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## THE REVOLUTION OF THE SOUL: WORDSWORTH'S CHOICE OF THE EPIC THEME IN *THE PRELUDE*

ANUKRITI BAJPAI

Master's in English, University of Delhi

Email: [anukritibajpai98@gmail.com](mailto:anukritibajpai98@gmail.com)



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### Abstract

This paper argues that the Romantic turn towards the self was a turn away from politics. For Wordsworth, The French Revolution was not an event of world importance but an important event in his own life story. The revolution happened not outside but within Wordsworth. The political disenchantment led to the development of the self. By using historical, autobiographical and critical analytical methods, this paper tends to trace the story of choosing an epic theme for *The Prelude*. In this context, this paper looks at the intertwining of the personal and the political and the inversion of the traditional relationship between the two with reference to the epic genre. The first section looks at how Wordsworth after extensive deliberation chose to narrate his own life story. The second section explores the relationship between Wordsworth and the French Revolution and the revolution within Wordsworth. The third and fourth sections look at the realization that the revolution brought for the Romantics and the rebirth of the epic form in the Romantic period.

**Keywords:** Wordsworth, The Prelude, French Revolution, epic tradition, Romanticism

### Introduction

"All my tale is of myself."-Wordsworth, *The Prelude*

The conventional view of epic and tragedy as the greatest literary forms and the epitome of literary accomplishment, effectively placed political life at the core of artistic concern. Classical epics like The Iliad, Odyssey, and Aeneid record the acts of heroism of famous warriors like as Achilles, Odysseus, and Aeneas, as well as glorify political life. This significantly changed around the eighteenth and the nineteenth century with the advent of the

Romantic revolution in literature where personal became more important or rather inextricably linked to the political. Wordsworth's choice of writing his own story in his poetic epic *The Prelude*, can be seen as belonging to the tradition of a supposed rejection of the political life as an artistic subject. But, since the two are inseparable, the political remained disguised as personal. The themes of literary interest became about political affecting the personal. Wordsworth's biographical epic also became about revolution within and outside.

The Romantic turn to nature can rather be seen as a turn away from politics. Political and personal co-exist where one affects the other and cannot be exclusive of the other. In a letter to his friend William Matthews in 1794, Wordsworth wrote, "I recoil from the bare idea of a revolution, yet....how is that dreadful event to be averted!" (Selincourt 124) Revolution in *The Prelude* is present everywhere and yet seems absent. This absence is marked by what seems to be a deliberate rejection of the French Revolution as the epic theme of *The Prelude*. The rejection looks deliberate because of his extensive consideration on an apt epic theme that would make him a part of the great tradition of Homer, Virgil, Spencer and Milton.

In this paper I argue that Wordsworth's choice of an autobiographical epic theme was highly influenced by the political happenings of the time. He captures through *The Prelude* what was the zeitgeist of the Romantic period. The personal became important due to a disenchantment from the political, mainly the revolution, injustice and bloodshed. The revolution happening outside generated a revolution within Wordsworth that was marked by a rejection of the injustices of the political sphere and which highly influenced his choice of an epic theme for his epic poem.

#### **Deliberation on a suitable theme**

A lot of features of *The Prelude* place it in the epic tradition including epic diction and a reflection of the style of Milton in the verses. *The Prelude* has been written in fourteen books. Wordsworth's poetic inspiration seemed to be marked by two conflicting facets: on the one hand, the instinctive receptivity and reaction characteristic of infancy, and on the other hand, knowledge of the self, mental tranquility, and conscientiousness of the adult artist. Right from the beginning of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth is fairly confident of his writing prowess, "the vital soul" (l. 161), "the needful to build up a Poet's praise" (l. 168). The only thing he is unsure of is the subject matter that will do justice to his writing prowess and the epic style he chooses to go with. He has high hopes of producing a "glorious work" (l. 158) only if he gets a "nobler theme" (l.139).

Wordsworth's exasperation is clear from the lines of the prelude where he is searching for a theme for his epic poem:

I settle on some British theme, some old  
Romantic tale by Milton left unsung;  
More often resting at some gentle place  
Within the groves of Chivalry, I pipe  
Among the shepherds, with reposing knights  
Sit by a fountain side, and hear their tales  
(l.179-84)

I would record  
How, in tyrannic times, some unknown man,  
Unheard of in the chronicles of kings,  
Suffered in silence for the love of Truth.  
(l.201-04)

He starts with the thoughts of choosing a political theme or as he puts it a "British theme". He also takes into consideration the tale of King Arthur "left unsung" by Milton. He deliberates on the idea of choosing themes of chivalry, knighthood or on the idea of chronicling the life of an unknown king. Wordsworth spends around three hundred lines in the beginning deliberating on a suitable theme for his epic poem to finally start talking about his childhood which is the beginning of his own epic story. As can be inferred from the opening lines of *The Prelude*, after weighing both political and contemporary options and showing a keen inclination towards political themes, he chooses not to do the obvious. In a series of rejections and frustration he finally stumbles upon the idea of being the epic hero himself. He chooses to write about his own life, growth and development as a poet. This finally ends his struggle and biography becomes epic. *The Prelude*, by this feature, is self-reflexive in a way. It narrates the story of its own formation.

#### **The French Revolution and the revolution within**

What looks like just a Romantic turn from politics to nature, had a deeper meaning for Wordsworth. For Wordsworth, turning away from the traditional themes of the epic form was not just

a literary experiment but was significantly affected by personal, psychological, literary and political factors.

For Wordsworth, the real revolution took place not in France but within him. In Book X, Wordsworth writes,

No shock  
Given to my moral nature had I known  
Down to that very moment-neither lapse  
Nor turn of sentiment-that might be named  
A revolution, save at this one time: (X. 233-37)

It was the revolution of the soul for Wordsworth. After the French Revolution, Wordsworth turned to a deliberate dismissal of history. His poem *Tintern Abbey (1798)* perfectly captures the sentiment where he seeks solace in nature after the chaotic revolution. The French Revolution was the reason Wordsworth turned away from politics but it had completely altered him as a person by then. Wordsworth's new epic form with which he experiments in *The Prelude* reevaluates the traditional idea of politics as the center of nobility by exploring the human consciousness.

The French Revolution shattered all the political hopes that Wordsworth had. Wordsworth got stuck in an unpleasant situation when British government reacted negatively towards the French Revolution. He got divided to the core. He couldn't go against his own country and thus had to move away from celebrating the revolution in his life and writings. He wrote

I rejoiced  
Yes, afterwards, truth painful to record,  
Exulted in the triumph of my soul  
When Englishmen by thousands were  
o'erthrown,  
Left without glory on the field, or driven,  
Brave hearts, to shameful flight. (X. 259-62)

Reason became the new God and overpowered the emotional. The revolution turned into a mass butchering of innocent people. The bloodshed that came along with the revolution was one of the main reasons of shunning the political life. The revolution went against the very ideals it stood for. The spirit with which it started was nowhere to be seen. No one was fighting for fraternity, liberty and equality anymore. The oppressed became oppressors. Crowning of Napoleon as the emperor was the final nail in the coffin. It was like the "last opprobrium, when we see the dog returning to his vomit" (X. 932-36). The French Revolution thus taught Wordsworth how vain human ambitions are, which is evident in these lines,

That their best virtues were not free from  
taint

Of something false and weak, which could  
not stand

The open eye of Reason

(XI. 64-69)

The vanity and hollowness of public life altered Wordsworth forever. The person who was ready to fight for the upliftment of the good suddenly turned to self. It was like a reverse metamorphosis, a butterfly going back to its cocoon but only to find its true spirit. He stopped searching for the meaning of life in political ambitions and public life. He found that the true emancipation is the emancipation of the soul. For him, nature became a means to return to his true self. Turning away from revolution brought him closer to himself. He started a search for his spiritual identity. The political revolution for Wordsworth was just a part of a bigger revolution which happened in Wordsworth's life in terms of development of his poetic sensibility and his relationship with nature. In Book X he writes,

Doubtless, I should have then made common  
cause

With some who perished; haply perished too,  
A poor mistaken and bewildered offering, —  
Should to the breast of Nature have gone  
back,

With all my resolutions, all my hopes,  
A Poet only to myself....

(X. 189-200)

*The Prelude* and story of its formation is a classic example of how political and personal are inextricably linked and inseparable. Wordsworth's life and works were significantly impacted by the French revolution but he did not see it as him being a part of an event of national and world importance. He rather saw it as one of the events in his own life story, like all the other events, some as simple as the boat stealing episode which probably proved to be a larger spiritual experience for him. *The Prelude* thus becomes a remarkable case of the inversion of the dichotomy of political and the personal. For Wordsworth, everything had a personal meaning and significance in terms of how it affected the soul. This was the big revelation that the revolution of the soul brought for him.

#### The revelation

The revolution helped him come to terms with his mistaken conception of self from a man of high political ambition to a poet. He started appreciating little things of life. He also gained clarity about what poetry means to him which he later elaborates in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads. He argues that the true poet is the one whose "passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men" (Wordsworth, *Preface* 148) and who writes in the language of men. Self-expression, search for an identity and the growth of the poet thus become the apt epic themes for Wordsworth.

The deliberation on the epic theme and finally settling on the mode of self-expression was enlightening for Wordsworth. He understood what he wanted to achieve through his poetry. His job as a poet was to find the extra-ordinary in the ordinary. To look at the quotidian life like no one has ever looked before. French revolution had taught him the hollowness of public life. In finding a theme for his poetic epic what Wordsworth found was his own true self. Political life helped Wordsworth find the true essence of his personal life. Wordsworth found his true self in nature that stood purer as ever

without being tainted by the vain ambition of the revolution. He sums this up in *The Prelude*:

Above all

Did nature bring again that wiser mood

More deeply re-established in my soul,

Which, seeing little worthy or sublime

In what we blazon with pompous names

Of power and action, early tutored me

To look with feelings of fraternal love

Upon those unassuming things that hold

A silent station in this beauteous world.

(XII.44-52)

This revelation brought about by the revolution had a direct impact on the epic form. *The Prelude* is based on this intentional revision of the traditional notion of political life as the focus of nobility by Wordsworth. Where Homer and Virgil saw heroic activity in the public realm as magnificent, Wordsworth sees it as just "pompous," and he confidently turns to his personal sphere as a poet as a superior mode of living. He portrays the encounters of everyday life and admiration of common objects as paradoxically nobler than the warrior's quest for glory. This paradoxical inversion led to what can be seen as the rebirth of the epic in the Romantic period.

#### Conclusion: The Rebirth of the epic

Wordsworth goes from political to personal to the level of consciousness and being. Kenneth Johnston says for Wordsworth that "self-quotation is the strongest form of authority this poet knows" (Johnston 317). He does try to reject French revolution as the epic theme but revolution never leaves him. According to Liu, *The Prelude*, "lays history to rest through precise strategies designed to transform the scene of collective authority into that of the poet's original self." (Liu 383) Wordsworth domesticizes revolution, he doesn't depart completely but rather reorients his way of thinking about the revolution. He writes about how politics has made him what he is. This is what leads to the rebirth of the epic. Revolution leads to redefinition

of the things that matter and for the Romantics these things are nature, emotion, self and the little things of life.

Romantics moved away from what Paul A. Cantor called the "aristocratic bias" (400) of the epic tradition. The Romantic endeavor to reimagine the epic is an interesting turn in the history of literature. Not only this, it also completely alters the way we look at politics and literature. Apart from the style, diction and form, the thematic concerns of a genre also play a defining role in its formation. The epic genre also like other genres remained a mode to capture only specific thematic concerns. The epic, which sprang from the ancient world of military aristocracies, had been tied for ages to the job of commemorating great soldiers' valiant acts. The Romantics, when confronted with the tradition of Homer and Virgil, realized that they were too disenchanted from politics to glorify it. In Cantor's words "they lost all hope in political action and began to think of their own poetry as the means of liberating humanity" (400). What came out of this exercise was a rethinking of the epic tradition.

For Wordsworth, it was not just the revolution of the soul but the way to attain freedom was also from the soul. Wordsworth, like the other Romantics, came to the conclusion that "genuine liberty" (XIII.122) came from the self, it occurred inside the soul rather than the society. For Romantics epic genre became a vessel in which they could pour their life stories, a mode of self-expression and introspection. The result was a beautiful amalgamation of the two; true-to-self lyric poetry clothed as an epic. It had the empathy and calm of lyric and the greatness of the epic. This literary hybrid is not only a marker of the Romantic spirit but is also a beautiful conclusion to the story of the revolution of the soul and the choice of an epic theme.

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