

WORDSWORTH AS AN INTERPRETER OF NATURE.

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WORDSWORTH AS AN INTERPRETER OF NATURE.

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INTRODUCTION. WHAT CONSTITUTES A NATURE POET.

A nature poet is a poet who finds inspiration and material for his poetry in nature. He must love nature and understand it in all its moods. He must also see God's love in nature. Every flower has for him a special message. He finds enjoyment in listening to nature's voices and studying nature's secrets. He would do as Bryant suggests--

"Go forth under the open sky and list to nature's teaching."

The poems of the nature poet must have something in nature for the theme. He must see in nature so much of truth, of beauty, of goodness, of love, of inspiration to righteousness -- in a word, so much of the divine, that he is moved to glorify the commonplace, because he himself is uplifted into the realm of the spiritual and enobled to "see the things that are invisible."

The nature poet must also be able to apply the lessons he receives from nature to life; he must be sympathetic with and love his countrymen and all humanity more, because of his insight into the works of creation. His poems should uplift humanity. He should tell others the beauties he finds in the visible universe and show them how to cultivate a love and appreciation for the world in which they live. Such a poet cannot be narrow and selfish.

Otherwise he does not understand nature perfectly.

Of course the nature poet must possess the requisites of a true poet with the love and comprehension of nature added. He must have, for example, imagination, without which he cannot draw

a true picture of a landscape, a sunset, or a scene in the woods.

The nature poet, moreover, is a man speaking to men -- endowed with lively sensibility - enthusiasm and tenderness. He has great knowledge of human nature and a comprehensive soul. His wish is to bring his own feelings into harmony with the feelings of the person whose feelings he is to describe. He is thus a sort of spiritual translator. He has one restriction -- he must give pleasure.

EARLY INSTANCES WHICH TENDED TO DEVELOP WORDSWORTH'S LOVE FOR NATURE. NATURE.

All these characteristics of a nature poet were exemplified in the writings of William Wordsworth. Wordsworth was born April 7, 1770, at Cockermouth, a small town at the edge of the Cumberland highlands. He spent most of his life in his childhood home. Of this home he has vivid memories. It is here that he derives many of his beautiful descriptions.

A. Environment or natural Inclinations as fostered by Environment.

As most of Wordsworth's life was spent among the fields, with the birds and flowers, naturally his thought and imagination were greatly influenced by the material universe. He was thoroughly acquainted with nature. When he was despondent he knew where to find her bright and cheerful side. He knew every nook and corner of his early home, every spot of which had for him a special lesson and charm.

In his poems he apostrophizes almost everything in nature; and ultimately rises to the conception of the world as a unit. To him there was a divine presence in the universe, so that his love for the physical ^{creation} took the form of a religion. He tried

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to exalt commonplace things because he thought the visible world possessed life and soul.

Most of Wordsworth's inspiration and earliest impressions were from external nature. The scenery of his native district was not grand, but he claimed that grandeur and sublimity depend more on the form and relation of objects to one another than on the actual magnitude. As a result some of his early poems, as poetic portrayals of unpoetic ideas, were little less than ludicrous. Every thing he did gave him new material. If he walked, watched a sunset or visited a flower garden he gained a scene or material of some kind for a song or sonnet.

B. Influence of his sister Dorothy.

In the reaction of his soul against the violence of the French Revolution, Wordsworth sank into a condition of apathy and almost despair. The first person to arouse him from this lethargy and morbidness was his sister Dorothy. This was the most critical time in the poet's life. He was much interested in the French Revolution and when the new republic went mad and the whole movement failed as it seemed to him, there was nothing to interest him and he was listless, dull and almost hopeless.

Dorothy Wordsworth made a home for the poet and became his best companion. She took him to the places he used to be interested in and used to love. She showed him the minute loveliness of nature which he had not perceived before until ultimately his early love for nature returned. Yet this love was not the same. His views about nature were now broader and deeper than before,

so as to include his fellowmen. His views have been briefly stated in this way: " first, nature has a self subsistence, existing outside of man's thoughts and feelings and wholly independent of them; second, a unity of life and power pervading it through all its parts and binding them together in a living whole; third, a true life of his own, which streamed through and stimulated his life -- a spirit which, itself invisible, spoke through visible things to his spirit which, itself invisible, spoke through visible things to his spirit; calmness which stilled and refreshed man, sublimity which raised him to noble and majestic thoughts; tenderness while, stirring in the largest and loftiest things, condescends to the lowest, is with the humblest worm and weed as much as in the great movements of the elements and of the stars." -- Shairp.

Thus he conceived of nature as a power which supports, calms and invigorates man. He discovered that to attain the highest and truest conception of nature, man must not be passive but act in unison with nature.

Dorothy Wordsworth did not preach to her brother or try to force him to think as she thought; she simply showed him the beautiful side of nature. She gave him something to be interested in and to love, and as he was in a passive mood, he followed where she led. He did not change his views suddenly; on the contrary the process was a slow one.

POEMS RESULTING FROM THIS LOVE OF NATURE.

The original judgment of the critics was overthrown in regard to Wordsworth. Although his first poems were laughed at, when he died he had a prominent place among the great English singers

not only of his own time but of all time.

It may help to an understanding of Wordsworth as a poet of nature to examine some of the poems in which he revealed himself.

The "Prelude" was written in the period from 1799 to 1805 but was not published until 1850. It is really a history of the growth of the poet's mind. Wordsworth saw the faults of the poem more clearly than the critics who condemned him. The title was suggested by his wife and was to indicate its relation to his more important work and also the fact that it was written early.

The poem has many beautiful and poetic passages and also many fine word pictures. The thought is high and noble. It has much imagination and noble sentiment and shows that the poet loved and understood nature.

Book I treats ^{of} Wordsworth's childhood home and is full of fine descriptions. He tells about the beauties found in nature and also speaks of his school life and some of his boy friends. Only a lover of nature would have written this opening book of his life development. Book IV with many other fine descriptions contains the following picture of the dawn:-

"Magnificent

The morning rose, in memorable pomp,
Glorious as e'er I had beheld -- in front,
The sea lay laughing at a distance; near,
The solid mountains shone, bright as the clouds,
Grain-tinctured, drenched in empyrean light,
And in the meadows and lower grounds
Was all the sweetness of a common dawn --
Dews, vapors, and the melody of the birds,
And labourers going forth to till the fields."

"The Excursion" composed between the years 1795 and 1814 was published in 1814. This poem consists of nine books. It is unnecessary for the present purpose to give an outline of this important poem. All that needs to be done is to call attention to the fact that the poem is a great gallery of pictures drawn from nature, and especially to the idea that the universe is pervaded by an active principle, the most important seat of which is the human soul. The following description of a summer forenoon is characteristic of a common mood:

"'Twas summer and the sun had mounted high:
 Southly the landscape indistinctly glared
 Through a pale stream; but all the northern downs,
 In clearest air ascending, showed far off
 A surface dappled o'er with shadows flung
 From brooding clouds; shadows that lay in spots
 Determined and unmoved, with steady beams
 Of light and pleasant sunshine interposed;
 To him most pleasnat who on soft cool moss
 Extends his careless limbs along the front
 Of some huge cave, whose rocky ceiling casts
 A twilight of its own, an ample shade,
 Where the wren warbles, while the dreaming man,
 Half conscious of the soothing melody,
 With sidelong eye looks out upon the scene
 By power of that impending covert, thrown,
 To finer distance. "

Still better is the following description of the twin mountains:-

"Those lusty twins," exclaimed our host, "if here
 It were your lot to dwell, would soon become your p
 Your prized companions. - Many are the notes
 Which, in his tuneful course, the wind draws forth
 From rocks, woods, caverns, heaths, and dashing shores;
 And well those lofty brethren bear their part
 In the wild concert -- chiefly when the storm
 Rides high; then all the upper air they fill
 With roaring sound, that ceases not to flow,
 Like smoke along the level of the blast,
 In mighty current; theirs, too, in the song
 Of stream and headlong flood that seldom fails;
 And, in the grim and breathless hours of noon,
 Methinks that I have heard them echo back
 The thunder's greeting. Nor have nature's laws
 Left them ungifted with a power to yield
 Music of finer tone; a harmony,
 So do I call it, though it be the hand
 Of silence, though there be no voice; - the clouds,
 The mist, the shadows, light of golden suns,
 Motions of moonlight, all come thither -- touch,
 And have an answer -- thither come, and shape
 A language not unwelcome to quick hearts
 And idle spirits:-- there the sun himself,
 At the calm close of summer's longest day,
 Rests his substantial orb; -- between those heights
 And on the top of either pinnacle,

More keenly than elsewhere in night's blue vault,
Sprinkled the stars, as of their station proud."

In the following quotation, Wordsworth's love and appreciation is shown. It is taken from the "Prelude" and describes his summer vacation.

"I, at this time
Saw blessings spread around me like a sea.
Thus, while the days flew by, and years passed on,
From nature and her overflowing soul,
I had received so much, that all my thoughts
Were steeped in feeling; I was only then
Contented, when in the bliss ineffable
I felt the sentiment of Being spread
O'er all that, lost beyond the reach of thought
And human knowledge, to the eye
Invisible, yet liveth to the least."

The following from the "Ode on Evening" shows how to him nature had within it the very presence of God:--

"It is a beautiful evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a nun
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
The gentleness of heaven broods over the sea.
Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder -- everlastingly."

ESTRANGMENT FROM NATURE.

When the French Revolution was over and

and all the hopes for that cause had failed - Wordsworth did not seem to care much for anything. He no longer cared to roam among the birds and flowers. Nature had no longer beauty or inspiration for him. He now looked on the operations of nature in a dull and spiritless way. It had now no charm for him and he could no longer see its unity. He still retained the craving for natural beauty, but his mood was uneasy and fastidious 5- and as he says!--

"Giving way

To a comparison of scene with scene,
Bent over much on superficial things,
Pampering myself with meager novelties
Of color and proportion, to the moods
Of time and season, to the moral power
The affections, and the spirit of the place
Insensible."

The persistent tension of his mind had been bent too ardently towards an ideal scarcely possible to man. The deepening insight into the lives of the peasants about him, the happiness and virtue of simple homes, restored him to a serene confidence in human nature. He felt that there is no side of truth however remote it may be from human interests and that there is no view of the universe however awful and impersonal it is, that may not guide and support the soul of man at some time in his life.

He acknowledges the influence of his sister Dorothy at this time. She became his companion and showed him greater and deeper beauties in nature than he had known before.

INFLUENCE OF THE ESTRANGMENT ON HIS LATER LIFE.

After Wordsworth's reconciliation to nature his love was deeper and higher than before. His insight also and his appreciation of nature became more profound. He lived on a higher plane. He better realized what a beautiful world he lived in and what privileges he enjoyed. He now saw something to admire in every flower no matter how small and insignificant.

His love for God likewise was stronger, and his life fuller and broader because he had a a new and fuller conception of God as manifest in the works of creation. His estrang^ement from nature when that estrang^ement was ended ~~made~~ him appreciate the privileges he had and to make more of the opportunities that came to him. Before his estrang^ement he recognized the beauties in the visible world but they were nothing more than beauties; they had no special message of God's love such as they had for him afterwards. When he was out of tune with nature and would not communicate with her he did not realize what he had lost until he was in touch with her again and received the inspirations she gave him. He did not have a true conception of nature's value. So this estrang^ement had a great influence on Wordsworth's life. In fact it prepared him for higher things which he would not have ~~done~~ ^{accomplished} if he had not had this experience.

CONCLUSION. CONTRAST BETWEEN EARLIER AND LATER POEMS.

It may not be uninteresting to compare, briefly, some of Wordsworth's earlier with some of his later poems as revealing the development of his mind in its attitude towards the external world. The poem entitled "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge" was written

Sept. 3, 1802, as Wordsworth was going from London to Dover. The coach left early in the morning and he rode on top and composed the poem while riding. This is one of the first of his poems that showed Wordsworth's greatness as a poet especially in his sympathy with nature. It is a description of London at sunrise. It is full of imagination and the thought is much deeper and more ennobling than that of most of his early productions. The following is one of the most significant passages:-

"Earth has not anything to show more fair:
 Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
 A sight so touching in its majesty:
 This City now doth, like a garment, wear
 The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
 Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples lie
 Open unto the fields, and to the sky,
 All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

 Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
 And all that mighty heart is lying still!"

"The Primrose of the Rock" is one of our poet's later productions. It was written in 1831 and published in 1835. Its sentiment is somewhat different from that of his early productions. A few stanzas are taken up with a beautiful description of the primrose on the rock. Then he draws a lesson of comfort and good cheer for those that are weak or dissatisfied. There is also a lesson of encouragement for those who are disheartened:-

"That love which changed - for wan disease,
 For sorrow that hath bent
 O'er hopeless dust for withered age-
 Their moral element,
 And turned the thistles of a curse
 To types beneficent.

Sin-blighted though we are, we too
 The reasoning sons of men,
 From one oblivious winter called
 Shall rise and breathe again;
 And in eternal summer lose
 Our three score years and ten:

To humbleness of heart descends
 This prescience from on high,
 The faith that elevates the just,
 Before and when they die;
 And makes this soul a separate heaven,
 A court for Deity."

In the earlier poems there are very few lessons of comfort or encouragement, few lessons indeed of any sort, but in these later ones we find lessons which will help people no matter what their circumstances. In the year 1834 Wordsworth wrote four evening voluntaries, a poem entitled "The Laborer's Noonday Hymn" and another poem called "The Redbreast." The sentiment in one of these voluntaries is, that the beauties in nature are not revealed to those who are busy with things pertaining to public life or

to those who spend all their lifetime getting riches; but that nature does reveal ^{it} ~~her~~self to those who have the time to put themselves in unison with it. Wordsworth says -- "nor do words, Which practical talent readily affords, Prove that her ~~hand~~ has touched responsive chords."

When he wrote these lines he was thinking of Byron's character as a poet. He seems to think that because a poet has talent in expressing beautiful thoughts about nature it does not follow that the poet really loves or understands nature. Wordsworth thought that one could not be in sympathy with nature and have such a character as Byron.

In one of his short poems he says :- :-

"My heart leaps up when I behold
 A rainbow in the sky:
 So was it when my life began;
 So is it now I am a man;
 So be it when I shall grow old,
 Or let me die!
 The child is father of the man;
 And could I wish my days to be
 Bound each to each by natural piety."

So he applied every lesson he saw in the out-door world to his own life.

Thus Wordsworth was a true interpreter of nature. He spent most of his life studying its different moods. He played

in the sunshine with the birds and flowers when he was a child, and when grief came to his maturer life he went to nature for comfort. And most of all, he saw the love of God revealed to him in all the works of creation. Thus to him the love of nature came to have the quality of religion.