

Social Activism Through Poetry

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Abstract

William Wordsworth's sonnet "On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway" vigorously objects to the proposed construction of a railway connecting two places (Kendal and Windermere) in the Lake District in the north of England. In my paper, I offer an analysis of the political and literary success and failure of Wordsworth's poem, and consider whether the platform of poetry is a logical choice for Wordsworth. I draw upon the eco-socialist criticism of William Morris, as well as the views of Tobias Menely and Timothy Morton as I examine the poet's arguments. I attempt to answer whether Wordsworth is misguided in asking specific landmarks and forces of nature to answer his battle-cry and join him in his revolution. The conclusion of this paper is strengthened by current environmental concerns regarding the Kinder Morgan Pipeline Project in British Columbia as well as the words of William Morris and Stephen Collis. What becomes evident by the end of the paper is that we have only begun to fathom the nature of poetry, and the poetry of nature.

Keywords: Wordsworth, Nature, Poetry, William Morris, Steve Collis, Activism, Once in Blockadia, Kendal, Windermere, Lake District

ON THE PROJECTED KENDAL AND WINDERMERE RAILWAY

Is there no nook of English ground secure
From rash assault? Schemes of retirement sown
In youth, and 'mid the busy world kept pure
As when their earliest flowers of hope were blown,
Must perish; - - how can they this blight endure?

And must he too the ruthless change bemoan
 Who scorns a false utilitarian lure
 Mid his paternal fields at random thrown?
 Baffle the threat, bright Scene, from Orresthead
 Given to the pausing traveller's rapturous glance:
 Plead for thy peace, thou beautiful romance
 Of nature; and, if human hearts be dead,
 Speak, passing winds; ye torrents, with your strong
 And constant voice, protest against the wrong.



Wordsworth's sonnet "On the Projected Kendal and Windermere

Panorama of Kendal (Cumbria) with the Parish Church (Holy Trinity) - August 2008
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Railway," which appeared on 16 October, 1844 in the *Morning Post*, (Mulvihill 305), shows that art could be used even in the nineteenth century for the purpose of social and political change. Wordsworth's radicalism connects him with today's slam poets who wish to create similar changes. In today's British Columbia, he would very easily create an alliance with all those opposing the Kinder Morgan Pipeline project. The arguments in Wordsworth's sonnet would find a degree of sympathy with certain environmentalists today, though the sonnet itself failed to successfully prevent the construction of a railway line from Kendal to Windermere

(Mulvihill 306). This paper analyzes the poetic merit of Wordsworth's sonnet objecting the proposed railway for Kendal and Windermere, as well as the validity of poetry, and in particular the sonnet form, as a platform for registering complaints and effecting positive political and social change.

The sonnet opens with a question that equates the progress and industry of the railway with physical violation of nature; "Is there no nook of English ground secure/ From rash assault?" (1-2). James Mulvihill posits that this question references the Napoleonic War years and likens "urban working class tourists [to] Napoleon's revolutionary rabble" (306). Wordsworth objects to the mass tourism (308) that would infiltrate the peace of the Lake District and, in doing so, he argues everyone should have access to nature, but only certain ways are appropriate (308). These methods of luxuriating in the riches that nature has to offer should not have a negative impact on the very things that people are trying to enjoy. As Mulvihill says, "one argument for the line was that it would allow large numbers of factory workers to take day trips to the Lake District, thus briefly escaping urban blight" (305). In light of this view, Wordsworth's opinion seems elitist: not everyone has the leisure or security to wander through the natural world in solitude. The railway line would have made nature's offerings easier to reach by others, and, while the poet argues against mass tourism, he seems to contradict himself. Wordsworth argued all his life that everyone has the right to access natural spaces (Bate 47). However, Mulvihill maintains that the poet complained to a friend that his critics "actually accuse [him] of desiring to interfere with the innocent enjoyments of the poor, by preventing this district becoming accessible to them by a railway" (306). Wordsworth did not expect that the success of his *Guide to the Lakes* would create such profound interest in people wanting to experience nature as he did. Though he does not express regret for praising his home county in this sonnet particularly, it is certainly something that must have been on his mind. His complaint to his unidentified friend, however, tells us that he does not object to people's access to the area, but he takes issue with *how* they travel to this place that is so treasured by him. The poet laments the fact that the beauty of "a countryside [is] reduced to the dimensions of a train window, each glimpse as fleeting as a movie frame" (Mulvihill quoting Walter Benjamin 325).

The theme of mass tourism assaulting the quiet country life continues in the next part of the poem, pertaining to Wordsworth's personal plans going asunder: "Schemes of retirement sown/ In youth, and mid the busy world kept

pure/ As when their earliest flowers of hope were blown,/ Must perish; - how can they this blight endure?" (2-5). Wordsworth here reveals his fears that the busy industrial city ways will encroach upon the simplicity of country life, starting with the railway and all that it brings: crowds, pollution, and noise. Hope and dreams are comparable to seeds that flower, and are fragile and vulnerable. Presented in this natural form and then disappearing, the poet's emotions have a powerful effect. The railway is then associated with a "blight", a disease that afflicts plant life (again a potent metaphor), but the engineers and politicians holding the reins of control may not have had the sensitivity to feel its impact. The words "sensitivity" and "sensibility" can be traced etymologically to the Latin *sentire*, which means in English "to be aware" (Menely 30). According to Tobias Menely, "sensibility describes the affective susceptibility of a sentient being" (31). Drawing on Jacques Derrida, Menely explains further:

the individual's "auto-affection" is externalized, brought to the "outside, the exposed surface of the body," in a form that "signifies," enabling the individual to be 'affected by,' and to affect 'the other.' (Menely 31)

Even politicians are a part of what Timothy Morton calls the "entangled mesh" of life. Hence, they too cannot be entirely detached and deaf to the appeals of other participants in the symbiotic relationships that connect everything on our planet.

In the next section of the poem, Wordsworth champions the powerless peasants:

And must he too the ruthless change bemoan
Who scorns a false utilitarian lure
Mid his paternal fields at random thrown? (6-8)

The railway line will disrupt the livelihood of those who depend upon the fields through which the line must run. The fields in this case are "paternal" since they feed and look after the peasants who tend them. However, Wordsworth's use of the word may have been an appeal to those in power, since "paternal" also implies tradition. "Paternal" also connects people to their relationship with the divine, since God is traditionally thought of as male. Hence, to call the fields paternal is to also connect them to a God figure. Further, the fact that

Wordsworth mentions "false utilitarian lure" indicates that he is cognizant of the arguments in support of the railway. Yet he calls those arguments a "lure," meaning that they are there to mislead people from the destruction that the project would entail. Wordsworth's empathy for the local residents, as expressed within the poem, makes one ask certain questions: were the Lake District farmers consulted or compensated for their losses?

In the next section of the poem, Wordsworth calls upon specific natural forces to join him in his protest. The poet is asking for the impossible to occur, and one wonders if he has indeed at this point in the poem already admitted defeat.

Baffle the threat, bright Scene, from Orrest-head
 Given to the pausing traveller's rapturous glance:
 Plead for thy peace, thou beautiful romance
 Of nature; and, if human hearts be dead,
 Speak, passing winds; ye torrents, with your strong
 And constant voice, protest against the wrong. (9-14)



View towards Lake Windermere from Orrest-Head Summit, November, 2006.
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While it is true that humans are often overpowered by certain natural forces such as floods, storms, and earthquakes, it is misguided or deluded to think that nature can, in any way, curb human impulses to change or exploit it for selfish reasons-- or to assume that nature can speak for itself and protest. Nevertheless, there are certain ways that the human body reacts in today's world to simple natural forces that make one consider that Wordsworth was perhaps not so idiosyncratic after all. Many among us every spring have an allergic reaction to pollen and many others of us have immune systems that reject certain plants and foods. This could very well be nature's way of defending itself against the human assaults it has to endure on a daily basis. If plants are "the food for life" according to scientists and "food for the spirit" according to the poets of the Romantic Era, as explained by Jonathan Bate (39-40), then do our modern allergies suggest that nature has served its eviction notice? Does this imply that nature is no longer our home because we have violated the sanctity of our relationship through the violence of our exploitative appetites? Tobias Menely explains that language resulting from voice and speech is not the only way of establishing communication (19-23). Buried within the words "semantic" and "semiotic" is a linguistic history that defines the terms as "signal, symptom, mark, or symbol" (23). It is too simplistic to distinguish between animals and humans by referring to our ability to speak (23-26). Even between humans, not all communication occurs through speech; there are other crucial elements that are involved, such as "the expressivity of voice, countenance, and gesture, the blush and the tear, [and] the trembling body" (31). All life forms and non-life forms are in an interconnected and interdependent mesh that is infinite (Morton 24), and as such we are in a symbiotic relationship with all other matter in which communication occurs at macroscopic and microscopic levels (Morton 24); this communication takes place in the form of exchange, negotiation, and transference of material and information, whether it is an atom, or a strand of DNA. Due to this constant and persistent interconnectedness, "differentiating between one species and another is never absolute [and additionally], there is no 'outside' of the system of life forms" (24). Therefore, the eccentricity in the sentiments in Wordsworth's poem expressing his faith in nature's powerful and purposeful agency are significantly decreased in view of all these considerations.

It is worthwhile to trace the political failure and success of Wordsworth's sonnet through its publication and reception history. It is reported that

Wordsworth received a "vehement response" to his poem and then to continue his complaint he wrote "two open letters to the editor of the *Post*" (Mulvihill 306). The first of the letters was published on December 11, 1844, and the second was published on December 17, and further received "a torrent of abuse" (306). In the new year, he published the sonnet and the letters together as a pamphlet (306). Hence it is heartening to hear that Wordsworth did not stop with just the writing of the sonnet. However, unfortunately all of Wordsworth's attempts were in vain: "The Board of Trade recommended incorporation of the Kendal and Windermere Railway by an Act of Parliament, and the line was completed on 21 April 1847" (306). Therefore, one must ask what specifically in the poem fails to garner support.

The problem may be the constricting form of the sonnet itself, requiring a specific rhyme and meter. Rather than choose a form traditionally used to express love for an unattainable women, he could have selected one that was more commonly associated with social protest. Wordsworth tries to free himself from the rigidity of the sonnet form by using enjambment and punctuating the thought partway through the next line, instead of necessarily at the end of the line:

Is there no nook of English ground secure
From rash assault? Schemes of retirement sown (1-2)

However, this use of enjambment makes one place less importance on the rhyme, and perhaps this de-emphasis robs the poem of its full political impact. Nevertheless, there are some aspects of Wordsworth's approach that complement his philosophy and the message he is trying to get across to the public. Plato asserts that all poets are liars: poetry can, at best, only gesture at the truth (Hollander 643). The sonnet form in particular has had a long history in western literary tradition and Zachariah Wells attributes the endurance of the sonnet to its malleability (Chiasson et al 48). On the other hand, the mathematical precision of meter and rhyme enforce a greater structure and rigidity to poetic expression, making it more excruciatingly painful to convey any poetic sentiment (48). This suffering is at the very heart of the nature of the sonnet. The poet's agony, in combination with the limitations of poetry allowing it to only hint at the truth, align perfectly with nature's ability to communicate without words through its own natural forces, such as wind and water.

It is easy to be under the misapprehension that Wordsworth had not been harsh enough in his sonnet. His words could have been stronger, and the form in which he chose to express his feelings could have been more powerful. However, nature and poetry function in similar ways: they communicate with aspects of ourselves from which we may be temporarily dissociated, but remain (nevertheless) connected; they plant little seedlings of thought within our physiological and psychological systems that bear fruit in due course. Wordsworth's sonnet, "On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway," has some powerful imagery and ends with the poet calling upon nature to join the fight against industrialization. He calls the proposed railway line a "blight," a clear appeal on behalf of the farming community and calls the fields that nourish us, "paternal" giving them a sense of patriarchy as well as a link to the divine. The success of Wordsworth's sonnet needs to be evaluated by more than simply examining the change that he affected within the years of the poem's publication. It is easy to see that Wordsworth's philosophy, as represented within his poetry, inspired people such as William Morris. Morris was deeply concerned that capitalism was injurious and "fundamentally incompatible with Earth's ecological balance" (Miller, 2015, 395). In addition to making his sentiments known through literary works such as *News From Nowhere*, Morris also delivered lectures, like the one he gave in 1884 called "Art and Socialism" where he said the following:

[under the] grasp of inexorable Commerce... our green fields and clear waters, nay the very air we breathe are turned...to dirt... under the present gospel of Capital not only is there no hope of bettering it, but... things grow worse year by year, day by day. Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die - choked by filth. (Miller, 2015, 396)



The title pages of "The works of Geoffrey Chaucer now newly imprinted", published by Kelmscott Press in 1896 in an edition of 425 copies. These pages were designed by William Morris. This copy is owned by the California State Library. Photo by Jim Heaphy. By Cullen328 - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=51149091>

Morris is like Wordsworth in disguise, but perhaps even more radical. He was blunt in his outrage that "whole counties of England, and the heavens that hang over them ...disappeared beneath a crust of unutterable grime" (401). Morris inherited his family's wealth that was derived from shares in the Devon Great Consols copper mine, but his socialist analysis of society allowed him to get rid of his shares in the mine (397). The books that he produced through the Kelmscott Press, lauded skilled labour, intricate workmanship visible in the printing, binding, and borders featuring botanical imagery (Miller, 2011, 13-14). Morris, in this case, is speaking through gestures that mirror nature and poetry as he leads by example and objects to mass production much like Wordsworth, who objected to mass tourism and favoured cottage industries. He was truly able to articulate Wordsworth's sentiments and legacy, as well as his own in the following statement: "Wealth is what Nature gives us... the sunlight, the fresh air, the unspoiled face of the earth" (Miller, 2015, 402). Wordsworth's success and legacy lies also in the current definition of a National Park that is used by England: it is property that should "benefit the whole nation," must consist of "landscape beauty, wild country," as well as having a marked "importance of the open air, respect for historical buildings within it, traditional agricultural practices" within those spaces (Bate 48-49). Though the Kendal and Windermere Railway construction went

through, there are still segments of English countryside and landscapes that are protected due to Wordsworth's efforts. Perhaps what is faulty is not Wordsworth's poetry but rather our definition of what constitutes success or failure. Perhaps my methods and definitions are entirely capitalistic and rely too much on empiricism. The triumph of poetry cannot be limited to known quantifiable methods just as nature's communication is beyond vocalized speech.

Wordsworth's poetry continues to affect present day political tensions about environmental concerns in Burnaby, British Columbia. Stephen Collis mourns the death of the idyllic landscape in his recent book of poetry *Once in Blockadia*. He channels Wordsworth as a poet and an activist and, in doing so, has been arrested for the printed text of his poetry as well as his involvement in protesting the Kinder Morgan Pipeline (Collis). When asked if poetry is capable of changing the minds of politicians, Collis responded that poetry works on the affect of the people and that is what in turn creates changes in the systems and institutions we put in place (Collis). His poems mourn the loss of the Grasmere within our domestic landscapes, and within ourselves in his poems titled "Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands" and "Home at Gasmere." If Wordsworth were to look at his poetic legacy in poets like Stephen Collis, he would undoubtedly agree that social activism is possible through poetry, and that his sonnet titled "On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway" was a success.

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