

**Shocks of Recognition:**

Encounters with the Individual and the Crowd in Wordsworth's Poetry

by

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## Abstract

Book VII of William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, "Residence in London," has often been read as the site of the speaker's famous and destabilizing encounter with a blind beggar holding a written sign. This reading, however, overlooks the fact that there is another significant encounter within the same Book: the encounter with the crowd of St. Bartholomew Fair. Following in the long-established tradition of what Frederick Garber has dubbed Wordsworth's "poetry of encounter," previous scholarship has largely neglected this meeting with the crowd because of an assumption that encounters are only possible when the speaker comes into contact with singular, seemingly bounded individuals such as beggars or vagrants. This thesis calls into question that assumption by suggesting that, in Book VII, the speaker also encounters the multitudinous and unbounded crowd. Reading Book VII as the site of two encounters rather than one reveals that the poem subverts the expectation that individuals are separated from their environments and from the Others they encounter by a distinct boundary. Rather—and uncomfortably—throughout Wordsworth's oeuvre, individuals are deeply implicated in what surrounds them, suggesting that human identity is not intrinsic or contained, but surprisingly permeable.

The first chapter directly challenges this supposed difference between individuals (whose appearance of bounded discreteness is only ostensible) and incoherent, clearly unbounded crowds by arguing that both can be understood as features of the environment and figures capable of being encountered. This leads to a discussion in the second chapter about why these encounters are so shocking. Their unboundedness, in addition to their abrupt entry into the speaker's field of vision and their embeddedness in a tense political context (one of urbanization and of the French Revolution's aftermath) interferes with the narrator's ability to contain them and make them recognizable through poetry. The third chapter uses this new interpretive framework to consider how Book VII's urban environment, which is literally textualized in the new form of advertisements and other postings, affects how the speaker encounters the beggar and the crowd: rather than simply seeing them, he attempts to read them. The written setting permeates the unbounded figures of the blind beggar and the crowd and renders them textual, though not easily legible.

**Keywords:** *The Prelude*, William Wordsworth, Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, Poetry of Encounter, Urban Encounter, Blind Beggar, Abject Figure, Literature of the Crowd, Unboundedness, History of Reading



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### Short Titles

*OED: Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Oxford University Press.

*Romantic Readers*: Jackson, H. J. *Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia*. Yale University Press, 2005.

“Tintern Abbey”: Wordsworth, William. “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798.” *Wordsworth’s Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Nicholas Halmi. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2014, pp. 65-70.

#### Note:

All references to *The Prelude* refer to *The Prelude* of 1850.

All references to other Wordsworth poems refer to:

Wordsworth, William. *Wordsworth’s Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Nicholas Halmi. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2014.



## Introduction

Many of William Wordsworth's poems are characterized by a propensity for encounter. Often, a male speaker wandering somewhat aimlessly in a rural setting is suddenly confronted by someone entirely foreign to him such as a female vagrant, a discharged soldier, or a leech-gatherer.<sup>1</sup> These encounters with figures on the margins of society are sometimes productive and stimulating and other times profoundly destabilizing. Frederick Garber's 1971 coinage of the phrase "the poetry of encounter" underwrites a conception of Wordsworth's work as a poetics of which the central focus is the meeting with the "discrete and not completely knowable" Other, whether person or object (28).

The subsequent scholarship on this topic has been extensive. David Simpson, who invokes Garber explicitly in his historicist analysis of the speaker's uncomfortable encounter with the protagonist of "The Old Cumberland Beggar," argues that "the interaction of poverty and mendicancy with polite values and perceptions" is one of Wordsworth's primary concerns (*Wordsworth's Historical Imagination* 163). For Simpson, figures like the Cumberland beggar and other "old and lonely men" are "shocking" because they pose "a direct threat to the assumption of a common humanity" through their very decrepitude, poverty, or Otherness (162-163). More recently, Adam Potkay has used Garber's phrase to make a drastically different claim. He has argued, albeit less convincingly, that this same meeting is one of "ethical import" and that it secularizes a religious doctrine ("Blessed are the poor") by suggesting that abject figures like this beggar are "generous" and "moral" since "they know from experience the vulnerability that is our shared condition" (Potkay 31, 39, 40).

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<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of Wordsworth's wanderings as well as several of these encounters, see Celeste Langan's *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom* and David Collings's *Wordsworthian Errancies: The Poetics of Cultural Dismemberment*.

Different critics apply this conception differently, raising an important question: what does it mean, practically speaking, to study Wordsworth's work as a "poetry of encounter"? For the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an encounter is a face-to-face meeting with someone other than oneself (*OED* "encounter, n" 1. a.). In Wordsworth's poems, this person is often someone who has been marginalized or excluded from the "progress" of industrialization and urbanization. But the word also has somewhat hostile connotations since it implies a confrontation, a sort of meeting against—*contra*—an adversary (*OED* "encounter, v" 1. a.). Encounter, then, is a highly charged term, signifying both a casual run-in and a tense conflict. In both senses, though, it implies a clear distinction—a sort of intermediary empty space—between the internal, bounded self and the external, also bounded or "discrete" Other (Garber 28). While Wordsworth's meetings do occasionally engender dialogue, the "poetry of encounter"—especially the poetry of destabilizing encounter—can also refer to a visual meeting that does not necessarily entail any kind of verbalized clash or even conversation. This sort of visual encounter is not synonymous with seeing in the sense of noticing or becoming aware of someone's presence. Rather, it requires an interpretive action that allows the speaker to make sense of the external figure, to mentally reshape him or her into a recognizable pattern or form.

For the speaker, the advantage of an encounter (even a hostile one) is that it allows him to define himself against the Other and to confirm his vision of himself and of his world. This is why the speaker feels a pressing "urge to protect his separateness," to establish himself as discrete and set apart from the encountered individual (Garber 29). In a "successful" encounter, the speaker becomes aware of a clear boundary between self and Other, yet he is able to understand or render understandable the person he encounters precisely because of this boundary. Even if these encountered people are very different from him, whether in terms of

class, gender, or ability, the speaker can recognize them in familiar terms because he can classify them according to intelligible categories that patently set him apart from them: Turk, Jew, beggar, leech-gatherer. But when the encounter does not confirm his worldview, when the boundary between self and Other is unclear or when the Other defies classification, the narrator is disoriented, unsure of his own identity because he cannot define it against an obviously different Other who conforms to his expectations. Thus, though the *OED* does not stipulate that an encounter is a meeting with another person, most readers of Wordsworth have limited the scope of the “poetry of encounter” by conceiving of the Other solely as a singular, physically coherent person (or, occasionally, object or animal) that enables the speaker to confirm his sense of himself as an integral whole.

One of Wordsworth’s most famous destabilizing encounters occurs in Book VII of *The Prelude* (1850), “Residence in London.” Scholars generally agree that this Book is organized around a central, shocking meeting with a blind beggar. Walking through the streets of London, the speaker

was smitten  
 Abruptly with the view (a sight not rare)  
 Of a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,  
 Stood, propped against a wall, upon his chest  
 Wearing a written paper, to explain  
 His story, whence he came, and who he was. (VII. 637-642)

As William Chapman Sharpe has noted, this meeting represents “a sudden, traumatic shock” (20). It even causes the speaker’s “mind [to turn] round / As with the might of waters” (VII. 643-644). The beggar’s written sign, which ought to make his story accessible, even legible, paradoxically turns him into “an Other already written yet unreadable” (Sharpe 20). For Quentin Bailey, this encounter is characterized by a “sensory overload” and it marks “a poetics of non-recognition that emphatically denies the possibility of transformation” (*Limits of Poetic Insight*

162). The beggar's sign, like *The Prelude* itself, attempts to tell a story that cannot be told adequately through written language, but that has no alternative medium. Thus, the speaker cannot *transform* the beggar—he cannot force him to conform to the clearly defined category of “beggar”—because he recognizes that he himself also employs a written paper (a poem) “to explain / His story.” The boundary between them is blurred by this shared project, prompting a mental crisis for the speaker whose identity is, to a certain extent, contingent on this boundary.

Both Sharpe and Bailey, as well as other critics who have studied this encounter, argue that it is shocking at least in part because of the presence of the city crowd. As Bailey puts it, “the crowd, it is clear, has disoriented the speaker to the point that he cannot, even in his later tranquility, answer questions about the ‘what, and whither, when and how’ of the myriad faces in front of him,” including that of the blind beggar (*Limits of Poetic Insight* 162). The crowd, in this line of thinking, is an “ever-present background” that prevents the speaker from turning the beggar into a recognizable Other (Sharpe 20). John Plotz further underscores this point, arguing that the crowd can sometimes serve as a “useful background” since an “individual in a foreign crowd, by comparison to that crowd, feels legible and comprehensible to himself” (19). But the crowd can also embody “overwhelmingly repetitive mutual incomprehension” in Book VII since, unlike an obviously foreign Other, it is not entirely separate or bounded: “The Jew or the Turk is legibly different, but the undeciphered, self-similar crowds of ordinary Londoners present a puzzle that is intractable precisely because of their seeming familiarity” (Plotz 28). This familiarity lies in the fact that the speaker, to a certain extent, is part of the crowd himself. As much as he attempts to distinguish himself from the surrounding crowd, there is a perpetual risk of being “swallowed up in the crowd’s homogeneity” (Plotz 29). For all these readers, the

London crowd is a sort of unnerving environment that influences the way the speaker moves through the city and attempts to make sense of its inhabitants, and therefore of himself.

But this emphasis on the speaker's encounter with the beggar as the sole encounter of Book VII and on the crowd as its backdrop overlooks the fact that, only a few pages later, the speaker actually encounters—visually meets or confronts—a London crowd: that of St. Bartholomew Fair. Considering the bustling, uncontained crowd as encountered on the urban street represents a rather radical departure from “the poetry of encounter” as Garber conceived of it. For him, the “distinctness of the [encountered] object is... primary and without qualification,” suggesting that a crowd that resists and pushes boundaries (against both its external urban environment and each component member) cannot be encountered (Garber 29). While Garber concedes that “the [encountered] object is distinct in a context, distinct as one of other discrete things,” he is nevertheless quite clear that distinctness, obvious separateness from both the background and the speaker, is a prerequisite for encounter (29). But Garber's notion that such a distinctness is “primary and without qualification” ignores the fact that such distinctness rarely, if ever, exists in Wordsworth's poems (29). Even in the most prominent examples of marginalized individuals who fall into an obvious social category—the Old Cumberland Beggar for instance—the boundary between individual and background is far from solidified: the poem makes clear that the beggar is so united with his environment that even little birds are not afraid of him and come “within the length of half his staff” (ll. 21). If individual figures like the old Cumberland beggar can be encountered despite their lack of self-containment, it follows that the similarly unbounded crowd can also be encountered.

My aim in this thesis is to broaden the understanding of Wordsworth's work as a “poetry of encounter” by arguing that what I outline as the speaker's confrontation with the crowd of St.

Bartholomew Fair is also an encounter in Garber's sense of the word. Reading the meeting with the blind beggar alongside the meeting with the crowd of the Fair reveals surprising parallels between these figures, both of which prompt a cognitive crisis for the speaker.

To understand this rather dramatic response, it is necessary to situate the meeting with the abject individual and the meeting with the multitudinous crowd within the socio-historical particularities of the Romantic period. At the end of the eighteenth century, advancements in trade and technology as well as government actions prompted what historian Jeremy Black calls "improvements in agricultural output and productivity" (30-31). Parliament's enclosure Acts endeavored to further this "improvement" by appropriating about 21 per cent of the land shared by England's peasants and allocating it to major landowners (Black 34). There is little doubt that "enclosure produced much hardship for the largely subsistence economies of small farmers and others who had relied on access to common land, and, as a result, helped to encourage migration from the land" (Black 36). Displaced farmers flocked to urban centers (especially London, but also Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield, etc.) in search of work, dramatically altering both the urban landscape as the population exploded and the rural landscape as small-scale agriculture was replaced by larger, ostensibly more efficient farming (Black 35, 117). Some of the dispossessed were unable to find a place in the new economy and were left to wander in the public roads, dependent on the charity of the passerby for sustenance.

Parliament regulated these individuals through a series of acts (most notably from 1572 to 1824) that criminalized the act of wandering in cases of "idle and suspicious characters," which included a vague and ever-expanding group of people such as "persons wandering and begging," fortune-tellers, vagabonds, and "[I]unatics with little or no estate" (Eccles 2, 6). Considering them a threat to public order, Parliament responded to the problem of their presence

by prohibiting vagrancy and empowering local authorities to punish offenders, often by returning them to their original parish, but sometimes by whipping and imprisoning them (Eccles 7). Many of these laws specifically targeted vagrants with disabilities, including beggars who were “blind, lame, or pretending to be so,” such as the beggar from Book VII of *The Prelude* (Eccles 9). In short, the vagrant who was unable to adapt to the new rules of the market also became the victim of a systematic government effort to reduce crime and maintain public order.

Another consequence of changes in agriculture was the accumulation of masses of people in the city of London. Unlike the presence of vagrants and beggars on public roads, which had always been a problem, the presence of the urban crowd was unprecedented. According to Raymond Williams, “poor people and vagrants, the casualties of a changing rural economy” arrived in London as labor for the construction of the “town mansions” and “fashionable terraces” of the wealthy (Williams *Change in the City* 145). This increase in population brought about “one of the newly emphasised fears of the city: the fear of the mob” (Williams *Change in the City* 143). Indeed, Wordsworth’s time in London coincided with the aftermath of the French Revolution, in which angry mobs successfully overthrew the social order as well as the monarchy. For Londoners who thrived in their own social order, this exacerbated anxieties about crowds. According to George Rudé, the crowd is always an extremely unstable entity since it is both a seemingly unified whole and an uneasy alliance of diverse individual entities from different social classes and with different social stances (178). The ambiguity of the word “crowd” itself—which means both a peaceful, unorganized group of people on the street and a violent and organized revolutionary mob—underscores its threat to the upper and middle classes, even when it is peacefully present (Plotz 1-2).

This context is important for my project because, while much of my thesis focuses on the cognitive aspect of encounter, I do not wish to discount the fact that both poverty and the agglomeration of human beings in cities carry with them an implied narrative that would be especially disconcerting for Wordsworth, a poet who lived through these changes himself and who grappled with his own political feelings about them. Perception is not ahistorical, so the speaker's disorientation or crisis upon confronting a beggar or crowd is fundamentally implicated in these tensions of the Romantic period.

Drawing from encounters throughout Wordsworth's oeuvre—meetings with individuals and groups (of people or objects) in *The Prelude* of 1850, *Lyrical Ballads*, and other poems—I argue in this thesis that, at the heart of “the poetry of encounter” lies a problem of self-definition. In the twentieth century, Jacques Lacan articulated this problem in psychological terms by arguing that the human conception of the self begins when a child looks into a mirror and first recognizes himself as a coherent, integral whole as opposed to a disjointed collection of limbs. But this “mirror stage” in which we recognize our coherence is short-lived and ultimately misleading. For Lacan, “the function of the mirror-stage” ought to be “to establish a relation between the organism and its reality” but, as humans age, “this relation to nature is altered” because of an opening up or a rupture, what Lacan calls “a certain dehiscence at the heart of the organism” (4). In other words, we are *not* coordinated wholes set apart from an uncoordinated background but instead open to and inextricably intertwined with our environment. Wordsworth, it seems, anticipated this idea of a fundamental human boundlessness since both the blind beggar and the crowd represent porous figures who lack an obvious and comforting border between internal and external.

Understanding both the beggar and the crowd as entities that are not bounded and distinct, but undefined and permeable, allows for a new reading of *The Prelude* that emphasizes the profoundly destabilizing difficulty of the speaker's repeated efforts to carve out his own identity in the absence of a clear Other against whom he might define himself. My argument, then, is both an effort to deconstruct an assumption present in previous readings of Wordsworth's encounters as well as a claim about *The Prelude* itself. By challenging the scholarship's unspoken—and, until now, unquestioned—premise that the “poetry of encounter” stops with discrete entities, I offer a new way of reading Wordsworth's work in light of his interest in encounter. In *The Prelude*, an encounter with the Other is not just a useful opportunity for the speaker to define himself by contrast or even to learn about the world of a radically different person, but a shocking confrontation that reveals neither comforting commonality nor expected difference. This kind of confrontation calls into question the basic human supposition that the individual is an integral and coherent whole, obviously separate from his environment and from those he encounters.

I begin in the first chapter by justifying my unconventional inclusion of Wordsworth's crowd in the discourse of the “poetry of encounter.” Generally speaking, despite a perceived difference in terms of boundedness, both *The Prelude's* beggars and its crowds can be *environmental*, features or forces of the landscape, and *encounterable*, entities capable of being confronted. In fact, Wordsworth's London contains many beggars and crowds that are merely observed as features of the environment. Only the blind beggar and the crowd of St. Bartholomew Fair are encountered, and only they destabilize the speaker to such an extent that he is overcome by a kind of frenzied overstimulation. This chapter seeks to answer a seemingly simple question: why?

To address this question, I rely on a Freudian theory of trauma from the essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in order to differentiate between the passing meetings with various marginalized individuals or throngs and the startling, debilitating encounters with the blind beggar and with the Fair's crowd. It bears mentioning that my consideration of such encounters as "traumatic" reflects the language employed in Freud's essay rather than my own understanding of them as emblematic of the literature of trauma<sup>2</sup>. Freud's observation that trauma patients often relive their distress after the fact in an effort to retrospectively buffer or mitigate it proves useful in a discussion of Wordsworth's inclusion of various non-encountered beggars and crowds, all of whom anticipate the speaker's two disorienting encounters. Still, I hesitate to use the language of trauma outside of this context because, trauma, as Cathy Caruth characterizes it, is "an effect of destruction," or an "external violence" that imposes itself on the psyche, as well as "an enigma of survival" because it manifests itself only after one has lived through—survived—a devastating event (58). Arguably, Wordsworth's encounters do not constitute this kind of "external violence" and, even more importantly, they are not rooted in a history of oppression or persecution. For Caruth, trauma is "deeply tied to our own historical realities," meaning that it is implicated in an ongoing narrative of repeated suffering (12). In Caruth's conception, for example, part of the trauma of the Holocaust is its links to a larger history of Jewish suffering, enslavement, and liberation (10-12). In this sense, *The Prelude's* shocking encounters cannot be considered traumatic because they are not tied to a history of shock.

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of how trauma is generally conceptualized in literature, see Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, as well as Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*.

But Caruth also argues that the cause of trauma “is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time” (61). Trauma, then, is not necessarily a physical violence but a disruption, a mental crisis centered around an unknowable and incomprehensible horror, which is in fact reminiscent of what the speaker experiences in Wordsworth’s *London*. I think it valid, therefore, to borrow Freud’s understanding of the prefiguration of trauma in a discussion of Wordsworth’s prefiguration of cognitive shock. However, in this chapter and throughout the thesis, I have opted to use the language of shock rather than the language of trauma in my description of these encounters (except where quoting from Freud) because, in spite of their definite “break in the mind’s experience of time,” I do not think that either of these shocking encounters is part of the larger literature of trauma.

After establishing that the crowd of the Fair is actually encountered and that Book VII attempts to buffer the shock of its two central encounters through prefigurations of beggars and crowds, I turn in the second chapter to a consideration of encounter in a wider selection of Wordsworth’s poems. Close readings of these poems help to clarify why the encounters with the blind beggar and with the crowd at the Fair are so destabilizing and shocking while other encounters can be intellectually or spiritually fruitful. A possible explanation hinges on the abrupt way that the fuzzy-edged individuals and crowds enter the speaker’s field of vision, hindering his ability to distance himself from them and subsequently contain or render them familiar through poetry. Further, this chapter suggests that the boundary between the encountered entity and its political context is unclear. The beggar and the crowd are both deeply embedded in contemporary conversations about vagrancy and revolution, which makes it difficult for the speaker to separate them from their position in the surrounding political discourses. Much of

Wordsworth's poetry is in fact characterized by a political sympathy for rural people displaced by industry and urbanization—Margaret from “The Ruined Cottage” is a good example—as well as a sympathy for the ideals of the French Revolution, which in his view nobly aimed “to equalise in God's pure sight / Monarch and peasant” (VI. 455-456). These encounters, then, are mired in a tension between the speaker's stated principles and his physical or instinctive response of recoiling in disgust or fear, suggesting that their destabilizing effect might stem in part from a political guilt.

Building on the foundations laid by the first two chapters, the final section of this thesis offers a possible reading of Book VII—and also of some other Wordsworthian encounters—based on the idea that Wordsworth's poems are anxious about the uncertain nature of the boundaries upon which their speakers rely for self-definition. Just as the unboundedness of the blind beggar and the crowd of the Fair links them to their physical background (the environment of London with all its beggars and crowds) and to their political contexts, it also implicates them in the textual background of London: its inescapable newspapers, postings, and advertisements. As Rachel Bowlby has already shown, in *The Prelude*, the city is “readable,” and, therefore, in the legible environment, the speaker's encounter with the blind beggar marks an attempt and a failure to *read* him, not just see him. By a failure to read, Bowlby means a failure to decipher, to understand the beggar in terms of familiar characters and signs. This chapter demonstrates the ways in which the environmental text also encroaches into the unbounded urban crowd, rendering it similarly legible, though difficult to read.

But this notion of a speaker attempting to read people or entities extends beyond the textual city, suggesting that the speaker tries to make the Other understandable by imposing a familiar metaphor upon him (or it): that of a written text. Sometimes, in rural settings, the

speaker articulates his meetings with fellow villagers and with shockingly different abject figures in a lexicon of reading. This effort to conceive of such figures as legible texts suggests that, in uncomfortable and alienating situations of encounter, a comparison to a book seeks to transform the Other into a comfortably recognizable, clearly bounded entity. Through this analysis, I aim to show that reading Wordsworth's work with a focus on the blurred nature of the boundaries between people, crowds, and environments can shed new light on the "poetry of encounter."

What is at stake in this project is not just a novel way of conceiving of the encounter with the Other in Wordsworth's work. Also at issue is a new possible reading of the speaker's many attempts to define himself in relation to the Other. My thesis challenges seemingly fixed notions of boundedness and unboundedness, of what is a whole or encounterable entity and what is a non-integral background. By doubting whether *The Prelude* itself actually embraces the seemingly obvious difference between an unbounded crowd and a bounded individual, it also raises questions about what it means in the poem to be an individual at all. My thesis redefines Garber's conception of Wordsworth's meetings and proposes a new "poetry of encounter" concerned with the fragility of boundaries between self and Other or between Other and environment, boundaries upon which the speaker depends for self-definition. Ultimately, and a bit uncomfortably, this thesis argues that, to a certain extent, for Wordsworth we are what surrounds us.

## Chapter One Redefining the “Poetry of Encounter”

For Frederick Garber, throughout Wordsworth’s work, the speaker’s encounter with a person or object different from himself “is an event in which the self may break through to a fleeting, incomplete, but definite understanding of something about the world of the other, an understanding which can result in a permanent increase of self and its knowledge”<sup>3</sup> (14).

Certainly, some scholars have challenged this idea that Wordsworth’s encounters are always productive in some way (or at least rendered productive through poetry)<sup>4</sup>. But, as I mention in the introduction, Garber’s understanding of Wordsworth’s oeuvre as a series of encounters between the self and a separate, strange, “discrete and not completely knowable” Other has been useful for many critics<sup>5</sup> (28). What is characteristic of this scholarship, otherwise quite diverse in topic and argument, is that it limits its definition of encounter to include only meetings with a separate, singular, firmly bounded, and physically coherent object, animal, or person.

Here, I seek to undermine this understanding of encounter in *The Prelude* (which I think is limited by an implicit assumption about who or what can be confronted) by comparing the speaker’s famous encounter with Wordsworth’s blind beggar to what I delineate as his encounter with the crowd of St. Bartholomew Fair. It is important to note that, within the critical framework of Wordsworth’s “poetry of encounter,” my assertion that the speaker can actually

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<sup>3</sup> For Garber, each “successful” encounter forces the speaker to “learn and keep learning all that he is not” without forgetting “all that he is,” leading to a net increase of epistemic certainty (26). Failed encounters, though destabilizing, also paradoxically increase the speaker’s knowledge because they increase his awareness of what he does not know (26).

<sup>4</sup> Quentin Bailey, for instance, considers the encounter with the blind beggar in Book VII of *The Prelude* as emblematic of “a poetics of non-recognition that emphatically denies the possibility of transformation” and not as a constructive moment (162).

<sup>5</sup> David Simpson and Adam Potkay are good examples; their arguments are more thoroughly discussed in the introduction.

encounter—not just observe or participate in—a crowd contradicts the conclusions of most scholars. This is because, unlike the abject figure, the crowd is not a discrete and physically coherent entity. Its boundaries—both its outermost edges and its borders with each individual member—are unclear. In an encounter with the crowd, the purportedly conspicuous frontier between self and encountered Other becomes blurred. Rather than assuming that this ambiguous border precludes encounter, however, I wish to show that it actually renders the confrontation between the poet-figure and the crowd of the Fair all the more significant as an encounter, especially when juxtaposed with the blind beggar episode. Significantly, while there are many beggars and many crowds present in Book VII, only this specific beggar and only this specific crowd are encountered in such a way that they are able to precipitate a cognitive crisis for the speaker. Other London beggars and crowds are merely noted and listed as part of the urban background. The first section of this chapter is thus concerned with establishing a principle that will be foundational for this thesis: that seemingly interchangeable beggars and crowds (which are both at times, to the eye of the spectator, unbounded) are sometimes observed as features of the environment and sometimes confronted or encountered. This leads to an important question about the text: why are most of Book VII's beggars and crowds observed as part of the urban environment while only the blind beggar and the Fair's crowd are encountered?

To answer this question, I turn in the second part of this chapter to argue that the observed beggars and crowds prefigure or anticipate the encountered beggar and crowd. The background figures and groups share many of the characteristics of the blind beggar and the crowd of the Fair, suggesting that the encountered entities act as a composite of the observed beggars and crowds that precede them. My argument is that such figures not only lead up to, but also represent an attempt to buffer the shock of the eventual cognitive crises that the encounters

trigger. Sigmund Freud's well-known essay, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," proves useful here since it argues that the human psyche, in an attempt to prepare itself for an imminent fright, constructs a "protective shield" of anxiety (23). When an event "break[s] through" this shield, it becomes traumatic (23). In fact, according to Freud, trauma patients often have dreams that force them to re-live the traumatic event because their minds are retrospectively attempting to construct a shield that might have successfully protected them in the first place. I argue that the presence of the beggars and crowds who anticipate the encountered ones represents a similar effort to build up a reservoir of anxiety throughout the poem which is intended to protect the speaker against the full impact of the shock. Ultimately, however, these efforts are rendered futile by the enormity of the sensory destabilization. Reading these encounters *with* rather than against each other thus opens Book VII to a number of novel interpretations, overlooked by scholars who have considered them only independently of each other.

*Environmental and Encounterable Entities*

Following in the long tradition of "the poetry of encounter," most critics read the London crowd as a backdrop for the "true" action of Book VII—namely, the encounter with the single figure of the famous blind beggar—and not as an active entity with the same potential for encounter. William Chapman Sharpe's analysis of Book VII epitomizes this tendency by proposing that, "[f]or Wordsworth, to enter the crowd is to suspend ordinary sensory contact with the world..." (19). According to Sharpe, the crowd is an unusual environment that the speaker can enter and leave. This environment disorients his senses, unsettling him just in time for a particularly destabilizing encounter with the blind beggar: "Chance and the crowd thrust upon his notice a figure that does indeed present the 'unimaginable' aspect of urban identity, the Other who cannot be overlooked" (Sharpe 18). The surrounding crowd, then, leads the speaker

into a confrontation with the beggar that “pits the desire for knowledge of self and Other against the incomprehensible enormity of the city” (18). In Book VII, Sharpe sees an obvious self (the speaker), a distinct and coherent Other (the beggar) and a disconcerting background (the multitudinous crowd, which is emblematic of “the incomprehensible enormity” of London). Because of this, he attributes the speaker’s cognitive breakdown and blindness upon encountering the blind beggar not only to the beggar himself, but also to the presence of the surrounding crowd, which affects the poet’s ability to see and mentally process him.

John Plotz makes a similar point when he notes that “the crowd has stripped from [the speaker] the ability to distinguish between reality and spectacle,” which is why the encounter with the beggar is shocking despite its advantage of offering a respite from “gazing without reciprocity at those who can see him, or being gazed at by those whom he cannot acknowledge” in the bustling throng (Plotz 30). Sharpe and Plotz both argue that the crowd is only present in “Residence in London” as a disorienting backdrop that undermines the poet’s ability to perceive properly or to assign meaning to what he sees. These readings place Book VII’s two principal entities—abject urban figures and crowds—into one of two binary categories, which I label *encounterable* and *environmental*. In the conception of Sharpe and Plotz, the beggar, a physically unified individual at a distance from the speaker, is encounterable, capable of being confronted, while the crowd, a disjointed body with unclear boundaries close to and sometimes even encompassing the speaker, is environmental, a feature of the urban landscape that can only be noticed, never confronted.

To a certain extent, these critics are correct: the crowd *is* an important part of the urban environment. As Plotz notes, the new presence of crowds in early nineteenth-century London produced “both a pleasant and a threatening urban anonymity” since “[m]undane outdoor life

came to include random encounters with strangers, inexplicable aggregations, sudden eruptions of violence, and permanent sites for encountering others *en masse*” (1). Crowds are simultaneously an ordinary element of urban life and an extraordinary force capable of overthrowing monarchs and the status quo (Plotz 1-2). Moreover, Plotz notes that the disorienting crowd is also a useful “backdrop against which one can do things that one could not have done outside it,” so the poet’s ability to see the city hinges in some sense on his anonymity, made possible by the urban crowd (19). The crowd, then, operates as an environmental feature that blocks the poet’s creative initiative by disorienting him or subjecting him to a sensory overload and at the same time enables his poetry insofar as it gives him a new vantage point, different from the removed “airy lodges” of lawyers who dwell comfortably above the crowd, not in it (VII. 187)<sup>6</sup>.

Despite these examples of environmental influence, accepting the crowd exclusively as a backdrop against which the speaker attempts to single out interesting figures or “candidates for regard” severely restricts our ability to understand Book VII (VII. 583). In fact, just as the crowd sometimes appears as a backdrop—“That huge fermenting mass of human-kind / Serves as solemn back-ground, or relief”—the abject individual, universally accepted as encounterable because of his coherence and separateness, also appears as a barely registered feature of the urban landscape (VII. 621-622). Figures like “The begging scavenger, with hat in hand” and “The Italian, as he thrids his way with care, / Steadying, far-seen, a frame of images / Upon his head” are only noted as part of the urban “hubbub,” certainly not encountered in the same way as the blind beggar or other prominent marginalized figures such as the discharged soldier or the

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<sup>6</sup> In sharp contrast to the bustling, noisy streets of the city, London also has “... privileged regions and inviolate, / Where from their airy lodges studious lawyers / Look out on waters, walks, and gardens green” (VII. 186-188).

leech-gatherer (VII. 213-214, 215-217, 211). If abject figures can constitute both features of an urban environment and encountered entities, it follows that crowds, too, despite their often-environmental presence, have the same potential for encounter.

In fact, these binary categories of environmental crowds and encounterable individuals are predicated on an erroneously perceived difference between unbounded, internally heterogeneous crowds and bounded, physically coherent individuals. Even in the case of the blind beggar, epitome of the uniquely encountered individual, the boundaries between the beggar and the speaker are not always clear. Initially, the poem attempts to emphasize the total difference between the wandering, mobile speaker and the disabled beggar, who is in a state of total destitution, even unable to support himself physically since he “Stood, propped against a wall” (VII. 640). But this idea of the beggar’s dependence on a wall implies that, like the crowd, he is not rigidly bounded or discrete: his body relies on an external support to perform the role of its legs. Moreover, the beggar’s “written paper,” as other critics have pointed out, is reminiscent of the speaker-poet’s vocation as a writer, especially as the writer of *The Prelude*, which is, as its subtitle indicates, “An Autobiographical Poem” (VII. 641). In effect, it is this sign, which explains the beggar’s “story, whence he came, and who he was” that precipitates the speaker’s mental crisis—“my mind turned round / As with the might of waters”—since it reminds him that these few words represent “the utmost we can know, / Both of ourselves and of the universe” (VII. 642, 643-644, 645-646). The speaker feels “admonished from another world” in the aftermath of this encounter because he becomes aware that his own fourteen-book poetic project cannot produce more knowledge of the self or of the universe than a few words written on the sign of a man on the margins of society. Part of what makes the encounter with the blind beggar so remarkable, then, is precisely the fact the border between speaker and encountered entity is

tenuous. The distinctions between environmental crowds and encounterable individuals are thus called into question by the individual's ability to act as a feature of the environment and by his ability to act as an unbounded entity.

*Environmental as Antecedent to Encounterable: Prefiguring Shock*

Wordsworth's blind beggar is preceded in the text by a number of similar abject characters, equally encounterable but presented merely as part of a series of mundane sights:

'Tis one encountered here and everywhere;  
A travelling cripple, by the trunk cut short,  
And stumping on his arms. In sailor's garb  
Another lies at length, beside a range  
Of well-formed characters, with chalk inscribed  
Upon the smooth flat stones. (VII. 202-207)

The fact that such figures are "here and everywhere" suggests that they are present not only in London but also in rural spaces as part of the general surroundings. While the text introduces these men as "encountered," it is clear that no critic would read them as emblematic of Garber's "poetry of encounter" because they are elements of a general urban background, more significant when taken together than when considered independently.

Beyond this example of individual as environment, what is particularly striking about this passage is the second figure's sign. With its "well-formed characters," it bears an uncanny resemblance to the blind beggar's famous plaque, which precipitates the speaker's dramatic response to their encounter:

Caught by the spectacle my mind turned round  
As with the might of waters; an apt type  
This label seemed of the utmost we can know,  
Both of ourselves and of the universe... (VII. 643-646)

While here the blind beggar's sign causes the speaker's mind to turn round "As with the might of waters," the other man's sign causes no reaction at all. The passage merely includes him and his

textual reinscription, so to speak, as part of a general survey of the various people who make up the urban scene. In fact, after noting his presence, the survey immediately moves on to “the Nurse” and “The Bachelor, that loves to sun himself,” apparently giving the man no more weight than these stock characters (VII. 207, 208). This casts doubt on an argument many critics have made and most have accepted: that what is particularly disorienting about the blind beggar (in addition to his position within a crowd) is his “written yet unreadable” text (Sharpe 20). The text alone cannot be responsible for triggering the speaker’s crisis if another beggar with a similar text has no discernible impact. In order to reconcile this argument with the poem, I propose that the first beggar is not shocking because he is not encountered. He is a feature of the environment, and as such he cannot elicit the kind of cognitive crisis precipitated by the blind beggar. Moreover, the environmental beggar is not shocking because he serves as a textual precedent, as one in a series of environmental figures who resemble the blind beggar. In effect, the blind beggar acts as a composite of the traits of his environmental antecedents, taking on the physical handicap of the “travelling cripple” through his blindness, the text of the man dressed as a sailor, and the begging of the scavenger. This section of Book VII, then, transforms a series of environmental, marginal—both in society and in the text—individuals into an encounterable entity.

Notably, just as the blind beggar reflects many of the qualities of textually prior environmental marginalized figures, the encountered crowd of St. Bartholomew Fair takes on several properties of the environmental crowd discussed by Sharpe and Plotz. Leading up to the Fair, Book VII describes the crowd in a number of ways. First, it is a “concourse of mankind”—from the Latin *concurrere*, to run together—suggesting that the crowd is a wonderful coming together of the diverse and ever-growing category of “mankind” (VII. 69). Next, it is labeled an

“endless stream of men and moving things” which eventually becomes “the comers and goers face to face, / Face after face” (VII. 151, 156-157). Here, the crowd begins to take on some less positive connotations, since the themes of endlessness and the notion of “Face after face” imply that the crowd is an interminable series in which face to face encounters are replaced by a staggering sequence of profiles. In fact, the speaker’s attitude toward the crowd becomes increasingly negative as he compares it to “an enemy” responsible for the disorienting and loud “thickening hubbub” (VII 169, 211). He even makes a moral judgment of “a throng / Of chance spectators, chiefly dissolute men / And shameless women” when he sees a group of people clustered around an attractive baby (VII. 359-361). The environmental crowd is also compared to “the fiery furnace” and a “many-headed mass,” as well as “a black storm upon a mountain top” and “that huge fermenting mass of human-kind” (VII. 370, 434, 619, 621). This crescendo in which the crowd moves away from being a symbol of unity and togetherness representative of mankind and instead becomes a rotting enemy eventually culminates in the introduction of the crowd of St. Bartholomew Fair.

The crowd of the Fair encompasses many features of the increasingly horrifying background crowds, which finally merge to become a kind of integral body that, like the blind beggar, is encounterable despite its unclear boundaries. The originally positive notion of the crowd’s embodiment of the unity of mankind is eerily echoed in the possibility that “half the city shall break out / Full of one passion” (VII. 672-673). Similarly, the idea of an endless series is embodied by the quality of the text, which itself becomes an endless series of odd spectacles:

And him who at the trumpet puffs his cheeks,  
 The silver-collared Negro with his timbrel,  
 Equestrians, tumblers, women, girls, and boys,  
 Blue-breeched, pink-vested, with high-towering plumes,  
 All moveables of wonder, from all parts,  
 Are here... (VII. 702-707)

Moreover, just as it was earlier in Book VII, the morality of the crowd is again called into question as the speaker loses his ability to distinguish between the crowd of spectators and the Fair's performers; both groups seem to fall into the category of "perverted things" (VII. 714). Even the unnatural danger of the crowd, expressed earlier in terms of a "many-headed mass," is repeated here, expressed as an area "alive / With heads" (VII. 434, 690-691). The throng's threatening nature—first articulated through its resemblance to "a black storm upon a mountain top"—is literalized here as the speaker becomes aware that half the city could break out, not only unified in their passion, but unified in their "vengeance, rage, or fear" and lead to "executions, to a street on fire" (VII. 619, 674, 675). During this episode, the crowd, which has been a part of the urban backdrop, asserts itself as an active entity whose contact with the speaker, like that of the blind beggar, constitutes not just an environmental influence, but an encounter in its own right, fraught with many of the same tensions and anticipations as the meeting with the abject figure.

It bears mentioning that I am not the first reader to juxtapose the encounter with the blind beggar and the scene at St. Bartholomew Fair. In fact, Geoffrey Hartman has argued that Book VII serves to contrast the "casual incident (e.g. his encountering the blind beggar)" with the "'moving accident' (the stage spectacle [of St. Bartholomew Fair])" (239). Hartman emphasizes the importance of "the abrupt entry-into-consciousness of an external figure marked by its naked or solitary aspect," which is, as he says, "a common part of the Wordsworthian landscape" (238-239). For Hartman, Book VII underscores Wordsworth's tendency to encounter exclusively individual figures, which defeat his "expectation of a strongly visual significance," but which never fail to stimulate his imagination (242). Hartman's point is that the meeting with the blind

beggar activates in “a quasi-apocalyptic” way, the speaker’s cognitive faculties (or imagination), while the Fair dulls them (242).

Though Hartman ignores entirely the speaker’s experience of the crowd during the Fair, he is right that the encounter with the beggar and what I have outlined as the encounter with the Fair’s crowd differ in some respects. Most obviously, as Hartman notes, the blind beggar stimulates the speaker’s mind: “Caught by the spectacle my mind turned round / As with the might of waters” (VII. 643-644). The Fair, on the other hand, leads to a certain dullness; it “lays, / If any spectacle on earth can do, the whole creative powers of man asleep!” (VII. 679-681). Rather than accepting Hartman’s claim that this contrast highlights the total difference between the run-in with the beggar and the experience of the Fair, I argue that these reactions represent two varying responses to a similar attack on the senses prompted by an encounter with a “spectacle,” which in my view need not be a singular figure. In the case of the blind beggar, the poem gives us some psychological access to the speaker’s response: the overwhelming shock of the sense of difference and yet sameness between speaker and beggar throws the speaker’s mind into a flurry of activity, into a *perversion*, which literally means a “turn[ing] round.” In the case of the crowd, the poem points to a dullness, placing no explicit emphasis on the speaker’s psychological motion. Instead, however, the poem itself begins to embody a similar kind of frenzied, swirling activity.

What I mean by this is that, in the encounter with the Fair’s crowd, the poem stages in its own body, so to speak—in its own formal and textual features—the crisis or breakdown that, in the episode of the blind beggar, takes place only inside the speaker’s head. As Plotz notes, despite the assertion that the speaker’s poetic faculties are dormant because of the Fair, the text

becomes increasingly animated and chaotic as it attempts to contain the multitudinous and unbounded throng:

Below, the open space, through every nook  
Of the wide area, twinkles, is alive  
With heads; the midway region, and above,  
Is thronged with staring pictures and huge scrolls,  
Dumb proclamations of the Prodigies;  
With chattering monkeys dangling from their poles,  
And children whirling in their roundabouts;  
With those that stretch the neck and strain the eyes,  
And crack the voice in rivalry, the crowd  
Inviting; with buffoons against buffoons  
Grimacing, writhing, screaming,—him who grinds  
The hurdy-gurdy, at the fiddle weaves,  
Rattles the salt-box, thumps the kettle-drum,  
And him who at the trumpet puffs his cheeks,  
The silver collared Negro with his timbrel,  
Equestrians, tumblers, women, girls and boys... (VII. 689-704)

In this passage, the poem is not just active, but frenetic. It presents inventories of images—monkeys, children, buffoons, a trumpet player, equestrians, etc.—without making any attempt to organize them, suggesting that the poem offers its readers odd and mundane sights as they appear to the speaker's overstimulated eyes, unmediated by his imagination or intellect. Unlike in the episode of the blind beggar, the poem does not reveal the speaker's cognitive reaction to this encounter with a disconcerting Other. The crisis is expressed not through the chaos of his mind, but through the enumerative chaos of the text itself. Through its liberal use of enjambment—"alive / With heads," "above / Is thronged," "the crowd / Inviting"—the poem embodies the chaos and uncertainty of meaning prompted by the encounter with the crowd. It separates words that ought to remain together to modify each other and prepositions that attempt to orient the reader, creating an effect of total confusion within the poem. The tumult of the crowd forces itself into the very language of the text.

For Plotz, Book VII follows the speaker's struggle to represent a crowd within the medium of poetry—to resolve an “antagonism between unmanageable crowd and magisterial poetry”—which culminates in the speaker's eventual success in poetically containing and aestheticizing the “moving veil” that is perpetually present as a feature of the environment in London (38, 35). Previously irreconcilable with poetry, the “urban experience has been set into the world of the poem” (Plotz 35). Yet Plotz concedes that “in the poem's own account of the uncontrollable powers of St. Bartholomew Fair... [the city crowd is not] wholly controlled” (38). This, for him, is actually rather positive: “There would be no aesthetic pleasure without the threatening world of the nonaesthetic—both as a continual presence outside the poem, and as an imprecisely controlled incursion into the poem” (38). Plotz's point here is that Wordsworth manipulates the threat of the crowd's intrusion into the poem in order to enrich his work, marking a successful mastery of the conflict between crowd and poetry, though the possibility of uncontrolled incursion remains. The intrusion of the “nonaesthetic” crowd into the poem during the episode of the Fair, for Plotz, renders Wordsworth comparable to “a tightrope walker who throws in mock stumbles to heighten the thrills” (39).

But is the encroachment of the crowd into the structure of the poem during the episode of the Fair really comparable to deliberate, performative “mock stumbles” intended to enhance the “thrills”? As compelling as I find Plotz's depiction of Book VII as a struggle to represent and contain the perpetually present crowd, I do not think that the speaker consciously invites the crowd into the poem for the fun of it. The formal chaos of the text during the episode of the Fair suggests that the poem is visibly overrun by the intruding crowd, marking a failure to contain or represent it rather than a success rendered more provocative by a carefully calculated admission of a certain amount of disorder. Even the walls, after all, become *thronged* with pictures,

implying an invasion on the part of the crowd more than an intentional invitation on the part of the poem. Thus, while the beggar and the crowd do spark the different mental reactions mentioned by Hartman—the beggar enlivens while the crowd deadens—both are marked by a turning round, a feverish activity prompted by an intrusion into the mind or poem of what the speaker attempts to maintain obviously external and separate by containing it from a distance.

The fact that the aftermath of both of these encounters consists of this kind of swirling, frenzied motion demonstrates that they represent a destabilizing shock for the speaker in a way that the other beggars and crowds of Book VII do not. Freud's essay, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," is relevant for explaining the odd presence of other, more environmental beggars and crowds in the moments leading up to the encounters with the blind beggar and with the crowd at the Fair. The essay is Freud's effort to reconcile "the pleasure principle"—the idea that human action is ultimately motivated by a desire to maximize pleasure and minimize pain—with the no less pervasive human tendency to repeat a past trauma. Freud considers "the common traumatic neurosis as a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli" (25). Significantly, he defines anxiety as "a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one" and he posits that this kind of expectation is part of the shield (6). For Freud,

preparedness for anxiety and the hypercathexis<sup>7</sup> of the receptive systems constitute the last line of defence of the shield against stimuli. In the case of quite a number of traumas, the difference between systems that are unprepared and systems that are well prepared through being hypercathected may be a decisive factor in determining the outcome; though where the strength of a trauma exceeds a certain limit this factor will no doubt cease to carry weight. (25-26)

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<sup>7</sup> According to *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, cathexis is "the fact that a certain amount of psychical energy is attached to an idea or to a group of ideas, to a part of the body, to an object, etc." (Pontalis and Laplanche 62). An object becomes hypercathected "when a supplementary charge of instinctual energy is directed on to it," so in this case, the receptive system (i.e. the senses) receives more energy in an effort to retrospectively buffer the trauma (191).

The argument here is that anxiety, or preemptive fear, is a useful protection—a kind of psychic armor—against the trauma of unwanted stimulation. In short, without a preliminary buildup of anxiety, trauma is much more difficult to handle. Perhaps, like the dreamer who revisits his past crises as he sleeps, the speaker of Book VII is “endeavoring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis” (Freud 26). Along these lines, one might read the series of both crowds and solitary figures leading up to the climactic encounter with the crowd and the blind beggar as a textual defense mechanism, as an attempt to anticipate the shock, whether mental or poetic, and thus mitigate it. Ultimately, as Freud admits, there are some traumas so powerful that even the greatest reservoir of anxiety cannot act as a protection against them. The speaker’s two encounters appear to fall into this category since, despite their textual antecedents, they undoubtedly precipitate a crisis, either of cognitive or poetic frenzy.

### *Conclusion*

As we have seen, both crowds and abject figures can be noticed as elements of the urban environment or encountered as unbounded (not necessarily integral) wholes. The assumption that only people and objects are encounterable has kept scholars such as Sharpe, Plotz, and Hartman from recognizing that, during St. Bartholomew Fair, the speaker’s confrontation with the multifarious crowd prompts a sensory shock that resembles the one sparked by his encounter with the beggar, though it manifests itself in different ways, either mentally or poetically. Moreover, both the encountered beggar and the encountered crowd are prefigured by earlier, partial, environmental versions of themselves, suggesting that their textual antecedents are intended to act as a kind of Freudian psychic armor against the inevitable shock (or, in Freud’s terms, trauma) of encounter. This leads us to another important question: why are these

encounters so deeply destabilizing? What is it about the Other or the crowd that causes a meeting with one of them to turn into a crisis or breakdown?

## Chapter Two Contextualizing the Destabilizing Encounter

To answer this question (why are these encounters so shocking?), I put forth two principal arguments. First, these figures—i.e. the beggar, the crowd—are disorienting because of how they rise into visibility for the narrator. They appear with a distinctive suddenness or immediacy that interferes with the speaker's ability to perform his usual tasks. He cannot select (or construct) a bounded object to see from a distance and readily distinguish from its environment, nor can he use the poem to assign some sort of meaning to it that confirms his understanding of the world and of himself as its stable observer, positioned in an invisible center. Second, such encounters are disruptive because marginalized figures and crowds are themselves deeply implicated in contemporary debates about urbanization, industrialization and the French Revolution. In other words, they cannot be easily separated from their contexts. Their sudden and shocking appearance thus precipitates internal turmoil for the English, forward-thinking speaker, who is forced to feel the chasm between his moral, political, and intellectually supported progressivism and his visceral response of disgust or fear.

### *Sudden Encounters and the Absence of Selective Seeing*

This section expands my analysis beyond *The Prelude* in order to examine several of Wordsworth's poems that do not result in a frenzied mind or text and compare them to scenes of destabilizing encounter. In these poems, the speaker generally surveys a spectacle from a comfortable distance and mentally reorganizes it so as to force it to yield a familiar reflection of himself. In the shocking confrontations with the beggar and the crowd, these entities appear to the narrator violently and suddenly, making it difficult for him to distinguish them from their environments. This distinctive immediacy limits the speaker's ability to perform his usual task:

to select, from a distance, a bounded object, and to attach to it some sort of meaning that reinforces his own understanding of a world organized around himself.

When the speaker attempts to apply this technique in London, he fails dramatically. As Tanya Agathocleous argues, initially, the speaker's visual work in the city "takes the form of proto-anthropological cataloging" (307). But, since they defy traditional categories of boundedness, the blind beggar and the crowd resist the usual classification, which renders them especially unsettling. For a speaker who aims to catalogue the people and crowds of London from a detached, quasi-scientific perspective, the knowledge that he is not separated from such people or crowds by a clear boundary is profoundly destabilizing. Moreover, because the ambiguously bounded beggar and crowd appear to the speaker suddenly and without warning, they force him to look at them from an uncomfortable proximity when they are "By nature an unmanageable sight" (VII. 732). As Sharpe notes, "Wordsworth prefers to perceive and create through *distance*," which suggests that, without a certain optical remoteness, he cannot use his mind to mediate—to survey and classify—sights such as the beggar and the crowd (28). Indeed, this idea of unmediated visual imposition is a recurring theme throughout Wordsworth's poetry. Sometimes, the notion that sights impress themselves on the mind is presented as a wonderfully reassuring example of human attunement to the natural world, but more often it constitutes a horrifying submission of the mind to the tyrannical eye.

"Expostulation and Reply," a poem constructed as a dialogue between the speaker and his friend Matthew, serves as an example of Wordsworth's favorable view of a passive acquiescence to nature's sights. In it, the poet figure is criticized for wasting his time sitting around outdoors instead of reading books, which contain "the spirit breathed / From dead men to

their kind” (ll. 7-8). The speaker’s response is that he can learn more from passively submitting to the experiences of the natural world than he can from actively studying his books since

The eye – it cannot choose but see  
 We cannot bid the ear be still;  
 Our bodies feel, where’er they be,  
 Against or with our will. (ll. 17-20)

Here, this notion of a passive receptiveness to nature, made possible by an eye that “cannot choose but see,” is presented as a glorious triumph of a spontaneously attuned human sensibility. In “Tintern Abbey,” the speaker expresses a similar idea that “with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things” (ll. 48-50). The quieted, passive eye is actually better at seeing than the eye that is actively working, striving to see something significant. The speaker’s capacity to yield to nature, to refrain from bidding his eyes and ears to look at or listen to specific sights or sounds (such as books) theoretically enhances his experience of nature. Conveniently, it also assuages Wordsworth’s anxiety about his vocation as a writer. The “wise passiveness” commended in “Expostulation and Reply” releases the poet-figure from the stress-inducing and challenging obligation actively to edify or fashion himself as a poet, to make good use of the talents bestowed upon him by an attentive Nature (l. 24).

But the mind’s dependence on the senses—specifically on sight—is not always so positive or comforting. In fact, the idea that the eye is an inlet through which the outside world impresses itself onto the mind suggests that the eye is a human weakness, inevitably susceptible not only to the wondrous performances of the natural world, but also to more hostile or disconcerting sights that its owner might prefer not to internalize. As many critics have already noted, much of Wordsworth’s poetry reflects a certain anxiety about his own eyes (sight, he says, is “the most despotic of our senses”) and an effort to combat that susceptibility or permeability

by seeing selectively (XI. 174). In the sonnet, “With Ships the Sea Was Sprinkled Far and Nigh,” the speaker looks upon a seascape marked by the chaotic presence of many boats, which he compares to “stars in heaven” (l. 2). This seemingly innocent simile inspires the poem’s mission to organize the unnervingly disorganized visual array in the mind. Just as the randomly scattered stars have been organized by human beings into named and understandable constellations—figural ensembles that resemble and therefore reinforce the perpetual landscape of the human—this simile attempts to organize the randomly scattered ships into a more understandable scene: one ship with special meaning set against a background of other, less important ships.

In an 1807 letter to Lady Beaumont, Wordsworth writes that the poem’s central premise is “that the mind can have no rest among a multitude of objects, of which it cannot make one whole, or from which it cannot single out one individual, whereupon may be concentrated the attention divided among or distracted by a multitude” (Wordsworth *Letters* 128). He argues that, in the face of an unbounded, incoherent array, “we must either select one image or object, which must put out of view the rest wholly, or must subordinate them to itself while it stands forth as a Head” (128). The mind is only “awakened” from its “sleepy and unfixed” state (the result of a despotic eye viewing the unbounded sight of the boats) when the speaker makes an active choice to exert his creative faculties over his eye, to single out one discrete ship from the rest (*Letters* 129). The chosen ship, which has no inherent distinction since “This Ship was nought to me, nor I to her,” is shown to acquire its exceptional status by virtue of the narrator, who selects it as the sole object of his previously divided attention. This exercise in selective seeing represents a mental effort to transform a disorganized scene with the potential to trigger the eye’s despotism into something that confirms the human sense of our own coherent, bounded being, by mirroring that figuration, which Jacques Lacan likens to “a fortress, or a stadium” (5). This poem thus

exemplifies the idea, also expressed in “Tintern Abbey,” that productive seeing is a purposeful exercise in which the eye half-creates and half perceives.<sup>8</sup> When the eye half-creates what it sees, it creates an internally coherent, bounded sight, and, with the same stroke, it mirrors and confirms the integral self since this too is imagined as a contained and coherent entity.

When the speaker encounters an urban crowd or a marginalized person, however, he is generally unable to perform this kind of selective seeing. In Book VII of *The Prelude*, the speaker attempts (as he did with the ships) to gain some kind of agency over the multifarious and visually disorienting crowd:

Before me flow,  
Thou endless stream of men and moving things!  
Thy every-day appearance, as it strikes—  
With wonder heightened, or sublimed by awe—  
Of strangers, of all ages; the quick dance  
Of colours, lights, and forms, the deafening din; (VII. 149-144)

But here the initial effort to command the crowd to flow before him is undermined by the speaker’s subsequent concession that the crowd’s quotidian appearance *strikes* him. The crowd’s syntactical agency supersedes the attempted agency of the speaker’s authoritative tone. The word “appearance” is also significant because it implies both the crowd’s outward aspect and its arrival or emergence in the speaker’s field of vision. This second meaning, taken together with the notion of striking and its connotations of violence, suggests that the speaker’s encounter with the crowd is one of disorienting and even hostile immediacy. As Freud explains, one of the chief reasons for traumatic neurosis is “the factor of surprise, of fright” (6). Without a preparatory anxiety sufficient to cushion the blow of the trauma of encounter, the speaker experiences what

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<sup>8</sup> “Therefore am I still / A lover of the meadows and the woods / And mountains; and of all that we behold / From this green earth; of all the mighty world / Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create, / And what perceive...” (“Tintern Abbey” ll. 103-108)

Freud calls fright, or “the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise” (6). In the sonnet discussed above, the speaker is able to invent a metaphor (stars) that can contain or organize the ships, easing the process of mentally acting upon the sight; but in the “deafening din” of London with its irresistible imprint of “colours, lights, and forms” he is subject to his own despotic senses and he becomes incapable of clearly outlining a boundary between himself and what he sees.

Similarly, in many of Wordsworth’s poems in which the speaker meets a person on the margins of society—rural or urban—their encounter is unpremeditated, abrupt, and therefore shocking. In “Resolution and Independence,” for instance, the speaker stumbles upon a leech-gatherer:

Now, whether it were by peculiar grace,  
A leading from above, a something given,  
Yet it befell that, in this lonely place,  
When I with these untoward thoughts had striven,  
Beside a pool bare to the eye of heaven  
I saw a Man before me unawares:  
The oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs. (ll. 50-56)

These notions of “peculiar grace” and befalling suggest that the old man has suddenly appeared as a providential revelation, responding to the despairing speaker’s identity crisis. But the figure is hardly comforting. He is extremely old and decrepit, which unsettles the speaker to such an extent that he begins to attempt to transform him into something familiar through simile:

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie  
Couched on the bald top of an eminence;  
Wonder to all who do the same espy,  
By what means it could thither come, and whence;  
So that it seems a thing endued with sense;  
Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf  
Of rock or sand reposes, there to sun itself;

Such seemed this man, not all alive nor dead,  
Nor all asleep—in his extreme old age:

His body was bent double, feet and head  
 Coming together in life's pilgrimage;  
 As if some dire constraint of pain, or rage  
 Of sickness felt by him in times long past,  
 A more than human weight upon his frame had cast. (ll. 64-77).

The comparisons to a “huge stone” and to a “sea-beast” represent the speaker’s effort to conceive of this strange man, who is “not all alive nor dead” in familiar terms, as a discrete rock or even as a bounded monster, which is horrifying yet recognizable. But what is unsettling about the leech-gatherer is his status as a deconstructed human whose boundaries with the world are unstable: “Himself he propped, limbs, body, and pale face, / Upon a long grey staff of shaven wood” (ll. 78-79). The leech-gatherer is not an integral whole, but a collection of limbs, body, and face, that requires an alien appendage—a stick—to perform the function of his legs. The speaker is unsettled by the encounter, then, because he cannot reconcile this incoherent Other with his own concept of what it means to be human. In other words, the leech-gatherer refuses him the comfort of narcissistic reinforcement.

This rural encounter is in some ways similar to the encounter with the blind beggar of Book VII of *The Prelude*, a figure who also appears suddenly and denies the speaker the opportunity to “half-create” him in his image. In fact, the speaker first introduces the beggar by saying that, walking through the streets of London, he “was smitten / Abruptly, with the view (a sight not rare) / Of a blind Beggar” (VII. 637-639). Both of these encounters are abrupt. In them, the speaker is forced into a confrontation with a person on the margins of society, a figure so abject that it is difficult to think of him as human. Moreover, like the leech-gatherer, the beggar is “propped,” by a wall, which, as noted in Chapter One, highlights the fact that he is not a clearly bounded or internally coherent figure who can stand on his own two legs (VII. 639-640). The kind of singling out or selective seeing performed in “With Ships” is impossible in episodes

wherein these kinds of unbounded though singular figures appear without warning and violently strike—in Book VII even *smite*—the eye. As in the case of the crowd, the immediacy of these encounters paired with the unclear borders between these figures and their backgrounds prevents an organizing act of mind that would permit the speaker to transform these sights into recognizable reflections of himself.

Another poem dramatizing Wordsworth's struggle against a despotic eye, however, complicates the idea that shocking immediacy and unboundedness are the only factors responsible for the speaker's inability to master his senses in encounters of this kind. The poem, often referred to as "Daffodils," opens as follows:

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils; (ll. 1-4)

The visual encounter in this famous stanza reflects the same suddenness (i.e. "all at once") that we see in the crowd's "appearance" and in the beggar's "abrup[t]" way of falling into the speaker's field of vision. The "crowd" of daffodils, like the crowds of London as well as the leech-gather and the blind beggar, is not clearly walled off from the speaker. Yet here he is able to take ownership of his vision, saying "I saw" rather than "it strikes" or "I was smitten with the view." This suggests that immediacy and unclear boundaries alone are insufficient to preclude the kind of seeing that involves an act of creation or projection. Indeed, the following stanzas offer a series of metaphors intended to make familiar the overwhelming and immediate sight of the flowers: "stars that shine," dancers "tossing their heads," and "jocund company" (ll. 7, 12, 16). Despite the suddenness of the daffodils' appearance, through these metaphors, the poem finally achieves its mental feat of containing and even transforming the flowers into something understandable—a companionable form, i.e. daffodils as friends. By the end of the poem, the

speaker's mind has successfully absorbed the flowers to such an extent that he can summon them—"They flash upon that inward eye"—even as he lies on his couch long after (l. 21).

Something else, then, beyond suddenness and a lack of distinct borders, must also contribute to the disorienting shock prompted by the crowd of St. Bartholomew Fair and by these abject individuals.

*Theory and Practice: Political and Visceral Responses to Encounter*

The difference between triumph over the despotic eye (successfully containing and rendering human a visually overwhelming spectacle) and capitulation is not merely a question of immediacy or even mirroring, but also a question of the context surrounding crowds and abject individuals, both of which differ in obvious and subtle ways from ships and flowers. The blind beggar and some of Wordsworth's other marginalized figures represent human beings excluded from the benefits of modernization and urbanization, who are sometimes even victimized by the government, ostensibly to further "progress." Since the speaker takes issue with England's progress-narrative, he is acutely aware that his empathy should go to those left behind or cast aside by its forward-looking vector. Instead, and very oddly, when he meets such people, he confronts the limits of his capacity for empathy and what Quentin Bailey calls "the limits of poetic insight." Similarly, Wordsworth composes Book VII, "Residence in London," at a historically significant time for crowds, when they first emerge as a normal part of life in the English capital and demonstrate their revolutionary presence and potency in France. The poet-figure, a fervent supporter of the French Revolution, should feel a sort of kinship with or at least affinity for the crowd, the same force that overthrew France's monarchy. Instead, he feels a paralyzing anxiety prompted by the crowd's cognitive and perhaps even physical threat (and, paradoxically, rooted in the same formerly exciting revolutionary potential) that stifles his ability

to recognize (i.e. cognitively register) or contain the London throng in poetry. Part of the reason that these people and crowds precipitate a crisis that cannot be resolved through language or metaphor, then, is because, in yet another example of environmental intrusion, they are deeply embedded in—indeed, even inseparable from—their political contexts. The speaker’s discomfort upon encountering a beggar or a crowd is inherently political, while his discomfort in the face of a group of ships or flowers can be merely cognitive.

The speaker’s comparable anxieties before and upon encountering a marginalized person or an urban crowd can be explained not just by the frightening immediacy of their respective appearances, but also by the fact that this immediacy forces the speaker into a confrontation from which he cannot withdraw in order to ponder an empathetic response that aligns with his political views. The cognitive crises prompted by these encounters stem from the contradiction between the speaker’s instinctive or visceral responses on the one hand, and his political and ethical convictions on the other.

Nowhere is this self-alienating conflict between the visceral impulse to recoil and the political imperative to reach out more apparent than in the encounter with the discharged soldier in Book IV of *The Prelude*. As in the encounters with the beggar and the crowd, this meeting is characterized by its immediacy:

All else was still;  
No living thing appeared in earth or air,  
And, save the flowing water’s peaceful voice,  
Sound there was none—but lo! an uncouth shape,  
Shown by a sudden turning of the road... (IV.383-387)

The soldier’s appearance suddenly interrupts a peaceful setting, refusing the speaker the requisite time to conceive of him as anything more than an “uncouth shape.” Celeste Langan argues that the episode “seems designed precisely to erase the social context of the two figures – one a

bourgeois, the other a vagabond – from the horizon of meaning” (194). But, as Toby Benis notes, the sudden presence of this vagrant “destroys” the claim of peacefulness and harmony with nature “and causes the narrator to react like the very villagers he himself fears,” meaning that he hypocritically recoils at the sight of a wanderer despite his own wanderings throughout Book IV (198). Moreover, while the sprinkled boats in “With Ships” are surveyed from afar, the soldier is “so near” the speaker, marking the same kind of uncomfortable proximity that, in the scenes of the blind beggar and the crowd, limits the poet’s ability to choose whether and how to see his subject (IV. 388).

But unlike in those episodes, where the immediacy and proximity are such that the speaker is unable to recoil from the shocking encounter, here, the speaker quickly seizes the opportunity to hide from the marginalized person in the shade of a hawthorn, thus buying himself some time. There is a reason why the speaker feels a need to conceal himself from the apparently harmless discharged soldier, who is yet another example of a man unable to stand on his own: “from behind / A mile-stone propped him” (IV. 395-396). As Benis argues, “the soldier’s very presence silently criticizes Britain’s leaders; of all *The Prelude*’s wanderers, he is the one whose sickly condition and wanderings are direct products of government policy and military service” (198). Since he is overtly implicated in the injustice of the war in the West Indies and the vagrancy acts, he is especially unnerving to the speaker who is forced to come to terms with the gap between his instinct and his ideology. This tension is dramatized here more explicitly than in any other Wordsworth poem:

From self-blame  
 Not wholly free, I watched him thus; at length  
 Subduing my heart’s specious cowardice,  
 I left the shady nook where I had stood  
 And hailed him. (IV. 407-411)

In this passage, the narrator explicitly cites the conflict between his instinctive cowardice and his political empathy. He expresses “self-blame” or guilt as he ruminates on his urge to draw back and hide from this weak and solitary man, who is “Companionless / No dog attending, by no staff sustained” (IV. 398-399). This man, whom the speaker does not know, is not really a discrete individual in this episode because his status as a discharged soldier, as a part of a political group or context, becomes his defining feature. Because the poet-figure has this time hidden in the shade of the tree to ponder his reflex and to reject it in light of his politics, he is able emerge and even speak to the soldier, offering to help him find a cottage where he might spend the night rather than “linger[ing] on the public ways” (IV. 454).

In Book VII, this tension between instinct and ideals is transferred to an urban setting in the encounters with the blind beggar and with the crowd of the Fair. In order to understand these meetings and the crises they precipitate, it is necessary to consider the unfamiliar, politically fraught urban context in which the speaker finds himself. Raymond Williams attributes London’s profound ambiguity—its ability to provoke both exhilaration and terror—in the period of Wordsworth’s encounters to the city’s precarious and questionable socio-economic success. Williams argues that the city was intended to combine “a bourgeois sense of achieved production and trade with an Augustan sense of civilized order” (Williams 143). The reality of London, however, far from being a pillar of progress and order, was one of deep social inequality and feverish expansion. Williams emphasizes that, as thousands of poor, rural people arrived in London to work, “overcrowded and insecure speculative building and adaptation” emerged, as well as “forced labyrinths and alleys of the poor” in order to accommodate them (Williams 145). It is important to note that this was

part of the same process as the building of town mansions, the laying out of town squares and fashionable terraces: the ‘Georgian’ London now so often abstracted. As indeed so

often, a ruling class wanted the benefits of a change it was itself promoting, but the control or suppression of its less welcome but inseparable consequences. (Williams 145)

Williams's chapter, "Change in the City," thus questions the morality of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century London's "progress." The metropolis's expansion had repercussions for all of England since "[a]ll around London itself, the country was transformed to supply the city... It was a case of a capital city drawing the character of an economy and a society into its extraordinary centre: order and chaos both" (Williams 147). In my analysis of Book VII, this paradoxical and politically uneasy urban landscape—not the crowd—is the relevant background for the speaker's encounters.

Many critics have observed that the encounter with the blind beggar is, like many of Wordsworth's meetings with the poor, informed by contemporary politics. When the speaker encounters the blind beggar, he makes clear that this is "a sight not rare," since abject figures are pervasive both on rural public ways and on city streets (VII. 638). Nevertheless, under the vagrancy acts, this helpless figure is actually considered criminal. As Benis notes, "the beggar occupies a marginal position. Though he may have a home, the law would hold him a vagrant simply for going through the streets to beg, a livelihood his poverty and his handicap would make exceedingly difficult to forgo" (203-204). The beggar is abject in a literal sense, cast out from the "progress" of the city and from society itself, with his only possible source of income—begging—criminalized. The wandering speaker of a poem informed by Wordsworth's social concern ought to be able to feel some kind of ideological compassion for the beggar, or at least a moral imperative to reach out to him. As Sharpe argues, however, due to the cognitive crisis the beggar's immediacy precipitates, the speaker "is unable to establish the brotherly communal bond that would prompt his immediate and willing almsgiving. Does he even drop a coin into the beggar's cup?" (23). Meeting with the beggar, Sharpe notes, forces the speaker to confront,

among other things, “the shortcomings of his social conscience” (24). Without a shady hawthorn to hide behind, the speaker cannot stop to separate the beggar from his political context and think of him as a discrete human being.

Like the beggar, the London crowd is also political. While the crowd of St. Bartholomew Fair is not overtly revolutionary, it is obviously implicated in the rhetoric and violence of the French Revolution:

What say you, then,  
To times, when half the city shall break out  
Full of one passion, vengeance, rage, or fear?  
To executions, to a street on fire,  
Mobs, riots, or rejoicings? (VII. 671-674)

Here, the speaker suddenly realizes that the crowd, which he has accepted as an ordinary though unnerving environmental condition of urban life, contains the intrinsic possibility of a violent outburst that could endanger his physical safety. This passage echoes George Rudé’s assertion that even a peaceful crowd can “[transform] into riots of insurrectionary proportions” at any time (220). The precarious “order” of the city, articulated in Williams’s chapter, is threatened by the very presence of a crowd, which, as Wordsworth’s contemporaries in England would have known from the well-publicized French Revolution, could become highly dangerous, even for those who agreed with the ideals promoted by its bourgeois leaders. When he encounters the crowd of St. Bartholomew Fair, the speaker, an active champion of the French Revolution—who, in Calais on the first anniversary of Bastille Day, is deeply impressed by “France standing on top of golden hours”—knows that he should be able to feel a sort of kinship with the crowd, which is in a sense the same crowd that overthrew France’s monarchy (VI. 353). Instead of conceiving of the throng as a democratic representation of *le peuple*, he feels a paralyzing anxiety prompted by the crowd’s ontological and even physical threat, rooted in the same

formerly exciting revolutionary potential, that stifles his ability to recognize (i.e. cognitively process) or poetically represent the crowd.

Rather than managing to see the multifarious throng as a coherent entity, as what Gustave Le Bon calls a “collective mind” or “single being,” the speaker is overcome by the fact that the crowd has no definite center or edge, that he cannot conceive of it as wholly separate from himself because he encounters it from within (Le Bon 26). The crowd’s unboundedness and immediacy are such that he is unable, despite his best efforts, to distance himself from it and allow himself the requisite space and time for empathy. In close proximity with the dangerous “mob,” the poet’s concern for his own safety necessarily overrides his intellectual sympathy for the revolutionary cause in a foreign and distant country. But the crowd’s unboundedness, like that of the beggar, also signifies a lack of boundaries between the crowd directly in front of him and the political crowd, the whole class of crowds.

### *Conclusion*

The immediacy of such encounters refuses the speaker the time to draw a clear line around the beggar or the crowd, which also means he is unable to distinguish between himself and them. Subject to his own despotic eye, to the unwelcome fate of being ruled by incoherent spectacles as they intrude upon his consciousness, he is incapable of proffering a response to these encounters that matches his political leanings. This is in part because the beggar and the crowd are also unbounded in the sense that the distinction between the individual beggar or crowd and the political discourse surrounding both as concepts becomes blurred. The blind beggar and the crowd of the Fair take on the frightening and guilt-inducing connotations of displaced vagrants, revolutionary mobs. The speaker, then, undergoes a sort of shock because he is overcome by his fearful response rather than his more compassionate premeditated response.

### Chapter Three Crises of Poetic Reading: The City, the Crowd, the Abject Figure

I have already discussed how, through these destabilizing encounters with the Other—whether singular person or crowd—*The Prelude* and many of Wordsworth's other poems call into question the idea of the individual as a coordinated totality, as an integral whole separated by clear boundaries from its environment. On the contrary, the environment almost always encroaches into the supposedly enclosed world of the speaker or of the Other. In this chapter, I use the critical framework I have proposed thus far to read some of Wordsworth's encounters as examples of the speaker's efforts to see and make sense of an Other in an intruding context. For instance, in Book VII, the setting of London is relevant not just as the site of a bustling crowd or of political debates surrounding vagrancy, but also, as Rachel Bowlby has pointed out, as a textual environment. The writing plastered on the city's walls renders London "readable," to borrow Bowlby's term. In the midst of this literally legible city, the speaker attempts to *read*—to decipher, to recognize and internalize based on a known system of signs—the blind beggar and (I will add) the crowd, suggesting that the textuality of the city has permeated both the poet and the beggar, transforming speaker into reader and Other into text.

Although Bowlby limits her investigation of this kind of people-reading to the textual city, it is also the case that the speaker uses language relating to reading during encounters with marginalized figures on rural roads. The second section of this chapter will therefore ask and endeavor to answer one question in particular: in the absence of a literally textual environment, what gives the speaker license to *read* a figure such as the discharged soldier or the old Cumberland beggar?

Ultimately, this chapter suggests that in both urban and rural settings, the speaker's attempt to read or peruse the crowd or the abject individual highlights an attempt to turn a

shockingly different or incoherent Other into a recognizable, bounded object: a book. By trying to make the Other legible, the speaker also tries to make it understandable, visually decipherable, in some fashion, however oblique, mirroring the felt coherence of the subject.

*The City of London: Text as Environment*

This thesis and other works of scholarship have demonstrated that, throughout *The Prelude*, the speaker's context or background affects his ability to encounter the Other. Here, I wish to extend Bowlby's argument about the legibility of London in order to draw attention to yet another way in which the environment affects or works to destabilize the speaker in the moments leading up to his encounters with the blind beggar and with the crowd. Destabilization, I suggest, takes place not just because of the city's chaos or political overtones, but also because of its distinctly textual nature.

This notion of a textual environment is apparent in the speaker's experience of London in Book VII, wherein he is perpetually surrounded by "symbols" and "blazoned names" and storefronts that are "like a title-page" (VII. 158, 160). The city is plastered with advertisements, written public notices intended to attract the urban dweller's eye in order to persuade him to buy a product:

Advertisements of giant-size, from high  
 Press forward, in all colours on the sight;  
 These, bold in conscious merit, lower down  
*That* fronted with a most imposing word,  
 Is peradventure, one in masquerade. (VII. 194-198)

Here, the advertisements are the subject of the sentence. Rather than telling us that the speaker chooses to read the commercial messages posted in the city street, the text makes clear that the agency belongs to the advertisements in the background: *they* press forward on the speaker's passive sight. This is reinforced by the idea of "a most imposing word," which suggests that the

unwelcome written word, embedded in the environment, imposes or forces itself onto the speaker's eye and even into his poem. The passage asks us to consider how advertisements, in addition to using language as a "masquerade" to gild or draw positive attention to an ultimately hollow product, also render reading inevitable in urban space. The aesthetically appealing or at least attention-grabbing "giant-size" and "all colours" of the advertisements draw the walker's eye to the text and compel reading. As Samuel Johnson put it in a 1759 chapter for *The Idler*, "[a]dvertisements are now so numerous that they are very negligently perused, and it is therefore become necessary to gain attention by magnificence of promises, and by eloquence sometimes sublime and sometimes pathetic" (225). This idea that London's advertisements are increasingly striking and "negligently perused" underscores the poem's notion that texts are so prevalent in the city that reading them is not a matter of choice, but an uncomfortable inevitability. Thus, the reflective meditations that usually accompany the speaker's walks in the countryside are impossible in London, where publicly available text intentionally blocks this kind of rumination in an effort to capitalize on the passerby<sup>9</sup>.

As Rachel Bowlby has pointed out, in response to this textual environment, the speaker undertakes "a process of gradual familiarization with what is initially strange" that enables what Bowlby calls his "city reading" (306). Walking around town, the speaker "Familiarly peruse[s]" his bustling surroundings, suggesting that his visual experience of the city is one of comfortable and even inattentive scanning (VII. 145). In Bowlby's terms, he begins to transform the urban landscape into a "readable Wordsworthian city" by getting used to its strangeness (307). In effect, "Residence in London" begins with an honest ("By personal ambition unenslaved") effort

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<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of the history of advertisements in London (from 1690 to 1950), see Raymond Williams's "Advertising: the Magic system" in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*.

to understand in concrete terms the city that the speaker once considered a sort of “Fairy-land” (VII. 63, 98). As he soon discovers, however, understanding the city entails a kind of deciphering or decoding of written symbols; in other words, it requires an act of reading.

The metropolis, according to Bowlby, is readable in three distinct senses: first, it requires a process of orientation; second, it invites an attempt (ultimately thwarted) to penetrate its depths of meaning; and third, it consists of literal texts such as advertisements and newspapers. This third aspect, the presence of writing in the city, allows Bowlby to explain the accepted link between urban space and text: “Experiencing the city, where posters and newspapers are concerned, is also, plainly, a matter of reading” (308). Since, as evidenced by *The Idler*, text was ubiquitous in urban space in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries prior to the introduction of laws limiting posting on public walls, reading was “really and unmetaphorically a part of everyday urban life” (308). Bowlby makes a clear distinction between the readily legible urban environment, however, and the unreadable Others within it who cannot be decoded because they are not written in a “shared code or language” and they therefore “cannot be assimilated to a recognizable, known pattern” (308). In other words, while reading London’s postings is a matter of decoding familiar letters, reading London’s strikingly different people precipitates a “breakdown” (308).

But reading the city’s non-metaphorical environmental text might not be so straightforward. David Simpson has accurately dubbed the London of Book VII “a sort of semiotic inferno, with so many signs demanding attention, that all chance of signification disappears” (*Irony* 64). Paradoxically, the city, despite being clearly labeled with legible text, is an ambiguous and deeply confusing space: an inferno, as Simpson puts it, as opposed to the “Fairy-land” envisioned by a younger Wordsworth. The chaotic language of Book VII—the

“colours, lights, and forms” and “dazzling wares”—marks the danger of London for the poet who must mentally organize what he sees in order to write (VII. 155, 157). A mere stroll in a city street can turn into an attack on the speaker’s ability to produce poetry—a hostile takeover of his professional capital—because the overwhelming multiplicity of the city’s texts can undermine his power to half-perceive and “half-create” (“Tintern Abbey” l. 107). The speaker’s experience of London’s text is not, as Bowlby suggests, a carving out of “semiprivate” reading space in public, but a forcible, even violent, intrusion of text upon the speaker’s wandering eye (308). Rather than representing a legible alternative to the unreadable Other, London’s encroaching text is part of what limits the speaker’s ability to successfully encounter (to understand or even read) the blind beggar and the crowd.

*Visual Encounters and Textual Encounters: Seeing as Reading*

Because the urban environment is textual, both the act of seeing it and the act of seeing within it—which generally means visually encountering its members—become efforts to decipher signs or marks. The difference, which Bowlby notes, is that the marks that make up London’s advertisements and other texts are familiar, part of a common language, while the marks that make up London’s members do not conform to a system that can be learned or studied. When the speaker represents his destabilizing visual encounters with the blind beggar and with the crowd, he subtly equates the visual experience of seeing and trying to make sense of a person or group with the visual experience of seeing and trying to make sense of letters on a page. In the case of the beggar, for instance, it is unclear whether the speaker’s “mind turned round / As with the might of waters” because of his visual encounter with the man or because of his textual encounter with the man’s written sign: the boundary between the two becomes blurred (VII. 643-644). In the case of the crowd, the speaker responds to the encounter with the throng

and perhaps with the surrounding written postings by lamenting the “blank confusion” of the city, which is oddly evocative of a blank page, of a sort of *tabula rasa* that jars with the speaker’s description of a textual city. In this way, when the person or crowd in the urban environment is incomprehensible to the speaker, when it refuses him the narcissistic reinforcement he craves, it becomes not just inscrutable, but eerily illegible.

William Chapman Sharpe, whose book does not focus on the non-metaphorical legibility of Wordsworth’s London, nevertheless emphasizes the poem’s conflation of seeing people and reading them. He argues that the various people of the city are figuratively legible:

In the textual city, seeing is reading, but Wordsworth is an unwilling *flâneur*. Unlike the strolling detectives who will succeed him—such as the narrators of Poe’s ‘The man of the Crowd’ or Baudelaire’s *Le Spleen de Paris*—he finds no pleasure in deciphering the barely legible mysteries written in the gait, dress, and faces of strangers.” (17)

For Sharpe, “the textual city” is a city whose denizens are legible but difficult to read—a city in which the Other is experienced as a text—not a city that whose surfaces are covered in writing. In Sharpe’s conception, observing the city’s dwellers is not just a passive act of seeing. The speaker’s visual work necessitates active interpretation in order to decode people who are unfamiliar and therefore more difficult to read than fellow villagers in a small town. Even a casual stroll on the urban street is unpleasant for the speaker because his ignorance of the other pedestrians’ lives and interiorities renders his task of seeing, deciphering, and writing more difficult: it becomes “an unresolved contest between the poetic consciousness and the city” (Sharpe 16). The visual multiplicity of London—its many “conspicuous marks”—thus threatens the poet’s vocation of people-reading, and eventually, people-writing (VII. 573).

While both the speaker of *The Prelude* and Sharpe use words relating to reading interchangeably with words relating to seeing, for my purposes it is significant to note what might seem obvious: that seeing and reading are not synonyms. According to the Oxford English

Dictionary, to see is “to perceive (light, colour, external objects and their movements) with the eyes, or by the sense of which the eye is the specific organ” (“see, v” 1. a.). To read, instead, is “to look over or scan (something written, printed, etc.) with an understanding of what is meant by the letters or signs” (“read, v” II. a). When Wordsworth conflates the terms in these passages, he implies that visually encountering an abject figure or crowd is a semiotic process, inherently associated with an attempt to interpret them as legible signs and symbols. This is rather different from ordinary seeing, which entails an optical awareness of presence but does not necessitate an interpretive action.

In effect, reading is a complicated term with connotations varying widely depending on the context. In order to understand what it means for Wordsworth to equate seeing a crowd or beggar with reading a text (or failing to read one), it is therefore useful to consider what it meant to read at all during the Romantic era. Here, I defer to H. J. Jackson’s history of reading, *Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia*, which situates the acts of reading and marking in their various Romantic contexts, ranging from studying (reading law books) to cooking (reading recipes)<sup>10</sup>. Jackson’s book relies on writings in the margins of texts from the period to reconstruct what she calls “the ever-elusive holy grail of the historian of reading, the mental experience of the individual reader” (251). Ultimately, she concludes, “beyond the mechanics of passing the eye over written characters, there is no uniform ‘reading experience.’ (Even the mechanics are subject to exceptions, as with Braille for the blind)” (Jackson 255). Despite the impossibility of full access to the cognitive process of the Romantic reader, Jackson’s analysis of marginalia remains useful for establishing how reading both differs from and at times resembles

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<sup>10</sup> For a broad overview of this topic, see Eve Taylor Bannet’s “History of Reading: The long Eighteenth Century.” For more specific essays relating to the history of reading, see *Bookish Histories* (ed. Ina Ferris and Paul Keen).

seeing. Her revelations illuminate the implications of treating the two activities as one and the same.

As Leah Price notes, however, not all interactions with text constitute reading. Just as “books are not the only thing that can be read,” it is also the case that “reading is not the only thing that can be done to books” (Price 34). For Price, it is necessary “to distinguish absence of reading from absence of use” because, as tangible objects, books can fulfill a number of functional roles (10). These “nonreading” functions can range from serving as décor or as a status symbol to serving, perhaps more practically, as “raw material for women’s curlpapers or pie liners” (Price 8, 10). More relevant to my argument is Price’s assertion that “[t]o take in a text is to tune out its raw materials,” so the act of reading necessarily entails ignoring the visual (and tangible) dimension of the book: its paper, its binding, the ink on its pages (Price 5). Reading, it would seem, precludes seeing. The only instance wherein reading converges with seeing—as it apparently does in *The Prelude* since Wordsworth conflates the terms—is when a person, as Price puts it, is “pretending to read” (48). When someone pretends to read, when he “reduces the book to a prop” by using it as a symbol of status or by hiding behind it to avoid being noticed, he sees the material book without actually reading it (Price 47). He perceives the presence of the black marks on the page as his eyes pass over them but he does not actively interpret them by recognizing them as letters, words, and sentences. This would seem to confirm my initial observation that reading differs from seeing because it involves a certain degree of interpretation, a basic effort to decipher the visible characters rather than a mere capacity to perceive their presence.

Despite this apparent contradiction in terms, there are some ways that actual reading (as opposed to pretend) actually resembles the speaker’s visual encounters with the beggar and the

crowd. Jackson observes that, both today and in the Romantic period, “reading involves an oscillation between text and reader, a vacillation between surrender and self-assertion” (296-297). In other words, reading is characterized by a tension between the text, which aims to convey a story that might captivate the reader and thereby momentarily alienate him from himself, and the reader, who seeks to impose himself on the text and control his interactions with it. To read, in these terms, is to encounter in the hostile sense. In his meetings throughout *The Prelude*, the speaker endeavors to see himself reflected in the person or crowd he visually encounters on the street. Chapter Two chronicled his attempts to force his own notions of coherence and stability onto the beggar or crowd, both of which are disorienting precisely because they disrupt his expectations of familiarity by refusing to be turned into mirrors reflecting his own image. Similarly, “self-referentiality is a built-in feature of reading; all readers want to know how a book is relevant to their lives” (Jackson 296). What happens, then, when a text is *not* relevant to the reader’s life or when a person or group refuses to reflect the viewer’s preconceptions back to him? What does it mean if the encounter is not one of vacillation, but one wherein the encountered entity refuses to surrender at all? If we read the meetings with the blind beggar—Sharpe’s “Other as text”—or with the London crowd as such encounters, it becomes clear that, in this event, the potentially illuminating confrontation between self and Other becomes profoundly destabilizing.

When it is successful, though, the speaker’s semiotic seeing—which I will call poetic reading—is often evident as a two-step process of looking at randomly arranged signs, scenes, or people and attempting to make sense of them through his own language. First, the speaker looks upon a scene, feels his mental faculties aroused and brought into the service of “reading” the disorganized and unbounded spectacle, itself reminiscent of the arbitrary marks on a written

page. In a secondary, more active phase, aligned with an act of verbalization, the narrator mentally reorganizes the initially incoherent scene into a meaningful set of patterns, often through similes or metaphors. When this process works—which is to say when the speaker is able to make sense of the scene before him—the text does not generally express its created understanding in terms of reading. There is no mention of perusing or pages in “With Ships The Sea Is Sprinkled Far and Nigh,” for instance.

But when the process fails and the speaker is forced to overcompensate, the text explicitly invokes this theme of reading:

Such candidates for regard,  
 Although well pleased to be where they were found,  
 I did not hunt after, nor greatly prize,  
 Nor made unto myself a secret boast  
 Of reading them with quick and curious eye;  
 But, as a common produce, things that are  
 To-day, to-morrow will be, took of them  
 Such willing note, as, on some errand bound  
 That asks not speed, a traveler might bestow  
 On sea-shells that bestrew the sandy beach,  
 Or daisies swarming through the fields of June. (VII. 583-593)

Here, the speaker insists that there is no difference between the “conspicuous marks” of London—both its texts and its inhabitants—and shells or flowers (VII. 573). He attempts to claim that he is able—even “willing”—to read, or organize and assign meaning to, the “bestrew[n]” members of the urban crowd as easily as seashells or daisies. But the overt invocation of reading betrays an underlying anxiety. The speaker makes quite clear throughout Book VII that London is an active, even frenetic, space, rather different from a “written book,” which as he says in Book VIII, is “Exposed, and lifeless” (VIII. 576). Reading, then, seems an odd—even forced—metaphor in a frenzied, overly active urban context that contrasts dramatically with the apparent inertia of a page.

It is relevant that, as many scholars have pointed out, the speaker's encounter with the blind beggar is characterized by the presence of a written sign. Sharpe and Bowlby have already studied the speaker's literal and metaphorical reading in the context of this meeting. Sharpe argues that the poet's effort to "read" the Other in the city, even a labeled Other like the blind beggar with a written sign around his neck, culminates in the destabilizing realization that it is impossible to "know" the Other, the city, and even the self:

The blind man wearing words that he cannot see or read becomes a type for the poet attempting, at this very moment, to write his own life. As a failed reader of the blind man and his text, the poet must turn his own 'sightless eyes' upon his own enterprise – thereby calling into question the whole project of *The Prelude*. In the city, Wordsworth's usually illuminating 'spots of time'<sup>11</sup> become blind spots, which disclose not what he has learned about himself and the universe, but rather, that they can never be known" (Sharpe 24)

For Sharpe, the speaker is a "failed reader." He attempts to decipher, to understand, when he looks at the blind beggar and his sign, but instead he can only visually register the beggar's presence. Sharpe's point is significant not only because of his claim that the encounter with the beggar poses a threat to Wordsworth's poetic project, but also because it suggests that this failure to make sense of the beggar—to recognize him as part of the known and familiar world of the speaker—is a failure to decipher what is visible, to decode marks and make meaning out of them. Bowlby makes this point even more explicitly, signaling that "there is no shared code or

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<sup>11</sup> From *The Prelude* Book XII: "There are in our existence spots of time, / That with distinct pre-eminence retain / A renovating virtue, whence—depressed / By false opinion and contentious thought, / Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight, / In trivial occupations, and the round / Of ordinary intercourse—our minds / Are nourished and invisibly repaired; / A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced, / That penetrates, enables us to mount, / When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen" (VII. 208-218). For an analysis of these "spots of time," awe-inspiring moments that can nourish the mind even long after the fact, see Geoffrey Hartman's book, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814*.

language” when the speaker attempts to *read* the blind beggar because this is a “confrontation with something that cannot be assimilated to a recognizable, known pattern” (307-308).

Notably, Sharpe and Bowlby both suggest that the speaker’s encounter with the blind beggar is also an encounter with his sign, meaning that the boundary between beggar and text is somewhat ambiguous. Sharpe argues that the meeting with the beggar might have been an encounter that confirmed or mirrored the speaker’s conception of the world, but the writing on his sign prevented this: “Whatever self-definition the beggar’s mirroring eyes may offer, his text, like an epitaph, speaks ‘from another world,’ refusing reciprocity and silencing interlocution” (22). Effectively, the “label shatters the totality of the mirror’s contents by providing an impoverished but indisputable textual supplement that dramatically deflates the value of specular knowledge: ‘The story of the man, and who he was’” (Sharpe 22). Sharpe conceptualizes the speaker’s encounter with the beggar as both a visual encounter with the man himself (a meeting where seeing is, metaphorically, reading) and as a textual encounter with his sign (an example of literal reading, a meeting between the speaker’s eyes and written characters that engenders interpretation). Somewhat similarly, for Bowlby, “[l]iteral legibility—the identifiability of sequences of letters and their meaning—is the sign of a more fundamental absence of human understanding, in which the impossible connection between two men appears as the inability of one to really ‘read’ the other” (Bowlby 307). Sharpe and Bowlby differ in their understandings of the cause of the speaker’s crisis: Sharpe argues that the text renders the speaker incapable of reading the beggar, while Bowlby argues that the text is only a sign of the speaker’s inability to read him. But both critics note that the speaker’s encounter with the beggar is also an encounter with his text, so the boundary between the supposedly discrete, physically coherent beggar and the external sign he holds is blurred.

Because scholars have not yet considered the crowd as encounterable, no such reading of what I will argue is the speaker's textual encounter with the urban throng exists. Still, some of the critics who have written about London's crowd as a feature of the environment have considered its (non-textual) indecipherability. Bowlby, for instance, does note that the speaker's effort to make the city legible—which here means understandable, visually decipherable because it in some way mirrors the felt coherence of the subject—is complicated by what she calls “uninterpretability, multiplied ad infinitum—the crowd” (307). John Plotz also argues that Wordsworth's “crowds of ordinary Londoners present a puzzle that is intractable,” specifying that these crowds are intractable “precisely because of their seeming familiarity” (28). This makes it all the more disconcerting when the speaker realizes that he cannot understand them.

Like the beggar, however, the crowd is not just intractable, but ultimately illegible. My aim here is to demonstrate that, as in the encounter with the blind beggar and his plaque, the speaker's encounter with the crowd of the Fair and its surrounding postings presents a problem of reading that ultimately underscores the futility of apparent boundaries between entity and environment. The speaker's encounter with the crowd takes place in a highly textual setting—St. Bartholomew Fair—and the textuality of the Fair, like that of the beggar's sign, infiltrates the crowd, which in turn presents a problem of reading. Frightened in the chaos of the throng, the speaker asks his muse to lift him onto a platform from which he can observe the scene:

Below, the open space, through every nook  
Of the wide area, twinkles, is alive  
With heads; the midway region, and above,  
Is thronged with staring pictures and huge scrolls,  
Dumb proclamations of the Prodigies... (VII. 689-693)

From his higher vantage point, the speaker is able to outline the sight spatially. Just as the “open space” below “is alive / With heads,” the “midway region, and above, / Is thronged with staring

pictures and huge scrolls.” Despite their obvious spatial distance—below and above—the poem suggests that the crowd and the textual scrolls are closely intertwined because these lines echo each other formally, even sharing verbs (is) and prepositions (with). It is also significant that the region is “thronged” with scrolls since this phrase draws together the language of the crowd (throng) with the language of the text (scrolls), blurring the previously obvious spatial boundary between them. The oxymoronic “Dumb proclamations” further highlight the textual nature of the scene. Proclamations, originating from the Latin *proclamare*, to shout out, cannot be dumb (mute, silent) unless they are written. Thus, because the crowd is unbounded, because it permeates even enclosed spaces such as “every nook,” its boundaries with the literal text of the environment are even less clear than the already ambiguous border between the beggar and his sign.

If the crowd, like the beggar, is textual, it follows that the speaker’s shocking encounter with it is also a failure of reading. As Plotz has noted, the speaker’s experience in the “self-alienated” crowd is marked by “overwhelmingly repetitive mutual incomprehension” (28). The failure of reading is exacerbated by the fact that the speaker—in spite of his wishful request to be lifted above it—is a part of the crowd and, as such, should be able to comprehend it, to read it. In Bowlby’s terms, there ought to be a “shared code or language” (308). Yet, for the speaker, the absence of such a code is tangible:

How oft, amid those overflowing streets,  
Have I gone forward with the crowd, and said  
Unto myself, ‘The face of every one  
That passes by me is a mystery!’ (VII. 626-629)

Unlike the faces of the speaker’s neighbors in the rural village of Hawkshead, which, as we will see later in this chapter, he attempts to argue are “as a volume” to him, the faces of the members of the urban crowd are “a mystery!” (IV. 59). This idea of the crowd’s mysteriousness, of its

hidden or unreadable significance, underscores the challenge of decoding or reading that it poses for the speaker.

After a long stanza that frenetically details the hectic “moveables of wonder, from all parts” that he sees at the Fair from his imagined platform, the speaker succumbs to the urban chaos, to the unreadability of the mysterious faces (VII. 706). He writes: “Oh blank confusion! True epitome / Of what the mighty City is herself” (VII. 722-723). By qualifying the city’s confusion as “blank,” the poem subtly takes up its motif of illegibility. Like a blank page, the confusion is impossible to read. It lacks a legible surface for the speaker to understand, interpret, and turn into poetry. Thus, the city that the poem earlier characterized as literally readable because of its textual advertisements and signs becomes, after the encounter with the crowd, not just difficult to read, but entirely blank. Because of this meeting with the crowd, the speaker’s role as a reader and as a poet is undermined by the fact that, for him, the city is metaphorically blank in spite of its objective textuality.

Studying the blind beggar and the crowd of the Fair in the context of *The Prelude*’s interest in hazy boundaries allows us to see that, because they are both in a sense unbounded, they can be permeated by the text of their environment. The generally present advertisements as well as two particular pieces of writing—the beggar’s sign and the crowd’s postings—actually change the internal makeup of these characters for the speaker. In a poem that calls into question the solidity of the boundary between the encountered entity and its surroundings, these figures become textual because they are surrounded by text.

*Beyond the Textual Environment: Implications of Seeing as Reading*

As we have seen, in Book VII, where encounters take place within the print-covered context of the city, the encroaching environment itself is grounds for conflating seeing the Other

with reading. For Bowlby, “reading the city” is a commonplace metaphor while “‘reading the village’ [sounds] like a contradiction in terms” (306). But this distinction is complicated by the fact that, even in some of Wordsworth’s most rural settings, efforts to prove kinship with denizens of rural settlements as well as encounters with the Other are repeatedly expressed in terms of reading. If, as Bowlby posits, the unique presence of text in the city, generally in the form of advertisements and newspapers, justifies the metaphor of poetic reading in urban spaces, it follows that something else must justify the possibility of poetic reading in a rural village. This chapter offers a potential explanation: perhaps rural people, who know each other’s families, habits, occupations, and stories, are perpetually reading each other in a way that the inscrutable members of an urban crowd cannot. The poem seizes on this possibility because the reading metaphor gives the uncomfortable speaker an opportunity to experience the rural Other as a familiar and recognizable text.

When the narrator returns to the town of Hawkshead for his summer vacation from Cambridge in Book IV, this notion of perpetual reading among rural figures begins to take shape. The vacation ought to offer a rustic respite from his studies, which he criticizes in Book III as a kind of “captivity” because of the school’s rigorous discipline and because studying indoors removes him from the natural world that inspires him (III. 363). But his relationship with the town has been altered by his time away and Book IV describes his return as ambivalent because he is at once a villager and an outsider: he arrives in a familiar place as a changed person. The poem thus follows the speaker’s efforts to reaffirm his ties to the town and its inhabitants. But the first example of rural reading in Book IV occurs when the speaker is reunited with his former landlady, Ann Tyson, and it is she—not the poet—who acts as the reader. Upon seeing the narrator for the first time since his departure for university, the poem tells us that Tyson “perused

[him] with a parent's pride," suggesting that, in the country, this kind of people-reading is not limited to poets (IV. 29). Here, the speaker, like all familiar rural individuals, is a text, legible to those who know him well.

Despite this warm welcome from Tyson, conveyed as an act of reading, it is clear that the narrator's return to Hawkshead has been complicated by his departure, raising the uncomfortable possibility that the village is no longer a home for the university-educated speaker. A newly emergent sense of class difference, likely the result of his sojourn in Cambridge, has altered his relationship with the town and its inhabitants. When Tyson takes him for a walk through the village, the speaker tries hard to assert his sense of belonging in the town, and this effort is expressed in terms of an ostensibly successful exercise in rural poetic reading:

My aged Dame  
 Was with me at my side; She guided me;  
 I willing, nay – nay – wishing to be led.  
 —The face of every neighbour whom I met  
 Was as a volume to me; some I hailed  
 Far off, upon the road, or at their work –  
 Unceremonious greetings, interchanged  
 With half a length of a long field between. (IV. 55-62)

Here, the speaker insists on the idea that he *wanted* Tyson to lead him around the town that he ought to know quite well. He urges the reader to understand that he could have walked through town without a guide, that he still remembers Hawkshead's streets and people, and that he is a local, not a tourist. This point, however, is somewhat undermined by the fact that the speaker protests too much, saying "nay – nay" and replacing "willing" with an unconvincing "wishing."

The claim that each villager's face is an open book to him contrasts sharply with his experience in Book VII, where the urban faces are "a mystery!" and the crowd is encountered in a chaotic and ultimately illegible blur of "face after face" (VII. 629, 157). But, as Toby Benis has pointed out, this claim of rural reading is characterized by a "particularly problematic

formulation, implying great intimacy while demonstrating great reserve” (196). Benis notes that the people whom the narrator supposedly “reads” are physically distant from him. Even if these faces *were* like volumes to him, it hardly seems feasible that he could “read” them “With half a length of long field between.” Moreover, not one of these neighbors stops working to come over to the speaker and greet him, which is odd considering that he has just returned from a year away (Benis 196-197). Similarly, the speaker does not make the effort to go to them and ask how they have been since the last time he saw them (196-197). The poem’s effort to assert his continued closeness to the inhabitants of Hawkshead instead reveals a major shift in their relationship, a shift precipitated by the speaker’s time at Cambridge. The formerly mutual legibility—never expressed in terms of reading—has shifted and now must be explicitly articulated in terms of reading.

Still, despite the contradictory nuances of that act of reading, he maintains that what sets him apart from others, what makes him a poet, is his superior ability to read:

Yes, I had something of a subtler sense,  
 And often looking round was moved to smiles  
 Such as a delicate work of humour breeds;  
 I read, without design, the opinions, thoughts,  
 Of those plain-living people now observed  
 With clearer knowledge; with another eye  
 I saw the quiet woodman in the woods... (IV. 209-215)

It is important to notice how the poem outlines the total legibility of the opinions and thoughts of “those plain-living people” to the literate poet, whose Cambridge education has further sharpened his ability to read. Here, the poem also sets up a parallel between reading and observing “with another eye,” which suggests that there is a connection between reading and seeing, most evident in the visual process of looking at print on the page.

As we have seen, the narrator's "readings" of his neighbors in Hawkshead are less successful than he makes them out to be, which calls into question the legitimacy of his connection to the town and raises the uncomfortable possibility that it is no longer home to him. When the speaker meets a discharged soldier on one of his nightly walks along the public road, however, his inability to read this marginalized figure has far graver consequences. Rather than casting doubt on his sense of belonging to a town, this failed reading challenges the speaker's identity as a poet. If a poet cannot read, the poem seems to ask, can he really be a poet? Both literally and metaphorically, the ability to see and interpret signs and figures is a fundamental part of the poet's identity. The encounter with the discharged soldier, examined in the first chapter as an example of the speaker's turmoil as he is caught between the visceral and the political, also obstructs this process of reading and thereby threatens the speaker's poetic agency.

As previously mentioned, before meeting the soldier, the narrator is slowly wandering alone in a peaceful natural setting, experiencing a sort of communion with nature that prompts an imaginative response. But this "happy state!" is suddenly interrupted:

While thus I wandered, step by step led on  
 It chanced a sudden turning of the road  
 Presented to my view an uncouth shape  
 So near, that slipping back into the shade  
 Of a thick hawthorn, I could mark him well,  
 Myself unseen. He was in stature tall,  
 A foot above man's common measure tall... (IV. 401-407)

...from behind  
 A mile-stone propped him, and his figure seemed  
 Half-sitting, and half-standing. I could mark  
 That he was clad in military garb,  
 Though faded, yet entire. He was alone,  
 Had no attendant, neither dog, nor staff,  
 Nor knapsack, in his very dress appeared  
 A desolation, a simplicity,  
 That seemed akin to solitude. Long time  
 Did I peruse him with a mingled sense

Of fear and sorrow. (IV. 412-422)

The poem is explicit in outlining the speaker's anxiety toward the discharged soldier, an abject figure whose presence triggers a response of both fear and sorrow. Initially, the narrator hides from the "ghastly" soldier and observes him from behind a tree, but eventually he approaches him, asks to hear his story, and charitably leads him to shelter (IV. 412). Quentin Bailey astutely notes that "Wordsworth's discharged soldier is deeply embedded in contemporary debates about social order and rehabilitation of the underclass" (Bailey *Limits of Poetic Insight* 159). This is because the Pitt administration, in response to the French Revolution, had decided to "crack down on those sectors of the community that it felt were most likely to participate in mob uprisings: vagrants, beggars, pedlars, gypsies, and discharged soldiers" and send them to prisons or workhouses (Bailey *Limits of Poetic Insight* 159). Bailey views the speaker's encounter with the soldier as a class-based confrontation and a failed effort to empathize with the abject and excluded figure: "such encounters identify the limits of poetry by suggesting that there are levels of experience not amenable to poetic appropriation" (Bailey *Limits of Poetic Insight* 151). He argues that the speaker's failure to understand the soldier is the result of a class difference that renders the soldier irretrievably foreign to the poet.

But what Bailey and other critics overlook is that, even here, the narrator begins to undertake the familiar task of trying to read his subject. This is apparent in part because of his use of the verb "mark," which appears twice in the passage ostensibly as a synonym for the word "observe" or "notice" (IV. 405, 414). Julia Carlson cleverly notes that, here, "Wordsworth presents himself as one who marks and measures, translating the immobile presence into feet" (147-148). In line with Carlson's idea that the speaker might be engaging in an act of cartographical surveying intended to help "overcome the incapacity of the printed word to

represent emphatic speech,” is the fact that marking also has important connotations of writing and text since one can mark objects, especially books, by writing a word or meaningful symbol on them (150). Both mapping and noting signal an effort on the speaker’s part to make familiar what is unfamiliar. The speaker’s hidden gaze upon the soldier—“I could mark him well”—represents an effort to turn him into a legible text (IV. 405). This is furthered by the speaker’s subsequent attempt to read his subject—“Long time / Did I peruse him”—which, unsurprisingly, does not culminate in an illuminating insight but in a failure of reading (IV. 420-421). When the speaker manages to overcome his cowardice and hail the discharged soldier, he “ask[s] his history” in yet another effort to understand him in terms of a text.

In effect, many of the encounters with vagrants in Wordsworth’s poetry can be considered as failures of reading. In “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” for instance, a mendicant encounters more integrated members of society—“the sauntering horseman-traveller,” the girl who collects the fee at the toll-gate, the fast-paced “Post-boy”—and these encounters seemingly transform the beggar into a kind of textual emblem of the community (ll. 26, 37). The speaker himself is largely absent from the poem since his only action is to see the familiar beggar and launch into the story of his wanderings:

While thus he creeps  
From door to door, the Villagers in him  
Behold a record which together binds  
Past deeds and offices of charity  
Else unremember’d, and so keeps alive  
That kindly mood in hearts which lapse of years,  
And that half-wisdom half-experience gives  
Make slow to feel... (ll. 79-86)

Each of the villagers reads the beggar in a highly inflected way and, collectively, these readings make of him a “record” which ostensibly reminds the community of its past generosity and inspires a furthering of this “kindly mood.” But the beggar is hardly legible. As Marjorie

Levinson observes, he acts as an “unmediated figure of embodied thought” since he is “very pointedly shorn of both the retinal reviewing apparatus and the equal, wide survey historically linked to productive and negotiable consciousness: that is, self-consciousness” (205-206).

Levinson’s point is that the beggar is shockingly different from the villagers because of his lack of personal agency and self-consciousness. His only action in the poem, besides wandering, always with his eyes turned “On the ground,” is to scatter some of his “scraps and fragments” so that the birds might eat them (ll. 19, 10). But even this is inadvertent, since his palsied hand attempts “to prevent the waste” (l. 17). The communal effort to make him into a shared text, into a kind of book passed from hand to hand that serves as a comfort to the community, a reminder of the “kindness” of their less-than-altruistic charity, is deeply undermined by his irreconcilable Otherness.

### *Conclusion*

Even in a rural setting, then, the speaker invokes the textual metaphor as a kind of comfortably familiar image that ought to facilitate the encounter with the unfamiliar villager or with the profoundly different Other. By comparing such figures to texts, the speaker mitigates the startling experience of meeting someone who calls into question his established notions of belonging and of what it means to be a person. In the city, the beggar and the crowd cast doubt on the speaker’s felt internal coherence, forcing him to consider the possibility that the boundaries against which he often defines himself are permeable. The environment, especially the textual environment, intrudes into the theoretically contained entities within it and shapes the way they are considered. In the less explicitly textual rural environment, the conflation of reading and seeing points to an effort to render familiar or legible what is unfamiliar. The discharged soldier and the Cumberland beggar pose distinct challenges to the speaker’s notions

of selfhood and individuality. Both are embedded in their setting and lack the kind of interior life or self-consciousness that the speaker associates with bounded humans.

## Conclusion

This thesis is about encounters and boundaries. Throughout, I have demonstrated that there is an assumption implicit in most previous scholarship on Wordsworth that encounters can only occur when two obviously singular and bounded individuals meet each other against a backdrop that is clearly separate from them. But blurred borders, particularly between self and Other or between self and environment, are characteristic of *The Prelude*. In my own close readings, I show that Wordsworth's encounter poems can reveal new tensions and insights when we challenge the scholarship's supposition of fixed boundaries. Indeed, many of these poems suggest that the instability of those boundaries is one of the fundamental problems of encounter for the wandering speaker in his quest for self-definition.

Such a claim has its limits. I have endeavored to conceptualize a new interpretive path for future readers of Wordsworth, a scope that extends well beyond the bounds of this thesis. Further study of Wordsworth's poems in relation to this theme of disquieting unboundedness would be necessary to really redefine the "poetry of encounter." Here, I wish to make clear that the purpose of this project has not been to supplant the critical lens of the "poetry of encounter," but to expand its reach, to examine its heretofore unexplored possibilities. In order for this kind of interpretive expansion to take place, additional readings of Wordsworth's encounter scenes are needed to test and challenge my theory that the speaker's post-encounter crises are caused at least in part by the difficulty of self-definition in the face of hazy boundaries.

At the heart of this investigation is a question: if, in Wordsworth's conception, the individual is not overtly separate, if he cannot be defined against an Other or a context, then how can he understand himself at all? At its core, *The Prelude* grapples with this problem of carving

out an identity in the absence of an evident contrast, particularly in scenes of encounter where such an opposition is expected but not granted.

For Wordsworth, the struggle to come to terms with the problem of identity in an encounter with a marginalized person or crowd is rooted in the uneasy socio-economic realities of the Romantic period. *The Prelude*'s meetings take place within a tense political context; they occur in the midst of a government crackdown on vagrancy for the purpose of public order and in the wake of a threatening revolution in the neighboring country of France. Part of the “renovating virtue” of this poetry—to borrow Wordsworth’s term—is the fact that its socio-historical realities have a great deal of bearing on our own (XII. 210). Contemporary readers of Wordsworth might be aware of similar government efforts to criminalize public poverty—Los Angeles’s skid row is just one example—and the influx of masses of newcomers into a society—for example the refugee crisis in Europe—is stirring deep-seated anxieties. Encounter, after all, is a modern problem, too.

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