

VI

Sonnets

Wordsworth's sonnets are always considered among the best in the English language. His sonnets as "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge", "On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic" and "London, 1802" rank with Milton's and Shakespeare's great sonnets. His success in sonnet-writing proves that his is a true poetic genius. From his poems already dealt with in the former part, we can see that he tended to write long poems. The accuracy and minuteness of his description and narration makes length necessary for him. Though from time to time he successfully explained his ideas in concise form, he preferred to choose long forms in which his words could flow freely. But the sonnet limits the length to fourteen lines. All ideas, feelings and thoughts have to be included ^{within} this limitation. Moreover, the essence of the sonnet is unity of thought or *idea*. Wordsworth had to follow this characteristic which is contrary to his love of freedom in writing, but the result is excellent.

Wordsworth turned seriously to the sonnet in 1801. In the note to "Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room", he wrote:

In the cottage, Town-end, Grasmere, one afternoon in 1801, my sister read to me the Sonnets of Milton. I had long been well acquainted with them, but I was particularly struck on that occasion with the dignified simplicity and majestic harmony that run through most of them,.....I took fire, if I may be allowed to say so, and produced three Sonnets the same afternoon, the first I ever wrote except an irregular one at school.

He first took up the sonnet in 1801 and wrote many fine sonnets. He gave the reason why he liked the sonnet form in "Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room." (1806). He said that people did not mind limitations if the limitations were of the right kind. Sonnet writing for him was like the convent's room for a nun, a cell for a hermit, a study room for a student and a flower bell for a bee. When he felt that he was too free and had various moods, he liked the restrictions of the sonnet:

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;
 And hermits are contented with their cells;
 And students with their pensive citadels;
 Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
 Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,
 High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,
 Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
 In truth the prison, unto which we doom
 Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
 In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
 Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
 Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
 Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
 Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

Sonnets are generally written to show serious ideas about important themes such as love, sleep, death. Some of Milton's sonnets are about politics. Wordsworth imitated Milton in writing his. The eventful period of the early nineteenth century provided rich material for Wordsworth. At the same time, though the sonnet form was much more classical than the ballad form he had formerly used to describe nature, he wrote memorable sonnets about nature, one of his principal interests.

Wordsworth's political ideas centered on the situations in England and Europe. By the time he began to write sonnets, Wordsworth had been completely disillusioned ^{about} the French Revolution. The revolution was no longer for the sake of the people. Napoleon was appointed consul for life in 1802 and Wordsworth wrote "I Grieved for Buonaparté" in the same year. Wordsworth's idea is that Napoleon did not have the qualities of a good governor and was not good and wise in the use of his power because of the way in which he was brought up.

"On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic" (1802) is an attack on Napoleon's occupation of the Venetian Republic. In Wordsworth's opinion, Napoleon represented the wrong kind of ambition. The sonnet was written in honour of Napoleon's victim. He sympathized with the oppressed people of Venice and praised its glory in the past. Venice used to be powerful and prosperous. She used to be free, being "the eldest Child of Liberty" and she had never been violated. Her prosperity came from sea trade and each year the people held a ceremony

wedding her to the sea. All those things were gone and, Wordsworth said, we should regret it.

Those titles vanish, and that strength decay;
 Yet shall some tribute of regret be paid
 When her long life hath reached its final day:
 Men are we and must grieve when even the Shade
 Of that which once was great, is passed away.

Wordsworth's sympathy with those who were oppressed by Napoleon occurred again in other sonnets. "To Toussaint L'Ouverture" was dedicated to a leader of slaves in San Domingo who refused to obey Napoleon's edict re-establishing slavery. Toussaint worked under the French authorities. When he resisted the edict, he was captured and brought to France where he was imprisoned. He died there in 1803.

The poem was written in 1802. Wordsworth called for Toussaint to be patient and cheerful. He said that though Toussaint's fate was hard, he should not be discouraged. Toussaint had done great deeds and everyone knew and remembered them. Though he was condemned, those who followed his example would carry on his work. He said:

Live, and take comfort. Thou hast left behind
 Power that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
 There's not a breathing of the common wind
 That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
 Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
 And love, and man's unconquerable mind.

"September 1, 1802" was about a negress who was expelled from France by Napoleon's decree. Wordsworth saw that she looked sad and poor,

Yet still her eyes retained their tropic fire,
 That, burning independent of the mind.
 Joined with the lustre of her rich attire.

To mock the Outcast, he exclaimed:

- O ye heavens, be kind!
 And feel, thou Earth, for this afflicted Race.

In "Calais, August 1802", Wordsworth criticized Napoleon and his fawning flatterers. He reproached:

Lords, lawyers, statesmen, squires of low degree,
 Men known, men unknown, sick, lame, and blind.
 Post forward all, like creatures of one kind,
 With first ~~X~~ fruit offerings crowd to bend the knee
 In France before the new-born Majesty.

He said to them:

Shame on you, feeble Heads, to slavery prone!

In his opinion, respect of power was good if the people who had it had considered and found that the power was true power. He blamed those who hastened to pay reverence to Napoleon's "new ~~X~~ born" power because real reverence to power could only come with time.

In "Composed near Calais, on the Road Leading to Ardres, August 7, 1802", he addressed his friend Robert Jones and recalled the time when he and Robert Jones travelled in France and found the people rejoicing because of the Revolution.

"Calais, August 15, 1802", was composed when France was celebrating Napoleon's birthday. Other cities were gay but Calais was quiet. Everyone was doing his usual job. Wordsworth thought again of the time when he visited Calais in his youth and had the joy which "was then sublime". He thought that a man who could probe into himself to know his fate and live with hope is happy.

Happy is he, who, caring not for Pope,
 Consul, or King, can sound himself to know
 The destiny of Man, and live in hope.

Wordsworth said "consul" because at that time, Napoleon was consul of France for life.

"The King of Sweden" (1802) was written in praise of the king who inherited the throne because he was the rightful heir. This was probably written to stress his opposition against Napoleon's coming to power.

"October 1803" is a direct criticism of Napoleon. He said that Napoleon used his power to cause trouble all over the world and to oppress other nations. He said that Napoleon was the meanest of men. He was sad to see the things happening in France. He trembled to think that he once supported the Revolution which brought Napoleon to power. He was so disillusioned that he even doubted God:

I find nothing great:
 Nothing is left which I can venerate;
 So that a doubt almost within me springs
 Of Providence,

As his hatred for Napoleon and France grew stronger, Wordsworth clung closer to England. His feeling was not patriotism but mature and profound love of his country. He was proud of England, was glad to return to her after a short voyage to France. He was worried by the bad things happening in England and was critical of her defects. He wanted her to get rid of them, to improve and to be perfectly good.

"Composed by the Sea-side Near Calais, August 1802" is a combination of his love of his own country and love of nature. He was admiring the beauty of the evening star when he thought of England. He asked it to be her emblem because it was the brightest star and "Splendour of the west".

"Composed in the Valley near Dover, on the Day of Landing" was about the political conditions in Europe. He went to France and found that the nations had lost their freedom. He was glad that England was free:

Europe is yet in bonds; but let that pass,
 Thought for another moment. Thou art free,
 My Country! and 'tis joy enough and pride
 For one hour's perfect bliss, to tread the grass
 Of England once again, and hear and see,

In this poem, there is also a description of his enjoyment of nature. He was glad to hear the cock and the sound of the bells, to see curls of smoke and the boys playing in the green meadow. The sound of the breaking waves made him happy. They were able to do so because, "All, all are English".

In "Near Dover, September 1802", Wordsworth, while standing on the sea-shore, dreaded to see that France was so near to England. When he looked at the water, he felt that there was some power in it. He said that winds and water were nothing in themselves but they brought strength, power and deity to the brave. God controlled the wind and the water and God said,

.....by the soul
Only, the Nations shall be great and free.

This freedom of soul was expressed again in

"There is a bondage worse, far worse to bear"(1803) in which he said that loss of physical freedom was not so bad as loss of freedom of the soul and he pitied people who:

must wear
Their fetters in their souls.

"It is not to be thought of", shows Wordsworth's pride in the freedom of his country which had existed for a long time. The world looked at English history with respect because England had great kings, had the language that Shakespeare used, and held the faith and morals that Milton held.

With deep love of his country, Wordsworth turned to criticize England. In "When I have borne in memory" Wordsworth thought of the causes that ruined nations and corrupted man and he had fear for his country. He said he should not be blamed for thinking so because he gave high value to her for she was "a bulwark for the cause of men":

And I by my affection was beguiled:
What wonder if a Poet now and then,
Among the many movements of his mind,
Felt for thee as a lover or a child!

In "England! the time is come when thou should 'st wean", he mourned to see that England had let herself become weak. He said she should stop eating "emasculating food." He said that England had been prosperous and there was hope that she would continue to be so. The world pinned its hopes on England and it would be sad if England should fail.

According to Wordsworth, the social and economic situation in England was very bad and the people became wicked. He grieved to see the situation.

"Written in London, September 1802" shows his attitude towards the corruption in England. He said;

O Friend! I know not which way I must look
For comfort, being, as I am, opprest,

To think, that now our life is only drest,
 For show; mean handy work of craftsman, cook,
 Or groom!

He said that England was full of vanity; people had to show whatever they had. They valued man in proportion to his money, caring not for real character. They were not interested in nature and in knowledge. They worshipped greediness and cheating. They were all misers but loved extravagance.

- We must run glittering like a brook
 In the open sunshine, or we are unblest:
 The wealthiest man among us is the best:
 No grandeur now in nature or in book
 Delights us. Rapine, avarice, expense,
 This is idolatry; and these we adore:

People did not live modestly and wisely any more. Good order, virtue and peace and good faith were all gone:

Plain living and high thinking are no more:
 The homely beauty of the good old cause
 Is gone; our peace, our fearful innocence,
 And pure religion breathing household laws.

In "London, 1802", he said that England was then like a pond of stagnant water. All institutions which had been the sources of peace: the church, the army, the press, domestic life, private and public prosperity were lost. In that condition, England needed a leader of the calibre of Milton. He said that English people had become selfish. He asked Milton to come back and save them and set an example of virtue, freedom and power to follow:

Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
 And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.

Milton's life would be a good example for them. Milton was a genius and he lived apart from the people of his time. What he wrote was deep, pure, majestic and free. He led a humble life, but was like a god. He did lowly work when he thought it was for the common good:

Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:
 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
 Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,

So didst thou travel on life's common way
 In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
 The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

In "Great men have been among us" he remarked that England had had many great men.

They knew how genuine glory was put on;
 Taught us how rightfully a nation shone
 In splendour: what strength was, that would not bend
 But in magnanimous meekness.

But he said that France did not have great men to point the way for the people. France needed such men and their wisdom.

In 1803, while England was likely to be attacked at any moment by France, Wordsworth wrote four sonnets to cheer up the people: "To the men of Kent", "In the Pass of Killicranky", "Anticipation", and "Lines on the Expected Invasion".

In "To the Men of Kent", he said,
 "Vanguard of Liberty, ye men of Kent,
 Ye children of a Soil that doth advance
 Her haughty brow against the coast of France,
 Now is the time to prove your hardiment."

He said they should fight for victory or die.

In "Anticipation, October 1803," he said that though men might die fighting to defend their country, their victory "Hath something in it which the heart enjoys". If men died for the safety of their country, "In glory will they sleep and endless sanctity".

In "November, 1806" when the Holy Roman Empire was dissolved by Napoleon, he wrote:

"Another year! - another deadly blow!
 Another mighty Empire overthrown!

He said that England had to be brave and firm in its opposition against France. Though she had to stand alone, the people had to defend their country:

'Tis well! from this day forward we shall know
 That in ourselves our safety must be sought;
 That by our own right hands it must be wrought;

Moreover, he added that people would rejoice if their ruler liked to make them happy and was wise and brave and just:

We shall exult, if they who rule the land
 Be men who hold its many blessings dear, . .
 Wise, upright, valiant; not a servile band,
 Who are to judge of danger which they fear,
 And honour which they do not understand.

Besides politics and situations in England, Wordsworth wrote sonnets on several subjects. In 1806, he wrote "To the Memory of Raisley Calvert," in memory of the friend who left him a legacy. "Me thought I saw the footsteps of a throne", written in the same year, was about a dead friend. In this poem, he talked about death which is a traditional subject of the sonnet:

Thou art our king, O Death! to thee we groan."

Other sonnets on various themes such as "How Sweet it is, when Mother's fancy rocks", "To Lady Beaumont" and his translations from the Italian of Michael Angelo and "A Prophecy" can be said to be his exercises in sonnet writing. "Thought of a Briton on the Subjugation of Switzerland" written in 1807 is quite a memorable one in praise and encouragement of the Swiss people's love of liberty.

Another traditional subject of the sonnet which Wordsworth used is: sleep. In 1806, he wrote three sonnets on the same subject under the same title.

In the first one, he thought of his inability to sleep. He said that usually, sleep was mild and gentle but,

This tiresome night, O Sleep! thou art to me
 A Fly, that up and down himself doth shove
 Upon a fretful rivulet, now above
 Now on the water vexed with mockery.

He called sleep "gentle creature" and wished to be able to sleep once and deeply.

In the second one, he told us of his insomnia. He thought of all kinds of things in order to fall asleep but sleep did not come. The things he talked about are gentle and his lines give the imagery that has the power to lull, yet he remained sleepless:

A flock of sheep that leisurely pass by,
 One after one; the sound of rain, and bees
 Murmuring; the fall of rivers, winds and seas,

Smooth fields, white sheets of water, and pure sky;
I have thought of all by turns, and yet do lie
Sleepless!

He said he had not been able to sleep for two nights. When he was speaking, dawn was coming near. He wished he could sleep because without sleep, he would not be able to enjoy the morning's beauty and the song of birds. He said,

Without Thee what is all the morning's wealth?

He called sleep:

Come, blessed barrier between day and day,
Dear mother of fresh thoughts and joyous health.

In the third poem, he said people had spoken well of sleep and called it by sweet names such as "Dear Bosom-child". Sleep made us forget our sufferings. It was:

Balm that tames
All anguish; Saint that evil thoughts and aims
Takest away, and into souls dost creep,
Like to a breeze from heaven.

He called sleep "worst Tyrant" because it was obstinate. It came to those who did not care for it but would not come to him who prayed for it to come. Sleep was:

Perverse, self-willed to own and dis-own,
Mere slave of them who never for thee prayed,
Still last to come where thou art wanted most!

In one poem translated from Michael Angelo's on sleep, there are memorable lines as:

On me can Time no happier state bestow
Than to be left unconscious of the woe
and
Come, gentle Sleep, Death's image tho' thou art,
Come share my couch, nor speedily depart;
How sweet thus living without life to lie,
Thus without death how sweet it is to die.

As in the case of ballads, Wordsworth's intense love of nature enabled him to make an original contribution to the English Sonnet.

His sonnets about nature were written with great power. When we talk about English sonnets, we think immediately of "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge" and "It is a beauteous evening, calm and free." They are splendid, with pure beauty and incomparable imagery. No poets before him had written sonnets on nature and poets after him imitated him. It is interesting to note that Wordsworth is remembered for what he was the first to have done.

"Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802," was written while Wordsworth was on his way to France. This poem is the description of the city of London, in the early morning, its beauty, its majesty and its calmness.

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,

The comparison of the morning's beauty to a garment which the city wore is wonderful.

Though this is a description of nature in a city which is not common in Wordsworth, it is very effective and pleasant. However, he chose to describe the city at the moment that it was most "natural". The ships, towers, domes, theatre and temples then were not considered as man's constructions because they lay:

Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

This beauty made him feel deep calm:

Never did seen more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:

He brought the city into one unity and presented it to us as a living thing with a heart. The city was quiet because the mighty heart that unified the town was asleep:

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

These powerful fourteen lines give us a beautiful and unified picture.

"It is a beautiful evening, calm and free." (1802) is an equally good poem. He compared the beautiful and calm evening to a nun, "breathless with adoration. The simile is effective because the evening is a "holy time" because it is when prayers are said; a nun is a holy woman, At that moment, everything is extremely quiet,

the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea:

He felt the living presence of nature and its permanence:

Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder - everlastingly.

He said that he had solemn thought when he saw the scene but if his companion did not have it, their nature was not less divine. If they loved nature for its real beauty, it meant that they had come nearest to God:

Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
And worship 'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not.

In "Beloved Vale! I said when I shall con ." (1806), Wordsworth expressed his belief in the healing and strengthening power of nature and his love of his country home:

.....when into the Vale I came, no fears
Distressed me; from mine eyes escaped no tears;
Deep thought, or dread remembrance, had I none.

.....

.....

I looked, I stared, I smiled, I laughed; and all
The weight of sadness was in wonder lost.

In "Composed by the Side of Grasmere Lake" (1806), the same thought re-occurred. He said that while human beings were fighting and suffering, nature in the place where he lived was still as beautiful and calm as before and tranquillity could restore men. Where he lived,

Clouds, lingering yet, extend in solid bars
 Through the grey west; and lo! these waters steeled
 By breezeless air to smoothest polish, yield
 A vivid repetition of the stars;

He said:

"Be thankful, thou; for, if unholy deeds
 Ravage the world, tranquillity is here!"

"With how sad steps, O moon, thou climb 'st the sky" (1806)
 is the description of the melancholy looking moon. He said that
 it used to be:

so often seen on high
 Running among the clouds a Wood nymph's race!

That night, it rose slowly and sadly like nuns who always
 breathed in sighs.

"With ships the sea was sprinkled far and nigh" is a beauti-
 ful description of ships on the sea:

With Ships the sea was sprinkled far and nigh,
 Like stars in heaven, and joyously it showed;
 Some lying fast at anchor in the road,
 Some veering up and down, one knew not why.

Among those ships, he noticed that one was large, noble-
 looking and speedy. He preferred her to all the rest and "pursued
 her with a Lover's look".

In "Where lies the land to which you ship must go?", he was
 simply fascinated by wondering where the ship was going.

Another of his best sonnets is "The world is too much with
 us; late and soon." In this poem he explained his creed of nature.
 He said that men paid too much attention to gaining and spending money.
 They did not know how to make use of their powers and had lost their
 sensibility. Moreover, men were unable to learn from nature:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
 Little we see in Nature that is ours;
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

He said that men no longer appreciated the beauty of nature:

The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.

He said he would rather be a pagan with old belief in order
to see something in nature or be like a Greek who saw a sea god when
he looked at water:

Great God! I 'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Having glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.