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Encounters with *Lear*

Beggar Imagery in Wordsworth's Poetry

"Wordsworth's poem suggests that we must read the writer as a reader."
Geoffrey Hartman¹

Jonathan Bate claims in *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* that "the exploration and definition of a writer's conceptions and various uses of Shakespeare provide a way of defining that writer's Romanticism."² With regard to William Wordsworth, this has yet to be written, largely because critics have dealt almost exclusively with his more obvious indebtedness to Milton. There are some important exceptions, of course. In his *Diction and Defense in Wordsworth*, Geoffrey Hartman finds the origins of an enigmatic poem of 1816 in *King Lear*, even though the text contains several allusions to Milton as well.³ Bate himself gives a fascinating account of Wordsworth's ambivalent relationship to Shakespeare as a "poetic father," showing how Wordsworth both contributed and

¹ Geoffrey Hartman, 'Words, Wish, Worth: Wordsworth' in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1985) p. 210.

² Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) p. 5.

³ "It is possible, that the real block, or the poet defended against [...] is Shakespeare. In the poem of 1816, at least, Milton is a screen, or part of the 'outwork' (Freud's metaphor) erected by Wordsworth's imagination to keep it from a starker scene." Geoffrey Hartman, 'Diction and Defense in Wordsworth' in Joseph H. Smith, ed., *The Literary Freud: Mechanisms of Defense and the Poetic Will* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1980) p. 215.

fell victim to the legend of his antipathy to Shakespeare and how he built various passages on overt or (more frequently) covert allusions to Shakespeare's works.

I am following these directions when I analyse various instances of what I shall term Wordsworth's beggar trope, which, in my opinion, is influenced by *King Lear*, even to the degree of being a series of rewritings (and thus Wordsworth's interpretations) of some important aspects of the drama. Wordsworth's beggar trope is not a fixed *topos*: it is rather a set of features occurring in various contexts with different emphases and meanings, often at crucial points in Wordsworth's poetry. Some of the individual cases may well be debatable, such as the extent to which, for example, the discharged soldier in *The Prelude* is *actually* related to Shakespeare. Unfortunately, such questions are unanswerable, for there are no clear boundaries between the "realms" of the two poets. I would even risk the suggestion that the more fundamental the Shakespearean influence, the more deeply concealed it is in Wordsworth's text. I shall therefore analyse a series of interrelated passages which are, or can be, connected to *King Lear*, as the poet's complex response to Shakespeare's drama. Such an enterprise, as Bate suggests, will also involve an interpretation that seeks to contribute to a definition of Wordsworth's Romanticism.

Wordsworth's poetic self is characterized by Keats as "the egotistical sublime."⁴ This phrase seems to involve that Wordsworth would never give up his own personality or his own perspective for the sake of other perspectives. In other words, Wordsworth's poetry might prove to be inherently undramatic and thus inherently un-Shakespearean.⁵ If this is true, what kind of role could *Lear* play in it? For one thing, it might well explain to us how stability and self-assurance were achieved – if indeed they were achieved – in Wordsworth's poems; especially since the appearance of Lear-like beggars is always accompanied by a momentary loss of balance. The structural features of tragedy (such as discovery

⁴ "As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself – it has no self – it is every thing and nothing – It has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated." John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1952) p. 226.

⁵ Hazlitt voices this opinion in *The Spirit of the Age*: "We do not think our author has any very cordial sympathy with Shakespear. How should he? Shakespear was the least of an egotist of any body in the world. He does not much relish the variety and scope of dramatic composition." William Hazlitt, 'Mr. Wordsworth' in *The Spirit of the Age* (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1989) p. 245.

and reversal) can also be identified in the narration of these scenes, and their descriptive passages suggest apocalyptic powers at work. And yet, tragedy itself is always avoided; as if the Lear-like figures were the cause of, as well as the means of preventing, an impending catastrophe. To see how this pattern operates, I will now examine some examples of Wordsworth's beggar trope.⁶

TRAVELLERS OF THE PUBLIC ROAD

Collecting the Lear-like destitutes in Wordsworth poses some difficulties. One is the fact that even in Shakespeare's play there is more than one Lear-like figure for even if we ignore the various faces of Lear himself, there is also Gloucester, whose tragedy complements that of Lear; their actions and characters (their "blindnesses") being interwoven and even their consciousness seeming to merge after Gloucester, blinded, starts out to Dover. Analysing the scene where the blinded Gloucester meets Lear, Cavell writes: "Gloucester has by now become not just a figure "parallel" to Lear, but Lear's double; he does not merely represent Lear, but is psychically identical with him."⁷ One of the most important of Wordsworth's Lear-like figures, the blind beggar in *The Prelude*, indeed resembles Gloucester rather than Lear, while the passenger who meets him (that is, "the poet") takes the part of the king.

There is another character in the drama apart from Lear and Gloucester, who is reduced to the state of "a poor, bare, forked animal" and thus can be a model for Wordsworth: Edgar, the only 'real' beggar of the play (ironically, he is also the one who takes on this role voluntarily as a disguise). Edgar as Poor Tom becomes an emblem of the *reductio ad absurdum* that takes place in the drama: he is the naked, "unaccommodated man" who owes "the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume" (3.4.106-8).⁸ Lear, at least, regards him as "the thing itself" and is ready to strip off his clothes in order to become even more similar to this mirror-image of himself. It is not by accident, then, that

⁶ Figures like the protagonists of *Resolution and Independence* and *The Pedlar* are outside the scope of this paper, although they are clearly related to the beggars. This time I can analyse only some characteristic *examples* of the beggar trope.

⁷ Stanley Cavell, 'The Avoidance of Love' in Janet Adelman, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of King Lear* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1978) p. 77.

⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, ed. Jay L. Halio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). All references are to this edition.

some of the Wordsworthian beggars bring to mind Edgar – or, rather, that they contain something of the “common root” of all the destitutes in *Lear*, including the Fool. Jan Kott may have this “common root” in mind when he calls these characters “four beggars wandering about in the wilderness, exposed to raging wind and rain.”⁹

The figure in Wordsworth’s *The Old Cumberland Beggar* is closely related to these outcasts. A rhetorical exclamation in the poem – “let the chartered wind that sweeps the heath / Beat his grey locks against his withered face”¹⁰ – invokes the Lear of the storm scene, not only on account of “heath,” “grey locks” and “withered face” but also because Wordsworth, here, repeats Lear’s “Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!” (3.2.1), in a different context. The beggar’s almost non-human age in Wordsworth (“His age has no companion”) also resembles that of Lear, which is central to the final lines of the play: “The oldest hath borne most: we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long.” The Lear-like quality of Wordsworth’s protagonist is also remarked upon by Harold Bloom,¹¹ and J. W. B. Owen points out the similarity between Wordsworth’s recurring line, “then let him pass, a blessing on his head” (162, 171), and Kent’s words as Lear approaches death: “O! let him pass: he hates him / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him any longer” (5.3.315-317).¹² But the pivotal link between the texts is the ambiguous status of Lear and the Cumberland beggar, who are both mighty yet also powerless. In the drama, the king is a houseless beggar (though even as a beggar he retains some traits of his kingly behaviour), while the most intriguing characteristic of the Cumberland beggar is the reader’s sense of his authority and self-sufficiency, which is preserved in spite of his dependence on other people’s charity. This paradox is repeated by Wordsworth in other passages that describe beggars, and it is certainly present in *King Lear*.

The beggar trope in *The Prelude* usually appears (as one would expect) in descriptions of a public road of some sort. But these “lonely roads” also have some

⁹ Jan Kott, *King Lear, or Endgame* p. 280.

¹⁰ William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, eds. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London, New York: Routledge, 1991).

¹¹ “... in his late twenties, [Wordsworth] was very Shakespearean, rewriting *Othello* in *The Borderers* and capturing in beggars, peddlers, children and mad people something of the Jobean quality of *King Lear*.” Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: the books and school of the ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994) p. 240.

¹² W.J.B. Owen, ‘Two Addenda’ *The Wordsworth Circle*. Vol. XIII, No. 2 (Spring, 1982), 86-89; p. 96.

less obvious qualities in Wordsworth. In Book XII, for example, he writes: "there I found / Hope to my hope, and to my pleasure peace, / And steadiness, and healing and repose / To every angry passion" (178-81).¹³ How could the road offer so much to the young boy? Why is it that it "hath had power / O'er [his] imagination"? The experience seems to be a kind of education, for a little earlier Wordsworth remembers: "[the roads] Were schools to me in which I daily read / With most delight the passions of mankind, / There saw into the depth of human souls" (164-6). The image of the road is closely related to that of travelling, a basic metaphor of *The Prelude*, which figures "the life which the poet narrates as a self-educative journey" and also the poet's "imaginative enterprise, the act of composing *The Prelude* itself, as a perilous quest through the uncharted regions of his own mind."¹⁴ The image of the road can be interpreted on both levels: as the course of education of the self and as the process of poetical composition; and the beggar trope bears upon both of these.

A description of such a road prepares an encounter with another Lear-like figure in Book IV. Wordsworth here also recalls his youth: "when at evening on the public way / I sauntered, like a river murmuring / And talking to itself" (118-120). In this state of mind, he meets another unconscious source of speech, a man from whose lips "there issued murmuring sounds, as if of pain / Or of uneasy thought" (422-3). These descriptions (as the former one about "schools" and "reading") suggest that the road conveys language, that can take an oral or enscripted form, and which can either be read or listened to by the traveller. Moreover, it mediates between two poles that fall outside language, as another passage about the road in Book XII suggests:

[...] its disappearing line
 Seen daily afar off, on one bare steep
 Beyond the limits which my feet had trod,
 Was like a guide into eternity,
 At least to things unknown and without bond.
(148-152)

The Lear-like figures come from one end of the "disappearing line" and move towards its other end; they appear to be intimately related to "things unknown

¹³ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*. eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (London, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979). Parenthetical references are to this edition.

¹⁴ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism. Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971) p. 285.

and without bond.” Probably this is the main source of the awe that they invoke in the child who sees them, for it is clear that their appearance belongs to the darker scenes of his education: to the ministrations of fear:

Awed I have been of strolling Bedlamites;
From many other uncouth vagrants (passed
In fear) have walked with quicker step.
(158-160)

The conspicuous word in this passage is “Bedlamites.” It is likely that in Wordsworth’s time this name was still in use to denote wandering beggars who received charity through of feigned or real madness (the term itself originates from the Bethlehem hospital for the insane). But it is certain that readers of Wordsworth remembered the most famous of all Bedlamites: Edgar, who disguises himself as a Bedlam beggar in *King Lear*. The description he gives of these people in the drama makes the fear of the young Wordsworth understandable: “The country gives me proof and precedent / Of Bedlam beggars, who with roaring voices, / Strike in their numb’d and mortified bare arms / Pins, wooden pricks, nails, springs of rosemary [...]” (2.3.13-16). The correspondance between Wordsworth and Shakespeare suggests that the description in *The Prelude* of that fearful experience stems not only from a real-life encounter between the young poet and a wandering beggar (which is probable but outside the concerns of this paper) but from the equally deep impact of reading *King Lear*. The roads where the beggars appear are, in this sense, indeed schools where the poet “daily read [...] the passions of mankind.”

The public road is also the scene of a later confrontation with a Lear-like destitute. The child who used to be afraid of Bedlamites has become a young man himself, a traveller of the road who is moving towards the end of the “disappearing line.” It seems that in his wanderings he wants to get rid of all the things that make man “accommodated.” I have already quoted the passage about the night-wanderings during which the young man converses with himself like a murmuring river. He also has a powerful urge to remove his clothes or, to use Lear’s words, to get rid of his “lendings”: “It seemed the very garments that I wore / Preyed on my strength, and stopped the quiet stream / Of self-forgetfulness” (IV, 295-7). The most powerful state, according to these lines, would be a nakedness untouched by civilization and lacking anything that does not belong to what is inalienably human, just as in childhood when the mountains “were bronzed with deep radiance [and he] stood alone, / A naked Savage in the

thunder shower" (I, 26). If the grown-up man did not resist the temptation, he would, like the child or like Edgar, "with presented nakedness outface / The winds and persecutions of the sky" (2.3.11-12). Such a state, constituting the myth of "the savage" as taken up by Romanticism, would make the subject both utterly vulnerable and utterly invulnerable – it would mean the zero point of human existence.

But this absolute zero is never really reached in Wordsworth's texts. The man in Book IV is halted by the sight of another outcast, a discharged soldier, and this experience makes him move back towards civilisation ("There sought with quiet heart my distant home"). Following a hint given by Kenneth R. Johnston, I call this reversal the moment of catastrophe in Wordsworth: "the precise instant when one course of events suddenly reverses itself into another."¹⁵ What is it that brings about this sudden change? I think that a scene of recognition is taking place, and what the poet recognizes in the veteran is an aspect of himself; more precisely, the self that he is unconsciously seeking in his night-time journey. The discharged soldier is stripped of all his "lendings," even his clothes forming an organic part of his being: "in his very dress appeared / A desolation, a simplicity / That seemed akin to solitude" (IV, 417-9). For him, nothing prevents the flow of the "stream of self-forgetfulness," since he embodies the genesis of half-articulate speech:

[...] From his lips, meanwhile
There issued murmuring sounds, as if of pain
Or of uneasy thought; yet still his form
Kept the same steadiness, and at his feet
His shadow lay, and moved not.

(IV, 421-5)

The uncanniness of this passage lies in the sense of discontinuity that surrounds the soldier. His speech is disconnected from his physical and also, it seems, from his psychological being. It is "issuing forth" from his lips while nothing else is moving. It gives intimations of the "things unknown and without bond" that attract man towards the "unaccommodated" state. It also bespeaks tragedy and

¹⁵ "[Wordsworth's] fixation upon individual power is paralleled by his attention to what mathematicians call 'catastrophe theory': the precise instant when one course of events suddenly reverses itself into another." Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and the Recluse* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1984) p. 181.

wounds; however, when the young man wants the soldier to speak “of war, battle, and pestilence,” there is “a strange half-absence” in his replies.

One of the most Wordsworthian acts of all is not letting this state of half-consciousness prevail. The traveller makes the essentially un-Romantic move of leading the discharged soldier to shelter – un-Romantic because it covers “the thing itself” and denies the possibility of directly knowing it. His motive for doing so is not only a sympathetic feeling towards the poor man but also a need to remove him as a source of apocalyptic and discontinuous speech from the hearing distance of other travellers. To ensure this, he even reminds the soldier not to “linger in the public ways,” as if the soldier were a child. When the tragic language is safely sheltered yet avoided, Wordsworth is ready to seek his own home in the society of men.

A very similar pattern can be traced in Wordsworth’s encounter with the blind beggar in the next book of *The Prelude*. But before analysing this passage in detail, let me turn to the only instance in the entire poem where Lear is explicitly mentioned. It is another moment of catastrophe when the French Revolution has already turned into its own reversal, the Reign of Terror. Wordsworth tries to prove that there were some pleasant happenings even at the time of that terrible continuum, and so he recalls his trip to Arras. He becomes uneasy, however, when he suddenly remembers that Robespierre, the leader of the massacres, was born in that town – the reference to Lear pertains to to this situation:

As Lear reproached the winds, I could almost
Have quarrel’d with that blameless spectacle
For being yet an image in my mind
To mock me under such a strange reverse.

(X, 463-6)

The “reverse” in this passage may refer either to the Revolution that devoured itself or to a turning point in the composition of the text. As Johnston points out: “the paragraph’s very movement has described a ‘strange reverse,’ since the verb tense (‘could... have quarrel’d’) refers less sensibly to 1790, or any time thereafter when [Wordsworth] thought of Arras, than to the beginning of the paragraph itself, when he set out to present a reassuring image but failed in the very moments of composition by its opposite.”¹⁶ Here, the confrontation with Lear (the raging Lear of the storm scene) takes place within the subject: the Lear-like

¹⁶ Johnston, p. 185.

self of the poet is observed and controlled by the non Lear-like "normal" self. The latter self knows that the spectacle is "blameless" and not implicated in the actions of Robespierre, but the Lear-like other self would still quarrel with it, employing Lear's irrational logic. In *The Prelude*, such a schizophrenic split is one of the main characteristics of Wordsworth's experience of the Revolution: "The Man has come parted as by a gulph, / From he who had been" (XI, 59-60). It is also the culminative mode in which Wordsworth is able to confront Shakespeare's *Lear*, without being overwhelmed by its power and thereby losing his identity.

THE BLIND BEGGAR

The elements that I have underlined in the individual passages above come together to form a coherent structure in one of the most fascinating appearances of the Wordsworthian beggar trope: the encounter with the blind beggar. It is another moment of catastrophe (literally of "turning round"), but one that takes place in the streets of London:

And once, far travelled in such mood, beyond
 The reach of common indications, lost
 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.
 My mind did at this spectacle turn round
 As with the might of waters, and it seemed
 To me that in this label was a type
 Or emblem of the utmost that we know
 Both of ourselves and the universe,
 And on the shape of this unmoving man
 His fixed face and sightless eyes, I looked
 As if admonished from another world.

(VII, 636-651)

The subject has again travelled far from home physically and mentally. He is "beyond / the reach of common indications," as if he were at the point where the public road and the indications of ordinary language disappear from sight. His striking encounter with the beggar at this crucial moment resembles Lear's

meeting with the blind Gloucester. Some of the enigmas of both texts can be more easily approached if we read the two of them side-by-side.

In the tragedy, Lear indeed travels far from his home and loses, together with his kingly power, his sense of the ordered meanings of language. He irrationally commands the blind Gloucester to read without even proposing a text. Strangely enough none of the participants of the scene query this. Perhaps Gloucester should simply invent a scripture, as Edgar invents a password ("Sweet marjoram") when Lear asks for one. He may think that he should read Edmund's letter once more, to find traces of falsehood at least in "the penning of it." Or maybe he should read the "character" of the king, to make him see, as in a mirror, his catastrophic mistake. Gloucester cannot fulfill any of these tasks. Edgar's commentary, uttered between Gloucester's refusal and Lear's renewed command, interprets this inability: "I would not take this from report; it is / And my heart breaks at it" (4.6.145-6). Gloucester, whose suffering virtually merges with that of Lear, cannot understand their situation in terms of language. He "sees it feelingly," to which claim Lear responds quite logically: "What! art mad?" (for if Gloucester is really in sympathy with Lear, he must be as mad as the king). What Gloucester experiences is something unmediated that simply *is* – it cannot be reported upon.¹⁷ Lear, in the same scene, makes various "reports" on Gloucester: constructing different identities for him by calling him different names. From addresses like "Goneril, with a white beard" and "blind Cupid," Lear gradually reaches a state in which he can affirm: "I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester" (4.6.182). This process is a healing experience for Lear because it brings about a recognition of others and consequently helps him to recognize himself. Lear reads his own mirror-image in the blind Gloucester precisely because Gloucester cannot read himself.

In the blind beggar episode of *The Prelude*, reading is important in a similar way. The traveller ("the poet") is overcome by a strong experience of discontinuity. He sees a man who is, like Gloucester, unable to read his own life story – the text that belongs, most intimately, to him. The figure resembles the discharged soldier who relates his own life story half-consciously. (The difference

¹⁷ "[Report] cushions the impact of immediate experience because it re-presents it as some distance in time, but also because, however scant it may be, report is still a made meaning, a transformation of rawness into the once-remove of speech, and hence of coherence, sequence, order, and form." James L. Calderwood, 'Creative Uncreation in *King Lear*' in Harold Bloom, ed., *William Shakespeare's King Lear. Modern Critical Interpretations* (New York: Chelsea House, 1987) p. 131.

between reading and hearing is not necessarily crucial here; Hartman suggests that "reading is, or can be, an active kind of hearing. We really 'look with ears' when we read a book of some complexity"¹⁸ [the advice of "looking with ears" is, of course, given by Lear to Gloucester]). However, the blind man himself is transformed into something knowable and even readable for his observer. At first, he is only an inarticulate and disturbing "view," but then the written paper is revealed on his chest and is transformed into a "type" or "emblem" of another text beyond our ordinary grasp ("the utmost that we know / Both of ourselves and the universe"). Moreover, the whole figure seems to be an emblem that has come to life: a form with a legend that interprets it (the legend, importantly, is not quoted by Wordsworth, just as the meaning of the emblem itself is left open). Finally, the face and eyes of the man bespeak an even deeper knowledge, becoming texts for the onlooker to read. Hartman observes that they are "equally fixed or affixed: we expect the beggar's face and eyes [...] to be centres of life whereas they are as much a surface as the paper he wears."¹⁹ This surface (the "texture") conveys for Wordsworth a sense of being "admonished from another world." The reading process closes with this experience. It seems that the encounter was essential for "turning round" the mind of the poet, who, like Lear, has travelled beyond "common indications" and has been led back to his home in the world of men with quasi-supernatural assistance.

THE LANGUAGE OF IMAGINATION

It has become inevitable by now to ask some questions about the quasi-supernatural power that seems to belong not only to the blind beggar but to all the other Lear-like destitutes in Wordsworth. What is the source of the power? What role does Shakespeare play in its context? To come closer to an answer, Wordsworth's interpretation of *Lear* has to be tackled. His prose writings are revealing in this respect. In the 1815 *Preface* he claims that, in the field of "the human and dramatic Imagination," Shakespeare is the single authority, quoting the storm scene of *King Lear* to support his opinion.²⁰ Coleridge, who must have

¹⁸ Geoffrey Hartman, *Saving the Text. Literature / Derrida / Philosophy* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1981) p. 128.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven, London: Yale UP, 1964) p. 241.

²⁰ William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works*, eds. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974) p. 31.

shared some of Wordsworth's views on the subject, quotes the same passage as "undoubted proof" of the power of imagination: "that which shewed itself in such might and energy in *Lear*, where the deep anguish of a father spreads the feelings of ingratitude and cruelty over the very elements of heaven."²¹ Coleridge and Wordsworth, according to these texts, regard *King Lear* as one of the most outstanding achievements of the imagination in literature, and consider Lear's speech as an example of its workings. It is plausible, then, that the Lear-like beggars in Wordsworth are manifestations of the imaginative power. What their poverty and powerlessness signifies is one of the most intriguing problems of Wordsworth's poetical world.

Wordsworth's conception of the imagination can be fruitfully analysed in comparison with Coleridge's theory. The latter is strictly philosophical, built on the Kantian idea of the mind as capable of transcending the boundaries of the empirical world. Coleridge, in his response to Wordsworth's *Recluse*, gives a characteristic account of his own position:

I supposed you first to have meditated the faculties of man in the abstract, in their correspondence with his sphere in action, and first, in the Feeling, Touch, and Taste, then in the Eye, and last in the Ear, to have laid a solid and immoveable foundation for the Edifice by removing the sandy Sophisms of Locke, and the Mechanic Dogmatists, and demonstrating that the Senses were living growths and developments of the Mind and Spirit in a much juster, as well as higher sense, than the mind can be said to be formed by the Senses.²²

Wordsworth must have been very familiar with Coleridge's vision. The idea of the mind "forming" the world of the senses is clearly discernible in some passages of his poetry. However, he most characteristically proposes a reciprocal relationship between the mind and the empirical world, as in the second book of *The Prelude*, when he writes about the "Babe, Nurs'd in his Mother's arms" whose mind is "creator and receiver both,/ Working but in alliance with the works/ Which it beholds" (273-5).

In the case of the beggars, the balance of "creator and receiver" is completely lost. The reciprocal functioning of mind and nature is prevented by the blindness or madness of the beggars because their channels of reception are

²¹ S. T. Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (London: Dent, 1960) p. 188.

²² S. T. Coleridge, *Collected Letters I-VI*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71) pp. 574-5.

blocked. Their mind is thus neither limited nor aided by the senses: it is given complete freedom to create a world of its own. How appealing such a possibility could be for Wordsworth is indicated by the frequent occurrences of the beggar trope in his poetry. But the way the beggars are actually described proves that he considers imagination without the mediation of the senses to be extremely dangerous because it disrupts a balanced relationship between the mind and the empirical world. Hartman encapsulates well this characteristic ambivalence: "... though the imagination is often said to be a life-giving or animating power, it is not, in Wordsworth, life-giving initially. The poet's later strength has its origin in experiences that intimate (negatively) death of nature and (positively) a faculty whose power is independent of nature."²³

Negative intimations occur in all the beggar episodes: the poet nearly loses his way and his place in human society, as if unbounded powers were threatening to devour him. A real apocalypse is experienced during the Reign of Terror, but the "nakedness" of an insufficiently mediated imagination (lacking the guidance of the senses) is always fearful. This is why all the Lear-like figures in Wordsworth are powerless outcasts even though they are also mighty and self-possessed beings. They are "boundary beings" (Hartmann's phrase), equally belonging to the realms of the mind and the senses and signalling the dangerous passage between the two. The poet does not follow them into their isolated world; he never strips off his "lendings" to become more similar to them, but avoids them after he has recognized their dangerous power in himself. In his own drama of the imagination, he plays the part of the peaceful Edgar rather than Lear, while still retaining the tragic dimensions of self-discovery and reversal in his narration.

Wordsworth's tragic vision of the imagination is strikingly in accordance with ideas dramatized in *King Lear*. I am specifically thinking of the Dover cliff scene that has "peculiar importance for the Romantics not only because it offers a sublime precipice but also because it is an example of the poetic imagination – the cliff is not a stage-location, it is created through the vividness of Edgar's poetry."²⁴ In this scene, Edgar's imagination appears to be a positive force that eventually saves his father's life. But Edgar himself does not conceal the risks he takes when he lets this power loose. Before his final success, he admits: "And yet I know not how conceit may rob/ The treasury of life..." Reading Wordsworth, one has to face the idea that conceit or imagination may indeed rob our "treasury of life" and

²³ Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* p. 215.

²⁴ Bate p. 83.

thus make “beggars” of us in that it leads to a world that is completely independent of nature and of the senses.

The Dover cliff scene in *King Lear* has a special significance in Wordsworth’s poetic world. In one of his most important theoretical writings, the 1815 *Preface*, he distinguishes between the literal, the visual (half-figurative) and the figurative senses of words, exemplifying the visual sense with a quotation from the Dover cliff scene: “Half way down / Hangs one that gathers samphire [...]” (4.6.15-16). The verb “hang,” according to his explanation, is used here in a sense that is neither literal nor fully metaphorical: in the intermediate “visual” sense.²⁵ Interestingly enough, Wordsworth uses the same verb in a similarly “visual” sense when depicting visitations of the imaginary power in passages of *The Prelude*, as in the episode of the Winander Boy:

[...] while he *hung*
 Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize
 Has carried far into his heart the voice
 Of mountain torrents

(IV, 406-9)

The earlier scene of bird-nesting is very similar:

[...] O! at that time,
 While on the perilous ridge I *hung* above,
 With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
 Blow through my ears! The sky seem'd not a sky
 Of earth, and with what motion mov'd the clouds!

(I, 341-5)

As these quotations suggest, a word that Shakespeare employs in an “intermediate” visual sense according to Wordsworth, comes to be associated in Wordsworth’s own poetry with the intermediate state of the children who experience the power of the imagination in nature, and who are also hanging from dangerous heights.²⁶

In some of his most famous passages, Wordsworth associates the imaginative power with high precipices or dark abysses, which could be a further echo of Shakespeare’s Dover cliff scene. In Book VI of *The Prelude*, the image of

²⁵ Wordsworth, *The Prose Works* III pp. 30-32.

²⁶ Interestingly, this Shakespearean passage has a specific meaning for Keats, as well. He writes in a letter: “I am ‘one that gathers Samphire dreadful trade’ the Cliff of Poesy Towers above me.” Keats p. 28.

the abyss lends a tragic, even apocalyptic tone to the poet's discourse about the imagination: "That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss/ Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,/ At once some lonely traveller" (594-96). A very high precipice, Mount Snowdon is the scene of the poet's ultimate confrontation with the power of the imagination in the last book of *The Prelude*:

[That vision] appeared to me the type
 Of a majestic intellect; its acts
 And its possessions, what it has and craves,
 What in itself it is, and would become.
 There I beheld the emblem of a mind
 That feeds upon infinity, that broods
 Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
 Its voices issuing forth to silent light
 In one continuous stream; a mind sustained
 By recognitions of transcendent power,
 In sense conducting to ideal form,
 In soul of more than mortal privilege.

The experience reveals for Wordsworth what the imagination is "in itself"; his vision, however, resembles to a remarkable degree his earlier descriptions of beggars in *The Prelude*. What he sees here is another "boundary being" similar to those outcasts who have marked out the lines between the two separate worlds, mind and nature. This "majestic intellect" is brooding "over the dark abyss" as the blind beggar is brooding over his own unapproachable self; it is listening to a voice "issuing forth [...] in one continuous stream" as the discharged soldier is listening to his own unbounded speech issuing from his lips. It appears to be "the type/ Of a majestic intellect" and "the emblem of a mind" while the label on the blind beggar's chest seems to be "a type/ Or emblem of the utmost that we know." The definite articles used in the Snowdon episode ("the type," etc.) as opposed to the indefinite articles of the blind beggar episode ("a type," etc.) suggest that a relation between "ideal form" and "example" connects the two passages (the "form," however, is also "the type" of something else). The revelation on Mount Snowdon presents the imagination in its full ("transcendent") power, while the beggar trope shows it "houseless" in the hostile world of the senses.

In his "Rhetoric of Temporality," Paul de Man discusses a general tendency of Romanticism that is relevant to the above correspondence: "The

relationship with nature has been superseded by an intersubjective, interpersonal relationship that, in the last analysis, is a relationship of the subject towards itself.²⁷ In connection with Wordsworth's beggar trope, all of these stages are present. A vision of a mountain landscape somehow re-formulates a vision of a destitute such as the blind beggar. Both of them, however, are instances of self-recognition, which is the reason why they are both crucial stages in the poet's self-education. In the last analysis, Wordsworth is in both cases confronted by the power of his own imagination, just as in the passage about his experience of the aftermath of the French Revolution: "As Lear reproached the winds, I could almost / Have quarrel'd with that blameless spectacle..."²⁸

I have already pointed out how Wordsworth in the above lines distances his past "unaccommodated" self from his present rational self though a split in perspective. The fact that he does so by using Lear as a *metaphor* of his own irrational and imaginative self is probably the most important characteristic of his beggar trope. For the Lear-like figures exist metaphorically, *in language*, which means that they are the sign-posts of the apocalyptic imagination and at the same time the means of avoiding its threats. Embedded in language, the imagination is not dangerous any more but infinitely creative. The speech of the discharged soldier and the inscription on the blind beggar's chest remind the reader that language only can mediate between the two worlds. That the source of this mediating language is in the realm of the imagination while its operations are in the empirical world, in human society.

The power that is able to bind together the world of the senses and the world of consciousness is the defining characteristic of Shakespearean language and imagination, according to Wordsworth and Coleridge. As we have seen, to illustrate the intermediate "visual" sense of a word (between the literal and the fully figurative senses) Wordsworth quotes a passage from *King Lear*. Coleridge also attributes Shakespeare's language (especially that of *King Lear*) with a

²⁷ Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' in *Blindness and Insight. Essays of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1996) p. 196.

²⁸ This simile refers to the same scene in *Lear* that Wordsworth and Coleridge quote as "undoubted proof" of imagination (see above). It might be more than mere coincidence that Wordsworth finds his own imagination guilty of the same transgression that Shakespeare is praised for. It can be a silent acknowledgement of his own poetical powers; especially since this method of projecting emotions is common in his works (it is in fact a characteristic of the "egotistical sublime")."

mediating quality.²⁹ For him, the tragedy is a masterpiece because it presents "apocalypse" mediated, through being distanced by language, and not "apocalypse" pure: "It is the representation of it, not the reality, that we require, the imitation, and not the thing itself," he asserts in his commentary on *Lear*.³⁰ Such use of language is the means and the meaning of the "binding" power that he attributes to Shakespearean imagination. It is also the way Wordsworth is able to tame his own apocalyptic powers into poetry.

If the language of imagination mediates between the empirical world and the world of the mind, then it is like a road leading towards the abyss of the imagination while at the same time offering escape from its destructive power for the finite consciousness. Similarly, the Lear-like figures in Wordsworth are mediators in both directions between language and non-language, between the worlds of the senses and imagination. What is intriguing about this is the fact that such motion is imaginable at all: that the two realms are indeed connected with each other through imaginative language. The joy over such a possibility is expressed in instances when one of Wordsworth's roads, "a pass, path, or thoroughfare – a medium of physical progress – is transmuted into a home, abode, or lodging for an 'unfather'd vapour' or 'homeless voice.'"³¹ The public road is thus transformed into the ultimate home of homeless beggars and, as the birthplace of imaginative language, of the poet himself.

²⁹ "Now the language of Shakespeare (in his *Lear*, for instance), is something intermediate [between the *Logos* and the arbitrary word], or rather it is the former blended with the latter, the arbitrary not merely recalling the cold notion of the thing, but expressing the reality of it and, as arbitrary language is an heirloom of the human race, being itself a part of what it manifests" (Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism* II p. 185).

³⁰ S. T. Coleridge, 'Second lecture in the series *Shakespear and Milton*' in Frank Kermode, ed. *Shakespeare: King Lear. A Casebook* (Nashville and London: Macmillan, 1969) p. 42.

³¹ Johnston p. 208.