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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE POETIC DOCTRINE AND NARRATIVE SKILL AS EMPLOYED BY WILLIAM WORDSWORTH IN HIS NARRATIVE POETRY: AN APPRAISAL

Dr. Chelliah, S.

Professor, Head & Chairperson, School of English and Foreign Languages, Department of English & Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai – 625 021. India

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ABSTRACT

This paper neatly picturizes the narrative skill and poetic doctrine projected through Wordsworth's narrative poetry. For, Wordsworth poetic composition was a primary mode of expression, his poetry avoided high-flour language however his poetry is best characterized by its strong affinity with Nature and his purpose was to make the incidents of common life interesting by tracing them all in his poetic creations. Over the course of a prolific poetic career his fame stands out rather obviously, his poetry is simple which intends to arouse the ordinary man's sympathy for his fellow men and creatures.

Key words:

Meditative observation, physiognomic
Expression, ballad, pastoral narrative,
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INTRODUCTION

William Wordsworth, one of the greatest poets of England, was well-known as a writer of philosophical poems. He has many claims to greatness. The cause of the greatness of Wordsworth's poetry is simple, and may be told quite simply. "Wordsworth's poetry is great because of the extraordinary power with which Wordsworth feels the joy offered to us in nature, the joy offered to us in the simple primary affections and duties; and because of the extraordinary power with which in case after case, he shows us this joy and renders it so as to make us share it" (Arnold 153). How great was the need for Wordsworth's lifelong crusade against artificial poetic diction is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that even he himself did not wholly free himself from the stilted phrases of the so-called classical school. Wordsworth was indebted to Burns in many ways; and a simple style, relying for effect solely on the weight and force of that which with entire fidelity it utters, Burns could show him:

"And keenly felt the friendly glow
And softer flame;
But thoughtless follies laid down low
And stain'd his name"

Every reader will be conscious of a likeness here to Wordsworth.

Still Wordsworth's use of a Burns-like simple style has something unique and unmatched. Matthew Arnold writes: "Nature herself seems, I say, to take the pen out of his hand, and to write for him with her own bare, sheer, penetrating power. This arises from the profound sincerity with which Wordsworth feels his subject and also from the profoundly sincere and natural character of his subject itself. He can and will treat such a subject with nothing but the most pain, first-hand, almost austere naturalness. His expression may often be called bald, as for instance, in the poem of *Resolution and Independence*: but it is bald as the bare mountain tops are bald, with a baldness which is full of grandeur" (PP 158-59). No doubt, he is an excellent poet-critic and philosopher-cum-moralist. His first excellence as a poet is an austere purity of language both grammatically and logically. In his poetry, there is a perfect appropriateness of the words to the meaning. In this connection, Coleridge observes: "I am far however from denying that we have poets whose general style possesses the same excellence, as Mr. Moore, Lord Byron, Mr. Bowles, and in all his later and more important works, our laurel-honouring Laureate. But there are none, in whose works, I do not appear to myself to find more exceptions than in those of Wordsworth" (Read 113). Another characteristic excellence of Wordsworth's poetry is a correspondent weight and sanity of the thoughts and sentiments, won not from books but from the poet's own meditative observation. His thoughts and sentiments are fresh and have the dew upon them. Yet another characteristic excellence of Wordsworth's poetry is 'the sinewy strength and originality of single lines and paragraphs – the frequent curious felicitous of his diction'. In order to illustrate this point, the following lines are worth quoting here:

*Corresponding author: Dr. Chelliah, S.,
Professor, Head & Chairperson, School of English and Foreign Languages,
Department of English & Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj
University, Madurai – 625 021. India.

“The river glideth at his own sweet will”
 (Westminster Bridge)
 “The soul was like a star and dwelt apart”
 (London 1802)
 “The child is Father of the Man”
 (The Rainbow)
 “The still sad music of humanity”
 (Tintern Abbey)

Another important sovereign quality of Wordsworth is ‘the perfect truth of nature in his images and descriptions, as taken immediately from nature, and proving a long and genial intimacy with the very spirit which gives the physiognomic expression to all the works of nature. The description of skating in *The Prelude Book-I* is a fine example of it:

“So through the darkness and the cold we flew,
 And not a voice was idle: with the din
 Meanwhile the precipices rang aloud;
 The leafless trees and every icy crag
 Tinkled like iron; while the distant hills
 Into the tumult sent an alien sound
 of melancholy, not unnoticed, while the stars
 Eastward were sparking clear and in the West
 The orange sky of evening died away”.

One important feature is that Wordsworth has the gift of imagination in the highest and strictest sense of the word. In imaginative powers, he stands nearest of all modern writers to Shakespeare and Milton; and yet in a kind perfectly unborrowed and his own. The following passage from the poem on the ‘Yew Trees’ may be cited as most obviously manifesting this faculty:

“ But worthier still of note
 Are those fraternal four of Borrow dale,
 Joined in one solemn and capacious grove:
 Huge trunks! – and each particular trunk
 a grow of intertwined fibres serpentine
 Up-coiling and inveterately convolved –
 Not uninformed with phantasy, and looks
 That threaten the profane; - a pillared shade,
 Upon whose grassless floor of red-brown hue,
 By sheddings from the pinal umbrage tinged
 Perennially – beneath whose sable roof
 Of boughs, as if for festal purpose decked
 with un rejoicing berries, ghostly shapes
 may meet at noontide – fear and trembling hope,
 Silence and foresight – death, the Skeleton,
 And Time, the shadow – there to celebrate
 As in a natural temple scattered o’er
 with altars undisturbed of mossy stone
 united worship; or in mute repose
 To lie and listen to the mountain flood
 Murmuring from Glaramara’s in most coves.”

Wordsworth was primarily concerned with the emotional, imaginative and spiritual forces within the mind of men. His own vitalisation, the “impulses of deeper birth” came to him in the country; Nature was the means, not the end. For others, ‘renovation’ may come from religion or poetry or music; but in many the moral force is renewed through “the beautiful and permanent forms of Nature”. However, the most important fallacy in Wordsworth’s Nature philosophy lies in the assumption that all people are open to restorative natural

influences which inspire lofty thoughts and disclose the primal duties. His philosophy of human life rests upon his basic conception that man is not apart from Nature but is the very “life of her life”. Burns and the early poets of the Romantic Revival began the good work of showing interest in common life; and Wordsworth continued in *Michael, The Solitary Reaper, To a Highland Girl, Stepping Westward* and *The Excursion*. Joy and sorrow not of princes or heroes but “in widest commonality spread are his themes; and the hidden purpose of many of his poems is to show that the keynote of all life is happiness to be won by work and patience. A careful study of Wordsworth’s Nature – description shows that his eye and ear were very sensitive. In this connection, Arthur Compton – Rickett observes: “As the poet of the eye, he has many peers, and in richness of effect and subtlety of appeal must yield the palm to a crowd of singers less great than himself; but when it comes to the symbolism of sound, Wordsworth stands supreme”. No other poet could have written thus:

“A voice so thrilling ne’er was heard
 In spring time from the cuckoo – bird,
 Breaking the silence of the seas
 Among the farthest Hebrides”.

His faith that every object of Nature is a sentient being is firmly expressed in “Lines written in Early Spring” as;

“And’t is my faith that every flower
 Enjoys the air it breathes”.

To reveal the invisible impulses at work behind the outward beauty of Nature was the mission of Wordsworth’s life. As Stopford Broke puts it, “He (Wordsworth) conceived, as a poet, that Nature was alive. It had, he imagined, one living soul which, entering into flower, stream, or mountain, gave them each a soul of their own” (24).

In the poem “The Excursion”, he reminds us;
 “. that man by Nature lies
 Bedded for good and evil in a gulf
 Fearly fully low”

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” (Beach 157). The main theme of Wordsworth’s poems of incidents in human life is love, the workings of love, its power to inflict the deepest wounds and to heal the most irreparable. Love is the, theme of poems such as Goody ‘Blake and Harry Gill’, ‘Simon Lee’, ‘The Thorn’, ‘The Last of the Flock’, ‘The Mad Mother’, ‘The Idiot Boy’ and ‘The Complaint’ of a Forsaken Indian Woman’. Love not as passion in the narrow sense of the word but passionate affection, it’s wily subtleties and reflexes’, this is what Wordsworth is in quest of in later and finer poems like ‘Michael’, ‘The Margaret’, ‘The Affliction of Margaret’, ‘Ruth’, ‘The Happy Warrior’, ‘The White Doe of Rylstone’. What is law in the inanimate world is in the free nature of man duty and duty is ultimately the law of love:

“Flowers laugh before thee in their beds
 And fragrance in thy footing treats;
 Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong;
 And the most ancient heavens through
 thee are fresh and strong”.

Wordsworth had “never any wish” to escape from the common places of life. He accepted them all, and viewed them with a calmness and a courage that could never be shaken” (Smit 13). It is quite known that Wordsworth had an epic mission. His highest ambition was to compose that great poem, ‘The Recluse’, which was to be the monumental work of his life. It is also known that ‘The Prelude’ was just to be the introduction to that great poem. But still it must be accepted “that *The Prelude* derives its energy and inspiration, its dignity and its religious aura from that larger epic mission towards which it was to lead” (P35). Then Milton was Wordsworth’s poet – hero and it was but natural for a ‘dedicated spirit’ else sinning greatly ‘to take his epic task with high seriousness. Milton wrote an epic about man’s moral rather than his military history and Wordsworth in turn claims to find heroic argument in man’s personal history:

‘A tale from my own heart, more near akin
To my own passion and habitual thoughts”.

“It we are ready to grant ‘*The Prelude*’ the other three epic qualities which Tilyard distinguishes – high seriousness, sustained exercise of the will, and even amplitude and breath, we are hard put to think of ‘*The Prelude*’, for all its declamatory movements, as a spokesman for its age: the egotistical sublime must by its very nature rejected such demands” (36). In his practice of poetry, Wordsworth made it a rule for himself not to write on any subject just at the time of observation or experience, but to postpone it to some future time. He would not write upon it until it had been acted upon by his imagination. He writes in *The Prelude*, Book I:

“Thus far, O Friend did I, not used to make
A present joy the matter of a song,
Pour forth that day my soul in measures strains
That would not be forgotten, and are here
Recorded” (Lines 46-50).

In a way, he may even be called a poet gifted with the poetic skill for writing narrative poems. A narrative poem tells a story in a simple and spiritual manner. Ballads, heroic poetry and epics are the different forms of narrative poetry. The ballad is probably the simplest form of narrative poetry. The ballad is probably the simplest form of narrative poetry and the epic being the most complicated. Yet the two are closely related. “The difference between them is like the difference two sisters both born in the same quiet country place. One of them has stayed there, kept all the charm of her natural simplicity, while the other has gone to the big city to find sophistication and money for expensive clothes” (Rees 25). Epic is a long poem. Because it is long, the poet has plenty of time for digressions and descriptions. Homer makes a description of the armour of Achilles which runs to several pages and Milton following Homer and Virgil does the same in describing the shield and spear of Satan. Epic poetry is marked by what has been called its high-seriousness. Milton’s *Paradise Lost* can be compared with almost all the epics of Europe. After Milton, the literary epic began to die not only in England but also in Europe. The readers at present prefer simpler and more direct narrative poetry.

Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is the most important group of narrative poems ever written in England. ‘*The Prologue*’, which is the most important part of the book describes Chaucer’s pilgrimage to Canterbury and his meeting with

twenty-nine people at an inn called ‘Tabard’. All of them were making the same journey and the host at the inn suggested that they should make the trip more interesting by narrating stories. Each traveler was asked to narrate two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. This would have come to one hundred and twenty stories. So it is not surprising that Chaucer had not the time to finish the work. Now it seems that long and carefully worked narrative poems as the epic which Milton inherited from Virgil and other great European poets are out of date and the narrative poems have taken their place instead. The nineteenth century was the most productive in the whole history of English literature from the point of view of narrative poetry. Wordsworth wrote many narrative poems, of which ‘Michael’ is perhaps the best. ‘The Idiot Boy’, ‘Laodamia’, ‘Lucy Gray’, ‘Simon Lee’, ‘the old Huntsman’, ‘The Thorn’ and ‘The Ruined Cottage’ are the other narrative poems. ‘Michael’ is perhaps the story of an old shepherd in the Lake District, where Wordsworth spent most of his life. It is a powerful and tragic poem written in a simple and direct style, which Wordsworth generally favoured in poetry. The poem is finely articulated. “The magnificent opening puts the incident in a two-fold perspective that of Wordsworth’s own mind and also of the Shareable, still accessible Westmoreland, where in fact it all took place” (Danby 23). The readers are first introduced to Michael himself. The story begins and ends with him:

“Michael was his name;
An old man, stout of heart, and strong of limb,
His bodily frame had been from youth to age
of an unusual strength; his mind was keen,
Intense, and frugal, apt for all affairs,
And in his shepherd’s calling he was prompt
And watchful more than ordinary man” (Lines 40- 46)

The poem is a pastoral narrative dealing with an old shepherd, eight years of age, his aged wife and the only child of their age, their son Luke. In spite of his old age, the shepherd led a very industrious life, but misfortune came to him as he had stood surety for a nephew. When the latter fell, the blow descended on Michael. The responsibility of paying the debt was now on him. His sentimental feeling prevented him from selling his land to make up the situation. So he sent his son Luke to town to make a fortune to repair the loss. The son, who would have been a prop to him at the time of misfortune, had only doubled his mental agony. He fell into bad ways of life and had to escape across the sea. All the plans Michael had built up were like lines drawn in water. With the disappearance of his son, Michael was never able to complete the sheepfold, which Michael had been building. Wordsworth had some original of Michael in his mind in writing the poem. He himself had confessed that the narrative was based upon the story of a family to whom Dove cottage had belonged many years before. He connected the main incidents with the remains of a ruined sheep-fold in the valley of Greenhead Ghyll, about a mile and a half beyond Dove cottage. The passions of Michael’s life to hand down his patrimonial fields unencumbered to his successor might have been found in many of the local free-holders or statesmen of Wordsworth’s own time. The poem is remarkable as an expression of the poet’s deep sympathy for the industry and virtue of the English shepherd’s life. In the words of W.R. Goodman, “The theme of the poem, if abstracted from its environment is a father’s love for his own just as ‘The Affliction of Margaret deals with

the love of a mother for her son and 'The Brothers' that of a brother for a brother" (P 65). The character of Michael is one of those characters who were very near to Wordsworth's heart and the poet has described the story with such an understanding and sympathy that no reader can remain untouched by its pathos. The style of Michael keeps close to 'the language really used by man'. Yet at the same time, the dangers to which simplicity is liable are avoided. The characters are simple shepherds of Cumberland and the language also comes closest to the spoken speech. It is this simplicity of language which Matthew Arnold admired so much. The poem 'Michael' is to be admired for the bare simplicity of its style. It is the surest achievement of Wordsworth's maturity as artist and man. The setting at the beginning of the poem, which is typical to Wordsworth is found in this poem also. The end is in its beginning;

"If from the public way you turn you steps
up the tumultuous brook of Greenland Ghill,
You will suppose that with an upright path
Your feet must struggle; in such bold ascent
The pastoral mountains front you, face to face.
But, courage! for around that boisterous brook
The mountain shave all opened out themselves,
And made a hidden valley of their own.
No habitation can be seen; but they
who journey thither find themselves alone.
With a few sheep, with rocks and stones, and kites
That overhead are sailing in the sky" (Michael Lines: 1-12)

Michael is neither a verbose and concocted figment of imagination nor a romantic wonderland for lovers and beloveds to pay hide and seek under the rose. '*Michael*' is a poetic mirror within nature's frame of reality; it is a poem of those imaginative links that are permanently linked with the unsophisticated life of the poor and simple rustics of the country side. '*Michael*' is neither the dazzling glare of multi-storeyed costless nor the spontaneous outburst of a melancholy heart. It is a bubble of sympathy in the gurgling stream of sentiments chuckling on perennially between the banks of human love and human life. The next narrative poem which needs certain kind of description is '*Laodamia*'. It is Wordsworth's first poem based solely on classic myth and elaborated strictly in the classical manner. It also enjoys an added interest from the fact that it is the only poem of erotic love which Wordsworth has left to us. The theme of love between man and woman never found favour with Wordsworth and he fails to celebrate the erotic love even in this poem. The overpowering passion in *Laodamia* did not please Wordsworth, the moralist. She is punished for her strong passion. A Browning or a Shelley would have appreciated the very excess of *Laodamia*'s passion but Wordsworth could only condemn her for her rebellious passion. The poem opens with the grief-stricken *Laodamia* at the death of her husband, Protesilaus. She has sought the Gods to restore her dead husband to her sight. Her devout prayers and intense love for her husband more the Gods and her boon is granted, but Protesilans is to remain only for three hours and also warns her to accept the gift as it is to 'behold him face to face'. At the sight of Protesilans, *Laodamia* cries out in sheer joy and forgets the commands of the Gods and attempts to embrace 'the unsubstantial form of her husband'. Protesilans adjourns *Laodamia* to control rebellious passion,

" For the Gods approve
The depth and not the tumult of the soul;
A fervent, not ungovernable love" (*Laodamia* Lines 74-76)

But *Laodamia*'s passion is too strong and when Protesilans departs, she falls dead on the floor of the place. Thus, the worthy purpose of the poem 'to put passion in its place' is sanctified. *Laodamia* has some fine descriptive touches. The re-appearance of Protesilans is very vividly described by Wordsworth. *Laodamia* tries to clasp her lord, but she fails:

"But unsubstantial form eludes her grasp
As often as that eager grasp was made.
The phantom parts – but parts to re-unite,
And re-assume his place before her sight"

Likewise, Wordsworth shows his imaginative power in drawing a picture of the Lower world, where spirits live in Elysian bliss:

"Of all that is most beautiful – imaged there
In happier beauty: more pellucid streams,
An ampler ether, a diviner air,
And fields invested with purple gleams.
Climes which the sun, who sheds the brightest day,
Earth knows is all unworthy to survey".

The poet's descriptive quality reigns supreme. *Laodamia* is condemned, for she is, 'strong in love' too weak in reason', and 'too slow in self-government'. Love does aim at trivialities:

"Lean, by a mortal yearning, to ascend –
Seeking a higher object, Love was given,
Encouraged, sanctioned, chiefly for that end".

The stoic view imparts a lofty tone to the poem. Yet another narrative poem is '*The Idiot Boy*'. '*The Thorn*' and '*The Idiot Boy*' were Wordsworth's own favourites in the *Lyrical Ballads* volume. Wordsworth himself is the narrator and from the start of the poem, one is aware of the distinctive narrating voice and of the narrator's power to merge its own voice in that of the actors in the story as well as his capacity to remerge and regain the commenting distinctness when necessary. The merging of his voice with his neighbour's is all the easier because he has the same village language and the outlook that goes with it. '*The Idiot Boy*' is a comedy, a Wordsworthian comedy. "As M.H.Abram puts it, "The story has mock-epic features, a life and death issue: the last chance of success depending on the last person likely to succeed; mental conflict between mother-love and good neighbourliness; the anguished search and rescue of the reserver: finally the happy issue out of everyone's affections, Susan's included" (P 90). It is a comedy of passions. Wordsworth is the satirist of feeling in this poem. Betty's concern for Susan makes her send Johnny off to the doctor. When he doesn't return, fear for her son brings her back to the facts and dispels neighbourly concern. The same is repeated in the case of Susan also. Her mysterious illness vanishes as she frets more and more about the others. Finally she is cured of imagery illness by real emotional distress. '*The Idiot Boy*' has dual role. He cannot be responsible for his actions and it is his failure to fetch the doctor that is more effective than his mother's concern for her neighbor. That is the comic side. Where the idiot is concerned, Wordsworth is a realist;

“Of moon or stars he takes no head;
of such are in romances read” (Lines : 354-355)

That is why we are left with Johnny’s idiotic verse at the end
when he is asked how he spent his time,

“The cocks did crow to-whoop, to-whoop,
And the sun did shine so cold” (Lines 450-451)

Thus, Wordsworth, as in the case of other poems, in narrative
poems, has used the simple language of the rural areas falling
in tune with the doctrine that poetry ought to be written in the
simplest language of the common people.

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