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Wordsworth and Industrialization in 1833

Until new technology becomes the old technology, anxiety about the future of humanity often runs rampant. Industrialization created new problems as it solved older ones. Its disturbance to the landscape and overturning of customs created anxiety reflected in William Wordsworth's poems. His idealization of pastoral life and revulsion toward urban life show his apprehension about mankind's future in an industrialized world. Over his lifetime he reconciled somewhat with industrialization. In his later sonnet, "Steamboats, Viaducts, and Railways," he warily accepts it, giving it credit for its capabilities and withholding ultimate judgment of its overall affects.

Although years later Wordsworth cited this poem as evidence that he supported railways, a close reading reveals ambiguity. Wordsworth celebrates the innovations, but he shows enough fear of them to raise doubts about their misuse. Wordsworth's praise for industrialization comes with a sting. He criticizes it for marring the "loveliness of Nature," which implies its ugliness (4-5). When he says that, "Nature doth embrace / Her lawful offspring in Man's art," it only comes after he has noted the lack of beauty in its "harsh features" (9-11). Industrialization is not only ugly, but harsh. This poem damns with faint praise.

Wordsworth makes plain that the Industrial Revolution, for all its benefits, came with a price. All change has positives and negatives. The positives require no pronouncements and no defense. Most nineteenth century people could weigh the obvious benefits of a railway against the loss of property, the intrusion, noise and smoke. Wordsworth wondered about the unseen consequences. Only a private competitive monetary system could produce steamboats and

railways. No tyrant, benevolent king or philosopher king can mandate things undreamed of. Such power in the hands of ordinary citizens can prove magnificent and frightful. Wordsworth wisely remained vigilant against excesses.

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