

“THE UTMOST THAT WE KNOW”: THE SUBLIME IN “THE LONDON BEGGAR”

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摘 要

〈倫敦盲丐〉(“The London Beggar”)乃是華滋華斯一八〇五年版《序曲》(*The Prelude*)中的一段插曲，描寫詩人敘述者倏忽目擊一介盲丐，胸前有一張介紹自我的標籤，因而獲得憬悟。對長期試圖解開人類之謎的敏銳敘述者而言，這幅景象強有力地訴說了人類的苦難以及溝通的限制。正如華滋華斯許多詩作一樣，本詩富於吊詭；雖然極度無情地呈現人類生存之無意義，卻並不意味人類努力之徒然。標籤裡的「故事」多少可以用來解開乞丐的謎；如此肯定了文字的價值，對詩人敘述者頗有助益。超越的想像力展現了觀察和創造的力量。再者，與乞丐邂逅所帶來的曖昧啟示使得這次經驗，無論從柏克(Edmund Burke)或華滋華斯的理論來說，都可謂「驚愕」(sublime)時刻。這段插曲能夠強烈震撼敘述者，正是由於此種曖昧以及隨之而來的驚愕效果。

Abstract

“The London Beggar” episode in the 1805 edition of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* describes the poet-narrator’s spot of time at the shocking sight of the pauper with a label on his chest to tell his story. To the sensitive narrator who has all along been seeking to untangle the mystery of man, this image speaks powerfully about human suffering and the possibility of communication. Like much of Wordsworth’s poetry, the episode is intensely paradoxical. Although it shows in a most relentless way the insignificance of human existence, it by no means suggests the futility of human efforts. The very fact that the label contains a “story” of the Beggar whereby we can unravel—to a certain extent—his mystery means a great deal to the narrator. The transcendent imagination has manifested its power to perceive and to create. Furthermore, the ambiguous revelation that this encounter with the Beggar brings to the narrator makes the experience a sublime moment for him in both the Burkean and the Wordsworthian senses of the term. And it is on this ambiguity and its attendant effect of the sublime that the episode draws for its shocking impact on the narrator.

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“The London Beggar” episode in *The Prelude*, 1805, VII. 595-623,¹ is set in the hustle and bustle of “the mighty city” of London, where the Blind Beggar is found standing “propped against a wall” in one of the city’s “overflowing streets.” Yet, although surrounded by throngs of people, the Beggar is not one of them; he exists rather in a vast solitude. Having lost his eyesight, he seems also cut off from all the other channels of personal communication as well, for his “story” is “told” not by word of mouth but in a text written on a piece of paper. To the sensitive narrator who has all along been seeking to untangle the mystery of man, however, this image of the Blind Beggar communicates not only loudly and clearly but most powerfully. In this sense, the theme that beggars are givers, which Wordsworth expounds to the full in “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” is again picked up—this time in a variation. To the narrator in this spot of time, the Blind Beggar is elevated to the role of a guide or a seer. As he stands propped against a wall, he is seen as a signpost; as he wears a written paper upon his chest “to explain / The story of the man, and who he was” (614-15), he is seen as a blind prophet to admonish the narrator about “the utmost that we know / Both of ourselves and of the universe” (619-20). The episode of “The London Beggar,” like much of Wordsworth’s poetry, is intensely paradoxical.² But, as the present paper attempts to demonstrate, it is on the ambiguity of the revelation and its attendant effect of the sublime that the episode draws for its shocking impact on the narrator.

I. The Faces

Book VII of *The Prelude* offers us a glimpse of the many faces of London—its sights and spectacles—recorded during the narrator’s sojourn there. The accounts, far from complimentary, are on the whole rather on the light side; all the shows “passed not beyond the suburbs of the mind” (507). The London Beggar episode, alone, manages to dart into the narrator’s inner mind. In comparison with the “foolishness, and madness in parade” (696), this episode becomes all the more shocking and enlightening. In the “weary throng,” here, there, and everywhere, the narrator finds himself among “The comers and the goers face to face—/ Face after face—” (171-73), feeling peculiarly alienated. He laments:

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all the line references to “The London Beggar” episode in this paper are to the 1805 *Prelude*, Book VII.

² For a detailed discussion of paradoxes in this passage, see Pirie 224-33.

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How often in the overflowing streets
Have I gone forwards with the crowd, and said
Unto myself, ‘The face of every one
That passes by me is a mystery.’ (595-98)

This feeling of alienation may well be common in a metropolitan city where people are seen more as types than as individual persons, as the narrator states elsewhere in this Book. For instance, having mentioned the Italian, the Jew, and the Turk, he adds, “Briefly we find . . .”

Among the crowd, conspicuous less or more
As we proceed, all specimens of man
Through all the colours which the sun bestows,
And every character of form and face:
The Swede, the Russian; from the genial south,
The Frenchman and the Spaniard; from remote
America, the hunter Indian; Moors,
Malays, Lascars, the Tartar and Chinese,
And Negro ladies in white muslin gowns. (235-43)

In the above-quoted passage are catalogued more than eleven national or ethnic groups, giving the semblance of variety and distinctiveness. But these peoples are described *in* types and *as* types, classified by color, region, custom, clothing, or religion. Since the narrator’s observation is superficial (he pays attention merely to “form and face”), they remain for him no more than “specimens of man.”

More significant is the fact that the narrator, while so much a part of the crowd, yet feels so very estranged. This seems to characterize him as a borderer. The lurking sense of not belonging looms larger and larger until “The face of every one / That passes by [him] is a mystery.” It is an uncomfortable sense that bothers him, challenging him to look steadily at them as subjects:

Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look, oppressed
By thoughts of what, and whither, when and how,
Until the shapes before my eyes became
A second-sight procession, such as glides
Over still mountains, or appears in dreams, (599-603)

The characteristic Wordsworthian gaze—"Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look"—sets the narrator's mind working as well. While trying to figure out the mystery, the narrator thinks big questions such as "what" these "shapes" are and "whither" they go, without losing sight of smaller details such as their "when and how."

Commenting on "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," Frederick A. Pottle observes that "Looking steadily at a subject . . . for Wordsworth means grasping objects firmly and accurately in the mode of common perception and then looking at them imaginatively" (283). The same thing is happening here. If the alienated narrator is looking fixedly, all the while his imagination is running wild. That is to say, in a defensive mechanism to repel his self-conscious alienation he internalizes what he sees. As he proceeds to absorb himself in "looking at them imaginatively," the faces begin to blur into "shapes" and are transfigured into a "second-sight procession." Only then can the narrator regain his self-composed solitude. This is perhaps what Pottle means when he distinguishes "the eye that looks steadily" from "the physical eye." "The subject," he continues, "is a mental image, and the eye is that inward eye which is the bliss of solitude" (280). The narrator's inward eye, or his second-sight, is blessed with the transfigured procession transplanted to familiar places such as "still mountains" or "dreams."³ This kind of solitude is not just one that has rid itself of self-conscious alienation, but one where all familiar human props are gone, since

. . . all the ballast of familiar life—
The present, and the past, hope, fear, all stays,
All laws of acting, thinking, speaking man—
Went from me, neither knowing me, nor known. (604-7)

In such a state of total emptiness, he is mentally ready for the important spot of time⁴ soon to follow:

And once, far travelled in such mood, beyond
The reach of common indications, lost

³ The idea of blurring and transfiguration when looking at things imaginatively has been discussed by Pottle in connection with Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" in his "The Eye and the Object in the Poetry of Wordsworth."

⁴ Discussing the poet-narrator's encounter with the discharged soldier, Herbert Lindenberger comments that "a sense of total calmness" and a felt solitude are among "the necessary conditions for the visionary mood, for the narrator "has gradually felt himself removed from the earthly sphere" and is ready mentally for the spot of time. (85)

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Amid the moving pageant, 'twas my chance
Abruptly to be smitten with the view
Of a blind beggar, who, with upright face,
Stood propped against a wall, upon his chest
Wearing a written paper, to explain
The story of the man, and who he was. (608-15)

It begins as what seems a routine walk for the narrator, but this time he obviously oversteps his bounds by travelling too far in the vacant mood. “Lost” in his own contemplative world and losing indications of *this* world, he finds himself drifting physically with the teeming crowd, the “moving pageant.” At this juncture, like the narrator in “The Discharged Soldier,” he is “smitten” with the view of a Blind Beggar—a shockingly fixed shape, if not appallingly uncouth like the Discharged Soldier. The Blind Beggar’s “upright” face and his posture (standing “propped against a wall”), rather like a signpost, immediately catch the eye of the narrator. Just as one would read what is written on the signpost in order to get the direction, so the drifting traveller reads the words on the Beggar’s chest to gain his sense of orientation.

It is a shocking experience because the sight catches his inward eye as well. The picture contains a direct answer, or so it seems, to the problem that has been haunting him. The words written on the paper are supposed “to explain / The story of the man, and who he was.” Yet what an explanation of a mystery! And how unlike what he has been imagining! The story of the Beggar is revealed in a label on his chest. So astonishingly brief yet so immensely comprehensive! The astonishment of the narrator’s immediate reaction to this apocalyptic revelation is powerfully expressed in the following image:

My mind did at this spectacle turn round
As with the might of waters. (616-17)

To the narrator, paradoxically, neither the moving pageant nor the second-sight procession, but this fixed, unsightly, and sightless Beggar deserves to be called a “spectacle.” So overwhelming is it that it checks his train of thought and forces his mind to “turn round” with the power of torrents. The crowd on the “overflowing” streets who leads him “forwards” has only led him astray; the Blind

Beggar overpowers him and turns his imagination to the opposite direction, compelling him to see the bare truth about humanity—with no fancy frills but just stark essence:

. . . and it seemed
To me that in this label was a type
Or emblem of the utmost that we know
Both of ourselves and of the universe,
And on the shape of this unmoving man,
His fixed face and sightless eyes, I looked,
As if admonished from another world. (617-23)

The admonished narrator thus gains a spot of time. He is given an important clue to the mystery of man—a recognition of how little we know about the subject.

II. The Types

The emphasis on “type” is a prominent feature in Book VII.⁵ It is evident in the introduction of myriad shows and spectacles throughout the Book. It is evident, for instance, in the cataloguing of “every character of form and face,” of “all specimens of man,” as noted above. All these types converge in Bartholomew Fair, *the* archetype of superficiality, “a type not false / Of what the mighty city is itself” (696-97):

All out-o'-th'-way, far-fetched, perverted things,
All freaks of Nature, all Promethean thoughts
Of man—his dulness, madness, and their feats,
All jumbled up together to make up
This parliament of monsters. (688-92)

The chaos is so utterly complete and of such a magnitude that the narrator calls it “blank confusion” (693); elsewhere he equates the sight to what might be seen in the infernal:

⁵ Ford T. Swetnam, Jr., comments that “type” is “a word that appears nowhere else [except in Book VII] in the 1805 *Prelude*” (102).

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What hell
For eyes and ears, what anarchy and din
Barbarian and infernal—’tis a dream
Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound. (659-62)

This complete disorder, as both Ford Swetnam, Jr. (102) and Jonathan Wordsworth (297) point out, reminds one of its eminent counterpart in nature at the Simplon Pass in Book VI, 556-72. Like Bartholomew Fair, the Simplon Pass has its seeming “confusion”:

The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
And everywhere along the hollow rent
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn[.] (556-60)

Such a place can indeed be a “sick sight” (VI. 564) or a “giddy prospect” (VI. 565). But the seeming confusion is subsumed under nature’s art, governed by an entirely different order or principle:

Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light,
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great apocalypse,
The types and symbols of eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end. (567-72)

As has been pointed out, the “different features . . . are uninfluenced either by man or by time. Everything is permanent, sublime, ultimately harmonious” (Jonathan Wordsworth 297).

In the Fair, which we are told is a type of the face of the city, the situation is just the opposite. “Nothing adds up, nothing is natural, nothing has a purpose”; in this annual event, the “energy is impressive, but wasted and frenetic” (Jonathan Wordsworth 297). Its disgusting character is effectively suggested by a “vomiting” image:

Tents and booths

Meanwhile—as if the whole were one vast mill—
Are vomiting, receiving, on all sides,
Men, women, three years' children, babes in arms. (692-95)

If the Simplon Pass is a sublime version of imagination, then Bartholomew Fair is a nightmarish version of imagination. Being “a hell / For eyes and ears,” “a dream / Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound,” the Fair succeeds only in putting imagination, “The whole creative power of man” (655), to sleep. In a wonderfully humorous tone approaching comic relief, the narrator declares that in such a hellish world the Muse’s help is implored, not to inspire, to fire up imagination, as it was wont to do, but so that

. . . she shall lodge us—wafted on her wings
Above the press and danger of the crowd—
Upon some showman’s platform. (666-69)

The showman’s show is variegated, with no lack of color and sound, but yet, to the narrator it proves to be, merely, “blank confusion,” and leaves him unimpressed.

In direct opposition to what Bartholomew Fair stands for is the type embodied in the London Beggar, who, in a most unexpected way, becomes *the* spectacle by which the narrator is truly “smitten.” The Beggar and his label awaken the narrator’s imagination and, with “the might of waters,” checks him in his aimless wandering. The label explaining “The story of the man, and who he was” becomes “a type / Or emblem of the utmost that we know / Both of ourselves and of the universe.” As opposed to the vanity fair of sense and sight, the London Beggar’s blindness and dumbness become paradoxically a highly valued asset, capable of making him immune to all the transient sensory distractions of the fantasy world,⁶ where there is no end of

Folly, vice,
Extravagance in gesture, mien and dress,
And all the strife of singularity—
Lies to the ear, and lies to every sense— (572-75)

⁶ Pirie observes that “The Beggar, undistracted by all that they [the crowd] can see in this particular street, may more clearly sense the sustaining forces of that overall ecosystem on which every one in the street depends” (228)

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Turning from the crowd and the many spectacles to the Blind Beggar is like switching TV channels from the most extravagant variety show in color to a silent motion picture in black-and-white. What is lost in color and sound is more than compensated by the activation of imagination the Beggar is able to trigger in the narrator. The crowd, all showy and loud, tells the narrator nothing; the Beggar, mute and sightless, shocks him into epiphany.

III. The Ambiguous Revelation

But what is the revelation? It seems to operate on several levels simultaneously. The Blind Beggar, standing “propped against a wall,” is the very picture of human suffering. He cannot go forward, he cannot move backward; he is stuck in an existentialist situation of no exit. Moreover, he is entirely dependent on others. But the view of the Blind Beggar could not have made such a great impact on the narrator were it not for the fact that he wears upon his chest a written paper to tell his story. As has been suggested earlier, the Beggar provides an indirect answer to the haunting question of the mystery of man. The narrator proclaims that he sees in “this *label . . . a type / Or emblem of the utmost that we know*” of the human situation. The view of the Beggar together with his label differs categorically from that of Bartholomew Fair because it can and does tell us something about this man; in the Fair as elsewhere in London, everybody remains mysterious and impenetrable. Yet, ironically, this man is just another type, and his story a label. The utmost that we know of ourselves, then, is not much; the ultimate mystery has yet to be resolved.

This, however, must not be taken to mean Wordsworth’s despair. The significance of these lines for our appreciation of “The London Beggar” may be illustrated by a brief comparison of its different versions. In the first version, as preserved in *MS X*, they read:

and I thought
That even the very most of what we know
Both of ourselves and of the universe,
The whole of what is written to our view,
Is but a label on a blind man’s chest.

(qtd. in Jonathan Wordsworth 304)

By equating “*The whole of what is written to our view*” to “*a label on a blind*

man's chest," Wordsworth shows the narrator as being struck by an abysmally despairing view of literature (in the broadest sense of the term) as a whole. In this sweeping generalization the possibility of the mystery of man ever getting resolved is all but denied. The magnitude of the categorical generalization is drastically curtailed in the 1805 version, quoted above. The absolute proposition

(All) A is but B

("the very most of what we know . . . / Is but a label on a blind man's chest")

is reversed and, in reversing, considerably modified. It now reads:

In (some) B was a symbol of A

("in this label was a type / Or emblem of the utmost that we know . . .")

The general is turned into the particular or incidental. Notice, too, that whereas in the first version the linking verb is in the present tense ("is"), in the 1805 version it has quietly receded to the past ("was"), thus further reducing the universality or general applicability of the statement. The trend toward containing or delimiting the proposition continues in the 1850 version, where the corresponding lines are emended to read:

an *apt* type

This label seemed of the utmost we can know,

Both of ourselves and of the universe[.] (644-46, emphasis mine)

The poet seems quite satisfied at this moment that the label just "seemed" a type, although "an apt type"; temporariness is again emphasized; and the addition of the word "can" further indicates a certain degree of uncertainty about this human effort.

The first version of the lines," in *MS X*, Jonathan Wordsworth observes, "makes the point less skillfully but with moving directness" (304); those in the other two versions tend to be more cautious and tentative in their claim. The reason for these revisions is open to discussion. It may well be that, the truth as revealed in the first version constitutes a just representation of the narrator's initial shock at the sight of the Blind Beggar with his story written on a piece of paper. But the truth, too shocking to be overlooked, proves too painful for the poet to reconcile with. In subsequent versions, he is able to see the whole matter in perspective. Instead of

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viewing the Blind Beggar with his written story as *the truth itself* about the mystery of human existence, he now sees him, still shockingly revealing, just as a type or an emblem. Whether large or small, the claim is about the littleness of man.

While the other Londoners are easily transformed by the narrator’s imagination into a “second-sight procession,” the Blind Beggar is “fixed,” “unmoving.” In his spot of time, the narrator remarks:

. . . on the shape of this unmoving man,
His fixed face and sightless eyes, I looked,
As if admonished from another world.

The Beggar belongs, not in the London with its vanity fair where he is physically found, but in “another world”—“a distant world in whose view humanity dwindles very uncomfortably” (Jonathan Wordsworth 304). His fixedness readily brings to mind another “unmoving” man—the Leech-Gatherer in “Resolution and Independence”—who is at first seen as a stone by the narrator, and who is finally believed to be a godsend. Each in his own way disarms the narrator and leads him to gain epiphany. What exactly that epiphany achieved at the pond is we are never told, but the Leech-Gatherer, who is an “emblem” of resolution and independence, offers “human strength” and “strong admonishment” at a time when the narrator is at a low point and in dire need of moral support. The Blind Beggar’s gift, on the other hand, appears rather negative and destructive. And since the truth he reveals is about human littleness, it is only natural that large claims such as is contained in the first version should be cut down to size. The delimiting process is an index of how the poet comes to terms with his realization of the revealed truth.

The truth is about littleness and insignificance. It shows how trivial man is as represented by the Blind Beggar. It shows how precious little man, being blind metaphorically, knows about himself and the universe. Moreover, as if to add insult to injury, it shows how feeble words are, for they fall far short of explaining the great theme of the story of man. To quote Jonathan Wordsworth again, the poet “is taken completely by surprise”:

What if his own life and work—*The Prelude* is after all “The story of the man, and who he was”—could be seen by some remote and dispassionate wisdom as “but a label on a blind man’s chest”? (306)

This encounter with the Blind Beggar shatters the narrator’s self-composed solitude

and deals a heavy blow to his comforting imaginings. Whereas the other characters in London are easily reduced to second-sight procession, the Blind Beggar resists shaping.

And yet, the delimited and delimiting revelation has a definitely positive side to it. Although it shows in a most relentless way the insignificance of human existence, it by no means suggests the futility of human efforts. The very fact that the label contains a "story" of the Beggar whereby we can unravel—to a certain extent—his mystery means a great deal to the narrator. The transcendent imagination has manifested its power to perceive and to create. In this episode neither is the significance of the Beggar and the few words contained in his label slighted by the narrator, nor is the narrator's imaginative power hindered by the Beggar's apparent bareness.

"Words," says Wordsworth, "are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with If words be not . . . an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift" ("Essays upon Epitaphs, III," *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, V. 2, 84). In other words, the relation between language and thought has to be seen as body and soul, "each coexisting not merely with the other, but each *in* and *through* the other" (Thomas De Quincey 229-30). In the present context, the variegated shows and spectacles in Bartholomew Fair and elsewhere in London may be compared to mere clothing, impressive only in their superficiality; the Blind Beggar, on the other hand, is an incarnation of the thought, because it reveals the important truth about human littleness. As for imagination, it is, according to Wordsworth, "a subjective term: it deals with objects not as they are, but as they appear to the mind of the poet" (*The Prose Works of William Wordsworth* V. 3, 464). The Blind Beggar episode, as we have seen, demonstrates the transcending power of imagination to liberate itself from the tyranny of sight and blindness,⁷ helping the narrator to penetrate most imaginatively and see most clearly through the littleness of the Beggar's dumb show. Liberated from all the evanescent trappings of the sensory experience, the narrator is able to gain an insight into human existence. Though containing just a few words, the Beggar's label speaks much louder and more vividly than all the other types of people and various shows and spectacles in London. In this sense, it asserts the power of words. *The*

⁷ Geoffrey Hartman notes three stages in Wordsworth's development of imagination, where the trend is "from visible to less visible, from place to unbounded." According to him, the poet's mind is roused, first, "by sight"; second, "by the idea of sight," i. e., to half perceive and half create; third, by the idea of a blindness (to nature), i. e., to be totally independent of sight. The Blind Beggar episode belongs to the third stage (240-41).

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Prelude itself, indeed, being an account of “The Growth of a Poet’s Mind,” may be seen as Wordsworth’s valiant attempt at recording the story of man, a lengthier version of the label that hangs from the Blind Beggar’s neck. The Beggar’s label excites the poet-narrator’s imagination and enables him to imagine intensely independent of sight. The words contained therein become for him “Characters of the great apocalypse” (*The Prelude* VI. 570). Thus, paradoxically, the Blind Beggar serves as a blind prophet.

IV. The Sublime

The ambiguous revelation that this encounter with the Beggar brings the narrator makes the experience a sublime moment for him in both the Burkean and the Wordsworthian senses. According to Edmund Burke, the sublime is closely associated with the terrible and the painful. One source of the sublime, he declares, is “[w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, . . . whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror”; the virtue of such an element, he goes on to say, lies in the fact that it can produce “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (39). On his list of the elements capable of arousing astonishment, which is “the effect of the sublime in the highest degree” (57), the following are applicable to our present case: terror, obscurity, power, privation, suddenness, and the feeling pain (57-87).

The narrator’s encounter with the Beggar takes place at a time when the former is giving a light-hearted account of all the shows and spectacles that London offers, entertaining or otherwise. Though clearly a misfit among the crowd, he is feeling rather complacent and aloof. On the other hand, because he is unimpressed by the sound and fury of what he sees and hears, he is in a state of emptiness conducive to gaining a spot of time; for, paradoxically, “isolation becomes the means toward interaction” (Lindenberger 84). And he gets it when he is smitten with the view of the Blind Beggar, an epitome of what man truly is, stripped of all the trappings, real or imaginary. His littleness is our “utmost” knowledge of ourselves; hence, notwithstanding the revelation, the mystery of man lingers on. The littleness symbolized by the Beggar poses a threat to what Burke calls “self-preservation” (38); it can excite pain and danger, sources of the sublime. “The [London] beggar,” as Jonathan Wordsworth observes, “is a daemonic presence who embodies the terrors [the narrator] might be expected to control. In him all the fears that have been so

carefully allayed . . . are suddenly confronted” (306). The terror nullifies all his efforts of imagining and forces him to confront man’s true self squarely—that is, to see himself in the Blind Beggar.

The truth is so shocking that, when the narrator takes in its magnitude, his mind is forced to “turn round / As with the might of waters.” Parallels may be drawn from a couple of other literary figures who also receive terrible and terrifying pronouncements of truth. Oedipus, to put an end to the pestilence gripping his state, goes about most dutifully and diligently in search of the pollutant, the person who has killed his father and married his mother. He is told by the blind prophet Tiresias, “You are the man.” In the Bible, Nathan the prophet tells King David a parable about a rich man with numerous flocks and herds and a poor man with only one ewe lamb. When a traveller went to the former’s house to eat, Nathan says, the rich man, unwilling to prepare a meal with his own flock, took the poor man’s only lamb. King David is outraged upon hearing this story; he believes that the rich man deserves to be killed and that the lamb ought to be restored to the poor man by fourfold. But to his utter astonishment and sheer embarrassment, Nathan reminds him, “You are the man,” and goes on to reveal him as an adulterer and murderer (2 Samuel Ch. 12). So it is with the narrator in the London Beggar interlude. Being the symbol of humanity as a whole, the Blind Beggar represents the narrator as well.

“You are the man.” The shock of the admonishment on the narrator cannot be overemphasized; its impact on the poet himself is just as great. As the unmoving, sightless man is a borderer between man and object, between man and prophet, between this world and another, so the narrator in Book VII of *The Prelude* is a borderer between city and country, between this world and his imaginary world. The narrator is always fascinated by the borderers, Jonathan Wordsworth explains, because he himself is “the ultimate borderer, ideal, unapproachable.” Furthermore, “there is a sense in which these borderers are Wordsworth himself”:

They resemble him in their remoteness from common humanity, and they reflect the grandeur of his aspiration. They typify an imagination untrammelled, freed from all the anxieties to which the poet is subject —fears of death, transience, human (and thus his own) littleness. (289)

The pronouncement “You are the man” brings to the poet-narrator great astonishment through terror, power, pain, and obscurity (because one does not know how to take it). The powerful apocalypse is a moment of the Burkean sublime.

Wordsworth’s own idea of the sublime of awe and power, as expounded in

“The Utmost That We Know”: The Sublime in “The London Beggar”

his “The Sublime and the Beautiful,” reads like a refinement of the Burkean sublime of terror:

Power awakens the sublime either when it rouses us to a sympathetic energy & calls upon the mind to grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but which it is incapable of attaining . . . ; or, 2dly, by producing a humiliation or prostration of the mind before some external agency which it presumes not to make an effort to participate, but is absorbed in the contemplation of the might in the external power, &, as far as it has any consciousness of itself, its grandeur subsists in the naked fact of being conscious of external Power at once awful & immeasurable; . . .

(The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, V. 2, 354)

The first may be seen as a source of inspiration, spurring one on to aspire to what is ultimately unattainable; the second leads one to a keen sense of humility in face of a much larger force outside. Both are conducive to the feeling of the sublime. The ambiguous revelation of the Blind Beggar pertains to both the aspiring and the humiliating. In the Blind Beggar the narrator sees himself reflected and refracted. The insight that his littleness is our “utmost” knowledge of ourselves is such a painful terror that it produces “a humiliation or prostration of the mind,” and leaves him “absorbed in the contemplation of the might” of the Blind Beggar’s admonishment, “conscious of [an] external Power at once awful & immeasurable.” That “external Power” is, I presume, the ultimate truth epitomized by the Beggar. The encounter is therefore also a moment of the Wordsworthian sublime.

The Wordsworthian sublime reveals not simply man’s littleness. What is more important, it underscores man’s “obscure sense of possible sublimity”⁸ as well as man’s anxiousness to know the utmost of his existence. Wordsworth’s fascination with the boderers is indicative of an aspiring mind and its unconscious striving for the eternal, the absolute, the infinite. Hence we see the narrator drawn to the Old Man (in “Old Man Travelling: Animal Tranquillity and Decay, a Sketch”) with his perfect peace, to the Discharged Soldier with his “ghastly mildness,” to the Old Cumberland Beggar with his (supposed) oneness with nature, and to the Leech-Gatherer and the Blind Beggar with their other-worldliness. Such fascination leads the poet-narrator to attempt to penetrate those solitary figures; he gets interested in them rather because of than despite their deceptive appearance. But, try as he may, they remain obdurately and essentially enigmatic. They all assist him in gaining a spot of time, helping him to understand himself in that particular moment of epiphany.

Yet their real selves refuse to be shaped by his imagination; in the end, he cannot understand them. These borderers, all of them "faces," play an important part in Wordsworth's enlightenment, for it is through them that he sees the types or emblems of the utmost that he can know of the human condition.

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⁸ For a detailed discussion of this aspect of Wordsworth's poetry, see Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Borders of Vision*, Ch. 1.