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IMPACT OF ROUSSEAU AND GODWIN ON WORDSWORTH: FROM REVOLUTION TO REVISION

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Abstract:

William Wordsworth came under the influence of the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau and supported the French Revolution for its high ideals of equality, liberty and fraternity as given by Rousseau in his Social Contract. However, Wordsworth soon got disillusioned with the French Revolution after seeing unmindful bloodshed all around during the Reign of Terror in France. He found himself without hope and in a dull state of mind. He was now in search of something that could bring him out of dejection. Incidentally he came under the influence of Godwin's philosophy as propounded in the latter's Political Justice. He found a temporary relief in the rational philosophy of Godwin but it could not hold sway over Wordsworth for long as both of them were temperamentally different from each other—one being a man of emotion, while the other being a man of reason.

KEY WORDS:

William Godwin, Rousseau, French Revolution, Reason, Emotion, Disillusionment.

INTRODUCTION

William Wordsworth supported the French Revolution for its sublime ideals of Equality, Liberty and Fraternity but when the Frenchmen, forgetting its lofty ideals, had changed 'a war of self-defence' into 'one of conquest', he felt disillusioned with it. Wordsworth had hoped that the establishment of the values of Equality, Liberty and Fraternity in France through revolution would be replicated in other countries too and thus the dream of an egalitarian world would be realized. However, his hopes came crashing down when the Frenchmen themselves had gone astray from the very ideals which originated the revolution. He felt utterly disgusted when he saw the French people usurping the fundamental human rights of their own people while they had started as the saviour of them:

But now, become oppressors in their turn,
Frenchmen had changed a war of self-defence
For one of conquest, losing sight of all
Which they had struggled for:
(Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book XI, lines 206-209)
Actually, Wordsworth had hoped:
That time was ready to set all things right,
And that the multitude, so long oppressed,

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Would be oppressed no more.
(Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book XI, lines 192-194)

Wordsworth, according to de Selincourt, lost his faith in the French Revolution sometime in the spring of 1795 and “Yielded up moral questions in despair” (*Wordsworth, The Prelude*, Book XI, line305). Wordsworth now found himself in a despondent mood. What added further to his despondency was his failure to marry Annette Vallon, a French girl with whom he had fallen in love. Wordsworth could not marry his beloved for a number of reasons. Firstly, because she belonged to a firm Royalist family while Wordsworth was a Girondist. Wordsworth, at this critical juncture, found himself in a knotty dilemma. John Beer remarks:

If he married Annette Vallon, he would marry a woman who belonged to a different nation and culture. Not only were their religious allegiances different but he might be forced to surrender to hers in the education of their children. And he, a Girondist, who had been offered a position in the Girondist Movement, would be marrying a girl from a firm royalist family. The example of his own idol Milton hovered again before him as a warning of the likely consequences. (24)

A war with France proved another major obstacle in the way of his immediate reunion with Annette Vallon. These tragic events led him into a situation in which he found himself in utter disgust and despondency. Now he was looking for something that could take him out of this dark sea of depression and dejection. Incidentally William Godwin’s *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Political Justice* was published by the same publisher from whom Wordsworth’s *An Evening Walk and Descriptive Sketches* had just appeared. Wordsworth felt attracted by the philosophic rationalism of Godwin’s Political Justice and found in it a source of relief from despondency. Hitherto, Wordsworth had been content with his philosophy imbibed from Rousseau deifying Nature and making a gospel of ‘the General Will’. Under the influence of William Godwin, he began to deify reason. Here it is essential to probe into Godwin’s ideology to understand the basic tenets of his philosophy.

William Godwin (1756-1836) was a Calvinist, who married Mary Wollstonecraft, who was a feminist and a strong defender of the rights of women. Godwin was an anarchist, who supported anarchism but not anarchy. By anarchy he meant a society in which everyone was free to do whatever he liked. Godwin disapproved of such a condition of anarchy. Instead, he supported anarchism which he defined as a society functioning without any external restraints like governments. But such a society does not seem to be a reality until each individual regulates himself for the public good. As Lee Cameron McDonald puts it:

... it required the voluntary self-regulation of each individual for the public good. Here Calvinist discipline and duty come again to the fore. Godwin’s ringing demand was for a spirit of ‘universal benevolence’ attainable by education With a mechanical psychology that trampled on moral subtleties and with a dogmatic conviction that science would conquer evil as it conquered nature, he blended a simple faith in man’s capacity to reason, to improve himself and to feel the tides of ‘universal benevolence’ out of which comes duty to common good. (346)

As Lee Cameron McDonald has put it, Godwin gave more importance to man’s natural reasonableness and sociability than other aspects of his personality. Godwin believed that man acted reasonably if he was not put under undesirable restraints by the State. Francis W. Coker remarks:

He [Godwin] maintained that ordinary men act reasonably and justly when their normal desires for self-expression and fair-dealing have not been perverted by unfair economic conditions, maintained by the coercive intervention of the state. (193)

Actually, philosophers, like Godwin, held it unreasonable to put benevolent and reasonable men under the control of political magistracies, which are often composed of inferior members of society. It is often argued that Godwin was not a revolutionary. He was against the use of violence and tumult for the destruction of government. He preferred discussions to action and martyrdom. That is why he opposed revolutionary movement for parliament reform in general and the corresponding societies in particular. Godwin writes in his *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Political Justice* that the interests of the human species require a gradual but uninterrupted change. He who should make these principles would not rashly insist upon instant abolition of all existing abuses. Truth, however unreserved by the mode of its enunciation, will be sufficiently gradual in its progress. He further asserted that it would be fully comprehended only by slow degrees by its most assiduous votaries. The degrees will be still more temperate by which it will pervade so considerable a portion of the community as to render their nature for a change of their common institutions. People shall have many reforms, but no revolutions. So revolutions are the produce of passion, not of sober and tranquil reason.

Godwin was against communal organizations. He asserted that progressive enlightenment would free man from his social organization and from the political, economic and social deficiencies of society. He believed that by inculcating in the individual true values through candor, benevolence and sincerity, his

desire for opulence, ostentatious behaviour and the need for coercion could be discouraged. Godwin hoped that the reduction of wants by reordering of individual priorities would remedy the unequal distribution of wealth. He advocated the use of machine as it would abolish labour. He was against the state control of education. He was of the opinion that education based on freedom would lead to moral progress and the general reform of society. The chief goal of this education was not to impose bookish knowledge, but rather to strengthen qualities of the mind that would turn the student toward wisdom and guard him against hostile forces.

Godwin was an egalitarian and advocated same rights and opportunities for all. He was against private property, which he believed, brought ills in the society. But he was not a communist, as he hated the thought of organized group co-operation. In fact, he devoted himself to the exposition of the social and moral ills created by public government and private property. He held that both public government and private property should be opposed.

At a time when Wordsworth was losing faith in the French Revolution for its failure to secure equality, liberty and fraternity for the French people, he started looking towards William Godwin for regaining faith in the capacity of humanity to achieve peace and perfection. Duncan Wu argues:

By this time he [*William Wordsworth*] had read *Godwin's Political Justice*—a powerful influence on the radicals of the day. And it is easy to see why that work would have appealed to him. Like Wordsworth, Godwin was pre-occupied by the problem of why man, in his fallen state, behaved as he did, and how he might improve. Godwin's vision of a better society was based on a belief in the perfectibility of mankind, which he thought attainable through the full exercise of the reason. (30)

Herbert Read supports this opinion and feels that Godwin exerted a powerful influence on Wordsworth, which he could never wholly relinquish:

He [*William Wordsworth*] turned to Godwin for an alternative faith and found in Godwin something which was wholly sympathetic—a type of philosophy we should now call personalist. This aspect of Godwinism was never to be discarded, however much it was transformed, or transcended. (179)

Herbert Read firmly believes that Godwin's philosophy had its dominant influence on Wordsworth for a certain period of time. Herbert Read further remarks:

There is better evidence of his direct contact with the works of Paine and Godwin. Paine need not be considered—he was hardly a philosopher. But Godwin was another question. 'Burn your books of chemistry and read Godwin on necessity', Wordsworth's advice to a young student, has almost become a legendary oracle. There is no doubt—though again there is paucity of records—that Wordsworth for a number of years was dominated by Godwin's ideas. (177)

Duncan Wu has analysed Wordsworth's *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* to trace the influence of Godwin's rationalism on Wordsworth. Duncan Wu remarks:

... Wordsworth was enough of a rationalist to illustrate Godwin's ideas in his new work. Its [*Adventures on Salisbury Plain*] central character, a Sailor, becomes a murderer largely as a result of the injustices that impinge on him, and this is in line with Godwin's Critique. (30)

However, Godwin's philosophy gave no more than temporary relief to Wordsworth from his despair. Actually, there was a fundamental difference between Wordsworth and Godwin. Godwin was a pure rationalist, who judged everything on the basis of reason, putting aside emotions and feelings, while Wordsworth valued emotions and feelings, and was not prepared to subordinate emotions to reason. Helen Darbishire aptly puts it:

Godwin's *Political Justice*, appearing early in 1793, appealed to him irresistibly. But it could give no more than temporary relief. Godwin's man was a feelingless abstraction. Wordsworth's beliefs had their roots in passionate feeling. (26-27)

Duncan Wu also finds that Godwin was somewhat of a materialist, who looked at man as a kind of automation. He gave excessive importance to man's reasonableness. But Wordsworth was totally opposed to this view. Duncan Wu remarks:

Wordsworth's days as Godwinian were numbered. The vision of man as a kind of automation whose highest virtue was reason entailed a corresponding denial of passion. Godwin's perspective was a grimly materialist one that looked forward to Marxism. It was fundamentally antithetical to Wordsworth who knew that emotional truth was the key to those questions about man and society for which he sought an answer. (31)

Wordsworth found himself torn apart between the excessive dependence on man's reasonableness as induced in him by Godwin's philosophy and his inborn belief in man's intuition and emotion. In *The Prelude* he refers to this dilemma that by following Godwin's rationalist philosophy, he was working against his true self. He asserts:

In such strange passion, if I may once more

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Review the past, I warred against myself—
A bigot to a new ideology—
Like a cowed monk who hath forsworn the world,
Zealously laboured to cut off my heart
From all the sources of her former strength;
And as, by simple waving of a wand,
The wizard instantaneously dissolves
Palace or grove, even so could I unsoul
As readily by syllogistic words
Those mysteries of being which have made,
And shall continue evermore to make
Of the whole human race one brotherhood.
(Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book XII, lines 75-87)

When Wordsworth got disgusted with the French Revolution, as they had changed ‘a war of self defence’ into ‘one of conquest’, he turned to Godwin to seek consolation and solace in his philosophy. However, it could not have a lasting influence on him, as they were temperamentally antithetical to each other.

It is true that Wordsworth bears resemblance to the philosophers like Rousseau and Godwin but resemblance never means repetition and imitation. Wordsworth gives us the impression that if he had lived on a bookless earth, he would have reached the same conclusions. Whatever he took from them, he coloured it with his own vision and philosophy.

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