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Nature-Human Interface: A Study of Wordsworth's Select Poems with Special Reference to "The Tables Turned"

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Abstract- The paper, while evaluating Wordsworth as a poet of nature, makes an attempt at analyzing Wordsworth's poems from a contemporary perspective. The contemporary ecological issues pose a threat to biodiversity. Scholars across time, space, and culture have been reading Wordsworth from different positions. The paper under discussion argues for rereading Wordsworth from the perspective of ecosophy. The discussion takes into account poems such *as* "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey", "Michael: A Pastoral Poem", "The Prelude", and "The Daffodils", with a special emphasis on "The Tables Turned" as the central text for the study. The choice of these poems is guided by the way they bring together Wordsworth's vision of nature as a living presence and his insistence on the moral and spiritual lessons that nature imparts to humankind. By situating these poems against the backdrop of present ecological debates, the paper makes an attempt to demonstrate how Wordsworth's poetry anticipates concerns that resonate with the ecological consciousness of our age. Thus, the study proposes that Wordsworth's poetry, when read in the light of ecosophy, continues to remain highly significant in an age of ecological crisis.

Keywords: Ecosophy, Romanticism and ecology, nature poetry, ecological issues, biodiversity

I. Introduction: Romanticism and the Return to Nature

By the end of the eighteenth century, Europe, swept by the slogans of liberty, equality, and fraternity witnessed the rise of modern states, concepts of nationalism, and liberationist principles. Besides, England that reeled under 'madness for reason' for quite some time was gripped by the call 'return to nature'. The call recommended for breaking free from the shackles of cramping conventions and advocated for a radical simplification of life that could provide the succour for humanity, nations and society. Thus, the writers, artists, and poets during nineteenth century, turned to nature seeking relief, comfort and support. William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and George Gordon Byron focused on nature, man and life. However, Wordsworth has created a niche for himself because he had the dexterity of turning the common into something magnificent, spectacular and admirable.

"The Tables Turned" is a Romantic poem by William Wordsworth who broke new grounds in the field of English Literature with his innovative approach and style. The poem consists of thirty-two lines and is divided into eight quatrains, each of which follows the ABAB rhyme scheme. It got published in the year 1798 in Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads".

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II. WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: THE HIGH PRIEST OF NATURE

William Wordsworth is widely acknowledged as one of the foremost poets of the Romantic era, renowned for his profound and enduring reverence for the natural world. In "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey", for instance, Wordsworth characterizes himself as a *"worshipper of Nature"* (Wordsworth 131) foregrounding his belief in nature's sanctity and its formative influence on the human mind. One can discern his fascination and gratitude towards nature in almost all his texts. Hence, when it comes to studying and gaining wisdom, he believed that nothing in the world would be a better teacher than nature itself. The theme of "The Tables Turned" is the importance of nature in our lives and how it serves as our guide. Since the Romantic period was mostly about the celebration of nature and imagination, and the critique of neo classicism which supported rational thoughts and logic, precision, order and decorum, it is thereby understood that this poem is a Romantic text, as it criticizes the idea of inculcating values and knowledge from books, rules and regulations. The Romantics took inspiration from nature instead.

2.1 Nature as Spiritual and Moral Guide

A close and critical reading of Wordsworth's poems offer us an insight into nature-human interface that keeps qualifying the perception, comprehension, and response of the poet to the time, place and people. From the earliest stages of his life, nature exerted a profound formative influence on Wordsworth's sensibilities, an influence vividly articulated in "Michael: A Pastoral Poem":

"Careless of books, yet having felt the power

Of Nature, by the gentle agency

Of natural objects, led me on to feel

For passions that were not my own, and think

(At random and imperfectly indeed)

On man, the heart of man, and human life."

(Wordsworth 292)

1. "The Daffodils" and the Spirit of Romantic Joy

It would be unjust to discuss Wordsworth's relationship with nature without taking into account his renowned poem "The Daffodils", which is regarded as one of the most widely read texts of the Romantic era. The poem embodies the very spirit of his philosophy that nature is not just a setting stage, but a living entity which evokes happiness, tranquillity, and solitude. The visual imagery of the daffodils *"fluttering and dancing in the breeze"* (Wordsworth 69) gives one an idea of how even the simplest of natural vistas might have stirred Wordsworth to a feeling of spiritual pleasure. The poem strengthens the Romantic conviction that nature is profoundly therapeutic and as such it transcends the human beings from mundane, ordinary and humdrum experiences to higher realm.

"Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;

Or surely you'll grow double:

Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;

Why all this toil and trouble?"

(Wordsworth 115)

Wordsworth was someone who looked down upon materialistic possessions.

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To him, books were like a dead source of inspiration, in the first stanza of the poem, "The Tables Turned" he urges the readers to abandon their books and wake up to the real world as spending too much time in reading books will probably make us physically distorted, the lines *"Or surely you'll grow double"* (Wordsworth 115) symbolize a loss of vitality.

William Wordsworth's privileging of nature over book learning emerged from his formative years in the Lake District, where the countryside inspired his poetic imagination. Despite academic success at Hawkshead Grammar and Cambridge, he grew frustrated with rigid education systems focused on rote memorization rather than lived experience. Wordsworth respected canonical writers like Milton, Shakespeare, and Spenser but rejected literature as the only source of wisdom. His disillusionment extended to political idealism; witnessing the French Revolution's Reign of Terror led him to question human reason and lofty philosophies. In response, he turned to nature as a stable, moral guide. Wordsworth saw nature as a living, spiritual entity that offers moral and spiritual lessons unavailable through books. His poetry emphasizes that nature nurtures the heart, teaching resilience, humility, and truth.

He famously wrote, *"Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her"* (Wordsworth 130). For Wordsworth, nature replaced traditional knowledge with authentic, experiential wisdom.

2. Critique of Bookish Knowledge in "The Tables Turned"

"The sun above the mountain's head,

A freshening lustre mellow

Through all the long green fields has spread,

His first sweet evening yellow."

(Wordsworth 115)

Throughout the "The Tables Turned", the beauty of nature is emphasized upon, *"The sun, above the mountain's head…"* (Wordsworth 115) points to the sun rising above the mountains, a metaphor for nature's inherent beauty and wisdom. The sunlight is described as *"fresh"* (Wordsworth 115) and *"mellow,"* (Wordsworth 115) symbolizing the gentle qualities of nature. The sun's rays spread across the fields, representing nature's reach and ability to touch everything. The poet criticizes books as being part of a repetitive, never-ending struggle for knowledge. He invites the readers to listen to the *"linnet"* (Wordsworth 115), a melodious bird, that emblematizes nature's direct, simpler, and more joyful source of wisdom. The praises for the bird's song, emphasize on the sweetness and purity of nature. The lines *"There's more of wisdom in it"* (Wordsworth 115) apparently asserts that more wisdom can be found in the bird's song than in books. Similarly, in "The Prelude", Wordsworth also criticizes conventional learning and institutions that prioritize intellect over emotional and spiritual development:

"We might have fed upon a fatter soil

Of Arts and Letters, but be that forgiven)

A race of real children; not too wise,

Too learned, or too good; but wanton, fresh,

And bandied up and down by love and hate;"

(Wordsworth 79)

Wordsworth valued the rawness of lived experience over the polished training of books and institutions.

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He admits that he and his peers could have nourished themselves on the *"fatter soil of arts and letters,"* (Wordsworth 79) leading to a richer, more cultivated education, but he brushes this aside, almost asking forgiveness for not pursuing it. Instead, he calls themselves *"a race of real children"* (Wordsworth 79) who were not burdened by too much wisdom, learning, or strict morality, but full of freshness, playfulness, and genuine emotions. They were guided by the honesty of their passions, tossed between love and hate, and never afraid to feel resentment when it was justified. Through these lines, Wordsworth argues that the true education of youth lies in sincerity, and emotional truth, not in the artificial constraints of bookish knowledge.

A close and critical reading of Wordsworth's works such as "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" unfolds the poet's philosophy that nature serves as his friend, his guide, his companion:

"Therefore am I still

A lover of the meadows and the woods

And mountains; and of all that we behold

From this green earth; of all the mighty world

Of eye, and ear, both what they half - create,

And what perceive; well pleased to recognise

In nature and the language of the sense

The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,

The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul

Of all my moral being."

(Wordsworth 129)

These lines further validate the stance that Wordsworth has always considered nature as the essence of his very existence. He has once again explained how nature is *"the anchor"* (Wordsworth 129) of his thoughts, as well as his nurse who heals him, the guide who guides him, the guardian of his heart who protects him and the soul of his moral being who keeps his virtues in check.

3. "Let Nature Be Your Teacher" (Wordsworth 115): The Pedagogy of Nature

Similarly, in this poem, Wordsworth articulates his central assertion through the imperative *"Let Nature be your teacher,"* (Wordsworth 115) positioning nature as a superior source of wisdom in contrast to the confines of book-based and intellectual study. This line also personifies nature as a living being that serves as our teacher. The lines "*She has a world of ready wealth, Our minds and hearts to bless"* (Wordsworth 115) once again personify nature as a living being. Nature possesses an abundance of knowledge and treasures that are readily available, it enriches our intellect and our emotions. The poet further argues that nature's truths are cheerful and life affirming, in contrast to the potentially dry and wearisome pursuit of knowledge through books.

The following lines of the poem are often inferred as the most famous and significant ones, which have made a lasting impact to this day.

"One impulse from a vernal wood

May teach you more of man,

Of moral evil and of good,

Than all the sages can."

(Wordsworth 116)

A single experience or feeling from a springtime forest can morally teach us much more than all the experienced sages of the world who are considered as the most learned of men. We have often heard tales of such hermits and sages who go to the woods for honing their skills and knowledge, and hence, the poet argues for turning to nature that is the store house of inspiration, education and wisdom.

4. Against Science and Art: Concluding Observations in "The Tables Turned"

Furthermore, Wordsworth criticizes human intellect for interfering or complicating things. He argues that human reasoning distorts the *"beauteous forms of things",* (Wordsworth 116) implying that we tend to overcomplicate the natural beauty of simple things. The line, *"We murder to dissect."* (Wordsworth 116) condemns the scientific approach of dissecting things to understand them, meaning that this annihilates the essence or beauty of what is studied.

In the last stanza, he calls for an end to the emphasis on science and art, possibly referring to the intellectual and academic pursuits that remove one from direct experience.

"Enough of Science and of Art;

Close up those barren leaves;

Come forth, and bring with you a heart

That watches and receives."

(Wordsworth 116)

The mention of *"Leaves"* (Wordsworth 116) here refers to pages of books, which he deems barren or unfruitful compared to nature.

The concluding lines stresses on the importance of being open and receptive to nature's wisdom, insisting that true learning comes from observing and experiencing the natural world.

Thus, we see that "The Tables Turned" calls for abandoning books in favour of immersing oneself in the natural world, which according to Wordsworth, offers more valuable and spontaneous insights into life, morality, and happiness. The poem promotes the Romantic ideal that nature is the greatest teacher, providing truths that formal education cannot. Before concluding, it is also worth noting how later critics and poets engaged with Wordsworth's ideas, often extending, questioning, or reinterpreting them in their own works.

5. Reception and Influence: Later Critics and Poets

In the opinion of Matthew Arnold, "Wordsworth himself was better employed in making his Ecclesiastical Sonnets than when he made his celebrated Preface, so full of criticism, and criticism of the works of others? Wordsworth was himself a great critic, and it is to be sincerely regretted that he has not left us more criticism" (Arnold 03). Arnold also argued that Wordsworth had a healing power in his poetry, providing a moral antidote to the materialism of the modern world. Arnold's recognition lays bare how profoundly Wordsworth's vision of nature and simplicity influenced even later poets, who saw in his verse a reflection of eternal beauty and strength to carry on with the mundaneness of the world.

We find a similar sensibility in Arnold's own works as well, as he often turned to nature as a source of consolation.

While Wordsworth celebrated nature as a moral guide and spiritual teacher, Arnold utilised it as a metaphor to reflect the anxieties of his age. His poetry is a literary sensibility which never gives us the flash and surprise of the lines of Wordsworth, but in him there is always just enough thought and feeling to transfer common places into poetry.

His "Dover Beach", celebrated as one of his finest lyrics, remains an elegiac brooding more or less intimately associated with symbolic landscapes. Though it is a metaphorical poem where nature is used to convey the times of war and scientific advancements during the 1850s, the genius with which Arnold uses the comparison of retreating waves, and the moonlight with the ongoing evolutions and themes of loneliness, brings out his view on nature as a calm order against the confusion of modern life.

While Arnold celebrated Wordsworth's moral vision and healing influence, not all critics viewed him in the same light. T.S. Eliot, for instance, though acknowledging Wordsworth's genius, questioned the very philosophical foundations of his poetic theory. Wordsworth believed that "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquillity…" (Wordsworth 273) Whereas T.S. Eliot held that, "We must believe that 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquillity. It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation." (Eliot 52)

Eliot here stresses that poetic creation is less about recalling past emotions and more about an unconscious yet intense fusion of experiences into a new artistic form. Further critiquing Wordsworth, he continues to elaborate:

"These experiences are not 'recollected,' and they finally unite in an atmosphere which is 'tranquil' only in that it is a passive attending upon the event. Of course this is not quite the whole story. There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him 'personal'." (Eliot 52)

Building on this, Eliot makes one of his most striking claims about poetic practice:

"Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." (Eliot 52-53)

In relation to his contemporaries, Keats, arriving at poetic maturity a generation after Wordsworth, inherited his sense of reverence for nature but expressed it in different terms. Where Wordsworth turned to nature for moral insight and religious truth, Keats tended to approach nature as a fountain of sensuous pleasure, imaginative awe, and timeless beauty. Nevertheless, the origin of his sensitivity to natural environments can be dated back to Wordsworth's influence.

Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" best shows us the inheritance. The nightingale, just like Wordsworth's skylark or daffodils, is not a mere bird anymore, but a symbol of eternal beauty and inspiration.

"Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!" (Keats 257) Keats portrays the bird's song as one which overcomes human pain and mortality.

In Wordsworth's "To the Skylark", the skylark is only commended for its *"ethereal minstrel"* (Wordsworth 78), whereas Keats calls on the same Romantic tradition but with his own particular focus on the imagination's ability to transcend the confinement of human existence. In the same way, in "Ode on a Grecian Urn", while Keats does look to art, he is still dependent upon nature's imagery of trees that never shed their leaves, flowers that never wilt, music that is always sweet, remembering Wordsworth's habit of finding permanence and eternity in the natural world. Yet while Wordsworth was wont to praise nature's capacity to impart moral truths, Keats detached himself from didacticism, tending rather to indulge in the delightful for itself. His renowned finishing line *"Beauty is truth, truth beauty"* (Keats 259) underscores the experience of beauty in nature, or in works of art taken from it, is itself a form of spiritual intelligence.

6. Wordsworth through an Eco-critical Lens

Further, it could be noted here that Wordsworth while spiritualizing nature tries to forge a connection between nature and human beings. Wordsworth through his observations of the external objects of nature examined the intricate nuances of life. He laments the nature-human rupture due to industrialization and materialism. As such the poet underlines the importance of nature that requires utmost care and attention. The contemporary world reeling under the threat of environment crisis, climate change, and pollution stands on the brink of devastation and destruction. The need of the hour is to prevent ecocide and protect and preserve the environment from further damage, danger and decay.

Thus, Wordsworth, could be read from the perspective of eco-criticism for safeguarding the world from doom and destruction.

III. CONCLUSION

Wordsworth's unconditional love for nature has been central to this discussion. "The Tables Turned" is a reflection of his conviction in nature's powers of instruction more than in formal schooling. He did not dismiss institutional learning, he taught us to remain attentive to the wisdom that nature alone can impart.

When read through the ecocritical lens, the poem hints at Wordsworth's early sensitivity to the need for deepening our relationship with our environment. His ideas remain profoundly relevant today, as the world falls prey to global warming and alarming climatic changes brought about by human selfishness. In such an era, Wordsworth's teaching draws attention to our responsibility to preserve and sustain nature, and to coexist with it rather than jeopardize our future by assuming supremacy over the ecosystem to which we belong. Perhaps we cannot be as wholly enraptured by the natural world as Wordsworth was, but we can certainly strive to live in harmony with it.

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