



Wordsworth's Philosophy of Nature

* Madhulika

Research Paper—English

Wordsworth was a great poet of nature. However, his uniqueness lies in the fact that he has presented in his poetry an impressive and emotionally satisfying account of man's relation to nature. All created things are part of a unified whole in his concept. Alexander pope is considered by popular opinion and seasoned judgement the poet of town and of artificial life, so is Wordsworth rightly considered the greatest poet of the countryside and of the life of nature in its physical as well as spiritual aspects. Poets earlier to Wordsworth, like Burns, Cowper, Crabbe and Goldsmith had exhibited a fine appreciation for the beauties of nature.

It was left to Wordsworth to reveal the inner soul of nature in his poems and to make it a better teacher than moral philosopher of the present and past. The neoclassicists took delight in abstract philosophy. In the preface to "Essay on Man": Pope saw in poetry a superior mnemoteohnic method of engraving in the mind the thought of the philosophers; Wordsworth and Shelley saw in it philosophy itself, the highest and profoundest philosophy. So romanticism, as M. Lanson has well expressed it, is 'short with metaphysics'. The romantics, relying on imagination and convinced of the absolute truth of poetic intuitions substituted for the cold mechanism of cause and effect a vision of mysterious forces which they called divine. Wordsworth was concerned for less with the sensuous manifestations that delight most of our nature poets than with the spiritual that he finds underlying these manifestations. "With the

outward show of things, with nature bewildering profusion, her firming, concern life, her riddles, her magical appeal to the eye and the sense of touch" says Compton Rickett, "he is little concerned".

Above all, Wordsworth emphasized the moral influence of nature. He spiritualized nature and regarded her as a great moral teacher, as the best mother guardian and nurse of man, as an elevating influence. According to him, nature deeply influences human character. In "Tintern Abbey" he tells his sister Dorothy that Nature never did betray the heart that loved her. A careful reading of The Prelude clearly shows that Wordsworth received the best part of his education from nature. The poet gives thanks to the means which nature designed to employ the discipline of fear and joy. The first stage in experience, the beginning of each man's education is the reception of impression through the avenues of the senses. This stage is emphasized in two poems – "Expostulation and Reply" and "Tables Turned". In "The Tables Turned" Wordsworth asks his friend to leave his books and come out into the open since he can learn more about man and about moral good and evil from the spring woods than from all the sages. "One impulse from a vernal wood / may teach you more of man of moral evil and of good' / than all the sages can."¹ "Beneath a half-playful and even superficial opposition to science and philosophizing, there is the wholly serious demand, central to Wordsworth's faith, for a total response by man's nature to the non-human na-

* Pilani Distt. Jhunjunu (Rajasthan)

ture around him...² Wordsworth no longer calls himself as in “Tintern Abbey”, a worshiper of nature. His faith in nature runs to maintain itself mechanically on the momentum gained in his youth. It yields more and more to a theological faith, which tends to drain it of its strength. In “The Excursion”, referring again to the rites of baptism, he reminds us - “... that man by nature lies / Bedded for good and evil in a gulf / Fearful low.”³ “He seems to have quite forgotten the Hartleian psychology which makes so much, in the building up of the human spirit, of the language of the sense? The naturalism has quite faded out of his concept of nature.”⁴ In his poetry Wordsworth shows how human beings fit into the midst of the interplaying forces of nature.

For the discerning intellect of man./When wedded to this goodly universe./In love and Holy passion, shall find these.

Paradise and groves Elysian, and fortunate fields.⁵ Man and nature, mind and the external world, are geared together and in union complete the motive principle of the universe. They act and react upon each other, ‘so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure? The exquisite functioning of this interlocked universe of mind and nature is for Wordsworth the highest theme of poetry; in poetry the process actually receives its final consummation.⁶ In the first period he loved nature with a passion which was all physical, without having any tinge of intellectual or philosophical association. Second stage the period of the senses – it was the age of sweet sensations. He was thrilled and enchanted by the sights and sounds of nature. Referring to the boyish delights of this period when he viewed nature with a physical passion, he writes boldly in “Tintern Abbey”:

The sounding Cataract/Haunted me like a passion, the tall rock/The mountain and the deep gloomy woods;/Their colour and their poems, were then to me/An appetite; a feeling and a love.⁷

“Wordsworth endows each and every object of nature with life. He foretells the modern biological researches that there is a soul and living

principle in all the forms and shapes of nature’s myriad objects. He unites nature with man. He looks on nature to hear the still sad music of humanity.⁸ Wordsworth believes that man can get lessons from nature for his edification if he brings, with him ‘a heart that watches and receives’. Nature can be a perfect educator of man and in his Lucy poems the poet represents the education of native. Wordsworth believed that God and his divine spirit pervaded the entire universe – both animate and inanimate. It is in the thought of God that the universe exists, and its life in God’s thought. Life in every flower bud, insect and the mossy stone in the hill side was a part of the divine life. The faith of divine spirit present both in nature and man is expressed mystically by Wordsworth in “Tintern Abby” where he says:

And I have felt/A presence that disturbs me with the joy /of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime/of something far more deeply interfused,/whose dwelling is the light of the setting sun,/and the round ocean, and the living air, and the blue sky, and the mind of man.⁹

It was because of the presence of one spirit permeating through all the objects of nature and human life. There could be communion between human life and life of nature. There could be a healthy understanding and mutual dependence. Between the spirit in nature and the mind of man there is a pre-arranged harmony. It was because of this harmony between man and nature that nature could teach and educate human beings. He had a belief that each object of nature had a life of its own, and this belief of the poet found expression in the following lines:

And Tis my faith that every flower/Enjoys the air it breaths and/The budding twigs spread out their fan /To catch the breezy air./ I must think, do all I can/That there was pleasure there.¹⁰

This aspect of Wordsworth’s mysticism has been very beautifully presented by Stopped A. Brooke as “The world according to Wordsworth was a world of loving and active friendship. Ev-

ery flower and closed, every stream and hill, the stars and the birds that lived among them, had each their own life and rejoiced in communicating all they had of character and love to one another". Like Blake, Wordsworth is a great poet of child-life. His interest in child-life is evident in poems like "We are Seven", "There was a Boy", "The Idiot Boy", "The Immortality Ode", The Prelude Books I and II, "Lucy Gray", and "The Cuckoo Poem" after poem describes the joy that Wordsworth found in child-life fill he burt out in lyrical raptures in "It is a Beauteous Evening", calm and free. Dear child! Dear girl! That Walkest with me here, /if thou appear untouched by solemn thought, /The nature is not therefore less divine:/Thou least in Araham's bosom all the year.¹¹

These are the different aspects of Wordsworth as a mystic poet. Caroline F.E. Spurgeon has very beautifully summed up the entire position of Wordsworth as a mystic poet in the following words: "Wordsworth was not only a poet, he was also a seer and a mystic and a practical psychologist with an amazingly subtle mind and an unusual capacity for feeling. He knew it and felt it, and if transformed the whole of the existence for him. The greatest contribution of Wordsworth to the poetry of nature is his unqualified pantheism. He believes that God shines through all the objects of nature, investing them with a celestial light, a light that never was an sea or land. He finds him in the shining of the stars; he marks him in the flowering of the fields. This immanence of God in nature, gives him mystic visions. Nature is a revolution and Wordsworth is the prophet. Wordsworth came to believe that beneath the matter of universe there was a soul, a living principle, acting, even thinking. It may be living, at least, speaking to him, communicating itself to him: "In all things, in all natures, in the stars, / This active principle abides, from link to link, / it circulates the soul of all the worlds". Wordsworth believed that there is a divine spirit pervading all the objects of nature. This belief in a divine spirit pervading all the objects of nature is called pantheism. Wordsworth loves all objects

of nature; but he is concerned for less with the sensuous manifestations that delight most of the poets of nature than with the spiritual that he finds underlying there manifestations. The divinization of nature, which began in the modern world at the Renaissance and proceeded during the eighteenth century culminates for English literature in Wordsworth. "It was Wordsworth's aim as a poet to seek for beauty in meadow, woodland and the mountain top, and to interpret this beauty in spiritual teems".¹²

Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Shelley, were all poets of nature, but in different way. "Coleridge sympathizing as he does intellectually with his friends transcendentalism, is far more readily influenced by the multifold sensuous appeal of nature, while Byron and Keats delight with a Frankly Pagan joy in landscape waterscape, and cloudscape and are content to worship the goddess not to consult the crack".¹³ Like other poets and philosophers with a religious determination to find design, order, and harmony everywhere in the universe, and to ignore everything that seems to contradict this providential interpretation. It was inevitable that Wordsworth should find that nature is 'kind' and kindly, that is fostering nature; holy nature, and that it teaches a 'lesson deep of love'. In Wordsworth the conviction of the universal presence of love in nature is equally characteristics of his working in phases as distinct from one another as those of The Excursion and Lyrical Ballads.

Love, now a universal birth,/From heart to heart is stealing/From earth to man, from man to earth:/It is the lour of feeling./One moment now may give us more/Than years of toiling reason:/Our minds shall drink at every part/The spirit of the reason.¹⁴ Since the individual mind and the external world are exquisitely fitted to each other, communion between the two is possible. But his communion is possible only when the soul of man is in harmony with the soul of nature. In his poetry Wordsworth shows how human beings, who are separated from all that in everyday humanity is disturbing or distressing. In "The Thorn", the

finest passage is that in which the tragic figure comes nearest to union with the elements: "And she is known to every star / And every wind that blows."¹⁵ The shepherd in Book VIII of *The Prelude*, seen against a mountain background, is "Man / Ennobled outwardly before my sight"¹⁶ The 'pure spirit' and 'best power' of things lie in their capacity for entering consciousness, when they pass from the macrocosms of their primordial existence into the microcosms of finite thought?

How exquisitely the individual mind/(And the progressive powers perhaps no less /of the whole species) to the external world /Is fitted: - and how exquisitely, too /Theme this but little heard of among men. /The external world is fitted to the mind; /And the creation (by no lower name/can it be called) which they with blended might accomplish.¹⁷

Thus nature's healing power, which for some may be merely outward doctrine, was for him a fact of experience, which glows through "Tintern Abbey" and much of his best poetry, can be caught by any reader, without reference to the ethical and philosophical theories which Wordsworth evolved from it.¹⁸ Like Wordsworth, Robert Frost is often called a nature poet because he depicts aspects of nature accurately. We often get the actual tone of the country dweller in Frost's poems. However, he is not interested in nature for itself. Critic like Robert Langbaum admires Frost that he has the capability to split the objects of nature in poetry in a vivid manner.

The use of the Frostian treatment of nature may be arbitrary but it has to be acknowledged that Frost's poetry is a living tribute to his capacity for minute observation and accurate description Frost derives philosophic note on the question of earth, life and death. Like Wordsworth, he is also a humanistic poet. "I would like to get away from earth a while / I don't know where its' likely to go better / / Earth's the right place for love."¹⁹ In many great poems, Frost philosophies about nature and discusses the question of man's relation to nature. His approach to nature depends on his mood. William Wordsworth always admires, or worships nature. Sometimes he finds no benevolent design in nature. If there is a design, it is the design of darkness and wanton destruction. He says in the sonnet design. **I found a dimpled spider, fat and white/On a white heal-all, holding up a moth/What but design of darkness to appall/If design govern a thing so small.**²⁰ Lionel Trilling talks of him as a terrifying poet on the basis of this poem which presents the horrors and the terrors of the modern world. Frost receives the teaching of nature out of contradiction, mental conflicts, mystery and uncertainty. So unlike Wordsworth, Frost does not find Spirit in the woods nor he is conscious of the healing touch of nature. Man is a separate entity who for his survival must study nature in all her aspects, and adjust himself accordingly. Frost's approach is not simple but critical and serious. He would not be carried away by such slogans as Back to Nature.

REFERENCES

1. William Wordsworth, "The Table Turned", William Wordsworth Selected Poems, ed. Walford Davies (London: Dent, 1975) 21-24.
2. Graham Hough, *The Romantic Poets* (London: Arrow Books Ltd) 49.
3. William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, William Wordsworth Selected Poems, ed. Walford Davies (London: Dent, 1975).
4. Joseph Warren Beach, *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth Century English Poetry* (New York: Russell, 1966) 157.
5. William Wordsworth, *The Recluse*, William Wordsworth Selected Poetry, ed. Walford Davies (London: Dent, 1975) 52-55.
6. Herbert Read, *Wordsworth* (London: Faber, 1949) 126-27.
7. William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey", William Wordsworth Selected Poetry, ed. Stephen Gill and Duncan (New York: O.U.P., 1994) 78-82.
8. "Tintern Abbey".
9. "Tintern Abbey", 95-101.
10. William Wordsworth, "Lines Written in Early Spring", William Wordsworth Selected Poems, ed. Walford Davis (London: Dent, 1975) 11-20.
11. William Wordsworth, "It is a Beauteous Evening", William Wordsworth Selected Poems, ed. Walford Davis (London: Dent, 1975) 9-12.
12. Arthur Compton Rickett, *A History of English Literature* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1963) 305.
13. Arthur Compton Rickett, *A History of English Literature* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1963), 309.
14. William Wordsworth, "To My Sister", William Wordsworth Selected Poems, ed. Walford Davis (London: Dent, 1975) 23-26.
15. William Wordsworth, "The Thorn", William Wordsworth Selected Poems, ed. Walford Davis (London: Dent, 1975) 69-70.
16. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude Book VIII*, William Wordsworth Selected Poetry, ed. Stephen Gill (New York: O.U.P., 1994).
17. William Wordsworth, *The Recluse*, William Wordsworth Selected Poetry, ed. Walford Davies (London: Dent, 1975) 63-70.
18. Basil Willy, *The Sixteenth Century Background* (London: Chatto and Wind, 1950) 283.
19. Robert Frost, "Birches", Robert Frost Selected Poems, n.p. (London: n.p., N.Pag.).
20. Robert Frost, "Design", Robert Frost Selected Poems, n.p. (London: n.p., N.Pag.).