

CAMBRIDGE AND LONDON IN WORDSWORTH'S *PRELUDE*

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines two sections of William Wordsworth's autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*: Book 3, "Residence at Cambridge," and Book 7, "Residence in London." Books 3 and 7 are often read as interruptions in the poem's narrative of psychological and artistic maturation. "Cambridge" and "London" are often read as impediments to the development of Wordsworth's imagination, a development which is traditionally associated with transcendental epiphany in nature. This thesis offers a re-reading of the Cambridge and London books, emphasizing their affirmative role in the organic structure of the poem, and suggesting that these spaces allow Wordsworth to reflect positively on his imaginative development.

Chapter 1 considers the issues involved in a literature review. Chapter 2 looks at the representation of Wordsworth's adjustment to Cambridge. Though the poet considers his imagination to have been dormant during his first year at university, Book 3 depicts a phase in which the mind is opening toward outside influences. In the sheltered groves and level fenland of Cambridge, Wordsworth finds an environment both protective and sufficiently strange to stimulate his sense of inner power. Chapter 3 is concerned with Wordsworth's changing attitudes toward London. The poet was composing Book 7 over a period of time during which he made multiple trips to the city. While it is ostensibly the record of his very first residence in London, Book 7 has a palimpsestic quality, layering together different encounters with the city and exhibiting an increasingly affirmative vision of urban life. In particular, this chapter traces the influence of Charles Lamb on Wordsworth's thinking about London. Chapter 4 considers the centrality of the body and the sense of touch in Wordsworth's response to London. Touch in Book 7 is both a source of anxiety and the vehicle for Wordsworth's understanding of the city, its influence on him and its significance for a poetics of belonging.

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## Introduction

This thesis focuses on Books 3 and 7 of *The Prelude*. It began with an interest in how Wordsworth's poetry relates to space, particularly unfamiliar space. Given the poet's obvious investment in the idea of being at home in a specific landscape, that of the Lake District, I was curious about how Wordsworth represents the experience of not belonging, of being unsettled. I was suspicious of the predominant critical emphasis on the poet's mental growth in an exclusive state of solitude, in wild and rural places. Book 3, "Residence at Cambridge," and Book 7, "Residence in London," belie these readings by placing the young Wordsworth in decidedly different contexts. These books deal with the poet's passage through populous built environments, where culture and society figure prominently and solitary communion with nature recedes. As such, their function in the poem is often downplayed or considered in purely negative terms. Yet those books contain a wealth of experience and impressions which are crucial to the young man's development. This thesis reevaluates Books 3 and 7 in an affirmative light, and it seeks to contribute to a discussion of their role in the greater poem. I have wanted to read the poetry for what it does, rather than for what it either does or doesn't offer as substance for critical argument. Over the course of writing, therefore, my opinions have been shaped by an ongoing engagement with the text, and I have allowed myself to be led by curiosity rather than by the wish to impose a rigid interpretive structure on Wordsworth's poem.

Through a close reading of the two books, I consider the ways that Cambridge and London are depicted as unique spaces in *The Prelude*. Wordsworth's narrative of growth, often thought of as giving priority to

moments of transcendental epiphany in nature, responds very productively to the poetic possibilities of urban and collegiate space. In Books 3 and 7, the poet reflects on the positive place and value of idleness, sociability and novelty in the organic development of his creative powers. The non-visionary, non-transcendental mode that he adopts for these books puts greater emphasis on the body and the senses, and on the shaping influence of the environment upon the poet's mind.

This thesis is divided into four parts: first, a literature review; second, a close reading of Book 3; third, a reading of Book 7 that focuses on the intertextual relationship between Wordsworth's depiction of London and the writings of Charles Lamb, and finally, a discussion of Wordsworth's embodied urban poetics. Following critical convention, as well as personal preference, I have made the 1805 version of the poem my primary source, and all references to *The Prelude* are to the 1805 text.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

One of my main reasons for focusing on both Books 3 and 7 of *The Prelude* is their frequent grouping together by other critics. Something about the levels of experience that Wordsworth had at Cambridge resonates with those he had in London, though accounts differ on precisely what the relationship between the two books is. Geoffrey Hartman, in *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (1964), suggests that “[i]n some ways Wordsworth’s London sojourn has the effect of intensifying by repetition his Cambridge experience” (239). It is a cursory remark, but Hartman seems to be indicating the intensity of “external stimuli” encountered in both places, in response to which the poet’s “imagination is dulled rather than delighted” (239). By this reading, the various urban entertainments documented in Book 7 serve a didactic purpose for Wordsworth, “show[ing] the imaginative impulse asserting itself blindly, yet being reduced to superstition and torpor by too quick or crude a satisfaction” (239). Cambridge, meanwhile, has a “dazzling yet transitory charm,” which contrasts sharply with the “permanent and immortal presences” (222) of nature.

Hartman’s reading introduces a number of recurring points in the criticism relating to Books 3 and 7. It casts both Cambridge and London as places where the Wordsworthian imagination cannot flourish—where the poet is overstimulated by a panoply of artificial and “transitory” objects and scenes. Books 3 and 7, by this view, have an antagonistic or negative function in the poem as a whole; they exist in order to show what Wordsworth rejects and overcomes in his progress toward psychological and artistic maturity. Francis Lester Cousens, who considers *The Prelude* an enquiry into “the epistemological constants of the

mind" (5), emphasises the artificiality of Cambridge and London. In *The Epistemological Poem: Wordsworth's Prelude* (1968), Cousens argues that the built environments of Books 3 and 7, full of strange and novel sights, disrupt the poet's philosophical commitments to discovering "cognitive truths" (165).

Wordsworth, Cousens asserts, "sees urbanism—and by synecdochic extension, civilization—as something that corrupts man's mental innocence" (291). London is the obvious exemplar of urbanism in the poem, and Cousens suggests that life at Cambridge, "more of an hallucination than an actuality" (285), is little more than a prefiguration of Wordsworth's encounter with the metropolis:

Essentially a caricature of the true mind, what Wordsworth sees at Cambridge, a foretaste of London itself, is rejected as meretricious, as being "the surfaces of artificial life" (III. 562). (290)

This is David Simpson's view, too, in *Wordsworth and the Figurings of the Real* (1982). Simpson is concerned with tracing the relationship between figurative language, perception and social organisation in the Romantic period. As such, he is alert to the socioeconomic structures represented in Wordsworth's poetry, finding in Book 3's portrayal of university life "a prevision of London" (52). Simpson groups Cambridge and London together in a chapter on "those parts of *The Prelude* which show the mind under siege from a hostile environment" (49), reading the poet's experience of both places in terms of absolute alienation. The experiences are "educative, indeed, but only because he can escape from [them]" (49). Like Cousens, Simpson sees both environments as characterised by artificiality, which he connects with Wordsworth's indictment of "poetic diction" (*Poetry and Prose* 82) in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*. Just as poetic contrivance distances itself from the natural language of ordinary people,



Simpson suggests, so do the physical and social worlds of the university and the city make for divided communities and selves:

What is the “intervenient imagery” (l. 555) of Cambridge if not a monumental incarnation of poetic diction as social practice and human environment? (51)

But the poet’s university experience “is not merely negative,” Simpson concludes, for “[i]t inoculates him, so to speak, against the graver threats apparently posed by the urban inferno” (52).

Between Simpson’s sense of inoculation and Hartman’s “intensifying by repetition” (239), the relationship between Books 3 and 7 would appear to be a matter of degrees of exposure. Both critics are attuned to the way the books construct a gradation of experience, the sheltered world of Cambridge preparing Wordsworth for the next phase of his emergence into the wider world. Yet both put too much emphasis on the threatening aspect of these environments, and both misrepresent the effects they have on the young man’s mind. Simpson suggests that Cambridge turns Wordsworth inward “into self-sufficient solitude” before corrupting his inner life “into idleness and minor dissipation” (52).

Returning to the Lake District on summer vacations, the poet “is able to build up a new set of habits and consequently a defence against Cambridge” (52), Simpson argues. The terms of Simpson’s reading suggest that Cambridge—and, by extension, London—inures Wordsworth to the novel, sometimes troubling, experiences he has there. In the same way, Hartman’s reference to a “dream-like void which enables Wordsworth to pass unscathed through London” (238) rejects the positive experiential value of this passage through the city.

For Herbert Lindenberger, both Cambridge and London serve a unifying purpose in *The Prelude*: to “distract[...] him in his spiritual journey” (233).

Lindenberger is more explicit than either Hartman or Simpson in his assertion of the negative role of Books 3 and 7 in the progress of the poem. In *On Wordsworth's Prelude* (1963), the critic argues:

Taken as a whole, *The Prelude* can be looked upon as a struggle between both worlds, inner and outer, for primacy over its hero. As such, one can read the poem almost like a morality play, with both forces alternately triumphing in the battle which rages within the poet. . . But the nature of this struggle is revealed even more conspicuously when we observe the sequence of the individual books of the poem, for each book concentrates primarily on but one of the two worlds. (169-70)

“Residence at Cambridge” and “Residence in London” are, according to Lindenberger, “books that deal specifically with the external life” (167)—by which he implies that they document developmental stagnation. Like Cousins and Simpson, Lindenberger associates the poet’s supposed antipathy for these places with their distance from nature, their artificiality. The most significant aspect of “the coldly mechanical world” (178) represented by Cambridge and London, for Lindenberger, is its enslavement to “clock-time” (167). Distinct from a temporal mode that is “in tune with the rhythms of nature” (167), Lindenberger insists, mechanically measured time represents a spiritually barren externality inimical to Wordsworth’s poetic project.

In order to make his case, though, Lindenberger somewhat distorts the representation of time in Book 3. Wordsworth’s first year at Cambridge actually unfolds according to a remarkably organic rhythm: “autumn, winter, spring— /

Nine months—rolled pleasingly away” (3.670-71) are the book’s penultimate lines. He and his fellow students are themselves “divers samples of the growth / Of life’s sweet season” (3.224-25), and their days are measured on the body, by cycles of activity and rest:

We sauntered, played, we rioted, we talked  
 Unprofitable talk at morning hours,  
 Drifted about along the streets and walks,  
 Read lazily in lazy books, went forth  
 To gallop through the country in blind zeal  
 Of senseless horsemanship, or on the breast  
 Of Cam sailed boisterously, and let the stars  
 Come out, perhaps without one quiet thought. (251-58)

Indeed, if one were to characterise the passage of time in Book 3, it would be more accurate to speak of its ineluctable flow rather than any rigid parceling out.

I agree with Lindenberger that Wordsworth is attentive to the different paces of inner and outer worlds, but they are hardly at odds with one another. Rather, the poet uses the rhythm of days, weeks, months, and seasons as a counterpoint to his depiction of mental growth. “The weeks went roundly on, / With invitations, suppers, wine, and fruit” (40), he notes, and “months passed on, remissly” (329); his easygoing friendships were a source of “love that makes / The day pass lightly on” (520-21). The sense we get is that time is not being utilised for any specific end—it passes “remissly,” almost unnoticed. External temporal rhythms are the backdrop to the growth of Wordsworth’s consciousness, a process of which Book 3 represents a uniquely relaxed stage. The poet sees merit in the unhurried pace of his inner development, which “[b]y

a more just gradation did lead on / To higher things, more naturally matured” (3.560-61).

Lindenberger detects a stylistic affinity between Books 3 and 7, too, referring to “the Augustan satire in the passages on Cambridge and London” (102). When Coleridge refers, in the *Table Talk* (1837) collected by his nephew Henry Nelson Coleridge, to “the plan laid out” (185) for *The Recluse*, he suggests something similar:

He was to treat man as man,—a subject of eye, ear, touch, and taste, in contact with external nature, and informing the senses from the mind, and not compounding a mind out of the senses; then he was to describe the pastoral and other states of society, assuming something of the Juvenalian spirit as he approached the high civilization of cities and towns, and opening a melancholy picture of the present state of degeneracy and vice (185)

Although, in Lindenberger’s opinion, “Wordsworth was temperamentally adverse to satire” (238), and therefore does it badly, the traces of “the plan” are evident in the two books of *The Prelude* that deal most extensively with “the high civilization of towns and cities.” They are only traces, however; as the poem grew between 1801 and 1805, content exerted its influence on form.

David Boyd, whose 1973 article “Wordsworth as Satirist” provides the most thoroughgoing analysis of satire in Book 7, acknowledges that “the satiric vision is only one element in the complex structure of the poem” (619). And yet, as Boyd points out,

it reappears with almost rhythmic regularity throughout *The Prelude*, in the description of Cambridge in Book III, the attack on modern education in

Book V, the description of London in Book VII, and in the disillusioned response to the excesses of the French Revolution in Book X. (619)

Boyd reads Book 7 for its formal satirical elements, arguing that it is at the structural level that we see Wordsworth's reworking of the genre. Specifically, Boyd identifies the "rhythm of dialogue, and the rhythm of dialectic" at work in the book as "inherited conventions of the genre [of satire]" (620). The dialogue, Boyd argues, classically between "Satirist" and "Adversarius" (621), occurs in Book 7 between Wordsworth the poet and Wordsworth the poetic subject:

The Satirist is, of course, Wordsworth's present self, the voice of experience. The Adversarius is that younger Wordsworth who first encountered London as a rustic innocent (621)

The dialectical movement of the book, according to Boyd, though "intricate," unfolds primarily as one "between denunciation and exhortation," and between "immersion in, and withdrawal from, the flow of humanity" (623).

Boyd's is an elegant way of accounting for the ambivalence of the poet's response to London—the more so because the critic allows that these elements of satire are significantly transformed by Wordsworth, and indeed, may not "represent a conscious imitation of classical or Augustan precedents" (624). Undoubtedly, the same interpretive frame might be applied to Book 3, which registers a similar distance between the experienced poet and youthful protagonist, and in which can be found numerous dialectical patterns. And yet, whatever formal aspects of satire Wordsworth might have borrowed (or unconsciously reproduced) for Books 3 and 7, neither book emerges as concertedly satirical in tone. In my reading of Book 7, I suggest that the book enacts "dialogues" other than the one between poet and protagonist, which can

account equally well for the see-sawing of Wordsworth's moral and aesthetic response to the city.

The assumption that Cambridge prefigures London for Wordsworth means that Book 3 has rarely been given much focused critical attention. The most notable exception to this is Muriel Mellow's 1979 article "Images of Fancy and Imagination: A Reading of *The Prelude*, Book III," in which she begins with same observation. Critics have "regard[ed] Book III primarily as a preview of the books on London and France," Mellow asserts, even suggesting that "the general critical consensus is that it is the least successful part of the work" (245). By contrast, Mellow considers the book "a crucial turning point" in the poem's narrative arc, "a mental voyage in which the mind moves from solitary communion with nature to contact with society, and back to a renewed kinship with nature" (246).

Mellow stresses the continuities between "Residence at Cambridge" and the rest of *The Prelude*, for although the book records a break with the inner and outer landscapes of childhood, she argues, "on a deeper level his imagination, nurtured by childhood experiences, continued to guide him imperceptibly to the state of maturity" (246). Therefore, the "special problem" that this stage of his autobiography presents Wordsworth with, says Mellow, is "of giving significant shape to ambivalent experiences" (246). The critical disregard of Book 3 is primarily due to a perceived weakness of style, she suggests—and so her main concern is to demonstrate how the style of the book actually responds appropriately to the subject at hand. The poet develops "a dual style," she argues, that is usefully conceived of as an alternation between the imagery of "fancy and imagination" (246). Citing Wordsworth's own discussion of the terms in his 1815

“Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*, Mellown elucidates the distinction, which “explains the poet’s practice in Book III” (247):

Imagination, he implies, produces evocative metaphors and similes which by their emotional reverberations increase the total meaning. . . Fancy, however, creates no such meaningful unity; it combines objects arbitrarily and produces figures of speech which illustrate or decorate an already conceptualized thought. (247)

The former kind of images appear in Book 3 in association with solitude, introspection, and the sublime, Mellown asserts; the latter as images of sociality. The alternation between the figural language of fancy and that of imagination corresponds to the period of Wordsworth’s life with which Book 3 is concerned, when “[i]magination slept, / And yet not utterly” (3.260-61). In fact, Mellown observes, “[t]he majority of images are the product of fancy and describe Wordsworth’s social life,” although “the images which refer to his continued sensitivity to nature result from imagination” (247).

Though attentive to the play between inner and outer phenomena in Book 3, Mellown, like most critics, reduces the connection to a conflict between the real (the inner, contemplative self) and the artificial (the social world). “The contrast between inner reality and surface appearance,” she argues, “illustrates the actual conflict experienced by Wordsworth at Cambridge and so expresses the focal idea of the whole book” (250). And while much of Mellown’s piece suggests that Book 3 is about, as she puts it, Wordsworth’s “first move upward and outward in his development” (246), she concludes by calling it a “temporary pause in his development” (251). Nevertheless, Mellown’s reading is valuable for

its positive attention to the style of Book 3, which, as she demonstrates, is a response to the book's dual themes of introspection and extroversion.

David Chandler's more recent discussion of a "*Three-Part Prelude*" (195) also considers Book 3 in some detail, with the intention of fleshing out a compositional history of the poem between its well-known "*Two-Part*" (1799) and "*Five-Book*" (1804) iterations. Chandler makes the case for considering *The Prelude* as it existed toward the end of 1803 as a separate, self-contained version of the poem, albeit "a failure, a wrong turn" (196). Book 3 began less as a development of the poem into new territory than a reiteration of the theme and structure of the preceding books, Chandler argues: "the first 194 lines of Book III can be read as repeating the structure of the existing two parts of *The Two-Part Prelude*" (201). This first third of the book describes Wordsworth's arrival at Cambridge, affirms his singular powers of attention and sensitivity to the natural world, and suggests the development of these capacities at university. It concludes with an address to Coleridge, which, as Chandler points out, is very similar to the concluding sections of both Books 1 and 2:

Like them it is addressed specifically to the poet's 'friend', Coleridge; like them it takes a retrospect of what has gone before; and like them it introduces a certain apologetic, doubtful note as it becomes more aware of its audience (199)

When Wordsworth resumes work on the book in 1804, Chandler suggests, he preserves this opening section but proceeds in a different direction, now "starting to build a 'Fall' structure into his poem" (202). Here, Chandler draws heavily on Jonathan Wordsworth's interpretation of Book 3, in *The Borders of*



*Vision* (1982)—a reading that traces the poet’s attempts to “portray a Fall at Cambridge” and his failure to do so “with any conviction” (240).

Chandler’s attention to thematic tensions within Book 3 further suggests the text’s heterogeneity, and he sees the book as a departure from the “radically interiorized” subject matter of the first two books (Chandler 204). “In early 1804,” Chandler argues, “[Wordsworth] clearly came to the conclusion that the poem had been prematurely closed to external realities” (204). This conclusion spurs Wordsworth to open his narrative out into the social world that surrounded him at Cambridge and, for the first time, to consider a phase in which solitude and introspection played a less central role in his development. It is a new direction for *The Prelude*, and one that Chandler suggests provides the momentum for the poem’s subsequent expansions into five and then thirteen books. The critic’s insistence on seeing the latter two thirds of “Residence at Cambridge” as a proto-“Fall,” intended to show “that Wordsworth’s imagination and poetic sensibility were . . . corrupted [at Cambridge]” (202), unfortunately flattens his reading, however.

Book 7 of *The Prelude* has received substantially more critical attention than Book 3 and, in the last decade, a keener interest in the book’s formal and stylistic innovations can be seen emerging. Mark J. Bruhn’s “Cognition and Representation in Wordsworth’s London” (2006) is an example of the new cognitive and spatial turns in literary studies, investigating Wordsworth’s mimetic imitation of the experience of London as he “escort[s] his readers . . . through the streets and districts of the city thus conjured” (157). Bruhn begins by noting Romantic literature’s commitment to mapping out cognitive processes, a practice that “constituted an influential working out of the new psychologically

focused poetic theories of the period” (159). He observes that Wordsworth’s exploration of the relationship between mind and world is often facilitated by distorted or illusory perceptions—so-called “*misrepresentations* of external reality” (159). This tendency creates a space in the poetry in which visual perception and mental processes are allowed to reflect upon one another in a “mimetic interpenetration of object and subject,” an implicit spatialising of cognition by analogy to perceptual phenomena (Bruhn 160).

Bruhn proposes to investigate the scope of “spatial imaging” (160) in Book 7. His discussion turns on the “hierarchy of aesthetic values” (160) encoded in Wordsworth’s response to the various mimetic arts encountered in London:

The many critics who speak of Wordsworth's indulgent or ambivalent attitude toward his London experiences are surely right, but it is nonetheless true that Wordsworth weighs and judges these experiences, and his representation of them, according to as strict a scale of value as he brings to the evaluation of panoramic and other mimic arts. (167)

Mere mimetic representation constitutes one pole of this hierarchy, while a variety of imaginative operations form its apogee—and Bruhn’s attention to the spatial qualities of these different modes has an extraordinarily elucidating power. Bruhn points out that the “body tour perspective” (162) of London that we are treated to early in Book 7 is the literary equivalent of the panoramas and plays, “those mimic sights that ape / The absolute presence of reality” (7.248-49):

As a viewer or 'reader' of these theatrical scenes, he is "obsequiously" subject to the representation, given over to it, passively obedient to its mimetic commands. Notably, this is exactly his condition (and by

implication ours) when walking (or conceptualizing walking) the streets of London (168-69)

In contrast to the merely mimetic, Bruhn argues, the Wordsworthian “imaginative” work is “self-reflective” (171)—that is, it draws our attention back to ourselves and the creative powers of the mind. This, too, can be analysed in terms of spatial cognition, as it involves the juxtaposition of perceptual objects from very different scenes—what Bruhn calls “spatial arrays” (173). The effect of such contrasting and blending is to focus the mind on its own capacity for discovering, as Wordsworth writes in the “Preface,” “similitude in dissimilitude, and dissimilitude in similitude” (*Poetry and Prose* 92). In moments of imaginative intensity in Book 7, this reflexive effect is produced when spatio-temporally stable description gives way to “a sudden proliferation of discontinuous search domains or spatial arrays” (173)—as it does in the Mary of Buttermere and blind Beggar passages, respectively.

Bruhn’s approach is illuminating for its own sake, but his treatment of Book 7 is more as a test-case, and his conclusions are not specific to Wordsworth’s London. Alberto Gabriele also attends to the mimetic effects of the poet’s tour through London, but, for Gabriele, the book consists of a radical poetic response to the experience of the early nineteenth-century metropolis. Through “[t]he mechanical registering of the spectacles of the city of London,” Gabriele argues in “Visions of the City of London: Mechanical Eye and Poetic Transcendence in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Book 7” (2008), the poet “inaugurates a new aesthetic of urban modernism” (366). Like Bruhn, Gabriele shifts the discussion of Book 7 away from the moral question of what Wordsworth thinks of the city—towards a consideration of how he experiences London, and the

poetic techniques he finds to represent that experience. Unlike Bruhn, whose emphasis is on the effect of spatial continuity in Wordsworth's "body tour" (and the contrasting spatial discontinuity of more imaginative passages), Gabriele sees the fragmentation of ordinary perception as central to Book 7.

Two ways of thinking about vision dominated eighteenth and nineteenth century aesthetics, Gabriele suggests: one an "intuitive" mode, prioritising intellectual contemplation, the other an "empirical" approach, characterised by fleeting, "fragmentary sensation" (368-69). It is the latter that, coincident with the emergence of cinematographic technology, would come to inform the modernist sensibility—and it is Gabriele's contention that there is something proleptically cinematic about Wordsworth's "I-eye" (366) in London:

Wordsworth's contemplative modality of vision, which informs the earlier part of the poem, is superseded during his London residence by a substantially new kind of perception that affected directly his poetry. The more fragmented, atomistic mode of perception through the poet's eye is strikingly similar to the privileging of the sensational in modern painting and, more specifically, to an a-systematic, disjoined representation that distinctive silent film genres made canonical at the beginning of the twentieth [century]. (369)

The poet responds to a latent modernist aesthetic that anticipates film technology, Gabriele argues, eschewing traditional narrative in favour of recording sensation and movement. The shattering of vision into discrete parcels of sensation undermines "the whole transcendental move of Wordsworth's poetry" (373), notes Gabriele, as it provides no opportunity for a fixed, contemplative gaze.

This is, in Gabriele's view, the result of Wordsworth's immersion in an environment which itself is not conducive to contemplative vision. The experience of London is qualitatively different from that of other spaces: "There is no still contemplation of the geometric outline of a shepherd against the majestic background of a mountain's peak but only faces, an undistinguished sea of heads that the mind cannot manage" (373). Part of the distinctiveness of the metropolitan landscape from more rural settings owes to the former's saturation with representational media. Not only does the experience of London inspire Wordsworth to stylistic experimentation, the city is already teeming with other forms of representation. "London is, therefore," observes Gabriele, "the city of 'spectacles,' of itinerant mass practices of vision" (375). Gabriele once again differs from Bruhn in suggesting that, rather than affirming a strict aesthetic hierarchy, the heterogeneity of "vision practices" (Gabriele 375) in London further unsettles the poet's habits of seeing and thinking.

Gabriele's reading usefully recasts the tensions in Book 7 in terms of sensation and perception. The character of the urban environment—its pace, density, diversity and noise—prompts Wordsworth to produce poetry of fragmented, ungrounded perceptions, "the quick dance / Of colours, lights and forms" (*Prelude* 7.157), but he is not necessarily at ease in this mode. There are moments, as Gabriele points out, when the verse inclines back towards transcendental vision—a stable, intellectualised perspective from which the poet can relate what he sees to a wider framework of meaning. The 'blind Beggar' episode is one such moment, in Gabriele's view, with its epiphanic reading of the Beggar's iconic sign as "emblem of the utmost that we know / Both of ourselves and of the universe" (7.619-20). At the same time, Gabriele's analysis benefits

from not overstating the degree to which Wordsworth is overwhelmed by London. Book 7 registers an experimental approach to representing the experience of a place, and its innovative techniques for doing so are directly related to the novelty and the confusion that the poet encounters there.

Nicole LaRose also emphasises the curious and enquiring nature of Wordsworth's engagement with London in Book 7: though the poet's "relationship with the city is often labeled by literary scholars as contempt," this appraisal "does not consider Wordsworth's struggle to explain his understanding of London" (74). She suggests, rather, that Book 7 concerns itself not with "a binary between the natural and the urban," but "with the spaces of community" (75), and that London helps Wordsworth to clarify what kinds of spaces he prefers. For LaRose, Wordsworth's London is one big theatrical space, its inhabitants involved in a performance of chaotic, but potentially "utopian" (77) heterogeneity:

The theatrical performance of equality in the city continually draws Wordsworth to these scenes of heterogeneous crowds, scenes that respond to Wordsworth's worry over the leisure of the urban laborer, but his immersion in them only proves that the chaos has sacrificed community for heterogeneity. The absolute corruption of community is a dystopian reality for Wordsworth. (86)

While I am not persuaded by LaRose's reading of utopian yearning in Book 7, her attention to the question of community—and the conditions required for community to flourish—suggests a key ambivalence in Wordsworth's depiction of London.

LaRose is also one of the few critics to focus on the profusion of typological lists in Wordsworth's depiction of the city. Boyd notes that the catalogue is a poetic device closely associated with satire, and he considers its function in Book 7 to be ironical. Wordsworth's catalogues of London's attractions and inhabitants create an impression "of order, distinction, discrimination" (626), Boyd argues. But their "indiscriminate absorption" (626) of typologically different objects suggests the impossibility of really discriminating between, for example, reality and simulacrum. The overall effect is a picture of senseless, superficial distinctions:

Indiscrimination, reduction, dehumanization, and, above all, the imposition of arbitrary order, form without meaning, autonomous and self-generating, these are the qualities that pervade the city and all its inhabitants. In the face of such enormity, Wordsworth just barely manages to maintain his satiric balance. (Boyd 627)

LaRose differs from Boyd in suggesting that the catalogues in Book 7 are one way in which Wordsworth makes London speak for itself:

Wordsworth makes the theatricality [of London] most apparent through his repetition of catalogues, much like a list of characters, and their corollary descriptions. These descriptions set the stage, embedding narrative within the scene instead of permitting the poet to create it himself. (76)

Boyd is correct, of course, when he asserts that, for Wordsworth, the catalogue represents "an adaptation of inherited resources to his own purpose" (625). As far as Boyd is concerned, however, the poet's "purpose" in Book 7 can still be considered broadly satirical. LaRose offers another way of reading Wordsworth's

catalogues, one that sees the poet adapting conventional literary devices to a more open-ended purpose.

Rather than situate his account of London firmly within a specific genre, Wordsworth allows various generic devices associated with urban literature to inform his poetry. His use of catalogues might be thought of as one way of invoking the city's literary-affective dimensions—a purpose to which Stuart Allen also ascribes the use of allegory in Book 7. Allen's discussion of the book takes allegory as the focal point for an elegant reading of Wordsworth's ambivalence toward London. Against what he considers "the anti-aesthetic prohibitions of much current historicist criticism" (4), Allen proposes "that Wordsworth's commitment to the relative autonomy of the aesthetic reflects a politics always vigilant against the poverty of dogma" (5). That is to say, Allen agrees with those historicist critics who have seen, in Book 7, a response to the machinations of urban capitalism (Karen Hadley's 2000 article in *Criticism*, for example), but not that this constitutes "a reactionary critique of capitalism" (29). Rather, the poet's response is grounded in an aesthetic sensibility that, as Allen says, follows a dialectic between sensation, emotion and thought—"between feeling and thinking, immediacy and distance" (25).

Allegorical language, Allen argues, initially allows Wordsworth to hold the experience of London at a distance. The poet's catalogues of objects and people, for example, emphasise only arbitrary "differences / That have no law, no meaning, and no end" (7.704-5)—and this self-disclosing artificiality is a primary effect of allegory:

Wordsworth recognises that allegory's enslavement to arbitrary conventions (its 'perverse' self-referentiality) is analogous to what looks to



be the fruitless and self-replicating circulation of people and commodities.

(12)

Designating the urban spectacle as arbitrary and inauthentic, the poet's use of allegory works "as a badge of his own authenticity," in that it implies a critical distance between observer and observed (Allen 12).

On the other hand, if such a distance gives an impression of Wordsworth's disdain for city life, of "a conservative hauteur towards the labours and pleasures of city-dwellers" (Allen 25), this is not the whole picture. For allegory, Allen asserts, has a mimetic purpose in Book 7, as well as a critical or analytical function: "the poem mimics the spell reification casts over London's predominantly commercial society" (27). In other words, by populating his text with abstractions—"The Swede, the Russian . . . / The Frenchman and the Spaniard" (239-40)—Wordsworth attempts to reflect the experience of London's inhabitants, an experience dominated by the artificiality of commodified culture. "Wordsworth," argues Allen, "attempts to render experiential the reservoirs of affect in London," to represent the felt presence of the environment in tandem with a more distanced, reflective stance (27).

At an affective level, Wordsworth's experience of the city is as exciting as it is disturbing. For Allen, this is what connects Books 3 and 7:

a memory endures of the bright and energising sociability Wordsworth enjoyed in Cambridge. For all the anxiety London causes him, the poet is clearly invigorated by the demonic energy trade unleashes, and the new relationships, thoughts and feelings it creates. (15)

Moreover, as in "Residence at Cambridge," the poet finds that his immersion in the urban, the social, and the unfamiliar informs his love of nature and local

familiarity. Allen recognises the affirmative power that such environments have for nature's formative gifts: "[o]nly through exposure to the city's accelerated, and sometimes gruelling, culture does Wordsworth learn that his early and habitual fellowship with nature enables him to dwell among 'transitory things'" (29). Addressing the poet's refusal simply to denounce urban life, Simpson suggests that it is either "a mark of Wordsworth's honesty or ambivalence that he incorporates into his autobiography those feelings and experiences which do not . . . accord with the social and ethical priorities which his writings generally endorse" (58). But, as Allen argues, such feelings and experiences are crucial to the poem's record of growth by experience.

Wordsworth is not, as Simpson implies, composing his autobiographical epic from a fixed ideological position. As I will argue in more detail later, Book 7 was written over a period in which Wordsworth's attitude toward London was demonstrably in flux. But regardless of his "social and ethical priorities," the Cambridge and London sojourns are included in *The Prelude* because they are essential to Wordsworth's conception of his own development. "The permanent forms of nature are mediated by the ephemeral; the ephemeral is mediated by nature," Allen observes, and, "[a]s a consequence, this dialectic produces an affirmatory critique of many aspects of the city" (29).

Like Allen, Benjamin P. Myers sees the interchangeability of commodities in Wordsworth's London as a source of ambivalence for the poet. Allen reads this ambivalence through the multivalence of allegorical language, Myers through the notion of financial "fluidity" (80). Myers finds Book 7 confronting the end stage "of England's transition into a capitalist economy" (80), a transition, he points out, in which money overtakes the use-value of commodities as the ultimate

source of value: “[w]ith the commodity as a mere vehicle for money, anything could be a commodity, from entertainment to money itself” (Myers 81).

Money absorbs formerly discrete categories of value into what Wordsworth calls a “perpetual flow / Of trivial objects, melted and reduced / To one identity” (7.702-4), and, according to Myers, this has more than commercial implications for the poet:

This fluidity seems to spread outward from the objects to contaminate all those involved with capitalist modes of exchange and, thus, it is appropriately ambiguous whether that which is ‘reduced/ To one identity’ denotes the objects in the market or those men who participate in such a market (83)

And Myers continues:

Just as the ‘flow of trivial objects’ makes the men of the crowd indistinguishable to Wordsworth, so it divorces signifiers from that which is signified, making words indistinguishable and meaning as arbitrary as value. (84)

To attribute Wordsworth’s struggle in making sense of the city to the fluidity of “capitalist modes of exchange” is one-sided, to be sure. Allen’s useful term for Book 7’s urban environment, “accelerated” (29), better suggests the complexity of the experience that Wordsworth records. Urban culture differs from rural life by degrees, so that commerce does seem to have a “demonic energy” (Allen 15) in the city, but many other things are also ratcheted up: population density, architectural scale, technological innovation—not to mention sheer noise and motion. All of these are aspects of Wordsworth’s experience of London from his first description of its “motley imagery” (7.150), which means that readings of

Book 7 through an exclusively economic-ideological lens tend to flatten rather than enhance the poetry. Nonetheless, Myers's argument introduces a number of ideas that are important to a more general discussion of the book.

"Fluidity," a key term for Myers, has connotative potential beyond the financial inflection that he gives it. In June 1791, Wordsworth wrote to his Cambridge friend William Matthews:

I quitted London about three weeks ago, where my time passed in a strange manner; sometimes whirled about by the vortex of its *strenua inertia*, and sometimes thrown by the eddy into a corner of the stream, where I lay in almost motionless indolence. (*Letters* 1.48)

Just as Cambridge seems "[t]o have an eddy's force" (3.11) as Wordsworth's chaise approaches the university, water imagery here evokes force and motion. The Latin phrase (borrowed from Horace, as the editors of the Norton *Prelude* note [145n1]) suggests the frenetic purposelessness of Wordsworth's activity in London. His entire experience of the metropolis is summed up for Matthews in this image of the poet carried along by currents more powerful than himself. Without wishing to overburden the term, I suggest that "fluidity"—and the attendant concept of 'flow'—is a crucial aspect of Wordsworth's embodied experience in Book 7.

London, perhaps more than any other place in the poem, prescribes movement. Cambridge, although comprised of "buildings and groves" (3.98), doesn't close the poet in—he "walked along the fields" (3.99) when it suited him, "sauntered, played" (3.251) and "went forth / To gallop through the country in blind zeal / Of senseless horsemanship" (3.254-56). In the city, to drift aimlessly

is to merge with the “endless stream of men and moving things” (7.158) and to “go[...] forwards with the crowd” (7.596).

The restrictions that space places on free movement can be felt at a stylistic level in the poetry. As Gabriele argues, the poet’s perspective throughout most of the book is “the individualized point of view of . . . a moving observer” (367), and this works against the larger poem’s inclination towards “transcendental epiphanies” (370). ‘Flow’ grounds the poetry of Book 7 in the senses, and, as I will argue, puts bodily feeling at the heart of Wordsworth’s experience. It is no coincidence that the two most frequently discussed sections of the book, the ‘blind Beggar’ and Bartholomew Fair passages, are exceptions: they portray moments in which the poet momentarily extricates himself from the flow of crowd. These are points at which the poetry strives to transcend the senses, moving towards epiphanic insight.

Having posited the “fluidity of the market place” (89) as the main enemy for Wordsworth in Book 7, Myers offers a surprisingly affirmative reading of the book’s closing section. In this final passage, Wordsworth moves from the spectacle of St. Bartholomew’s Fair to a consideration of the city itself as a disturbingly chaotic spectacle. Here, he suggests that the metropolis, though “an unmanageable sight” (709), is not utterly baffling to one who “sees the parts / As parts, but with a feeling of the whole” (711-12). What looks like an inclusive gesture—the affirmation of London’s place within a wider sense of “the whole”—has been read with suspicion by some critics. Lucy Newlyn, for example, considers this “extraneous last passage” an arbitrary “denial of the imaginative centre of Book 7” (182), a retreat from the aesthetic pleasure Wordsworth takes in the city. Similarly, Jonathan Wordsworth suggests that “Wordsworth for most

of the Book responds with pleasure at . . . [London's] life and strangeness," and that "[t]he wish to see London as part of a total natural harmony . . . has very little to do with VII as it was actually written" (305). Paul Youngquist, in *Monstrosities: Bodies and British Romanticism* (2003), sees a reaction against the "deviant flesh" exhibited at the Fair, as Wordsworth's language of parts and wholes "reinforces a cultural norm of embodiment that morally devalues monstrosities" (37).

Myers, on the other hand, reads the passage as the final stage of a confrontation with the sublime, in the form of the "fluid money economy" (83). If the homogenising force of the market makes Wordsworth anxious, Myers argues, he is only able to resolve his misgivings when he exhausts "his attempt to contain [it] within the faculty of his reason" (87). Having given up wrestling with "blank confusion" (7.696), the poet's "feeling of the whole" (712) is an imaginative identification with the uncontainable—an affirmation of the mind's sublimity, reflected in the mercurial power of capital. "In order to transcend, then, the liquid nature of exchange," Myers asserts, "Wordsworth must take pleasure in the liquidity that allows his mind to encompass such modes of exchange" (87). It is an idiosyncratic reading, certainly, but one that usefully frames this last section of Book 7 as an affirmative coda, rather than a denial or retreat.

C. R. Stokes is more suspicious of Wordsworth's claims in Book 7's final passage. In his article "Sign, Sensation and the Body in Wordsworth's 'Residence in London'" (2012), Stokes proposes to read the book through its elision of the poet's body. "Despite the privileging of flesh-and-blood and a certain organicism in *The Prelude*," Stokes observes, "it is only recently that criticism has turned its

attention to the question of the body, moving against the transcendentalising impulse in his [Wordsworth's] work" (203).

Like Gabriele, Stokes reads 'London' as a disruption of the steady, contemplative vision that grounds Wordsworth's transcendental poetics. This is partly attributed to lack of familiarity with the environment. But this difficulty is also related to what Stokes terms "Wordsworth's effaced corporeality" (203).

The body, in Book 7, becomes the locus of a conflict between competing eighteenth-century phenomenologies, Stokes argues: between "Romantic organicism" (204) and "British empiricism" (219). By "organicism," Stokes means a set of assumptions about the natural relationships between the parts and the whole, and about the possibility of visionary insight based on the contemplation of such relationships. He contrasts this with the empiricist philosophies of, chiefly, John Locke, David Hume and David Hartley—each of whom, by attending to the "data of consciousness," theorised a world much less intuitively comprehensible than that of the Romantic vision (219). Empiricism, suggests Stokes, implies that the semblance of a coherent self which is able to discover natural relationships between itself and the world is, in fact, only the product of "habit" (220). Beneath this is "a perpetual flux of sensations and nervous vibrations," lacking intrinsic order (220).

The conflict, Stokes argues, is played out in Book 7 at the level of the physical body. In the city, individual bodies are absorbed into "supra-individual trajectories," movement determined by the interaction between the crowd and the built environment (213). It is also a space in which attention and affect are directed *en masse*, as Book 7 shows, by advertising, entertainments, political and religious rhetoric, and by explosive mob behavior:

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? (7.645-49)

Such collective experiences, Stokes observes, “capture the body on its inside, binding it to shared experiences of urban performativity, dangerously co-opting its ability to feel and occluding the higher faculties” (214). Urban embodiment, then, has an unsettling quality for Wordsworth. Although much of Book 7 is animated by the flux of raw sensation, the book’s closing passage is a testament to “[c]omposure and ennobling harmony” (741).

In his sojourn in London, Wordsworth writes, “[t]he soul of beauty and enduring life / Was present as a habit” (737-38), allowing him to discern order amidst chaos. To make this claim, Stokes argues, it is necessary for Wordsworth to repress his own corporeality:

The constructed, mediated and ultimately contingent experience of a body in the city is simply too unstable for some of Wordsworth’s core principles: within the city, this means the establishing of a fixed and clean gaze which can embrace and understand its chaotic sights (218)

The critic’s strategy for untangling the web of anxieties and elisions in Book 7, therefore, is to show how the body remains implicated in the poet’s efforts to “embrace and understand” what he sees. Focusing on the ‘blind Beggar’ and Bartholomew Fair passages, moments “when the poem is trying to recuperate symbolic meaning” from the chaos and confusion of the city, Stokes argues that we should read embodiment back into the picture. In the latter passage, for



example, Wordsworth stages a moment of transcendence when he asserts his authorial power to distance himself from the fair:

For one the Muse's help will we implore,  
 And she shall lodge us—wafted on her wings  
 Above the press and danger of the crowd—  
 Upon some showman's platform. (656-59)

And yet, as Stokes observes, “the muse’s aerial perspective can only be envisaged as an embodied position itself,” one that places Wordsworth in the role of showman, “orchestrating the spectacle of grotesque corporeality all around him” (216). Reading Wordsworth’s body back into the text, Stokes suggests, reveals the effort to escape the physical as a further entanglement with it.

The poet’s ultimate recourse to “a rhetoric grounded in organicism and natural harmony” in the final passage is, for Stokes, “highly problematic” (217). The natural body, the comprehending gaze, the autonomous self—these components of “Romanticism’s ideological edifice” are profoundly destabilised by Wordsworth’s urban experience (217). Where Gabriele reads the last section of Book 7 as “the final step in a dialectic process” that reconciles “immediate vision” with “interior mystical contemplation” (380), Stokes suggests that this “raw material” of sensation is “an intractable problem and anxiety – as disruptive as it is impossible to disavow” (221).

The recognition that embodied experience is fundamental to Book 7 opens up valuable interpretive possibilities, but by insisting on Wordsworth’s need to “read” the city in its “semantic and representational” aspect, Stokes may overstate the intractability of the problem (213). Wordsworth is caught, in Stokes’s reading, between “a poetics of urban novelty” that would adequately

represent his experience of London (220), and “his symbolic investments (vision, order, transcendence, organicism)” (221). Framing this dynamic in terms of a tension between empiricist and Romantic phenomenologies, Stokes provides a valuable historical context for Book 7, but his reading is primarily a symptomatic one. The poetry inscribes a conflict that ultimately sees Wordsworth frustrated in his attempt to impose meaning upon chaos, Stokes claims. It is not clear to me that Wordsworth is as committed to recuperating symbolic meaning from his urban experience as Stokes suggests, however. In my discussion of Book 7, I suggest that the poet’s “feeling of the whole” (7.712) needn’t be read as a denial or suppression of the senses in favour of transcendental perception.

What is clear from a survey of recent critical writing on Book 7 is that there is a growing interest in the poetics of embodiment. Rather than reading Wordsworth’s city poetry in terms of a dichotomous preference for the rural over the urban, or as a horrified response to early nineteenth-century capitalism, critics are expressing an interest in space, movement, and sensation. Broadly speaking, this might be thought of as a shift of attention from how Wordsworth feels about the city, to what the city feels *like* in the book. For Book 7 is not a concerted polemic against urban culture that one might associate with Wordsworth the ‘nature poet,’ who laments “the encreasing accumulation of men in cities” in his 1800 “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* (*Poetry and Prose* 80). Rather, it concerns itself with a stage in the growth of the poet’s mind—a stage which, as in rest of *The Prelude*, is inextricable from an experience of place.

“Residence in London” portrays, as Stokes suggests, an encounter with an unfamiliar environment. Indeed, the larger poem can be thought of in terms of expanding fields of experience, the mind coming to recognise what remains

constant in itself by exposure to the new. Book 3 depicts an earlier phase of this process, but should not be thought of—in teleological terms—as only a warm-up to Book 7. The poet’s memories of Cambridge are bound up with an experience of place and a period of life quite distinct from that of Book 7, and Book 3 invites more detailed critical attention than it has so far received.

## Chapter 2: “Just Gradation”: The Growth of the Mind in Book 3

Opening Book 3 with a recollection of his first glimpse of Cambridge from Huntingdon Road in 1787, Wordsworth describes being pulled with centripetal force toward his destination:

The place as we approached seemed more and more  
To have an eddy's force, and sucked us in  
More eagerly at every step we took. (3.10-12)

In a footnote, the editors of the Norton Critical Edition of *The Prelude* (1979) gloss these lines with the assertion that “Cambridge is an eddy in the river of Wordsworth’s development” (92n2) and draw attention to the poet’s conception, in the previous book, of what he calls “the river of my mind” (2.214). The “river,” by this reading, has teleological implications—it is the image of a developmental arc leading from birth to poetic maturity. Cambridge, the Norton editors imply, is a countervailing influence, less a part of this development than a disruption. It is a common approach in the criticism, one that Monique Morgan summarises succinctly: “Wordsworth's arrangement of his narrative has an associative logic that unites each episode to the final goal, rather than a causal logic that would directly link each episode to the next” (306). This is a structure that, as Morgan points out, “encourages a strongly prospective reading experience” (305), and in a prospective mode, episodes in Wordsworth’s autobiography that seem not to overtly anticipate “the final goal” will be felt to impede his development.

It is perhaps impossible to avoid prospective thinking entirely in the case of *The Prelude*. The destination of the poem’s course—the poet’s artistic maturity, “his fitness to produce great poetry” (Morgan 298)—swims in and out

of focus along the way. At the beginning of Book 9, for example, another instance of the river trope speaks to Wordsworth's sense of progress toward a fixed endpoint:

As oftentimes a river, it might seem,  
 Yielding in part to old remembrances,  
 Part swayed by fear to tread an onward road  
 That leads direct to the devouring sea,  
 Turns and will measure back his course—far back,  
 Towards the very regions which he crossed  
 In his first outset—so have we long time  
 Made motions retrograde, in like pursuit  
 Detained. (9.1-9)

Book 8 re-crosses childhood and early adulthood, and finishes where Book 7 leaves off, on an image of London, though in a rather different register from the preceding book. These are “motions retrograde”—the implication being that to travel backwards in memory is to retreat from the poem's final destination. Even here, though, the sense that the poem is gradually progressing toward a determined destination is far from straightforward. The narrative is imagined as consisting in tarrying, “[d]etained” as if for its own sake—made to re-cross old ground in beguiling reminiscence and “fear” of concluding too soon. Though “the devouring sea” waits somewhere in the distance, it is not necessarily what animates the poetry and gives it purpose.

Moreover, the “river” is not a stable image in *The Prelude*. As Jonathan Wordsworth observes, “[i]t is an image at once of the poem, and of the mind that is the subject of the poem, and of the poet's mind that is controlling, or failing to

control, the narrative” (233). In the passage above, it represents the rhythms of narrative as it crisscrosses memory; in the context to which the Norton editors allude, Wordsworth is speaking about his own mind:

Who knows the individual hour in which  
 His habits were first sown even as a seed,  
 Who that shall point as with a wand, and say  
 ‘This portion of the river of my mind  
 Came from yon fountain?’ (2.211-15)

The passage attests to the impossibility of precision in tracing smooth lines of personal development. The “river of . . . mind,” here, evokes irresolvable complexity, a river of causes and effects which cannot be parsed; the emphasis is decidedly not on the river as a determined course. To consider “Cambridge . . . an eddy in the river of Wordsworth’s development” (92n2) implies a teleological narrative structure that isn’t borne out by the poem.

What the Norton editors suggest in their footnote is that Cambridge impedes Wordsworth’s development into the poet of *The Prelude*. Both the river images I have discussed, however, encourage us to read in a more open-ended mode. The river of narrative must be allowed to meander, to cross and re-cross the ground of memory, or risk excluding much and terminating too early, for the river of development cannot be traced with clear causal logic. Indeed, to the extent that the river image implies ‘flow’—connectivity and forward momentum—we should be cautious about treating it definitively, as Morgan does, as “Wordsworth’s chosen model for his narrative structure” (308). For Morgan, everything in *The Prelude* flows toward a predetermined endpoint:

With a river, the flow happens in the opposite direction as in a forking path, which changes the implications of the model and makes a river a more apt metaphor for prospective texts. . . In a text with a plot structured like a river, there is no guesswork involved about which path the plot might follow, because there is always only one point toward which all the plot elements could and will converge. (308)

The trouble with such readings is that whatever appears not to advance along the proscribed course tends to be seen in negative terms, as waste, hindrance, interruption. Morgan refers to Wordsworth's "unprofitable and unpoetic first year at Cambridge" (314), considering "how far from his natural path he had strayed during his Cambridge days" (315)—and this typifies many critical responses to Book 3, particularly those concerned with building a totalising interpretive framework for the poem. Herbert Lindenberger provides one of the most succinct examples of such an approach, calling Book 3's Cambridge "one of Wordsworth's images of the deceptive 'outer' life which distracts him in his spiritual journey" (233).

Wordsworth himself is cannier about the mind's development. *The Prelude* is sensitive to the organic rhythms of development, exhibiting a distrust of arriving too suddenly at any given stage, and is as much concerned with fallowness as with progress. To this extent, it is useful to bear in mind the "growth" alluded to in the poem's subtitle, resonant with a sense of open-ended, organic development, and to not allow the image of the river—or, indeed, any specific image—to overdetermine our reading of the poem. Cambridge, says the poet toward the end of Book 3, was for him "a privileged world / Within a world, a midway residence" (3.553-54), which,

With all its intervenient imagery,  
 Did better suit my visionary mind—  
 Far better, than to have been bolted forth,  
 Thrust out abruptly into fortune's way  
 Among the conflicts of substantial life—  
 By a more just gradation did lead on  
 To higher things, more naturally matured  
 For permanent possession, better fruits,  
 Whether of truth or virtue, to ensue. (3.555-63)

The passage, with its emphasis on shelter, uninterrupted maturation, and a natural developmental pace, counters the Norton editors' "eddy" (92n2) and Morgan's reference to deviation from the "natural path" (315). Perhaps neither of Morgan's structural alternatives, the "associative" (river) and the "causal" (forking path), are entirely adequate to describe the narrative of *The Prelude*, which circles back on itself repeatedly, jumps around in time and reflects on its own progress.

Reading the poem "prospectively" (Morgan 299)—teleologically—often imposes a structure of 'crisis-and-recovery' upon significant portions of the text. Such patterns do exist, as in the record of mental collapse in the wake of *The Terror* (Books 10-11), but when Book 3 is read in terms of 'crisis,' it is because of what it does not do. It does not include a single visionary 'spot of time,' nor any specific episode foreshadowing Wordsworth's future vocation as poet—and the landscape it depicts does not necessarily lend itself to sublime meditations. Wordsworth is explicit in his depiction of that first year at Cambridge as a time of imaginative fallowness:



The memory languidly revolved, the heart  
 Reposed in noontide rest, the inner pulse  
 Of contemplation almost failed to beat. (3.336-38)

It is possible to see the basis of a crisis-reading in such admissions, if *The Prelude* is taken to be animated by an inexorable drive toward Wordsworth's 'arrival' as a great poet. At the same time, however, the language of Book 3 is more suggestive of productive dormancy than of destructive errancy—as evidenced in this excerpt. The phenomenon that Wordsworth depicts is a change in the pace of his development, a slowing of the creative "inner pulse." It seems the result of a diurnal-like rhythm, the relaxation rather than the impairment of inner life.

To interpret the book in terms of impairment, critics have had to contend with Wordsworth's ambivalence towards this creative slackening. Jonathan Wordsworth gives some attention to the problem in *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision* (1982), where he reads Book 3 as a "failed [attempt] to portray a Fall" (240). Wordsworth's acute awareness of *Paradise Lost* as the point of departure for his own epic poem, argues the critic, suggests to him a model of fall and redemption. Although the poet "relegates Milton . . . to a now outmoded past" (*Borders* 237), Jonathan Wordsworth observes,

It does not mean that he is any less dependent on his predecessor, just that he can use him now for his own purposes. Wordsworth by this stage had clearly decided to include a version of the Fall that will demonstrate a need for restoration through the 'spots of time'. (237)

This determination conflicts with Wordsworth's "refusal to believe that his imagination has ever truly been impaired," the critic argues (234-35), resulting in "[a]n odd see-saw movement . . . within the verse as the poet struggles to meet

the demands of his chosen structure, yet is unable to bring himself to describe a fall from grace” (238). Every apparent introduction of a “fall” motif is marred by an immediate qualification. Wordsworth refers, for example, to:

a treasonable growth  
Of indecisive judgements that impaired  
And shook the mind’s simplicity. And yet  
This was a gladsome time. (3.214-17)

The ‘and yet’ construction is repeatedly used to undermine any suggestion of crisis at Cambridge. “Imagination slept, / And yet not utterly” (3.260-61), we are told, in a “typical statement *plus* retraction” (*Borders* 238) that, for Jonathan Wordsworth, encapsulates the book as a whole. The formulation occurs in a particularly resonant image of dormancy:

Hushed meanwhile  
Was the under-soul, locked up in such a calm,  
That not a leaf of the great nature stirred.  
Yet was this deep vacation not given up  
To utter waste. (3.539-43)

In Jonathan Wordsworth’s view, this is all so much equivocation, the “fall from grace” deferred repeatedly, first until Book 4, then Books 10 and 11—and ultimately never resolved: “When all is said and done, the paradise-lost-and-regained structure of *The Prelude* is never very marked” (276).

David Simpson is more emphatic than Jonathan Wordsworth in his treatment of Book 3 as a point of crisis in the narrative. In *Wordsworth and the Figurings of the Real* (1982), Simpson discusses what he calls “those parts of *The Prelude* which show the mind under siege from a hostile environment” (49), for

which his exemplars are Cambridge and London. For Simpson, Cambridge is the embodiment of a socio-economic order that Wordsworth utterly rejects, “a ‘class’ society based on the figurative expression of difference, dividing man from man and therefore from himself” (50). Simpson singles out a particular episode from Book 3 to make his point—one in which Wordsworth recalls arriving late to a church service:

Upshouldering in a dislocated lump  
 With shallow ostentatious carelessness  
 My surplice, gloried in and yet despised,  
 I clove in pride through the inferior throng  
 Of the plain burghers, who in audience stood  
 On the last skirts of their permitted ground,  
 Beneath the pealing organ. Empty thoughts,  
 I am ashamed of them (3.316-23)

Simpson remarks:

This little incident is an exact symptom of the society which Wordsworth did not want, and it is crucial that the alienation effected by the imposition of the metonym (he would have been obliged by the ‘rules’ to wear his gown to chapel) is reciprocally divisive both of the inner self and of the social self. (50)

To begin with, this interpretation requires Simpson to ignore the humorous context of the episode, in which the young Wordsworth is depicted “[p]our[ing] out libations” (304) to Milton, that “temperate bard” (299), before racing intoxicated through the streets with his surplice hiked up “ostrich-like” (309) in order to reach the service. Simpson’s severe reading, however, makes no

concessions to the obvious humour of the passage. Moreover, the poet is to describe Cambridge in Book 9, in contradiction to Simpson's interpretation, as a place of republican and fraternal community:

Nor was it least  
 Of many debts which afterwards I owed  
 To Cambridge and an academic life,  
 That something there was holden up to view  
 Of a republic, where all stood thus far  
 Upon equal ground, that they were brothers all  
 In honour, as of one community—  
 Scholars and gentlemen—where, furthermore,  
 Distinction lay open to all that came,  
 And wealth and titles were in less esteem  
 Than talents and successful industry. (9.226-36)

It is true that these sentiments are expressed with regard to the life of the university and do not make room, on "equal ground," for "the plain burghers" of Cambridge town. Nevertheless, Wordsworth's attitude toward Cambridge in this passage contains no hint of the opprobrium Simpson extracts from the 'surplice' episode. If anything, it suggests that the university came to represent for the poet a model of egalitarianism—one that helps to lay the groundwork for his revolutionary zeal in years to come.

More recently, David Chandler has affirmed the view that "Wordsworth can be observed starting to build a 'Fall' structure into his poem" in Book 3 and that, as the Book's account of university life proceeds, it "hesitantly suggests that Wordsworth's imagination and poetic sensibility were, after all, corrupted"

(202). Chandler's main purpose is to sketch the compositional history of Book 3 from 1800 to 1804, over which time, he argues, Wordsworth was grappling with the scope and intent of the poem—and to suggest that the version of 1805 bears the traces of significant thematic revisions during its composition. But he follows Jonathan Wordsworth in considering Book 3 to be an attempt on the poet's part to contrive an imaginative crisis. Chandler suggests that Wordsworth, working through a period of frustrated creativity in 1804, begins to consider his time at Cambridge as a precedent for his current difficulties, allowing him "to acknowledge, however reluctantly, the fact that there were times in his life when he had been indolent and uninspired" (205).

'Indolence' figures large in Book 3—much of Wordsworth's Cambridge retrospect comprises memories of play and idle loafing—and yet, it may be a mistake to read this exclusively in terms of frustration. Chandler might be right that the poet is seeking to understand the ebbs and flows of his creativity, through an exploration of earlier stages in his development. "Residence at Cambridge," however, evokes a time of unhurried maturation, during which the emphasis shifts from the first books' intense, largely solitary communion with Nature, to a heightened social awareness.

Book 3 introduces a new dynamic between the inner life of the subject and the world of "outward things / Done visibly for other minds" (3.174-75), and it figures this in numerous images of contrasting dazzle and darkness, motion and stillness. The holistic nature of this dynamic is evident in the images it produces:

easily I passed

From the remembrances of better things,

And slipped into the weekday works of youth,  
 Unburthened, unalarmed, and unprofaned.  
 Caverns there were within my mind which sun  
 Could never penetrate, yet did there not  
 Want store of leafy arbours where the light  
 Might enter in at will. (3.242-49)

The self is represented as a concentricity of layers, opening out onto the world—sun-dappled alcoves leading into darker regions presumably associated with “the remembrances of better things.” There is no disjunction apparent between the strata of Wordsworth’s mind, no self-admonition in the transition to “the weekday works of youth.” Rather, Wordsworth seems interested in portraying an emergent social self as adjunctive to the private, intrapersonal “under-soul” (3.540).

Readings which privilege Wordsworthian solitude and visionary self-communion, however, attribute censure to such passages. Jonathan Wordsworth, committed to finding traces of a Miltonic ‘Fall,’ considers a more overt reference to the young man’s sociability a “moment of self-criticism” (238):

Yet could I only cleave to solitude  
 In lonesome places—if a throng was near  
 That way I leaned by nature, for my heart  
 Was social and loved idleness and joy. (3.233-36)

The implication is that “idleness and joy” are antithetical to the Wordsworthian imagination and, as such, are antagonistic to the kind of development with which *The Prelude* is concerned. But this depends upon a teleological reading of the poem, by which the spots of time, with their “renovating virtue” (11.259),

determine the experiential value of everything else. It is not a reading grounded in the passage in question, which is more concerned with depicting the young man's newfound sociability as a natural developmental phase. It represents the shift first as a response to the new environment of Cambridge:

Thereafter came  
 Observance less devout: I had made a change  
 In climate, and my nature's outward coat  
 Changed also, slowly and insensibly.  
 To the deep quiet and majestic thoughts  
 Of loneliness succeeded empty noise  
 And superficial pastimes (3.206-12)

Wordsworth inarguably sets great store by solitary contemplation, but it oversimplifies the picture to simply take this as his preferred mode. The recollection of his first year at Cambridge gives the poet an opportunity to reflect on his attunement to the environment in a new way. The new social "climate" of the university calls forth a new gregariousness, an adjustment as appropriate as an animal's seasonal change of "outward coat." If "empty noise / And superficial pastimes" sounds pejorative at first, Wordsworth hastens to qualify his remarks:

And yet  
 This was a gladsome time. Could I behold—  
 Who less insensible than sodden clay  
 On a sea-river's bed at ebb of tide  
 Could have beheld—with undelighted heart  
 so many happy youths, so wide and fair  
 A congregation in its budding-time

Of health, and hope, and beauty, all at once  
 So many divers samples of the growth  
 Of life's sweet season, could have seen unmoved  
 That miscellaneous garland of wild flowers (3.216-26)

The 'budding' imagery gives noise and superficiality an unexpected inflection. Cambridge life in Book 3 is awash with the bright and senseless surfaces of things—and yet, there is a 'seasonal' logic to this. Sociability, play, "idleness and joy" come to seem in keeping with the "just gradation" (3.560) of Wordsworth's progress into the wider world, the efflorescence of "life's sweet season."

For although *The Prelude* is an inward epic, its subject is better conceived of as a journey outward. The crossing of the Cam in Book 3's opening passage is a threshold moment in young man's passage through widening circles of experience—it has "an eddy's force" (11, emphasis added), an ineluctable propulsion. Not all would agree with this point; Herbert Lindenberger considers the external world something from which the poet would fain escape:

*The Prelude* includes three major symbols for worldly externality—Cambridge, London, and the France of the Revolution—each of course distinguishable from the other in individual detail, yet all surprisingly similar through the problems they create in the poet's inward development. With each, for one thing, there are frequent interludes in which he retreats from the outer world, where, as at Cambridge, he turned "the mind in upon itself, / Pored, watch'd, expected, listen'd; spread my thoughts / And spread them with a wider creeping" (III, 112-114). But inevitably he is forced back into outer reality, only once more to seek out a retreat, and finally to escape from it altogether. (168)



Book 3 traces the subject's development as a dialectic between inner and outer spaces, but this is figured as a gradual opening out toward the world.

The lines Lindenberger quotes are part of an extraordinary passage that articulates this process as a deepening self-awareness, precisely in response to the new environment in which Wordsworth finds himself. Just as his "nature's outward coat" (208) adjusts itself to Cambridge's social milieu, the poet finds his inner world responding to the change:

And now it was that through such change entire,  
 And this first absence from those shapes sublime  
 Wherewith I had been conversant, my mind  
 Seemed busier in itself than heretofore—  
 At least I more directly recognised  
 My powers and habits. (3.101-6)

The fields and fens of Cambridgeshire must have been a remarkable change of scene for the young man born and bred amongst the lakes and mountains of the north. The sky's "blue concave" dominates the landscape in Wordsworth's description, conspiring with "the level fields" to render those familiar "shapes sublime" conspicuously absent. With the props of his "unconscious intercourse / With the eternal beauty" (1.489-90) removed, Wordsworth's attention is turned inward with a fresh curiosity, and he begins to recognise—to recover—in his own patterns of thought and feeling the signs of a sublimity he had hitherto attached to his native landscape. It is a self-recognition made possible by "this first absence" from his familiar environment, but the busyness of Wordsworth's mind is also actively concentrated by his new surroundings:

Let me dare to speak

A higher language, say that now I felt  
 The strength and consolation which were mine.  
 As if awakened, summoned, roused, constrained,  
 I looked for universal things, perused  
 The common countenance of earth and heaven . . . (3.106-11)

“The strength” that attends Wordsworth’s sense of singularity at Cambridge consoles him in the face of an uncertain future and fears that he could not meet family expectations for his future career. If the prospect of disappointing others burdened him at times, he suggests, he was also energised by the move to Cambridge—it both “summoned” and “constrained” his sense of individual purpose, throwing wide the scope of his attention to “universal things” while sharpening his awareness of internal sublimity:

And, turning the mind in upon itself,  
 Pored, watched, expected, listened, spread my thoughts,  
 And spread them with a wider creeping, felt  
 Incumbencies more awful, visitings  
 Of the upholder, of the tranquil soul,  
 Which underneath all passion lives secure  
 A steadfast life. (3.112-18)

“As if awakened” to the fact that he has an interior life at all, Wordsworth seems to become a student of his own interiority, the habits of watching and listening developed in Books 1 and 2 seamlessly becoming introspective. This deliberate, probing self-examination is new to the poem, as the constraint he experiences—the consolidating of his sense of self into something substantial—prompts an active testing of the boundaries of the self. These boundaries seem almost to blur

mental and physical space, with the body's sensory array tuned in both directions, and indeed, the haptic "wider creeping" of thought into newly cognised territory is spatialised in such a way that it seems a function of the decluttered landscape of sky and "level" ground. "The common countenance of earth and heaven" (111) clears a space in which the "spread" of Wordsworth's inner attention and the attunement of his perceptual faculties to the "universal" emerge as inextricable processes.

The effect that Wordsworth elicits is close to what Timothy Morton, in *Ecology Without Nature*, calls "a poetics of *ambience*," (33) the result of a "shuffl[ing of] subject and object back and forth so that we may think they have dissolved into each other . . ." (15). Morton clarifies:

Ambience denotes a sense of a circumambient, or surrounding, world. It suggests something material and physical, though somewhat intangible, as if space itself had a material aspect . . . (33)

It is partly the generality of Wordsworth's diction that produces this effect of blurry continuity between thought and landscape. All is intense, expectant attention, but what he seeks and finds can hardly be articulated; the phrase "universal things" hovers between the archetypal and the particular, and it is unclear where such things are to be sought, for Wordsworth has collapsed earth and sky into one "common countenance."

The poet opens a channel, however shadowy and ill-defined, to "that serene and blessed mood" evoked in "Tintern Abbey" (42), by which he is enabled to "see into the life of things" (50). In that poem, he is speaking of the effects of an "absent" landscape (23), the memory of which provokes feelings that move through "the blood, and . . . along the heart" (29) to reach the "purer mind / With

tranquil restoration" (30-31). So too at Cambridge, it is precisely "through such change entire, / And this first absence from those shapes sublime" (101-2) that Wordsworth begins to access intimations of what subtends personality, "all passion," or "the affections," as he says in "Tintern Abbey" (43). Both texts work to make the awareness of an absent place into a positive, emotional-affective state that precipitates a deepened sense of interconnectedness.

"Tintern Abbey" is also about the self-estrangement that comes with ageing—something that Wordsworth does not claim to have felt at the stage of life with which Book 3 is concerned. But he may certainly have been thinking of that poem when he turns to the idea of the life of things in the proceeding passage, calling it "A track . . . not untrod before" (121):

A track pursuing not untrod before,  
 From deep analogies by thought supplied,  
 Or consciousnesses not to be subdued,  
 To every natural form, rock, fruit or flower,  
 Even the loose stones that cover the highway,  
 I gave a moral life—I saw them feel,  
 Or linked them to some feeling. The great mass  
 Lay bedded in a quickening soul, and all  
 That I beheld respired with inward meaning. (3.121-29)

This is not a rhetoric of 'either/or.' Rather, the language preserves the indeterminate middle-ground of "Tintern Abbey"—a "world / Of eye and ear, both what they half-create, / And what perceive" (106-8). In "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth struggles to articulate the memory of a time when the natural world was to him:

An appetite: a feeling and a love,  
 That had no need of a remoter charm,  
 By thought supplied, or any interest  
 Unborrowed from the eye. (*Tintern* 81-4)

Recalling roughly the same period of his youth in Book 3, but some five years after the composition of “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth dissolves the epistemic paradigms of youth and maturity into one another. Though the “remoter charm” of “Tintern Abbey” and the *Prelude* passage’s “deep analogies” are both “by thought supplied,” the latter has none of the distance from authenticity suggested by the former. The correspondence between Wordsworth’s own “moral life” and that of nature emerges, in the Book 3 passage, from a ‘depth’ that seems to preexist the thought that makes it available to consciousness.

The use of the word “consciousnesses” in the next line is unusual, denoting as it does Wordsworth’s private intimations, or recognitions, of a life in “every natural form,” but not without further blurring the point of contact between mind and world. After all, the only other iteration of the word its plural form in *The Prelude* is in the famous “[t]wo consciousnesses” (2.32) passage in Book 2, in which the presence of the past seems to produce in Wordsworth’s mind the sense of an “other”:

... so wide appears  
 The vacancy between me and those days,  
 Which yet have such self-presence in my mind  
 That sometimes when I think of them I seem  
 Two consciousnesses—conscious of myself,  
 And of some other being. (2.28-33)

When it comes to the passage from Book 3, it is hard to read the line in question without pausing to ask oneself where these “consciousnesses” have appeared from. Critics have responded differently to these lines, but their differences turn on the degree to which Wordsworth perceives or creates what he is describing. Klaus Mortensen reads the passage as a depiction of “the naïve correspondence between nature’s physical forms and the feelings,” representative of “the childish animism which the young boy grows away from” (145). H. W. Piper suggests instead that the perception of a living universe is something Wordsworth matures into:

According to *The Prelude*, Wordsworth in his early youth fancifully attributed life to natural objects and this paved the way to the recognition of a real life there. (61)

“At Cambridge,” Piper writes, it is simply that “this belief took a more reasoned form” (61). Geoffrey Durrant emphasises the “intellectual discipline” apparent in the passage, which describes “a deliberate process by which the world man lives in is to be redeemed from the deadness to which the physical science of the previous century had consigned it” (128). The process is explicitly creative for Durrant, who contends that when Wordsworth writes “of giving a life to stones, he understands very well that the only life they have is that given to them by his imagination” (128). All three readings articulate a process of development underway in Wordsworth’s mind—the growth of self-awareness and a new emphasis on reason—and yet, the inextricability of the sensory from the intellectual in the passage goes unremarked.

Durrant’s suggestion that Wordsworth is here aligning himself against the “deadness” of Newtonian mechanics is astute, but it perhaps overstates the

cerebral dimension of this position. Just as Wordsworth is able to turn the focus of his watching and listening inward, to recognise the reality of his own inner life, the senses mediate his access to the inner life of the universe. When Wordsworth says of natural objects, “I saw them feel” (126), he describes a self-evident relationship to the external world. The combinatory power of the imagination that “linked them to some feeling” (127) does not so much qualify this evidence as complement it—something that is made clear when the poet continues: “all / That I beheld respired with inward meaning” (128-29). If the preceding passage undermined the boundaries of mind and world, here Wordsworth’s own sense of embodiment extends into the natural objects he beholds, which ‘breathe’ with an inner life. The sense of “inward meaning” puts emphasis not so much on a hermeneutic curiosity about specific meanings, but on the realisation of a more general ‘inwardness’ in things, the evidence for which is simply their availability to the senses.

If Coleridge might have caught flashes of his own poetic-philosophical musings in Wordsworth’s talk of “a quickening soul” that animates nature, the verse moves swiftly to remind us that Wordsworth himself is still the subject at hand. It does so by echoing the tropes of Coleridge’s “The Eolian Harp” with a different emphasis. “Thus much for the one presence, and the life / Of the great whole” (3.130-31) Wordsworth summarily states, seeming to speak directly to both Coleridge’s “one life within us and abroad, / Which meets all motion and becomes its soul” (“The Eolian Harp” 27-28), and to his own, earlier poem “Tintern Abbey” and its intimations of “A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things” (100-1). The passage continues:

suffice it here to add

That whatsoe'er of terror, or of love,  
 Or beauty, Nature's daily face put on  
 From transitory passion, unto this  
 I was as wakeful even as the waters are  
 To the sky's motion, in a kindred sense  
 Of passion was obedient as a lute  
 That waits upon the touches of the wind. (3.131-38)

In "The Eolian Harp," the image of the instrument is used to suggest the common condition of "all of animated nature" (45), which is brought to consciousness by the motion of "one intellectual breeze / At once the Soul of each, and God of All" (48-49). Here it is reemployed as an image of Wordsworth's singular attentiveness and sensitivity, shifting from the unidirectional "sweep[. . .]" ("The Eolian Harp" 47) of Coleridge's animating principle toward a dynamic of active responsiveness. Wordsworth's is a poetry of sympathy, of "kindred" passions, that preserves individual separateness while it affirms the mind's capacity to feel with others. His responsiveness to the natural world is conditioned by a "wakeful" attention, and where Coleridge's image of the wind harp emphasises its passive instrumentality—"the mute still air / Is Music slumbering on her instrument" (33-34)—Wordsworth's "waits upon the touches of the wind" with an expectant, watchful agency.

What is philosophically speculative in "The Eolian Harp" is absorbed into a description of emotional reciprocity with the world at large. As if to underscore his claim to "more than usual organic sensibility," one of the essential poetic gifts identified in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads (Poetry and Prose 79)*, Wordsworth continues:



So was it with me in my solitude:  
 So often among multitudes of men.  
 Unknown, unthought of, yet I was most rich,  
 I had a world about me—'twas my own,  
 I made it; for it only lived to me,  
 And to the God who looked into my mind. (3.139-44)

On the face of it, the passage might seem to express a kind of solipsism, with its dense rhythm of personal and possessive pronouns, situating the young man at the centre of a world of his own creation. M. H. Abrams reads it this way in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), asserting that “in Wordsworth’s expression of his state of mind at Cambridge, . . . the suggestion is of a kind of Fichtean absoluteness, in which all objects resolve into a product of the Ego” (62). Abrams supplies this passage as an exception to the Wordsworthian norm, continuing:

But in most passages the implication is that the content of perception is the joint product of external data and of mind; and we are sometimes enabled, very roughly, to make out various positions of the line between inner and outer . . . (62)

It isn’t clear, however, that the “world” of the mind’s making equates to “the content of perception” *per se*. Following directly on from the description of Wordsworth’s emotional responsiveness to the world, these lines are a realisation of “The strength and consolation which were [his]” (3.108) in the midst of these new surroundings. The passage registers the young man’s sense of precariousness in society, the awareness of his own inconsequentiality to others—“[u]nknown, unthought of”—and counters this by reflecting on the private solace that his particular gifts afford him. Wordsworth is suggesting a

process of settling and familiarisation, too. Realising that his sympathetic correspondence with the forms and forces of the world is not bound to a specific locale, he is able to extend a field of personal significance—"it only lived to me"—to his new abode.

Chandler argues that this section of Book 3—specifically, "the first 194 lines" (201)—is thematically discontinuous with the rest of "Residence at Cambridge," in that it merely repeats the structure of the first two books:

a series of 'external events' is followed by a 'Mid-Point Conflict' which then leads to a series of 'internal events' and a conclusion addressed to Coleridge. (200)

After the address to Coleridge, Wordsworth abruptly changes track:

Enough, for now into a populous plain  
 We must descend. A traveller I am,  
 And all my tale is of myself (3.195-97)

At this point, Chandler suggests, "Book III, and ultimately *The Prelude* as a whole, gets significantly redirected" (201). For Chandler, this amounts to a reconceptualisation of the poem's scope that sees Wordsworth "starting to build a 'Fall' structure into his poem" (202)—symbolically signaled in the poet's descent towards "a populous plain." Without wishing to dispute Chandler's account of the compositional history of the book, I suggest that the first third of "Residence at Cambridge" has more thematic continuity with what follows than he implies.

Chandler observes an indecisiveness in the book, which "begins with descriptions of Cambridge life, then says this had no effect on the poet, who inhabited an imaginative world of his own," and subsequently "suggests that

Wordsworth's imagination and poetic sensibility were, after all, corrupted" (202). For the critic, the most compelling explanation for this is that the poet had "two different conceptions of Cambridge" (202): one in which the university had a malign influence on him, and one in which it had no effect on him at all. I have suggested, to the contrary, that Cambridge does begin to exert an influence on Wordsworth's mind from early on, and that, as Book 3 proceeds, this influence can hardly be seen as corruptive.

The 167 lines preceding the address to Coleridge might better be thought of not as a reiteration of what has come before, but as depicting a process of settling in an unfamiliar environment. In these early days at university, there was, the poet says, "a strangeness in my mind, / A feeling that I was not for that hour / Nor for that place" (79-81). Naturally, the feeling of dislocation upon first experiencing life away from home prompts the young man to consider his internal resources. The lines that lead up to his turn to Coleridge reflect on Wordsworth's "strength and consolation" (108) in this strange new place—and they do so explicitly in terms of his "first absence from those shapes sublime" (102). The descent "into a populous plain" (195) marks the end of this period of upheaval, and a passage "into the weekday works of youth, / Unburthened, unalarmed, and unprofaned" (244). One can see why the critics might read this absorption into the rhythms of university life as a break with the visionary intensity of the preceding books. Yet we should consider, too, what Wordsworth tells us about the rhythms of psychological development with this book. The period of "idleness and joy" that the poem enters, as the poet adjusts to Cambridge life, is as significant as the shock of the new.

### Chapter 3: “Purely Local”: Charles Lamb as Interlocutor in Book 7

The consternation Wordsworth registers at the spectacle of St. Bartholomew’s Fair is carried into the concluding passage of Book 7, and the poet’s summative evaluation of life in London is tinged with a sense of dismay:

O, blank confusion, and a type not false  
 Of what the mighty city is itself  
 To all, except a straggler here and there—  
 To the whole swarm of its inhabitants—  
 An undistinguishable world to men,  
 The slaves unrespited of low pursuits,  
 Living amid the same perpetual flow  
 Of trivial objects, melted and reduced  
 To one identity by differences  
 That have no law, no meaning, and no end—  
 Oppression under which even highest minds  
 Must labour, whence the strongest are not free. (7.696-707)

Lucy Newlyn describes the section as “astonishing in its insensitivity to the claims that have gone before” (181-82). Wordsworth appears to affirm a vision of the city as a debased world of constriction and drudgery, utterly inimical to imaginative freedom. What has led up to this conclusion, however, as Newlyn argues, has been a complex engagement with “the city as a formative experience – just as crucial in moulding his imagination as the country, just as exciting as the ‘changeable language’ of the ‘ancient hills’” (181). Newlyn traces the evolution of Wordsworth’s urban poetics from ‘Home at Grasmere’ (1800), through the 1802

sonnets ‘Composed Upon Westminster Bridge’ and ‘The World Is Too Much With Us,’ to Book 7 of *The Prelude*, written in 1804. It is a period in which his thinking about the city becomes increasingly ambivalent, as his experiences complicate any bias he may have held against the urban environment. This ambivalence, given its fullest expression over the course of Book 7, is what the “astonishing,” opprobrious final passage seems to deny.

“Residence in London” is not simply the endpoint of this process, however—it is a composite account of Wordsworth’s numerous visits to the capital between 1791 and 1802. As James Heffernan attests, the poet “chose to spend well over a year there in the course of at least five visits made from 1791 to 1802, the very years in which he was finding and forging his poetic voice” (422). The overall picture of London that emerges has a palimpsestic quality, therefore; it is a compression of multiple encounters with the city over thirteen years into the “little space of intermediate time” (7.65) between the poet’s graduation and his return to France. With this understanding, we should not be surprised that Book 7 runs a gamut of moral responses to London. The impression of narrative continuity in *The Prelude* is perhaps nowhere so unsettled as it is in this book, where London is evoked by a juxtaposition of several distinct periods in Wordsworth’s life up to that point. We are encouraged to read ‘Residence in London’ as the account of a single visit to the metropolis, and to think of the city as a place with which the poet has made a definitive break. London, says Wordsworth, was

A vivid pleasure of my youth, and now,

Among the lonely places that I love,

A frequent daydream for my riper mind (7.151-53)

This formulation puts London at a comfortable distance temporally and geographically, from which the memories of “youth” can be savoured. Newlyn observes in these lines a “reversal” (181) of the dynamic articulated in “Tintern Abbey,” by which nature’s “beauteous forms” nourish the poet’s mind “‘mid the din / Of towns and cities” (21, 24-25). “And yet,” Newlyn adds, “this conscious acknowledgement of the city’s potential (containing as it does Wordsworth’s self-conscious admission to a change of mind) is not the true centre of Book 7” (181). Rather, the poet evokes London most powerfully as a proximate phenomenon—something in which he is immersed, and which disturbs and fascinates him. One visit was particularly significant in shaping this approach to writing the city, as Newlyn argues: “Wordsworth’s response to London altered drastically as a result of his stay there during September 1802 – a period in which he was shown the sights of London by Lamb” (178).

Charles Lamb’s enthusiasm for London is almost a counter-image of the Wordsworths’ love of Grasmere and the Lakes. Lamb himself makes this comparison in a January 1801 letter to William, claiming to “have formed as many and intense local attachments as any of you mountaineers can have done with dead Nature” (*Letters of Charles Lamb* 1.164-65). The letter—Lamb’s response to the Wordsworths’ invitation to Grasmere—goes on to evoke the vitality of the city in terms that, as Newlyn observes, emphasises “the ordinary, the palpable, the seedy,” while also adopting “a Wordsworthian language to describe imaginative growth” (Newlyn 172):

The lighted shops of the Strand and Fleet Street; the innumerable trades, tradesmen, and customers, coaches, waggons, playhouses . . . the crowds, the very dirt and mud, the sun shining upon houses and pavements, the

print-shops, the old bookstalls, parsons cheapening books, coffee-houses, steams of soups from kitchens, the pantomimes London itself a pantomime and a masquerade all these things work themselves into my mind, and feed me, without a power of satiating me. The wonder of these sights impels me into night-walks about her crowded streets, and I often shed tears in the motley Strand from fulness of joy at so much life. (*Letters of Charles Lamb* 1.165).

Lamb's paean to metropolitan life clearly made an impression on Wordsworth, for something of the style and exuberance of the letter inflects parts of Book 7. One can see this in the poet's first evocation of the city as it might appear to a pedestrian newcomer. Lamb singles out "the motley Strand" as exemplary of London's nourishing vitality, and it is "the crowded Strand" (7.169) to which Wordsworth turns when he proposes to "describe for pastime's sake, / Some portion of that motley imagery" (7.149-50). Like Lamb, too, the poet begins with a catalogue of impressions related to trade and movement:

The endless stream of men and moving things,  
 From hour to hour the illimitable walk  
 Still among streets, with clouds and sky above,  
 The wealth, the bustle and the eagerness,  
 The glittering chariots with their pampered steeds,  
 Stalls, barrows, porters, midway in the street  
 The scavenger that begs with hat in hand (7.158-64)

The echoes of Lamb's letter are unmistakable, here, as Wordsworth sets a scene of energy, motion, light, without a hint of opprobrium. Michael Gassenmeier and Jens Martin Gurr go so far as to call the "city tour" begun in these lines "perhaps

the most unprejudiced, enthusiastic, and innovative poetic treatment of the urban experience in pre-modern English literature” (310). How different this is to the city scene of ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802,’ which Newlyn calls “an important transitional moment” (178) in Wordsworth’s thinking about the urban:

silent, bare,  
 Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
 Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
 All bright and glittering in the smokeless air. (5-8)

That piece responds to the possibility of urban beauty opened up by the 1802 visit to London, a possibility which Newlyn attributes to Lamb’s influence as a guide to the city. Nevertheless, the sonnet still draws on the dichotomous worlds of town and country for its effects—“Never did sun more beautifully steep / In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill” (9-10)—and, as Newlyn indicates, “it is the pleasure of finding these opposite worlds at all comparable which gives [the poem] immediacy and significance” (179). Only in approaching the city as a place of significance beyond its mere opposition to ‘Nature’ does Wordsworth produce “a true evaluation of the city” (179)—and where he does so in Book 7, Lamb serves as a useful model.

Book 7, then, marks a point of confluence between different stages in Wordsworth’s thinking about town and country. In ‘Home at Grasmere’ (1800), the construction of his “Beloved Grasmere” (57) as a final stopping point, “a last retreat” (147), relies in part on its distance from the “dead Wilderness / Of the thronged world” (613-14). Identifying himself and his work very deliberately with a specific locale, Wordsworth never wholly embraces Lamb’s enthusiasm



for metropolitan life. Nevertheless, the poet's vision of the city as a "dead Wilderness," so neatly mirrored by Lamb's vision of "dead Nature," has become highly equivocal by 1804. Many critics ignore the fact that the London of Book 7 reflects a process, not a static place about which Wordsworth feels a certain way.

Traditionally, *Prelude* criticism has emphasised the poet's negative response to London, affirming a moral dichotomy between town and country. In the midst of "the urban inferno," Herbert Lindenberger argues, "he does not celebrate his interaction with the outer environment, but insists, instead, on his alienation from it" (235). R. A. Foakes, in *The Romantic Assertion* (1958), characterises the London of Book 7 as "labyrinth" of monstrosities which "were to bring a devastating shock to him" (66)—but does not elaborate on this assertion. In his study of *The Prelude*, titled *The Character of the Poet* (1971), Richard Onorato refers to Wordsworth's "feeling of aversion for the city" and suggests that London, "oppressively lacking in natural imagery, becomes . . . a disturbing analogue of a troubled dream" (275). David Simpson includes Book 7 among "those parts of *The Prelude* which show the mind under siege from a hostile environment" (49), and echoes Lindenberger's language when he speaks of the "threats apparently posed by the urban inferno" (Simpson 52). Hartman, too, implies that London is a menacing environment from which the poet maintains his aloofness, referring to "that abstracted, dream-like void which enables Wordsworth to pass unscathed through London" (238). Patrick Parrinder identifies the London of Book 7 as "a prototype of the artificial human world in that it has no moral center, and offers the poet no escape from the subservient multitude" (411) and suggests that "he gets out of London as fast as he can" (412). These critics find ample evidence for such assertions, but only by

concentrating their attention selectively on one of Book 7's multiple and shifting registers.

More recently, other critics have noticed Wordsworth's alternation between affirmative and opprobrious responses to the city. Jonathan Wordsworth writes:

London in VII could so easily have called up the unthinking prejudice of which Wordsworth too was capable, but, until a sudden arbitrary change of tone in the last few lines, his observations are presented with amusement and indulgence. (*Borders* 295)

This resonates with Newlyn's sense that in the final lines of Book 7 "Wordsworth retreats from the implications of his most imaginative writing" ('Lamb, Lloyd, London' 181)—namely, that the city encountered on its own terms is just as imaginatively stimulating for the poet as the country. In a piece tellingly titled 'Wordsworth's Invigorating Hell,' Eugene Stelzig arrives at a similar conclusion:

It is only in the second half of Book 7 that the poet writing about his impressions has decided that the indiscriminate hodgepodge that is the bustling life of London is not only too much—but that that too much needs to be unequivocally condemned as a modern inferno. In thus finally denouncing and dismissing the city, the poet allows the moralist in him to overwhelm the admiring spectator (Stelzig 187)

Stelzig overstates the force of the poet's moralising here; Wordsworth never denounces the city "unequivocally." Nevertheless, he articulates the same feeling that Newlyn and Jonathan Wordsworth have, that Book 7's account of London closes on an incongruously different note from that with which it began.

Wordsworth's recollection of "that motley imagery, / A vivid pleasure of my

youth" (150-51) resolves at last into a "blank confusion" (696) which, as Newlyn points out, "belongs, chronologically and stylistically, back in 1800 when Wordsworth had thought of the city as a universe of death" (182).

If the moralising tone of this final passage comes as a surprise, it is because for most of Book 7 the poet seems unconcerned with either celebrating or condemning the city and its "swarm of inhabitants" (7.699). Gassenmeier and Gurr remark:

[Wordsworth's] impressions of London are as little colored by the denunciatory topoi and concepts of classical city satires as by the encomiastic formulas and motifs of classical city panegyrics which tended to prevent the emergence of an unbiased perception and presentation of the urban experience and scene. (311)

Instead, London emerges through Wordsworth's engagement with it as a physical space. "Wordsworth is at his best," Newlyn observes, "when he is disturbed; when the random or the chaotic unsettles his sense of order; when the alien refuses to be subdued" (181). It is precisely the city's "alien" quality that motivates Wordsworth's poetic foray into urban space—London neither as home nor hell, but as a mysterious presence permeating perception, thought and movement.

Lamb's letter to Wordsworth seems to have been the inspiration for an essay published in *The Morning Post* a year later, on February 1, 1802. The essay, entitled 'The Londoner,' sees Lamb returning to the crux of his disagreement with Wordsworth—his strong preference for London over rural environments—and repeats certain phrases and images from the letter almost verbatim.

Although there is no mention of Wordsworth by name in the essay, which is

ostensibly addressed “To the Editor of The Reflector” (*Collected Works of Charles Lamb* 4.301), Lamb is evidently refining and extending his response to Wordsworth’s invitation. In the earlier text, Lamb’s partisan enthusiasm for London overflows in a catalogue of beloved scenes and objects, “all local, purely local” (*Letters of Charles Lamb* 1.165). Adapting this for public consumption, Lamb adopts a self-satirising persona, constructing himself as the quintessential Londoner:

Indeed I consider myself in some sort a speculative Lord Mayor of London: for though circumstances unhappily preclude me from the hope of ever arriving at the dignity of a gold chain and Spital Sermon, yet thus much will I say of myself in truth, that Whittington with his Cat (just emblem of vigilance and a furred gown) never went beyond me in affection, which I bear to the citizens. (*Works* 4.301)

Lamb’s essay, together with the January 1801 letter, hovers in the background of Book 7 as Wordsworth negotiates his own response to the metropolis. Lamb compares himself with Dick Whittington as Lord Mayor in order to suggest his own native, insider’s “affection” for the London citizenry. Wordsworth echoes the allusion, also comparing himself to Whittington, but with an emphasis on an earlier part of the legend, “When he in friendlessness, a drooping boy, / Sate on a stone and heard the bells speak out / Articulate music” (115-17). The image suggests Wordsworth’s outsider status in relation to the city, but also the promise that it holds for him, and this distinction between the indigenous Londoner and the visitor remains important to Wordsworth—even as he adapts Lamb’s essayistic effusions on city life to his own purposes.

Among other things, Lamb's emphasis on the role of habit in forming local attachments supplies a crucial subtext for Book 7. "The very deformities of London, which give distaste to others, from habit do not displease me," Lamb writes in *The Morning Post* (*Works* 4.302). It is a statement about the power of familiarity to shape pleasure, and we may wonder if Lamb is conscious of the resonances it has with parts of the 1800 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*:

All men feel an habitual gratitude, and something of an honorable bigotry for the objects which have long continued to please them: we not only wish to be pleased, but to be pleased in that particular way in which we have been accustomed to be pleased. (*Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose* 95)

Wordsworth is writing about poetry, and his hope is to convince readers to set aside any "honorable bigotry" so as to experience "other enjoyments, of a purer, more lasting, and more exquisite nature" (95-96). But ideas about poetry and place are entangled in the 'Preface'—perhaps most obviously in the poet's famous remark about "the encreasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident" (80-81). This is offered as one of "a multitude of causes unknown to former times [that] are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind" (80). And yet, Lamb seems to suggest, the city affords its own pleasures to those who have learned how to view it:

The obliging customer, and the obliged tradesman—things which live by bowing, and things which exist but for homage—do not affect me with disgust; from habit I perceive nothing but urbanity, where other men, more refined, discover meanness: I love the very smoke of London, because it has been the medium most familiar to my vision. (*Works* 4.302)

Fiona Stafford, in *Local Attachments* (2010), suggests that the 1801 letter which forms the basis for Lamb's subsequent essay is "not so much a counter to the rural bias of *Lyrical Ballads* as a sympathetic endorsement of Wordsworth's faith in the universal meaning inherent in local attachments" (274). Lamb's response to Wordsworth affirms a wider truth implicit in the poet's celebration of rural life: that the love of place is not exclusive to a particular kind of environment. "In each case," Stafford observes, "it was the familiarity of the environment and the distinct human dimensions that proved so sustaining" (274).

Nevertheless, Lamb's statement of local affections does serve as a provocation to Wordsworth, and Newlyn considers the letter, even in its "whimsicality . . . [a] private challenge" (179). James Heffernan agrees that "it seems plausible that Lamb's letter might have prompted Wordsworth to write something more than a Popean satire on London life" (431). It is useful to bear the notion of Lamb's "private challenge" in mind when reading Book 7, because in writing about London the way he does, Lamb makes it harder for Wordsworth to fall back on comfortable clichés. By evoking an urban landscape hidden to "other men," a landscape redeemed from "meanness" by the eye of an enthusiast, Lamb suggests that the city is available to the type of poetic sensibility outlined in the 'Preface.' There, Wordsworth defines the "Poet" in terms of an unusually expansive, inclusive capacity for sympathy: "more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm, and tenderness . . . a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind" (85). Lamb's assertion in *The Morning Post* essay, of an unsurpassed "affection, which I bear to the citizens [of London]," and "entire affection for that way of life" (*Works* 301), taps into the magnanimous qualities that undergird

Wordsworth's own sense of vocation. Moreover, Lamb's love of urban life vouchsafes him perceptions of a poetic, elevating character, hidden to the casual observer: "I see grand principles of honour at work in the dirty ring which encompasses two combatants with fists, and principles of no less eternal justice in the detection of a pick-pocket" (302).

Stafford suggests that Wordsworth was likely "discomforted by his friend's witty dismissal of 'dead nature' and unaccountable preference for the city" (274)—but he must also have been struck by Lamb's implicit "challenge" to respond creatively to the experience of London. 'Residence in London,' his most extended and thoroughgoing attempt to do so, finds Wordsworth reaching for a sense of what London might mean to him as a stranger in the city. There is never any question, in *The Prelude*, of Wordsworth making London a home. The city has been left far behind before the poet even begins to describe it—it has become a "daydream" (7.153). Wordsworth is clear on this point when he addresses his choice to reside in the capital:

soon I bade  
 Farewell for ever to the private bowers  
 Of gowned students—quitted these, no more  
 To enter them, and pitched my vagrant tent,  
 A casual dweller and at large, among  
 The unfenced regions of society.  
 Yet undetermined to what plan of life  
 I should adhere, and seeming thence to have  
 A little space of intermediate time  
 Loose and at full command, to London first

I turned, if not in calmness, nevertheless  
 In no disturbance of excessive hope—  
 At ease from all ambition personal,  
 Frugal as there was need, and though self-willed,  
 Yet temperate and reserved, and wholly free  
 From dangerous passions. (7.57-72)

Bidding “Farewell for ever” to the sheltering academic environment, Wordsworth must have felt keenly the uncertainty of his position. At the age of 21, he was still too young to take holy orders, and while it was ostensibly this “plan of life” that he was waiting for, the poetry suggests that Wordsworth himself was “undetermined.” Under the confident rhetoric of freedom and self-possession, the passage conveys a sense of frightening indecision. The departure from Cambridge seems almost like a banishment: he is “no more / To enter” that privileged world, and he seems entirely without a home, “vagrant . . . / . . . and at large.” Given the emphasis Wordsworth places on his own uprootedness, we might expect the turn to London to be freighted with hopes for a new home. The poet seems to anticipate this, however, assuring us that the move was not motivated by any “excessive hope” or “ambition personal.” He continues to stress his transitory status in the city:

’Twas at least two years  
 Before this season when I first beheld  
 That mighty place, a transient visitant;  
 And now it pleased me my abode to fix  
 Single in the wide waste. To have a house,  
 It was enough—what matter for a home?—



That owned me, living chearfully abroad  
 With fancy on the stir from day to day,  
 And all my young affections out of doors. (7.72-80)

Although he stops in London, “fix[ing]” his dwelling there, he retains something of the “transient visitant” he was during his first visit. The city in this passage is a “wide waste,” suggesting something featureless and inhospitable—a non-place—and the distinction drawn between “a house” and “a home” makes the temporary nature of his stay clear.

While we must assume that he had come to know parts of London fairly well by 1804, Wordsworth is very deliberate in establishing London as a strange and novel environment, and this makes the experience both exciting and elusive. Lamb’s feeling for London comes from an intimate familiarity with its sights and sounds, its spaces and people. The ‘Londoner’ essay attests to the myriad ways that Lamb’s mind has been shaped by the city’s influence—to the extent that he can claim to “love the very smoke of London, because it has been the medium most familiar to my vision” (*Works* 4.302). The challenge that Wordsworth faces in Book 7 is that of asserting his own ‘feeling’ for the city, without being able to claim the strong local attachments that Lamb does. Heffernan, emphasising the rivalry with Lamb implicit in the poet’s response to London, summarises the problem like this:

How can Wordsworth compete with such authoritative testimony, which rests on the very ground—life-long possession—that Wordsworth was using to authenticate his own portrayal of life in the Lake District? (431-32)

The poet’s solution is to consider London in the mode of a visitor, sensitive to elements of the urban experience that Lamb misses, and “never gaining,” as

Heffernan says, “the ‘city eyes’ that would allow him to overlook such figures as the blind beggar” (432). Stafford makes the acute observation that “Wordsworth’s difficulty with London was not so much that it was a *city* as that it was unfamiliar” (275)—yet it is also true that Wordsworth’s portrayal of the city as an unfamiliar place is a deliberate construction, “obliquely calculated to rival Lamb’s” (Heffernan 431). Unfamiliarity, then, furnishes the poet both with opportunities and with difficulties. Chief among the problems that Wordsworth faces in Book 7 is what to make of the encounter with the city at large—for the project of *The Prelude* commits him to a narrative of growth and development that simply isn’t a concern for Lamb.

Here, the book’s final passage warrants closer attention, both for the way it seeks to resolve the poet’s differences with Lamb, and for its encapsulation of a process of psychological growth. Like the rest of the book, this last section is anything but univocal, comprised as it is of parts composed at different stages in the development of Wordsworth’s thinking about the urban. Even the most strident denunciations of city life are immediately qualified, so that, for example, the city seems a “blank confusion . . . / . . . / To all, except a straggler here and there” (696-98). Writing in 1804, with Lamb’s celebration of the city in the background, Wordsworth clearly finds it harder to generalise about the experience of Londoners. At the edge of the crowd, the “straggler” cuts a solitary figure. Seeing and understanding more than the “swarm of . . . inhabitants” (699), the figure is more Wordsworth than Lamb as he stands back from the spectacle to watch. At this point, the poet interposes an earlier vision of the city—the Norton editors note that “[l]ines 701-5, with their disdain of city life, were originally written for *Michael* in 1800” (264n1)—and the tone reverts to moral

outrage. As Newlyn observes, the characterisation of city dwellers as “slaves” (701) and the condemnation of city life as a “perpetual flow / Of trivial objects” (702-3) “belongs, chronologically and stylistically, back in 1800” (182). As the text shifts back to the compositional phase of 1804, Wordsworth begins to equivocate again:

But though the picture weary out the eye,  
By nature an unmanageable sight,  
It is not wholly so to him who looks  
In steadiness, who hath among least things  
An under-sense of greatest, sees the parts  
As parts, but with a feeling of the whole. (708-13)

The language of “parts” and “whole” sees Wordsworth reaching for a way to integrate the experience of London into a wider conception of organic growth. Importantly for the discussion that follows, the possibility of apprehending “the whole” is couched in terms of a shift of emphasis from “the eye” to “feeling.” It will suffice at this stage, however, simply to point out that Wordsworth does not feel the urban to be irreconcilable with his sense of an harmonious natural order.

Lamb’s enthusiasm for what is local and familiar leads him to consider the affective possibilities of town and country as separate and dissimilar. “All these emotions must be strange to you,” he writes of his love for London street life in the 1801 letter to Wordsworth, “so are your rural emotions to me” (*Letters* 1.165). Wordsworth’s response, at the close of Book 7, is to suggest that his and Lamb’s habits of mind are in accord. Rather than fall back on local attachments, the poet affirms the universal in the local, the perception of which, he allows, is not contingent on the kind of upbringing he has had:

This, of all acquisitions first, awaits  
 On sundry and most widely different modes  
 Of education—nor with least delight  
 On that through which I passed. Attention comes,  
 And comprehensiveness and memory,  
 From early converse with the works of God  
 Among all regions (7.714-20)

In the two-part *Prelude* of 1799, Wordsworth hymns the “first / Poetic spirit of our human life” (1799 2.305-6):

By uniform control of after years  
 In most abated and suppressed, in some  
 Through every change of growth or of decay  
 Preeminent till death. (1799 2.307-10)

We may wonder why, at the end of Book 7, he now makes a point of acknowledging the “widely different modes / Of education” which might nurture the “Poetic spirit”—the celebration of his own “early converse with the works of God” throughout *The Prelude* is, after all, rarely qualified in this way. Although they are followed by a section written in 1798 on the formative value of the “mountain’s outline” (723) and “the ancient hills” (727), these lines hold out the possibility that the city, too, might prove hospitable to poetic vision. I suggest that—as Newlyn has already strongly implied in ‘Lamb, Lloyd, London’ (1984)—it is Lamb, as much as Coleridge, to whom Wordsworth addresses himself in Book 7, and with whom he tries to come to terms. Lamb’s writing on London prompts Wordsworth to go beyond his conception of the city as a “dead

Wilderness" ("Home at Grasmere" 613) and to situate his London experience in a broader context:

This did I feel in that vast receptacle.  
 The spirit of Nature was upon me here,  
 The soul of beauty and enduring life  
 Was present as a habit, and diffused—  
 Through meager lines and colours, and the press  
 Of self-destroying, transitory things—  
 Composure and ennobling harmony. (7.735-41)

Just as Lamb finds "grand principles of honour . . . and principles of no less eternal justice" (*Works* 4.302) in London's everyday goings-on, Wordsworth is ready to affirm the "enduring life" and an underlying, "ennobling harmony" present in the city.

## Chapter 4: Feeling and the Body in Book 7

The final passage of Book 7 shows Wordsworth not content merely to restate the moral and aesthetic dichotomy between the “undistinguishable world” (700) of the city and the “forms / Perennial of the ancient hills” (726-27). The experience of London has been evoked too vividly by this point to be dismissed in such a way. At the same time, issues of continuity are at stake. The opening lines of the poem, after all, make a period of residence in the city sound like a prison sentence:

O welcome friend!

A captive greets thee, coming from a house

Of bondage, from yon city's walls set free,

A prison where he hath been long immured. (1.5-8)

This newfound freedom, and the joy it occasions, are made the starting impetus for *The Prelude's* composition, and the city is repeatedly figured as a place of captivity. This is most apparent in the parallel narrative of childhood misfortune that Wordsworth creates for Coleridge:

Of rivers, fields,

And groves, I speak to thee, my friend—to thee

Who, yet a liveried schoolboy in the depths

Of the huge city, on the leaded roof

Of that wide edifice, thy home and school,

Wast used to lie and gaze upon the clouds

Moving in heaven, or haply, tired of this,

To shut thine eyes and by internal light

See trees, and meadows, and thy native stream

Far distant—thus beheld from year to year

Of thy long exile. (6.274-84)

Removed from his “native stream,” the River Otter—here, a clear parallel to the Derwent, Wordsworth’s own “beauteous stream” (1.278)—Coleridge is imagined pining for home. A “schoolboy in the depths / Of the huge city,” he seems lost against the inhuman scale of London. And although Wordsworth celebrates the “[t]he self-created sustenance of a mind / Debarred from Nature’s living images,” (6.312-13) he also implicitly links his friend’s “long exile” in the city with a troubled development. Should they have met earlier, the poet speculates,

My calmer habits, and more steady voice,

Would with an influence benign have soothed

Or chased away the airy wretchedness

That battered on thy youth. (6.323-26)

Wordsworth, never plucked from his native region at such a formative age, practically embodies the virtues of “Nature’s living images” here. He has absorbed “the calm / That Nature breathes” (1.284-85) and the “steady cadence” (1.280) of the River Derwent—to the extent that his presence might have a similarly steadying influence on others. Such an intervention in Coleridge’s wayward development may even have had a physically salubrious effect, Wordsworth suggests, when he refers to his friend’s present condition:

health suffers in thee, else

Such grief for thee would be the weakest thought

That ever harboured in the breast of man. (6.329-31)

The association of Wordsworth's poetry with the idea of health as steadiness has been noted. In *Monstrosities: Bodies and British Romanticism* (2003), Paul Youngquist associates Wordsworth's "preoccupation with the growth of the poet's mind as a dynamic effect of the body's life" with a "tendency to advance the norm of the proper body as the measure of human health" (30). Youngquist traces the influence on Wordsworth's poetry of Scottish physician John Brown (1735-1788), who held that the body's health was a matter of equilibrium in the "Exciting Powers" that make life possible (Brown 1.9). Youngquist summarises the theory succinctly: "Stimuli produce excitement and excitement is life; too much or too little and a body deviates from the norm of health and falls ill" (31). The job of the physician, Youngquist continues, is by this account "to observe and modify the play of forces responsible for pathological levels of excitement" (32)—and he suggests that Wordsworth's poetry has a similar aim. When the poet discusses his intentions for 'Goody Blake, and Harry Gill' in the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, for example, he demonstrates his belief that stimulation of the mind can have profound effects upon the body:

I wished to draw attention to the truth that the power of the human imagination is sufficient to produce such changes even in our physical nature as might almost appear miraculous. (*Poetry and Prose* 93)

In the 'Preface,' too, Wordsworth identifies the cultural malaise which he proposes to "counteract" with his poetry as an imbalance of stimuli:

For a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events



which are daily taking place, and the increasing number of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies . . . —When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the feeble effort with which I have endeavoured to counteract it (81-82)

“By implication,” Youngquist observes, “Wordsworth’s own poetry is a stimulant too, but one that works more moderately . . . to restore a debilitated body to the healthy norm” (33).

Wordsworth’s ‘diagnosis’ attributes the problem to the nature of life in the nation’s cities—“the uniformity” of work there, and ease of access to “outrageous stimulation.” By contrast, the influence of “Nature” as it is described in *The Prelude* is usually regulatory: “tempering / Our human waywardness” (1.280-81), as the poet says of the River Derwent. In that passage, the river’s “steady cadence” (1.280) is imagined to have been internalised by the infant Wordsworth: it “composed my thoughts / To more than infant softness” (1.281-82), he writes. This transformation of a physical property of the landscape—in this case, the regular rhythm of flowing water—into a personal attribute is one of the ways in which Nature moulds the young Wordsworth’s character. The same dynamic seems to be at work in a slightly later recollection:

I held unconscious intercourse  
 With the eternal beauty, drinking in  
 A pure organic pleasure from the lines  
 Of curling mist, or from the level plain  
 Of waters coloured by the steady clouds. (1.589-93)

There is a fluid transition from the forms of the landscape, here—composed, “level” and “steady” as before—to the bodily “pleasure” of the observer. In the next verse paragraph, the formative impact of this “unconscious intercourse” is elaborated: “The earth / And common face of Nature spake to me / Rememberable things” (1.614-16), Wordsworth says, though they were things sometimes “doomed to sleep / Until mature seasons called them forth / To impregnate and elevate the mind” (1.622-24). The idea that there is something about natural scenery especially conducive to the development of a healthy mind is articulated again at the end of Book 7:

The mountain’s outline and its steady form  
 Gives a pure grandeur, and its presence shapes  
 The measure and the prospect of the soul  
 To majesty: such virtue have the forms  
 Perennial of the ancient hills—nor less  
 The changeful language of their countenances  
 Gives movement to the thoughts, and multitude,  
 With order and relation. (722-30)

The lines are interpolated into the book’s conclusion from a fragment written in 1798 (*Prelude* 266n4), and serve to reinforce Wordsworth’s claim to have been infused with “[t]he spirit of Nature” (736) during his sojourn in London. Again, it is the steady lines of the natural world that actively “shape[...]” the inner life of the individual, and what is “changeful” in the visible landscape isn’t chaotically so, but productive of inner “order and relation.”

The city is an altogether different prospect for Wordsworth, characterised in the closing passage of the book by “meagre lines and colours, and the press /

Of self-destroying, transitory things” (739-40). It has been linked, in both earlier sections of *The Prelude* and Wordsworth’s previous writing, with illness, captivity and bad habits. Nevertheless, Book 7 yields a far more ambiguous, probing account of the poet’s time there than might have been expected. It calls forth a different calibration of the senses in Wordsworth’s poetry, and a distinctly embodied, non-transcendental aesthetic. For, where the influence of Nature on the growth of the poet’s mind is largely expressed in visual metaphors—the steadying effect of the steady line—the city is evoked as a tactile, kinetic phenomenon.

At the level of vision, Wordsworth’s London resists interpretation. “By nature an unmanageable sight” (7.709), it presents a “picture [to] weary out the eye” (708). Paradoxically, perhaps, the difficulty of ‘reading’ the urban landscape in Book 7 is partly due to the fact that it is already legible, already composed of myriad, shifting representations. As Ross King remarks of the advertising that confronts the poet in his evocation of “the crowded Strand” (7.169), “the billboards and tradesmen’s signs are intended to be legible, not merely visible, and consequently must be read or deciphered rather than experienced phenomenologically” (58n2). One shouldn’t underestimate the impact that signage must have had on the urban scene in the early nineteenth century, as Rachel Bowlby points out:

New printing technologies, especially lithography, greatly expanded the production of posters, as well as offering more sophisticated design possibilities, with the result that posters were everywhere you looked—or would have seemed so to twenty-first-century eyes. The nineteenth century was the multicolored age of the poster city—until, in its final decades,

restrictions and regulations were introduced in European countries and in the United States. (308)

Much of London's surface is literally readable to Wordsworth—like an open book:

Shop after shop, with symbols, blazoned names,  
 And all the tradesman's honours overhead:  
 Here, fronts of houses, like a title-page  
 With letters huge inscribed from top to toe (7.174-77)

The irony of this legible city—what Stokes calls “a kind of urban textual space” (204)—is that it occludes rather than facilitates understanding. This is very unlike the “monumental writing” (11.294) which marks the site of the murderer's execution in Book 11, “engraven / In long times past” (294-95) into the very “turf” (291), and maintained “from year to year / By superstition of the neighbourhood” (295-96). The inscription of the hanged man's name upon the ground outlasts all other remnants of the execution, and has become a kind of epicentre of meaning—where text fuses with landscape, and history flows into local tradition. In London, Wordsworth encounters a different kind of “monumental writing”: text reduced to pure surface, shifting and untrustworthy:

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. (7.210-14)

Stokes, for whom “it is clear that a crisis of readability is fundamental to Wordsworth's London,” sees the “rhetoric of dissimulated spectacles . . . [as] a

recurrent note in Wordsworth's poetics of the metropolis" (204). King, likewise, identifies a crisis of visual representation as thematic in this section of *The*

*Prelude*:

Book Seventh consists in part of an exploration of the relationship between nature or reality and its figurative presentation, examining the collapse of the specular structure of representation in which the graphic image corresponds to, but distinguishes itself from, its referent in the world of nature. (57)

The visible city unfolds itself to Wordsworth as a series of representations, and the poet's progress in Book 7 might almost be thought of as a passage through concentric circles of dissimulation. Words "in masquerade" (7.214), panoramas "that ape / The absolute presence of reality" (7.248-49), the "[d]elusion bold" (7.308) of stagecraft—Wordsworth continually draws our attention to the illusory nature of the scenes that comprise the urban landscape.

Stokes suggests that London presents Wordsworth with such a chaos of sensory information that it subverts the poet's "symbolic investments" (221) in an ordered natural world:

With the structures of habitualized perception (the symbolic layer) stripped away, *The Prelude* rediscovers the streamy mass of tones, colors and motions delivered through the external organs. (Stokes 220-21)

Stokes is concerned to trace a layer of embodied, sensory experience, which he terms "the *semiotic*" (206), through Wordsworth's more overt engagement with the readable, "semantic" (205) meanings of the city in Book 7. The body of the poet is inextricably involved in the rhythms of the city, Stokes argues, and his attempts to invest what he beholds with meaning are destabilised by this

entanglement. Indeed, the coherence of the body is called into question by “the urban environment’s determination of embodiment – of the body’s motions, temporalities, affective intensities, and physiological reactions” (Stokes 214). What is implicitly at stake for Wordsworth as he is swept along by the crowd and bombarded with audiovisual stimuli, Stokes claims, is the tenability of a “Romantic organicism” (204) which would guarantee the unity and autonomy of the embodied self.

Stokes’s image of Wordsworth in the city is of the poet attempting “symbolic recuperation[s]” (214) of meaning and order amidst the noise of raw sensation. Proposing to “read the semiotic and the body *back* into those crucial moments [of recuperation]”, the critic considers embodiment—the poet’s, as well as that of the figures he depicts—largely in terms of its tendency to disrupt moments of transcendence (214-15). The blind Beggar serves to illustrate this point for Stokes, as the poet’s transcendentalising of this figure’s physical “strangeness” (Stokes 215) into “the utmost that we know” (7.619) is anchored firmly in the world of physical abjection:

Real medical blindness is metamorphosed into the poeticized blindness of the seer. However, this only works insofar as it begins from flesh: the beggar existing on an interstice within a great system of bodies of which Wordsworth himself is also a part. Restoring the flesh to our reading undermines everything the poem attempts to achieve at this point. (216)

I concur with Stokes that “[r]estoring the flesh to our reading” is crucial if we are to read Book 7 in all its complexity. I am not entirely convinced, however, that doing so is as contrary to the poem’s intentions as Stokes suggests. It depends on how one interprets Wordsworth’s own interpretation of the encounter:

And on the shape of this unmoving man,  
 His fixed face and sightless eyes, I looked,  
 As if admonished from another world. (621-23)

Stokes considers this a matter of attempted transcendence, which appears to correlate with the avoidance of discomfoting material realities:

Instead of inscribing the poverty and suffering which the socio-economic mechanism of the city produces as a material waste product, then, the beggar's body comes to stand for a message sent from an indeterminate spiritual outside. (215-16)

The sense of admonishment is, of course, characteristic of Wordsworth's encounters with liminal, solitary figures. At the same time, its implications in this passage are ambiguous in the extreme. Stokes is not alone in placing his emphasis on the suggestion of sublimity in that reference to "another world." Gabriele similarly argues that Wordsworth's discomfort motivates the turn toward personal revelation when he suggests that, in this passage, "fancy allows a form of sublimation corroborated by a religious sense of awe" (377). Eugene Stelzig also reads the passage for its transcendental significance, seeing the Beggar as something close to an allegorical figure: "a visionary signifier of the epistemological limits of the human condition, [and] . . . also a reminder of death" ('Bleeding Spots' 541).

William Galperin, on the other hand, suggests that we read the "[a]s if" of the passage's last line "as bearing not just on the speaker's sense of being warned or cautioned . . . but on the 'world' as well from which the reminder emanates" (127). Galperin continues:

the beggar introduces something both here and there, both beyond and close at hand, both past and present, that Wordsworth . . . calls the 'world' (91-148): not 'another world' or the one to which Wordsworth frequently recurs both in this poem and elsewhere, but 'as if . . . another world.'

(Galperin 127)

Galperin's emphasis on the analogy at the heart of Wordsworth's response draws out the uncanniness of the encounter by fixing it in the real, phenomenal world of the senses. It is the Beggar's corporeality that stops the poet short, and his response suggests a subtler play of the senses than Stokes allows for. The encounter is precipitated, after all, by Wordsworth's description of a kind of urban drift, in which vision becomes increasingly spectral:

How often in the overflowing streets  
 Have I gone forwards with the crowd, and said  
 Unto myself, 'The face of every one  
 That passes by me is a mystery.'  
 Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look, oppressed  
 By thoughts of what, and whither, when and how,  
 Until the shapes before my eyes became  
 A second-sight procession, such as glides  
 Over still mountains, or appears in dreams,  
 And all the ballast of familiar life—  
 The present, and the past, hope, fear, all stays,  
 All laws of acting, thinking, speaking man—  
 Went from me, neither knowing me, nor known. (595-607)



Wordsworth describes a failure to read the faces of the crowd for any sense of the lives they represent. In Book 4, home from Cambridge for the summer, he has no such difficulty: “The face of every neighbour whom I met / Was as a volume to me” (58-59). But the legibility of the face depends upon the understanding that a shared ground provides, and it breaks down in London’s crush of unfamiliar, unneighbourly strangers. It is the precariousness of community that Wordsworth seems to feel amidst the sea of anonymous faces, for the city presents a model of intense physical proximity without any guarantee of sympathy. The young Wordsworth finds the very idea incomprehensible:

Above all, one thought  
 Baffled my understanding, how men lived  
 Even next-door neighbours, as we say, yet still  
 Strangers, and knowing not each other’s names. (7.117-20)

In London, his perplexity persists, and is only deepened by the encounter with the Beggar.

Paul Fry has suggested that an intensification of feeling in the face of sensory impediment is characteristic of Wordsworth’s spots of time:

The spots of time typically carry us from dark senses to dark abyss, from bright mist to bright moon, from indifference as a sign of torpor to the perception of in-difference as a sign of truth. Mist, opacity, and distraction are supplanted by mist, opacity and concentration. (9)

Such is certainly true of the ‘blind Beggar’ episode, in which the Beggar’s face becomes a focal point for the poet’s feelings of unease, but does not provide the basis for moving beyond “thoughts of what, and whither, when and how” (600). The “non-epiphany” (9), to use Fry’s term for such moments, sees a movement

from the “mystery” (598) of many faces to a single, inscrutable face, and from blurred “second-sight” (602) to absolute blindness. At the same time, as Fry argues, “Wordsworth's ‘opening,’ his moment of deepened feeling, is the moment in which he is allowed to see nothing at all” (7). In this encounter, “feeling” is figured in the ebb and flow of physical sensation.

The tactility of the scene—or what Stokes calls “the semiotic” (206)—is present as an undercurrent in the passage, in the suggestion of a river in flood, “overflowing,” and the “forwards”-tug of the crowd’s momentum. Yet Wordsworth continues to invoke the unmanageable visibility of the crowd in tandem with his efforts to understand, “what, and whither, when and how,” as the spectacle grows ever more abstracted from reality—from the physical, embodied dimension of the crowd that carries him on. The uncomprehending reverie into which he falls is actually figured as a drift away from embodied identity, an emptying out of “all the ballast of familiar life.”

When the Beggar impinges upon his awareness, tactility floods back into the passage as metaphor for psychological impact: the poet is “smitten with the view” (611) and his “mind did at this spectacle turn round / As with the might of waters” (616-17). Both Geoffrey Hartman and Frank McConnell gloss this moment as an overwhelming reassertion of imagination over ordinary sight: “a quasi-apocalyptic feeling of reversal turning the mind around or into itself,” as Hartman puts it (242), or, as McConnell says in *The Confessional Imagination* (1974), the vouchsafing of “a power beyond sight, eternal like the apocalyptic might of waters” (107). Both critics respond to the sudden disruption of ‘looking’ as a mode of enquiry, but in attempting to explicate the moment, they extrapolate a transcendental significance from the lines. I suggest, instead, that

the crux of the encounter lies in what it *feels* like, and that Wordsworth, reaching for a way to express the psychological impact of the sight, returns to a language of tactility. The “chance” (610) sighting is a collision in all but the literal sense, recalling us to the flow of bodies along the street, the extreme proximity and corresponding emotional distance which is for Wordsworth the “one feeling . . . which belonged / To this great city by exclusive right” (593-94). The moment passes quickly, as the poem shifts back into a readerly, interpretive mode with “an act of symbolic decipherment” (Stokes 205) that elevates the Beggar’s sign to “a type / Or emblem of the utmost that we know / Both of ourselves and of the universe” (618-20). And yet, this is a curiously blank assertion, one which restates rather than penetrates the “mystery” (7.598) with which Wordsworth has been preoccupied. The Beggar’s sign-like “upright face” (612), the face-like advertisements “in masquerade” (214)—words and images in Book 7 frustrate the poet’s hermeneutic efforts. The significance of the episode has already been registered as an abrupt change in the poet’s “mood” (608), expressed as a dramatic shift from perplexed spectatorship to embodied feeling. The kinetic “might of waters” (617) evoked in this moment brings mental and physical space together, as Wordsworth is stopped short in the midst of the “overflowing streets” (595) while his mind undergoes a corresponding “turn” (616).

For all the attention given to specular phenomena in Book 7, it is “[a]n under-sense” (712) and “a feeling of the whole” (713) that Wordsworth claims in the book’s closing passage. If we attend only to the poet’s engagement with spectacle (and indeed, “spectacle” [616, 634, 654] and “spectacles” [245, 430] are referred to more here than in any other single book of *The Prelude*), it is difficult to reconcile this conclusion with what has preceded it. In what does

such “a feeling” inhere? I suggest that the sense of touch informs Wordsworth’s feeling for the city, and supplies him with a means of representing a kind of impressionability that does not depend on an experience of sublime natural beauty. As William A. Cohen writes of “the proximate senses” in Victorian literature, “because ‘feelings’ lie in a gray zone between physical sensations and emotional responses, somatic and affective experiences can switch, blend, or substitute one for another” (6). The ambiguity of feeling means that touch is a particularly effective medium for writing about the growth of the mind, because, as Cohen observes, it both “model[s and] . . . perform[s] the flow of matter and information between subject and world” (xii). We might think of the way Wordsworth acknowledges the formative role that Cambridge plays in his development, offering the image of a museum,

where little can be seen,

Well understood, or naturally endeared,

Yet still does every step bring something forth

That quickens, pleases, stings (3.654-57)

These little shocks suggest experience as a series of fleeting sensations, moments of figurative contact, and Wordsworth’s image for the more enduring influence of university is one of sustained contact: “Yet something to the memory sticks at last / Whence profit may be drawn in times to come” (3.667-68). In Book 7’s London, where symbolic representation proves unreliable, we can trace a tactile “under-sense” (712) through which Wordsworth figures his exposure to formative experience. As Ava Arndt writes, of the rise of an urban literature of touch in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century:

What the city seemed to offer in terms of corruption was also linked to a process of education, which was itself linked to contact. The advantage as well as the danger of urban life was precisely its increased, multifarious and fearfully indiscriminate possibilities for circulation. (98)

The formative—or transformative—potentiality of London is something felt on the body from the very start, prefigured in Wordsworth's recollection of a classmate who visits the metropolis:

I well

Remember that among our flock of boys  
 Was one, a cripple from the birth, whom chance  
 Summoned from school to London—fortunate  
 And envied traveller—and when he returned,  
 After short absence, and I first set eyes  
 Upon his person, verily, though strange  
 The thing may seem, I was not wholly free  
 From disappointment to behold the same  
 Appearance, the same body, not to find  
 Some change, some beams of glory brought away  
 From that new region, Much I questioned him,  
 And every word he uttered, on my ears  
 Fell flatter than a caged parrot's note,  
 That answers unexpectedly awry,  
 And mocks the prompter's listening. (7.93-108)

The account preserves something of the naïvety of childhood, by which the apparent fortune of his classmate's call to the capital obscures the reasons for the trip. Implicitly, though, the otherwise irrelevant detail of the boy's physical disability serves as the most likely pretense for such a journey, and it is a healing transfiguration that the poet expects to behold. Cumberland may figure in *The Prelude* as an ideal setting for Wordsworth's healthy and energetic childhood, but London extends an obscure panacean promise to those excluded from such a model.

"Wordsworth demonstrates how the disabled body can become a limit case for humanity," writes Emily Stanback; he "figures disability at the boundary of man and animal or human and thing—or at the edge of articulation or the margins of society" (159). Here, the boy's ambiguously "cripple[d]" (95) body stands in for London itself, the disappointment it elicits a foretaste of what the poet feels when he comes to "look[...] upon the real scene" (7.139). But it is also what makes the "envied traveller" (97) an appropriately liminal figure to penetrate London's negative space, the object of "wonder and obscure delight" (91). Youngquist contends that, for Wordsworth,

the true standard of material and moral value thrives beyond the London metropolis with its fairs and freaks and fire-eating women. . . The norm of the proper body refers directly back to nature's forms, the ground of all that is morally and materially valuable. (37)

This rather overstates the moral priority of "the proper body" in Book 7, I think, but it does hit upon the association of the city with the non-normative body (or "deviant flesh," in Youngquist's term [9]). Wordsworth's first act of mapping the capital is carried out through the proxy of his classmate, whose

unchanged disability serves as the measure of his failure to relay some 'impression' of the city.

The following passage further elaborates on London as an imagined space defined by monumental and famous sites, sustained by the "wondrous power of words" (121):

The river proudly bridged, the giddy top  
 And Whispering Gallery of St. Paul's, the tombs  
 Of Westminster, the Giants of Guildhall,  
 Bedlam and the two figures at its gates,  
 Streets without end and churches numberless,  
 Statues with flowery gardens in vast squares,  
 The Monument, and Armoury of the Tower. (7.129-35)

This is still the semantic city, space as history and architecture, the pedestrian body abstracted out of a seemingly infinite thicket of hypostasised placenames. Stokes considers the passage "an ironic prolepsis . . . [by which] the fantasies woven around London's lustrous and illustrious sights become the city where every surface, tone, accent or gesture is excessive" (211). I would suggest, instead, that it represents a way of evoking London—a fragmented series of overdetermined placenames and geometric abstractions ("[s]treets without end")—that Wordsworth rejects. Instead, when he comes to "look[...] upon the real scene" (7.139), it is as a member of the crowd, at street-level.

Gabriele gives a great deal of attention to Wordsworth's highly novel approach to this immersion in the urban spectacle, arguing that it "inaugurates a new aesthetic of urban modernism that informed a distinctive genre in early cinema, i.e. 'a day in the life of a big city'" (366). Like the cinematic eye, Gabriele

suggests, the point of view Wordsworth adopts in Book 7 is local, subjective, restricted from seeing everything at once, and London is caught in “a rhythmic parataxis of flashes of vision” (377) comparable to the syntax of montage in cinema:

And first, the look and aspect of the place—  
 The broad highway appearance, as it strikes  
 On strangers of all ages, the quick dance  
 Of colours, lights and forms, the Babel din,  
 The endless stream of men and moving things,  
 From hour to hour the illimitable walk  
 Still among streets, with clouds and sky above,  
 The wealth, the bustle and the eagerness,  
 The glittering chariots with their pampered steeds,  
 Stalls, barrows, porters, midway in the street  
 The scavenger that begs with hat in hand,  
 The labouring hackney-coaches, the rash speed  
 Of coaches travelling far, whirled on with horn  
 Loud blowing, and the sturdy drayman’s team  
 Ascending from some alley of the Thames  
 And striking right across the crowded Strand  
 Till the fore-horse veer round with punctual skill (7.154-70)

Gabriele provides a valuable commentary on Wordsworth’s innovative response to the unique sensory world of London—his recourse to a bounded, non-transcendental perspective within an unstable, fragmentary space. But it is the irresolvably fragmented quality of vision throughout Book 7 that Gabriele



emphasises, the chaotic mosaic of impressions that “strikes / On strangers” (155-56):

Wordsworth’s first vision of the bustling city of trade places the observer in a discontinuous space, which is given some consistency only by the observer’s reception of atomistic, unrelated fragments of vision. (Gabriele 372)

It certainly seems Wordsworth’s intention, in this initial passage, to evoke something of the outsider’s shock and disorientation upon first encountering such a cacophonous spectacle. But in drawing the comparison between Wordsworth’s vision and the disembodied eye of a camera, Gabriele is led to deny the influence of Wordsworth’s physical self on the text entirely:

The poet disappears from the scene, impersonally recording a flow of images just as a technological eye would. The poet has no physical body that creates an urban subjectivity by moving through space . . . (Gabriele 372)

With Stokes, I regard the tactile, embodied dimension of experience in Book 7 as not just available, but also crucial to our understanding of what Wordsworth is attempting in the book. If our introduction to London as a physical space is a somewhat fragmentary “dance / Of colours, lights and forms,” it is at the level of the body—of pulse, rhythm, current and drift—that the city begins to cohere.

The frenetic energy of the Strand impels the poet toward calmer regions:

Meanwhile the roar continues, till at length,  
Escaped as from an enemy, we turn  
Abruptly into some sequestered nook,  
Still as a sheltered place when winds blow loud.

At leisure thence, through tracts of thin resort,  
 And sights and sounds that come at intervals,  
 We take our way—a raree-show is here  
 With children gathered round, another street  
 Presents a company of dancing dogs,  
 Or dromedary with an antic pair  
 Of monkies on his back, a minstrel-band  
 Of Savoyards, single and alone,  
 An English ballad-singer. Private courts,  
 Gloomy as coffins, and unsightly lanes  
 Thrilled by some female vendor's scream—belike  
 The very shrillest of all London cries—  
 May then entangle us awhile,  
 Conducted through those labyrinths unawares  
 To privileged regions and inviolate,  
 Where from their aery lodges studious lawyers  
 Look out on waters, walks, and gardens green. (7.184-204)

Cambridge's "crowd, buildings and groves" (3.98) push Wordsworth out into the open countryside beyond. Now in London, "among / The unfenced regions of society" (61-62), escape from the crowd requires ingress into "privileged regions" (202) within—a return to "private bowers" (58). With fewer people about and "intervals" between distractions, the poet is able to adopt a leisurely pace, and the sparser "sights and sounds" present themselves from street to street as he approaches, rather than whirling around him. The inns of court are very much a part of Lamb's London, and here Wordsworth is again in a Lambian

mode, attending to the backstreet oddities he encounters with the “amusement and indulgence” that Jonathan Wordsworth considers characteristic of Book 7.

In fact, Lamb’s description of the Inner Temple in one of his *Elia* pieces bears interesting similarities to Wordsworth’s passage:

What a transition for a countryman visiting London for the first time – the passing from the crowded Strand or Fleet-street, by unexpected avenues, into its magnificent ample squares, its classic green recesses! What a cheerful, liberal look hath that portion of it, which, from three sides, overlooks the greater garden . . . right opposite the stately stream, which washes the garden-foot with her yet scarcely trade-polluted waters

*(Collected Works of Charles Lamb 3.118)*

Both writers consider the effect of the inns’ seclusion on a first-time visitor from outside London, the sudden passage, through “labyrinths unawares” (7.201) and “by unexpected avenues” (*CWCL* 3.118), from the shared space of the crowded thoroughfare into a private, sheltered recess. This is a protective space—“inviolat,” (7.202) in Wordsworth’s phrase, where even the portion of the Thames that passes it seems spared the polluting effects of river-based commerce. It is a world Wordsworth was familiar with too; as the Norton *Prelude* editors observe, the poet “lived with his brother Richard at Staple Inn after his return from France at the end of 1792, and with Basil Montagu at Lincoln’s Inn early in 1795” (236n1). However, like Cambridge, it is “a privileged world / Within a world” (3.553-54). If Wordsworth is struggling to understand how London left its mark on him, he must return to the city of crowds, trade and spectacle in order to do so:

Thence back into the throng, until we reach—

Following the tide that slackens by degrees—  
 Some half-frequented scene where wider streets  
 Bring straggling breezes of suburban air. (7.205-8)

Following the tidal rhythm of the crowd, Wordsworth moves outward from the city centre into more liminal areas, where the boundary between town and country is porous. Here, the energy of city relaxes its hold on the human body:

The nurse is here,  
 The bachelor that loves to sun himself.  
 The military idler, and the dame  
 That field-ward takes her walk in decency. (223-6)

As the crowd “slackens” and the streets widen, the poet is again able to pick out individual figures, but there is an odd listlessness to the poetry. None of the characters inspire Wordsworth to comment or reflect, and he moves briskly on, “homeward through the thickening hubbub” (227). For all that the poet needs sometimes to escape from the tumult of crowd “as from an enemy” (185), this is also the animating force of the city. Describing the limited impact of the city’s theatrical entertainments on his imagination, Wordsworth remarks: “all this / Passed not beyond the suburbs of the mind” (506-7). To be impressed by the experience of the city, one must submit to the pressure at its centre. This is why, when he proposes to “give way, / Copying the impression of the memory” (145-46), the poet moves straight into a depiction of “[t]he bustle and the eagerness” (161) of the crowded central city.

The memory of London retains its vitality as a pressing feeling, both oppressive and impressive. Wordsworth might contrive to extract himself, at

Bartholomew Fair, from the “press and danger of the crowd” (658), but the ensuing description still conveys the dangerous force of that contact:

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;  
 And 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 (663-75)

The passage converts the fairground into a medieval torture scene, recalling another sense of the word ‘press’: “to torture or execute (a person) by means of *peine forte et dure*” (OED). Figures vying for attention appear as though stretched on a rack, necks, eyes and voices straining, while even the music seems a product of violence: grinding, rattling and thumping. And yet, how far this is from the city as “dead Wilderness” (“Home at Grasmere” 613). If anything, the Fair is an image of monstrous, excessive vitality and creativity: “all Promethean thoughts” (689) are manifest here. It is a scene which, “with small internal help,” seizes “[p]ossession of the faculties” (627-28), penetrating beyond the “suburbs of the

mind,” yet refusing the transcendental gaze that would “see into the life of things” (“Tintern Abbey” 50).

Wordsworth’s urban exegesis is ultimately left unresolved. Something of the alarm aroused by the Fair is still present at the conclusion of Book 7—and yet, I do not entirely agree with Newlyn that in the book’s final passage “Wordsworth retreats from the implications of his most imaginative writing” (181). In the end, the poet of *The Prelude* is concerned with how his mind is nourished and influenced by his experiences, and he does not insist on a single pattern of causes and effects. The transcendental “spots of time” (11.257), with their “renovating virtue” (11.259) and intimations that “the mind / Is lord and master” (11.270-71), are certainly a significant feature of the poem’s narrative of psychological development. On the other hand, Wordsworth seems just as intent on exploring the ways that “outward sense” (11.271) acts upon the mind. In the layering together of numerous visits to the capital, and in the weaving together of satirical and more celebratory, Lambian perspectives, Book 7 reaches for a poetic language that would express the city’s formative power. In his claim to “see the parts / As parts, but with a feeling of the whole” (7.712-13), I suggest that Wordsworth returns to *feeling* as the most reliable index of this power. The ‘press’ of the crowd is both dangerous and vital—overwhelming, but also life-affirming—and by his immersion in it, the poet is able to make contact with the imaginative potentiality of the metropolis.

## Conclusion

Beginning in the “unconscious intercourse / With the eternal Beauty” (1.589-90) of Wordsworth’s Lake District childhood, and proceeding by “flashes” (6.535) of insight, *The Prelude* culminates in the epiphanic meditation on Snowdon in Book 13. As the poet takes in the moonlit scene from the mountain’s summit, he sees “[t]he perfect image of a mighty mind” (13.69), a mind which

Exerts upon the outward face of things,  
 So moulds them, and endues, abstracts, combines,  
 Or by abrupt and unhabitual influence  
 Doth make one object so impress itself  
 Upon all others, and pervades them so,  
 That even the grossest minds must see and hear,  
 And cannot chuse but feel. (13.78-84)

The poem is about gaining consciousness of this creative energy, and about the biographical circumstances that stimulate or vex its emergence. The “spots of time” (11.257) appear as a clear structuring principle for Wordsworth as he looks back at the development of his imagination, and these moments, “the hiding-places of my power” (11.335), as he calls them, have naturally become focal points for critical readings.

Why, then, should Wordsworth have included in this project whole sections in which the “imagination” is apparently untouched? With the exception of the ‘blind Beggar’ passage, Books 3 and 7 represent ostensibly dormant phases in the maturation of the poet’s creative powers. “Imagination slept” (3.260) at Cambridge, he tells us, and in London “[i]t slept, even in the season of my youth”

(7.503). Critics have often read this sleepy state in terms of the environment, so at odds with the Lake District, depicted in both books: the social milieu of Cambridge, its artificial “buildings and groves” (3.98), and London’s accelerated whirl of people and things. Such environments impede the imagination’s progress, it has been argued, distracting Wordsworth from inner growth with, to use Lindenberger’s phrase, too much “wordly externality” (168). By drawing closer attention to the way Books 3 and 7 actually depict these places, I hope that my thesis has pointed to a different direction for possible readings of *The Prelude*.

“Yet was this deep vacation not given up / To utter waste” (3.542-43), the poet writes of his first year at university, for at Cambridge he begins “an approach / Towards mortal business” (3.552-53). Book 3 is the evidence that the imagination does not flourish in isolation, and *The Prelude* does not figure the growth of the mind as a steady trajectory towards poetic greatness. In the opening passage of Book 7, the poet reviews the cycles of composition that have brought him to this point in the poem. It is an “interrupted strain” (10), flowing and ceasing according to its own logic, “stopped for years— / Not heard again until a little space / Before last primrose-time” (11-13). Now, Wordsworth says, he has been given the impetus to resume work by two events which have heightened his awareness of a change of season. His encounter with a flock of robins, “sent in by Winter to bespeak / For the old man a welcome” (26-27) is followed by the discovery of a “glow-worm” (39), “the child / Of summer, lingering” (43-44). Despite a period of inactivity, these little reminders of nature’s ebbs and flows suggest a model of integrated rest and activity, such that “the whole year seemed tenderness and love” (48). In recognising the organic



cycle of his creative habits, Wordsworth is motivated to proceed “with cheerful hope, / Nor checked by aught of tamer argument / That lies before us, needful to be told” (54-56).

Books 3 and 7 consist of “tamer argument” that is vital to the poem’s organic structure. In the unique settings of Cambridge and London, Wordsworth finds a space for the stages of maturation that he depicts. Most importantly, a close reading of “Residence at Cambridge” and “Residence in London” demonstrates that the poem itself eludes the grasp of totalising interpretations, which favour a picture of solitary development in rural isolation.

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