

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: A CRITIQUE OF HUMANISM

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ABSTRACT

The present study is a humble attempt to study Wordsworth with reference to his attitude towards Humanism. It appears that he is critical towards the rationality-based forms of Humanism that generated industrialization and urbanization. Critics have highlighted his skepticism in viewing science. It is really very interesting to discover whether he is a critic of a particular kind of Humanism or Humanism as such. As his poetry reflects his vision of life, he is not anti humanist. Rather he is among the greatest humanist of all ages. His love for mankind is unquestionable. This study is inspired by the initial impressions that Wordsworth is dissatisfied with the narrow Humanism of the urban and industrialized England. He visualizes a broader form of human sympathies where the non-human universe is not sidelined for nothing. Throughout this paper, during the discussion of the poems, an attempt will be made to clarify how Wordsworth constantly expands the territory of his vision of Humanism. But this is done not without disagreeing with and distancing from the shortsighted practices and definitions of Humanism. His Humanism is well rooted in the material and ordinary existence of human life. But it, at different occasions, transcends these limits and merges with the eternal.

Key Words: Humanity, Romanticism, Philosophy, Asceticism

A writer is not an autonomous unit. He is open to all sorts of influences in society. He imbibes ideas and tastes from his surroundings. William Wordsworth is not an exception. The age of industrialization to which he belonged, is the shaping factor behind his sensibility. His likes and dislikes are determined by his individual attitude towards the processes of urbanization and industrialization. These larger processes in the social reality of England are the formative factors behind his mental makeup. The following description of England of 18th century may be useful in understanding the poetic sensibility of the writer, William J. Long comments on the scene of England of Wordsworth's time:

By her inventions in steel and machinery and by her monopoly of the carrying trade, England had become the workshop of the world. Her wealth had increased beyond the wildest dreams. But the unequal distribution of the wealth was a spectacle to make angels weep. The inventions of machinery at first threw thousands of skilled hand workers out of employment. In order to protect a few agriculturists, heavy duties were imposed on corn and wheat. The result was that bread rose to famine prices just when the labouring men had the least money to pay it. Fathers sent their wives and little children into the mines and factories. Sixteen hours labour would

hardly pay for the daily bread. There can be seen in every large city, riotous mobs made up chiefly of hungry men and women. (Long, 371)

This model of development is basically governed by a total reliance on rationality or mind. It is the scientific model of growth. Here, man as well as his rational powers is given the most important place. Thinkers of various orientations have linked the expansion of industrialization with the legitimacy that rational Humanism gained in the aftermath of Enlightenment. But Humanism has various meanings. It is a complex term. This term has gained new connotations at different junctures in the history of mankind. It is a philosophical concept. With the passage of time, its meaning, practical relevance and social forms have widened, and changed. According to Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the philosophical term Humanism refers "to a series of interrelated concepts about the nature, defining characteristics, powers, education and values of human persons". It further defines the term, thus: "In one sense Humanism is a coherent and recognizable philosophical system that advances substantive ontological, epistemological, anthropological, educational, aesthetic, ethical and political claims" (Concise, 365)

Here the definition is deeply philosophical. According to oxford advanced learner's dictionary, "Humanism is a system of beliefs that concentrates on common human needs and seeks ways of solving human problems based on reason rather than on faith in God." (Oxford, 582) From 14th century onwards Humanism has meant many things. When associated with Enlightenment this term gains its present meaning and resonance. The Concise Rutledge Encyclopedia offers some pertinent comments on this discussion:

It is a belief in reason and autonomy of human subject as foundational aspects of human existence. This may be termed as a belief that reason, skepticism and the scientific method are the only appropriate instruments for discovering truth and structuring the human community. This may be taken as a belief that the foundations for ethics and society are to be found in autonomy and moral equality. (Abrams: 2000, 117)

At one stage in the evolution of this term, Humanism was related with the wider sympathies that Christianity stood for. Defining this particular aspect of the term, M.H. Abrams says:

In our time, "humanist" often connotes a man who bases truth on human experience and bases values on human nature, rejecting the truths and sections of a supernatural creed. With few exceptions however **Renaissance** humanists were pious Christians who incorporated the concepts and ideals inherited from pagan antiquity in to the frame of the Christian creed. The result was that they emphasize the values achievable in this world, and minimized earlier Christian emphasis on man's innate corruption and on the ideals of extreme asceticism and of withdrawal from this world in a preoccupation with the world here after. It has recently become standard to refer to this structure of classical and Christian views, typical of writers such as Sir Philip Sydney, Spenser and Milton, as Christian Humanism. (Cambridge: 1998)

According to Cambridge dictionary of philosophy:

Humanism is a set of presuppositions that assigns to human beings a special position in the scheme of things. Not just a school of thought or a collection of specific beliefs or doctrines, humanism is rather a general perspective from which the world is viewed. That perspective received a gradual yet persistent articulation during different historical periods and continues to furnish a central leitmotif of Western civilization. It comes into focus when it is compared with two competing positions. On the one hand it can be contrasted with the emphasis on the supernatural, transcendental domain, which considers humanity to be radically dependent on divine order. On the other hand, it resists the tendency to treat humanity scientifically as part of the natural order, on a par with other living organisms. Occupying the middle position, humanism discerns in human beings unique capacities and abilities to be cultivated and celebrated for their own sake. (Abrams: 2000, 75-76)

In the modern usage "Humanism" becomes a key term but only as 'rationalist humanism' or 'scientific humanism'. The present form seems to have imbibed all the earlier meanings. Here, the special emphasis is on rationality and scientific temperament. It is a way of thinking that relies on the supremacy of reason. It is exceptionally dependent on Enlightenment which was a European phenomenon. The complex connections of rationality and Humanism are deftly simplified by M.H. Abrams in the following manner:

It is the name applied to an intellectual movement and cultural atmosphere, which developed in Western Europe during the seventeenth century and reached its height in the eighteenth. The common element was the trust in man's reason as adequate to solve all the important problems and to establish all the essential norms in life, together with the belief that the application of reason was rapidly dissipating the darkness of superstition, prejudice and barbarity, was freeing man from his earlier reliance on mere authority and unexamined tradition and was preparing him to achieve an ideal existence in the world. In some thinkers the model of reason' was the inductive procedure of science: reasoning from the facts of experience to general laws. (Abrams: 2000, 244)

But Humanism comes to be known, as rationalist Humanism only in the 19th and 20th century. During the last two centuries, this term has become the key term in the world of ideas. That is why, in the 20th century it is not merely a philosophical concept. It is a way of life. Rationalist Humanism finds its most powerful manifestation in the process of industrialization. The growth of science and technology are basically results of reason-based mankind. The western world, as influenced by the ethos of Enlightenment, awoke to a new religion. This was the reverse religion of industrialization and science. One may adore science and its positives. But poets and intellectuals are never blinded to their inadequacies. England was the first nation to experience the process of industrialization. Hence, it was the first one to celebrate the supremacy of rationalist Humanism. But the voices of dissent are also immediately registered. Wordsworth is among them.

As a poet and as a sensitive human being, he realized the fact that science, industrialization and ruthless expansion of urban market economy was of no practical use to the human 'soul'. His poetic venture is the initial response to this complex issue. William Wordsworth, as his poetry witnesses, was a staunch critic of industrialized England. To him, industries were mere instruments bent upon damaging the human sensitivity. His poetry expresses this social or historical process. He was the first to alarm us about the ills of excessive or uncritical industrialization. He is the forerunner to the twentieth century environmental movements. He advocates nature not as a non-human force but as an integral component of human existence. Urban life is a forerunner in the organic world of Wordsworth. That is why he distrusts it. This is the reason behind his undaunted faith in the mystic unity between man and nature. Sometimes he appears to be a primitivist though he is not. M.H. Abrams writes defining this term:

Cultural primitivism is the preference of 'nature' over 'art' in any field of human culture and values. For example, in ethics a primitivist lands the natural or innate, instincts and passions over the dictates of reason and prudential forethought; in social philosophy, the ideal is the simple and 'natural' forms of social and political order in place of the anxieties and frustrations engendered by a complex and highly developed social organization; unmodified by human intervention, to cities or artful gardens; and in literature and the other arts he puts his reliance on spontaneity, the free expression of emotion, and the intuitive products of 'natural genius', as against the reasoned adaptation of artistic means to foreseen ends and the reliance on "artificial" forms, rules, and conventions. Typically, the cultural primitivist asserts that in the modern world, the life, activities and products of; "primitive" people who live in a way more accordant to "nature" because they are isolated from civilization-are preferable to the life, activities and products of people living in a highly developed society especially in cities. The eighteenth century cult of "the Noble Savage" and the concurrent vogue of natural poetry written by peasants or simple working folk, were both aspects of primitivism. (Abrams: 2000, 244)

This point is uncritically endorsed in the context of Wordsworth's poetry by J. W. Beach where the critic observes:

Wordsworth's" preference of country to town, like that of many 18th century poets is probably somewhat colored by the legend of Golden Age in which man's heart and manners were still natural, uncorrupted by institutions and ideas which had swerved from the simplicity of nature. (Beach, 202)

However, it needs to be clarified at the outset that Wordsworth is not a primitivist as M.H. Abrams's explication of term goes. He appears to have strong inclinations towards a previous mode of existence. Actually, Wordsworth is torn between the positives and negatives of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment heritage. His generation is the first to be benefited from these new developments. But it is also the first one to realize its future inadequacies. Wordsworth is not a primitivist in totality. Rather, it would be wiser to term him as a critical analyst of the social and cultural milieu of his times. He is essentially a champion of individual of freedom. This idea is well expressed in his many poems where he celebrates the unlimited powers of imagination.

One way of defining his critique of industrialization and organization is his positive attitude towards the faculty of imagination. Unlike the rational rigidity of an industrialized world, his beloved characters are those who follow their 'innate' urges and resist the artificiality of urban existence. It is because of this that 'innocence' and rural life' appears to be synonymous in his poetry. Yet it would be erratic to draw the conclusion that he is a primitivist totally rejectionist toward the ideals and ethos of French Revolution. The life and manners of men in cities and their working conditions were seen by a sceptic eye by William Wordsworth. Seeds of Wordsworth's later fears about the universal suffrage and popular radicalism can be found in the 'Preface' of 1800. He clearly saw a future of increased brutalization for urban workers. The opportunists were suppressing workers as much as they could. The fear of population explosion was also there. David Simpson Says, the population of England was to double between 1801 and 1851, a greater proportion than ever before would reside in the manufacturing towns and in London. These trends were noticeable even in marginal Westmoreland and more so in neighboring Cumberland. (Simpson, 179)

Writers are not blind towards these changes. They see such changes in the broader context of the nation or humanity at large. Wordsworth is always in search of an authentic pleasure. Authentic pleasure for Wordsworth seems to be of great importance in any healthy society. He dreams of a society in which there would be a love of self as well as love for others. This authentic pleasure can be witnessed in his poems. He expresses elementary human passions in his poetry. M.H. Abrams has rightly observed:

Wordsworth's poems manifest emotions of the pathetic that are 'complex and revolutionary'. As for the sublime- he is specifically a poet charged with a new mission to extend its kingdom and to augment and spread 'its enjoyments' as one of the poets who combine the 'heroic passions' of pagan antiquity with Christian wisdom, he has proclaimed a new synthesis - an accord of sublimated humanity. And his chief enterprise as a poet is expressed in a Christian paradox- he must cast his readers down in order to raise them up: their spirits are to be humbled and exalted. (Abrams: 1979, 02)

But the fact is that these delicate feelings are not result of a neutral attitude of the poet. His preference for a simple way of life needs to be elaborated on the basis of a close reading of his poems. While preferring country life and rejecting city life Wordsworth actually reviews the beliefs of Humanism based on reason. He sincerely believes that town life has its own distractions. Here man has forgotten nature. The social intercourse based on the morality only leads to wastage of human energy and talents. Such hearts fail to appreciate simple and pure impression. Wordsworth thinks of man's delight and liberty and advises man to be like a child-natural. Wordsworth decides to penetrate the realities of life and universe, of man and of nature. His purpose seems to restore man to nature. He discovers that reason, which was the chief and only tool of knowing the age of materialism, was rather an inadequate tool for comprehending the entire reality about man and universe. For him imagination acquired the 'supreme importance'. Imagination no doubt is a better instrument to operate in the spiritual territories of the bodies of man and nature. In his search for reality he does not look for the general or average human Nature but for the fundamental and the original human nature. Wordsworth is a poet of Romantic era that is 1800 to 1850. This period is also called the second creative period of

English literature first being the Renaissance period. This period preceded the neoclassical movement, which was based on scientific enlightenment. Wordsworth as other Romantic poets seems to review the Humanism based on scientific enlightenment. He advocates for essential Humanism or real happiness of man. Imagination to the Romantic poets is of utmost importance. It is the supreme form of rationality. It is the highest form of 'mind'; it is a spiritual faculty.

This study highlights that the poetic venture of William Wordsworth is basically an encounter with the Life forms that industrialization at its initial stage offered to the England of early Eighteenth century. The poet is temperamentally inclined towards a simpler way of life and social existence. To him, life style uncorrupted by the excesses of mind or rationality is the only worthwhile way to lead a happy and balanced life. The poet is a great admirer of those individuals who lead a simpler and innocent life. To him urbanization is a process by which one's humanity and individual dignity is damaged. It is Wordsworth's concern and sympathy for humans that he comments upon the social scenario of his time. The poet deals with the phenomenon of vagrancy in order to reveal actual picture of the society. The vagrancy can be traced in "The Old Cumberland Beggar", "Beggars", "Alice Fell", "Resolution and Independence", "Gipsies" and "The Female Vagrant". The class of beggars and other vagrants, to whom the human beings described here, will probably soon be extinct. This is what Wordsworth thinks and fears. This class consists mainly of poor and mostly old and infirm persons. There is a great deal of consistency in Wordsworth's treatment of such figures. Harold Bloom says, "The Old Cumberland Beggar is Wordsworth's finest vision of irreducible natural man, the human stripped to the nakedness of primordial condition and exposed as still powerful in dignity, still infinite in value." (Bloom, 10) It is not a sentimental celebration of the outcasts. It appears to be a genuine liking for their way of living. But through this poet seems to distance himself from industrialization and its morality.

Wordsworth, as witnessed in his poetic journey is actually looking for an alternative way of life. As he feels, his historical present is a disturbing reality. These simple and innocent figures are his true visionaries. These acts of love added to one another, at least insensibly dispose their performers to virtue and true goodness. We need to be careful in our reaction to this. Here the poet's aim is not to preach that begging is good because it makes charity possible. Here the poet highlights various aspects of vagrancy but he thinks of the old man as a human being, who has influenced other lives, and always for the better. In "Alice Fell" the poet's treatment of rationalist humanism takes a complex form. Here, his poetic powers are at his best and his ideas are clear.

An important feature of Wordsworth's poetic vision is the ever expanding territory of his broad sympathies. This was not possible with a narrow framework of rationalist humanism. It required an intuitive mind or imagination which seems to be at the root of all that Wordsworth writes. In "Simon Lee" Wordsworth's aim seems to teach the humans a lesson of brotherhood. He suggests that old men become unable to do work in the old age and so the youngsters should lend a helping hand to them. The humanistic vision of Wordsworth finds powerful expression in new ways in different poems. The poet depicts human suffering in his Poems on human life. These poems are- "The Thorn", "The Sailor's Mother" "Ruth" "The Affliction of Margaret", "The Emigrant Mother", "Michael" and "The Childless Father." In these poems we find ourselves in the presence of poverty, crime, insanity, and ruined innocence, torturing hopes doomed to extinction, solitary anguish and even despair. His World so far

as humanity is concerned is a dark world. He saw the cloud of human destiny but did not avert his eyes from it. Wordsworth had a feeling mind. His imagination was well attuned to the ordinary currents of life where happiness and sorrow are complexly integrated. He tries to teach man in one way or other. Some of his suggestive poems are "To a Butterfly" "To the Cuckoo", "To the Small Celandine", and "Written in March", "Ode to Duty", "Daffodils" and "Nutting". In these poems the poet depicts certain ways to be happy in life.

Looking at Wordsworth's general outlook on life, it can be noticed that he is especially concerned with two things—nature and man. He is less concerned with the sensuous charms of nature that delight most of the nature poets. In fact he finds a spiritual contentment in the different forms of nature. The primrose and the daffodils are symbols of the message of nature to man. A sunrise for Wordsworth is not only a spectacle of bright colors but is a moment of spiritual illumination. His love of nature is transferred to ordinary men and women with simple joys and sorrows. Wordsworth seems to be in search of an ordered and harmonious universe. He tries to disassociate himself from everything that seems to contradict his own worldview. While doing so, he has immense respect for the mystic and the transcendental aspects in the universe. But it is never delinked from a vibrant humanism that runs through his poetic works.

The notion of soul or spirituality, which is central to the poet's vision in several poems, is emblematic of his distrust in the faculty of rational mind. A most interesting aspect of Wordsworth's concept of nature is his metaphysical notion of the spirit or soul of the universe. But man is an essential component of this universe. This idea is widely present in his nature poetry. It is expressed philosophically in "Tintern Abbey", "The Prelude", and "The Excursion". "Tintern Abbey" seems to be entirely devoted to a statement of the reasons why the poet is a worshiper of nature. A close look at these poems would reveal how Wordsworth joins the larger process in nature. It is part of his poetic practice that he rarely remains a detached observer of the natural beauty around. He participates in it as a mystic and a visionary. But it would be erratic to say that Wordsworth's only topic is nature. Actually, nature is a kind of solution. The poet brings it as a solace giving force. However, his poetry is never without a reference to the urban life, which is depicted as a negative thing. Nature and city lives are as various forms reflect polarities in the poetry of Wordsworth. During his celebration of nature, city life is always there, present in his mind. His concern for humans seems to be always present and he sees nature preoccupied by the pain of men. He enjoys the company of nature in "Tintern Abbey" but he also likes human company there.

Wordsworth rejects materialism and he does not want to go into that world again. He feels at home in the lap of nature. He wants to rest there and suggests other men to be like him. He hopes for well being of men and dreams of their happiness. Wordsworth considers nature as man and visualizes nature, always with love. The poet always desires for happiness of mankind. The poet, once, standing on the bank of river 'Thames', has imaginary conversation with river 'Thames'. He asks the holy river to glide gently and glide so forever, so that other poets may also be blessed like him. He seems to have a wish that all the poets should be visionary like him. And minds of all should ever be like deep waters of river 'Thames'. Wordsworth's insight seems to be really deep rooted. In the process of the building up of man's attitudes, Wordsworth makes much of pain and pleasure as the directing forces.

The poet sometimes becomes a doctor. The nature, with all its therapeutic powers is available to the humble souls among human beings. Arrogant rationality cannot enjoy its richness. The use of nature in some of his poems, as in 'The Solitary Reaper' and 'The *Excursion*' has a medical and scientific flavor. This science seems to be guided by a religious metaphysics. The mind may easily go wrong unless guided by what is called the heart or imagination. This amounts practically to spiritual insight or intuition. Wordsworth says, in "The Tables Turned" that nature is a better teacher than books. Due to the impact of industrialization nature that is the trees seems to be in danger. Industrialization gives birth to deforestation. Wordsworth's insight sees it and he tries to tell the importance of nature for humanity. "Nutting" seems to be an imagination of such thoughts. The modern man is antagonist towards nature. Wordsworth was aware of it. In several poems as in 'Nutting' the poet actually highlights a situation where man is pictured as an actual intruder, whose restless thoughts and impulsive actions violates the harmonious calm of nature. Actually Wordsworth considers nature as a nursemaid who nurses the small child and teaches him to live. Nature acts as a friend and guide for the youth. It helps him resolve his cares and problems. And in the old age nature acts like a philosopher making man realize the subtle realities of the life.

Thus, this study, though a limited attempt, has hinted some new points. But its limitations are many. Wordsworth is an epoch-making poet in English Literature. His attitude towards Humanism is not so simple as to be elaborated in this single and humble study. Wordsworth himself is a humanist. But he is far away from various narrow kinds of humanistic perspectives. This study has tried to indicate these aspects of his poetic vision.

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