Wordsworth as an Educationist

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Abstract: During the closing of eighteenth and the opening years of nineteenth centuries a revolution in educational theory was taking place. Instead of mechanical method of education emphasis was laid on natural method of education. The educationists of the time aimed to bring out natural responses of the child. Rousseau was one of the fore-runners of “natural education.” He suggested that the child should be raised in the country away from the complexity of civilization and to learn, not through the use of books, but by experience. To him, children should not be confined inside closed places and memorize abstract information; instead they should be set free to experience things themselves and learn accordingly. These ideas of Rousseau correspond with Wordsworth’s child rearing. He thought that nature helps in the development of inherent capacities of a child. He believes that child’s imagination is fostered by nature. In The Prelude he says:

......... bright blue river passed
Along the margin of our terrace walk;
A tempting playmate whom we dearly loved.
Oh, many a time have I, 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, or scoured
The sandy fields, leaping through flowery groves
Of yellow ragwort; or, when rock and hill,
The woods, and distant Skiddaw’s lofty height,
Were bronzed with deepest radiance, stood alone
Beneath the sky, as if I had been born
On Indian plains, and from my mother’s hut
Had run abroad in wantonness, to sport
A naked savage, in the thunder shower.
Fair seed time had my soul and I grew up
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear:

This research article will trace Rousseau’s influence on Wordsworth with especial reference to his poem The Prelude.

I. Introduction

Wordsworth was a native resident of the Lake District. His poetry describes a dynamic world in which people live in harmony with nature. Like Rousseau, Wordsworth believed that nature has a powerful influence on man and that the world of nature is a paradise of simplicity and joy. He believed that in the company of nature, man can think of no wrong and do no wrong because, “in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint,...because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, ....because in that condition the passion of men are incorporated with the beautiful and the permanent forms of nature.’(Cited in Owen,1974:71) For Wordsworth his birth place was a paradise he says:

But lovelier far than this Paradise
Where I was rear’d; in Nature’s primitive gifts
Favor’d no less, and more to every sense
Delicious, seeing that the sun and sky,
The elements and seasons in their change
Do find their dearest Fellow-labourer there,
The heart of Man, a district on all sides
The fragrance breathing of humanity,
Man free, man working for himself, with choice
Of time, and place, and object; by his wants,
His comfort, native occupations, cares,
Conducted on to individual ends
Or social, and still followed by train
Unwoo’d unthought-of even, simplicity,
And beauty, and inevitable grace. (98-110)

The poem begins with Wordsworth's description of his childhood and boyhood experiences amid lovely natural surrounding. He traces the influence of nature on his personality. In childhood he used to love river Derwent because it tempered his 'waywardness' and composed his thoughts. He says:

That one, the fairest of all Rivers, lov’d
To blend his murmurs with my Nurse's song,
And from his alder shades and rocky falls
And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
That flow’d along my dreams?
For this, did'st Thou, O Derwent!
Travelling over the green plains
Near my 'sweet birthplace,'
didst thou, beauteous Stream,
Make ceaseless music through the night and day
Which with its steady cadence, tempering
Our human waywardness, compos’d my thoughts
To more than infant softness, giving me,
Among the fretful dwellings of mankind,
A knowledge, a dim earnest, of the calm
That nature breathes among the hills and groves. (270-281)

Rousseau said let nature be your teacher. Child Wordsworth has a strong sense of integration with the external world. Wordsworth perceived nature not as something alien but as his friend, due to his intense relationship with nature. Sarker says, 'Between his ages of five years ten years, the poet abundantly enjoyed the beauty of nature-the beauty of hills, forests, banks of flowers, meadows, the moon, and the stars.' (Sarker, 2001:472) Wordsworth says in The Prelude:

Ere I had told Ten birth-days,
When among the mountain slopes
Frost, and the breath of frosty winds, had snapped
The last autumnal crocus, ’twas my joy
With stores of spring o'er my shoulder hung
To range the open heights where woodcocks run
Among the smooth green turf.
Through half the night,
Scudding away from snare to snare, I plied
The anxious visitation;— moon and stars
Were shining o'er my head.

Similarly, in the following lines of The Prelude also and says:

Oh! Many a times have I, a five years’ Child,
A naked Boy, in one delightful Rill,
A little Mill-race server’d from his stream,
Made one long bathing of a summer’s day,
Bask’d in the sun, and plunged, and bask’d again
Alternate all a summer’s day, or cours’d
Over the sandy fields, leaping through groves
Of yellow grunsel, or when crag or hill,
A naked Savage, in the thunder shower.
There was a reciprocal relationship in which the more Wordsworth gave to nature in his openness and love, the more he received. Wordsworth ‘speaks not of “not of outward things,” but of “passed within me” and of “ my youthful mind.”’ (Abrams,1971:94) As a boy, Wordsworth’s delight in nature was coarse and animalistic. This stage can be called as instinctual one. Wordsworth’s childhood experiences involved some other incidents. These incidents provided him the moments when Wordsworth’s better Reason was overpowered by a strong desire. Wordsworth describes such activities in order to illustrate those innumerable ways through which nature influenced him on his way to becoming a compassionate and a wise person. For instance once he stole another’s captive bird and then he heard some mysterious sounds coming from nowhere. He says:

.... when the deed was done
I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathing coming after me, and sounds
Of undistinguishable motion, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they trod.( Bk 1,321-325)

After this experience he was pursued by sounds of breathing and of undistinguishable steps which were haunting his disturbed conscience. During that period Wordsworth experienced another such incidence. One beautiful summer evening, led by the attractions of nature Wordsworth untied a boat which was left behind by some other person and began to row it in order to steal it away. Wordsworth shares:

I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
Went heaving through the water like a swan;
When from behind that craggy steep till then
The horizon’s bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct
Upreared its head. (Bk1,373-380)
The sight was terrible and then,
With trembling oars I turned,
And through the silent waters stole my way
Back to the willow tree; ..... 
And through the meadows homeward went, in grave
And serious mood;
.........moved slowly through the mind
by day, and were a trouble to my dreams. (Bk1,385-400)

The boy was troubled in conscience and was horror struck. He was profoundly unsettled by his inability to apprehend what happened on the lake. Moreover the mysterious occurrences made him see that nature lies partly beyond his ken, that there was an alien dimension to materiality which was beyond the grasp of living men. Wordsworth records dozens of such experiences, not for themselves; but for what his mind could learn from them. When Wordsworth recollected the natural scene’s emotional impact in tranquility, he recognized them, not for their beauty or anything else but for what they had become for him. The negative or the painful experiences were crucial to Wordsworth’s mental health. He believed that nature admonished him for failing to resist the mischievous urge. He believed that nature guided him and helped him understand and control his petty desires. Here after Wordsworth discovered that nature builds up the soul not with mean and vulgar works of man but with high objects and teaches how to recognize a grandeur in the beating of the heart. In The Tables Turned, Wordsworth says:

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

For Wordsworth, nature is the anchor of his purest thoughts and all his moral being. He believes that nature has a way of pricking the conscience and demonstrating morality for a wayward human. In Book 1 and Book2, the principal message is that ‘nature is not alien to man, not a stranger to humans, rather there is a bond between nature and human consciousness, such that human consciousness can have the natural or ideal growth and development only in the communion between man and nature.’ (Sarker, 2001, 494) Nature stimulated Wordsworth’s imagination and made him see into the reality of things.
As Wordsworth advanced in years his wanderings through the groves and open fields developed in him taste for solitude. The ‘Bliss of solitude’ deepened his love of nature. In calm moods Wordsworth was filled with religious love for nature and saw blessing all around him. According to Sarker’s statement, ‘the poet received from nature inspiration for ‘religious love.’” (Sarker, 2002:489)

Wordsworth says in *The Prelude*:

> Oft in these moments such a holy calm  
> Would overspread my soul, those bodily eyes  
> Were utterly forgotten, and what I saw  
> Appeared like something in myself, a dream,  
> A prospect in the mind.  

Wordsworth talks about feeling a presence that dwells in everything in nature. This is a higher and a greater Power that is in control of the world and everything in it. When in Cambridge, unlike the ‘loyal students faithful to their books,’ who aspired academic glories, Wordsworth would wander across the fields and searched for universal things.

> My powers and habits: let me dare to speak  
> A higher language, say that now I felt  
> The strength and consolation which were mine.  
> As if awaken’d, summon’d, rous’d, constrain’d,  
> I looked for universal things; pursued  
> The common countenance of earth and heaven;  

As Selincourt says, ‘there could hardly be stronger testimony to the soundness of his early education and the strength of his character than that he could pass unscratched through the Cambridge of his day.’ (Selincourt,lix)

> He lived in his own world, ‘…yet I was most rich–I had a world about me–’twas my own;/I made it, for it only lived to me,/And to the God who sees into the heart.’ (143-146) His soul ascended to a path untreated before to a community with highest truth and he felt uplifted. Wordsworth wonders at the power of human soul and says:

> O Heavens!  
> How awful is the might of Souls,  
> And what they do within themselves, while yet  
> The yolk of earth is new to them, the world  
> Nothing but a wild field where they were sown.  

> And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands  
> Press’d closely, palm to palm, and to his mouth  
> Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,  
> Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls  
> That they might answer him– And they would shout  
> Across the watry Vale, and shout again,  
> Responsive to his call, with quivering peals,  
> And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud  
> Redoubled and redoubled;…….  

The boy is reared by nature but there is an element of wilderness, of imaginative freedom to his education, which Wordsworth prizes highly. Wordsworth instead of rejecting the society redefines way of living. He upheld that:

> Youth should be aw’d, possess’d, as with a sense
Religious, of what holy joy there is
In knowledge, if it be sincerely sought
For its own sake, in glory, and in praise,
If but by labour own, and to endure.
The Passing Day should learn to put aside
Her trappings here, should strip them off, abash’d
Before antiquity, and steadfast truth,
………………………...and overall
Should be a healthy, sound simplicity
A seemingly plainness, name it as you will,
Republican or pious.  ( 390-400)

Wordsworth walked aimlessly through hills and winding paths. He felt that his journey was a ‘guide into eternity’ and on the roads he met simple people which acquainted him with the variety of human passions ‘by words, looks, sighs, or tears, revealed. Wordsworth says that he learned more about human life from wandering through nature than from formal education. Nature strengthened and increased his understanding, gave him hope for future years and provided a balm for his injuries. The Prelude discusses sublimity of souls attained by putting aside the petty needs of ego and material distractions. It depicts the struggle of the mind to regain that ‘blessed mood’ in which the human mind irradiates and transforms the world which it perceives, giving life and meaning to what is considered dead. Wordsworth says:

I never, in the quest of right and wrong,
Did tamper with myself from private aims;
Nor was in any of my hopes the dupe
Of selfish passion; nor did willfully
Yield ever to mean cares and low pursuits;
But rather did with jealousy shrink back
From every combination that might aid
The tendency, too potent in itself,
Of habit to enslave the mind, I mean
Oppress it by the laws of vulgar sense,
And substitute a universe of death,
The falsest of all worlds, I place of that
Which is divine and true……. ( 150-162 )

Nature stirs man’s imagination and clean his doors of perception, rescuing him from ‘the visionary dreariness’ of a life without joy.’ He claims that if man does not benefit from nature, the blame is ours and not of nature.

II. Conclusion

As Wordsworth grieves at man’s ineffectual hard work for ‘trifling recognition.’ He emphasizes the fact that man works hard to enjoy the eternal life but he foolishly adopts wrong means for the purpose. He criticizes the dry academic pursuits which are of no real worth on contrary they are the cause of man’s sadness. Wordsworth asserts that unhealthy approach to life can be altered through fruitful instruction. Dr Aleris Carrel says, ‘The born criminal…… does not exist…..there are born defectives…their moral sense has not developed. This disharmony in the world of consciousness is a phenomenon characteristic of our time. We have succeeded in giving organic health to the inhabitants of the modern city. But despite the immense sum spent on education, we have failed to develop completely their intellectual and moral activities….The happiest and most useful men consist of a well integrated whole of intellectual, moral, and organic activities ….It is only with such thoroughly developed individuals that a real civilization can be constructed.’(Carrel,137)8 Similarly Hazrat Ali (PBUH) said to his son, ‘A young heart is like virgin soil which accepts whatever kind of seed is sown in it. My son, I took opportunity offered by your childhood years for training you, before that your impressionable heart should become hardened and before that different things occupy your mind.’( Cited in Lari,1997:33)8 Wordsworth’s ideal education sought:

…to guide the fluctuating youth
Firm in the sacred paths of moral truth,
To regulate the mind’s disordered frame;
The glimmering fires of Virtue to enlarge,
And purge from Vice’s dross my tender charge.
(Lines written as a school exercise at Hawkshed,1951:483)
In *The Prelude* Wordsworth feels glad that he was not reared in the artificial environment of urban life because it negatively affects the development of a child. He thought that children should grow in simplicity, truth, knowledge, imagination, which he thought is innate in man and guides him to most of the virtues and assist him in seeking perfection which forms his moral behaviour, and also passion, which he accepted ‘the supreme guide of life…the superior reason.’ (Sarker, 2001:510) In *The Prelude* he says:

Simplicity in habit, truth in speech,
Be these the daily strengthens of their mind;
May books and Nature be their daily joy!
And knowledge, rightly honoured with that name-
Knowledge not purchased by the loss of power! (V.421-25)

In Book 3 of *The Prelude* Wordsworth expresses his disgust at the dry method of academic pursuits. For him scholars are ‘honest dunes’ for running after worldly advancements which are of no real value in life. What Wordsworth objects to in Cambridge is slavery to intellectual competition - the principle that dominates the college. He says:

Far more I griev’d to see among the band
Of those who in the field of contest stood
As combatants, passions that did to me
Seem low and mean;… (501-505)

In Book 5 of *The Prelude* Wordsworth says:

……O Man,
Earth’s paramount Creature! and thy race, while ye
Shall sojourn on this planet; not for woes
Which thou edur’st; that weight, albeit huge,
………………but for those palms achiev’d,
Through length of time, by study and hard thought, (3-10)
and yet Man (24)
As long as he shall be the Child of Earth,
Might almost ‘weep to have’ what he may lose,
Nor be himself extinguish’d; but survive
Abject, depress’d, forlorn, disconsolate. (28)

References

[5] ibid,489
[8] ibid,33