

THE PRELUDE: A FAITHFUL RECORD OF POET'S INNER LIFE AND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The motive of this paper is to check out Wordsworth's poem *The Prelude* in the sense of being autobiographical. The Poem is deemed as the longest, finest and the best example of the spiritual frugality of Wordsworth and a handsome anticipation of the modern concept of autobiography. Although analytical study, this paper attempts to pour some light on the autobiographical elements in the poem, and to depict how the poem illustrates the growth of the poet's mind throughout the various stages of his life. The study finds out that *The Prelude* is not an autobiography in the usual sense from the sacred pen of the high lover of nature. In it, we have the pious record of his inner life and emotional experiences enabling us to possess a glance of the innermost recesses of the poet's soul. So we may firmly call it a spiritual or poetical autobiography.

Keywords: Landscape, Kite-sailing, Bask, Bird-snaring, Autobiography.

1. Introduction

It has always been a great pain ache for the critics and trouble for readers to deal the facts and incidents mentioned by William Wordsworth in his work poem *The Prelude* (1850), as purely biographical. In *The Prelude* Wordsworth tells that the aim is the preservation of the soul of the past "for future restoration" because the foundation of human greatness is childhood, which is father of manhood and, in fact our days are bound together by the fibred piety, which the poet sees at in the statement that "feeling comes in aid of / feeling and a diversity of strength attends us / if once we have been strong" (XII. 269-271). In the poem, Wordsworth refers to his childhood experience, which played a major character to shape his manhood. Thus the motive of the poem is twofold: first, self-examination, to dig and find out if he was a real poet and if he was fit enough for making a great poem that will stand the test of time; second, a self-expression, opening the expression of an age of renewed nobility and manners. What this paper attempts to get or determine is to know whether *The Prelude* is an autobiography in the real meaning. According to Pascal (1960),

“Wordsworth is the first autobiographer to feel that each man builds out of his world a peculiar framework of meaningful events, and that the deepest purpose of autobiography is the account of a life as a projection of the real self on the world” (p. 32). These words show that an autobiographer projects himself in his literary work and considers his psyche, faithfully and realistically, in words.

2. Preparatory Poem to be Autobiographical

It's important to note Wordsworth's own words-relevant words from the Preface to the first edition of *The Excursion* in 1814:

Few years back, when the author went to his native mountains, with a expectation of being enabled to make a literary work that might sustain, it was a reasonable thing that he should take a review of his own mind and check how far Nature and Education have qualified him for such employment. As subsidiary to this preparation, he undertook to record, in verse, the origin and progress of his own powers, as far as he was acquainted with them ... The preparatory poem is biographical, conducts the history of the author's mind to the point when he was emboldened to hope that his faculties were sufficiently matured for entering upon the arduous labor which he had proposed to himself ... (pp. 1-2).

As it has been made clear by the above quote, this “preparatory poem” is *The Prelude*, and the words quoted above make it lucid that it is a biographical work as it is “to record, in verse, the beginning and progress of his own powers.” It was Coleridge, ‘the mentor figure of Wordsworth's poetical genius’, who inspired and motivated the poet to make “. . . some philosophic song / of truth that cherished our daily life” (I. 228-231).

2.1 Not an Autobiography in the Usual Sense

At first, it is vivid to us that *The Prelude* is not an autobiography in the usual sense. Certainly in the preface to *The Excursion*, the poet mentioned that the preparatory poem is “biographical.” So, it is likely to be biographical, but not so in a direct manner and chronological way. Here events do not ever pursue each other in the order in which they occurred. The poet left the simply chronological arrangement in favor of one which would give pressure on the essential significance of certain experiences and condition of mind. To the poet, the subjective area is much more significant than the objective aspect of the poem. So we are supposed to be vivid in our mind that the subject is not “My Life,” but “The Making of a Poet,” though Wordsworth has presented the phrase “the story of my life” (639) at the end of Book.

2.2 Record of Inner Life

The Prelude we have a record of that inner life out of which Wordsworth's poetry developed. It's the highly motivated life of childhood and youth that the poet attempted to

record. So in Books I and II we have Wordsworth's childhood and boyhood experiences amid the fabulous landscapes. So we have a greater importance of these two books. And, from the poem, we get that his poetic life started, as it were, on the shore of the Derwent when he was just a small baby. When he found himself "Baffled and plagued by a mind that every hour / Turns recreant to her task. (I. 257-258). He appeals to the river Derwent—"... Was it for this / That one of the fairest of all rivers loved, / To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song. (I. 269-271).

3. Awakening of Poet's Love of Nature

Awakening of the poet's falling in love for nature is the most important aspect in his early education. At the early stage it was only a simple and fit boy's love for open air sports and pastimes amidst lovely natural activities. So in Books I and II we see an unforgettable transformation of his childhood indulgence in physical activities and the joys and fears which were their outcome. In the first two Books, Wordsworth shows of various exciting activities in which he used to take part with full zest and vigour. In the first Book we have the following—"bathing, bird-snaring, bird-nesting, and expedition in a stolen boat, skating, fishing, kite-sailing, noughts,-and-crosses and cards." In the second Book, also we all see they still "ran a boisterous course" and their favorite pastimes were boat-races, boating excursions on the lake, walking tours and riding on horses "through rough and smooth."

The first Book is blended with numerous impressive incidents presenting us the means by which Nature tells her discipline on young Wordsworth by triggering the emotions of pleasure and fear. Thus on a day of summer, the child would have vivid animal pleasure by bathing or basking:

Oh, many a time have it a five years' child,
 In a small mill-race severed from his stream.
 Made one long bathing of a summer's day;
 Basked in the sun, and plunged and basked again
 Alternate, all a summer's day... (I. 288-292)

Another very important area that hits our mind is in *The Prelude*, especially in the first two Books, is that in it the poet has found out the three stages of his love of nature. We are able to note three stages of development. In the first phase, as a child we find the poet spending truly an animal or sensuous happiness in Nature. In the second stage he could have more peace, calm and pleasure from his profound and close relationship with Nature. And finally, we see the love of Nature leading to the love of man, and this alteration presents a meek and peaceful attitude. Again in Book II, we know the other three stages in the process by which the transcendental or mystical relationship is established between Nature and the poet.

4. Wordsworth Writes of Himself

According to Dr. Samuel Johnson, "Every man's life is best presented by himself" (qtd. in Trueblood, 1974, p. 1). Wordsworth took the clue and made what Legouis (1965) describes "the unique autobiographical poem" (p.32). If these scenarios are to be held true, then Wordsworth's '*The Prelude*' is the finest autobiography in verse in English. Wordsworth tells it "A poem on my own earlier life" (Letters 3).

4.1 Wordsworth's Poetry and His Personal Experience

The relationship between Wordsworth's poetry and his personal experience is of the finest type, and he started the writing of *The Prelude* in a mood of self-examination. The poet was convinced enough to create a literary work that might sustain; and he considered it right to check his potential for such a work before he actually undertook it. The result was *The Prelude*. The poem is thus Wordsworth's outcome of his own ability and power and a fine record of those influences that changed him. And in this psychological account of the development of his own mind, and of the most important of the impact that designed it, he has done the biographer's work once and for all. According to Herford (2004), his boyhood in: the beloved vale is unforgettable of all poetic boyhoods and the first two Books of '*The Prelude*' touch the top level of spiritual autobiography and reach now and then the top levels of English poetry by simply recording with perfect fidelity whatever in it bore upon the growth of his own mind (p. 272).

5. *The Prelude*: A Key to Wordsworth's Poetry

Thus *The Prelude* can never be pondered only as a poem of Wordsworth's childhood life; it is a main key used by the poet himself to unlock the door leading to his poetic room. With the help of this long, personal poem, a reader can make out and know the meaning of the rest of Wordsworth's poetry more clearly. It is like a guide for understanding perfectly the tight relationship between human life and nature, without which life to Wordsworth was no mean. His childhood became accountable for shaping Wordsworth a great poet of nature.

5.1 Nature and Man in Wordsworth

"Wordsworth had his obsession for Nature mingled in his blood," observed De Quincy (1970). "It was a necessity of his being like that of the mulberry leaf to the silkworm, and through his commerce with Nature did he love and breathe." (p. 22). Hence it was by the truth of his love that his knowledge developed. If Wordsworth had a favorite area, it was Nature only, and when he dealt with man it was surely in relation to Nature. It was because of the love of Nature that made him to love of man. In the words of Pater (2001), "Wordsworth approached the spectacle of human life through Nature. When he thought of man, it was as in the presence and under the influence of effective natural objects and linked to them by many associations"(p. 12). These words point out how Nature and Wordsworth utilized to communicate faithfully and peacefully with each other. And the

serenity and solace, the poet received from Nature very much affected his later interactions with human beings. This theme of the influence of Nature on man is the finest part of Wordsworth's teaching in poetry. Nature is the best teacher, and she has deep interest in Man and tries to impress human mind. The following words from Book I can clearly and perfectly depict this point:

I believe that Nature, often times, when she would frame
A favour'd Being, from his earliest dawn
Of infancy doth open up the clouds
As at the touch of lightening, seeking him
With great visitation. (362-367).

If we reckon the above quotation minutely, we will feel how nature made the poet love human kind in general, and how the poet found serenity when his soul was disturbed. Three things are intended to cast a good impact even on the normal reader of *The Prelude*: first, Wordsworth's love to be alone, he is not alone with nature. Second, like every other child, who spends much time in the forest and farms, he ponders the presence of some living spirit, real though unseen, and companionable though silent. Finally, His early impressions make him what he, later on, becomes: "The child is the father of man" (Wordsworth, *My Heart Leaps Up*, p. 7)

9. Conclusion

So in *The Prelude* we check the poet first attempting to catch and record the full passionate life which he spent through his senses as a child and youth. Wordsworth had the extraordinary potential to "live intensely in the past, he could revive and recreate; and it is a chief part of his purpose in '*The Prelude*' to recall and quicken into permanent life those pregnant moments. For they were, he well knew, the making of him as a poet" (Moorman, 1957, p. 22).

We can recapitulate without any hesitation that *The Prelude* is not an autobiography in the usual sense from the sacred pen of the "high priest of nature." Though it may, to a very good limit, be a way of information regarding the poet and a philosopher to the important incidents in Wordsworth's early life. In it we have a fine picture of his inner life and emotional experiences enabling us to have a glance of the innermost vacation of the poet's soul. So we may firmly state it a spiritual or poetical autobiography. Prof. Read (2006) has felt: "'*The Prelude*,' undoubtedly places before us Wordsworth-the revolutionary; Wordsworth-the man; Wordsworth-the poet; and finally, Wordsworth-the high priest of nature" (p. 25). These quote advices that the poem opens before us the great poet of nature, and Wordsworth as man and child, whose soul has faithfully been laid naked. Hence we may

be confirm to state the idea of treating *The Prelude* as an autobiography and consider it as a great poetically autobiographical poem without any hesitation.

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