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Pedestrian Politics: William Wordsworth's THE OLD CUMBERLAND BEGGAR

William Wordsworth's "The Old Cumberland Beggar" (1797, published 1800) reveals a disciplinary social regime through its rhetoric of walking framed within a discourse of officialdom.

Infirm old beggars, writes Wordsworth in his headnote, "confined themselves to a stated round in their neighbourhood, and had certain fixed days, on which, at different houses, they regularly received alms, sometimes in money, but mostly in provisions" (49). This sense of regimentation is the poem's keynote. As so often occurs in the picturesque depictions of Romantic pedestrianism (Jarvis 53–61), the beggar first appears in the scene of the poem while the speaker is on a walk. Here, the beggar is perched "On a low structure of rude masonry / Built at the foot of a huge hill" (lines 3–4)—that is, near a human construct and a natural feature. This combination of landmarks gives us the beggar's exact coordinates, providing the reader with a kind of grid of information. Furthermore, the landmarks circumscribe the beggar within a system, which will become more clear later in the poem.

Wordsworth then carefully emphasizes the order and disorder within the scene by contrasting items whose shape and number are easily measured with those whose existence is more chaotic. The beggar sits upon the "second step" (13) of the masonry with his staff laid "across the broad smooth stone / That overlays the pile on the heap" (7–8). Yet his food is an assortment of shapeless "scraps and fragments" (10) and, although he "scan[s]" the food "with a

fix'd and serious look" (11), his mind is only engaged in "idle computation" (12). This locational and computational imagery anticipates the theme of regimentation and order.

Wordsworth then begins to detail, with the arithmetic and geometric exactitude demanded by his discourse of regimentation and order, the beggar's meal, his location, and his pattern of perambulation. The beggar sits in "solitude" (15) and food crumbs fall "in little showers" (18) from his shaking hand. The "small" (19) birds standing "within the length of half his staff" (20) await their share. Having consumed his meager rations, he proceeds on his walk. The horseman lodges a coin firmly "within the old Man's hat" (29), the girl lifts the tollgate for him, and the post-boy's carriage makes way for him. But the beggar "does not change his course" (40), moving slowly, his eyes fixed on the ground. Wordsworth contrasts the grandeur and appeal of the panoptic "prospect" view, which an observer sees when gazing down at farmland, rolling plains, or distant horizons—in this age linked to vast landscapes, possessions, and power (Barrell)—with the poverty and weakness of this landless beggar's perspective:

Instead of common and habitual sight
Of fields with rural works, of hill and dale,
And the blue sky—one little span of earth
Is all his prospect. (48–51)

Wordsworth's reference to a "habitual sight / Of fields with rural works, of hill and dale, / And the blue sky" is the prospect view that the beggar does not have. The beggar does not even see the tracks in the road—tracks which are "in the same line, / At distance still the same" (57–58). In sharp contrast to the panoptic view, the beggar is so deprived of any autonomy or vantage that he cannot even see the tracks that are right before him.

For Lefebvre, walking by members of a community constitutes a social practice through which the land or path becomes a common space. Thus the community is concerned about the paths available for walking, the nature of the walkers (whether they are vagrants or criminals), and the conventions of walking (making way for the carriages of lords, for example, or tollgates where one stops). The social practice of walking is different for different people—here the beggar can only walk along certain routes approved by the community, which has rights over the paths. The beggar ignores the social conventions—making way for the carriage, for instance—of the pedestrian. This nonparticipation in the regular spatial practices locates the beggar outside of the community. Being outside, the beggar is condemned to trek only a specific path. The villagers' behavior might indicate that they grant him a special status and, in making their decision to help him, defer to his needs (such as his hunger, frailty, and poor eyesight), but it also suggests the beggar's exclusion from social and communal spatial practices.

The poem maps his totally circumscribed movement:

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 (79–83)

The rhetoric of walking and the discourse of officialdom (“deeds,” “offices”) conflate: as the beggar “creeps” along, he becomes a “record.” Not only is the beggar, on his circumscribed (prerecorded, predetermined) walk, a record of charitable acts, he is reduced to those records. The wandering beggar is firmly embedded within the discourses of the age when the evolving network of statistics, demography, and classification was concomitant with debates about human freedom (Porter 151–92; Headrick 59–95). The system (this age’s key concern [Siskin]) of numbers, account books, and laws—over which the beggar has no control and in which he does not consciously participate—maps the beggar’s movements. And rather than performing any spatial practices that locate him in a position of some power over the land, the beggar is a systematic record of others’ actions.

The beggar is himself being recorded. He exists only *as* a record, his circumscribed walk a record of people’s charitable acts. The beggar “takes his rounds” and the people offer alms because “habit does the work of reason” (90–93). Both begging and alms-giving are acts performed within a larger regiment of conditioned behavior.

A solitary beggar is a manageable nuisance. For the numerous villagers “who live / Shelter’d, and flourish in a little grove / Of their own kindred” (112–14), the solitary beggar poses no threat. The villagers “behold in him / A silent monitor” (114–15). In turn, the beggar, as a register of the villagers’ “offices” (82), monitors their kindnesses and humanitarian actions. It is clear that the man who is monitoring is also being monitored: the villagers “behold” him (81, 114)—containing a concealed pun in the latter half of the word, “hold,” and allied with “bind”—when he is on his rounds. There is an alignment of the money economy with the beggar’s movement in Wordsworth’s imagery of “lodged” coins and “industry” (Langan 71), but it is also significant that the beggar *accounts* for the villagers’ industry and acquisition of blessings. The money economy that benefits the beggar has an interesting, if ambivalent, relationship with the philanthropic economy: alms for blessings.

When the poem concludes, Wordsworth prays: “May never House, misnamed of Industry, / Make him a captive” (172–73). Yet, ironically, he has never been free outside of either. The villagers offer alms to the beggar *because* he can be monitored, because he is not a vagabond. In an age when

England—and Europe—had witnessed the horrors of the anomic mobs of the French Revolution, Wordsworth’s poem actually celebrates order, predictability, and certainty while ostensibly revering the beggar’s freedom. The beggar remains firmly embedded within the “system” that sought to impose order on vagrancy and unruliness: the domain of numbers, laws, and demographic accounts.

It is significant that the beggar is an old man. Poverty in old age is a function of lower economic and social status *prior* to aging. The economic dependency of old people is not the result of age; rather, because a worker’s occupation determines his or her income, social security benefits, savings for retirement, pension, and health care options, various social situations and policies could be said to combine to create poverty, in that they determine whether a worker is more or less dependent later in life (Walker). Wordsworth’s prayer that the old man, even if infirm, may be allowed to continue begging perversely proposes that the conditions which created poverty prior to his aging may be retained.

The poem showcases a politics of walking, especially monitored walking, and, with its rhetoric of regimentation and ordering, proves the failure of Wordsworth’s prayer for the freedom of the beggar.

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KEYWORDS

begging, discourse, officialdom, pedestrianism, regimentation, William Wordsworth

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