

## Sublime of the Useless Body in “The Old Cumberland Beggar”

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### Abstract

William Wordsworth depicted an extremely decayed and useless body of an aged beggar in “The Old Cumberland Beggar” through a complicated network of vision from different viewers. The old beggar is not regarded as an individual suffer, but an epitome of the doomed human beings facing a country holding utilitarianism in esteem. Wordsworth created for the useless old body an aura of sublime through a Trinity of Body, art work and Nature.

**Key words:** Useless body; Art work; Nature; Sublime

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William Wordsworth’s “The Old Cumberland Beggar”<sup>1</sup> begins with a note named as “A Description”, which is rare among his other poems in *Lyrical Ballads*. The note opening the poem text reads just as its title suggests:

“The class of Beggars to which the old man here described belongs, will probably soon be extinct. It consisted of poor, and, mostly, old and infirm persons, who confined themselves to a stated round in their neighbourhood, and had certain fixed days on which, at different houses, they regularly received charity;

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, I refer to the 1800 version of “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” as printed in R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones, eds., *Lyrical Ballads*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 1991) 198-203, hereafter cited in the text by line number.

sometimes in money, but mostly in provisions.” (1991, p.198)

In his compelling essay “Poverty, Charity, Poetry: The Unproductive Labors of ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’”, Alex J. Dick depicts this note as “a disfigured economic classification”, which is both “epitaphic” and “proleptic”, “forecasting extinction but relying on historical evidence to make that forward-looking claim” (2000, p.386). This fact-based description of beggars highlights the existence of a group of “old and infirm” persons who “confined themselves” to a “stated round” and receive charity on “fixed” days. This group’s approaching extinction is not due to the perishing of their biological lives, but to a coercive confinement of their bodies, which stems from the government’s political and economic ambition to remove poverty through institutionalization of private charity and forced labor, and which is debated throughout 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century England and finally legally forced through by the harsh reforms of the 1834 Poor Law.

### THE ELIMINATION OF “USELESS” BEGGARS

Michael Foucault mentions about the extinction movement of beggars in Europe in his archeological history research in *Madness and Civilization*, that “purely negative measures of exclusion were replaced by a measure of confinement; the unemployed person was no longer driven away or punished; he was taken in charge, at the expense of the nation but at the cost of his individual liberty” (1965, p.48). “For a long time, the house of correction... would serve to contain the unemployed, the idle, and vagabonds” (1965, p.50), and later “confinement acquired another meaning. ...It was no longer merely a question of confining those out of work, but of giving work to those who had been confined and thus making them contribute to the prosperity of all” (1965, p.51). The primary reasons of the large-scale confinement of beggars

are twofold: first, to eliminate the possible danger of a large number of vagrants, and second, to squeeze labor from those idle beggars, supplementing what the country needs most in the rapid development of capitalism and industry. Though Foucault was not talking directly about the era of Wordsworth's England, the situation of beggars in this period was in many ways alike<sup>2</sup>, as Wordsworth described in "A Description" leading the text of the poem, as well as in the last stanza: "May never House, misnamed of industry, / Make him a captive; for that pent-up din, / Those life-consuming sounds that clog the air, / Be his the natural silence of old age." (line 172-175) In Wordsworth's eyes, what's waiting for beggars, the old Cumberland beggar included, is not a "House" providing shield and provision, but an "industry" extorting their life. What Wordsworth resists against is the utilitarianism coming with the era of industry and commerce in which human beings no longer find "natural silence". With the absence of silence, people lose not only the peace of environment, but more severely, the tranquility of heart. Practical usefulness becomes the largest weight of the set of scales judging everything and everyone in this era.

The class of beggars disappears for the confinement deprives them of their identity as "beggar" or "vagrant". The compulsive confinement of beggars, from either Foucault's condemnation or Wordsworth's denouncement, indicates the usefulness of vagrants and beggars: their bodies will, though forced to, make contributes to the prosperity of the country. Nevertheless, the old beggar described in Wordsworth's poem cannot serve his countrymen in this way, for his body is useless and totally unproductive according to the poet's narration.

## USELESS BODY OF THE OLD BEGGAR

Representing the body in modern narrative and poetic narrative as well is always inseparable with viewing the body. Visual observation makes up a large part, many an occasion the most important part, of body description. The subject narrated continuously falls into the center of attentive gaze or scan from the Other, or the other, or others. Seeing is the first step of Knowing, and observation of one's appearance is often the first step to know a person. Except for the omnipotent narrator, nobody can penetrate into the brain of another person and read his/her mind; therefore, body description, as an indispensable means of understanding a subject, always starts from treating this subject as an object being viewed.

In the 189-line-poem, the old Cumberland beggar's body is reduced to an object in vision from the first

line: "I saw an aged beggar in my walk". The speaker of the poem gives a direct and vivid picture of this aged beggar's useless body. In the opening stanza, in contrast to the functional rude masonry (which is used for people to remount at their horses after a walking down the steep rough road on the huge hill) on which he was seated, this vagrant, not only senile but also invalid, outlived his usefulness: "He sate, and eat his food in solitude; / And ever, scatter'd from his palsied hand, / That still attempting to prevent the waste, / Was baffled still, the crumbs in little showers / Fell on the ground" (line 15-19). The powerful word "palsied" conveys much more than a plain "shaking" or a "shivering" out of scare or a "trembling" out of chillness, for it indicates "palsied decrepitude" or "palsied paralytic", and reveals a body incapable of labor or even thinking, as the old man scanned his food with "a fix'd and serious look / Of idle computation" (line 11-12). So old and weak is this old beggar, that he can no longer control the most potent part of human body, the hands, or the most powerful part, the brain. He is announced as futile by the word "palsied" for he can contribute neither physical labor nor brain work. In certain sense, the old Cumberland beggar achieves the same lack of comprehensiveness of thinking and feeling as the idiots and innocent rustic children described by Wordsworth in many of his poems.

The opening sentence of the second stanza seems logically problematic if considered carefully: "Him from my childhood have I known, and then / He was so old, he seems not older now" (line 22-23). According to his lecturing tone, the speaker of the poem is certainly not a teenager, probably at his late-twenties at least, just as the poet himself was then. Since his childhood the beggar was already "so old" that at least a decade of years passing cannot make him any "older", readers will wonder about his exact age and how he struggled through this tough life during all these years. Time seems to have stopped for this aged wanderer: he has been "so old" for such a long time, but surprisingly, Death never comes for him. This sentence is also ambiguous that though the speaker reveals the fact of knowing him from childhood, he does not confirm the then old man's identity. It is possible that the man was a decent peasant, an old father at that time but is reduced to poverty for some reason, or it is also possible that the man became a dangling wanderer from a quite younger age and has been wandering in the speaker's neighborhood for all these years. It is unreasonable for the narrator to know nothing about the old beggar's life story, especially considering his keen interest in and detailed observation of him. However, the speaker has no intention to share with readers any more information. Brett and Jones comment on Wordsworth in their introduction to the *Lyrical Ballads*: "His Personae are never allowed a dramatic life of their own and exist only in so far as they represent their creator's point of view" ((Brett & Jones, 1991, p.xxvii). Wordsworth's refusal to give a story of the

<sup>2</sup> Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989) 225-310, provides an extensive reading of these contexts as they are tragically restaged in *The Borderers*, Wordsworth's only completed play, the early version of which was composed and revised during the same period as "The Old Cumberland Beggar."

old Cumberland beggar conveys the speaker's intention of telling about this old beggar, that he is not going to construct a relatively full and round subject through a story, instead, the old beggar is reduced to an old and sick body of that moment and of that place, an always old body, changing neither younger nor older.

In his observation of the old beggar, the speaker notices not merely the aged vagrant alone; besides him, there are other viewers of the beggar in the speaker's omnipotent gaze. In the poem, multiple pairs of viewers and the viewed constructed a complex network of sight lines, which in hierarchy contains the speaker's gaze, other people's vision, the beggar and the beggar's vision. As the narrator of his monodrama, the speaker is the panoramic viewer and the only one talking, nevertheless, the old beggar's bodily uselessness is intimated mostly not through the speaker's direct picturing.

Two groups of other viewers are presented in sharp contrast in the second stanza; one consists of "the sauntering horseman-traveller", "She who tends the toll-gate" and "the Post-boy"; and the other consists of "the cottage curs" and "Boys and girls, /The vacant and the busy, maids and youths, /And urchins newly breech'd". The first group comes across the beggar, seeing him and being touched by his 'helpless... appearance' and to do him some small favor; while the same helpless body encounters quite different treatment from the second group: the dogs "will turn away, weary of barking at him" and the boys, girls, the vacant and the busy, maids and youths, and little urchins, "all pass him by". They see the beggar, but his image scarcely exists in their vision as if it is unconsciously deleted from their sight because "he is so still / In look and motion" (60-61). The beggar's stillness stems from his old and decayed body, indicating his closeness to his end, since only in never-ending sleep can a person enjoys real "stillness". "Stillness" is in some extent synonym to death, or an omen of its coming.

The stillness of the aged beggar's body is shown best in the way he looks at what surrounds him. He is reduced to a dumb body moving in stillness and motionlessness typically by the way the speaker depicts the beggar's eyes: "...On the ground /His eyes are turn'd, and, as he moves along, /They move along the ground; and evermore, / 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. Thus, from day to day, / Bowbent, his eyes for ever on the ground, / He plies his weary journey, seeing still, /And never knowing that he sees..."(lines 45-54). The old beggar's eyes are "fixed", which is uttered first in the opening stanza, and here, this image is reinforced. Though the old man's eyes still have some function, he can see only "one little span of the earth" because of his "bowbent" gesture. His vision span is incredibly small, which is distinguished from a normal person's vision field, for instance, the speaker's. The speaker can see much more: "fields with rural

works, of hill and dale. / And the blue sky", landscapes near and afar, up and down; and more importantly, his panorama vision covers other people. The speaker can gaze at or observe others, such as the old beggar, and upon his observation, he can also judge or make comments. Seeing indicates thinking and knowing, thus sight is closely related to insight. Eyes are the windows of mind, which is true in many levels of meanings. But the old man's eyes are different, that they are "for ever on the ground"; the spectacle in his vision is always a patch of unchanged ground that he "never knows that he sees". The pallor, dullness and content-less of his vision symbolize the dullness of his mind: he is not thinking, or rather, he cannot think. It is possible that he is too old or too weak to think or feel, and this incapability is even more pathetic than his poor body condition because he loses a clear consciousness of his own condition, and of the outside world. The vacancy of mind echoes the "idle computation" in the first stanza, only stronger in degenerating the old beggar to a state of living death.

The following description is even clearer in a paint of a motionless body: "Poor Traveller! / His staff trails with him, scarcely do his feet / Disturb the summer dust, he is so still / In look and motion that the cottage curs, / Ere he have pass'd the door, will turn away / Weary of barking at him." (line 58-63) The liveliness is extracted from this old man, as if he is barely alive but not living. Even the dogs cannot sense any danger or life from his useless body. Stillness and motionless highlights his bodily uselessness, however, in another sense, the same stillness grants this old person an aura of a walking statue by extracting life but injecting immortality. Perhaps that's why the old beggar was "not older"; and the cottage curs surely will not bark at a cold statue.

The narrator of this poem, through the complicated network of vision from different viewers, takes away all the "uses" from this old beggar, granting him a useless and invalid body, even incapable of thinking or knowing. Such an old beggar is facing a country holding utilitarianism in esteem and this is the situation Wordsworth created not merely for the old Cumberland beggar but for every of his "statesmen". The old beggar is not an individual suffer, but an epitome of human beings, since every man and woman is facing an inevitable aging process and every one has a chance to sink into a useless and decayed body even impotent to think. But we are moved by the old beggar's "palsied hand... baffled still" the same as Harold Bloom revealed in *The Western Canon*. Bloom extols the "terrifying poignance" in "The Old Cumberland Beggar", "The Ruined Cottage" and "Michael", and relates that he was moved by them "more than virtually any other poems", by "their exquisitely controlled pathos and their aesthetic dignity in representing individual human suffering" and "a universal common sorrow presented with stark simplicity and no taint of ideology of any kind" (1994, p.240). Highly praising "The Old Cumberland

Beggar", Bloom acclaims it "an epiphany because it intimates to Wordsworth, and to us, a supreme value, the dignity of the human being at its most outrageous reductive, the immensely old beggar scarcely conscious of his condition" (1994, p.241). An old, decayed body is the coming future of every person, conscious of it or not. With such a useless body, is there any pride left to be a human? The first two stanzas raise this painful question which Wordsworth strained his every nerve to give an acceptable answer in the following lines. The dumbness and useless body exemplified by the old beggar is embodied by Wordsworth's beloved personae, Idiot, more often. Wordsworth writes of the veneration given to idiots and declares: "I have often applied to Idiots, in my own mind, that sublime expression of Scripture that, their life is hidden with God" (Selincourt, 1967, pp.356-357). Wordsworth's preference for Idiots rests with his feeling that idiots evokes in others (those who care for idiots willingly) a love which is unselfish and uncalculating. In this sense Wordsworth's describing of the old Cumberland beggar is out of a similar purpose, as in the opening line of the third stanza the speaker (here mingles with the poet himself) lifts up a cry: "But deem not this man useless. — Statesmen!" Following this, the poet luxuriously spends two long stanzas in arguing metaphysically the usefulness of this useless body arousing benevolence in other people. Probably this is why Charles Lamb dismissed this poem as a "lecture" (1975, pp.1.265). Here what Wordsworth emphasizes is a love freely given, without any thought of a reward, as a realization of the mystery of original goodness. What helps him in achieving this goal is the desperate situation he created for the old beggar's body, thus there is no need for more information about the old beggar's life. Here this useless and unproductive body is granted a last "function" which is to lead others into benevolence, a natural and original way into heaven; and in this way what Wordsworth creates for the useless old body is not pity or resentment, but an aura of sublime which is often seen form many art works, paintings or statues, though depicting suffering and agony of human beings, arousing sympathy as well as respect and reverence from their viewers.

### USELESS BODY AS A WORK OF ART

Alex J. Dick explains Wordsworth's purpose in writing this poem as to invite questions about the value of poetry. Dick proposes that Wordsworth's endeavor in defending for the existence of the beggars is actually a defense for the value of poetry and poets in a larger economic community, asserting that "the crux of Wordsworth's poetic treatment of vagrancy is the idea that poetry, poverty, and charity are 'unproductive labors'" (2000, pp.367). Dick's equation between begging and poetry writing might be arguable, but at least it testifies the

extraordinary artistic aura aroused by the pathetically useless body of the old Cumberland beggar. In stressing the stillness of the old body, Wordsworth successfully grants it a double connotation: on one side, motionlessness reinforces the decay and helplessness of the body and suggests the soon coming death, a natural, destined and undeniable end, just as Wordsworth out-cried in the last stanza for eight times: "let him", especially in the famous last sentence: "...in the eye of Nature let him die". While on the other side, stillness solidifies this rotting body into a fossil, a picture, or rather a work of art; it becomes a bearer of meaning, such as an aggregation of the despair and agony of devastating and inevitable doom of aging, or a question mark about the value and pride of human body, especially when it is striped of all "functional" use.

The Old Cumberland beggar's body is for sure a work of art, at the most superficial meaning. The image of this decayed body is Wordsworth's creation. Bloom depicts that Wordsworth gives "almost ecstatic emphasis to the beggar's bodily decay and helplessness" (1994, p.242). Wordsworth composed so many extraordinary lines in tirelessly presenting the old beggar's body in almost inconceivably poor condition. Almost all of the details Wordsworth gave about the old beggar's portrait are on the body, such as the palsied hand, the bowbent gesture; Wordsworth did gave some description about the face, the eyes of "idle computation", "grey locks" and "weathered face", but these are not details capable of picturing a clear face. It is reasonable to say that the old Cumberland beggar does not have a distinct face; he has only a bowbent body, sitting, walking, creeping, and plying on his way. Wordsworth shapes his old Cumberland beggar in a series of statues rather than in a portrait. Stillness and motionless are the qualities Wordsworth emphasized for his statues. The old beggar's body is created in poetic art, and in poetic art it gains the artistic quality.

The old beggar's body is a useless one---it cannot be employed in any productive function, in other words, it is not instrumentally practical. It contains its good, its end, and its reason for existing within itself. In this sense it is akin to works of art, as Terry Eagleton argues in "Bodies, Artwork, and Use Value", that bodies and works of art are "forms of praxis rather than that of utilitarian practices" (2013, p.564). According to Eagleton's assertion, what an art work resembles most is the Almighty, "the most supremely useless being is God" (2013, p.565). Just like God does not exist for a purpose, nature does not either. This decayed, rotten body belongs to nature, as Wordsworth uttered clearly: "let him breathe / The freshness of the vallies, let his blood / Struggle with frosty air and winter snows, / And let the charter'd wind that sweeps the heath / Beat his grey locks against his withered face.../As in the eye of Nature he has liv'd, / So in the eye of Nature let him die" (line 165-169, 188-189). In these lines, Wordsworth displays some aspects of naturalism. But Wordsworth's Nature is not a Darwinist Nature; it

is closely related to God, to the tranquility of inner heart, and to a good human nature. Even if Wordsworth places hope on that the old beggar arouses benevolence from his countrymen, he makes it clear that this good will is not launched by any political economy, but by “the benignant law of heaven / Has hung around him” (line 160-161). The old beggar is a part of Holy-Nature, of a system created and watched by Heaven and Almighty; what he relies on for a living is not superficial benevolence of people, but the good nature of human beings, a realization of the original good God creates for the human race and teaches them to. When he lives in this Nature, he is not an independent dramatic existence, but he obtains and gives, blending in this system naturally, though he has not a serviceable body or mind capable of any practical function. Creation, life and death are refutation of utilitarianism and instrumental rationality. Body, art work and Nature here become a new Trinity, and through the other two, the useless body gains the value and pride in sublime.

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