

Chapter 12

Stanzas I–IV: The Statement of Loss

*'I believe in pure explication de texte.
This may in fact be my principal form of piety.'*¹

THE FIRST TWO VERSES are emotionally lucid, in that they state the loss unequivocally, though the conclusion of each verse suggests a different cause – either loss of vision in the poet, or loss of glory from the earth, and this is the first indication of his divided vision. In the third verse, the poet looks up from his sense of loss to observe the loveliness of a spring morning,

Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,
And while the young lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound,

That 'Now' marks a wish to participate in the Maytime celebrations, to look outward on the immediate world, not backward or inward to a sense of loss.² It represents an attempt to unite time past and time present. Nevertheless, the spirit of this looking, the kind of looking that he brought or wanted to bring to the rainbow, is compromised by 'a thought of grief' – probably, but not certainly, the loss lamented in the first two verses – a grief singularly at odds with the 'joyous song' that all nature is otherwise singing. The very next line suggests an immediate recovery, confirmed in the following line, 'And I again am strong.'

¹ Wallace Stevens to Bernard Heringman, 21 July 1953; *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (London, 1967), p. 793, quoted by Jim Mays, 'Reading Alice du Clós, and for the Birds', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, ns Vol. 45 (Summer 2015), pp. 1-21.

² *Experiments* 121-22: 'the first four stanzas ... establish the basic conflict between "then" and "now" over which the poet broods. ... The force of "now" is literal: not "nowadays" but "exactly at this moment."'

To me alone there came a thought of grief:
 A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
 And I again am strong:

The sources of that strength are identified in the lines that follow:

The Cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep,
 No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;
 I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,
 The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep

Like many of Wordsworth's lines, their potential significance is suppressed by the simplicity of their syntax and the brevity of their reference. Cataracts, echoes and winds have more than walk-on parts in Wordsworth's poems, and it is possible that he is expecting readers to have picked up hints on what these lines signify from poems in this volume, as well as the earlier *Lyrical Ballads*.

'The Cataracts blow their trumpets'

The first of those lines might be considered a good example of the bombast of which Montgomery, Coleridge and others complained. Trumpets traditionally announce the arrival or return of power, but the metaphor is unusual, an unlikely association of two very different types of sound. Cataracts are noisy, a dense and continuous roar, nothing like the cracking or blaring of trumpets. Southey, who used every relevant verb to describe how the falls come down at Lodore, makes no association with trumpets or any kind of horn. So this military or regal metaphor seems inaccurate and hyperbolic, out of place in a poem intimating the immortality of the soul. Whatever the accuracy of his observation, Wordsworth was conscious not just of the sound itself, but some quality in himself thus disclosed – 'The sounding cataract / Haunted me like a passion', as he puts it in Tintern Abbey (77-78) – the passion itself undefined.³ But he suggests the quality of that passion, using the river as a metaphor, in *To a Skylark*: 'Happy, happy Liver, / With a soul as strong as a mountain river / Pouring out praise to the Almighty Giver' (March-July 1802).⁴ That passion is comparable to the

³ Wordsworth remarks in the 'Preface' to *Poems* (1815), that these lines 'represent implicitly some of the features of a youthful mind, at a time when images of nature supplied to it the place of thought, sentiment, and almost of action' (MW 629).

⁴ See also *On the Power of Sound* (1828-29): 'The headlong Streams and Fountains / Serve Thee, Invisible Spirit, with untired powers' (ll. 17-18). Wordsworth's headnote to the

experience described in Chapter 8, in *To H.C.*, when ‘a gentle shock of mild surprize / ... carried far into’ the boy of Winander’s heart ‘the voice / Of mountain torrents’ (1805 V 405-8), De Quincey seeing in that ‘far’ Wordsworth’s attribution of ‘space and its infinities’ to the human heart. That he was right in making a connection between the voice of mountain torrents, and a sudden impression of the infinite is confirmed by what follows Wordsworth’s disappointment after he realizes that he has crossed the Alps.

He pauses, and then pours forth his great tribute to the imagination. That uttered he continues on his way, but the power is still with him, and colours all he sees as he walks down ‘a narrow chasm’. The features of the immediate landscape ‘Were all like the workings of one mind.../ Characters of the great apocalypse, / The types and symbols of eternity’, prominent amongst which are ‘The stationary blasts of waterfalls, / ... torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,’ and ‘the sick sight / And giddy prospect of the raving stream’ (1805 VI 556-72). The power of the imagination alive in him, Wordsworth connects cataracts, waterfalls and raving streams with the ideas of infinity or eternity. And those ideas he links to the Apocalypse, the traditional herald of which is The Last Trumpet. Thus it is possible that cataracts blowing their trumpets from the steep announce the return of that imperial power, the lost vision – what perhaps we might call an intimation of immortality. It is perhaps worth repeating a quotation from the first chapter: if he manages to retain a faith ‘That fails not ... / ... the gift is yours / Ye winds and sounding cataracts! ... / ... O Nature! Thou hast fed / My loft speculations;’ (1850 II 447-51). A faith that looks through death to immortality may be the loftiest of speculations, but a belief that such a faith has been fed by the features of nature, including cataracts, justifies, whatever one may make of such a belief, what would otherwise be no more than an extravagant and bombastic metaphor.

‘I hear the Echoes’

Celebrating the coming of spring, ‘The Idle Shepherd-Boys’, composed in 1800 some two years before the first stanzas of the *Ode*, begins, ‘The valley rings with mirth and joy, / Among the hills the Echoes play / A never, never ending song / To welcome in the May’. The nature of that song is undefined, just as the passion associated with the ‘sounding cataract’ of Tintern Abbey is undefined, but it is emphatically endless.

poem begins, ‘The Ear addressed, as occupied by a spiritual functionary... This “Invisible Spirit” is “Harmony”, a form of immortality.’

Could it also be a song pouring forth some kind of recognition of or praise for 'the Almighty Giver'? The two poems on the cuckoo offer such a reading, and the first, *To the Cuckoo*, from which that quotation comes, considered in Chapter 8, was probably written just before the first four stanzas of the *Ode*, and like 'My heart leaps up', is much more optimistic than the *Ode*, as he is able to beget again the golden time of childhood. The second, 'Yes! full surely 'twas the echo', belongs to 1806, two years after completion of the *Ode*. The cuckoo is heard not seen, and upon this Wordsworth builds both poems. The progress of the 1804 poem, from a natural observation to the visionary world of childhood revived, is the progress Wordsworth sought in the *Ode*, although it left the question of where our home is – heaven or earth – unresolved.

In the 1806 poem the cuckoo's original call is distinguished from its echo, and the cuckoo is puzzled – 'Whence the Voice? from air or earth? / This the cuckoo cannot tell'. What the poet can tell, however, is that the cuckoo's echo is like 'her ordinary cry, / Like – but oh how different', and the rest of the poem depends upon this perceived difference. The two worlds, material and immaterial, are more closely related in this poem than that of 1804. The cuckoo's cry is mortal; its puzzling echo points to the immortal and, in our mortality, although 'Slaves of Folly, Love, or Strife', we can still hear 'Voices of two different Natures'. Although the idea is clear, the language and verse are strange, intense – each question and answer almost rough, the syntax hectic and disordered, pulling in different directions:

Hears not also mortal Life?
 Hear not we, unthinking Creatures!
 Slaves of Folly, Love, or Strife,
 Voices of two different Natures?

 Have not We too? Yes we have
 Answers, and we know not whence;
 Echoes from beyond the grave,
 Recognized intelligence?

 Such within ourselves we hear
 Oft-times, ours though sent from far;
 Listen, ponder, hold them dear;
 For of God, of God they are!

Like the cuckoo, we hear 'answers' or echoes to our material calls – but initially we do not know where these echoes come from. In the next line, however, that not knowing is replaced by an assertion that they are

‘from beyond the grave’ and that they come in the form of a ‘Recognized intelligence’ – that intelligence which makes the world intelligible – a surprisingly latinate phrase, almost out of place in this otherwise lexically simple poem, yet suggesting the seriousness of Wordsworth’s affirmative questions. The final verse is steadier, an assertion in which doubts are replaced by certainties. If we question De Quincey’s evaluation of ‘far’, then here the word is used again in much the same way – the echoes are sent to us ‘from far’ by God: unlike the child, we are no longer close to the source, but that source is still in touch with us. The distance is implicit in the penultimate line – though perhaps not seeming such to us, the echoes must be taken as divine utterances. The final line not only declares this conviction boldly, it does so in a way that conveys its emotional truth. The surprising repetition, ‘of God, of God’ is a rising note of discovery, (inversely matching the call of the cuckoo?) a rhythm in which the joy of knowing the source is as much felt as spoken.

To return to *The Idle Shepherd-Boys*: it is a pastoral and the springtime celebrations are forgotten in the poet’s saving of a lamb. Yet the voice of mountains and their echoes, used instinctively here, have a particular resonance for Wordsworth, often speaking of a power that lives beyond the immediate, beyond mortality, as does the cuckoo’s cry.⁵ In *Home at Grasmere* Wordsworth recalls an ‘awful voice’ that

... I in my walks have often heard,
Sent from the mountains or the sheltered fields,
Shout after shout – reiterated whoop
In manner of a bird that takes delight
In answering to itself (HG B 407-12)

That awful voice speaks of a mysterious power, a power ‘sent’ to remind the poet that behind appearance is a life issuing from and constituting the being of nature, a power in which fear and awe are close companions. Here the ‘Shout after shout – reiterated whoop’ might be that of shepherd boys, but is more like the ‘restless shout’ of the cuckoo, also restless in the 1806 poem. ‘Whence the voice... /... the Cuckoo cannot tell’, but goes on shouting, puzzled. The boy of Winander mimicked the hooting owls, and when they ceased to answer, the ensuing silence ‘carried far into his heart / The voice of mountain torrents’ (1805 V 408-9), which is

⁵ There are a few lines in *The Idle Shepherd-Boys* that look forward to the springtime celebrations of the *Ode*: ‘A thousand lambs are on the rocks, / All newly born! both earth and sky / Keep jubilee, and more than all / These boys with their green Coronals’.

a little odd, in that he would have more likely heard the echoes of his or the owls' hootings. Unlikeliness is often associated with Wordsworth's hearing of mountain voices: in his boat-borrowing, 'an act of stealth / And troubled pleasure' he remembers that 'Not without the voice / Of mountain echoes did my boat move on' (1805 I 389-90). No cause is assigned to these echoes, but they are certainly not the splash of oars, however 'lustily' dipped. They might have been sounds unheard arising from the guilt and fear which invested 'the huge cliff' that 'like a living thing / Strode after me'.

Even when a 'jocund din' is the source of an echo, the end is almost always awe or fear. With a laugh Joanna mocks the poet's 'ravishment' at the beauty of an early morning. It is some laugh, even from a 'wild-hearted Maid', for first it echoes from the rock that would be named after her, and then is taken up by Helm-crag, Hammer-Scar, Silver-How, Loughrigg, Fairfield, Helvellyn, Skiddaw, Glamara and Kirkstone. Wordsworth wonders, justifiably, whether this was 'A work accomplished by the brotherhood / Of ancient mountains, or my ear was touched / With dreams and visionary impulses', adding 'It is not for me to tell'. If the word 'brotherhood' suggests they are close to each other, it also suggests that their echoes are in some way alive. Joanna's scepticism is happily punished because she finds this 'loud uproar in the hills' not a 'jocund din', but a source of fear: 'to my side / The fair Joanna drew, as if she wished / To shelter from some object of her fear'.⁶ If the hills are not alive with the sound of music, they are certainly alive with a mysterious and awful power.

At the time of publication, only very close readers of Wordsworth's poetry would have been able to pick up the reverberations that substantiate 'I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng'. With the publication of his works and manuscripts completed, current readers are in a position to understand just how significant that simple sentence might have been to Wordsworth.

'The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep'

The final line of these four has proved the most difficult to interpret, if interpretation is required: what are the winds that come to him, and what 'the fields of sleep' from which they come? Early comments tend to the literal, taking Wordsworth as a poet of nature; referring to such lines as 'The green field sleeps in the sun', (Lines written in March), Helen

⁶ Poems on the Naming of Places II – To Joanna.

Darbishire suggests that he is simply remembering ‘The yet reposeful country-side’ and that that ‘The echoes come from the mountains, the winds from the sleepy fields’. She records Professor Dowden first thinking that the winds refer to the blowing of the west wind, because the west is where the sun sets, and is thus emblematic of sleep.⁷ Dowden then adds that the fields of sleep may be the shadowy parts of our own souls that lie out of the view of consciousness. That interesting idea, not followed by Darbishire, moves the phrase beyond the literal, and is comparable to Frank Kermode remarking that ‘The basic meaning, I suggest, is “sleep, or inactivity – a fallow period – has refreshed me; out of it blows the wind of inspiration: as in the opening lines of *The Prelude*” – in other words, a correspondent breeze.’⁸

George Whalley takes up a version of that reading, believing that the phrase “‘the fields of sleep’... is linked with ... the notion of a lost Paradise’, pointing to the passage, ‘Fortunate Fields – like those of old / Sought in the Atlantic Main’, from the Prospectus to *The Excursion*, variations on it from earlier manuscripts, and another passage from *A Tuft of Primroses*, which all associate Paradise with islands in the Atlantic.⁹ Nonetheless, as in the opening of *The Prelude*, he begins with a literal reading akin to Dowden’s – that the winds blow into Grasmere from the west, from the Atlantic, and thus from the fields of Paradise. Still, his most interesting insight is to connect this line with a passage from Book V of *The Prelude*:

Visionary Power

Attends upon the motions of the winds,
 Embodied in the mystery of words:
 There darkness makes abode, and all the host
 Of shadowy things work endless changes there,
 As in a mansion like their proper home;
 Even forms and substances are circumfused
 By that transparent veil with light divine,
 And through the turnings intricate of Verse,
 Present themselves as objects recognis’d,
 In flashes, and with a glory scarce their own.
1805 V 619 ff; (1850 ‘not their own’)

⁷ Helen Darbishire, *Wordsworth, Poems published in 1807* (Oxford, 1914), p. 452.

⁸ Kermode, *Romantic Paradox* (London, 1962/2016), p. 78, and M. H. Abrams, ‘The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor’, *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 19, no. 1 (Winter 1957).

⁹ Whalley, ‘The Fields of Sleep’, *Review of English Studies*, Vol. 9, no. 33 (February 1958), pp. 49–50.

As the lines from the *Ode* are presented as an illustration of renewed strength, the winds are those of a recovered visionary power, of a kind with 'Such feelings' as pass into an infant's 'torpid life / Like an awakening breeze'.¹⁰ Whalley suggests that the winds here and in the *Ode* are both actual and inspirational, literal and metaphorical, or, to use Coleridge's word again, 'tautegorical' – partaking of the truth they symbolize.¹¹ Were it not for the third line, 'Embodied in the mystery of words', the winds would be little more than the wind that 'rav'st without' in 'Dejection', initially one of the sounds that might 'their wonted impulse give' to 'startle this dull pain', but finally dismissed with other natural phenomena by the question 'what can these avail, / To lift the smoth'ring weight from off my breast?' Had they contained any visionary power, that is what they would have done.

Words work (like the Word) in 'a mansion' – the mind, his purer mind – comparable to the 'proper home' of words – heaven, infinitude or God – and imbue the objects of sense with a glory 'scarce their own'. The winds are thus endowed with 'light divine' by which 'forms and substances are circumfused' and via 'the turnings intricate of verse' become 'objects recogniz'd' or made intelligible, transfigured from a type of sensation into a symbol of glory and power, a process that could be described as creation or recreation. Nonetheless, we are left with a residual doubt as to whether these winds really are themselves, or have been given a life 'not their own'.

If the winds are those of visionary power, 'the fields of sleep' provide a metaphor for the conditions under which that power comes upon him. The sleep is that of the senses, the escape of a mind 'beset with images' from immediate sensory input – sleep a symbol of the 'conquest over sense' (1850 VI 446) that Wordsworth repeatedly insists is required for the realization of the power he seeks. This method as part of process of rendering the world intelligible is first evident in Tintern Abbey, which follows the growth of 'that serene and blessed mood', the effect of which is to make the eye quiet, not roving restlessly over disparate objects, and so laid asleep in body, the senses conquered, the deep power of joy is released, and we are enabled to 'see into the life of things'.

Therefore, what we see is less the things themselves, more the immanent power that sustains them. The very process of realizing the immanent life of nature, seeing into the life of things, is also a realization

¹⁰ *The Prelude*, 1798-99, II 274-75.

¹¹ Wordsworth seemed to be emphasizing that point in 1850 by describing the winds as 'viewless'.

that that informing power is ultimately separate from nature. Thus, after his disorientation in the Alps,

to my soul I say
 'I recognise thy glory.' In such strength
 Of usurpation, in such visitings
 Of awful promise, when the light of sense
 Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
 The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
 There harbours whether we be young or old.
 (1805 VI 531-37)

The visible world is separate from the invisible. This double vision is more easily discerned in this description than in Tintern Abbey, where the power gained seems to irradiate the visible world. He proceeds down 'a narrow chasm' of which all the features are 'like the working of one mind', 'Characters of the great apocalypse'. Not, one might argue, the things in themselves, but things invested with a glory other than their own.

To sum up: visionary powers ('The winds come to me') are only revived under certain conditions ('the fields of sleep'), and those powers enable two potentially conflicting forms of experience: 'Voices of two different Natures' – one which speaks of infinity or eternity and has sight of 'that immortal sea / Which brought us hither'; and one which can see 'into the life of things'; one looking beyond the world and the other looking into the world, one recognizing the soul or mind, human and divine, with a separate life of its own; at times claiming to be the life of the object, at others asserting that the glory of the object is not its own. Perhaps these are theoretically reconciled in the idea of Paradise, but as Wordsworth grew older the more certain he was of the source of power, the less certain he was that it informed the visible world. That doubt infuses his elegy *Ode Composed Upon an Evening of Extraordinary Splendour* and the assertion that only one life is real concludes *On the Power of Sound*, where the 'Voice' that 'to Light gave being' shall 'sweep away life's visionary stir' – finally declaring of Platonic Harmony:

No! though Earth be dust
 And vanish, though the heavens dissolve, her stay
 Is in the WORD, that shall not pass away