

WORDSWORTH'S MISSION TO HIS AGE.

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WORDSWORTH'S MISSION TO HIS AGE.

As we near the middle of the Eighteenth Century, we find that English Literature is affected by the great changes that are occurring in the industrial, religious and political worlds, and that it flows in two great channels; one marked by a cold, intellectual, cynical temper, having an artificial mode of writing, Dryden, Pope and Johnson being typical representatives; the other, the outcome of a revolt against the earlier standards of the century, is a literature purified by the new love of nature, the new sympathy for suffering and the new spirit of democracy. It is the result of the rise of Methodism, the progress in music, the philanthropic work in prisons and among the poor and the struggle against slavery. The representatives of this fresh stream of literature are Thomson, Gray, Goldsmith, Crabbe, Cowper and later the greater poets, Burns, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey.

Toward the close of the Eighteenth Century, we reach, in the French Revolution, the most stormy and critical period in the history of Modern Europe. In all great historical crises there seems to rise up some great man, who has been specially fitted by surroundings and education, to meet the special emergency.

"Seers, prophets and teachers have been divinely raised up to interpret the mind of God to man." So it was during this period Providence was rearing, amid the beautiful, rural scenery of Cumberland, one who was to stand forth as an exponent and defender of the true, the beautiful and the good.

William Wordsworth was born at Cockermouth, April 17, 1770. He was thoroughly educated at Hawkshead Grammar School and St. John's College, Cambridge, after which he traveled in France; where, for a time, he was completely committed to the Republican cause.

He wrote:

"Blessed was it in that time to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven."

In 1792 he returned to England and soon after published his first works in poetry, - "An Evening Walk" and "Descriptive Sketches." He afterwards lived at Racedown, Alfoxdown, Grasmere and Rydal Mount. In 1798-9 he traveled in Germany. In 1842 he was made Poet Laureate and in 1850 he died.

Wordsworth's message may be considered under several heads, as, higher thought, love of nature, broader religion, spirit of democracy, and his mission to poetry itself.

His motto was: " Plain living and high thinking", and his own life was an example of this precept. He lived on frugal fare and simplicity governed all of his habits; indeed, for the most part, he lead an uneventful life, yet he has contributed some of the purest diction and most profound thought to be found in English literature today. He was a firm believer in honest work; an exponent of manly industry and frugality. He was a poet of common life and in this realm he stands foremost. For many years he stood alone as the poet who found beauty in the ordinary things of life and made them the themes for his poetry. In Michael we have a beautiful and pathetic description of the humble life- the love, the joy, and the sorrow- of the shepherd. And again, in " The Afflictions of Margaret", we see his great sympathy and love for suffering humanity. He expresses in a true and comprehensive manner the more tender and the more thoughtful qualities in the spirit of ordinary life. He seems to see to the very heart of things. And thus by his lofty manner of expression and his insight into the very depths of things, he combines the spiritual and the material worlds. By so doing he touches the hearts of men and arouses in them new emotions and lofty thoughts.

As a nature poet, Wordsworth stands supreme. He has been fittingly called the "Priest of Nature". He teaches us to enter into the world, to put ourselves in harmony with Nature's laws and find in her the temple of God where we may draw close to Him and He to us. Wordsworth teaches that Nature is, or should be, the great formative agent in the life of man. His own life exemplifies this principle, because he shows us how to make a new use of the familiar things which lie open to all and give us joy and comfort. In Nature he recognized no fear. No matter how wild or awful her mood might be, he watched her every manifestation with an intense joy. He saw always the grand and the sublime in every aspect of Nature. His teachers had been the flowers, the birds, the woods, the green grass, the gentle winds, the starry sky. He looked on Nature as a great teacher and through her he could oftentimes hear "the still, sad music of humanity". In communion with Nature he received his purest and most elevated thoughts and his inspiration for his life work. He calls Nature the guide, the guardian of his heart, the soul of all his moral being.

The smallest and most insignificant things were recognized by him. Even the tiniest flower presented to him a lesson and suggested "thoughts too deep for tears".

In Wordsworth's own language I give what he considers to be the moulding influence of his life:

"Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe:
Thou Soul that art the Eternity of thought!
And givs't to forms and images a breath
And everlasting motion; not in vain,
By day and starlight, thus from my first dawn
Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me
The passions that build up our human soul."

And so Wordsworth's mission was to bring the whole world in a like communication with nature, that her purifying influence might bring to man an understanding and appreciation of the higher and more enduring things of life.

Again, Wordsworth's message was a message full of religion and and the key to this message is his love for Nature. Nature and religion to him are inseparable, because through his interpretation of the one he received his ideas of the other. He was led through his love of Nature to his love of God and then to his love of mankind. Regarding Nature as a manifestation of God's presence, he sees God in the clouds, in the balmy air, in the green leaves among the trees, in the gentle breeze and in the bright sunshine; and he believes that God will guide and inspire men if they will but put themselves in harmony with Nature and Nature's laws. Thus, he was not only the poet of Nature but he was the poet of the "spirit of man".

His poetry was a poetry of life, with Nature as a background. Through Nature he would lift the soul to God.

Wordsworth's love of nature and love of man led him to a love of democracy- of freedom, of equal rights and of universal brotherhood. He was not only a poet but he was a patriot. He believed that a good citizenship could not exist without a true manhood- that a good citizen must be a good man. He honors men of all ranks, rich and poor alike. He believes that each man is entitled to the best education that the state can afford and thinks a nation's safety depends upon the highest development of the individuals that make up the nation--all working together in a common aim to raise the standard of citizenship. He discusses political, educational and sociological questions. One great man has said:- " I do not believe that anybody of his time--statesman, philosopher or poet-- saw with such unerring insight into the great moral forces that determine the currents of history."

Nineteenth Century English poetry is the outcome of Wordsworth's life work. He raised poetry to a higher plane than before and gave to it a "Vital Soul". There is an element of personality in his poetry-" He speaks to man's entire being". His poetry purifies, dignifies and inspires

human life. He attacks the old poetic diction, which dealt with the artificial manners of the people and lost sight of the human heart, and gives to the world a simpler and truer manner in its stead. He uses the simplest language, the language of the common people. He teaches that the highest and most ennobling sources of inspiration are in the love of the true, the beautiful and the good.

Wordsworth said, "Every great poet is a teacher. I wish to be considered as a teacher or as nothing." The purpose of his poetry was to console the afflicted, to add sunshine and happiness to the world and to teach the young to see, to think and to feel. He talks to thinking hearts and opens to them a lofty and inspiring realm of thought. Wordsworth has truly been a teacher- a great teacher- and has left to the world such a collection of noble thought, as will cause all who read it to think more deeply, to feel more tenderly, and men will thus be wiser, better and happier.