roasted alive. The countess PERIGNAN with her two daughters, the daughters first, and the mother after, were stripped of their cloaths, washed with oil, and roasted alive, while the mob were singing and dancing round the fire, and amusing themselves with their cries and sufferings. After the repeated prayers of the eldest girl, not more than 15 years old, that some one would with a sword or a pistol put an end to her horrid existence, a young man shot her through the heart, which so irritated the mob, that they immediately threw him into the fire, saying, he should suffer in her place. When the mother was roasted, the mob brought six priests to the same fire and then cutting some flesh from the body, ordered the Priests to eat it. They all of them approached the horrid scene with their eyes shut, and did not speak a word in answer. The mob directly undressed the eldest of them, a man about 60, and roasted him; saying, they perhaps might like the flesh of their friends better than that of the Countess.

The other five instantly threw themselves into the fire, and were burnt to death, embracing each other; and though the mob did every thing they could to get them out of the fire, in order a little to prolong their sufferings, they could not effect it, as the fire was extremely fierce. This happened about ten o'clock on Monday night. (Times , 1979). Wordsworth was extremely disappointed and scared. Expressing his fears in *The Prelude*, he says:

But that night  
I felt most deeply in what world I was,  
What ground I trod on, and what air I breathed.  
High was my room and lonely, near the roof  
Of a large mansion or hotel, a lodge  
That would have pleased me in more quiet times;  
Nor was it wholly without pleasure then.  
With unextinguished taper I kept watch,  
Reading at intervals; the fear gone by  
Pressed on me almost like a fear to come.  
I thought of those September massacres,  
Divided from me by one little month,  
Saw them and touched: the rest was conjured up  
From tragic fictions or true history,  
Remembrances and dim admonishments.  
The horse is taught his manage, and no star  
Of wildest course but treads back his own steps;  
For the spent hurricane the air provides  
As fierce a successor; the tide retreats  
But to return out of its hiding-place  
In the great deep; all things have second birth;  
The earthquake is not satisfied at once;  
And in this way I wrought upon myself,  
Until I seemed to hear a voice that cried,  
To the whole city, "Sleep no more."

Wordsworth felt that the ideals of the revolution had been betrayed so he ceased to support the Revolution. In *A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, illustrates his argument with historical detail. In rebutting the Bishop's support of the British Constitution, Wordsworth states,

You say "I fly with terror and abhorrence even from the altar of liberty when I see it stained with the blood of the aged, of the innocent, of the defenceless sex; of the ministers of religion, and of the faithful adherents of the fallen monarch." What! Have you so little knowledge of the nature of man as to be ignorant, that at a time of revolution is not the season of true Liberty. Alas! The obstinacy & perversion of men is such that she is too often obliged to borrow the very arms of despotism to overthrow him, and in order to reign in peace must establish herself by violence. . . . Political virtues are developed at the expense of moral ones; . . . It is the province of education to rectify the erroneous notions which a habit of oppression . . . may have created . . . ; it belongs to her to create a race of men who, truly free, will look upon their fathers as only enfranchised.

([http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/~dmiall/TinternRev/Ames\\_3.htm](http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/~dmiall/TinternRev/Ames_3.htm))

In 1794, under the leadership of Napoleon Bonaparte France began to take away the liberty of other countries. In one of his sonnets *Napoleon as Fallen Angel* he writes:

Look now on that Adventurer who hath paid  
His vows to fortune; who, in cruel slight  
Of virtuous hope, of liberty, and right,  
Hath followed wheresoe'er a way was made  
By the blind Goddess; —ruthless, undismayed;  
And so hath gained at length a prosperous Height,  
Round which the Elements of worldly might  
Beneath his haughty feet, like clouds, are laid.  
O joyless power that stands by lawless force!  
Curses are his dire portion, scorn, and hate,  
Internal darkness and unquiet breath;  
And, if old judgments keep their sacred course,  
Him from that Height shall Heaven precipitate  
By violent and ignominious death.

After the failure of the French revolution, Wordsworth was disillusioned. He realized that his belief in the Golden Age was ending in horror and atrocities in. He blamed the French people for Napoleon's rise to power in Calais, August, 1802, he says:

Ye men of prostrate mind,  
A seemly reverence may be paid to power;  
But that's a loyal virtue, never sown  
In haste, nor springing with a transient shower:  
When truth, when sense, when liberty were flown,  
Shame on you, feeble-heads, to Slavery prone!

Wordsworth was extremely disappointed. In *The Prelude* he writes:

Domestic carnage now filled all the year  
With Feast-Days; the old Man from the chimney- nook,  
The Maiden from the bosom of her Love,  
The Mother from the Cradle of her Babe,  
The Warrior from the Field, all perish'd, all,  
Friends, enemies, of all parties, ages ranks,  
Head after head, and never heads enough  
For those that bade them fall: ..(BK X, 336-342)

Lamenting the time in *The Prelude* and writes:

It was a lamentable time for man  
Whether a hope had e'er been his or not,  
A woeful time for them whose hopes did still



Outlast the shock; most woeful for those few,  
They had the deepest feeling of the grief,  
Who still were flattered, and had trust in man. (BK X,387-392)

Purkis is of the view that 'Wordsworth was intensely politically conscious all his life; he may have changed sides, but he never lost interest in the battle. He is indeed the most political of all our poets and this is hardly surprising when we remember that he grew up in an age of Revolutions' (Purkis,2003:20). Wordsworth had witnessed enough of bloodshed and horror in France. He accepts conservatism and follows the principles advocated by Edmund Burke. He realized that like an oak Burke's constitution was organic, time honored, slow to change and grow, protective of the subjects who sheltered beneath it. He compares Burke to an oak tree, acknowledging the power of his symbol as an anti- revolutionary- a conservative. In *The Prelude* he says:

I see him,- old but vigorous in age,  
Stand like an oak whose stag-horn branches start  
Out of its leafy crown, the more to awe  
The younger brother of the grove..  
While he forewarns, denounces, launches forth,  
Against all systems built on abstract rights,  
Keen ridicule; the majesty proclaims  
Of institutes and laws, hallowed by time;  
Declares the vital powers of social ties  
Endeared by custom; and with high disdain,  
Exploding upstart Theory, insists  
Upon the allegiance to which men are born.

As a conservative Wordsworth preaches that there must be respect for institutions, tradition, religion and judgment of community because it is formed after thousands of experiments in the great laboratory of time. Change, for Wordsworth includes no risk of a chaotic social order, but instead entails gradual orderly progress towards a better society. Go slow he warns the advocates of change. Wordsworth does not like volcanic burst and of violent upheaval. He advises the people of England in the following words:

Long favored England! Be not thou misled  
By monstrous theories of alien growth  
Lest alien frenzy seize thee.

Wordsworth returned to the Lake District. In his sonnet Composed in the Valley near Dover, on the Day of Landing, Wordsworth contrasts the enslavement of Europe with the political freedom still prevailing in his own country. The sonnet speaks of the relief with which he again sets foot on English soil. He expresses his satisfaction in the following lines:

All, all are English. Oft have I looked round?  
With joy in Kent's green vales; but never found  
Myself so satisfied in heart before.  
Europe is yet in bonds;but let that pass,  
Thought for another moment.Thou art free,

My Country! And 'tis joy enough and pride  
For one hour's perfect bliss, to tread the grass  
Of England once again...

## CONCLUSION

For Wordsworth Ideals of freedom remained unattained. Thousands of lives sacrificed in the name of liberty and equality appeared futile as the revolution was followed by the violence of the Reign of Terror and imperialism of Napoleon. He was no more an impatient republican. He believed that a gradual progress brings peace and prosperity in life and violent changes cause disturbance and destruction of humanity. He decided to spread his message of peace and equality through his poetry

Wordsworth's egalitarianism inspired him for new kind of verse. It was his love for common man that he wrote that the subject of poetry was common man and language of conversation as language of poetry. He always believed that poetry was a social product and had a social function. The poet's job is to humble and humanize the reader. Right feelings make men better human beings. Wordsworth aims to rectify men's feelings. He explains to his reader how great characters are formed; how pain and sorrow may be transmuted into new strength; how mind may be fixed upon lofty purposes, how domestic bonds of love and affection generate genuine happiness in time of disappointment and how man can overcome petty ambitions. Through his poetry he wanted to teach men the value of sacrifice, humaneness, goodness and morality and transform this earth into a paradise for all.

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