

William Wordsworth as Philosophical Escapist: A Critical Evaluation

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William Wordsworth

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Abstract

William Wordsworth was a prolific voluminous writer and few poets stand in comparison to him. He is far more than a member of any movement; through his supreme poetic expression of some of the greatest English poets. As a profoundest interpreter of Nature in all poetry, his feeling goes beyond the mere physical and emotional delight of Chaucer and the Elizabethans. For him, Nature is direct manifestation of the Divine Power, which seems to him to be everywhere immanent in her.

The present paper deals with the tendencies of escapism in Wordsworth's poetry. In addition, it aims to prove that Wordsworth, under the tremendous influence of 'Pantheism', 'French Revolution', 'Rousseau's philosophy' and 'Godwin's outlook', took his tenets from the deep-rooted convictions of the day and gave them the authenticity of personal experience and vitality of the poetic expression. As a matter of fact, Wordsworth regarded himself with Coleridge as a philosophical poet and his philosophy according to his confessions, was hewn out of his own experiences and entitled him to the position of teacher of society which he was anxious to achieve and maintain.

Keywords: Wordsworth, Ecological, doctrine, emotion, escapism, humanity, imagination, intellect, Nature, philosophical, poetic expression, romanticism, sensibility, spontaneous, tendencies, transcendental

Romanticism

The term 'Romanticism' stands for several things together. It has been associated with the word 'romances' of the medieval period which had a certain feeling of remoteness and a far-away atmosphere particularly regarding the landscape: feats of daring and bravery; chivalry, belief in supernatural charms and magic; woman worship, etc. In Romantic era, even death was romantic; it was considered a beautiful land of dreams where one could escape the harshness, troubles and greyness of reality. When one sleeps, one dreams and in death one would be dreaming forever, eternally united with Nature. In life, Romantic poets were sad, melancholic, disappointed, alienated, lonely, burdened with social injustices, and powerless against established social and moral norms, and the only comfort and sweetness they could get was sleep; dreams. Hence, originally the word "romantic" signified the qualities in these semi-historical cycles, such as, "far-fetched and opposed to fact."

A Major Romantic Poet

William Wordsworth was a major English Romantic poet who, with S. T. Coleridge, helped to launch the Romantic Age in English literature with their joint publication of Lyrical Ballads (1798). Literary historians consider Lyrical Ballads a seminal work in the ascent of

Romanticism and a harbinger of trends in the English poetry that followed it. The poetic principles discussed by Wordsworth in the 'Preface' to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* constitute "a key primary document of the Romantic era because they announce a revolution in critical notions about poetic language, poetic subject matter, and the role of the poet.¹

Poetic Career – Three Periods

Wordsworth's poetic career covers a period of more than sixty years. He was a prolific voluminous writer and few poets stand in comparison to him. He is far more than a member of any movement; through his supreme poetic expression of some of the greatest English poets. As a profoundest interpreter of Nature in all poetry, his feeling goes beyond the mere physical and emotional delight of Chaucer and the Elizabethans. For him, Nature is direct manifestation of the Divine Power, which seems to him to be everywhere immanent in her.

Wordsworth, more than any other great English poet, is a poet for mature and thoughtful appreciation. Various critics divide his poetical career curiously. For example, Harper divides it into three periods and Bateson into six. But the division of Herbert Read seems to be more reasonable. He divides Wordsworth's poetical career into three – the Early Period, the Period of Gloom, the Glorious Period and the Period of Decline.

Does a Poet React to Impression Immediately?

It is commonly observed that feelings tend to express itself in the speech or action. But the poet's feelings do not act in this way. According to Wordsworth, the poet, as a poet, does not react to an impression immediately. He allows it to sink into his mind along with the feelings which it has excited. When, later, the impression purged of accidents, is recalled, the original feeling, similarly purged, revives with it. This is what Wordsworth means when he says that poetry takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility. The poet is endowed with the ability to reconstruct an emotion to an eminent degree.

Wordsworth's Belief

What distinguishes Wordsworth from other poets is his firm belief that Nature is not merely a physical phenomenon, but a living entity. To him, Nature has not only life but feeling also. It is a living sentient being. Wordsworth goes even beyond that. To him, Nature is endowed not only with life and feeling, but also with will and purpose. He worshipped Nature, because he saw in all natural objects the indwelling spirit of the Supreme Being.² He brilliantly scribes to it all the attributes of humanity – life, feeling, thinking, and willing. Further, his mysticism is deeply rooted in his conception of Nature. For him, Nature has life and joy in herself; she is a manifestation of an active principle which has its noblest seat in the mind of man. His senses, through which he communicates with Nature, feed his soul. That is why Wordsworth is of strong opinion that Nature is the guardian of his heart and soul of all his moral being.

Tendencies of Escapism in Wordsworth's Poetry

Wordsworth's *The World is Too Much with Us* that speaks volumes about poetic philosophy, is a scathing attack on the gross materialism and consequent moral and spiritual decay of the people of his times. Wordsworth is pained to see people busy hoarding and squandering wealth and thus wasting their nobler and greater power. Moral elevation and spiritual enlightenment in man is possible only when he subjects himself to the chastening influence of Nature. So far escapism tendency is concerned, "The world is too much with us" not only characterizes the entire Escapist Movement but epitomizes the escapist tendencies in Wordsworth. He wanted to turn his back on a 'world' that offered three reasons for him to escape. He wanted to escape from the city, trammled by convention and commercialization, to Nature, free, glorious, luxuriant in its nobility: the voice, friend, nurse, mother, guide, solace of man. Secondly, Wordsworth craved to escape from man, depraved by vice and limitations, his higher faculties benighted by the effects of the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution and find surcease, and realization of his humanitarian ideals in nature's man, rejuvenated by Nature, blossoming to full fruition of all his powers under Nature's benign and chastening influence. Thirdly, Wordsworth wanted, in a personal ultimatum, to escape from his personal disillusionment to personal rehabilitation.

Moods of Escape

In moods of escape, it is evident that it is rather an intellectual than an emotional escape. It is an objective escape with a subjective purpose. Wordsworth would relieve himself, not so much of himself, as of those exterior circumstances which aggravate and disturb him.

The escapist tendencies evidenced in Wordsworth's poetry are of a philosophical and ethical tone. To arrive at this exposition, it would seem logical to consider first the exterior circumstances of the world at large from which Wordsworth escaped and the resulting expression in his poetry. Then his escape from man himself to Nature's man will be surveyed and commented. In both instances Wordsworth, escaping from a fallen world and a fallen man went to Nature, but with this difference: in the first instance, he sought in Nature idealized living conditions for society, as a whole, and in the second instance, he went to Nature for those personal, ethical and philosophical bases as surcease for his personal disappointments in man as a social, human being. The one escape was general; the other, particular. Finally, the third, takes in the other two and synthesizes them: Wordsworth seeing all his philosophy and his own personal 'self' in Nature. All this is a slow process, one mood dovetailing the other; no distinctive boundaries for anyone of them; yet each distinct, at some period in his life.

Noting then, Wordsworth's escape from commercialized society, he is not the first to rebel against its condition. Goldsmith in *The Deserted Village* regrets the passing of fair Auburn.

Lady Winchelsea in *A Nocturnal Reverie* after describing a nature bountiful night, continues:

“In such a night let me abroad remain
Till morning breaks and all's contused again;
Our cares, our toils, our clamours are reviewed,
Or pleasures, seldom reached, again pursued.”

(ll. 46-50)

Return to Nature

Grongar Hill of John Dyer is a typical poem of the return to Nature. Pre-eminently *The Seasons* by James Thomson glorify Nature. These, as it were, encourage Wordsworth to go to Nature. Hence, in the famous sonnet, *The World is too Much with Us*, an excellent piece of poetry, Wordsworth voices his escape:

“The World is too much with us, late and soon;
Getting and spending we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon.”

The poet is pained to see people busy hoarding and squandering wealth and thus wasting their nobler and greater powers.

Specifically, Wordsworth is dismayed at “the artificiality, the complexity, the patent fraud and wretched poverty, the contrasting conditions of rich and poor.”³ He escapes from a world of commercial competition because “it blinds him to the loveliness which he believes to exist in natural scenes.”⁴ His friend, Robert Southey, expresses the mutual sentiment in *On a Landscape of Gaspar Poussin*.

Residence in Lake District

Wordsworth, by his very choice of residence in the Lake District, endorses his escape from city life. Gradually this district, too, becomes revolutionized and he foresees:

“Change wide, and deep, and silently performed
This Land shall witness; and as days roll on,
Earth's universal frame shall feel the effect;
Even till the smallest habitable rook,
Beaten by lonely billows, hear the songs
Of humanized society.”

(11. 384-389)

Personal Memoirs

Reading the personal memoirs at the head of Wordsworth's poems gives a further insight to the extent to which Wordsworth tried to escape from the commercial life of the English towns and to become attached to the simple rustic life and scenes of his own Lake District.⁴

The Prelude, philosophically recounts a journey of self-exploration by the end of which the poet is certain of his calling as a poet. As we study his creative process, we will see how he relates emotion, cognition and reflection in his concept of imagination. Moreover, the poem expresses the deep sense of joy and relief that Wordsworth felt after leaving the big city of London for Racedown where he and Dorothy came to settle in the autumn of 1795. Here in London he felt like “a discounted sojourner”. But in this valley of Racedown, the poet felt as free as a bird to settle down wherever he liked. He was then relieved of the burden of the artificial life in London. He could then shake off the depressing load of despair and dejection from his soul. Lofty ideas and exalted flights of imagination could crowd his mind.

“Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze,
A visitant that while it fans my cheek
Doth seem half-conscious of the joy it brings
From the green fields, and from yon azure sky.
Whate'er its mission, the soft breeze can come
To none more grateful than to me; escaped
From the vast city, where I long had pined
A discounted sojourner: now free,
Free as a bird to settle where I will”.

The Prelude, ll. 1-9

Impact of French Revolution

The great Revolution of France had its deep impact on Wordsworth's outlook on life, on Nature, and on society. As a contemporary of the French Revolution, Wordsworth was at first fascinated by its cry of “Equality, Fraternity and Liberty.” He dreamed that at last the Utopia

which he had been seeking in England in his escape from its factory system and consequent commercialization, had been realized in France.

With the failure and tragic close of the French Revolution Wordsworth “turned to philosophy, and, still trusting revolutionary theories, became an ardent disciple of William Godwin, admitting which reason could not prove and, in opposition to the attitude of his youth, toiled intent to anatomize the frame of social life.”⁵ The period of the influence of Godwin on Wordsworth may be dated between 1793 and 1797. Godwin's *Political Justice* gave him all he needed temporarily. The unexplored Utopia or democracy was the ideal to which Wordsworth fled....

“more ardent in that it was based on the belief in the original goodness and ultimate perfectibility of man and justified the most absolute optimism. For the great consummation to which all tends is nothing less than a perfected race, all base appetites crushed under man's feet, old age averted, and the immortality or a perfect body attained on earth, under the law or perfect reason.”⁶

Fascination with Death

Wordsworth's fascination with death, purporting a feel of his escapism, frequently shows up in his poetry. *The Lucy Poems*, for instance, are a series of poems about a young girl who may or may not have been a figment of Wordsworth's imagination, and who ultimately dies. Wordsworth looks at the event from several angles. In *She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways*, he focuses on the unexpectedness of her death, and the unpredictability of life and death in general. In *Three Years She Grew*, Wordsworth creates a fanciful rationale for her death: Nature became entranced by her and promised to give her an incredible life, but once all of her promises were fulfilled Lucy had to die. In *We are Seven*, Wordsworth looks at a young girl who had six siblings but now lives at home with only her mother, because two of her siblings have died and the others have moved away. The little girl seems not to understand death throughout the poem, but in the end the reader learns that she may have a clearer understanding than the speaker. In *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth is comforted by the thought that he will live on after his death, because his sister Dorothy will remember him lovingly.

Wordsworth's Philosophical Thoughts in Perspectives of His Escapism

Wordsworth's only means of escape from the blighted life of the past is nature - not yet the deep philosophy of nature - but the Arcadian wilderness. The Lake District again proves a balm. He becomes engrossed in the simple life and simple emotions of the rural characters. "Wordsworth believes that the Lake Country shepherds are on the whole the happiest and best of men. Although by no means perfect, they are the least corrupted people known, and their virtues show what nature intended man to be."⁷

It is easy to associate Wordsworth with joy and happiness of human destiny. But, in reality, he was fully conscious of the "cloud of human destiny". For example, in *Tintern Abbey*, he speaks of the "still sad music of humanity" which colours the mature mind and makes Nature all the more significant. In the *Immortality Ode*, again we read of the "soothing thoughts that spring out of human suffering". Indeed, it is suffering that leads to the philosophic mind which finds meaning in the "meanest flowers that blows". In the *Elegiac Stanzas*, he welcomes the humanizing of his soul through distress; it is suffering that supplies fortitude and patient cheer. In *The Thorn*, the anguish of the forsaken woman is presented vividly and metaphorically.

"To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears"
Ode on the Intimations of Immortality

The philosophical content of *The Prelude* is made up largely of Wordsworth's doctrine of Nature, which is outlined and repeated in other poems also – especially in the *Tintern Abbey* and *Lucy's Education of Nature*. It has been rightly pointed out the Wordsworthian philosophy of Nature, with its emphasis upon the divinity of Nature, Nature's holy plan, the one life in the Universe and in Man, the joy in the widest commonality spread and Nature as a source of wisdom and moral health, etc., was derived from the current speculations of the day, to which poets, philosophers and scientists had contributed alike. Wordsworth took these tenets from the deep-rooted convictions of the day and gave them the authenticity of personal experience and vitality of the poetic expression. As a matter of fact, Wordsworth regarded himself with Coleridge as a philosophical poet and his philosophy according to his confessions, was hewn out

of his own experiences and entitled him to the position of teacher of society which he was anxious to achieve and maintain.

As regards the poem *Michael* is concerned, it is highly packed with philosophical notions. The tragic end of the old shepherd and his wife leaves an impression of man's helplessness at the hands of worldly circumstances. This universe, in which all life is subjected to fixed laws which must sooner or later bring about its end, is one in which it is not easy for man to live. Here in this specific narration lies the poet's sense of escapism.

Pastoral Doctrine – Rousseau's Influence

This pastoral doctrine of Wordsworth's takes direct reference from a philosopher of the age, who did much in determining Wordsworth's escape to Nature and his glorifying of its inhabitants, and that is Rousseau. His cry was "Back to Nature." He "emphasized the natural gifts of man, instinct, intuition, insight, with special stress on the inherent goodness of children."8

Man is good of himself and under Nature's direct teaching will live most happily and develop most completely. Nature will respond to all the needs of Man. Wordsworth glorified this in his escape to Nature, as a civilization all its own and superior to all others.

Now again in his escape from man, marred by intellectual inhibitions, to man, rejuvenated by nature's direct teaching, Wordsworth follows Rousseau's doctrine. There is further evidence of this in his great works. In *The Excursion*, Wanderer and Solitary are the important characters who teach the only worthwhile knowledge. The Prelude, the finest fruit of Wordsworth's great creative period and The Recluse, an ambitious philosophic poem abound in Nature's characters. Their moral code is simpler: Close to Nature they imbibe the only true philosophy of life. Under the influence of Rousseau, he prefers the rustic to the urban. Hence, Wordsworth resolves:

"Of these (the rustics) said I, shall be my song;
If future years mature me for the task,

Will I record the praises, making verse
Deal boldly with substantial things. My theme
No other than the very heart of man.”⁹

Further, following of Rousseau's doctrine as a means of escape is advanced in his adherence to the idea of “inherent goodness of children.” Wordsworth glorified childhood in his Lucy poems. He gives to the escape into childhood a personal connotation as evidenced in Influence of Natural Objects, There Was A Boy, Nutting, The Tables Turned, Book I of Prelude, and superbly, the famous Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood. The essence of this escape was that it offered a solution to the restless search within him in the idea of pre-existence. Wordsworth believes we have fallen from a superior state or condition and try to escape to that. The closest he can come to it is by recollection of his former greatness. Wordsworth recollects that in his childhood:

“such a holy calm
Would overspread my soul, that bodily eyes
Were utterly forgotten, and what I saw
Appeared like something in myself, a dream,
A prospect of the mind.”¹⁰

Seeking the glory and the dream, he cannot reconcile himself to present reality. He describes the “truths that wake to perish never.” The last lines of the *Ode*, critics indicate as reminiscent of Rousseau, and at the same time indicative of the naturalistic mysticism of Wordsworth:

“To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.”

Nature a Perennial Source of Joy

Wordsworth is evidently a poet of joy. He finds Nature a perennial source of joy. But with the gradual development of his sensibilities, his undiluted sense of joy began to hear the

‘still sad music of humanity’. But he would not feel sad in his heart for this reason. Rather he would dispel his gloom by sharing the joys of Nature.

“Not without hope we suffer and we mourn.”

Elegiac Stanzas, l.59

Final Conviction

Rapidly, all philosophy, past and present, was failing him, and ultimately he comes to rest in the conviction that:

“Our destiny, our nature and our home

Is with infinitude and only there:

With hope it is, hope that can never die,

Effort and expectation and desire,

And something evermore about to be.”

The Prelude (Bk. VI, ll 604-608)

Conclusion

Wordsworth himself remarks that he wanted to get away from the classical tendencies of the previous age. The Neo-classicists considered poetry the product of head rather than heart. But Wordsworth changed the whole concept. To him, the clear springs of poetry must flow freely and spontaneously – it cannot be made to flow through artificiality laid pipes. Secondly, poetry is a matter of feelings, powerful feelings. It is generated in the heart not in the mind; it is never an intellectual process. The glorious outburst of imaginative work is the result. His very definition of poetry: “A spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” is escapist. He is escaping from the rigidity of classical form, Spenserian stanza, the couplet, use of mythology and artificial modes of expressing sentiment which were far from spontaneous. Not only feeling but powerful feeling is a far cry from the cold reasoning of the Augustan period. The contemplation of Nature alone for Wordsworth was the means of arousing feelings in him. As has been before intimated, his return to Nature was an escape from the tawdriness of the town, “from the pressure of the ordinary - a mode of deliverance from the dead weight of routine.” Further than that, he indulges in nature until it becomes a personality for him, a Transcendental being, almost his God.

In conclusion, Wordsworth can be adequately discussed only in his escape from reality into Nature and the philosophy he built up as a result. The past, neither of the Middle Ages, nor of classical antiquity, held any charm for him. His was a different, personal, egotistic past. To trace Wordsworth's escapism into nature has been the burden of this chapter. "He, who escaping through passionate love of Nature from self, looks straight into Nature and sees her as she is, beholds God not only as a personal, but as impersonal, not only as a human God, but as far beyond humanity."¹¹ It is to this that Wordsworth develops as an escapist.

Relevance of this Research Paper in the Present World Scenarios

In *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*, Karl Kroeber vehemently argues that British Romantic Poetry was "the first literature to anticipate contemporary biological conceptions and that poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats were proto-ecological in their intellectual orientation"¹² (Kroeber: 2). They often seek to address perennial questions concerning the relationship between mankind and the natural world which has become one of the most important terrains for the development ecological criticism. Everybody seems to be concerned at the impending doom of our planetary ecosystem due to an array of man caused environmental hazards on an unprecedented scale as never before.

What is alarming that despite widespread awareness of these shocking environmental problems no effective remedial action is in sight. The poetry of Wordsworth which has been critically discussed and probed in this paper, will be a positive step towards the solution of this turbulent global problem because, "the business of literature is to work upon consciousness"¹³ (Bate, 2000: 23). Hence the Wordsworth's poetry assumes utmost significance in the context of generating awareness for Environment, promoting love for Nature, preserving of natural resources for all species on the earth.

In addition, our society is today fast losing social values, moral values and human values in the name of so-called progress and as consequences, prejudices, differences, selfishness, and other social evils are challenging our real mottos of life. However, in the present social set up

man must be true to his own impulses and desires, but not greedy. He should be available to help his fellow man irrespective of any sort of discriminations. He should be in constant communion with humanity and then with himself analytically. This means that genuine humanity is in big demand everywhere, and we need to study the Romantic poetry in this perspective too. For example, one of Wordsworth's greatest worries is the descent of humanity. As man moves further and further away from humanity he seems to be losing more and more of his soul. Often when Wordsworth is in nature he is saddened because he is forced to think about the people trapped in cities, unable or unwilling to commune with nature. In London, 1802, for instance, Wordsworth complains that man's morals are in a state of constant decline, but the morals he is talking about have more to do with following the natural process of life – being free and powerful, not tied down by city living or common thoughts. Wordsworth symbolically makes a strong plea to the poet John Milton to return and teach humanity how to regain the mortality and virtue it once had. The greater portion of Wordsworth's poetry is ethical; it teaches moral lessons. Wordsworth himself said, "I want to be considered as a teacher or nothing else". Wordsworth's democratic impulse, influenced by the French Revolution, led him to become a poet of man, or rather a common man. The men and women of his poems are not kings, queens, princes or aristocratic men. They are ordinary simple folk like the Cumberland beggar, the leech-gatherer, the solitary reaper, or the forsaken village girl. The reading of such men or women and their toiling and struggling aspects of life lead us towards nursing the sympathetic feelings for common people which they deserve in our present democratic set ups of society.

The power of Wordsworth's poetry derives from the intensity and sincerity of his spiritual experience. What comes from the heart goes to the heart. He felt deeply but the emotion was calm and equable. It was not disturbing and turbulent passion. Accordingly, we are moved deeply, but it is a feeling of calm pleasure. The aspects of his teaching are – simple living and high thinking – a return to naturalness and simplicity, love of one's fellows, faith in divine Providence, control of one's desires and hopes, and obedience of divine law – the eternal law of Duty that preserves 'the stars from wrong' and keeps "the most ancient heavens fresh and strong" (Ode to Duty).

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