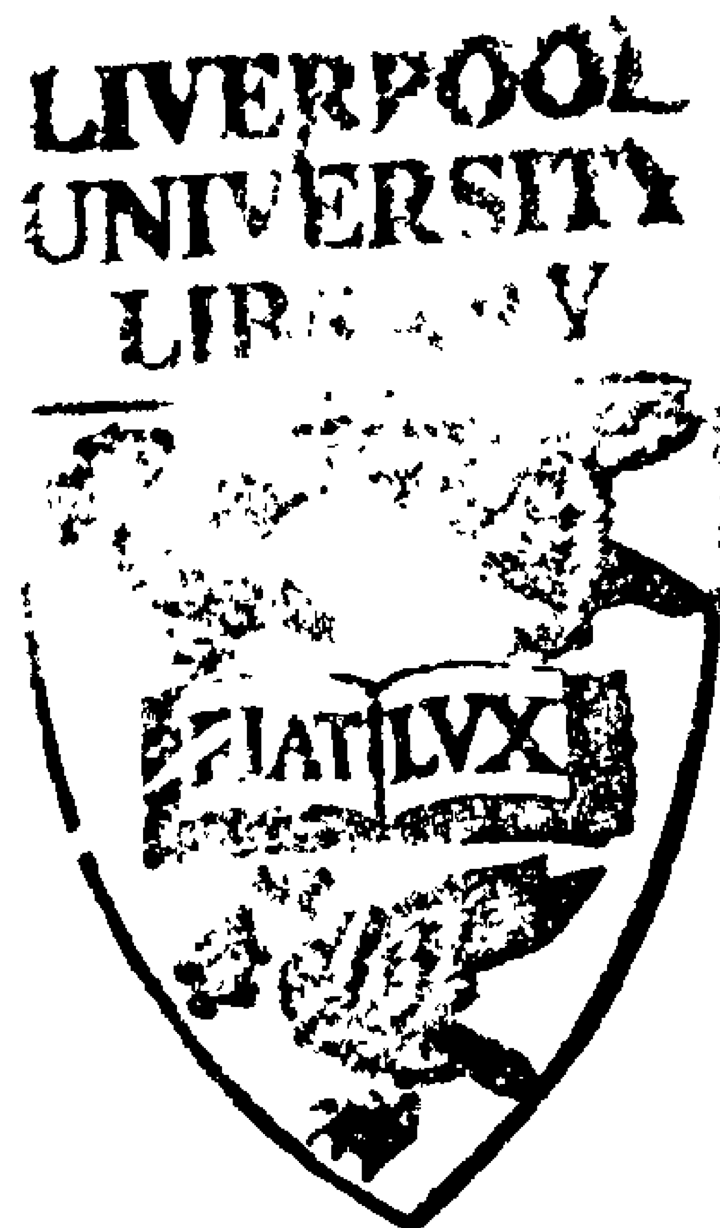
'COMPOSING DARKNESS': WRITING OUT OF SILENCE

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy by Sarah Coley. May 1996.



'Composing Darkness': Writing Out of Silence

Sarah Coley

At the most intensely felt and thought moments of utterance, literature will often express an incapacity to go further and will merely indicate a significance beyond, about which it must remain silent. In formally religious writing such silence finds justification in the sense of the divine transcendence but in Romantic literature, especially in Wordsworth it often involves a leap into the abyss without any such sustaining presence that would be justified by a faith shared with the reader. The point of silence offers a metaphysical challenge which after Wordsworth has to be met either by a re-defined religious utterance or as an unmet need from which the writing must recoil. Early Modernism is seen in the writing of Yeats and Eliot as an open acknowledgement of that point of breakdown, from which poetry must always retreat into the sheltering house of language. The problem remains, however, and if twentieth century writing has become progressively less subject to such naturalising of metaphysics, it is maybe in 'realist' writing, about acute points of mental suffering and how to survive them that the Wordsworthian sense of the abyss, the fall of language into the silence and its rebirth, has to be sought. I offer Oliver Sacks's A Leg To Stand On as the prime example of such writing. I am not in the thesis offering a formal history of the subject but seeking to gain an outline map by looking closely at crucial landmarks that gave shape to the subject.

Chapter 1 sets out the parameters of the subject and establishes the identity of the particular silence under discussion, by a study of its place in Wordsworth's poetry. Heidegger is used so as to give formal shape to the silent presences in Wordsworth. Cowper is the measure of both comparison and distance. The apprehension of silence by the writer involves an act of faith, as does its reception by the reader, but an attempt is made here to explain the effect of that faith in terms that are experiential and concerned with its effect upon the perceiver.

Chapter 2 returns to the issue of silence as an act of faith, in order to examine its place in religious poetry and particularly that of G. M. Hopkins. Religious poets are far more confident than secular poets what to call silence and what to see in it, so that quietness is for them less unspeaking. It is experienced less as an inward compulsion for their writing (as it was for the Romantics) and more as a real or a potentially real language. It becomes, in terms that are to be found in Newman and in medieval mystical writing like The Cloud of Unknowing and Meister Eckhart, the language between the human and the divine. Donne and Herbert are used as comparisons for Hopkins.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the place of silence in two late Victorian or proto-Modern novelists, Hardy and Conrad. For the Romantics silence was a major part of their writing consciousness. The realist assumptions of much Victorian novel-writing mean that the problem can often be relegated to the background, but, a crisis of confidence in the nature of the world 'realistically' presented forces the threat to the sufficiency of language-as-explanation close to the surface, in Hardy and Conrad in particular. For Conrad, paradoxically, the unsayable seems in the end to portend a kind of confidence.

In chapter 4 I am concerned with Yeats and Eliot as poets who seem familiar with the problem of silence in writing yet who both write it out of their poetry as a mode of discovery. In this, Yeats, like Blake, finds silence as the point at which the imaging faculty on which poetry depends breaks down. Silence is the threat from which

poetry must recover. Eliot, on the other hand, particularly in his later poetry, befriends silence as the ally of his religious belief, marking the point of poetry's limits and the moment of its retreat into privateness.

The problem in much twentieth century writing, written in open revolt against its Romantic origins, has been to take the issue of absence, as more than a literary starting point, maybe because it is so taken for granted by so many writers. Actually to articulate silence afresh needs some startling personal experience which restores the issue to priority. Oliver Sacks in A Leg To Stand On is forced to use a language of literary resourcefulness to present an experience of breakdown which he actually underwent. In effect, he is writing with a realism that is forced to the frontiers of the real and into the place beyond, where his customary language is lost and silence brings him new words. The text does itself retrospectively illuminate problems of consciousness that have recurrently persisted in writing since Wordsworth.

In the Conclusion, I consider the problem of being explicit about what cannot be expressed, in particular with reference to Heidegger's 1950 lecture 'Language'.

CONTENTS

Preface i

Acknowledgements xx

Chapter 1.
Wordsworth: The Poetry of Silence 1

Chapter 2.
'Where No Storms Come': Hopkins, Herbert and Donne 70

Chapter 3.
Horizontals and Horizons:
Response and the World in Hardy, Shelley and Conrad 140

Chapter 4.
Familiar Silences: Yeats and Eliot 210

Chapter 5.
'A New Beginning': Oliver Sacks, _A Leg To Stand On_ 258

Conclusion 313

Bibliography 329

The title quotation 'Composing Darkness' is from Wordsworth's 'Home At Grasmere'.

Preface

My aim in writing this thesis is to explore an impression that I have for a long time simply assumed to be true, that it is the things that cannot be said, that cannot be given explicitly in words, which hold the incalculability and the strength of great writing. Silence seems to be at the heart of recognition. Far from being the mere absence of noise, this silence has a definite charge.

This communicative silence is not at all the same as Derrida's more general 'ungrounding' of language. For William Ray, Derrida is an extreme reply to what he argues has been the central dialogue in literary theory in the last thirty years or so. Critics have, he maintains, been concerned either with the phenomenology of text-reception, or they have studied the nature of the language-act itself and have constantly produced contradictions which have driven on the entire project.[1] I am appealing to an older construct of literature but one which, in a way, parallels that trajectory. I am assuming that there is a perceptible, common-sense level of signification but that in the writing that concerns me here there lies an apprehension which is silent but which enters the reading in two ways. There is an intensification of significance which makes the words into pointers beyond themselves, dependent on the tacit recognition of the reader. But there will also, often, be a loss of signification in things, in the world, an abyss of apprehension which may produce in the writing either confidence asserted or the stillness of dread, but always a state unappeasable by the verbal sufficiency of reason or argument.

---

1. William Ray, Literary Meaning from Phenomenology to Deconstruction (Oxford, 1984), p.3 and passim.

The 'critical' voice that most supports this attempt would be late Heidegger, I suppose. In his essay, 'Language', he argues that language speaks at the point of 'dif-ference', that is, where things and world, existents and cosmos co-exist in an intimacy that involves also the pain of separateness. He phrases it graphically: 'Language speaks as the peal of stillness'.[2] By this he does not refer to the common scope of language, to our ordinary matter-of-fact assumption of its symbolic relationship with world and thing, but to a more specific and fundamental claim. He has in mind not our everyday practical naming of world and thing, but their original calling. How do world and thing come into presence? He is interested in a pure language which for him is the language of the poem. It is not verbal performance but rather the ability of the poet to listen that is the power behind speech:

> Mortals speak insofar as they listen. They heed the bidding call of the stillness of the dif-ference even when they do not know that call. Their listening draws from the command of the dif-ference what it brings out as sounding word. This speaking that listens and accepts is responding.
> (PLT, 209)

'Stillness' is as he says not simply lack of sound, but then neither is what I mean by silence; these terms must suffice because metaphor is the only available language here. It is as if the language of explanation must break off where language itself begins (as if language had a blind spot like that made in the eye by the optic nerve). The attempt to think the thing within the world and the world within the thing produces a gap, the dif-ference, which is where 'the peal of stillness' is heard. This gap itself is beyond expression and yet it

2. Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971), p.207. Hereafter referred to as PLT.

is in being attentive to this breach, merely listening, that the poet is able to speak: 'Mortals speak insofar as they listen'.

Heidegger's images in this essay come from a poem by Georg Trakl, though its authorship is irrelevant, not because of a general 'death of the author', but because it is a 'masterful' poem: 'The mastery consists precisely in this, that the poem can deny the poet's person and name' (PLT, 195). Not all writing has this mastery where the words take precedence over accidents of history. He is specifying that greatness in writing which is my starting point.

What makes the writing great is its attentiveness to the silence, 'stillness': 'Every authentic hearing holds back with its own saying' (PLT, 209). Poetry, literature, is not for Heidegger mainly to be approached as a form of rhetoric but as a serious encounter with the nature of being and being-there. In this, he belongs in that tradition of Romantic philosophy in particular which takes the claims of literature very seriously indeed as a distinct mode of apprehension.[3]

We do not, on these terms, read by thought and sound alone. There is not enough in these elements to grant purchase to the mind. Words deal slowly with events and experiences, revealing partial aspects of reality, one by one, like capillaries that allow the transit of a single cell at a time, whilst all the time true understanding demands (even if it does not find) complete recognition. Something more is

3. As Ruskin wrote in Modern Painters II: 'There is in every word set down by the imaginative mind an awful under-current of meaning, and evidence and shadow upon it of the deep places out of which it has come. It is often obscure, often half-told; for he who wrote it, in his clear seeing of the things beneath, may have been impatient of detailed interpretation: but, if we choose to dwell upon it and trace it, it will lead us always securely back to that metropolis of the soul's dominion from which we may follow out all the ways and tracks to its farthest coasts'. Quoted from John Ruskin: Selected Writings, ed. Philip Davis (London, 1995), p.86.

needed, especially in the reading of Romantic literature, a primary connection, or a first beginning that may at least look towards what is coherent and clear. This first purchase is the preserve of silence, or stillness as Heidegger calls it. It is that moment in reading when suddenly the words grow real and familiar.

The reading needs to make leaps of silent assumption at such a point. To use another writer standing between literature and formal thinking, Nietzsche writes in Thus Spoke Zarathustra:

> He who writes in blood and aphorisms does not want to be read, he wants to be learned by heart.
> In the mountains the shortest route is from peak to peak, but for that you must have long legs. Aphorisms should be peaks, and those to whom they are spoken should be big and tall of stature.[4]

Nietzsche describes two approaches for the understanding, a long and a short route. By following the contours of the writing exactly the reader may come eventually to the next peak; but 'In the mountains the shortest route is from peak to peak'. Daring the depth between the peaks, the reader may arrive the sooner. Efficiency is not, however, the only difference between the high and the low road (nor is it the most important); the nature of the apprehension is altered too. Nietzsche says: 'He who writes in blood and aphorisms does not want to be read, he wants to be learned by heart'. It is as if the outward depth and horror of 'the shortest route' would fall simply into recognition. The expected plummeting is thus replaced by a meaning that sounds deep within the reader, 'learned by heart'. The mode of apprehension here is one of sheer familiarity. It's like suddenly seeing a shape, say the movement of a horse, in the tossing

---

4. Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra (Parts I & II published in 1883, Part III in 1884, Part IV written 1885, published 1892), trans. and ed. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, 1969), Part One, 'Of Reading and Writing', p.67.

of trees in a strong wind. The picture was there before, in all of its elements, and yet the seeing requires a wholesale leap of the imagination. You cannot be persuaded into the perception; rather it must come all at once. Great writing has always depended upon such moments of recognition for its meaning. My interest lies in writers who demand that response consistently from their readers, who inscribe the hiatus into their work, and for whom the gap is the place where significance happens. This power is at its strongest in the Romantics and in Wordsworth in particular. He does not, like Nietzsche, write in 'blood and aphorisms' but of all the poets, Wordsworth is to be 'learned by heart'; this is indeed the only way to read him, by the shortest route. For this reason, Wordsworth is the central figure and mainstay of this thesis.

This existential silence manifestly relates to other identifications of absence in or beyond the text, which demands that some preliminary distinctions but also some influences be acknowledged. Least relevant to this discussion is the most rhetorically explicit mode, what Curtins called 'the inexpressibility topos', when a writer confesses 'he can find no words'.[5] Usually this is in a poem of praise and the person praised shares the attributes of God in reminding the writer of the inadequacy of language to measure such grandeur. Even here it would appear that silence is not an empty space. On the contrary, it seems to be generally agreed that there is something of great importance within it.

Pychoanalysis, at the other extreme of total inwardness, is by definition opposed to the notion that the silence of the mind is an

---

5. E. R. Curtins, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (New York, 1953), p.159-60.

empty space; the regions of the inexpressible, the unconscious, the preconscious, are at the centre of Freud's work. The Studies On Hysteria in particular[6] witness to the claim that wherever science or philosophy become aware of an inexpressible element, the silent idea grows to command the very centre of thought. It is as if there were something in the bare appreciation of silence that is in itself persuasive, has to be made to speak. Hence the strange and purposeful traction of ideas that depend on nothingness.

Analogy may be made with recent work on the physiology of the brain. Working with brain-injured babies, Professor Ferenc Katona, the Hungarian neurologist, claims to be able to cure the deficiency of the damaged brain. At the heart of his method there is an urgent sense of the power of the negative. Stressing the importance of immediate diagnosis and treatment, Katona asserts:

> If we wait, it's too late. In a short time the spontaneous movements which matter will become gradually abnormal. No information is still information. No is not zero. The brain will assume, for instance, that it has no lower extremities. By training we try to correct the defaults to give the normal spontaneous development a platform.[7]

Katona's fundamental grasp, 'No is not zero', gives him an axis with which to assault brain injury. Neuro-habilitation does not work to allay the effects of brain damage, but rather to prevent them from ever taking root. Implicitly Katona's method relies upon nothingness. It is as if putting his feet down on apparent silence, Katona forged a pathway across the chasm, giving 'spontaneous development a plat-

---

6. Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, Pelican Freud Library, Volume 3, Studies On Hysteria (1893-1895), trans. James and Alix Strachey, ed. Angela Richards (Harmondsworth, 1974). See especially pp.53-69; 'On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena: Preliminary Communication'.
7. Martin Plimmer, 'The Budapest Method: A Cure for Damaged Brains?', Observer Magazine (12 July, 1992), 40-2, (p.42).

form'. The brain automatically assumes a silence whereas to ignore it forces it back into speech. But in both these cases silence is the enemy of life, that which has to be by-passed or overcome. It is not an inkling of the fundamental ground out of which discovery grows, an intensification of significance.

If William Ray is right then much modern critical theory is like a debate about the nature of inexpressibility between a rhetorical tradition concerned with the slipperiness of signifiers (the inexpressibility topos) and a 'scientific' interest in the hidden and unexpressed assumptions within all (literary) language. The empty signifier of the semiologists and the self-deconstructing literature of the Yale school, the 'dissemination' of Derrida and the third meaning of Barthes, all of these depend on the awareness of a surplus and a vagrant meaning. The enterprise has been in part an attempt indeed to silence traditional valuations and readings of literature:

> Through its interrogation the consensus around literary studies, and the ideological grid which underwrites it has been fragmented.[8]

What I am concerned with here is by use of what could be identified as an old 'consensual' reading, to look at writings and moments in the texts where the 'ideological grid' becomes hazy or absent and 'meaning' baffles enunciation. But the Wordsworthian silence does not signify the failure of meaning, nor does it act to unravel the text, exactly the reverse - Wordsworth's silence proves the very ground of his poetry.[9] In its sense of energy and importance, Wordsworth's unknown has more in common with the 'zero' of Katona than with the

---

8. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (ed.), Modern Literary Theory, a Reader (London, 1989), p.3.
9. So Donald G. Marshall writes of Wordsworth: '"Nature", it seems to me, is invoked precisely to relocate the "religious" outside any sphere of "culture". What Wordsworth lives through is that experience

dispiriting silence of deconstruction.

Without wanting to diminish the force of the distinctions made, I would want to ask whether these various modes of silence are versions of the existential shock, the primary silence, I am concerned with. Whether it be with Freud's unconscious or with the difference and deferral of the post-structuralists, it is the meanings which evade expression that dominate the imagination. For a philosopher of the aesthetic like Henri Bergson, it is as though the unsayable idea governed and shaped the entire visible portion of his thought and feeling. He describes philosophy as the pursuit of a shadow, a quest for 'something simple, infinitely simple, so extraordinarily simple that the philosopher has never succeeded in saying it. And that is why he went on talking all his life.[10] In this light, the unified system of thought is not the primary element in philosophy but rather a secondary effect of this fascination and pursuit. The system grows complete because the philosopher goes on talking. Bergson expands on this theme: 'A philosopher worthy of the name has never said more than a single thing: and even then it is something he has tried to say, rather than actually said' (ibid., 132). Clearly, for Bergson, the inarticulate shadow is the formative influence, with the articulate regions following in the wake of this obsession. The study of silence is at the heart of the text.

The problem is that, by definition, such silence defeats the processes of logical analysis and progressive argument, both predates

---

of the sacred which can only be laid bare and made available after not just sects, but virtually everything that goes under the name of religion has been stripped away... If anything remains after such a purgation, it will be almost literally unspeakable'. Foreword to Geoffrey Hartman, The Unremarkable Poet (London, 1987), p.xvii.
10. Henri Bergson, The Creative Mind, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York, 1968), p.128.

and survives them - it is what is left when they have had their say. Literature's capacity to demonstrate, to show, beyond languages of explanation, gives it a deep-based priority here. Formal thought, philosophy, may attend to the issue from different viewpoints, may touch on the issue and can help, but the silence itself directly affects the language only in literature, as Heidegger claims. It is a religious issue primarily, of course, but however profoundly God is hidden for the religious thinker his name is still 'God'. For the writing I am concerned with that is, also, too specific an identity. Writers as different as Meister Eckhart, the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, and Cardinal Newman all in the end know who the silence is and can therefore identify its source. From the standpoint of literature all such explicit and philosophical voices are other ways of approaching the problem rather than sources. Here, they are treated as companion works rather than as secondary texts.

Demonstration, the indication of places where silence occurs, has to replace formal argument with this subject, therefore. There is a real danger that in a historical discussion silence would become just one of a series of phenomena, a rogue display to be accounted for again and again, so that instead of becoming conscious of its place and moment in the work of specific writers, we are left with the graphs and charts of its progress. There seems no alternative to the actual business of reading, and reading as though they offered revelations, those writers for whom the experience of silence is urgent and presses upon their text.

The purpose of such reading is two-fold; it is both to present the pursuit of silence as a method of reading, as the way that comes most close to the text, and also, by extension, to gauge the worth of this stillness itself.

The discussion must start with a writer who presents silence indisputably and in whom the germ of the idea is strong - that is Wordsworth. There is a rashness of spirit in Romanticism that contrasts sharply with the eloquence and measure of so many of the Augustan poets. Romantic silence, the sudden hiatus in Wordsworth's poetry, the deepening of the voice all at once from some unspecified source, must be received in faith. It is as though the audacity of the poet must be met by the trust of the reader, if meaning is to take place at all. Thus Coleridge writes:

> WE (that is, the human race) LIVE BY FAITH. Whatever we do know, that in kind is different from the brute creation, has its origin in a determination of the reason to have faith and trust in itself. This, its first act of faith is scarcely less than identical with its own being. Implicitè, it is the COPULA - it contains the possibility - of every position, to which there exists any correspondence in reality. It is itself, therefore, the realizing principle, the spiritual substratum of the whole complex body of truths.[11]

It is the apparently back-to-front reasoning here, the origin of argument in silent assertion, 'the determination of the reason to have faith and trust in itself', that provides the ground of any continuity. The detachment and isolation of the spirit become necessary to the fact of our outward ties. Reality itself thus appears guarded by a barrier of silence, where it can be gained only by a moment of great daring. For these poets what is remarkable is their high estimate of silence, their experience of such creative stillness. It is a great challenge that in the Romantic poets, but most especially Wordsworth, the unknown should act as an anchor to the spirit.

---

11. S. T. Coleridge, Lay Sermons, ed. R. J. White (Princeton, New Jersey, 1972), p.18; from The Statesman's Manual (1816).

The question I am asking is not, historically, what happened to Wordsworthian stillness and where did it go, but what is it and to what problems is it an answer, or more fundamentally, what deep problems does it express? Hence I have not tried to chart a progress of the word or the experience in Victorian literature, to enquire how such a sense of silence operates in In Memoriam or to assess 'the roar on the other side of silence' in George Eliot. In some sense, the Wordsworthian silence is religious, though that is maybe to appropriate it too easily to an idea of 'spilt religion'. Nietzsche, after all, saw Christianity as itself Romantic in spirit. The refusal to do without doctrinal names in the Wordsworthian silence is not a rhetorical trick but the essence of the experience. 'The dif-ference carries out world in its worlding, carries out things in their thinging' (PLT, 202); what happens when that 'dif-ference' is identified with the divine: 'The world is charged with the splendour of God'?

It is the almost too ready availability of a certain kind of silence in the Christian tradition which, maybe, marks the difference from the secular silence I am concerned with. Hopkins is both a religious poet and a writer who intensely admired Wordsworth. Is there a different quality of silence in his work from apprehensions of it in earlier poets, like Herbert and Donne? In a real sense, silence is the language between the human and the divine. But, for that reason, religious poets are far more certain how to name their silence than a secular poet would be. This empowerment provides only an ambiguous comfort to the spirit, since it is won at the cost, in some sense, of knowing the answer before the question is asked. How can a Romantic poetry, which thrives on not knowing the answer, survive the weight of God?

Whilst silence is dealt with primarily as a form of recognition, as the common ground of the text, the study of the inarticulate is relevant also to matters of style, since a writer's silences are absolutely characteristic. Muteness leaves a mark that is far more distinctive, far less easy to forge, than the visible lines of writing. It is as though the very thoughts and feelings that defied expression, formed an artistic signature. Thus in the poetry of Herbert and Donne, for example, the awful awareness of the unknown that they share produces voices that are utterly distinct. The problem for Hopkins, wanting to reclaim the Wordsworthian silence, is whether he can return it to a usage in any way cognate with those seventeenth century poets.

Rather, the Romantic silence, the sudden encounter with what mutes the continuity of discourse, becomes for late nineteenth century writers a threat so great that they would be glad if the blessed but delusive chatter of everyday occurrence could deafen them to it. Silence is the burden that has to be born unless they can create out of it a new bond of trust. The authors who are both representative of this relation with silence and for whom as individuals the experience is crucial are Hardy and Conrad. There is a truth in the extremity of silence that has a vitality beyond mere emptiness of feeling. Thus in Conrad's Under Western Eyes, Razumov catches a glimpse of his own reflection, startling in the midst of his dull depression:

> He yawned frequently. He drank large quantities of tea, he walked about aimlessly, and when he sat down he did not budge for a long time. He spent some time drumming on the window with his finger-tips quietly. In his listless wanderings round about the table he caught sight of his own face in the looking-glass and that arrested him. The eyes which returned his stare were the most unhappy eyes he had ever seen. And this was the first thing

> which disturbed the mental stagnation of that day.[12]

In his unacknowledged torment it seems to Razumov as if all feeling has left him, leaving him trapped in this numb and formless boredom. Then suddenly he catches sight of 'the most unhappy eyes he had ever seen' and their look arrests him with a curious awful honesty that immediately centres the book. It is this barely spoken sense of truth which has status as an event, 'the first thing', and breaks rather than intensifies the dullness. The narrator does not comment further on the expression of those haunted eyes; he simply leaves them staring from the page, with an intensity of feeling. This too is a kind of faith, Conrad's need (and his ability) to take things so much to heart. His silence comes on the outskirts rather than at the centre of feeling, and yet it too offers an anchor to the spirit. There is a kind of settled truth in the outrage of Razumov's feeling, as if he had found a limit beyond bounds or had been given coordinates in despair.

Conrad and Hardy present the experience of silence as something thrust upon them, a sudden intrusion of what was always there but hidden. The difficulty of early Modernism, by contrast, is that the presence of silence is so apparent that the writing itself then hides it. Where silence is so familiar a friendly-foe, its place is taken by equivalents, by the strain of the high-talk in Yeats and the symbol and by the knowingness of Eliot. Against the threat of the silence, Yeats sets the image of the poet as fluent and articulate speaker so that he hardly leaves room for the quiet in his verse. He

---

12. Joseph Conrad, Under Western Eyes (1911), ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth, 1985), pp.106-7.

is a writer more like Blake for whom silence is perception more than act of faith, idea more than event. The silence in Yeats lies at the uncanny edges of the poetry; the most authentic moments of revelation are offered by a spontaneity that comes in opposition to his own focus of attention. Whereas in Eliot, especially in Four Quartets, the problem rather lies in making the silence speak too readily. The 'raid on the inarticulate' leaves poetry with what it had not meant to say. The closer the idea comes to expression the further it flies from the pain, the shock of its nature. Or rather, because he actually knows this, the actual shock is not felt. Though silence is brimming in his poetry, it becomes a thought about silence, a secondary silence rather than the intrusive encounter with it.

It is for this reason I find Oliver Sacks's A Leg To Stand On compellingly useful. It is a hybrid work, not anxious about its own status, not claiming the dignity of 'literature' like the other works. Yet Sacks is forced to meet silence, life's sudden breaks of continuity, testing the adequacy of the language crossing the frontier of articulacy; he confronts the fear of a final incomprehensibility, and speaks the inexpressible. Yet he does that not as an idea but because it is forced by fact; the break is a broken leg. Just as we read his book, moreover, Sacks is reading literature and searching it for authentic words to address his own silence.

It is an autobiographical book by a man who, unwillingly, underwent an encounter with such primary silence and who has the analytical and discursive skills to describe the experience and its intellectual consequences in awful detail. Silence is not to Sacks a wholesome energy, but rather a deeply undermining force that fills him with doubt. So though it may seem strange to include the popular

writings of a neurologist in a thesis concerned with 'literature', Sacks is here by right. Scientific analysis, anecdotal history, the passion of the text, together with his extraordinary vigour of mind provide a strong insight into the hidden organisation of silence. Maybe silence can best be restored to writing by such first-hand accounts, as is a belief in literature's capacity to address a human crisis. Sacks frequently charts neurological terrain by literary reference, supporting his scientific observations with a surprising confidence in the witness of the poets and mystics. Sacks's experience of the dark silence comes after a climbing accident, in which he loses temporarily the use and feeling of his leg. With the loss of this limb he is thrown into an increasing negative:

> I felt myself sinking. The abyss engulfed me. Although scotoma means 'shadow' or 'darkness' - and this is the usual symbolism of horror and death - I was sensorially and spiritually more affected by silence... A deadly inner silence - the silence of timelessness, motionlessness, scotoma, combined with the silence of non-communication and taboo.[13]

Far from being the 'copula' of life, this silence is an 'abyss' that swallows reality in all of its forms, depriving the speaker of time and movement, and communication too. The 'deadly inner silence' subjects him to utter isolation, even dividing him inwardly from himself. Yet it is here in the intensity of his horror that Sacks contributes most to the discussion of silence, because he relies so fully upon traces and indications that might, by another writer, be seen as mere effects. Faced by the abyss, Sacks feels that he must take it on directly, fighting every point with the 'shadow'. He grants a horrible reality to unreality. Though his silence has a

---

13. Oliver Sacks, A Leg To Stand On (London, 1986), p.78.

specific, neurological root, Sacks's book has a far wider relevance. It throws a light on the nature of creativity itself.

Compare his description of the scotoma to Conrad's frustrated account of the writing process itself. In a letter to Garnett who has been trying to convince him of the worth of his endeavour, Conrad exclaims against the task:

> I feel like a man who can't move, in a dream. To move is vital! - it's salvation - and I can't! I feel what you mean and I am utterly powerless to imagine anything else. It's like being bewitched; it's like being in a cataleptic trance. You hear people weeping over you, making ready to bury you - and you can't give a sign of life! - I wish to goodness I could not believe in you. But I can't. I feel all you say and all the same I remain in the dark.[14]

As with Sacks's scotoma, this is an experience by a writer, of writing as motionlessness and non-communication, and Conrad's negative is startling in its coherence too. Hence his helpless sense of his work as both flawed and true: 'I wish to goodness I could not believe in you. But I can't. I feel all you say and all the same I remain in the dark'. When Sacks addresses his leg and it won't move, he thinks that maybe he didn't speak. For Conrad he knows that for Garnett his writing is good, but to him it is as though he is not saying anything at all. And yet this is what he has to trust - 'I am utterly powerless to imagine anything else'. It is as if silence had shape, bore dimension, and was capable of truth; as if the margins of powerlessness held his spirit intact. This is the discovery that Sacks makes in A Leg To Stand On, as he slowly learns to treat the undermining and divisive silence as the source of his integrity (in

---

14. Letters from Joseph Conrad 1895-1924, ed. Edward Garnett (Indianapolis and New York, 1962), pp.108-9; letter dated 8 October 1897.

both senses of the word). Sacks's dark vision is not finally an answer to silence's question, but rather continuous with its impulse. His style indeed is curiously Conradian in its weight of apparently vague intensity; his import too seems to be held beyond immediate account. This is a common feature of all the silent writers. At some point, all display this reliance upon the ineffable, trusting the 'abyss'.

Probably the best demonstration is Wordsworth, in the episode of the drowned man, for example:

> Twilight was coming on; yet through the gloom,
> I saw distinctly on the opposite Shore
> A heap of garments, left, as I suppos'd,
> By one who there was bathing; long I watch'd,
> But no one own'd them; meanwhile the calm Lake
> Grew dark, with all the shadows on its breast,
> And, now and then, a fish up-leaping, snapp'd
> The breathless stillness. The succeeding day,
> (Those unclaimed garments telling a plain Tale)
> Went came a Company, and, in their Boat
> Sounded with grappling irons, and long poles.
> At length, the dead Man, 'mid that beauteous scene
> Of trees, and hills, and water, bolt upright
> Rose with his ghastly face.[15]

Wordsworth attends with an attitude of peculiar openness. The intrusion of the dead man could and more naturally might well have led to his revulsion, but neither the boy watching then nor the poet watching now turns or flinches from the spectacle. It is not really the corpse recovered from the bottom of the lake that Wordsworth records so powerfully here, but rather the unexpected state of calm. It is his own mood of strange suspension that he is recalling in the scene. On one level, we seem to be looking through a context of twilight and quiet to the disturbing focus of the dead man; but this

---

15. William Wordsworth, <u>The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind</u>, the 1805 text, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, second edition, corrected by Stephen Gill (Oxford, 1970), pp. 79-80, V. 459-72.

is not the true centre of the recollection. Wordsworth is drawn to something beyond the horror:[16]

> At length, the dead Man, 'mid that beauteous scene
> Of trees, and hills, and water, bolt upright
> Rose with his ghastly face.

The dead man surfaces in a crude and startling juxtaposition of the horizontal and the vertical, the living and the dead. He rises as if unassisted, like a living man (the only verb 'rose' belongs to him); and with a 'ghastly face' too, not so much frightening as terrified. His 'bolt upright' appearance comes with force against the levelness and patience of the search, 'At length'. And yet despite these starkly opposing terms - in fact, in their very divergence - the poet observes the beauty of the trees, and hills, and water. He seems to take this opportunity to see it! The evening calm with which the passage began is thus met by an inward stillness which does not come solely in response to the external beauty, but which has relation to the dead man. The presence that might have disturbed the mood of the poet instead brings a stronger sense of calm - stronger because now it is not based upon outward things but has a source within.

For the moment Wordsworth seems to see not with his own eyes, but with absorbing clarity, as if through the eyes of the dead man. Concentrating upon the man intensely, in a moment he sees not the ghastly face and the water pouring as the body is raised. He sees instead what the dead man would be in a position to see, the round of

---

16. Kierkegaard describes a situation very like that in Wordsworth: 'In immediacy the most terrifying description of the most horrifying and definite something cannot inspire so much dread as a shrewd half-word... about something indeterminate'. The states are similar except that for Wordsworth the quick look at the indeterminate (even while it is a look of dread) yet fills him with a curious stillness. From Søren Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death (1849), trans. and ed. Alastair Hannay (Harmondsworth, 1989), pp.55-6. Hereafter referred to as SD.

the lake and its beautiful serenity. He looks with a strange sense of security beyond the image of horror and it grants him a new platform for vision, a glimpse of beauty and calm beyond the immediate.[17]

These lines reveal the domain of silence, and are its expression too; 'Language speaks as the peal of stillness'. Between the intense perception of the body being raised and that strange glimpse of the lake scene, there are no words of explanation, only commas; so that the dominant mood of the passage (the reason why it was written and the reason why it is recalled) remains beyond expression, an abyss. Yet the breach between the two types of seeing is the site of a great event; and it is the source of an articulating energy that survives beyond the present moment. In the 1798-99 text of The Prelude, where the episode of the drowned man is grouped together with the spots of time, Wordsworth continues:

> I might advert
> To numerous accidents in flood or field,
> Quarry or moor, or 'mid the winter snows,
> Distresses and disasters, tragic facts
> Of rural history that impressed my mind
> With images, to which in following years
> Far other feelings were attached, with forms
> That yet exist with independent life
> And, like their archetypes, know no decay.[18]

For Wordsworth as for Heidegger the silence is formative. The ability merely to listen and accept connects him to vein of imagery and form that appears endowed with 'independent life'. It connects him to the 'dawn almost / Of life' (Prelude XI. 335-6).

---

17. Paul de Man in his discussion of 'A slumber did my spirit seal' questions suddenly whether Wordsworth could have written in the same manner about his own death: 'For the informed reader of Wordsworth the answer to this question is affirmative; Wordsworth is one of the few poets who can write proleptically about their own death and speak, as it were, from beyond their own graves'. Paul de Man, Blindness and Insight, second edition (Minnesota, 1983), p.225.
18. William Wordsworth, The Prelude (1798-1799), ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca, 1977), p.50; First Part, ll.279-87.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Brian Nellist.

Chapter 1

Wordsworth: The Poetry of Silence

I

Wordsworth's poetic commitment is outright. He seizes his words directly, almost before their sense has settled:

> And now recovering, 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.[1]

With a headlong emphasis the voice breaks in, catching at his meaning, 'And now recovering, to my Soul I say / I recognise thy glory'. It is as though simply to be true to his experience, to find the words that match his state, Wordsworth would have to place his emphasis on 'Greatness' and 'glory'. It is counter to the spirit of his poetry to lower the expectations inherent in his words; they must all mean at their highest level. He wants to bring his readers to a pass where bare truth is poetry.[2]

Risking the exposure of the claim, Wordsworth's recognition of his temerity balances the terms with 'usurpation' and 'visitings / Of awful promise'. Symptomatically not one of the lines is end-stopped, until we reach the word 'abode', significantly. It is openness that provides the character of the lines - 'when the light of sense / Goes

---

1. William Wordsworth, The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind, the 1805 text, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, second edition, corrected by Stephen Gill (Oxford, 1970), p.99, VI. 531-7.
2. Paul Hamilton, Wordsworth (Brighton, 1986), p.116, describes the passage as a demonstration of 'the poetic power of language to go on talking us through the uncertainties of an experience which has abandoned any... referential guarantees of meaning'.

out in flashes'. His vision strikes like lightning, the stimulation and extinguishing of sense. It 'goes out' caught between extinction and brilliance.

There could hardly be a greater contrast to the equally assured voice of eighteenth century poetry, in Pope's Essay On Man, for example, where a comparably evolved power and balance are linked most explicitly. Pope's ambition is not merely to arrange or to present reality; it measures the underlying nature of reality. Every creature and every cause has its place within the system, which it must not over-reach:

> Let Earth unbalanc'd from her orbit fly,
> Planets and Suns run lawless thro' the sky,
> Let ruling Angels from their spheres be hurl'd,
> Being on being wreck'd, and world on world,
> Heav'n's whole foundations to their centre nod,
> And Nature tremble to the throne of God:
> All this dread ORDER break - for whom? for thee?
> Vile worm! - oh Madness, Pride, Impiety![3]

Here every line ends sharply. Pope's poetry reads like a light carriage driven far too fast; lawlessly, so that at the corners, the angels have to hold tight. His words work in a way entirely different from those of Wordsworth. Each has its own weight and energy; it is harnessed in the line and made to fight for its feet as the couplets race: 'Let Earth unbalanc'd from her orbit fly, / Planets and Suns run lawless thro' the sky, / Let ruling Angels from their spheres be hurl'd'. With that perilous 'Let', Pope threatens disorder. The tone of his voice alters through the lines, starting wickedly in mimicry of the speculative formulation ('Let Earth unbalanc'd...') as if that were a reasonable proposition; but then, perceptibly, he grows stern and absolute in authority (Let Earth fly, will you?). Pope extends an

---

3. The Poems of Alexander Pope, ed. John Butt (London, 1963), pp.513-14; Essay On Man, I. 251-8.

awful balance, 'Being on being wreck'd, and world on world', controlling his meaning with such an autocratic hand, that the mastery of his voice becomes necessary to the safety of his verse.[4]

Wordsworth, on the other hand, depends on an element that he cannot control, an 'awful promise' that weighs unequally on his words, merely 'visiting' rather than being held as intrinsic 'Order'. His sense is far more vagrant than that of Pope, and it is less readily quantifiable. The balance of their poetry is altogether different. Where Pope fends off chaos, growing ever more articulate by his accelerating recreation of its threat, for Wordsworth vision stands on risk. 'All this dread ORDER break - for whom? for thee?' The warning comes too late for Wordsworth, for whom the dread exists precisely to be recognised by 'thee': 'And now recovering, to my Soul I say / I recognise thy glory'. His words return from disorder, rich with an inexpressible sense of something beyond the choice, order or chaos.

What can Wordsworth mean by this? Where would we look to make sense of these lines? They are difficult, even though the imperative emphasis of the address betrays no doubt of being understood. But then, Wordsworth's first hearer is his own deepest nature, his Soul. Almost his whole point is that he is sure 'now', at this moment, to understand and to be understood, while his very 'Soul' is clear. Yet despite his forthright expression, the words have for us an esoteric quality. He names so surely and abstractly ('thy glory', 'Greatness') ideas which, if we lack them, must undermine his meaning utterly. If 'thy glory' means nothing, if the words fail to remind the reader of

---

4. Margaret Anne Doody, The Daring Muse (Cambridge, 1985), p.152, comments on the precariousness of the balance between order and violence in Pope's universe which composes 'a rather giddy cosmos'.

any thing, they must surely work oppositely, to engender a sense of impatience or misgiving. What glory? What visitings? Nor is having once understood a safeguard against forgetting. The tenuousness of the diction often makes sense depend on the reader's willingness to go half-way to meet it. It is all too possible in times of dullness to lose track of Wordsworth's poetry, to lose his meaning altogether; and then the lines look impenetrably dark and forbidding. As Donald Davie, long ago claimed: 'Wordsworth's words have meaning so long as we trust them'.[5] But why should this be so? We could never feel so excluded from Pope's poetry, for example, for all the marvellous exclusivity of his voice. Because even as Pope reproves and rejects, the vigour of his expression draws the reader into admiration. If we cannot share in Pope's priorities, our distance from them does not harm his poetry. It is not so with Wordsworth, his poetry seems to demand more from us than this.

The most important word in these lines ('And now recovering...') is 'recognise'. The Prelude is a poem that is addressed less to the understanding than to the sense of recognition. Wordsworth seems fascinated by its power, drawn constantly to events and feelings, and to modes of expression, which defy explanation or justification, which must rather work all at once, suddenly, by the power of recognition. The language operates on the tacit assumption that there are responses, consequences of reaction, which cannot be explained by the poet, but which can be acknowledged by the reader. The poetry constitutes an act of faith that these unspoken areas of mind are held in common. It's as if he were engaged in an investigation whose proper medium were silence, but yet would talk about it anyhow.

---

5. Donald Davie, Articulate Energy (London, 1955), p.107.

Hence the peculiar sense of disorientation and grounding in the lines. On one level, Wordsworth seems determined to be explicit. After the first short phrasing of conviction, 'And now recovering, to my Soul I say / I recognise thy glory', there comes a longer, more analytical and more purposeful assay:

> in such strength
> Of usurpation, in such visitings
> Of awful power, when the light of sense
> Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
> The invisible world, doth Greatness make abode

The twice-repeated phrase 'in such' and Wordsworth's precision over the circumstances of vision, gives direction to the passage. The balance of the lines demands a point of arrival, a demand which is only temporarily met by 'doth Greatness make abode'. We have been carried too far in the invisible world to be content with this domesticity. We require a further destination, something more to do with the 'invisible world' than with our own perceiving senses. The phrase is curiously quiet after all of the preceding momentum; it seems unbalanced and the eye is carried past the comma to another verb of belonging:

> There harbours whether we be young or old.

'There harbours' picks up the sense of 'make abode', except that this time the verb of belonging conjures the breadth and excitement of the journey. Now expectation and arrival meet. Momentarily, 'harbours' seems a transitive verb, as though there were some further, hidden term. It is with an odd effect then that this new phrasing simply confirms the residence of 'Greatness': because unknowingly we had already arrived. In microcosm, the reading of 'harbours' mirrors the passage of the Alps, the heedless crossing, the disappointment and the recovery. In this way Wordsworth preserves the integrity of the event and of his mode of apprehension as well, and leaves in silence

the boundaries between them.[6] On one level, he writes clearly and openly of his transformed view; on another, he leaves the associated feelings unspecified, forcing us to read wrongly, to make the mistake and thus to perform the discovery afresh. It gives a rich emphasis to the line, of stirring and of stasis at once.

Christopher Ricks writes well of Wordsworth's temper: 'It is characteristic of Wordsworth's sturdiness that he wanted to know where he stood'.[7] The observation is true, hence Wordsworth's attention here to home and harbour, to belonging. Wordsworth wants, habitually and primarily, to be sure of his ground, and so it is striking that he should rely on even a momentary disorientation. Still more that he should connect the sense of belonging to the losing of his way. In the momentariness of divination that follows upon his realisation, in the 'flashes' of sense, and 'visitings / Of awful promise', he finds the purest vein of permanence:

> Our destiny, our nature, and our home
> Is with infinitude, and only there.
> (Prelude VI. 531-9)

In some way that surely needs examination, Wordsworth approaches infinitude with a sense of sheer familiarity. It is wonderfully unequal that his counter (or perhaps his response) to infinity is not finitude, but 'home'. Sent a blow of realisation, so unprecedented as to appear disastrous (a usurping power), Wordsworth's first coherent sense is one of familiarity: 'And now', even now, 'recovering, to my Soul I say / I recognise thy glory'. It is as if recognition of the

---

6. Max F. Schulz, however, sees this indeterminacy between event and apprehension as a source of anxiety to Wordsworth in the period of The Prelude of 1805; Paradise Preserved (Cambridge, 1985), p.93.
7. William Wordsworth, Penguin Critical Anthologies, ed. Graham McMaster (Harmondsworth, 1972), p.510; from Christopher Ricks' essay, 'Wordsworth: "A Pure Organic Pleasure from the Lines"', originally published in Essays in Criticism, volume 21, 1971.

experience of being lost were a genuine force of advance for Wordsworth, paradoxical though this may seem. Of necessity, recognition covers old ground, and yet it seems here to deal with the rashest encounterings.

In Wordsworth, by his own testimony, we are dealing with a poetic vision that intervenes in the common role of perception, and which sees between and beyond the margins of the visible world. Though recent criticism, Materialist or Freudian, has been unhappy with this mode of assumption in Wordsworth and has tried to explain it in terms of its social or psychological causation, the habit is too persistent in his poetry to be readily explained away. Earlier criticism often seemed to be more interior to the process of mind entailed in this mode of vision, and whatever limitations there may be involved in such sympathy, it makes us see what is there in the lines. A. C. Bradley writes of this visionary aspect of Wordsworth's poetry:

> He apprehended all things, natural or human, as the expression of something which, while manifested in them, immeasurably transcends them. And nothing can be more intensely Wordsworthian than the poems and passages most marked by this visionary power and most directly issuing from this apprehension.[8]

Perhaps this is true of only the most 'intensely Wordsworthian' poems and passages. Bradley's expansive 'all things' is the expression of his own idealist philosophy rather than a literal description of Wordsworth's everyday vision. Even so it is a bold claim. In the best and most characteristic passages, Wordsworth apprehends 'all things, natural or human, as the expression of something which, while manifested in them, immeasurably transcends them'. It is not (Bradley is

---

8. The Norton Critical Edition of The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850, ed. Jonathon Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York and London, 1979), p.563; A. C. Bradley, 'Wordsworth', in Oxford Lectures on Poetry [1909]. Hereafter referred to as Norton's.

careful in his causation) that the sight of the particular object yields to a further view; rather it is that the visionary power itself is the first-seen element, electing the object for Wordsworth to see. This is how he apprehends things. And yet, though instrumental in Wordsworth's perception, the visionary power seems to lack expression of its own, achieving substance only in the action of transcendence. How are we to make sense of this power, at once so vagrant, and again so persuasively solid? Either it will fade before the view, or else it presents a language so simple and sturdy that it hardly seems to require interpretation at all. Revealingly, Bradley identifies the stiffest challenge to the understanding of Wordsworth as the failure to observe his difficulty, a mistakenness that he says begins with Arnold's Introduction:

> Arnold wished to make Wordsworth more popular; and so he was tempted to represent Wordsworth's poetry as much more simple and unambitious than it really was, and as much more easily apprehended than it ever really can be.
>
> (Ibid., 563)

Bradley was probably responding to this passage of Arnold's:

> And let us here be on our guard, too, against the exhibitors and extollers of 'a scientific system of thought' in Wordsworth's poetry. The poetry will never be seen aright while they thus exhibit it. The cause of its greatness is simple, and may be told quite simply. Wordsworth's poetry is great because of the extraordinary power with which Wordsworth feels the joy offered to us in nature, the joy offered to us in the simple primary affections and duties; and because of the extraordinary power with which, in case after case, he shows us this joy, and renders it so as to make us share it.[9]

Arnold is right, the greatness of Wordsworth lies in his simplicity. And Bradley is right too in saying that Wordsworth is not easily

---

9. Norton's, 562; Matthew Arnold, from the Preface to The Poems of Wordsworth, edited by Arnold [1879].

apprehended. It is because Wordsworth is simple that he is difficult to understand. He is simple and severe in his simplicity, and his greatness offers little or no purchase to the reader. The simplicity points only to the silence which surrounds the utterance; and we are made to feel the weight of what is not said. The best illustration of this is in Wordsworth's own lines:

> Motionless as a cloud the old Man stood,
> That heareth not the loud winds when they call;
> And moveth all together, if it move at all.[10]

His poetry too (like the cloud) 'moveth all together, if it move at all'. It is a huge challenge: to understand Wordsworth you must recognise Wordsworth. Perhaps it is no surprise that the poet who values recognition so highly should expect his readers to employ its power in reading. It is as though the reader must see as Wordsworth himself sees for the poetry to work. The big question is how this may be done.

It is not so awful a challenge as it might at first seem. We are not presented with a blank page, but with a huge body of work. It is obvious that the solution to the problem must lie somewhere before us on the printed page. What is needed is some method or approach that can attend specifically to the margins of severe simplicity, and utilise the points of purchase. One way to approach the point of recognition is by an investigation of Wordsworth's poetic silences.

II

What is silence in Wordsworth? One answer is to be found simply in the use that Wordsworth himself makes of the word. As, for example,

---

10. The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols (Oxford, 1940-49), II, 237; 'Resolution and Independence', 11.75-77. Hereafter referred to as WW.

in the lines which introduce the episode of the Discharged Soldier in

The Prelude:

> A favourite pleasure hath it been with me,
> From time of earliest youth, to walk alone
> Along the public Way, when, for the night
> Deserted, in its silence it assumes
> A character of deeper quietness
> Than pathless solitudes.
> (_Prelude_ IV. 363-8)

Although it is an actual silence which is meant, this silence seems to be more than an absence of noise. It is dealt with as a positive influence, as a force capable of contact; and so at night the road 'assumes / A _character_ of deeper quietness'. There is a quality of real presence. The most striking thing however is that the 'deeper quietness' belongs to the deserted highway, and not to the 'pathless solitudes'. The deeper calm comes in contact with human places now quiet. Silence is given the character of memory; it grows compelling through the overtreading of experience now absented.

Though the passage begins cautiously, with the advent of silence the whole tone is transformed, and it ends in a way utterly unlike its beginning. The 'deeper quietness' rises palpably, half-way between enticement and warning. Silence comes forward to meet the walker, and its presence is intensified by the return of memory, vivid and forceful, in sharp contrast to the inert recollection of the past ('A favourite pleasure hath it been with me / From time of earliest youth'). Emphatically, the memory grows most forceful when 'the Public way' supplants 'me' as the subject. Its silence harbours the depth and reality of memory, just as the usurping moments did the sense of greatness on the Alps.

The impression of depth and prior contact, of life as remembered moments of silence, is corroborated in 'Simon Lee':

O Reader! had you in your mind
Such stores as silent thought can bring,
O gentle Reader! you would find
A tale in every thing.[11]

There is, to the quick glance, a superficial ordinariness in Wordsworth's thought: 'silent thought' has been spent by the narrator on Simon Lee, and so there appears more in the huntsman's life than if the poet had never considered him. But it is not 'silent thought' which is directly active in the finding of tales; rather it is the 'stores', the barely recognised recollections, set down by silent thought, which act. Moreover, it makes no difference whether the thought was spent originally on Simon Lee, or on any other person or thing. The stored influence is free, and finds 'A tale in every thing'. Wordsworth starts with a degree of circumspection, 'O Reader, _had_ you in your mind / Such stores as silent thought _can_ bring', but he throws aside such caution at the end, stating with certainty, 'You _would find_ / A tale in every thing'. Thus prepared, the mind is inherently creative, finding narrative everywhere, with an immediacy which makes it even stranger that behind this there should lie a time of dark accumulation. Poetry takes effect before its achieved expression, in a barely heeded aggregation of thought.

The first answer to the question, 'What is silence in Wordsworth?' is that it is more than absence of noise; Wordsworth's silence rather points to a mental state (an active state) that is anterior to meaning, but different from any Freudian sense of the unconscious. This state, though prior to articulation, surfaces in poetry with potent force. Wordsworth's most brilliant exposition of this assumption comes in his account of reading in Book V of _The Prelude_:

---

11. _WW_, IV, 63; 'Simon Lee', 11.65-8.

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 do work their changes there,
As in a mansion like their proper home;
Even forms and substances are circumfus'd
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.
(Prelude V. 619-29)

The passage is finely complicated, and not least because Wordsworth writes as if there were no difficulty in the conception at all. The lines are contagiously full of trust. The three distinct elements in the opening sentence are joined together without a pause (in syntax or daring) as if indeed a strong wind this instant swept the lines: 'Visionary Power / Attends upon the motions of the winds / Embodied in the mystery of the words'. Without harm to their integrity, vision and wind and word are simply united within a single purpose, utterly distinct yet joined in the magisterial syntax. Wordsworth helpfully offers us an insight into the mechanism of verse, but without ever stopping to do so.

The striking thing is that whilst it is done with an appearance of haste, the three gathered into one, the actual terms imply a deeper, slower acquaintance. Attendance and embodiment, the specified states, speak of longer service. As in 'Simon Lee', the impulse of poetry stems from an experience of darkness and shadowy development:

There darkness makes abode, and all the host
Of shadowy things do work their changes there,
As in a mansion like their proper home;
Even forms and substances are circumfus'd
By that transparent veil with light divine.

'There', he says, as if he had said where. Momentarily the word lacks any external purchase, until burr-like, it attaches to the preceding sentence. It takes a glancing purchase in that rash certainty; and to

no particular element, but to all at once. The beginnings are wild enough, but the syntax is determined to deal patiently and slowly with the impulse the poet gave such rapid expression to before. Place is thus stressed foremost, named three times over (abode, mansion, home) and implied twice in the repeated 'there'. In lingering after rushing, the lines seem determined this time to give a clear articulation to the actual birth of poetry, to watch the processes carefully, and to record the moment where vision began.[12] If the first three lines quoted ('Visionary Power...') gave expression to instantaneousness, these seem to be slowed to the point almost of disintegration. The simile forgets its beginning, repeating itself both in form ('As' and 'like') and substance ('mansion' and 'home'). Disclosure is delayed to the point of tautology. And yet, despite this slowness, there is still time for an impulse to appear that was not there before. The 'light divine' springs from the darkness of the abode, unheralded by the 'host / Of shadowy things', yet for all this, miraculously, as if it belonged. It is as if the shutter could never move fast enough to capture the arrival of the sudden, the unprepared vision which has the quality of the given.

The second answer to the question 'What is silence in Wordsworth?' is that it is a form of suddenness. The anterior power seizes voice in this way, and becomes formally present in the text. Ordinary 'forms and substances' are worked upon in darkness and forgetfulness, unknown to the poet, until in a second phase, in the 'turnings intricate of Verse', they emerge transformed:

---

12. 'Abode' is Wordsworth's usual term for the physical world into which vision is displaced; Richard J. Onorato, however, claims that these lines refer to the power of poetry to evoke 'the infantile and fantastic sense of alternatives to reality, of a prior and superior existence, perhaps as soul, from which the sense of self and time are a gradual estrangement'; 'Metaphors of Beginning' in Norton's, p.623.

> Even forms and substances are circumfus'd
> 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.

The strangeness and certainty of Wordsworth's meaning concentrates about that extra, inexplicable comma; when 'forms and substances... Present themselves as objects recognis'd, / In flashes'. The more mundane and the safer way of punctuating these lines, and the way that expectation tempts us to read, would be to omit the comma after 'recognis'd', as Wordsworth does in the 1850 text. The comparison of the texts is revealing. The 1850 version reads in a far simpler way: 'forms and substances... Present themselves as objects recognis'd / In flashes'. In this later version it is the action of recognition that provides the flash; the understanding sparks in a sudden grasp of recognition. In 1805, however, it is the objects that flash, the suddenness belongs to them. It is a huge shift of meaning, even for 45 years, to move from object to reader. It's as if the Wordsworth of 1850 could not quite believe what he had written in 1805.

It would be hard to account for the import of the 1805 text. Poetic objects appear instilled with latent recognition, they present themselves thus, as if the reader would simply recognise the poet's own thoughts, and could not help but do so! Wordsworth's high estimation of the power of recognition does not end here though. These objects grow familiar just as they hardly resemble themselves, 'with a glory scarce their own'. He is deliberately driving poetry to a form of communication that goes beyond the expressed language, towards a silent correspondence; which is indeed where it began, with the inarticulate prompting of the wind.

Wordsworth's poetry harnesses the 'motions of the winds', but not so as to tame or to reduce their influence; nor is it an attempt

merely to transcribe their voiceless communication. There is a native unwillingness to curb their power. Poetry becomes the letting free of their basic impulse in verse. At the centre of Wordsworth's poetic practice there is this fierce recklessness and trust. Compare his analysis of language in Essays on Epitaphs:

> Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve.[13]

At first sight, this argument sits oddly with the development of Prelude V. 619-29, where words are a power, and essential to the transformation of wind and darkness into poetry and light. Here, Wordsworth writes, the job of language is to leave well alone, to 'uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet'. Wordsworth is neither disparaging nor doubting language, however, but tracing its power to source. The power of language is not in boisterous new formulations that may distract attention from the meaning. The power of language lies rather in an ability merely to allow meaning to take place. Language should be 'like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe', neither of which exactly draw attention to themselves.

At this stage, the study of silence faces two large, seemingly divergent routes of investigation. Silence in Wordsworth can be characterised both as an authority that predates meaning, a source lying in the deep past of the poet and his poetry and which demands recognition, almost collusion, in the reader; and also as suddenness, a form of contact in the writer so abruptly new that it evades all precedent. The challenge now must be to reconcile these two routes.

---

13. The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser, 3 vols (London, 1974), II, 85; 'Essays upon Epitaphs' III. Hereafter referred to as Prose Works.

The most complete answer to the question, 'What is silence in Wordsworth?', and the answer that will eventually unite these two paths is that it is the ground of his poetry, in Heidegger's sense of the term. Wordsworth is a poet of discovery (rather than a poet of creation) who makes his discoveries within his own memory. This is why he kept revising his poetry, and why there are three complete versions of The Prelude. His desire in writing is not to say anew, afresh each time, but each time to get closer to an original meaning. This is his quest, but he does not search alone. The original meaning (lying in deep memory) is also, and his beliefs rest on the claim, the source of his being, which means that (at the same time) it is trying to get closer to him.

Wordsworth is a reader as well as a writer of his poetry; he listens as he writes, revising constantly, patient with his own spasmodic vision. With this dual search, it is no wonder that recognition is so potent a force in his poetry. But why is it that recognition should be so central to the reading of Wordsworth? Are we too involved in some way in this inquiry?

III

These are questions raised by Heidegger in his lecture, 'What Are Poets For?', not of Wordsworth but of poetry in general, and Romantic poetry in particular. The great strength of Heidegger's thought here lies in his estimation of poetry and poets. It seems to him that poetry has no less a function than to ground humanity.[14] Humanity needs grounding, Heidegger writes, because we are living in a time of darkness and destitution, an era defined by the default of God:

---

14. Cf. the discussion of the Holzwege in Laszlo Versényi, Heidegger, Being and Truth (New Haven, 1966), p.91ff.

> Because of this default, there fails to appear for the world the ground that grounds it... The age for which the ground fails to come, hangs in the abyss. Assuming that a turn still remains open for this destitute time at all, it can come some day only if the world turns about fundamentally - and that now means, unequivocally: if it turns away from the abyss. In the age of the world's night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured. But for this it is necessary that there be those who reach into the abyss.[15]

It is striking that though the age is poised over the abyss, the danger is not that of people falling in; rather it is that no one will venture to enter there. The vacancy seems positively to repel attention, so that it must be approached decisively. Heidegger writes, 'the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured... For this it is necessary that there be those who reach into the abyss'. In this, two areas of concern arise immediately, two points that demand a leap of understanding. Firstly, there is the seeming paradox that ground is to be secured in the abyss, in emptiness and vacancy, in what could be termed silence. Secondly, there is the belief that the personal daring of those who reach into it can really have such immense significance for all, securing for us the world. For Heidegger these adventurers are the poets. Our relationship to poetry is one of deep necessity. It is, however, a need of which the age is mainly unaware.

The absence of God is a profound problem, so desperate, paradoxically, that many fail even to observe the loss. Wordsworth was, of course, never consciously unbelieving in God, but The Prelude almost studiously ignores the language of orthodoxy and in many places where

---

15. Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. Albert Hofstader (New York, 1971), p.92. The lecture 'What Are Poets For?' was delivered on the twentieth anniversary of Rilke's death in 1926, but not printed until Holzwege, 1950. Poetry, Language, Thought hereafter referred to as PLT.

the divine name might have been invoked, avoids doing so. Wordsworth addresses other powers instead (glory, visionary power, Imagination, the sublime...). The effect of the poem, as in Heidegger, is to find in the deficit an experience that could be called 'religious'. Heidegger begins his lecture starkly mindful of the decline, as he echoes Hölderlin's question from the elegy 'Bread and Wine': '...and what are poets for in a destitute time?' Heidegger comments bleakly on it: 'We hardly understand the question today. How, then, shall we grasp the answer that Hölderlin gives?' (PLT, 91). His frustration and patience are tangible; a huge question is being asked and yet it is as though we cannot understand the first difficulty. One must see the default of God as a default, and grasp the reality of the abyss. For Heidegger, as for Wordsworth, recognition of what apparently defeats the utterance is of the first importance.

Just how vital recognition is for Heidegger can be seen in the passage quoted above, where he makes this aside: 'Assuming that a turn still remains open for this destitute time at all, it can come some day only if the world turns about fundamentally - and that now means, unequivocally'. It's his rewriting of 'fundamentally' that is interesting. Ordinarily, 'fundamental' does not mean 'unequivocal' at all; it means basic, original, essential, primary. Yet for Heidegger, the meanings carried by 'fundamentally' are collected in the decisive turn of 'unequivocally'. A single moment of single mind becomes the equivalent of all that original security. In describing the event, Heidegger follows his own principles, 'and that now means...', he writes. To see unequivocally, even for a moment, is fundamental. Recognition grounds the spirit.

In this context, Wordsworth's recovery on the Alps is brilliantly determinate: 'And now recovering, to my Soul I say / I recognise thy

glory'. It is a wonderfully intemperate awareness of time; this 'now' is more, far more, than a marker of chronology. It is rather the sign of an event, as if the momentary nature of vision, the flashes and visitings of promise, were actually fundamental. This is indeed how Wordsworth treats them, as the ground of his soul's glory: 'There Greatness makes abode'. Clearly we are dealing here with a measure of understanding that is absolute - that is wholesale and thoroughgoing. Wordsworth's perspective is changed fundamentally by this recovery.

It is strange to observe that this upheaval of understanding is not in the least unfamiliar in this context, remarkable though it is. Such wholesale manoeuvres are becoming common: Heidegger requires them in the turn from the abyss, Wordsworth performs them, and they are the way too in which we are to read. So M. Guy Thompson writes:

> For Heidegger to understand something means to be transformed by it. There is no such thing as purely cognitive understanding. If we were to say that we understood something but that it did not make any difference, that it did not change anything, Heidegger would simply say that we did not hear it, even if we thought we did.[16]

If this is extended to the reading of poetry, then great writing could only be approached greatly. It is impossible, and furthermore, it would be irrelevant to attempt to understand evasively. Thompson's phrasing is emphatic: 'If we were to say that we understood something but that it did not make any difference... Heidegger would simply say that we did not hear it'. Understanding must make a difference to the reader. This is true particularly in the reading of Wordsworth, where a purely technical or aesthetic approach will be insufficient to the task; though technique and aesthetics are of course a necessary part

---

16. M. Guy Thompson, The Death of Desire (New York and London, 1985), p.171.

of the reading. Something more is needed so as to hear his meaning, a wholesale and unguarded approach. The poets, Heidegger would say, reach first into the abyss; but in order for the reader to achieve a genuine understanding, or to ground the reading, it is necessary that we must dare to follow them. There is no point and little traction in reserve. And in this reading, Wordsworth's silence has the function of a guide; the tacit, the inexpressible, in his poetry sharpens our hearing.

Certainly Wordsworth shows no sign of hanging back in these lines from the two-Part Prelude of 1799. He remembers standing before the expanse of the sea in a mood of peculiar openness:

> How I have stood to images like these
> A stranger, linking with the spectacle
> No body of associated forms
> And bringing with me no peculiar sense
> Of quietness or peace, yet I have stood
> Even while my eye has moved o'er three long leagues
> Of shining water, gathering, as it seemed,
> Through the wide surface of that field of light
> New pleasure, like a bee among the flowers.[17]

It's the quality of 'Even' that is so effective: 'yet I have stood / Even while my eye has moved o'er three long leagues / Of shining water'. As an adverb (meaning 'yet') and a conjunction (meaning 'while'), 'even' is superfluous, because these meanings are already directly given by the text. It seems an unnecessary word. And yet as an adjective 'even' is powerfully expressive, even though the poet initially risks confusion and incongruity in this use of the word ('Yet I have stood / Even'). It is strange as well that this should be the word to give expression to the daring of the poet. It means unbroken of surface; smooth of action; unruffled of temper; and equal

---

17. William Wordsworth, The Prelude (1798-1799), ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca, 1977), p.53; First Part, ll.399-412.

of rank. These four senses run through the enjambment, back and forth, the level of the horizon drawing from the perceiver a level mood to match - and all with a strange sense of equality in the contact. It is not just that Wordsworth is soothed by the setting; more than this, it seems actively to balance him, here and now, with 'Even' as the pivot. The redundant senses of 'even' are re-collected here (the supernumerary 'yet' and 'while') attending to this act of balance.

It is the openness of the poet's response that is so striking, and that constitutes his sense of balance. Ricks deals with such moments of poise in his discussion of Wordsworth's line-endings:

> The white space at the end of a line of poetry constitutes some kind of pause; but there need not be any pause of formal punctuation, and so there may be only equivocally a pause at all. A non-temporal pause? Unless the rhythm or the sense or the formal punctuation insists upon it, the line-ending (which cannot help conveying some sense of an ending) may not be exactly an ending. The white space may constitute an invisible boundary; an absence or a space which yet has significance; what in another context would get called a pregnant silence.[18]

The white space at the line-ending harbours a potential that Ricks finds he can only locate, not name; it is an 'ending [which] may not be exactly an ending', 'an invisible boundary', 'a non-temporal pause'. Language pulls against its confines when it has to address silence. Yet these cryptic terms capture the effect of Wordsworth's enjambment ('Yet I have stood / Even while my eye has moved...'), where the manifest smoothness of the transition acts strangely in reading to convey a jolt, as if sense had indeed crossed an invisible boundary. The poet stops short ('I have stood') in such a way as to

18. Ricks, 'Wordsworth: "A Pure Organic Pleasure from the Lines"', in <u>William Wordsworth</u>, Penguin Critical Anthologies, pp.505-6.

go beyond. It has to do with the line's utter openness. On one side there is the pure stasis of the watcher, on the other only movement in the ranging of his eye; similarly, the vertical 'I stood' joins the horizontal 'Even' - all without guard, with nothing tangibly in between. Manifestly the line expresses equilibrium, but silently (and piquantly so as to achieve this equilibrium) a complete upheaval is performed. There is thus 'a sense of ending' folded into the very equanimity of the poet, a darker potential of vision, which is alike made and phrased by openness: 'For the use of line-endings can be a type or symbol or emblem of what the poet values, as well as the instrument by which his values are expressed' (Ricks, 507).

What Wordsworth gathers is simple and it is gathered simply too; he takes 'New pleasure, like a bee among the flowers'; but it is the disturbance of the invisible boundary rather than new pleasure that has the greatest effect. The importance of the white space shows up in comparison with the text of 1805 where a comma is interposed: 'Yet I have stood, / Even while my eye has mov'd...' (<u>Prelude</u> I. 604-5). Without the significant absence of the two-Part <u>Prelude</u>, the impact of the lines is reduced. Their sense is clearer though less sure.

The poet's sense of an unspoken region in poetic language, and his inclination to allow meaning to rely upon it, is evident too in that most Wordsworthian of formulations, the double negative. As with the white space of the enjambment, the double negative is a phrasing of silence. It is not (as it might seem) circumspection, but rather an impulse of commitment that lies behind the formulation:

> So through the darkness and the cold we flew,
> And not a voice was idle; with the din,
> Meanwhile, the precipices rang aloud,
> The leafless trees, and every icy crag
> Tinkled like iron, while the distant hills
> Into the tumult sent an alien sound

> Of melancholy, not unnoticed, while the stars,
> Eastward, were sparkling clear, and in the west
> The orange sky of evening died away.
> (<u>Prelude</u> I. 465-73)

It is itself such a striking phrase: 'not unnoticed'. Immediately it is the centre and the pivot of the passage. Why could he not have written 'deeply noticed', or 'which struck at once', or any phrase that would positively own the 'alien sound / Of melancholy'? That he uses a negative phrasing gives his regard an odd air of independence; as if his own attention, as well as the sound, came to him without volition, 'sent' from some inaccessible place. Oblivion would be the more expected response; that the boys did not ignore it, gives the feeling an unspecific importance. At a physical level, of course, the note of distant melancholy begins with the present tumult of the skaters; but this is not how it appears, nor how it is received. The 'alien sound' comes 'while' the other features of the scene, the crags, trees and precipices catch the 'din'. It joins the tumult as a stranger. Yet with an unerring directness, 'not unnoticed', it becomes the new centre of the poet's perspective. From this static, independent point, he observes an altered scene, composed now of silence and calm, where before there had been din and movement.

'While' he says, as though resuming his old thread, 'while the stars, / Eastward, were sparkling clear, and in the west / The orange sky of evening died away'. Like the pause that is not a pause, the double negative sets up a moment in which inarticulate sense finds a footing in the verse. It sets up a pregnant silence in the middle of the line. A positive expression would give a very different emphasis:

> the distant hills
> Into the tumult sent an alien sound
> Of melancholy, that I did hear, while the stars,
> Eastward, were sparkling clear...

There is no pause in this case, no jolt of the invisible boundary. Sense is rather continuous, and the temptation is to read through the second comma, so that the stars and fading sky mingle with the alien sound without any break or sense of contradiction. With 'not unnoticed' matters are not so seamless: the speaker looks at the stars in a sort of surprise, at the same time as being held by the strange sensation of 'not unnoticed'. The sense is decidedly not continuous, but represents rather an over-laying of attention, in which the clear sky ahead and the darker region of the double negative test out each other's weight and claim. Just as in the enjambment 'Yet I have stood / Even...', a reorientation or a balancing is taking place, that affects the poet's relationship to the external world and to his deep inward nature.

What is silence in Wordsworth? It is an idea of something that lies what actually gets expressed in the lines. But this does not mean that it cannot be traced. Its effects are to be seen; the peculiarities of his writing are not really separate phenomena, but originate in a response to a hidden reality which forces his words into strange forms, makes the poetry always on the point of transcribing its meanings. Silence is an active element in Wordsworth's poetry, and it is formally present in many guises. It is there, for example, in his use of white space, in his double negatives, as well as in the visible vacancies, the blanks and breathing spaces of his poetry.[19] These and other evidences can be traced, and together, they

---

19. Geoffrey H. Hartman, Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814 (New Haven, Conn., 1964), pp.17-18, sees the pause of silence as central in his definition of Wordsworth's imagination: 'The effects of "imagination" are always the same: a moment of arrest, the ordinary vital continuum being interrupted; a separation of the traveler-poet from familiar

provide a strong practical account of what is unspoken in the text. In their oddness and upheaval, these silences command the attention of the reader, imposing a momentary confusion that is yet oddly confirming of the identity of his work. It is so for the poet too - it should not be understated how far or how completely Wordsworth is drawn by silence. As for example with the boy of Winander, who blows 'mimic hootings' to the owls:[20]

> And when it chanced
> That pauses of deep silence mock'd his skill,
> Then sometimes, in that silence, while he hung
> Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize
> Has carried far into his heart the voice
> Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
> Would enter unawares into his mind
> With all its solid imagery, its rocks,
> Its woods, and that uncertain Heaven, receiv'd
> Into the bosom of the steady Lake.
> (*Prelude* V. 404-13)

It is not the conversation with owls, surprising though that is, which is creative here so much as the unexpected silence. Though at first the 'pauses of deep silence' seem to represent a deficiency, to mock his skill, they are transformed into a positive energy. He hangs listening 'in that silence', waiting for what may come, and the poet waits too. For Wordsworth, silence is an attitude or a state of mind as recognisable as a geographical place would be (though not so easy to locate as, say, the cliff's edge in *Prelude* I, where the poet hangs suspended above the raven's nest). The pause of deep silence

---

nature; a thought of death or judgement or of the reversal of what is taken to be the order of nature; a feeling of solitude or loss or separation'.

20. Mary Jacobus, *Romanticism, Writing, And Sexual Difference* (Oxford, 1989), p.265-6, (in her discussion of De Quincey's reading of the boy of Winander passage) describes the 'moment of silence or uncertainty... its irreducibility and its oddly unstable, momentary effect of equilibrium'.

that opens in his verse, and which gets before his eye, is a region of visionary potential which instils in his consciousness thoughts and images that appear to him independent of poetic 'skill'; that 'enter unawares into his mind', and strike with 'a gentle shock of mild surprize'. Wordsworth trusts silence as a place where poetry happens.

In what sense is this what Heidegger calls a reaching into the abyss? Wordsworth's silence seems a sustaining influence, utterly opposed to the darkness and undermining of the abyss. And yet, the sound of 'melancholy' in the icy din, the mocking of skill, the sense of an ending that is not exactly an ending, all of these touch upon a darker aspect of silence. There are times in The Prelude where this darkness dominates, where the light of sense seems to have gone out permanently, leaving the poet bereft. As when he observes the English fleet at Portsmouth, at rest before it must sail on France:

> I beheld the Vessels lie,
> A brood of gallant creatures, on the Deep
> I saw them in their rest, a sojourner
> Through a whole month of calm and glassy days,
> In that delightful Island which protects
> Their place of convocation; there I heard
> Each evening, walking by the still sea-shore,
> A monitory sound that never fail'd,
> The sunset cannon. While the Orb went down
> In the tranquillity of Nature, came
> That voice, ill requiem! seldom heard by me
> Without a spirit overcast, a deep
> Imagination, thought of woes to come,
> And sorrow for mankind, and pain of heart.
> (Prelude X. 293-306)

Three times the first sentence opens with a perception: 'I beheld the Vessels lie', 'on the Deep / I saw them', 'there I heard...'. In spite of his misgivings at the project of the fleet, Wordsworth is drawn to their beauty. They call his eye and hence the lovely enjambment of 'on the Deep / I saw them', the silent pause and suspension in which the 'I' seems drawn (like the boy of Winander) to rest on

the deep that the poet observes. Seen and heard each evening, the ships have become for Wordsworth a part of the scene, as necessary to its composition as the 'three long leagues / Of shining water' were before, when he stood gathering new pleasure from the round of the horizon. Both in broad shape and in detail, these lines recall that other time, its stillness and its jarring. Yet Wordsworth cannot attend as he did then. There is a reserve in his response that was not there before.

If these were the only lines of Wordsworth's remaining, we might be tempted to read them purely as an expression of political belief or principle. The war-cannon booms and disturbs the peace of nature, bringing thoughts of death and sorrow into the calm of evening. The 'monitory sound' of the cannon would thus appear altogether an alien and an adverse influence; as it is indeed in truth. Yet this configuration of disturbance and calm is the very pattern of Wordsworthian vision. Hence the poet's pain of heart as he turns from the prospect. ('Then sometimes, in that silence, while he hung / Listening'... 'came / That voice, ill requiem!'). It is a betrayal of his own response.

Just as the 'brood of gallant creatures' was able to command his eye despite its coming purpose, so too the cannon's voice has power to catch the poet unawares. After the first mention of the monitory sound 'that never fail'd', he thus starts again in an unbroken calm:

> While the Orb went down
> In the tranquillity of Nature, came
> That voice, ill requiem!

It's the preposition that is interesting: it is not 'Into', but more unguardedly '<u>In</u> the tranquillity of Nature, came / That voice'. This 'In' refers of course to the setting sun of the preceding line, but it is the reassuring, apparent universality of the line which

prepares the shock, a line that starts without a thought of this conclusion, even though Wordsworth has just said that the monitory voice never failed. How does he forget? His oblivion is obvious in the impact of the cannon, introduced by its own force in the verb 'came'. It comes (it seems to surface) endowed with a sense of volition and of purchase: 'While the Orb went down... came / That voice'. The voice is both unexpected and unerring, presenting itself to be 'recognis'd / In flashes' (Prelude V. 627-8). When he says that the monitory sound 'never fail'd', Wordsworth means primarily that the cannon marked the sunset without fail, but it is also that its murmur never fails to find him. It is the voice that he remembers, the sudden voice, that calls him in spirit to the 'place of convocation'. Far from disturbing the scene of nature, therefore, the monitory sound is at the centre of the occasion, revealing the calm that it momentarily disturbs. The air of repose is restored over and again, in the glistening surfaces and stillness of the passage, and it seems to last for an unbreakable and timeless span. So it is not just a month that the poet describes but 'a whole month of calm and glassy days', a separate time, unbroken and complete. It's this unbroken quality that he stresses in 'glassy': the reflective, buoyant surface of the water is lent to the passing days, as if time itself would return only images of joy. The quietness of the shore too has an embedded sense of permanence ('still'). Wordsworth wants the encounter to be safe, even as he shows how it may not be. So with a perfect enforcement of the open line-ending ('on the Deep / I saw them'), he shares this time of peace with the Vessels out at sea and preserves intact the mood of calm.

Yet finally in the writing the poet turns from the prospect, and breaks the spell. Instead of the timeless pause of silence he finds

what is decidedly finite, the likelihood of an immediate conflict. The cannon was 'seldom heard by me / Without a spirit overcast, a deep / Imagination, thought of woes to come'. It is too great a darkness, too antipathetic a force for the poet to admit; he baulks at it, and in so doing alters fundamentally the balance of the passage. Where typically, the shock of vision would be absorbed into the calm, this time, imagination cuts short his rapture. Now, painfully, the 'deep / Imagination' limits the scope and freedom of the verse, as if the greatness of his feeling here led Wordsworth to be less. Where before there had been an effortless freedom of response, now the poet stops in constraint and reserve. It is this hiatus between serenity and foreboding, the capacity to be in two minds at once which also expresses that silence in the poetry, a refusal to explain.

In his lecture, 'What Are Poets For?', Heidegger offers a way in which to understand the nature of the transformation that Wordsworth undergoes in this passage. Heidegger describes distinct stages in the development of being, identifying first an original state of reckless outgoing. Such daring is for him the essential character of being, and quite literally so; audacity is the ground of being for all living things, man, plant and beast:

> Being lets beings loose into the daring venture. This release, flinging them loose is the real daring. The Being of beings is this relation of the flinging loose to beings. Whoever is in being at a given time is what is being ventured.
> (PLT, 101)

The 'daring venture' of Being is a simple and careless release, whose very heedlessness amounts to gravity. As with the syntactic freedom of Wordsworth before the expanse of the sea ('Yet I have stood / Even while my eye has moved'), an openness of spirit in the venture acts to balance being:

> What is ventured is thus careless, sine cura, securum - secure, safe. What is ventured can follow the venture, follow it into the unprotectedness of the ventured, only if it rests securely in the venture.
>
> (PLT, 104)

Risk appears implicit in being, to the extent that carelessness seems necessary to the safety of the venture: 'What is ventured can follow the venture... into the unprotectedness of the ventured, only if it rests securely in the venture'. With bewildering tautology, Heidegger says that the way to be secure in the venture is to be secure. The tautology phrases a moment curiously like that of the 'non temporal pause', making a jolt in the smoothness of the line, except that in this case, the ventured being is not conscious of transition at all; consciousness of the moment would indeed prevent the simple, careless venture. This is the first state of being described by Heidegger, and it is not one that self-conscious man can maintain.

The second stage in Heidegger's progression is characterised by will instead of daring. This he contests is the state of the present age: 'This willing determines the nature of modern man, though as yet he is not aware of its far-reaching implication' (PLT, 111). In place of the heedless abandon of before, man seeks to perform and to control the terms of his venture: 'Man sets up the world towards himself, and delivers Nature over to himself' (PLT, 110). There are grave dangers in the appropriation, Heidegger writes, in the tendency of man to deal objectively with the world:

> What threatens man in his very nature is the willed view that man, by peaceful release, transformation, storage and channelling of the energies of physical nature, could render the human condition, man's being, tolerable for everybody and happy in all respects... What threatens man in his very nature is the view that technological production puts the world in order, while in fact this ordering is

> precisely what levels every _ordo_, every rank, down to the level of uniformity of production, and thus from the outset destroys the realm from which any rank and recognition could possibly arise.
> (_PLT_, 116-17)

By 'technological production' Heidegger refers not merely to the influence of industry or science, but more specifically, and more urgently, to the desire of man to order nature, to treat matter and experience alike as susceptible to his design. This 'willed view' of man's relationship with the world 'threatens man in his very nature', Heidegger writes, the desire for 'happy' order inducing a profound disorder and inward discontent. The attempt destroys what is far more rare and precious than the system it sought to achieve, 'the realm from which any rank and recognition could possibly arise'. It eats away at the centre, the action of the will disastrously bringing man to the very borders of spiritlessness. Seeking to involve himself in the processes of nature, man effects instead a severance with his own deep being.[21] For Wordsworth too, at Portsmouth, the condition of mind is comparable, when in the tranquillity of nature he attends to the booming of the cannon. The disturbance might in other circumstances have been the consummation of the calm, but it is not so here; conscious imaginations (of man's sorrow) get in the way of vision and cut the moment short. Everything is changed. He starts in

---

21. If one were to attempt to situate this argument of Heidegger's within conventional Wordsworthian criticism, it would be aligned squarely with the Hartman tradition. See especially _Wordsworth's Poetry_, pp.33-69, where the relationship of imagination and nature in Wordsworth is discussed. The 'apocalyptic' moments of imagination that Hartman identifies represent moments where the power of recognition breaks through natural ties. In Wordsworth's own writing, of course, the strongest expression of this thought would be in 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality': 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy! / Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy' (_WW_, IV, 281, ll.66-8).

the serenity of implicit faith but is forced into consciousness by the perceived threat. The shift has no explanation and, really, no voice; everything happens in the pause before 'came / That voice'.

IV

Though at first it had seemed to Wordsworth that revolution might be accommodated to the operations of nature, increasingly there comes upon him in Book X of The Prelude the realisation that in following its path he has lost track of all such continuity:

> I, who with the breeze
> Had play'd, a green leaf on the blessed tree
> Of my beloved Country; nor had wish'd
> For happier fortune than to wither there,
> Now from my pleasant station was cut off,
> And toss'd about in whirlwinds.
> (The Prelude X. 253-58)

It is no longer a gentle breeze but a whirlwind that directs the poet here, cut off from his 'beloved Country' and caught in a pattern of confusion. In the period of his life described in Books IX and X of The Prelude - his entanglement in the hopes of revolutionary France, and his alienation from his native land - Wordsworth's poetic vision appears to lose its footing.[22] The severance from his country coincides with a deeper sense of alienation from his very being than in the Portsmouth quotation. His silences bear witness to the severity of the transformation.[23] After the removal of the King, for instance, when the poet returns in hope to Paris, he comes face to face with a place of silence:

---

22. Hartman writes 'The hope inspired by Revolution is not destroyed in Wordsworth, but it is radically displaced. It has, in fact, no home or sphere of action left for it' (Wordsworth's Poetry, p.245).
23. See Jacobus, pp.40-5, where there is an interesting account of the poet's sense of his own speechlessness and incomprehension in the French Revolution.

> I cross'd (a blank and empty area then)
> The Square of the Carousel, few weeks back
> Heap'd up with dead and dying, upon these
> And other sights looking as doth a man
> Upon a volume whose contents he knows
> Are memorable, but from him lock'd up,
> Being written in a tongue he cannot read,
> So that he questions the mute leaves with pain
> And half upbraids their silence.
> (Prelude X. 46-54)

In contrast with the rich resonance that silence had before (when the poet walked along the deserted public way, for instance), the 'blank' of this abandoned public place is only confusingly 'memorable'. It is empty and unyielding and it defeats the attention of the poet, 'Being written in a tongue he cannot read'. Though the occasion of the lines is sharp, the experience they present has an awful looming dullness. The episode reads like one of the spots of time, with its visionary elements of blankness, darkness and death, yet with all the energy drained out of it. It might have been one, the features of the landscape are strikingly familiar, except that the Square of the Carousel lacks any 'vivifying Virtue' (Prelude XI. 260). For all of its painful immediacy, the recollection falls with numbing horror. Wordsworth watches himself as he 'questions the mute leaves with pain / And half upbraids their silence', and he seems debarred from his own existence. He fears that he is indeed dead to himself. So he confides in lines addressed to Coleridge that at this time:

> I scarcely had one night of quiet sleep
> Such ghastly visions had I of despair
> And tyranny, and implements of death,
> And long orations which in dreams I pleaded
> Before unjust Tribunals, with a voice
> Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense,
> Of treachery and desertion in the place
> The holiest that I knew of, my own soul.
> (Prelude X. 373-80)

In his 'ghastly visions' of despair the soul appears to Wordsworth horribly claustrophobic, a place of entangled ceaseless argument. It

is not so much infinite as incessant. One equivocal moment of release alone survives in this relentless gnawing, a moment that is quickly stifled. It comes in Wordsworth's darkest submission, when he pleads 'with a voice / Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense, / Of treachery and desertion in... my own soul'. On one level, the line-ending 'and a sense, / Of' looks nothing but continuous. And yet this 'sense' is precisely not a 'sense / Of treachery...', the comma prevents that reading. It is rather, simply, 'sense', and what it is a sense of remains hidden. The one detached phrase ('and a sense') looks beyond the continuous nightmare. It is as though for a moment only the poet had glimpsed a stronger and more vital possibility of sense, such as that found by him 'when the light of sense / Goes out in flashes...'.[24] Yet the impulse fades. Vision is obstructed here and Wordsworth's next words openly admit the defeat, the 'treachery and desertion' of his very soul. The structure of the passage is like that of moments where Wordsworth is surprised by silence, but here though the occasion is formally noiseless, sleep, it is filled with activity and clamour, reformulating the cliché 'quiet sleep'. He has lost the power of silence to the power of polemic.

The real terror of the revolutionary books of The Prelude lies not in the course of the political developments, but rather in the poet's feared deprivation of soul. Half asleep with horror, it seems to him that the very power on which he should be most able to rely - the

---

24. William Empson ('Sense in The Prelude', in Norton's, pp.625-42), comments on Prelude (1850) I. 391-3: '"my brain / Worked with a dim and undetermined sense / Of unknown modes of being." There is a suggestion here from the pause at the end of the line that he had not merely "a feeling of" these unknown modes but something like a new "sense" which was partly able to apprehend them - a new kind of sensing had appeared in his mind' (626).

spark of sudden contact - itself has fallen empty and unreliable.[25] At times it seems to Wordworth he has forgotten his very being:

> In the depth
> Of those enormities, even thinking minds
> Forgot at seasons whence they had their being.
> (Prelude X. 345-7)

The power of silence connects the poet to his deeper self. Its sudden voice strikes from the source of his being. So it is a fundamental loss to him when this impulse ceases. Books IX and X of The Prelude describe a time in which the power of silence falters for the poet; which is the reason why their narrative is so long and rambling, and so essentially self-unknowing. Wordsworth does not know (he cannot guess) what he has said, and so in honest confusion he goes on talking. Significantly, this time of deep forgetfulness is experienced by the poet not as absence or inarticulacy, but rather as too great an articulacy. Wordsworth observes the trouble of his soul in a kind of helpless clarity:

> Thus I fared,
> Dragging all passions, notions, shapes of faith,
> Like culprits to the bar, suspiciously
> Calling the mind to establish in plain day
> Her titles and her honours, now believing,
> Now disbelieving, endlessly perplex'd
> With impulse, motive, right and wrong, the ground
> Of moral obligation, what the rule
> And what the sanction, till, demanding proof,
> And seeking it in everything, I lost

---

25. See however Jerome J. McGann, The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation (Chicago and London, 1983), pp.82-92, where silence is interpreted as a sign of political guilt. Locating silence in, for example, Wordsworth's failure to mention Bastille day in 'Tintern Abbey', McGann treats silence as a purposeful act of evasion: 'The works tend to develop different sorts of artistic means by which to occlude and disguise their own involvement in a certain nexus of historical relations. This act of evasion, as it were, operates most whenever the poem is involved most deeply immersed in its cognitive (i.e., its ideological) materials and commitments. For this reason the critic of Romantic poetry must make a determined effort to elucidate the subject matter of such poems historically' (p.82).

> All feeling of conviction, and, in fine,
> Sick, wearied out with contrarieties,
> Yielded up moral questions in despair.
> (Prelude X. 888-900)

The conscious endeavour to test 'passions, notions, shapes of faith', gets in the way of judgement and leaves nothing on which he can rely, 'till, demanding proof, / And seeking it in everything, I lost / All feeling of conviction'. Conviction needs some other stay than proof, which offers no ground, no traction for the spirit to steady itself. Wordsworth's demand for proof removes the very certainty he had set out to find. As Heidegger said, the attempt to order nature 'destroys the realm from which any rank or recognition could possibly arise'. The pause of silence emerges with vital importance in the life of the spirit, as the stay required by certainty. It is the right tool for the job. Like Heidegger, who attempts to ground his age in the abyss, Wordsworth must look for certainty in the breaks, pauses and silences of his vision - even though they appear now shrouded in despair.

This is not to deny the relevance or the historical reality of the poet's world. One point is clear and provoking, that if his involvement in the Revolution were not necessary to the growth of his poetic imagination, Wordsworth could have left it out of The Prelude - just as he left it out of 'Tintern Abbey'. That he includes it still, suggests that the lostness and disengagement that he felt then must be an essential part of his account. After all, such dark passages are not unheard of in Wordsworth's poetry - they are rather central to his growth of mind, as the poet himself understands:

> Ah me! that all
> The terrors, all the early miseries
> Regrets, vexations, lassitudes, that all
> The thoughts and feelings which have been infus'd
> Into my mind, should ever have made up
> The calm existence that is mine when I
> Am worthy of myself!
> (Prelude I. 355-61)

His mind is formed of terrors, early misery and regret; 'thoughts and feelings' which make up 'The calm existence that is mine when I / Am worthy of myself'. Forcefully, as the poet describes his mind, there is no distance (and no voice) between these two states of terror and calm, only the unsummonable impulse to be 'worthy of myself'.

The Square of the Carousel could have been a spot of time, with its bleak and sombre mood. The resemblance is close enough indeed to make the point of difference interesting. What is it that prevents the Square of the Carousel from being a spot of time? Clearly it is neither darkness, desertion, nor the presence of death that prevents the poet from finding in the deserted square a 'vivifying Virtue', such as that found by him in the gibbet scene (<u>Prelude</u> XI. 279-326). These bleak elements are rather the constants in the equation. The difference exists in Wordsworth's ability to recognise the region of his poetry. He can see what is going on in the spots of time precisely because they remain mysterious to him, in a way that he cannot grasp the bearing of events in the Square of the Carousel, where the silent mystery is replaced by the clamour of confusion. Of course he knows the circumstances well enough, and he is painfully aware too of his inability to respond to them. He records both elements, both the facts and his failure to respond. Yet he is not satisfied. The poet knows there should be more. He passes the Square and looks:

> as doth a man
> Upon a volume whose contents he knows
> Are memorable, but from him lock'd up,
> Being written in a tongue he cannot read,
> So that he questions the mute leaves with pain
> And half upbraids their silence.

Why should he only 'half' upbraid the silence of the book? Surely a wholesale upbraiding would be appropriate, since the volume keeps its meaning from him. Perhaps it is 'half' because the poet does not want

in truth to decipher such 'memorable' bloodshed. The word 'half' in this case would be full of McGannian evasiveness, an occasion where the poet withdraws privately from the scene. But if it is a withdrawal, why should 'half' feel so much like an advance? The overall impression is indeed one of reluctance. The negatives in the passage are multiple and forbidding, blocking every angle of approach; so it is both that the pages are 'mute' and that the man 'cannot read' them. Negatives leap across the syntax to touch subject and object, as with the gerund here, 'Being written in a tongue he cannot read'; it is both that the man is unable to decipher the external signs, and that his own being is locked away. Everything is retracted and full of pain, and yet the would-be reader only 'half upbraids' the leaves. His mildness is striking. If he merely half upbraids their silence, then he must half endorse it too. Less than an evasion, this is a willingness to understand silently contradicted by a revulsion which can find no language. Far from being a sign of retreat, with 'half' the poet makes a return. He comes back against the flow, to regard the blank and empty square. There is no overt reason for this return, no tie, nothing that compels him, yet vaguely the poet motions to return. The word of apparent circumspection, 'half', is the most certain word on the page, and also the most reckless.

There is, in Heidegger, a parallel to this movement, which might help to explain the boldness of that 'half'. The action of the will, Heidegger observes, extends a sort of security to the human spirit, much as might the active and voluntary rehearsal of a political faith. 'But', he goes on, 'the peace of this peacefulness is merely the undisturbed continuing relentlessness of the fury of self-assertion which is resolutely self-reliant' (PLT, 116). Term after term, self-reliance after self-assertion, the will offers no release,

no freedom, from the resolute tension of the self. There are no external reference points, nothing at all beyond the self, so that human nature is essentially unseeing in its 'fury'. It is this sheer blindness to the danger of its own condition that strikes Heidegger as the darkest feature of his age. Determinedly he phrases it:

> The time remains destitute not only because God is dead, but because mortals are hardly aware and capable even of their own mortality. Mortals have not yet come into ownership of their own nature.
> (PLT, 96)

It is a groundless and an empty state that Heidegger describes, in which mortals intent on living forget their own mortality. They have forgotten in Wordsworth's phrase 'whence they had their being'. The time is essentially blind, and the more men strive to build contentment, the more they undermine their nature. Hence the exasperation of Heidegger at the start of his essay 'What Are Poets For?': 'We hardly understand the question today. How, then, shall we grasp the answer?' There is a dark awareness of this impasse in Wordsworth too when he talks of having 'Yielded up moral questions in despair'. The abandonment of moral questions is at the same time, ungraspably, an offering of moral questions, an ambiguity centred in the word 'yield'.

Heidegger offers a way to break through this state of despair (at best) or blindness (for the worst). Almost the greatest thing he does in this essay is to quote from Hölderlin: 'But where there is danger, there grows also what saves' (PLT, 118). As with dockleaves and nettles, so too with ground and the abyss. It is a colossal and an unnerving solution that he suggests. Heidegger calls on the spirit to return to the openness of the 'daring venture'; but not this time in innocence, rather the openness is to be experienced consciously. The human spirit it seems must approach safety by the darkest path:

> It may be that any other salvation than that which comes from where the danger is, is still within the unholy. Any salvation by makeshift, however well-intentioned, remains for the duration of his destiny an insubstantial illusion for man, who is endangered in his nature. The salvation must come from where there is a turn with mortals in their nature.
>
> (PLT, 118)

This is where Heidegger's thought corrresponds so well with Wordsworth's experience in The Prelude. To Heidegger it seems that the awareness and the ownership of nature demands a 'turn' in nature itself, a pause in the action of the will, like that of Wordsworth's 'half' in the Square of the Carousel, where for a bare moment the speaker looks clearly and unguardedly at the place of danger.[26] What Heidegger calls 'salvation' is not located ahead as a goal that may be achieved in time and distance, rather it takes effect in a moment. So it is significant and revealing and true that Heidegger resorts to repetition when he talks of this recovery, deliberately recalling his words of before:

> The more venturesome daring does not produce a defense. But it creates a safety, a secureness for us. Secure, securus, sine cura means: without care.
>
> (PLT, 120, and supra 28)

The recovery is phrased in the exact opposite of linear persistence: in tautology. It crops up in the same words, 'Secure, securus, sine cura means: without care'. The 'abyss' is phrased, and entered, and overcome within the repetitions. The essential characteristic of the recovery is that it is an embrace of the open - and openness for both Heidegger and Wordsworth means not distance but trust. So repetitions are a sign of life in Wordsworth's poetry: 'So feeling comes in aid /

---

26. This is where Ricks is so dazzlingly close to the actual mechanism of Wordsworth's poetry. A pause is the deepest necessity of his vision, a silence or a 'breathing-place' (Prelude XIII. 57) where the poet simply sees.

Of feeling, and diversity of strength / Attends us, if but once we have been strong' (Prelude XI. 326-8). He does not reach for another term, but holds his ground while 'feeling' fills with 'feeling'. Here (if pressed for an example), Wordsworth should say that he was worthy of himself. Tautology can so often be dead and forgetful, but it too may be a phrasing of silence, a willingness to speak sustained by an acceptance of the strong faith that lies beyond the limits of the repetition. Like the open line-ending and the double negative, tautology is an expression of trust which relies on a given, sudden truth ('if but once...'). The transformation is a matter of visionary adjustment rather than of substantial change; yet even so it is complete. There is a faint glimmer of this potential when the apparent equivocation of Wordsworth's 'half' grows to be wholesome, not an evasion but a willingness to accept the mysterious limits placed upon the volubility of the reason.

Where there is a turn in nature, Heidegger affirms, the spirit finds the ground of its being, but in the same moment, the abyss that has been veiled grows real:

> Assuming that a turn still remains open for this destitute time at all, it can come some day only if the world turns about fundamentally - and that now means, unequivocally: if it turns away from the abyss. In the age of the world's night, the abyss must be experienced and endured. But for this it is necessary that there be those who reach into the abyss.
>
> (PLT, 92)

There are two stages in this turning from the abyss, and two kinds of courage that are required. There is of course the courage to oppose the abyss, to experience and endure it in the world's night; but before this courage can be tried, first of all, there is the courage to grow aware of the abyss. The original and the greatest challenge is for the poet simply to pause in the effort of his will, and to

see. It is in this fundamental sense that Wordsworth admits silence into his poetry. He does not need to say another word, only to stop and see what is already there.

V

Largely it is for this reason that the process of re-writing is so vital in Wordsworth's work. For Wordsworth the greatest poetry is found, not made.[27] This deep reliance upon discovery (as opposed to the craftsman's desire to make or to improve) is evident in the comparison of early versions of Wordsworth's poems. Compare thus the first version of these lines from 'Salisbury Plain' with the vigorous signs of recognition that show up in revision. In MS.1 Wordsworth writes:

> Then looking up at distance he surveys
> What seems an antique castle spreading wide.
> Hoary and naked are its walls and raise
> Their brow sublime.[28]

There are few clues here to show that Wordsworth and no other could have written the lines. They impress a sense of the castle's scale and bleakness, but in a voice that does not respond. The tone of the speaker is far more moderate than his object. It is in returning to the passage that Wordsworth seems suddenly to find what it was he had

---

27. So Coleridge writes: 'To invent was different from to discover - a watchmaker invented a time-piece; but a profound thinker only could discover. Sir Isaac Newton, when he thought upon the apple falling from the tree, discovered but did not invent the law of gravitation', S. T. Coleridge, Lectures (1808-1819): On Literature, ed. R. A. Foakes, 2 vols (Princeton, New Jersey, 1987), I, 583.

28. William Wordsworth, The Salisbury Plain Poems, ed. Stephen Gill (Ithaca, 1975), p.23; MS.1, ll.77-80. The first version of the poem ('Salisbury Plain' or 'A Night on Salisbury Plain') was written in 1793 and 1794, the Additions to the first MS being dated between April-May 1794 and November 1795. The process of writing and revision, that is, straddles the period of the poet's despair. See also Prelude XII. 298-353 where Wordsworth writes of crossing Salisbury Plain, and describes its rejuvenating influence upon him.

wanted to say. In two or three reworkings, there is one particular phrase that continues to rise, as here:

And I have heard from travellers pale
Storm driven when that stupendous monum
Enclosed them in its blank immensity[29]

The last line is characteristically Wordsworthian in its responsiveness and scale, and it is this phrasing that continues to surface as Wordsworth reworks the passage. His very haste, which leaves 'monum-[ent]' half-written, reveals the strange stability of 'Enclosed them in its blank immensity'. It is Wordsworth's <u>openness</u> of response that anchors the line. So the word of embrace, 'Enclosed', tacitly is challenged by the endlessness and vacuity of the 'blank immensity', like the home found in infinitude in <u>The Prelude</u>. Yet the line is absent from the published text of 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain'. Wordsworth keeps it for himself. It is as if the words were part of a private language, something close and unwritten, that said his meaning perfectly, but which he did not trust to be generally understood.

There are other instances too in Wordsworth's revision of this poem where the resurgent, distinctive phrases are used and then suppressed. Such phrases seem the scaffolding of his poetry, or its invisible structure. They harness the meaning exactly, but they are too gaunt or too purposeful, perhaps, to be left showing at the finish. At a break in the female vagrant's tale, for example, (as it appears in the first version of the poem), the narrator looks to the sun and comments darkly on the dawn:

He looked and saw the smiling morn
All unconcerned with their unrest resume
Her progress through the brightening eastern gloom.

---

29. <u>Salisbury Plain Poems</u>, p.109-10, Additions to MS. 1. The lines as quoted here have been simplified, to omit Wordsworth's reworking of his reworking.

> Oh when shall such fair hours their gleams bestow
> To bid the grave its opening clouds illume?[30]

When Wordsworth comes to rewrite the passage, he feels again the contrast between the chill of the tale and the brightness of the dawn, but now with his return, his words catch the light of the sun and respond with it. Instead of the dark moral comment ('Oh when shall such fair hours their gleams bestow / To bid the grave its opening clouds illume?'), this time as he watches the sunrise, the narrator 'feels his friendly beams a vital influence shed'.[31] The contrast between the dark tale and the bright day is registered now in the positive response of the narrator, as the 'vital influence' leaps across to rouse him from despondency and, as usual, the defiance comes out of nowhere apparently. Again and again, four times, Wordsworth writes of this 'vital influence', sure of its effect, though still he does not commit it to the final version. The most characteristically Wordsworthian of phrases is left aside.

Somewhere behind this silent shift of voice there may in this case lie Miltonic precedent. The sustained grief and anger evidenced in 'Lycidas' famously yields, without explanation or preparation, to sudden consolation, 'Weep no more' and the sun rises and 'Flames in the forhead of the morning sky'.[32] Mourning gives way to the morning. But the ground of that change declares itself later in Milton as the vision of Heaven, whereas in Wordsworth the recovery of faith is self-generated and unexplained.

---

30. Salisbury Plain Poems, p.31-2, Salisbury Plain (1793-1794), MS.1, 11.327-31.
31. Salisbury Plain Poems, p.110. Significantly, Wordsworth worked on this passage at the same time as the lines of 'blank immensity'. The dark mood of the one phrase and the brightness of the other strike the poet at once, not as opposites but kin.
32. John Milton, The Complete Poems, ed. Gordon Campbell and R. A. Wright (London, 1980), p.45; 'Lycidas', 11.165, 171.

Perhaps it is Wordsworth's tact in deploying these strong words that gives them their force when they finally break through. As in the earliest draft versions of The Prelude, where he allows their influence to show. He seems to be taking dictation from the energy itself, seizing phrases intact:

> a mild creative breeze
> a vital breeze that passes gently on
> Oer things which it has made and soon becomes
> A tempest a redundant energy
> Creating not but as it may
> disturbing things created.-
>
> a storm not terrible but strong
> with lights and shades and with a rushing power[33]

The vivid influences of storm and lights and shades and rushing power appear all in a rush, strong with their own impetus, whilst being at the same time barely coherent in terms of syntax. This first version of the preamble does not in fact appear in the two-part Prelude, but when Wordsworth takes up the passage again (for the 1805 text), he does not this time seek to subdue the power that he finds, as it had been his instinct to do when he was deciding the final form of 'Adventures Upon Salisbury Plain'. Instead he opens himself more himself more fully to its influence. With his return to the lines, the recognition grows stronger, until with the prowess of conscious attainment, he suddenly exclaims:

> Nay more, if I may trust myself, this hour
> Hath brought a gift that consecrates my joy;
> For I, methought, while the sweet breath of Heaven
> Was blowing on my body, felt within
> A corresponding mild creative breeze,
> A vital breeze which travell'd gently on
> O'er things which it had made, and is become
> A tempest, a redundant energy
> Vexing its own creation.
>
> (Prelude I. 39-47)

---

33. William Wordsworth, The Prelude, (1798-1799), p.123.

In contrast with the emptiness he found before, when 'demanding proof, / And seeking it in everything, I lost / All feeling of conviction', now it is proof that is denied evidence ('methought' is the only concession to doubt), while the feeling of conviction rises spontaneously strong: 'Nay more, if I may trust myself...'. With this inward trust Wordsworth finds an emphatic and a brilliant 'more' - he finds the ground of his own vision.[34] It is in pausing to affirm the given, and to rely upon the 'gift', that he discovers the true nature of his creativity. In a very real sense this 'trust' is the element he keeps finding in the process of revision.

The lines are buffeted from without and within, by the 'sweet breath of Heaven' and by the 'corresponding mild creative breeze' that answers within. Yet this rough unison is not the source of the poet's inspiration, but merely its expression. The source of Wordsworth's vision lies deeper than this, with the present discovery of his past 'creation'. He finds anew what he had found then, and the two discoveries escalate, until the breeze becomes: 'A tempest, a redundant energy / Vexing its own creation'.[35] The kindred nature of the present and the past inspiration can be seen in confusion of the wind direction:

> A vital breeze which travell'd gently on
> O'er things which it had made, and is become
> A tempest...

---

34. Coleridge speaks of those who have 'ceased to look back on their former selves with joy and tenderness. Annihilated as to the Past they are dead to the Future, or seek for proofs of it everywhere, only not (where it may be found) in themselves'; S. T. Coleridge, The Friend, ed. Barabara E. Rooke, 2 vols (Princeton, New Jersey, 1969), I. 40.
35. Heidegger describes such moments of unanimity with one's own Being as a kind of transcendence: 'But this surpassing, this transcending does not go up and over into something else; it comes up to its own self and back into the nature of its truth' (PLT, 131).

'Travell'd' attaches to 'had made' in two ways; in a continuous line (where the vital breeze is understood to travel on from the 'things which it had made' towards the present), and as a separate approach (where the vital breeze returns to the scene aross a breach of time). As one breath travels back to find its source, there is another which travels out, towards the present. The vital breeze thus involves both of the forms that silence adopts in Wordsworth's poetry - both the anterior power (or store) and the sudden voice. No wonder that when the two meet they should 'become a tempest'. The 'vital influence' that sparks continually as Wordsworth rewrites his lines has its source in the silent regions of the text.

The 'vital influence' crackles at first below the full attention of the poet. At a syntactical level the lines seem entirely innocent of its presence. So, for example, between the 'corresponding mild creative breeze' and 'A vital breeze' a huge event of meaning takes place which is acknowledged formally only by a comma. Or again with 'and' (as the breeze travels on) 'O'er things which it had made, <u>and</u> is become...'. This 'and' makes no approach to the real force of the event of 'is become'. It's as if the 'tempest' (once again) were too spontaneous to register at an organisational level. Forcefully, he writes not 'and has become' but 'and <u>is</u> become'; the fusion of the past and present breezes takes effect now - at the very moment of writing. Once begun, however, the power of the tempest rapidly grows and gathers in force. It rises in the poetic hierarchy until the 'vital influence' which began in sparks of syntax gives way to a language that is itself insurgent:

> ...and is become
> A tempest, a redundant energy
> Vexing its own creation.

The words in their ambiguity harness the quality of unknowing that

had belonged to the syntax before. The sense hinges on the meaning of 'its own creation', where 'creation' refers equally to the poetry that the 'vital breeze' has made, and to the inspiring breeze which made it. The same words capture both the maker and the made, so that they are for the moment indivisible. It is this proximity of the maker and the made that explains the vexing presence of the wind. The creative energy haunts or rather howls around the region of its own creation, part independent of its origins, and yet still strongly attached to the scene. The tempest does not seem to be satisfied by its creation, but rather to await some further task. So 'Redundant' has its modern sense of superfluousness, of being extra or unnecessary, but it also has the older meaning of abundance, plenty and fullness. It is both what the wind has done and that it has more to do. But it is entirely independent of any subject, a problem that strikes him shortly: this tempest is both vehement and unmotivated. In Wordsworth, the written word is visibly, tangibly, rich with the power of its own creation, and stored with the same potential.

This is the power that Wordsworth retrieves when he returns to the lines, and it is this power too that presents his poetry to be read, vexing the words and arching across syntax. The reading of Wordsworth is (in the ideal) an act of purest coincidence; because it is not the finished text that we read in Wordsworth, but rather his unfinished act of poetry. As the poet wrote to Lady Beaumont:

> Every great and original writer, in proportion as he is great or original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished; he must teach the art by which he is to be seen... and if this be possible, it must be a work of _time_.[36]

---

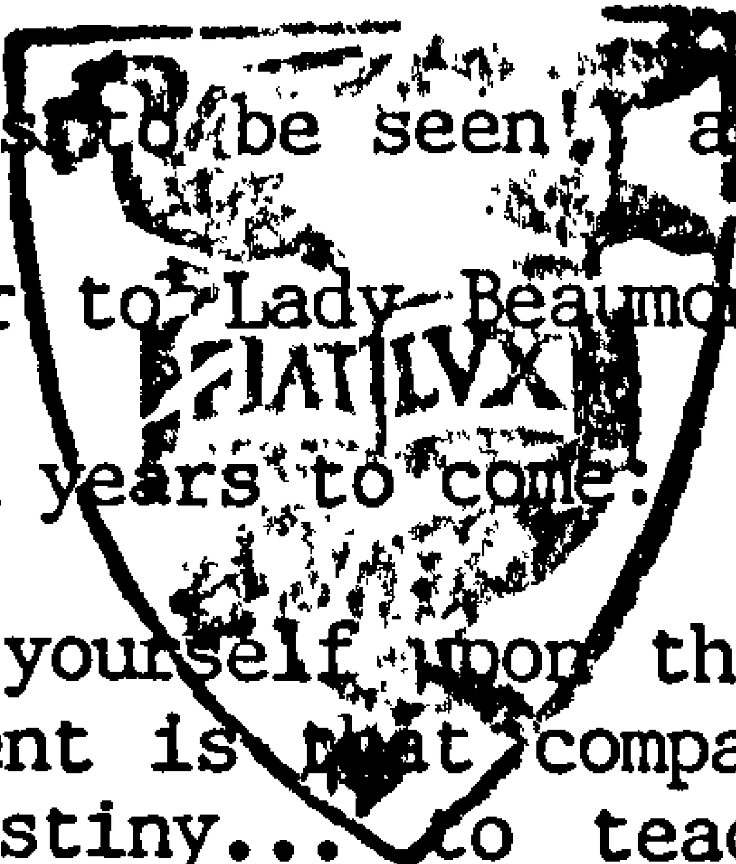
36. _Letters of William Wordsworth_, ed. Alan G. Hill (Oxford, 1984), pp.103-4; letter to Lady Beaumont, 21 May 1807.

The poet may have said all that it is possible for him to say, and be great and original, but something further is required if his poetry is to be understood. In poetry, Wordsworth says, which may seem to be nothing but words, words alone might not be enough to communicate his meaning. Something extra is needed to give his poetry its voice. The poet names this additional force: 'the art by which he is to be seen' or 'the taste by which he is to be relished'. That he uses the words of a slightly old-fashioned aesthetic, 'taste' and 'art', should not distract attention from the seriousness of his meaning; Wordsworth does not mean to discuss the niceties of aesthetic response, but rather the chance of making a first contact with the reader (i.e. making real contact). Considering his own age, Wordsworth notes that even the best of readers find it hard to read his poetry:

> I hope that these Volumes ['Poems in Two Volumes', 1807] are not without some recommendations, even for Readers of this class, but their imagination has slept; and the voice which is the voice of my Poetry without Imagination cannot be heard.
> (Ibid., 100)

Wordsworth is absolute in his demands: 'the voice which is the voice of my Poetry without Imagination cannot be heard'. Imagination is the art that is necessary to the life of Wordsworth's poetry; and so much so that without its waking presence in the reader, it will be for that reader as if nothing had been said at all; the poetry will be mute. But there is something strange in this claim. Imagination is extra to the words of poetry (or no reader would ever lack it); and yet, the great and original writer must himself 'create' or 'teach the art by which he is to be seen'; and how else but in his poetry? So in the same letter to Lady Beaumont, Wordsworth anticipates the impact of his poems in years to come:

LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY LIBRARY



> Trouble not yourself upon their present reception; of what moment is that compared with what I trust is their destiny... to teach the young and the

> gracious of every age, to see, to think and feel,
> and therefore to become more actively and securely
> virtuous; this is their office, which I trust they
> will faithfully perform long after we (that is, all
> that is mortal of us) are mouldered in our graves.
> (Ibid., 99)

It is not an individual meaning but a wholesale vision that the poems are to foster. So Wordsworth trusts that they will teach 'the young and the gracious of every age, to see, to think and feel'. It is 'their office' to instil new sense in those who read them - as if the words had power to create the light by which they would be read! It is an extraordinary act of trust that Wordsworth has performed: to make the very substance of his words depend on the chance that the reader will respond to the original influence that they hold, that 'redundant energy / Vexing its own creation'. It is in this sense that recognition is essential to the reading of Wordsworth's poetry. There is nothing more important to find in Wordsworth's poetry (or in life) than this point of sudden recognition. It is not just a place to start, it is the place to begin:

> O joy! that in our embers
> Is something that doth live,
> That nature yet remembers
> What was so fugitive!
> ('Immortality Ode', ll.130-3)

He says 'embers' and we visualise a grate with grey and dusty embers in it; but the fire itself is not so easily seen. Wordsworth does not describe the fire or even name it to make it visual. The sparks and flames are rather cloaked as 'something that doth live'. The fire is not visible because it is the very power to see that the poet finds still living. The flames take effect in 'nature', in 'joy' and the kindling of memory; so the 'embers' glow inwardly in 'remembers'. It is when the fire dies down out of sight (or becomes silent) that its influence is felt most strongly.

The 'vital influence' that Wordsworth finds is the very ground of his vision, not mystical or aloof, but here and now. He does more in 1805 than to remember what it was that he had meant when he first drafted the Preamble; as he remembers, the impulse of the meaning is profoundly restored. What is it that he finds in 1805? In the half-written and abandoned fragments of 1799, he discovers the 'rushing power' of the storm still active and able to affect him. But even in 1799, this power had a deeper source, 'Creating not but as it may / disturbing things created'. The 'rushing power' that strikes anew issues from a further point. Heidegger has no difficulty in naming the birth-place of creation:

> To create means to fetch from source. And to fetch from source means to take up what springs forth and to bring what has been so received. The more venturesome daring of the willing exercise of the will manufactures nothing. It receives and gives what it has received. It brings, by unfolding in its fullness what it has received.
> (PLT, 120)

For Heidegger (as for Wordsworth) poetic creation is an act of discovery, an unfolding, that puts the spirit in contact with its very source. Poetic creation anchors the man. It is striking however that the poet is simply to 'take up what springs forth', and no more than that. Poetry is a power of immense potential, but its creation requires the willing passivity of the poet and not active endeavour. Heidegger's poet appears as an energy-conductor, to receive and give poetry. Hitherto I have described Wordsworth's silence in objective terms (as a store and as a sudden power); but there is a further subjective form that silence has in his poetry, in the deep trusting of his spirit. Such encodings of faith are not uncommon in the writings of the Romantic poets about poetry. So Keats describes the essential character of the poet:

> I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.[37]

Wordsworth's constant attention to the revision of his poetry might seem like an 'irritable reaching after fact & reason', but he revises so as to recover more of the same. He rewrites so as to plant his feet and to recapture the original emphatic form of vision. To do so he must stand his ground, without any reaching after guarantee, in uncertainties that involve him profoundly. So it is that the spots of time are central to his writing. Their darkness is manifest in the bleak circumstances that they describe. But their darkness is expressive of poet's inward forbearance too, and the deepening mystery of his engagement with the very source of his poetry.

Wordsworth was not able to treat the Square of the Carousel as a spot of time, or simply to look through its horrors. The sense of limitation in the Revolutionary books of The Prelude seems to him to have entered his very soul. Yet the despair that he felt in 1795, by 1805 has been replaced by an interior and much less specified hope in liberty:

> The earth is all before me: with a heart
> Joyous, nor scar'd at its own liberty,
> I look about, and should the guide I chuse
> Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
> I cannot miss my way.
> (Prelude I. 15-19)

The pattern of The Prelude is one of recovery. Whereas before in the Square of the Carousel, Wordsworth could not even begin to interpret the sights he knew to be 'memorable', now he feels that every chance presence comes unerringly, 'and should the guide I chuse / Be nothing

---

37. Letters of John Keats, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford, 1970), p.42; letter to George and Tom Keats, dated 21, 27 (?) December 1817).

better than a wandering cloud, / I cannot miss my way'. In a mood of trust that is both precipitous and level, with all the earth before him, the poet asks no questions of his guide.

In its larger movement, The Prelude performs the recovery that takes a moment in Wordsworth's crossing of the Alps, going wrong so as to come gloriously right. This is why he includes the Revolution in the poem, and why also he places his identification of spots of time at the end of the 1805 and 1850 texts.[38] He leaves the spots of time until after the Revolution to show and to glory that he has recovered. He puts them there because they are the very site of his recovery! So in 1805 he comments on the gibbet scene:

> When in the blessed time of early love,
> Long afterwards, I roam'd about
> In daily presence of this very scene,
> Upon the naked pool and dreary crags,
> And on the melancholy Beacon, fell
> The spirit of pleasure and youth's golden gleam;
> And think ye not with radiance more divine
> From these remembrances, and from the power
> They left behind? So feeling comes in aid
> Of feeling, and diversity of strength
> Attends us, if but once we have been strong.
> Oh! mystery of Man, from what a depth
> Proceed thy honours! I am lost, but see
> In simple childhood something of the base
> On which thy greatness stands, but his I feel,
> That from thyself it is that thou must give,
> Else never canst receive.
> (Prelude XI. 318-34)

The 'naked pool and dreary crags' and the 'melancholy Beacon' extend only blankness. It is an inhospitable terrain and the poet announces plainly 'I am lost'. When he first came to the scene, Wordsworth had

---

38. In the 1799 poem, the spots of time are collected along with the Drowned Man of Esthwaite (Book V in 1805) in the first part. Jonathan Wordsworth writes about the losses and damage to the original version of The Prelude caused by Wordsworth's dispersal of their material in the 1805 and 1850 texts ('The Two-Part Prelude of 1799', in Norton's, pp.567-85).

lost his guide, and, now, remembering, he misses the way again. Far from offering guidance to the poet, the spots of time seem to make erring inevitable. Yet this lostness is the source of power in the passage: 'I am lost, but see...'. The language of threat and pain is silently recreated as also that of strength and recovery.[39] The bleak circumstances of the scene, the naked pool, the dreary crags and the Beacon appear to his memory surrounded by a 'golden gleam' and by a 'radiance more divine'. It is hard in writing about Wordsworth to be as literal as befits the poems without straying from analysis. This divine radiance is 'something that doth live'. It is the 'glory' of his Soul recognised by the poet on the Alps, and it is the 'vital influence' of the tempest.

VI

In his 'Lectures on the Principles of Poetry', Coleridge distinguishes between the senses, dividing them into two broad groups. In the first group he puts sight and hearing. They are the senses of unity, taking in their object wholesale; they 'present a Whole to us combined with a consciousness of its parts'.[40] Sight and hearing are the aesthetic senses, and 'following Plato & all the Platonists', he writes, 'we should define Beauty to be a pleasurable sense of the Many... reduced to unity'. For Coleridge, Wordsworth's poetry would witness to the power of these senses. Touch and taste belong to the

---

39. Hartman writes of Wordsworth's optimism: 'It arises from an extraordinary resilience having to do with the reading of signs: with events that impinge like omens, sometimes even bad omens, yet are converted, explicitly or implicitly, into blessings'. From Geoffrey H. Hartman, The Unremarkable Poet, foreword by Donald G. Marshall (London, 1987), p.217.
40. S. T. Coleridge, Lectures (1808-1819): On Literature, I. 35; from Lecture 1 of the 1808 series, 'Lectures on the Principles of Poetry'.

other group. They do not surround and claim their object altogether, as the aesthetic senses do; their method is more partial, and more dependent on the object:

> Taste... as opposed to Sight and Hearing teaches us to expect in its metaphorical use, not merely a distinct notion of an object in & for itself - for that would be better expressed by Sight - but a coinstantaneous reference of the Object to our own Being.
>
> (Ibid., 29)

If we were to seek a poet, admired by both Wordsworth and Coleridge, who was representative of this other group of senses, and who would clarify by his difference how silence operates behind Wordsworth's poetry in The Prelude, the reference point would be Cowper and The Task. It is not, of course, that his poetry is guided exclusively by taste or touch - but his perception does seek the reassurance of contact between the distinct object and the 'coinstantaneous' sense of self. On the surface, The Task is discursive and apparently rambling, but below its contented flow the poet constantly re-applies himself to the poetry, renewing the contact. It is as though the discontinuity of the meaning must be met in outward constancy.

Cowper is one of the most responsive of poets, and he is fluently open in the presence of beauty. He is drawn to it without question, gratefully alive. Yet he dare not formulate hope as a creed, as Wordsworth will. His poetry only looks expectant when it has already received what it would want:

> Then liberty, like day,
> Breaks on the soul, and by a flash from heav'n
> Fires all the faculties with glorious joy.[41]

---

41. William Cowper, Poetical Works, ed. H. S. Milford, fourth edition with additions by Norma Russell (Oxford, 1967), p.219; The Task V. 883-5 ('The Winter Morning Walk').

The 'flash from heav'n' comes suddenly, as in Wordsworth, breaking on the soul so that 'liberty' seems to strike freely in every sense. It comes from beyond human reckoning and it works to an excess, firing 'all the faculties with glorious joy'. But its blessing appears to come as inevitably as day and less like the 'awful promise' of the lightning flash in Wordsworth.

The lines do, however, use the expectations of language to usher in a meaning that goes far beyond anticipation. Breaking down a common language of reference, 'day-break' is both said, but also parted from itself and revitalised; 'Then liberty, like day, / Breaks on the soul'. This light is not simply the sign of coming day but a 'flash from heav'n', a sudden and unsummonable grace, and in saying this Cowper has to break the simile. The phrase is left half-way between shedding and gathering sense. Similarly the end-of-line comma diverts the comparison of liberty and day and turns it instead into an active impulse - allowing liberty to appear as day would, rather than examining its right to do so. In this way the extra activity of language has the effect of an extra-linguistic impulse. Simile and metaphor are amended to escalate sense, rather than simply to offer a sufficient expression of it. Cowper's sudden sense must come back to his first ushering 'Then'. The very promise of the word is based in contingency.

Once touched by grace, Cowper is able to respond with unequivocal delight to the brilliance of the scene: 'In that blest moment Nature, throwing wide / Her veil opaque, discloses with a smile / The author of her beauties' (<u>Task</u> V. 891-3). When the moment is passed and the opacity returns, he has schooled himself not to mourn or fruitlessly pursue the vanished blessing: 'Give what thou canst, without thee we are poor; / And with thee rich, take what thou wilt away' (<u>Task</u> V.

905-6). Cowper is the most needful of poets but also the least expectant. The unspoken before and after of Wordsworth lies in Cowper with his relation to God, the 'author' of Nature's beauties.

If the watchword of Cowper's perception is touch, that of Wordsworth's perception is trust. The unauthorised vision is fundamental to his poetry. Imagination itself seems inexplicable to him, as in his passage over the Alps:[42]

> Imagination! lifting up itself
> Before the eye and progress of my Song
> Like an unfather'd vapour.
> (Prelude VI. 525-7)

The very impulse of his poetry (even now!) detaches itself to appear before him, 'an unfather'd vapour' interrupting 'the eye and progress of my Song'. Where Cowper's poetry is manifestly continuous in the presentness of the self and the foregrounded recollection of God, Wordsworth's, which seems to have continuity in his life story, actually presents division. Yet despite this obvious break, it is Wordsworth, not Cowper, who dares to hope. Hopefulness is his first thought and the method of his poetry. He has an implicit trust in poetry's making what he wants of it. The many chances for waywardness, in the free-running of the imagination, in the taking of a poetic object, or in the reading of the poetry, Wordsworth sees as bound to confirm an undaunted impulse. The mist may momentarily bemuse him, but he trusts the eye and the mystic word 'progress', rather than simple movement.

So in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads he writes that, through long and deep thought, the poet who is 'possessed of more than usual organic sensibility' is committed to an inevitable strength:

---

42. Geoffrey H. Hartman, Wordsworth's Poetry, p.40ff, gives a notably influential account of this passage.

> Such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature, and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified.[43]

Written 'blindly', the poetry finds stability in 'objects' and 'sentiments', with a certainty that 'necessarily' strengthens others' 'understanding' and 'affections' too. Wordsworth trusts poetry like pregnancy, as a process in which creation and organisation are unseen and autonomous, but which is yet trusted to produce form or being addressed to the understanding.

Contrasting with Cowper's 'liberty' lines, where hope depended on coincidence, and the attempt to force it would crush any vision, in Wordsworth, compulsion leads to enlightenment. Indeed it seems that it is only with the 'unfather'd' words that the inheritance of meaning is certain; only with those words taken in 'blind' obedience to a law that remains unknown. The method of Wordsworth's poetry is more like that of Coleridge's eye than of his touch. He takes what comes to him in a sheer independence of spirit, though it is a strange kind of freedom that comes 'obeying blindly and mechanically'. There is something at work within and behind the words of the poetry for Wordsworth that resists expression, which is nevertheless precisely communicative, that gives his words their power to speak! This model for writing does, however, seem a true description of Wordsworth's poetry, in which sometimes the very efficiency of his meaning seems superfluous. It is often pointed out, for instance, that the social

43. Prose Works, I, 127; 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads' (1850 text). Compare Prelude I. 351-3, where Wordsworth writes that 'the mind of Man' is governed by 'a dark / Invisible workmanship'.

protest of poems like 'Goody Blake', 'Simon Lee' or 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' is in practice usurped by a weight of implication which alters the poem's significance. His poetry has two energies, that of the content's meaning and that of meaning's active conveyance, so that it often works like an electric shock, not to tell you this, but to make you jump.

The impetus of Cowper's poetry by contrast leads away from the power to startle, in the main. Cowper is the lightest of travellers. He has hit upon a perfect source of refreshment, like the Londoner assured by his dusty garden that 'nature lives; that sight-refreshing green' (Task IV. 759); it is a kind of looking that literally is given life by its object. The perception offers a daunting wholeness and even a self-sufficiency of view. Yet Cowper does not hold onto the vision, or offer it as final. It is simply celebrated and passed by; because perception alone is not the main concern of the poetry, or perhaps it is that the voice mistrusts completeness. Even the fullest extrapolation from the hint of nature in the Londoner's garden, the 'wish for ease and leisure' (Task IV. 800) manifests its own insufficiency as a teleology for the poem.

The Task does tend to moving on, but it's not through restlessness or impatience so much as in recognition of its own undetermined condition. The voice can, however, gather a settled sense through finding a conditional necessity. Thus Cowper relishes the slow employment of his own garden:

> Oh, blest seclusion from a jarring world,
> Which he, thus occupied, enjoys! Retreat
> Cannot indeed to guilty man restore
> Lost innocence, or cancel follies past;
> But it has peace, and much secures the mind
> From all assaults of evil.
>
> (Task III. 675-80)

Activity fends away the 'jarring world', but it has to be continuously performed to succeed.[44] 'Seclusion' is thrown off as the poet works - and it is a strange kind of cover that it provides. Rather than finding a place of refuge, 'thus occupied', the voice himself becomes like a house. It's as though the pace of the garden provided a measure and rhythm to Cowper's mind. So though he dare not on his own account look too far ahead, here he can plan the coming year:

> He, therefore, who would see his flow'rs dispos'd
> Sightly and in just order, ere he gives
> The beds the trusted treasure of their seeds,
> Forecasts the future whole.
> (Task III. 648-51)

By this forecast of the 'future whole', Cowper means of course that the seed-bed must be anticipated in full bloom; but it is implicit in the projection that he contemplates the future without the ruinous 'assaults of evil'. In the very planting of 'the trusted treasure', he predicts the 'future whole'. Hence the peculiar warmth of his expression. Who but Cowper could write with such direct pleasure: 'Who loves a garden loves a green-house too' (Task III. 566), or write the sentiment down so simply, trusting it to hold its own? Even here though, it seems that Cowper cannot secure his peace directly: 'Retreat / Cannot indeed to guilty man restore / Lost innocence', he writes, 'But it has peace'. He does not risk the use of his 'I'. It's as if he could not quite believe in his own tranquillity. Cowper's silent motive leads him to relinquish many claims; his very needfulness asks that he disregard his need.

---

44. Thus his one-time advisor, the Rev. John Newton reports Cowper's gradual recovery from a severe bout of depression: 'He works incessantly in the garden, and while employed is tolerably easy; but as soon as he leaves off he is instantly swallowed up by the most gloomy apprehensions'; The Life and Works of William Cowper, ed. Robert Southey, 15 vols (London, 1836); I, 258.

Cowper does not seem like a silent poet, because he conceals its origins so completely. His verse is graceful and articulate, but behind his poise there is an inarticulacy derived from a covert sense of horror. Cowper too is motivated by an 'awful promise'. The quality of his openness, however, contrasts strongly with that of Wordsworth. In neither is this openness civilised. It is a wild and unknown element, but where Cowper flies before its influence, trying not to realise it's there, Wordsworth has it clearly before his eyes. He sees by it, and his objects are sharpened by its presence. Thus he explains the origins of 'The Thorn', to step outside The Prelude. It

> Arose out of my observing, on the ridge of Quantock Hill, on a stormy day, a thorn which I had often passed in calm and bright weather without noticing it. I said to myself, 'Cannot I by some invention do as much to make this Thorn permanently an impressive object as the storm has made it to my eyes at this moment?'[45]

He wants to make the thorn 'an impressive object'; not to fix it with a particular meaning, but to touch and leave it reactive. It seems an almost God-like (or Frankensteinian) approach to poetry, harnessing the storm to give a 'permanent' force to what he chooses; or rather, to what the storm has made him see. There is a an odd sense of inevitability in the vision, but also of inexplicability: the aim is the permanence of the impressive power rather than precisely what the tree has impressed him with. It's as though 'The Thorn' were already written before Wordsworth could get to it. To this extent a poet is a superfluous thing, and 'The Thorn' not an 'invention' as such, but the continuation of the storm, without hindrance. As in Prelude V, where Wordsworth declares: 'Visionary Power / Attends upon the motions of the winds / Embodied in the mystery of words' (11.619-21).

---

45. WW, II, 511; I.F. note.

Wordsworth's vision is particular, alighting on one insignificant thorn, with a form of election that is not readily transferrable to other objects. It is more than seeing. The chance sighting of the peripheral thing, the thorn, becomes an unavoidably centralising force in his attention. This is in marked contrast with Cowper, who seems rather to coax the sense of the peripheral into his lines. Wordsworth sees the thorn with a strange concentration; the storm is the agent, but itself remains unseen. It's as though its sharp light were captured in the vivid, self-revealed look of the thorn. The thorn seems to give itself away, poised between divulging and concealing its meaning. Mosses grow up the thorn:

> Up from the earth these mosses creep,
> And this poor Thorn they clasp it round
> So close, you'd say that they are bent
> With plain and manifest intent
> To drag it to the ground;
> And all have joined in one endeavour
> To bury this poor Thorn for ever.[46]

'The Thorn' at once, and before it has any relevance to Martha Ray, depicts a murder - as if the poem's objects would speak themselves; and it tries to hide what, if anything, has happened, with the mosses overgrowing the thorn and pulling it down, 'To bury this poor Thorn for ever'. The poem's objects are thus coexistent between two worlds, half prompting, half shunning attention. The 'plain and manifest intent' defies explanation or accountability.

One intent however is clear. As Hazlitt wrote of Wordsworth, 'His language may not be intelligible, but his manner is not to be mistaken'.[47] Wordsworth's poetry is blatant in its extension of things,

---

46. WW, II, 241; 'The Thorn', 11.16-22.
47. William Hazlitt, The Collected Works, ed. A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover, 12 vols (London, 1902), IV, 275; from The Spirit of the Age (1825).

as if expecting the original site of a feeling or idea to harness and present the same response in another. The many repetitions in 'The Thorn', the repeated phrases ('Oh misery! Oh misery!'), and the fixed features of the poem (the thorn, the moss and the pond) are there in trust. Wordsworth renders his words as near to the unanalysable indifference of things as possible.

It is, then, disconcerting how profoundly deceptive those landmarks can be. The storm-light makes Wordsworth see intensely, with great clarity; but in addition to this sharpness of line, the impression works with an unreserved sense of commitment. So too in 'The Thorn', vision is both precise and unseeing. The narrator is out exploring on the hills when a storm breaks. Looking around for shelter he finds what he needs at the moment, a 'jutting crag'. He uses a telescope, and still his eyes betray him:

> Off I ran,
> Head-foremost, through the driving rain,
> The shelter of the crag to gain;
> And, as I am a man,
> Instead of jutting crag, I found
> A Woman seated on the ground.
> ('Thorn', 11.182-7)

There is something hard to reconcile in the very fundamentals of this perception, and something that it is hard to limit: 'Instead of jutting crag, I found / A Woman seated on the ground'. He is so <u>far</u> mistaken; in basics, the inanimate is living, and in scale, the rising crag is in fact a woman 'seated on the ground'; and he sought 'shelter' here, with this abandoned woman!

What is it that is so hard to balance? There is the feeling of betrayal, of having been entirely mistaken - though at the same time, in the residues of his first conception, the woman's transformation gives the whole mountain a potential for life, as if indeed there had been no error. There is an odd feeling of elasticity in the transit-

ion, a slowness or a potential. The sense of credence does not adjust as swiftly as the eye. The poem foregrounds its own disproportion and unmeetness at every point.

Similarly, the woman's tenure in the poem is uncertain. Here she seems part of the mountain; elsewhere she seems the only non-consistent, anomalous thing. As the wind drives rain on to her she cries 'Oh misery!' but it is not because of the rain. She cries to herself and for her past. Whilst at one level the whole landscape is 'bent' to the telling of her story, memorialising her, on another, she lives a detached, unresponsive existence. Her story seems more aged than the woman herself. 'The Thorn' is made both irresolvable and complete. Any point of entry into the poem leads away from itself, seeking justification beyond the narration or the landscape. The bare features of the poetic map may tend towards narrative; and Martha's condition demands some root, but the surface of the poem yields immediately to a further view.

This tilt of focus means that reading is always a displaced activity:

> Now would you see this aged Thorn,
> This pond, and beauteous hill of moss,
> You must take care and choose your time
> The mountain when to cross...
> ('Thorn', 11.56-9)

so as to <u>avoid</u> Martha, whose story it is! We are invited by the poem to look at something all the elements of which can never be seen together, and that is exactly the nature of the experience:

> I never heard of such as dare
> Approach the spot when she is there.
> ('Thorn', 11.98-99)

It's almost a warning against reading at all. Because whilst reading is consecutive and partial, the imaginative moment is synchronic and so complete as to defeat reading. Meaning and memory are given an

ominous precedent in Martha. They cannot contain significance; rather their need to account in terms of cause and effect casts her out, of mind and home. The centre of the story harbours too great a disturbance. At the same time, however, contrarily, it seems the only place of clarity. The narrator thus relates (in the post-1820 version):

> Last Christmas-eve we talked of this,
> And grey-haired Wilfred of the glen
> Held that the unborn infant wrought
> About its mother's heart, and brought
> Her senses back again.
> ('Thorn', 11.137-41)

Like the moss pulling on the thorn, 'the unborn infant wrought / About its mother's heart' and restored her sanity. The murderous image here become healing. 'Sense', exactly what troubles the reader, is assured most in 'blind obedience' to the story's impulse. It is typical of Wordsworth that at the centre of a harnessed quandary there should be speculative calm. He finds a kind of security in the extremity.[48] Again, for example, when the narrator is caught in the storm, his only clear vision is specifically related to the tale that he does not yet know, at child's height: 'A storm came on, and I could see / No object higher than my knee' ('Thorn', 11.175-6).

The poem is unmeet and out of scale, yet it is also to the point, finding Martha's narrative wherever it looks. Perhaps then the disproportion is true. As when the light of sense 'goes out' in flashes, the unruly, extra sense that sees the invisible seems the telling element. Instead of seeking to explain away by Freudian or political analysis the paradoxes in Wordsworth's claims, we often need to trust

---

48. See Herbert Lindenberger, <u>On Wordsworth's Prelude</u> (Princeton, NJ, 1963), p.222. Lindenberger says: 'One can discern a certain "brinkmanship" in which Wordsworth engages, whereby he leads the reader to the edge of the abyss, only to reveal the saving hand of a higher power'.

them to describe the strangeness that lies at the centre of his most powerful poetry. Wordsworth's poetry acts with an unusual force. The storm breaks on a landscape that is already complete, so Wordsworth can write of the thorn that 'he had often passed in calm and bright weather without noticing it'. The storm is wholly extraneous, adding apparently nothing to the features of the scene; yet it is to this independent force that the poetry belongs! Wordsworth's creative impulse is at once extra and central: 'A tempest, a redundant energy / Vexing its own creation'. His poetry works with an irreducible excess.

It is a significant distinction between Cowper and Wordsworth that where Wordsworth's poetry may resist interpretation and find strength in that, in The Task, the speaker himself holds back from a commitment to fixed meaning, far in spirit from that permanently impressive object Wordsworth had wanted to make the thorn tree. So Cowper writes in dismay of the shelter on the summit of a hill whose walls have been engraved by 'rural carvers... leaving an obscure, rude name, / In characters uncouth, and spelt amiss'. He exclaims:

> So strong the zeal t'immortalize himself
> Beats in the breast of man, that ev'n a few
> Few transient years, won from th'abyss abhorr'd
> Of blank oblivion, seem a glorious prize,
> And even to a clown.
> (Task I. 281-3, 284-8)

The 'zeal t'immortalize himself' is seen as a superficial spoiling, a contemptible defacement that is finally no stay against 'th'abyss'. His view of memorialisaton is directly counter to that of Wordsworth, the essayist on epitaphs. The origins of poetry lie further back in Wordsworth, and the abyss has for him a more directly creative authority. Cowper sees a far greater initial separateness of subject and object, and their coming together is more casual, improvised. His

idea of a truly permanent speech would always have to be active, like carving. It is a position that is hard on a poetry that is in nature far more passive than Wordsworth's.

Wordsworth draws deeply from his own material, held by the 'Visionary Power' which is both the means and the subject of his poetry. Hazlitt, in The Spirit of the Age, described Wordsworth's Muse in this way: 'It is distinguished by a proud humility. It relies upon its own resources'.[49] Cowper's words, by contrast, hardly take sustenance from their object. His preferred view is effacing: if Throckmorton allows him access to his estate that is because 'The guiltless eye / Commits no wrong, nor wastes what it enjoys' (Task I. 333-2). Yet despite this glancing, peripheral approach, and partly because of it, Cowper's words are far more precise than those of Wordsworth. The certainty of place and the fixing of relationships have a clearer function in Cowper, whilst why 'The Thorn' is written isn't at all clear.

There is in The Task a figure like that of Martha in 'The Thorn'. Kate has been abandoned and bereaved, and like Martha, she too haunts the place of her loss:

> There often wanders one, whom better days
> Saw better clad...
>   And now she roams
> The dreary waste; there spends the livelong day,
> And there, unless when charity forbids,
> The livelong night. A tatter'd apron hides
> Worn as a cloak, and hardly hides, a gown
> More tatter'd still; and both but ill conceal
> A bosom heav'd with never-ceasing sighs.
> She begs an idle pin of all she meets,
> And hoards them in her sleeve; but needful food,
> Though press'd with hunger oft, or comelier clothes,
> Though pinch'd with cold, asks never. - Kate is craz'd!
>   (Task I. 534-4, 546-56)

---

49. Hazlitt, Collected Works, IV, 271.

Living without an object seems literally to wear her down. Her suffering is depicted as exposure, but as an exposure which she herself maintains - the pins she begs are merely hoarded and she doesn't eat. She is seen in detail and presents herself as an image of devastation, kept up like a newly built ruin. Yet, in contrast with Martha in Wordsworth's poem, Kate is tentatively handled.[50] Her disordered perspective is not allowed to dominate the poem, so that whereas in 'The Thorn' the narrator is often betrayed by his senses, Cowper makes sure that he sees clearly and with a sharper sense of boundary. The two poets' handling of these outcast women could hardly be more distinct. Contrast the narrator's avoidance and fascination with Martha in 'The Thorn' to the carefully limited role of Kate in The Task. It's as though her mental and physical wandering became a sign-post to reinforce place: 'There often wanders one'. Significantly the poem proceeds after this with an apparently blithe air: 'Kate is craz'd! / I see a column of slow-rising smoke / O'ertop the lofty wood...' (Task V. 556-8). With this quick transition, Kate's distress is moderated until, like the smoke from the gypsies' fire, it becomes part of the external landscape, a feature chartable if temporary. The identification, 'craz'd', allows him to shock us but also to pass on and it is that distancing word which Wordsworth never allows himself in 'The Thorn'.

It is not that Cowper is unfeeling, merely that he cannot afford to feel too much. There is a necessary lightness in his verse. Even

---

50. See Vincent Newey, Cowper's Poetry (Liverpool, 1982), p.119, where Kate's madness is described as a direct threat to Cowper: 'This is a particularly interesting instance of Cowper's tragic awareness; for it envisions the reverse-state of his ontological ideal of a gentle communion with a benign nature... Cowper's "natural faith" and optimism are challenged from within'.

memory, with its potential to waylay and captivate attention, in Cowper is converted to a kind of route allowing him to 'retrace / (As in a map the voyager his course) / The windings of my way through many years' (Task VI. 16-18). In this final book of The Task, the important mental process is meditation or contemplation. As it leads him into his past, the 'course' of memory equally returns him to the present of reflection. In this way his former life is not marked by a series of disturbing hopes and despairs, instead it is overlaid by the 'map' which he is reading in the present of the poem.

The winding route of The Task passes on lightly past its dangerous moments, implying a background of unspoken fears and traumas, but its strength lies precisely in that passage, in the uninterrupted conversation of the work. Wordsworth's poetry, on the other hand, springs from the ambush of its silence, as in 'The Thorn', maximising the sense of unexpectedness and inexplicability. It is the discontinuity in The Prelude, the hiatuses, and abrupt interventions which force the poet to acts of transformation, trying to make them more like his preferred metaphors of river and road.

Wordsworth is a poet of transformation, but for the transformation to take effect he must dare to enter what Heidegger calls the abyss. The silences in Wordsworth are literally fundamental and central to his poetry: 'From thyself it is that thou must give, / Else never canst receive'. The gap is the ground. Without this giving, nothing can be received.

Chapter 2

'Where No Storms Come'

Hopkins, Herbert and Donne

Wordsworth's poetry remains close to religious discourse but without, in the earlier great works, specifying an actual religious point of view. What gets articulated starts in a point within him which is hidden, a place of 'more deep seclusion' to use the phrase in 'Tintern Abbey', which needs the shock of the visual to express itself yet appeals to something always beyond the physical image:

> The phrase 'of more deep seclusion' has a referent of which we are hardly conscious because a transcendent one immediately suggests itself.[1]

The response in excess of its stimulus reveals the constant presence for him of, 'A never-failing principle of joy, / And purest passion' (Prelude II. 465-6). 'Principle' is the odd word because it attributes back to cliffs or, in The Prelude, mountains and lakes the thought that is in his own mind. The depth of this sense of reciprocity between inner and outer is essentially a religious issue. I want in this chapter to look at the differences between Wordsworth's poetry and the religious poetry of a successor and intense admirer, Hopkins, and of predecessors, Donne and Herbert, whose poetry he himself knew, partly through the prompting of Coleridge.

The problem for the consciousness, attentive to religious awareness but impinged on by the social and the accidental is most fundamentally expressed by Kierkegaard. In The Concept of Anxiety, Kierkegaard writes: 'There never was an individuality more beautiful

---

1. Geoffrey H. Hartman, The Unmediated Vision, second edition (New York, 1966), p.22.

and noble in its expansiveness than one who is inclosed in the womb of a great idea'.[2] The spirit is closed off paradoxically within its own 'expansiveness'; 'inclosed in the womb of a great idea'. There is, however, a darker side to this state of 'inclosing reserve' (CA, 129). The spirit may be trapped in muteness, caught up in an awful internal monotony (a state which Kierkegaard calls the demonic). Inclosing reserve may be either a prison or a boundless state, but in either case its terms are compelling. It is a state that is formed essentially in silence, the attribute of the womb, with the result that when it does speak, it speaks with original force:

> Inclosing reserve closes itself off more and more from communication. But communication is in turn the expression for continuity, and the negation of continuity is the sudden.
>
> (CA, 129)

When words break at last from this silence, they do so suddenly, with a tremendous strength. The sudden voice is full of discovery, both of its object and of itself. Hence the power of Wordsworth's poetry, where common things are seized suddenly in the consciousness of the self, from the silent 'womb of a great idea'.

But what would silence sound like where the power of suddenness, the breaking of the habitual continuity of things, belonged not to the poet, but rather to some external agent; in religion, for example, where the silent power belongs to God? Whether its import be coming or going, either as prayer or grace, the capacity for understanding the divine communication lies beyond the calling of the individual. The precariousness is different from that in Wordsworth.

---

2. Søren Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety (1844), trans. and ed. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton, 1980), p.123. Hereafter referred to as CA.

Almost fifty years ago, Humphry House in a radio talk, 'Wordsworth's Frame', accounted for the poet's influence over Victorian writers by two quotations which acknowledge his capacity to draw words from the deep silence within him. E. S. Dallas concerned with Wordsworth's revelation of the 'secrecy of art' claimed:

> He is describing with all the clearness he can command, the know-not-what - the vanishing effects produced in his consciousness by the veiled energy of his hidden life.

Alongside that claim, House set words of Hopkins which want to identify a religious function for this hiddenness of life in Wordsworth. The 'Immortality Ode', he thinks, is a moment which changed the way in which human beings regard themselves or, at least, that is what the Wordsworthians declare:

> When he wrote that ode human nature got another of those shocks, and the tremble from it is spreading. This opinion I do strongly share; I am, ever since I knew the ode, in that tremble.[3]

There is a tacit mischief in putting the two quotations together which indicates a major problem for Hopkins and the attempt to use Romantic silence to orthodox ends. Fear and trembling would be the appropriate response to the Unknown God but equally, if the 'Know-Precisely-What' of the believer keeps turning back into Dallas's 'know-not-what', the tremble might be for the inability to make the connection of silence with the Divine.

The silences of religious poetry are different in nature and operation from those in The Prelude. The religious poet is far more certain how to name silence and what to see in it, but he does not have the power to call it forth, nor can he dispense with it. If it seems merely dead or an absence still he must carry it around within

---

3. Humphry House, All in Due Time (London, 1955), pp.44-45.

him, and talk to it, and listen intently for a reply. The religious poet is rather caught by the 'sudden' language than desiring it. Hopkins' early poem 'Heaven-Haven' (subtitled 'A nun takes the veil') shows the complexity of dependence on an externally governed silence. In place of the Wordsworthian expansiveness there is a marked need for restraint:

> I have desired to go
> Where springs not fail,
> To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail
> And a few lilies blow.
>
> And I have asked to be
> Where no storms come,
> Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,
> And out of the swing of the sea.[4]

The poem has no means by which to modulate its tone. It could be read with quiet confidence or with a shout of desperation, without affecting the meaning in its substance. All of the overt attention of the speaker goes to the material condition of the haven, which is given in specific detail and intense clarity: 'Where springs not fail, / To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail / And a few lilies blow'. Such particularity betrays the opposite instinct of Wordsworth's in 'Resolution and Independence', where, he says, he tried to give life 'in the most naked simplicity possible'.[5] Here every word is rooted in longing. With the 'sharp and sided hail', for example, the adjectives do not corroborate the noun so much as they insist on their own reality. Yet despite this fierce material base, the voice

---

4. The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie, fourth edition (Oxford, 1967), p.19. Hereafter referred to as GMH.
5. Letters of William Wordsworth, p.56; letter to Sara Hutchinson, 14 June 1802: 'A person reading this Poem with feelings like mine will have been awed and controuled, expecting almost something spiritual or supernatural - What is brought forward? "A lonely place, a Pond" "by which an old man was, far from all house or home" - not stood, not sat, but was.

seems as though disengaged. Everything depends upon the nun's appeal: 'I have desired to go'. So it is significant that the retreat is given almost entirely in negatives, 'Where springs not fail', 'Where no storms come'. There is only one positive element in the description, the 'few lilies' that blow. Delicacy must have great strength for Hopkins.

There is a shortfall between the sound of conviction, and the meaning of wished-for conviction. From afar, the nun looks assured and confident of her destination, but closer in, there is the 'swing of the sea', a massive upheaval and uncertainty. The silence of God leaves the speaker both with too much and with too little control. She has to keep herself calm, whilst waiting for God to bring her peace. 'I have asked', she says, in a still open request, refusing the safety and foreclosure of 'had'. The emphasis of the poem is one of immense patience.

Hopkins' silence is more complex than that of Wordsworth, both in the character of the individual incident and in the diversity of separate incidents, precisely because it ought to be less complex, more assured of what the silence means. Thus whilst the emphasis here is one of painful moderation, elsewhere Hopkins is far more demanding and active in his dealings with the inexpressible. As with the Romantic silence, Hopkins' sense depends on an impasse, on a region beyond his will, though the rift is situated differently in his poetry. Wordsworth's break is central, 'A grandeur in the beatings of the heart', so that his silence speaks with a mighty voice. For Hopkins, on the other hand, the impasse lies outside poetry, accompanying the fall of every line and every word. It is the condition of the poetry, even in its absence; seemingly less an energy than a context.

He might have found in a Catholic contemporary a means of identifying this silence. Newman writes:

> Of all points of faith, the being of a God is, to my own apprehension, encompassed with most difficulty, and yet borne in upon our minds with most power.[6]

His word 'encompassed' is revealing. The 'being of a God' is a bare, ungraspable presence, too extensive to be 'encompassed'; and yet, Newman feels, this 'being' is at the same time acutely persuasive, 'borne in upon our minds with most power'. It is as if the very ulteriority of God gave courage to this inward voice.

The religious poet is 'inclosed in the womb of a great idea', as Kierkegaard said, only, the idea is not his own. Specifically religious lyric, outside of the hymn, is a discontinuous tradition in English poetry, so that later writers necessarily recall antecedents. The practice of Hopkins invites memories of seventeenth century religious lyric, especially of Herbert and Donne, but manifestly he feels himself more alone than they did. Uttering the divine vision is even more difficult when it seems that nothing can be taken for granted. Hopkins seems like one of Heidegger's 'poets... in a destitute time' in his ambition to make the god speak.

'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?'.[7] What Christ said, clearly and distinctly, before his disciples, was in some manner inaudible, a 'hard saying'. His words have a silence which falls not merely in the difficulty of understanding, but actually, so that what he says is 'hard', and painful, and repels hearing: 'Who can listen

---

6. J. H. Newman, Apologia pro Vita Sua (1864), ed. Maisie Ward (London, 1976), p.160.
7. The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition, ed. Dom Bernard Orchard and the Revd R. C. Fuller (London, 1966), The New Testament, p.93; John 6.60.

to it?' The main force of his words is to convey how unconveyable his meaning is. They are immediately, on the surface, anti-words, touching those eager to hear in such a way as to stop them from hearing. Yet he spoke with simple clarity, 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him' (John 6.56).

The Christian silence seems a barrier. Is it that we cannot hear well enough, or does the muteness lie in the nature of the utterance? Most forcefully it lies in the resistance of the hearer. When the disciples murmur against his hard saying, Christ challenges them, 'Do you take offence at this?' (John 6.61). Belief itself would make his words more hard to swallow, because it is its insufficiency which is always being reproached.

Though we may not hear, however, might it not be possible to speak; if not to have silence, to be inarticulate? This is Hopkins' approach to the silence of God. In his poetry he does not try to hear God so much as, by his force and incoherence, he hopes that God will hear him:

> I did say yes
> O at lightning and lashed rod;
> Thou heardst me truer than tongue confess
> Thy terror, O Christ, O God;
> Thou knowest the walls, altar and hour and night:
> The swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee trod
> Hard down with a horror of height.[8]

His speech to God is beyond the immediately vocal, 'Thou heardst me truer than tongue confess / Thy terror, O Christ, O God'; rather it is a performance of excess meeting a fixed point. Though he speaks beyond his tongue, his meaning hits against the same limit, of terror, Christ, or God - as if the surplus of feeling would always reach towards this affirmation.

---

8. GMH, p.52, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', stanza 2.

There are two impulses in Hopkins, the first to form and rest in particulars, so that though he himself cannot read the connection, God yet knows 'the walls, altar and hour and night' when the voice said 'yes'. The second impulse contradicts this, in a movement of restlessness that barely suffers individuality to survive. Within these defining walls, God knows also chaos, 'The swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee trod / Hard down with a horror of height'. This second impulse resists completion. The closer his words come to describing the event, the more disruptive it becomes, as if there were something here that could not be confined. Yet this unruliness is not a spiritual anarchy; if he is 'trod / Hard down', in that moment he has a 'horror of height'. It simply lifts the poet to begin his fall again.

In contrast with the early 'Heaven-Haven', where the silence seemed a quiet place, away from the 'swing of the sea', here it becomes a force of tension. In rough words and unruly syntax, Hopkins drives his poetry to the point of breakdown, as if the splintering of language must make new meaning. It is not merely ambiguity that he seeks. Hopkins finds a strange agility in the extra meaning of words, and it is always to the extra sense that his meaning leaps:

> Let me be to Thee as the circling bird,
> Or bat with tender and air-crisping wings
> That shapes in half-light his departing rings,
> From both of whom a changeless note is heard.
> I have found my music in a common word.[9]

He does not want to 'be to Thee' in mere relation; he climbs onto the 'be' as if he meant to go directly. Yet at the same time, his eye is drawn to the flight of the bird and the bat. In their movement he sees them gain a purchase so that they more than inhabit the air;

9. GMH, p.28, 'Let me be to thee as the circling bird'.

they interrupt and participate in it, with 'tender and air-crisping wings'. In 'half-light' there is 'half-flight'; the bat makes its way in the medium, between movement and shadow. In this early poem Hopkins' eye is caught in conflict between looking up, wanting to see or hear more from above, what later becomes restlessness, and looking in rapture at the scene around him, seeing in its halfness something of God, here. In the deflecting, circling movements he finds a 'changeless note... music in a common word'. This is where Hopkins is best, in a quiet exhilaration.

The inexpressible may offer a point of access beyond the physical image, or a sign of broken communication with the divine, and both are modes of religious understanding to Hopkins. Where in Wordsworth the underlying silence was the source of his confidence, in Hopkins the incapacity to make the relation with the divine is the way in which his belief expresses itself. Kierkegaard observes in Fear and Trembling:

> The more silent one keeps the more terrible the demon becomes; but silence is also divinity's communion with the individual.[10]

The trouble is to know which silence you are getting, whether it be the demonic or the divine.

The silence of religion is even more open-ended than the Romantic silence, because its objective is both more known and more unattainable; there is by definition no way to make God speak. God's silence falls like a judgement on the individual. In John 8.47, Christ says: 'He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God'. To be unable to hear is not

10. Soren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling (1843), trans. and ed. Alastair Hannay (Harmondsworth, 1985), pp.114-15. Hereafter referred to as FT.

merely to be hard of hearing, it is to be beyond the range of God, 'not of God'. With a helpless finality, the burden of silence falls on the hearer. It is a frustrating impasse. How can you learn to be 'of God' unless you hear 'the words of God'?

The accusative nature of the silent authority yields an entirely different emphasis from that of the Romantic power. Wordsworth was constantly being drawn into the presence of the unknown, given over to it in trust. With Kierkegaard's demonic silence, the origins lie in a gap in the self. The negative is embodied in consciousness itself. For Hopkins, in 'To seem the stranger lies my lot', his very words seem swallowed in deafness. Parted from his family, by religion and by sea, the speaker consoles himself with the thought of God's closeness: 'Not but in all removes I can / Kind love both give and get'. And yet, though love's kind word is apparently always there, he finds now that he cannot find it. Something bars the way:

> Only what word
> Wisest my heart breeds dark heaven's baffling ban
> Bars or hell's spell thwarts. This to hoard unheard,
> Heard unheeded, leaves me a lonely began.[11]

The silence of God impinges on the common senses, so that perception lacks effect. The very word his 'heart breeds' is stopped, so that he hardly hears himself what it was that he wanted to say; and doubts whether if it were said, it would have effect: 'This to hoard unheard, / Heard unheeded'. The half-rhymes are as much an attempt to bite back the word, as to release it. This silence is not an active power like that of Wordsworth; it is a surrounding, crushing vacancy, that stifles speech and being too, 'leaves me a lonely began'. He began, but to be what? The word was never said. Without an object,

---

11. GMH, p.101, 'To seem the stranger lies my lot'.

the verb falls back a noun. Silence here is not rarified, but a toughened material given three times over, 'heaven's baffling ban / Bars'. It is strange that in so emphatic a muting, still the voice has room to question its source, whether it be of heaven or hell.

The Christian silence emerges as far more self-conscious, and far less trusting than the nominally secular silence of Wordsworth. It is surprising to find what Cardinal Newman writes in praise of superstition, as though he were familiar with the experience, or could be:

> It is man's truest and best religion, before the Gospel shines on him. If our race be in a fallen and depraved state, what ought our religion to be but anxiety and remorse, till God comfort us? Surely, to be in gloom,- to view ourselves with horror,- to look about to the right hand and to the left for means of safety,- to catch at every thing, yet trust in nothing... They who are not superstitious without the Gospel, will not be religious with it.[12]

In this 'gloom' there is no certainty, no external object sufficient to steady the spirit. Nor is there any internal stability, we rather 'view ourselves with horror'. Materially, superstition provides extensive support, catching 'at every thing', but spiritually it has no hold, we can 'trust in nothing'. For Newman as well as Hopkins, God may be hidden by a 'baffling ban'. This concealment indeed seems to him part of God's essential character:

> What strikes the mind so forcibly and so painfully is, His absence (if I may so speak) from His own world. It is a silence that speaks... He is specially 'a Hidden God'; and with our best efforts we can only glean from the surface of the world some faint and fragmentary views of Him.[13]

---

12. John Henry Cardinal Newman, A Reason For The Hope Within (1843), (Denville, NJ, 1985), p.106.
13. John Henry Cardinal Newman, An Essay in aid of A Grammar Of Assent (1870), (Westminster, Md., 1973), pp.396, 397. Hereafter referred to as GA.

There is nothing to see or hear of the Creator in this world: 'It is a silence that speaks'. There is on the other hand only too much to feel, 'What strikes the mind so forcibly and so painfully is His absence... from His own world'. God is all the more lost to us for the fact that the world is complete without his presence.

The problem for Hopkins is that he wants to force this Hidden God to reveal his presence within the fullness of individual identities that compose 'His own world'. Between the two there is a gap which is liable to become at moments a roaring silence. We may contrast him with Cowper, for example, who shares this sense of 'a Hidden God'. But when he gleans a 'faint and fragmentary view' of Christ, the vision is not necessary to the scene:

> Light appears with early dawn,
> While the sun makes haste to rise,
> See his bleeding beauties, drawn
> On the blushes of the skies.[14]

The 'blushes' of the sunrise are not Christ's 'bleeding beauties', nor even their metaphor; the vision is rather super-added to the scene, as a deeper hue 'drawn' across the 'blushes of the skies'. There is nothing inevitable in the vision. To Cowper it seems that God must be sought beyond evidence. In a 'Light Shining out of Darkness', he claims that it is an error to look for God in the world:

> Blind unbelief is sure to err,
> And scan his work in vain;
> God is his own interpreter,
> And he will make it plain.[15]

Perception itself is rewritten as blindness. To scan God's work is 'blind unbelief', 'sure' only 'to err'. Cowper feels fully the danger

---

14. Cowper, <u>Poetical Works</u>, p.475; 'I will praise the Lord at all times', 11.17-20.
15. Cowper, <u>Poetical Works</u>, p.455; 'Light Shining Out of Darkness', 11.21-24.

of trusting his eyes, since what they show to him is unbearable. He needs to hope in the interpretation: 'Ye fearful saints fresh courage take, / The clouds ye so much dread / Are big with mercy' (ibid., 11.9-11).

With Newman it is not so much that perception is feared, as that he does not quite believe in it. At least, he subordinates the eye to faith. He asks: 'Can I believe as if I saw?... No one in this life can see God' (GA, 102). He answers by inverting the authority of seeing and believing, so that sight is made to depend on belief:

> The presence of unseen individual beings is discerned under the shifting shapes and colours of the visible world. Is it by sense, or by reason, that brutes understand the real unities, material and spiritual, which are signified by the lights and shadows, the brilliant ever-changing calido-scope, as it may be called, which plays upon their retina? Not by reason, for they have not reason; not by sense, because they are transcending sense; therefore it is an instinct.
>
> (GA, 110-11)

Newman is not here describing a special kind of intuition. Commonly, he thinks, we see by 'transcending sense'. It is as if we saw in spite of our eyes. It's the reverse of the case with superstition, where we 'catch at every thing, yet trust in nothing'. Here, every-thing, all the 'shifting shapes and colours' go unattended, whilst faith unerringly descries 'the presence of unseen individual beings' beneath them. This is what Newman means by 'assent'. In the positive sense it is 'a silence that speaks'. Newman's unseen impulse turns attention away from an ungraspable God, to the action of the self in grasping. What seems most unreliable and contrary, the impulsiveness of human judgement, is thus for Newman the mainstay of reliable being. For him this impulse of apparent wilfulness is where we are most given over to the way of God; so that whilst it is our nature, it is furthest removed from an act of will.

Hopkins, too, finds voice beyond the 'baffling ban', and it is upon an impulse also, but his impulsiveness takes a different direction entirely to that of Newman. Hopkins, unlike Cowper and Newman, finds it easy to trust perception, and his poetry is rich in sensory experience. In the fragment, 'Repeat that, repeat', for instance, the sound of the cuckoo escalates in his ear, until the whole landscape becomes an arena of perception:

> Repeat that, repeat,
> Cuckoo, bird, and open ear wells, heart-springs, delightfully
> sweet,
> With a ballad, with a ballad, a rebound
> Off trundled timber and scoops of the hillside ground, hollow
> hollow hollow ground:
> The whole landscape flushes on a sudden at a sound.[16]

The sound strikes instantaneously, 'The whole landscape flushes on a sudden at a sound'. Yet despite this suddenness, the hearing is laid down as if it were innate to the scene, in 'ear wells' and 'heart-springs'. It's as though the suddenness of the sound revealed the expectation of the sound! If the perception is deep-laid, so too is the performance. The 'whole landscape' is disturbed by the cuckoo's call, roused in 'scoops of the hillside ground'. Earth and wood are caught up in the note, resounding with it like the belly of a violin. Both sound and hearing seem to belong to the 'hillside ground', at a geological level, an involvement that is in strong contrast to the added appearance of Christ in Cowper's poem. But then perhaps it is not quite appropriate to compare the two poems. What Hopkins finds here is not the silence of the divine: it is an energy found in perception. Perhaps this is why the poem was left unfinished: silence breaks the poem off at the point where it must move towards the different energy of the divine. Hopkins' problem is that he knows

---

16. GMH, p.183, 'Repeat that, repeat'.

where he wants to get and whose name he wants to speak so that his silence becomes a threat to him, an inability to reach the desired point. Heidegger quotes a fragment from Rilke which declares the poet more adventurous than life itself, 'more daring by a breath...', and comments:

> It is not for nothing that the words 'more daring by a breath' are followed in the original by three dots. The dots tell what is kept silent.[17]

To 'keep silent' is more than Hopkins wants to do, or can do.

Much of Hopkins' poetry is spent in the discovery of freedom. It is not that he rebels against his God, but that he wants to approach him freely; not bound by a 'hard saying', or thwarted by a 'baffling ban'. Hopkins' poetic impulse is to unleash meaning. He throws up words, and leaves them to resolve, wanting to find in their excess a phrasing of the silence which is the Hidden God. The trouble is that freedom does not always end in the divine. His words do not always catch that particular light. Perhaps Newman was right to turn from the eye.

Hopkins would agree with Newman to this extent, that God must be approached by 'transcending sense'; but, Hopkins' transcendence would not be a common reality like that of Newman: it is rather a colossal event. Thus he writes of Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' in the letter that House quoted:

> There have been in all history a few, a very few men, whom common repute, even where it did not trust them, has treated as having had something happen to them that does not happen to other men, as having seen something, whatever that really was... Human nature in these men saw something, got a shock; wavers in opinion, looking back, whether there was anything in it or no; but is in a tremble

---

17. Martin Heidegger, 'What are Poets For?' in Poetry, Language, Thought, p.140.

> ever since... In Wordsworth when he wrote that ode human nature got another of those shocks, and the tremble from it is spreading.[18]

It's as though one day a new reality could simply be seen, 'human nature' realising with a jolt. Perhaps the main force of the 'shock' lies in the sudden sense that consciousness is incomplete, and able to expand, but also to expand limitlessly, not necessarily towards the everlasting arms. Hopkins sees himself as working in the 'shock' of Wordsworth's ode, 'I am, ever since I knew the ode, in that tremble' (ibid., 148). Wordsworth writes of those individuals who see without precedent:

> Willing to work and to be wrought upon,
> They need not extraordinary calls
> To rouze them, in a world of life they live,
> By sensible impressions not enthrall'd,
> But quicken'd, rouz'd, and made thereby more fit
> To hold communion with the invisible world.
> (Prelude XIII. 100-5)

Hopkins' way of seeing is like Wordsworth's, one of being 'quicken'd, rouz'd, and made thereby more fit / To hold communion with the invisible world'; and yet their focus is very different. Where Wordsworth's sight is on the unknown ahead, the focus of Hopkins' words instead is on the phrasing of that beyond. He is both more 'enthrall'd' with 'sensible impressions' than Wordsworth is, but also he has less trust in the 'invisible world' as a sufficient experience. So contrasting with the silence implicit in Wordsworth's use of 'hold', a constant state outside the limits of the present moment, Hopkins' 'communion' is always either present, or about to be. He is always beginning, stuck at the stage which he identifies more darkly in 'To seem the stranger lies my lot', as a 'lonely began'.

---

18. The Correspondence of G. M .Hopkins and R. W. Dixon, ed. C. C. Abbott, second edition (London, 1955), pp.147 & 148; letter dated 23 October 1886.

So local is Hopkins' attention, that words are often a syntax unto themselves, veering between noun and verb as in 'Repeat that, repeat', with 'open ear wells' and 'heart-springs'. His poetry is barely continuous from word to word, Hopkins rarely allowing his meaning to gather momentum over the line. It is rather forced out of inward pressure. As in 'Spring':

> Nothing is so beautiful as Spring -
> When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;
> Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush
> Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
> The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing.[19]

His attention is deliberately excessive, in his description of the weeds, for example, that 'shoot long and lovely and lush'. He comes close to them, not so that his own words may contain their life, but rather to unfold their potential. It is typical of Hopkins that he should enjoy the weeds. Any word may suddenly rise, and abruptly more than this, any sense of any word may rise; as with the thrush's eggs: 'Thrush's eggs look little low heavens'. The eggs look like heavens (pale blue domes), they reflect heaven, they hatch in the direction of heaven, the grown thrush will fly there... Hopkins throws down words and meanings, but with a careful delicacy. His poetry is all-at-once, but it is also, without pausing in its rush, willing to wait, for eggs to hatch, for example. Where Wordsworth is waiting to see or hear that which he holds to be constant, Hopkins is waiting for <u>change</u>. Hopkins' voice is curiously like that of Donne in its material resistance, though his egg-words are intrinsically temporary, whilst Donne's bone, hair, and relics will into being a far more permanent home.

Hopkins and Newman agree in one important respect. Both seek an

---

19. <u>GMH</u>, p.67, 'Spring'.

expression beyond the justifications of formal logic. The visible parts of argument, the explanation and proof, do not secure God so much as they reduce the ground of certainty. Newman, for one, can see no point being careful: 'Life is not long enough for a religion of inferences; we shall never have done beginning, if we determine to begin with proof' (GA, 94-5). God rather is gained at the very outset, by the invisible claim of belief. Though proof holds onto God with many hands, belief alone has him absolutely, unattached and whole, by letting go of proofs. Newman thus calls his assents 'intellectual moorings' (GA, 88). To tell more surely, even to tell just one thing, is to be more surely.

This is one thing that the religious and the Romantic silence have altogether in common. For both Wordsworth and Hopkins the unsayable recognition by the deepest, unknowable response of the self is an anchor that permits a steadier view of articulate experience. Where conscious self loses hold, certainty starts. Like Newman then, Hopkins shies from proof, though the impulse looks very different in his poetry. His recognition is not an 'assent' at the core of experience; his conviction brims at the very limits of material reality. Hence, objects characteristically appear with a vacancy about them. A common phrasing of his is 'Nothing is so beautiful as Spring...', or 'No worst, there is none...'. Contact itself reveals a gap or a distinctness between things:

> The heights by Snowdon were hidden by the clouds but not from distance or dimness. The nearer hills, the other side of the valley, shewed a hard and beautifully detached and glimmering brim against the light, which was lifting there.[20]

---

20. The Journals and Papers of G. M. Hopkins, ed. Humphry House and Graham Storey (London, 1959), p.258; journal entry dated 6 September 1874. Hereafter referred to as Journals.

So much of Hopkins' energy comes by his own effort, and yet there is also here an initiating effortlessness in his vision. Objectivity itself has a sort of beauty for him; the pure distinctness of the hills fascinates him, with their 'hard and beautifully detached and glimmering brim'. The hills are not however sealed off by their clarity, rather the line of division is poised like a point of entry, or a vision of distance. The separateness of things in Hopkins is revealed like a route.

He seems to find what he needs in that which definitively does not meet. As in 'Moonrise': 'I awoke in the Midsummer not-to-call night, in the white and the walk of the morning'.[21] 'Moonrise' makes a path for the voice to walk, just as morning itself is beginning to stir; and in a strange, unequal coincidence they walk together, the morning and the man. The very route his feet take itself is moving.

Hopkins, like Newman, seeks 'intellectual moorings'; but where for the latter, assent was an end in itself (God was the point), in Hopkins there is a further activity. Whether this movement be one of luxury or of discontent, Hopkins' words of certainty have a look of momentariness:

> Not of all my eyes see, wandering on the world,
> Is anything a milk to the mind so, so sighs deep
> Poetry to it, as a tree whose boughs break in the sky.
> Say it is ashboughs: whether on a December day and furled
> Fast or they in clammyish lashtender combs creep
> Apart wide and new-nestle at heaven most high.[22]

The tree offers immediate stability to the poet: 'milk to the mind... sighs deep / Poetry to it'. Yet despite the centrality and depth of the tree to his mind, he sees it at a brink; the 'boughs break in the sky'. Hopkins does not see them break in outline merely, against the

---

21. GMH, p.176, 'Moonrise'.
22. GMH, p.185, 'Ashboughs'.

sky; they break up towards it, 'in clammyish lashtender combs creep / Apart wide and new-nestle at heaven most high'. Hopkins' perception is interpretive and testing, always reaching for a further point. The sight of one object, the tree, thus grants him another perspective, as if the poem looked through the eyes of the tree itself.

Individual things have a peculiarly pivotal role for Hopkins. Their integrity is emphatic, and yet they become visible on the verge of dispersal. Outwardly the ashboughs are finished and distinct as they 'break in the sky'. Inwardly the poetry has another voice, of the tree itself in congress with the sky, new-nestling it. Hopkins' lines do not cohere, with like meeting like. Rather, they hold together by an inner adherence, between like and unlike. Far more than Wordsworth, for whom poetry appeals to a common voice, Hopkins depends on a dialogue internal to himself. So in contrast with the grandly collective movement in Wordsworth's lines, Hopkins' poetry catches hold by its individuality, in light and shadows, surfaces and shapes. Paradoxically, the more vividly he sees, the greater his sense of the unseeable.

This holds true for the early writing in the Journal, before the period of the great sonnets:

> I have now found the law of the oak leaves. It is of platter-shaped stars altogether; the leaves lie close like pages, packed, and as if drawn tightly to. But these old packs, which lie at the end of their twigs, throw out now long shots alternately and slimly leaved, looking like bright keys. All the sprays but markedly these ones shape out and as it were embrace greater circles and the dip and toss of these make the wider and less organic articulations of the tree.[23]

The 'less organic articulations' extend the identity of the tree,

---

23. Journals, p.146; journal entry dated 19 July 1866.

claiming the air around it as a part of itself; equally though, the 'dip and toss' of the branches reveals what is decidedly other. They 'shape out and as it were embrace greater circles' of an unnamed object. Hopkins does not say what they embrace. The perfect shape of the circle is also indescribable, because never, of course, actually seen. It is as though the tree's self at its optimum found its limits in what is silently present. So the new shoots look to Hopkins like 'bright keys', achieving an intensity of selfhood just as they offer to unlock a wider vision. He sees the tree so precisely because he sees it in terms of what cannot be seen, as in another passage from Journals: 'This is the time to study inscape in the spraying of trees, for the swelling buds carry them to a pitch which the eye could not else gather'.[24] It is the solidity of the phrase 'carry them' that is odd, as if the new buds bore the tree. Hopkins' '*in*scape' is unexpectedly outward in its bearing; an outwardness that indeed seems curiously functional. The buds 'carry' the tree only a few centimetres more, a 'pitch' only just beyond the bare boughs, yet their potentiality intimates the tree's growth to the eye more than the summer leafage could do.

In Wordsworth the source of the poetry is hidden in the constancy of the deepest self, but in Hopkins the constancy lies in the world itself. Wordsworth's unknown is unpredictable in its physical occurrence, appearing vertically, as a drop or a rising at his feet. To Hopkins the sense of the inexplicable is far more on a level than this; he appears to know much more what he is doing. Confidently he writes, 'I have now found the *law* of the oak leaves'. His inscape

24. *Journals*, p.205; journal entry dated 'End of March and beginning of April, 1871.

stores power everywhere, so that chance itself has the appearance of inevitability. 'All the world is full of inscape and chance left free to act falls into an order as well as purpose'.[25]

And yet, despite this trust that chance will yield sense, it is Wordsworth, not Hopkins, who emerges as the poet most at home with faith. Where for Wordsworth, the unknown has a steady reality, for Hopkins silence can be intransitive. Contrast the sense of belonging in this passage from The Prelude, with Hopkins' eagerness for change in the lines that follow:

> I would stand,
> Beneath some rock, listening to sounds that are
> The ghostly language of the ancient earth,
> Or make their dim abode in distant winds.
> (Prelude II. 326-9)

Wordsworth listens in an habitual mood of deep contentment, 'I would stand...', he is altogether at home with these dim sounds from the distant winds, and he meets them equally. Hopkins' mood could hardly be more different. His poetry is essentially mid-way, on the verge of expression. It is as if he wanted to force silence into speech:

> Is out with it! Oh,
> We lash with the best or worst
> Word last! How a lush-kept plush-capped sloe
> Will, mouthed to flesh-burst,
> Gush! - flush the man, the being with it, sour or sweet,
> Brim, in a flash, full![26]

Hopkins writes with an urgency, 'Is out with it!', that has hardly time to gather sense: 'We lash with the best or worst / Word last!' It is as though his meaning, the idea that even now he is trying to convey, were not yet complete, and needed expression to give it birth: 'How a lush-kept plush-capped sloe / Will, mouthed to flesh-burst, / Gush! - flush the man, the being with it...'. Meaning here

---

25. Journals, p.230; journal entry dated 24 February 1873.
26. GMH, p.54, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', stanza 8.

is far less a matter of intention than of 'being'. It is something in himself that he is trying impart, as if he could surprise and flush the unknown out into disclosure; the unWordsworthian excess marks it as aspiration only.

That God's silence is an impasse in religion cannot be evaded, yet there is in Hopkins an acquaintance with God, beyond this point: 'Beyond saying sweet, past telling of tongue, / Thou art lightning and love, I found it, a winter and warm'.[27] It is as if, shelled of words, consciousness could get farther; 'I found it'. What comes back from beyond the impasse is converted, like Christ's 'hard saying', into paradox: 'lightning and love', 'a winter and warm'. The silent limit seems to impose metaphor, throwing back words without explanation or excuse; so that poetry is as much the result of conflict with silence, as it is an attempt to utter it.

The problem for religious expression in Romantic currents of thought is that the highly developed sense of the uniqueness of the self has to stand in relation to God who is perceived as universal. The predicament is embodied for Kierkegaard not only in the figure of Abraham, but in the gap between intense admiration and the inability to apprehend:

> When I have to think about Abraham I am virtually annihilated. I am all the time aware of that monstrous paradox that is the content of Abraham's life, I am constantly repulsed, and my thought, for all its passion, is unable to enter into it, cannot come one hairbreadth further. I strain every muscle to catch sight of it, but the same instant I become paralysed.
>
> (FT, 62-3)

The 'monstrous paradox that is the content of Abraham's life' is repeated in Kierkegaard's thought. He taxes himself to think of

27. GMH, p.55, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', stanza 9.

Abraham, but he finds himself halted directly, by an impasse in himself. His physical endeavour dissolves into paralysis: 'I strain every muscle... but the same instant I become paralysed'. Rather than Kierkegaard being able to analyse or to untangle the 'monstrous paradox', it starts to dismantle him: 'When I have to think about Abraham I am virtually annihilated'.

For Hopkins too the attempt to cross the divide between self and other results in an experience of profound incongruity. He finds the highest intensity of inscape in his own selfhood, in:

> That taste of myself, of _I_ and _me_ above and in all things, which is more distinctive than the taste of ale or alum, more distinctive than the smell of walnutleaf or camphor... Nothing else in nature comes near this unspeakable stress of pitch.[28]

As with the oak-leaves, he becomes himself in leaving himself. Through sheer distinctiveness, self rises to universality: 'My mind would be one selving or pitch of a great universal mind' (_Note-books_, 312). This is where the incongruity lies. In this 'unspeakable stress', the self reaches the 'universal mind'; yet this is also, precisely, where he is denied access to the universal. Where he is most himself, Hopkins is also furthest from kinship with God:

> The universal cannot taste this taste of self as I taste it, for it is not to it, let us say / to him, that the guilt or shame, the fatal consequence, the fate, comes home.
>
> (_Note-books_, 313)

He steps forward into contact with the 'universal mind', only to find that here he can have nothing in common with it, or 'let us say... him'. The instant he contemplates God, it seems that the boundaries of his own life become a barrier to the divine. Limitation here does

---

28. _The Note-books and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins_, ed. Humphry House (London, 1937), p.309, 'Comments on _The Spiritual Exercises_ of St. Ignatius Loyola'. Hereafter referred to as _Note-books_.

not lie in an oblivion of God. It is not to the deficiency or the weakness of human consciousness that this negative state belongs; rather, horribly, it is that God can come no further. He 'cannot taste this taste of self as I taste it'; God cannot be conceived as Romantic solipsist.

Geoffrey Hartman, with characteristic intellectual elegance, in his reading of 'The Windhover' argues that Hopkins:

> Views the world through the actual body of Christ, instead of through His spiritual body, which is the Church... At the end [his own body] wrestles with itself as with Christ, not knowing any longer how to distinguish one from the other, or soul from self.[29]

Yet the evidence would seem to indicate that either this is true in aspiration rather than in fact, or that he is all too conscious of the difference. What is impressive in Hartman's account is that he presents a Hopkins who is at the opposite end of the religious from the mystics of the Via Negativa. The mystics pursue an alternative route to God, one that avoids all confrontation with the self. According to the mystical way, self must be made quiet before it can hear or receive the divine. In contrast with the tension of Hopkins' active approach, there is in Meister Eckhart, for example, an utmost passivity:

> If God is to speak his word to the soul, it must be still and at peace, and then he will speak his word and give himself to the soul and not a mere idea, apart from himself.[30]

This contact with God is a matter of alignment more than of meeting. When the soul abandons its own effort, is 'still and at peace', then

---

29. Geoffrey Hartman, The Unmediated Vision, p.67.
30. Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation by R. B. Blakney (New York, 1941), p.99, 'The Sermons', Sermon I.

God '<u>will</u> speak his word'. In this stillness God's word is more than understood, it is received altogether. God gives 'himself... and not a mere idea, apart from himself'. The perplexing thing is that though the two approaches (the active and the passive) are entirely opposed, their terms of reference are broadly constant. Eckhart's conception is curiously similar, and yet, entirely dis-similar to Hopkins' perception of inscape. Compare what Eckhart says here, to the 'less organic articulations' of the oak tree:

> Where the creature ends, there God begins to be. God asks only that you get out of his way, in so far as you are creature, and let him be God in you. The least creaturely idea that ever entered your mind is as big as God. Why? Because it will keep God out of you entirely. The moment you get [one of your own] ideas, God fades out and the Godhead too. It is when the idea is gone that God gets in.
> (<u>Eckhart</u>, 127)

The element beyond the reach of self, for both Hopkins and Eckhart, is the divine: 'Where the creature ends, there God begins to be'. The difference is that where Hopkins stays with the self, catching odd glimpses of God in the turmoil of ordinary movement, Eckhart throws himself entirely to the stillness. He says 'The least creaturely idea... is as big as God'. Perhaps Hopkins could say the same thing too, though if he did it would mean exactly the opposite. In the mysticism of Eckhart, individual things, far from providing a spring-board to God, obliterate the very possibility of finding him. This contrasts entirely with Hopkins' God: 'A man with a dungfork in his hand, a woman with a sloppail, give him glory too';[31] and for Hopkins that 'too' tends to mean 'especially'.

---

31. <u>Note-Books</u>, p.305; 'The Principle or Foundation' (An Address based on the opening of <u>The Spiritual Exercises</u> of St. Ignatius Loyola.

For mystics of the Negative Way, the ability to turn from your own ideas is not merely what would facilitate contact with God. For the writer of The Cloud of Unknowing it is the whole method of advance:

> Lift up thine heart unto God with a meek stirring of love; and mean himself and none of his goods... And do that in thee is to forget all the creatures that ever God made and the works of them, so that thy thought or thy desire be not directed or stretched to any of them, neither in general nor in special. But let them be, with a seemly recklessness, and take no heed of them.[32]

The would-be mystic is to forget all recognisable forms, whether they be worldly or divine; even to forget the attributes of God: 'Let them be, with a seemly recklessness, and take no heed of them'. The first movement towards God is a massive giving-up; simply to disallow the ties and disturbances of the world. It is an horrific 'recklessness'. The mystic does not so much lose sight, as he, or she, abandons the input of his or her eyes. Here again, as with Eckhart's brusque 'God asks only that you get out of his way', the passivity that is at the base of mystical experience, works with an unexpected force. This passive is tough and gruelling, and not in the least an easy or a comfortable experience. For one thing, the Cloud's forgetting is not a momentary detachment, but a prolonged condition:

> For at the first time when thou dost it, thou findest but a darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing, thou knowest not what, saving that thou feelest in thy will a naked intent unto God. This darkness and this cloud, howsoever thou dost, is betwixt thee and thy God... And therefore shape thee to bide in this darkness as long as thou mayest, evermore crying after him whom thou lovest. For if ever thou shalt see or feel him, as it may be here, it must be always in this cloud and in this darkness.
>
> (Cloud, 12)

---

32. The Cloud of Unknowing and other treatises by an English Author of the Fourteenth Century, ed. Dom Justin McCann (London, 1936), p.11; hereafter referred to as Cloud.

'And therefore shape thee'; the phrase is altogether unaccountable. With this forgetting, the spirit finds nothing but darkness and hindrance: 'This cloud and this darkness, howsoever thou dost, is betwixt thee and thy God'. The only specifiable feeling, the 'naked intent unto God', is itself un-met and bare. Yet here, the writer says, the spirit must stay. He speaks with more than hopefulness: 'And therefore shape thee to bide in this darkness'. In some way, the lostness, darkness and unknowing of his state, seem to him apt. He's like an angler who knows a particular stretch of water, or a hunter knowing where to wait, except that his special acquaintance is not one of knowing at all. He would, furthermore, disapprove of any such comparison. Repeatedly he stresses that his words are not to be taken literally, nor referred to the recognisable world. The 'cloud' is not to be understood as a real cloud of vapour, nor the 'darkness' as the darkness of night:

> For such a darkness and such a cloud mayest thou imagine with curiosity of wit... Let be such falsehoods; I mean not thus. For when I say darkness I mean a lacking of knowing.
>
> (Cloud, 20)

The cloud of unknowing is essentially unimaginable. The author has no eye for external forms, and still less interest in them; yet he has a vivid and reliable awareness of inward states. He finds a strangely determinate character of experience beyond imagination. It is as if beyond imagination, form, or choice, the soul had shape of its own.

Any comparability with Wordsworth is just as dangerous. Where to the poet it is the point at which silence breaks into utterance that matters, for the mystic, though he must use words to describe the devotional intensity, there are no words to describe the experience itself, because there is no experience. The condition of silence is absolute.

One thing that Hopkins' active approach does have in common with the passive route of the mystics, is that both presume some vein or plateau within experience (selving for Hopkins, unknowing in the Cloud), which permits communication with the divine. The method of communication too is similar. One is written to provoke the imagination, the other to subdue it, but the 'cloud of unknowing', like Kierkegaard's 'monstrous paradox', repels thought. In both instances, the closeness of God is felt in negative, as paralysis or darkness. To the author of the Cloud, however, it is here that God is to be found: 'This darkness and this cloud, howsoever thou dost, is betwixt thee and thy God'. It seems that the cloud must forever obscure God; and yet: 'If ever thou shalt see him... it must be in this cloud'.

Might this not be true for Hopkins too? The mystic comes to God through unknowing. By extension, Hopkins' way forward should be through his own 'selfbeing'; not, that is, in the ease and excess of his perception, but through himself literally, by a process of unselving. In The Cloud of Unknowing, consciousness is brought to acquiesce in a dark and formless state. The problem for Hopkins, on the other hand, is to stand up to this immensity, in person.

The intermediary between orthodox tradition and Romantic experience should be Newman, of course. He copes with the incomprehensible with great forbearance, simply by leaving aside the shape and organisation of mystery. Faced by the obscurity of the Holy Trinity, for example, he simply understands each element separately:

> Our image of Him never is one, but broken into numberless partial aspects, independent each of each. As we cannot see the whole starry firmament at once, but have to turn ourselves from east to west ... We know one truth about Him and another truth,- but we cannot image both of them together; we cannot bring them before us by one act of the mind; we drop the one while we turn to take up the other.
> (GA, 131)

He accepts the mystery with a thrilling contentment, dropping one truth 'while we turn to take up the other'. It's a view that opens onto a world far more sharply delineated than that of Hopkins. In place of Hopkins' rapturous momentariness, Newman has this partialness and independence, 'numberless partial aspects, independent each of each'. Newman's view is inherently tolerant of human deficiency, and far more humane than that of either the mystics or Kierkegaard.

In much nineteenth century religious writing, however, the problem of God's absence is felt more strenuously. God becomes a lack, a need, at the heart of material existence and Hopkins' fierce assaults upon the physical world are attempts to force God out of hiding and make him speak. Even Newman too feels that religion must be founded originally on a negative element. Religion has no force unless it begins beyond option:

> I say plainly I do not want to be converted by a smart syllogism... And how, after all, is a man better for Christianity, who has never felt the need of it or the desire?
>
> (GA, 425)

It is 'need' or 'desire', Coleridgean forces of emptiness and disturbance, that give an urgent voice to faith. Most notably, Kierkegaard writes in The Sickness Unto Death: 'Only the person whose being was so shaken that he became spirit by grasping that everything is possible, only he has had dealings with God' (SD, 71). It is a colossal meaning to condense into a single sentence. The being can be 'so shaken', shaken free of all recognition, until it seems at last that 'everything is possible'. In this unfounding, finally, the spirit has 'dealings with God'. The silence of God, that seemed at first a crushing weight of compulsion, thus can be transformed into a silence of possibility. This is indeed, for Kierkegaard, the true nature of the relationship with God: 'The fact that God's will is the

possible means I can pray; if God's will is only the necessary, then man is essentially as dumb as the beast' (SD, 71).

The trouble is that this freedom of possibility comes by the most unlikely of routes. We 'become spirit' by a means that is so rudely material as to feel like ruin. Thus Kierkegaard writes of despair:

> It is an infinite merit to be able to despair. And yet not only is it the greatest misfortune and misery actually to be in despair; no, it is ruin. Generally the relation between possibility and actuality is not like this; if the ability to be such and such is meritorious, then it is an even greater merit actually to be it... In the case of despair, however, in relation to being able to be, actually being is one of descent.
>
> (SD, 45)

This too, like the cloud of unknowing, is a dark and formless state. The closer you come to this 'infinite merit', the more it defies approach. It unravels the spirit. The experience of 'unknowing' in the Cloud, compares to one of 'unmaking' for Kierkegaard. In the Cloud reason is put in its place, but in Kierkegaard the whole personality is undone.

Hopkins is closer to the Lutheran voice than to the medieval Catholic voice. In the first stanza of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', for example, he describes his direct experience of God:

> Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,
> And after it almost unmade, what with dread,
> Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?
> Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.
>
> (GMH, 51)

God makes man with a workmanlike strength. He seems rigged like a ship for the sea, with 'bound bones and veins' and 'fastened' flesh. The problem is that God would be the storm too: 'And after it almost unmade, what with dread, / Thy doing'. There is a marked contrast between the strength of physical binding in the first making, and the deeply dispiriting force of the second encounter. The strongly made

body is racked by intangible 'dread'. Hopkins' own poetic impulse, to summon or to approach God in the breaking of words, seems here to be replayed disastrously on himself. He ends with appalled and jagged words, 'And dost thou touch me afresh? / Over again I feel thy finger and find thee'.

The struggle of the active approach is to stand up to God's touch; not to be crushed by dread. Hopkins' God speaks with a personal voice, directly to the individual, and identity cannot be put aside as self was in the Cloud: 'I feel thy finger and find thee'. Unless he is to turn from God, Hopkins has to hold his ground. Cowper's God too speaks with a personal voice; and similarly, Cowper has to fight to hold himself steady against the stress of God, as in these lines from 'Temptation':

> The billows swell, the winds are high,
> Clouds overcast my wintry sky;
> Out of the depths to thee I call,
> My fears are great, my strength is small.[33]

Cowper watches the winds blow with a disturbing conception of their force. The storm tells on him directly and imaginatively, but he does not watch the winds grow as Wordsworth would, enthralled by their power. The storm is not a force of equanimity to him; rather it is as if at any moment his own vision would supersede his strength: 'Out of the depths to thee I call, / My fears are great, my strength is small'. It is as if he found his own scope insupportable. But in Hopkins this is almost a condition he seeks in order to feel his identity in the struggle with God.

Cowper's hope in the 'Olney Hymns' is of necessity double-edged. He waits for God to welcome him, but equally, he has to hope and pray

---

33. Cowper, Poetical Works, p.457; 'Temptation', 11.1-4.

that he will be there himself, under control, and worthy to want God. His words are clear, yet his poems are filled by a mute and helpless sense. It is this muteness that lifts itself to be read. In 'The Contrite Heart', for example, the most basic and important decisions alike are left to God:

> I sometimes think myself inclin'd
> To love thee, if I could;
> But often feel another mind,
> Averse to all that's good...
>
> O make this heart rejoice, or ache;
> Decide this doubt for me;
> And if it be not broken, break,
> And heal it, if it be.[34]

He describes his state attentively, mediating it with care, 'I sometimes think myself inclined / To love thee, if I could', but the growing precision takes him nowhere. He is merely 'inclined', tilting towards God with his will still rooted, unable to fall into complete love. Then he observes: 'another mind, / Averse to all that's good'. The continuity of his attention is drawn in an awful provisionality. He cannot by his own effort find rest. His only hope of escape lies in the sudden voice of God. After all of the care of the first stanza quoted, in the second he breaks off, and beyond determination he cries: 'O make this heart rejoice or ache; / Decide this doubt for me'. He pleads with an inattentive thoroughness: 'And if it be not broken, break, / And heal it, if it be', leaving all of the care and attention to God. In this resolution, Cowper sounds curiously like George Herbert, a poet whom Cowper liked, and in whose poetry he found some relief; there is an outward warmth in his voice. This God is not silent though he may be so at the moment, to the poet.

---

34. Cowper, Poetical Works, pp.438-9; 'The Contrite Heart', 11.9-12, 21-4.

At the limit of his endurance, Cowper calls to God. 'Out of the depths' he calls, allowing himself to depend entirely on the word of God. He is still in doubt, uncertain what the reply will be, but God's word must be certain. At the limit of his endurance, Hopkins clings on, and refuses to give way:

> Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
> Not untwist - slack they may be - these last strands of man
> In me or, most weary, cry I can no more. I can;
> Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.[35]

The openness of Cowper's voice is complete. There is, above the line, a region that he cannot effect, where God's voice must take over: 'Decide this doubt for me'. This is, in a positive sense, a cry of 'I can no more'. There is openness in Hopkins' poem too, but crucially in his case, it is not matched by a breaking of will, a mute reliance upon God. Hopkins' greatest trial lies in his determination to hope. He says 'I can', fighting for control in a region of the self that is all but humanly inoperable. The openness gnaws at him, and distinct sites of vacuum appear within the lines, as here, for example: 'Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee'. 'Carrion' is both the eater and the eaten. Hopkins refuses to 'feast' on the 'Despair' that is all the time eating him. Paradoxically, his attempt to continue provides less appreciable character than does the possibility of his relinquishing control. Contrast the bare 'I can', with the active details and convolutions of despair: 'Not, I'll not... Not untwist - slack they may be - these last strands of man / In me'. It is the strong 'I can' which is left with the open experience of the negative: 'Can something... not choose not to be'.

Worst of all, however, is that his resistance to despair involves

---

35. GMH, p.99, ('Carrion Comfort').

him in a conflict with God, as if God and despair worked in the same breath. In the middle of speech, mid-thought, there God appears: 'I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God' (ibid., 1.14). Against the impulse of Hopkins' poetry before, to break words and release meanings out towards his end, suddenly all the words he has are gathered to mean the same thing, 'my God'. It seems that Hopkins' extension of consciousness is less to do with the advance to an unknown, than with a movement to coincide with his own unsuspected realisation. It is in his daring to come home.

So much of Hopkins' poetry is spent looking for freedom, for a way of approaching God freely - hence his manifest welcome for visions of possibility, for the 'glimmering brim' of Snowdon, or for the 'hal(f)light' of the bat. It is apparently strange then that he should find God in constraint. Could it be that the rebellious, offended counterflow of Christ's 'hard saying', is actually the way of God? Significantly in the 'terrible sonnets', Hopkins refuses to relinquish the words which he himself holds out as unmeaning:

> No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
> More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
> Comforter, where, where is your comforting?[36]

'Pitch' for Hopkins means roughly the same as his 'selving' (as with 'one selving or pitch of a great universal mind'), so that the personal sense of being thrown randomly combines with that of collection and stability which belongs with God. There is always some element of abandon in Hopkins' vision. Here, however, the speaker is 'Pitched past pitch of grief', cast beyond conception, to an impartial numbness. The past participle yields to future sense; what is apparently over still continues, is held in process. It strikes from within,

---

36. GMH, p.100, 'No worst, there is none'.

like hunger or childbirth: 'More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring'. Pangs give rise only to more pangs. In an energetic description of despair Hopkins writes: 'My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main' (ibid., 1.5). Through this 'selving' the self is not collected, but split into many, unending trails of being; his identity is 'herds-long', dispersed through many bodies. His very wholeness is born in fear, as the 'cries' draw close to 'huddle in a main'. This 'worst' strikes indeed like a 'hard saying'. Old words are kept, tried as noun and verb ('pitched' and 'pitch'), giver and given ('comforter' and 'comforting'), but still they fail to yield meaning, until with all his language inoperative and broken, the speaker resorts instead to a nameless searching, 'where, where'. But he does not give up on either identity or God's comfort. The issue is more than an aesthetic problem, though John Robinson, for example, has described well how silence may also be the result of a kind of expressive over-ambition:

> Much of the impressiveness of the gift lies in its tautness, and, whereas it is the weakness of fluency to become lax, the risk inherent in tautness is that <u>nothing</u> will result.[37]

He cannot just <u>say</u> his meaning; it's not in his power to do so. His existence seems itself a phrasing or a word for a possibility that he cannot see. So in ('Carrion Comfort') he exclaims against the torment of belief: 'Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear' (1.6). His being is 'shaken' into possibility, but the results are inappreciable to him. The echoes however are true: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much

---

37. John Robinson, <u>In Extremity: A Study of Gerard Manley Hopkins</u> (Cambridge, 1978), <u>p.151</u>.

fruit' (<u>John</u> 12.24). It is a willingness to sustain contradictory experience, and in the face of unreality, to believe without reason, that permits Hopkins to remain in religion. It is as though he must match up to God.

In <u>The Sickness Unto Death</u> Kierkegaard writes:

> What an infinite accent is laid upon the self when it acquires God as its standard! The standard for the self is always: that directly in the face of which it is a self.
>
> (<u>SD</u>, 111)

Hopkins refuses to break off and submit to despair, but he is not thereby saved from catastrophe. The depths open within him. Avoiding the fall, his mind yet gives onto a vacancy:

> O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
> Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
> May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
> Durance deal with that steep or deep.[38]

The poetry of Hopkins usually interrupts the outside world, his inner vision setting externals on edge, as in 'Repeat that, repeat', where 'the whole landscape flushes on a sudden at a sound'. Here the landscape is altogether internal, 'O the mind, mind has mountains'. Again, at least to the ear, he uses the same word both as noun and verb; 'mind' is not just repetition but an imperative to take note, though it is an almost inconceivable watchfulness he calls for. How can he guard against this 'fall'? The drop comes in his own mind, and he cannot prepare against the implicitly unexpected edge. His awful discovery is that though the mountains are internal they are also unknown, 'no-man-fathomed'. Bergson says of inward attention, that when it is turned in on itself: 'Our mind is as if it were in a strange land, whereas matter is familiar to it and in it the mind is

---

38. <u>GMH</u>, p.100, 'No worst there is none'.

at home'.[39] Hopkins too finds a 'strange land'. His own being falls destructively within him, unmeasured, never visited, and beyond the reach of understanding. He sees the recognisable 'I' as psychologically bivouacked, 'hung there' on the side of himself, like Wordsworth gathering birds' eggs on the cliff. The terrible thing is that he has already begun the unfinishable descent. It is himself, but there seems no end to this 'steep'. The mind has 'Cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed'. It is not just that 'no man' has 'fathomed' them; inwardly he is fathomed by 'no-man'.

But if this is so, if the 'sheer' depth falls in consciousness itself, might not Hopkins have the potential for a sudden voice, like that of 'inclosing reserve', a voice as though in common with his God, that sense of sudden converse that Herbert finds, for example? But, no; God's unmaking touch prepares a ground where communication is denied, where Hopkins lacks even a sense of inward continuity. He is 'pitched past pitch', where inscape cannot grip. He has no ready language to cope with this harrowing. Norman White comments on the conclusion to this sonnet:

> The fact his fate is unearned but decreed, implies that he is excluded from Christian Justice. The poem finishes just as the question 'Why?' is about to be asked.[40]

Unable to find the silence of resolution, he is driven back on the silence of the stoic: 'all / Life death does end and each day dies with sleep'.

In a Journal entry, written years before the terrible sonnets, Hopkins reports how at Roehampton one evening, as he was listening to

---

39. Henri Bergson, The Creative Mind, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York, 1968), p.47.
40. Norman White, Hopkins: A Literary Biography (Oxford, 1992), p.400.

the Father Rector, he closed his eyes and began to dream: 'I saw one of the Apostles - he was talking about the Apostles - as if pressed by a piece of wood'. He writes with an uncharacteristically careful hand as he continues, watching his words, where usually he is so spontaneous:

> Even then I could not understand what the piece of wood did encumbering the apostle. Now this piece of wood I had seen often in an outhouse... In reality it is used to hold a little heap of cinders against the wall which keep from the frost a piece of earthenware pipe which there comes out and goes in again making a projection in the wall. It is just the things which produce dead impressions, which the mind, either because you cannot make them out or because they were perceived across other more engrossing thoughts, has made nothing of and brought into no scaping, that force themselves up in this way afterwards.[41]

These 'dead impressions' resist his insight, working in a way entirely counter to inscape. Hopkins' perception gives the world a vivid look, precisely because his mind usually does make something of what he sees; yet here it seems to him that it is 'just the things which produce dead impressions', which his inscape cannot apprehend, that have most power. They 'force themselves up' when he is too tired to resist them, and their impulse seems full of voluntary meaning. They seem to carry a weight or a presence that resists account: 'Even then I could not understand what the piece of wood did encumbering the apostle'. There is a gap between the intention of the wood, 'what the piece of wood did', and the watchful pity of 'encumbering' for which he can find no words. Hopkins' tense too seems oddly matched with the experience: 'Even then I could not understand'. It would make more obvious sense for him to say 'Even now I cannot...'. Here, it's as though time and thought could have no effect whatsoever.

---

41. Journals, p.193; journal entry dated 23 December 1869.

The dislocated freedom of the 'dead impression' is opposed to the habitual working of Hopkins' vision. He describes it with a queasy pen, yet at the same time he recognizes in it, as he does not in the sonnets, a healing and a wholesome influence:

> But neither the weight nor the stress of sorrow, that is to say of the thing which should cause sorrow, by themselves move us or bring tears as a sharp knife does not cut for being pressed as long as it is pressed without any shaking of the hand but there is always one touch, something striking sideways and unlooked for, which in both cases undoes resistance and pierces, and this may be so delicate that the pathos seems to have gone directly to the body and cleared the understanding in its passage.
>
> (Ibid., 195)

The indirect 'unlooked for' touch strikes with a beautiful directness, clearing a path through the understanding; so that the light 'sideways' contact of the knife in fact works deeply. It is as if the half-seen thing had an active knowledge of him, and knew how to touch him at core. The impression which begins in randomness and detachment, thus ends with a 'delicate' personal touch; the objective 'dead impression' producing a purely subjective effect. This is what the sudden voice would be like.

The sudden voice has its home in catastrophe, in the vertical fall of the mind-mountains, and this is a landscape with which Hopkins is acquainted, only, he lacks the patient waiting in silence of The Cloud of Unknowing. In his depth there is no sense of quiet such as that which overtakes Wordsworth 'Suspended by the blast'. To Wordsworth the fall brings a kind of peace, an effortless sense of pure attainment: 'That calm existence that is mine when I / Am worthy of myself' (Prelude I. 360-1). Hopkins responds to the 'steep' with an imaginative horror at its depth, but it does not bring him peace or set him in abeyance, as it does Wordsworth. His eye is too active

for that and he cannot cease from effort; his 'I' is also too active.

I don't know that there is any answer in his poems to the experience of the terrible sonnets. There seems to be more depth in his despair than in his hope, or at least, the 'Cliffs of fall / Frightful' have greater permanence. In complete contrast to Wordsworth, Hopkins values most the impressions that he cannot store. His sense of the divine is essentially fleeting, as in 'Spring':

> Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush
> Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
> The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;
> The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush
> The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush
> With richness.
>
> (GMH, 67)

Every impression is impermanent in its clarity. The eggs 'look little low heavens', whilst above there is the 'descending blue' of the sky. The ground looks up, whilst the sky comes down; similarly, matter and air reach towards the condition of the other. The 'glassy peartree leaves' are rendered in light, while the sky is presented as solid, 'that blue is all in a rush / With richness'. In 'Spring' the poet captures height, and is captured by it; he stands surrounded by the heavens. When the thrush sings, 'it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing'. The source of the lightning is close at hand, but it is an impression that cannot last, dependent on a moment of apprehension and then passing away.

It is the transience of this moment of encounter which brings Hopkins in many ways closer to Keats than to Wordsworth, for all his admiration. The relation between the natural and divine in Hopkins never produces symbol because God's presence within the physical can never be steadily assumed. The contrast with Coleridge, for example, is clear. In 'Frost at Midnight' Coleridge addresses his child asleep beside him, comparing his own early years 'pent 'mid cloisters dim',

with those in prospect for the child, living 'beneath the crags / Of ancient mountain':[42]

> So shalt thou see and hear
> The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
> Of that eternal language, which thy God
> Utters, who from eternity doth teach
> Himself in all, and all things in himself.
> Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
> Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.
> ('Frost', 11.58-64)

In the mountains and the lakes Coleridge finds an ideal confluence of human and divine; though it would be hard to tell where the two had joined. The 'shapes and sounds' of the hills, finite and fleeting by turn, convey the infinite and eternal language of God. There seems an unattended (or an unseeable) point in the poem where the mountains meet 'eternity'; as if though God's language were 'intelligible' it could not be transcribed. In aspiration at least Coleridge finds a free and outward sense of God. Yet, if God's language is 'intelligible', it is not by exact, articulate means; his words are rather unattached and open: 'Great universal Teacher! he shall mould / Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask'. What God gives does not as might be expected, immediately complete or make the spirit whole. His gift rather is to make the spirit 'ask'. We are given unfulfilment, and this is where God is intelligible, in the reaching of the spirit. So it is significant that Coleridge can find no contentment in the calm of midnight:

> So calm, that it disturbs
> And vexes meditation with its strange
> And extreme silentness.
> ('Frost', 11.8-10)

He finds his footing in disquiet:

---

42. S. T. Coleridge, Poetical Works, ed. E. H. Coleridge, 2 vols (Oxford, 1912), I, 242; 'Frost at Midnight', 11.52, 55-6.

The thin blue flame
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form.
('Frost', 11.13-19)

The calm of the night, paradoxically, disturbs his peace and 'vexes meditation'. It is the restless, prophesying 'film' that fits in with his mood. The comfort and implicit custom of the 'low burnt fire' can hardly draw on him at all. The easy recognition of his sympathy goes rather to the unsettling presence, 'that film, which fluttered on the grate... the sole unquiet thing'. It is for Coleridge an open-ended and precarious kind of guarantee that God gives: 'He shall mould / Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask'. It sounds so simple and yet it is immensely hard for the poet himself to accept this provocation. Nevertheless, and granted this qualification, this relationship with God differs fundamentally from that of Hopkins. The difficulty here is not, as it was for Hopkins, to find freedom in religion; but rather to accept God's freedom, to pick up a gift that has been freely given.

In terms of the degree of tension involved in the transaction between divine and human, Hopkins often sounds closer to the seventeenth century religious poets than to a Romantic like Coleridge, yet appearances are deceptive. For all of them the problem lies in the relation between God's freedom and the contingency to which the poet is subject. But where for Hopkins the primacy of the physical makes the divine voice almost unhearable except by an act of will or in conditions of extreme jeopardy, in the Metaphysical poets the physical is offered in order to witness its defeat and make the poet more attentive to the silence beyond it. Donne writes:

> I, like an usurped town, to another due,
> Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end,
> Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend,
> But is captived, and proves weak or untrue,
> Yet dearly'I love you, and would be loved fain,
> But am betrothed unto your enemy,
> Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
> Take me to you, imprison me, for I
> Except you enthral me, never shall be free,
> Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.[43]

In full strength of will he asks God to overcome his strong will. His every expression fortifies him to resist, so that he cannot 'admit' God. He will not: 'Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend, / But is captived, and proves weak or untrue'. He can only plead above his own defences, for a violence to force him to surrender. He asks for what he cannot and will not do, every strong metaphor that he seizes shouting against the meaning: 'For I / Except you enthral me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me'. It is a voice from nowhere. It is as if the communicative sense itself were isolated and captive: 'Yet dearly'I love you, and would be loved fain'. The yielding impulse has no outlet. Yet even so, despite the roughness and paradox of the lines, and despite the involuntary nature of the call, Donne's voice is strangely earnest and direct.

Samuel Johnson would almost certainly disagree. In his 'Life of Cowley' he writes more generally of the Metaphysical poets, and he sees them as anything but earnest:

> Their thoughts are often new, but seldom natural; they are not obvious, but neither are they just; and the reader, far from wondering that he missed them, wonders more frequently by what perverseness of industry they were ever found.[44]

---

43. John Donne, The Complete English Poems, ed. A. J. Smith (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp.314-15; 'Batter my heart' ('Divine Meditations 14'), ll.5-14. Hereafter referred to as JD.
44. Samuel Johnson, Lives of the English Poets, ed. John Wain (London, 1975), p.11. Hereafter referred to as Lives.

It would be hard to fault Johnson's terms of engagement. Donne's poem is fundamentally perverse; it is the resistance of the speaker that gives the poem shape. His thoughts are far from 'obvious' and 'neither are they just' - his seriousness goes beyond the range of playing fair or being right. To Johnson it seemed that the thoughts of the Metaphysical poets were deliberately inconvenient, so that, 'the reader, far from wondering that he missed them, wonders more frequently by what perverseness of industry they were ever found'. Their meanings are too far removed to be understood with passion. Yet Coleridge does just that in his 'Notes on Donne'. He reads Donne off with ease, often simply agreeing with him. Johnson is right, there is a remoteness of meaning at the centre of Donne's predicament in 'Batter my heart', but this is something that the speaker himself feels and struggles to oppose. It is this seriousness perhaps that Coleridge responds to in Donne. Under the old corrupt text of 'The Good Morrow', Coleridge comments thus:

> What ever dies is not mixt equally;
> If our two loves be one, both thou and I
> Love just alike in all, none of these loves can die.
>
> Too good for mere wit. It contains a deep practical truth - this Triplet.[45]

In the thick of Donne's metaphysics, beyond the wit and the undeniable 'perverseness' of his industry, Coleridge finds 'a deep practical truth'. For Coleridge, Donne does have a natural voice, and he responds to it as to a kindred spirit, with real enthusiasm: 'This power of dissolving orient pearls worth a kingdom! in a health to a Whore! this absolute Right of Dominion over all thoughts' (ibid.,

---

45. S. T. Coleridge, Marginalia, ed. George Whalley, 3 vols (Princeton, New Jersey, 1984), II, 218; 'Notes on Donne'.

219). Where Johnson sees only proof of 'industry', Coleridge hears the 'unquiet thing', an active will refusing to sleep. Perhaps it is less that Donne's poetry is unnatural, than that the nature he describes is specifically appropriate to the religious predicament, and one paradoxically close to Johnson's own difficulties as a believer: 'I, like an usurped town, to another due, / Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end'. His poetry is founded in a helpless strength.

The problem is that the heightened consciousness in Donne's poetry self-dramatises and then has to dramatise also the overcoming of the self: it is a noisy silence that the poems achieve. The process is ascribed by Stanley Fish also to Herbert:

> It is not difficult to see why a poem whose subject is the countermanding and gradual stilling of the individual will would end in what is for the speaker a virtual moment of silence. Speech, after all no less than action (it _is_ an action) is the vehicle of self, and it is entirely appropriate that the realization of total dependence coincides with the disappearance (at least as a separable and identifiable entity) of the first-person voice.[46]

He finely describes a culture of the self which also explains why Hopkins can never himself quite achieve such a silence. But I would want to argue that Herbert is more naturally disposed towards that silence, that he is in some sort in his poetry to be compared with Wordsworth's description of the '_silent_ Poet',[47] specifically of his brother, Captain John Wordsworth:

> Between us there was little other bond
> Than common feelings of fraternal love.
> But thou, a School-boy, to the sea hadst carried
> Undying recollections; Nature there
> Was with thee; she, who loved us both, she still

---

46. Stanley E. Fish, _Self-Consuming Artifacts_ (Berkeley, 1974), p.189.
47. _WW_, II, 122; 'When, to the attractions of the busy world', 1.80.

Was with thee; and even so didst thou become
A _silent_ Poet; from the solitude
Of the vast sea didst bring a watchful heart
Still couchant, an inevitable ear,
And an eye practised like a blind man's touch.
(Ibid., 11.74-83)

Here, of course, it is Nature rather than God that quietens the individual will, and which operates beyond the scope of outward circumstance to make the boy become a silent poet. But this silence is not the end of poetry, not its death, rather it is a source of beginning. It is the unerring quality of his brother's perception that Wordsworth praises. His ear is 'inevitable' before hearing, and his eye 'like a blind man's touch' sees intimately and dependently. The eye's distance is telescoped to the closeness of touch, so that Wordsworth's vision is implicitly in advance of itself, in common with what it sees.

In Herbert's poetry also, in contrast to Donne, there is this element of effortlessness. He too has 'inevitable' vision. In 'The Flower', for example, where he marvels at his return of spirit:

How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! ev'n as the flowers in spring...

And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing: O my onely light,
It cannot be
That I am he
On whom thy tempests fell all night.[48]

The perception is instantaneous, 'fresh', 'sweet and clean', but also it is as if permanent. Herbert feels immediately the inalterable nature of his outlook: 'It _cannot_ be / That I am _he_ / On whom thy

48. _The English Poems of George Herbert_, ed. C. A. Patrides (London, 1974), pp.171-2; 'The Flower', 11.1-2, 36-42. Hereafter referred to as _GH_.

tempests fell all night'. His vision strikes absolutely, like life 'After so many deaths'. Before, the storm's huge sounds and sights had failed to rouse the speaker, they simply 'fell' on him 'all night'. Now, with the first opening, he perceives even the slightest and most pure of substances with an earthy vividness: 'I once more smell the dew and rain'. The visible 'flowers in spring' are more than seen, they are felt directly, 'I bud again'. In common with Wordsworth's 'silent Poet', Herbert's vision breaks the boundaries of perception; sight breaks into touch, inward rapture into touch and smell. 'My onely light', it seems, is less an external beam that reveals things by their form, than an internal disturbance, that reveals them from within. All his objects look self-revealed, in contrast with the wrestling-match of Hopkins' poetry. Dew, rain and versing are not seen or approached, so much as they appear suddenly close, within the power of the voice. It is as if Herbert's silence had been answered: 'How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean / Are thy returns'.

As with Wordsworth's words of discovery, Herbert's words here are bright and visual. It is as though the power of vision itself had grown visible. Compare, for example, the start of Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode', where perception carries a brilliant emphasis. The stanza is, as it were, the other way around to 'The Flower':

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore; -
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.[49]

---

49. WW, IV, 279; 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', ll.1-9.

Herbert's vision too is one of dazzling excess. In 'The Flower', every 'common sight' appears 'Apparelled in celestial light'. His phrasing is strikingly like that of Hopkins too, though in reverse. (Reversals seem more common than gradations here.) Where Hopkins says: 'No worst there is none', 'Nothing is so beautiful as Spring', Herbert says: 'And now... After so many deaths... I once more...'. His vision is sheer-edged too, though all his attention turns to the light. With his recovery: 'Grief melts away / Like snow in May, / As if there were no such cold thing' ('The Flower' 11.5-7, my emphasis). Similarly severe, Wordsworth writes: 'The things which I have seen I now can see no more'. Perhaps it is the vertical fall around the words that gives their edges brilliance. This glittering quality however seemed to Johnson a fault in the Metaphysical poets:

> Their attempts were always analytic; they broke every image into fragments; and could no more represent, by their slender conceits and laboured particularities, the prospects of nature, or the scenes of life, than he who dissects a sunbeam with a prism can exhibit the wide effulgence of a summer noon.
>
> (Lives, 12)

Herbert's focus does intercept and break the outlines of 'nature', but his intense vision in 'The Flower' is not that of a dissected sunbeam, something divisive or dead; far from it, his sharpness seems a source of continuity: 'And now in age I bud again'. His 'return' cannot begin in 'laboured particularities'. It cannot be worked for, only given: 'Who would have thought my shrivel'd heart / Could have recover'd greennesse?... These are thy wonders, Lord of power' ('The Flower', 11.8-9, 15). Herbert's effortless presence contrasts with Donne's disquiet, but the two are to this extent alike: in both the unsayable element seems the source of life and creativity. Silence is not an unpoetic obstacle, but a vital means of attachment.

There are in Herbert's poetry, as in Wordsworth's, moments of certainty, of real spontaneous confidence, where the voice feels in silence an invigorating force. The poetry that this inevitable grasp produces in each, however, is very different. In Wordsworth the moments of insight are Wordsworth. There may be lines and pages where he is not especially held (where it seems to Wordsworth that he can see no longer); yet it is in those moments of certainty that the voice grows characteristically Wordsworthian. Herbert's certainty is not so individualising, because of the absoluteness of his vision. In Wordsworth the silent recognition is foretold in upheaval, and marked by an aftermath of feeling. Imbalance surrounds his certainty, so that the scale of the event is forcibly revealed. It seems almost as if precariousness were necessary to his weight: 'As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie / Couched on the bald top of an eminence'.[50] Herbert's silence is neither so unmoveable as that stone, nor so barely balanced. Its effect in his poetry is rather instantaneous and discrete:

> Of what an easie quick accesse,
> My blessed Lord, art thou! how suddenly
> May our requests thine eare invade![51]

Paradoxically, Herbert's more perfect 'accesse' makes his vision more difficult to trace or to recover; he is admitted so quickly. Where Wordsworth's certainty makes a great disturbance, Herbert's 'accesse' is inappreciably quick.

Certainly Herbert sees this quick sharpness as the route that any vision must take. So in 'The Search' God appears forcibly unrevealed, as a vast extent too large to be seen. His very presence conceals him:

---

50. WW, II, 237; 'Resolution and Independence', 11.57-8.
51. GH, p.117; 'Prayer (II)', 11.1-3.

> Thy will such an intrenching is,
> As passeth thought:
> To it all strength, all subtilties
> Are things of nought.
>
> Thy will such a strange distance is.[52]

God appears as a pure vast space, beyond body, imagination, or thought: 'Thy will such an intrenching is, / As passeth thought'. This 'strange distance' cannot be seen in whole, nor glimpsed in part, so that when God would be seen his appearance must be piercing. Inconceivably, Herbert's sight of God is to 'come between' 'all':

> When thou dost turn, and wilt be neare;
> What edge so keen,
> What point so piercing can appeare
> To come between?
> ('The Search', 11.53-6)

The closeness of God at first seems gentle and approximate: 'When thou dost turn, and wilt be neare'. God turns and wishes to be 'neare', but this kindly approach descends to 'piercing'. It is as if to be 'neare' were still to be at a 'strange distance'. The only possible access of God seems one of transfixion, or of 'wilt' breaking 'will'. The question of whether this sharpness lies in the experience or in the poetry is no further resolved, since Herbert too leaves the idea resting between the two possibilities: 'What point so piercing can appeare / To come between?' His voice is characteristically balanced between warmth and precision.

Herbert has a rare ability to rely on what he cannot grasp. The scale of God's will seems to take all power from the human spirit, and yet the necessary route of vision, of coming between all, is mirrored in Herbert's poetry. He does not as Hopkins does, splinter language and compress syntax, so as to force new meanings to emerge.

---

52. GH, p.169; 'The Search', 11.37-41.

Herbert does not break his words. The strength of his poetry lies rather in their distinctness. In 'Prayer (I), for example, in strong and complete phrases he throws down pictures of prayer, each one intact and separate, leaving the attitude of prayer to appear between:

> Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age,
> Gods breath in man returning to his birth,
> The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
> The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;
>
> Engine against th' Almightie, sinners towre,
> Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
> The six-daies world-transposing in an houre,
> A kinde of tune, which all things heare and feare.[53]

Each phrase has clear direction, running from the human to the divine, yet despite their common goal, each phrase is isolated. Partly this isolation lies in the falling away of meaning in each phrase. 'Reversed thunder' rises to God, but it gathers the full force of its meaning from God. The very idea of its destination at the human level is fading. Like God's will in 'The Search', Herbert's prayer 'passeth thought', going where he cannot follow, and meaning beyond his own conception. It is a perplexing idea, that you could mean more than you meant, or say your own 'soul in paraphrase'. Despite the glimpsing quality of Herbert's vision, there is yet something expansive and physically celebratory in his images, as in the last two lines of 'Prayer (I)':

> Church-bels beyond the starres heard, the souls bloud,
> The land of spices; something understood.
> (Ibid., 11.13-14)

The trust is implicit in the domestic sound of the church bells stirring God too, and the patience of his final prayer, 'something understood'. The phrase is poised between God and man, belonging

---

53. GH, p.70; 'Prayer (I)', 11.1-8.

clearly to neither. Prayer is vital, 'the souls bloud', and yet the voice leaves it resting here, content with the vague and unowned sense of 'something understood'. This still point is the basal rate of Herbert's prayer.

Wordsworth and Herbert, however different their spiritual cultures, share a kindred sense of the silent. More immediately than any other poet, save Wordsworth, Herbert gains clarity from the exhilarating undersense of something out of view. What difference can it make that this confidence is positioned differently in their poetry? Wordsworth's certainty is at the centre of his outlook. It is 'an internal brightness' or an 'inward lustre',[54] something unavoidably before his eye and wrapped up with his vision, felt as individual to himself. His recognition carries with it a deep sense of belonging. Thus in Grasmere he finds what he cannot say:

> 'Tis, but I cannot name it, 'tis the sense
> Of majesty, and beauty, and repose,
> A blended holiness of earth and sky...
> A Centre, come from wheresoe'er you will,
> A Whole without dependence or defect.
> ('Home at Grasmere', 11.142-4, 148-9)

It is his first idea, clear and present: ''Tis, but I cannot name it'. It is as though Wordsworth could not stray from this nameless feeling, its 'blended holiness' holds him finally: 'A Centre, come from wheresoe'er you will'. By contrast Herbert can allow himself to be lost entirely, if not finally. His self-recognition is not at the centre of his vision but rather at the poles; and it is autonomous and inherently forgetful. If at one limit his silence is answered, so that he rises 'ev'n as the flowers in spring', at the other he is

---

54. WW, V, 335-6; 'Home at Grasmere', 11.674-8: 'Yet to me I feel / That an internal brightness is vouchsafed / That must not die, that must not pass away. / Why does this inward lustre fondly seek, / And gladly blend with outward fellowship?'

lost and does not even wish to be found. Herbert has an unanswered silence too, as can be seen in 'Affliction (IV)'. At both poles Herbert's voice has an immediacy, but where before it was sharp with discovery, here it is harsh with despair:

> Broken in pieces all asunder,
> Lord, hunt me not,
> A thing forgot.[55]

He is not merely 'Broken in pieces', they are 'all asunder' too; he is broken and lost, 'A thing forgot'. His responsiveness in 'The Flower' is replaced here by a shedding of all response that is even wished-for. His words have a curious sound, one that is both mute and jarring, as he appeals to his Saviour, 'Lord hunt me not'. But the quality of Herbert's brokenness differs markedly from that of Donne. In 'The Broken Heart', Donne's heart is broken by love, shattered into a hundred pieces, but the voice himself will not sustain the injury. Each fragment continues alive and insistent: 'As broken glasses show / A hundred lesser faces'.[56] Instead of one traumatic voice, there are a hundred little voices speaking. Herbert, by contrast, sustains a painful sense of wholeness: 'Broken in pieces all asunder', he is yet 'A thing forgot'. His brokenness covers a far greater distance than that of Donne, open to emptiness.

At this extreme, all contact is excruciating. The speaker's senses are in revolt, so that instead of working outwardly, they wound him from within:

> My thoughts are all a case of knives,
> Wounding my heart
> With scatter'd smart,
> As watring pots give flowers their lives.
> ('Affliction (IV)', 11.7-10)

---

55. GH, p.105; 'Affliction (IV)', 11.1-3.
56. JD, p.46; 'The Broken Heart', 11.29-30.

Here again there is the sense of his lostness being found, as his thoughts discover him with 'scatter'd smart'. The strangest thing though is his example: 'Wounding my heart / With scatter'd smart, / As watring pots give flowers their lives'. The simile itself seems inwardly incompatible, with an inappropriateness indeed which breaks the nature of comparison, drawing the wounding and the cure together in actual connection. More like Wordsworth than at first it seemed, Herbert too is held beyond expression, collected without willing it and when he cannot even gather his thoughts together. It seems he cannot escape integrity. The poles of his experience are not then marked by silence and its absence, but rather by a discovery that is at one pole understood, and at the other, unrealised or unrealisable.

The significance of the experience of handing over meaning to silence in Herbert lies in the difficulty, though, as it does not for the mystic, for the author of The Cloud. As Stanley Fish writes:

> There is nothing easy about the 'letting go' this poetry requires of us. We are, after all, being asked to acquiesce in the discarding of those very habits of thought and mind that preserve our dignity by implying our independence.[57]

Paradoxically Herbert's voice sounds most constrained when it is most dangerously open, as in the rebellion of 'Affliction (I)':

> Well, I will change the service, and go seek
> Some other master out.
> Ah my deare God! though I am clean forgot,
> Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.[58]

He is withheld by the slightest of contracts: 'Let me not love thee, if I love thee not'. Though he would, he cannot say categorically 'I love thee not'; instead he has to petition God, 'Ah my deare God!

---

57. Stanley E. Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts, p.157.
58. GH, p.67; 'Affliction (I)', ll.63-66.

though I am clean forgot...'. It is noticeable how the warmth and closeness of his voice ill-fits the contractual formula of the appeal. Even as he asks to leave, his voice stays. Perhaps it is this bare remaining strength that Cowper was drawn to in The Temple. 'Overtaken by a dejection of spirit', Cowper yet found comfort in Herbert:

> This was the only author I had any delight in reading. I pored over him all day long; and though I found not here, what I might have found, a cure for my malady, yet it never seemed so much alleviated as while I was reading him.[59]

But what could Cowper have found here to give him freedom from his malady; what could he rely on? Herbert's poetry swings from hope to torment and back again, in a fluctuation that does not on the face of it, sound soothing to the spirit. Nor is the fluctuation in any way diffused, or held at arm's length. It comes in close and strikes at the heart.

Perhaps the main difference between Herbert's answered silence and his unanswered silence, is that whilst to his sure sight, the inexpressible is a visible impulse; when he is 'clean forgot' the unknown breaks its bounds and dominates him utterly. So in 'Miserie' Herbert describes man:

> A lump of flesh, without a foot or wing
> To raise him to the glimpse of blisse:
> A sick toss'd vessel, dashing on each thing;
> Nay, his own shelf:
> My God, I mean my self.[60]

Man is 'A lump of flesh, without a foot or wing', without the ability to move, or rather to control his movement - in this disabled state he moves too freely: 'A sick toss'd vessel, dashing on each thing'.

---

59. The Life and Works of William Cowper, ed. Robert Southey, I, 26.
60. GH, p.116; 'Miserie', ll.74-8.

Johnson's charge, that the Metaphysical poets are not 'natural', here again seems to be true. Herbert's experience is all inside-out, the response coming foremost as if that were the cause of the turmoil: 'A sick toss'd vessel'. The psychological horror seems to be the root of the upheaval. The trouble however (for both Herbert and Johnson) is that the strangeness of the poetry depends on the true rendering of experience. To Herbert it seems as if he is both unfathomable and a shallow and at the same time the boat navigating those waters: 'A sick toss'd vessel, dashing on each thing; / Nay, his own shelf: / My God, I mean my self'. It is as if the unknown and the contradictory were the source of his consistency! There is a frightening authority in Herbert's frightened words. Neither Herbert nor Donne receive the unknown as the mystics do, in a rare and self-less region. Rather the unknown is experienced as a 'dashing' back upon themselves. They grow characteristic to themselves when exposed to the negatives of character. They must respond to God as themselves, with all the felt inadequacy. After all, you cannot understand or feel as someone else; if you are to feel at all it must be as yourself. There is a sort of home-coming in the extremity, a fatal calm beyond the storm.

Where Herbert finally relies upon the unknown, Donne's immediate response, in that, more like Hopkins, is to fight against it. Contrasting with the visionary effortlessness of Herbert, Donne's words have a visibility and an active fluency of effort that implies there is nothing too small or intricate for him to see. His poetry seems, at first, opposed to the whole experience of God as silence. To him everything must be touchable, seeable and sayable. Donne does not throw himself to the silent element as Herbert does, 'without a foot or wing'. He keeps his head, and can report on his own un-doing. So in 'Nocturnal' he describes how he is destroyed by love:

> For I am every dead thing,
> In whom love wrought new alchemy...
> He ruined me, and I am re-begot
> Of absence, darkness, death; things which are not.[61]

Donne faces silence directly, awake through 'absence, darkness, death'; but he meets the objective break with subjective perseverance: '_I_ am re-begot / Of absence, darkness, death; things which are not'. Donne's vision seems opposed to any breach; it is essentially active.

When Donne refers to a supernatural cloud, therefore, it is not to a 'Cloud of Unknowing', but rather to a 'cloud of Ignorance'. In a Sermon he writes: 'Hell is darknesse; and the way to it, is the cloud of Ignorance; hell it self is but condensed Ignorance, multiplied Ignorance'.[62] For Donne the way to Heaven is one of conscious knowing. With a Coleridgean care over his terms, he criticizes those who: 'Call one another inconstant, and accuse one another of having changed their minds, when, God knowes, they have but changed the object of their eye'.[63] Inconstancy and constancy alike demand far greater exertion than this: 'The Mind implies consideration, deliberation, conclusion upon premisses; and wee never come to that; wee never put the soule home; wee never bend the soule up to her height' (ibid., 326). It is typical of Donne that he would see the soul being 'bent' to heaven, rather than its being suddenly received. Only by active, probing thought can we 'put the soule home'.

These preoccupations affect his secular poetry too. In 'The Ecstasy', Donne envisages a continuity of both consciousness and

---

61. _JD_, p.72; 'A Nocturnal upon S. Lucy's Day', ll.12-13, 17-8.
62. _The Sermons of John Donne_, ed. G. R. Potter and E. M. Simpson, 10 vols (Berkeley, 1953-62), VIII, 256; no.29 in _LXXX Sermons_ (1640). Hereafter referred to as _Sermons_.
63. _Sermons_, VIII, 326; no.48 in _LXXX Sermons_.

matter. It is not just that matter is continuous, at every stage it has person:

> As our blood labours to beget
> Spirits, as like souls as it can,
> Because such fingers need to knit
> That subtle knot, which makes us man:
>
> So must pure lovers' souls descend
> T'affections, and to faculties,
> Which sense may reach and apprehend,
> Else a great prince in prison lies.[64]

Only Donne would give 'fingers' to essence! Within the lovers, blood, like an autonomous creature, 'labours to beget / Spirits as like souls as it can'. Donne sees creation within creation. The spirits themselves are living entities, with tiny 'fingers' to tie 'That subtle knot, which makes us man'. Donne demands visible control of his poetic processes, no matter how mysterious or minute. The purest essence must 'descend' where 'sense may reach and apprehend, / Else a great prince in prison lies'. Yet, unlike Hopkins, his sense of the physical is led in the first instance by an act of mind; it is knowledge more than encounter.

The strange thing with Donne, though, is how this intellectual meticulousness carries such a disproportionate physical weight. Thus in 'The Ecstasy' he makes the transition from spiritual ecstasy to sexual love:

> To our bodies turn we then, that so
> Weak men on love revealed may look;
> Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
> But yet the body is his book.
> ('The Ecstasy', 11.69-72)

The context creates an extra sense in 'To our bodies turn we then'; his attention is both precise and displaced. In the physical movement of the two lovers turning to each other, the immense idea above the

---

64. JD, p.53; 'The Ecstasy', 11.61-8.

body is made to turn <u>with</u> the body. Hyperbole is fitted to his scale; the simple movement of the lovers is like the turning of the spheres.

How does this surplus power of Donne compare to that of Wordsworth? Perhaps the main cause of their difference lies in their starting points. Wordsworth sees material things with sudden intimacy, so that spirit must take steps to recover equilibrium; he is surprised by joy. Donne sees by the spirit, making matter do all of the re-orientation. All his energy is prior to the object, and the object itself is arbitrarily seized. Coleridge compares Cowley to Donne:

> The populousness, the activity, is as great in C. as in D.; but the <u>vigor</u> - the insufficiency to the Poet of active <u>Fancy</u> without a substrate of profound, tho' mislocated, Thinking - The Will-Worship in squandering golden Hecatombs on a Fetisch, [on] the first stick or straw met with at rising! this pride of doing what he likes with his own... this is Donne!
> ('Notes on Donne', 219-20)

On the surface, there are sticks and straws, compasses and fleas, but below this, Donne's poetry is anchored in a movement of 'profound, tho' mislocated Thinking'. The very crudity of the surface materials reveals the pureness of the spirit: 'The Will-Worship... squandering golden Hecatombs on a Fetisch'. It is '<u>Thinking</u>' with Donne too, rather than <u>thought</u>, something both quick and immense, a real and present movement of the mind. It is too easy to make historical diagrams which explain why Hopkins cannot apprehend religious silence in the way Herbert or even Donne can. But crossing these diachronic distinctions are differences and coincidences of temperament in individuals which make comparisons between writers, across cultural divides, also valid. Donne's poetry works the other way around from that of both Wordsworth and Herbert. All its freedom lies in his own power, which he spends that instant, 'on the first stick or straw met

with at rising'. For Herbert the sense of detachment comes after attachment. It seems that the characteristic voices of Herbert and Donne come on separate sides of dependable reality.

A sense of detachment is essential to the grasp of truth, as Coleridge wrote of 'real objective, necessity'. A true idea is by nature insupportable:

> The idea is its own evidence, and is insusceptible of all other. It is necessarily groundless and indemonstrable; because it is itself the ground of all possible demonstration.[65]

The unsayable has an unexpectedly close and urgent voice, but it is also set at a profound distance. Truth is finally 'indemonstrable'. It is no wonder then that the certainties of both Herbert and Donne, which are culturally determined, carry such an uncomfortable freedom of movement. In 'The Collar', for example, the clear stark lines of the communion board result in Herbert's furious detachment. The board is emphatically 'groundless', it seems to have 'no more':

> I struck the board, and cry'd, No more.
> I will abroad.
> What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
> My lines and life are free; free as the rode,
> Loose as the winde, as large as store.[66]

The words are plain rather than ornate, and it's not a poetic syntax; the poem is striking rather in the force of its meaning. It's the power of fury finding words, and the bare exhilaration of escape. Herbert's words here are open and expanding, 'Loose as the winde, as large as store', with excess and boundary together escalating sense. In a strong, hard impulse, his fury sweeps past all confines, 'My lines and life are free'. Yet it is obvious that the speaker finds in

---

65. S. T. Coleridge, Lay Sermons, ed. R. J. White (Princeton, New Jersey, 1972), p.32; from The Statesman's Manual (1816).
66. GH, p.161; 'The Collar', ll.1-5.

this abandon, an inevitability, and a direction, that the 'board' does not extend to him. He finds determinacy in freedom: 'I will abroad'. Contrasting with the loose, large freedom of himself, God's way seems one merely of fitting, without pull or direction. Herbert admonishes himself for his tolerance of before:

> Leave thy cold dispute
> Of what is fit, and not. Forsake thy cage,
> Thy rope of sands.[67]

Herbert of all poets is impatient of 'cold dispute'. His whole urge is towards the presence and immediacy of experience, he succumbs entirely to the mood of the instant. It is this confidence not to interrupt or hinder his own feeling that gives his voice such force; the poetry thus draws the full strength of simple words and syntax. A 'cold dispute', a 'sigh' and a 'rope of sands', have no strength to hold him. They are inaudible, and he turns from them impatiently:

> But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde
> At every word,
> Me thoughts I heard one calling, Child:
> And I reply'd My Lord.
> ('The Collar', ll.33-6)

The two aspects of silence, its groundlessness and its ground, have instant access to each other in Herbert. Despite the distance he has travelled in the spirit of rebellion, still God's voice sounds close; it speaks 'as I rav'd', simultaneous with his fury. Herbert hears and replies in immediate alignment, even to the italics (that my type-set cannot show): 'Child', 'My Lord'.

There is an unchartable distance between ground and groundlessness in silent moments, as Coleridge says, 'insusceptible' of all other evidence. What on the surface of experience might seem to lie within a moment, may in truth lapse into free-fall to an inconceivable

---

67. 'The Collar', ll.20-2, from MS. B, footnoted by Patrides.

extent. So in 'Affliction (IV)' Herbert feels that he is: 'A wonder tortur'd in the space / Betwixt this world and that of grace' (11.5-6). The brokenness of 'this world' alone does not account for all his torture. It is the extent 'Betwixt this world and that of grace', a space both inconceivable and felt, that wounds him primarily. In both Wordsworth and Herbert, the silence that makes spots of time instils a sense of distance that is not subject to common laws of dimension.

The vacancy in Wordsworth though apparently an experience purely of mind is just such a vertiginous opening within 'this world'. The silent breach is manifestly there. Thus high on Snowdon, standing before a huge sea of mist, it is the break in the sea that compels his eye. He sees it with an overwhelming clarity: 'a fracture in the vapour, / A deep and gloomy breathing place' (Prelude XIII. 56-7). Despite the depth of the breach and the confusion of agency in the 'gloomy breathing place', the margin of the chasm is unnaturally absolute (crisp in a fluid medium), and utterly compelling:

> In that breach
> Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,
> That dark deep thoroughfare had Nature lodg'd
> The Soul, the Imagination of the whole.
> (Prelude XIII. 62-5)

It is not just that the breach is at the centre of his vision. To Wordsworth it seems that the spectacle has its source in the 'dark deep thoroughfare', as if 'Imagination' belonged to the vacancy and issued from it presently.

The vacancy in Herbert's poetry is not seen so much as performed, expressed in a swerving of perspective. It is implied in vertigo, 'I flie with angels, fall with dust'.[68] The very sureness of Herbert's words secures their terrible provisionality in experience. It is as

68. GH, p.74; 'The Temper (I)', 1.25.

if the wholeness that Wordsworth sees, in Herbert were to be experienced gradually, as a progressive revelation rather than a single vision: 'O rack me not to such a vast extent; / Those distances belong to thee... Will great God measure with a wretch?' (ibid., 11.9-10, 15). The vacancy is unchanging and absolute but it also admits relative experience, as if God would indeed 'measure with a wretch'. The transformations of his state are hidden in the words. In 'The Collar', for example, in the fury of rebellion, his words find a footing in compliance. The tempest 'winde' is thus drawn to an action of gathering, and the 'rope of sands' grows strong. The very 'board' he struck at first, becomes the boat on which he flees. Even in his anger it seems he cannot find words that do not resonate in calm.

For Donne the freedom of detachment is a more alien idea. He hasn't Herbert's sense of distance. Taken altogether Herbert's poems follow a pattern of slack and billow; whilst Donne's poems, on the other hand, provide a steady tension. Contrasting strongly with Herbert for whom the outward impulse is necessary, to save him from the 'groundless' aspect of silence, for Donne, the ground must lie within his own control. Nowhere is this more forcefully shown than in this Sermon, where he considers his own decay:

> (I shall not be able to send forth so much as an ill ayre, nor any ayre at all, but shall be all insipid, tastelesse, savourlesse dust; for a while, all wormes, and after a while, not so much as wormes, sordid, senselesse, namelesse dust) When I consider the past, and present, and future state of this body, in this world, I am able to conceive, able to expresse the worst that can befall it in nature, and the worst that can be inflicted upon it by man, or fortune; But the least degree of glory that God hath prepared for that body in heaven, I am not able to expresse, nor able to conceive.[69]

---

69. Sermons, VII, 390; no.22 in LXXX Sermons.

He starts with a vivid insistence on his incapacity. In the grave, 'I shall not be able to send forth so much as an ill ayre, nor any ayre at all'. But contrast this lack of impulse with Donne's development of the theme: 'When I consider... this body, in this world, I am able to conceive, able to expresse the worst that can befall it'. Words of power start to creep in. Putrefaction itself turns into an exercise of power, lingeringly and luxuriously described as he settles in his grave. Decay is what he can do, and he follows the progress of the 'insipid, tastelesse, savourlesse dust' with relish. God's 'glory', by contrast, falls with a curious flatness at the end. Donne is 'not able to expresse, nor able to conceive', not so much heaven, as an existence different from that of his present tense contemplation.

Implicitly his poetry is set against the indemonstrable idea. Only in the 'Divine Meditations', does he struggle visibly to maintain his stance. He starts in strength, even so, with audacious demands:

> Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?
> Repair me now, for now mine end doth haste,
> I run to death, and death meets me as fast.[70]

God's creative might is made to rest on the condition that Donne will be preserved. He throws it down like a challenge, 'Shall thy work decay?'. The paramount impulse belongs to Donne, in the unreasonable reason of his demands. He wants to be made whole ('Repair me now'), so that he can end properly, intact and strong. The speed of his death, 'I run to death, and death meets me as fast', is strictly at odds with the slow 'decay'. It's as if Donne had no register to deal with weakness. Yet as with 'Batter my heart', the 'I' is complex in its form:

---

70. JD, p.309; 'Thou hast made me' ('Divine Meditations 1'), 11.1-3.

When towards thee
By thy leave I can look, I rise again;
But our old subtle foe so tempteth me,
That not one hour I can myself sustain;
Thy Grace may wing me to prevent his art,
And thou like adamant draw mine iron heart.
(Ibid., 11.9-14)

Left to himself the 'I' is weak, constantly falling back, unable to resist the 'subtle foe'; yet in relation to God he is unmoveable. He is 'iron'. More than this, it's as though resistance were <u>his</u> part in salvation, as though his 'iron heart' were the relative of Grace: 'And thou like adamant draw mine iron heart'. Though he feels himself buckling, Donne cannot unbend. To accept God would be to walk against his own impulse. It is counter-intuitive. God's presence threatens his tension:

O my black soul! now thou art summoned
By sickness, death's herald, and champion;
Thou art like a pilgrim, which abroad hath done
Treason, and durst not turn to whence he is fled.[71]

Even in recognition, as the words admit his predicament, as sickness, treason and exile, there is still an energy racing along the lines, seeking an extension. So whilst the words say 'turn', the speaker continues walking. The lines lean towards statement, attempting to forestall their sense, or better, to close before the reversal can come. So 'now thou art summoned' is complete without 'By sickness'; and even the third line, whose meaning needs continuation, tries to 'hath done'. Coleridge wrote of Donne:

To read Dryden, Pope &c, you need only count syllables; but to read Donne you must measure <u>Time</u>, & discover the <u>Time</u> of Each word by the Sense & Passion.
('Notes on Donne', 216)

Coleridge reads Donne as Donne might wish, so that his 'Sense and

71. <u>JD</u>, p.310; 'O my black soul!' ('Divine Meditations 4'), 11.1-4.

Passion' persist the longer. It is a strangely double view of time, that you read by measuring time, whilst time itself has no fixed measure. Donne both sets and bends his terms. The problem here though is not for Donne to master time, but rather for him to begin the immeasurable: 'Grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lack; / But who shall give thee that grace to begin?' ('O my black soul!', 11.9-10). Donne must 'turn' and accept the slack of the summons. In contrast with 'The Collar', where God's call grows compelling, God here for Donne is horribly optional. The road to him is unguided, even though this slackness is also a summons.

In the 'Perspectives' chapter of Awakenings, Oliver Sacks writes:

> Health is infinite and expansive in mode, and reaches out to be filled with the fullness of the world; whereas disease is finite and reductive in mode, and endeavours to reduce the world to itself.[72]

It is not necessarily that Donne is moving from sickness to health, but it is a similar transformation that he has to make. Each 'mode' works according to its own strong laws (the one 'infinite and expansive', the other 'finite and reductive'), but the experience of transition from one to the other is deeply lawless. It is a monstrous inversion that Donne has to undergo to accept God's freedom:

> When I shall need peace, because there is none but thou, O Lord, that should stand for me, and then shall finde, that all the wounds that I have, come from thy hand, all the arrowes that stick in me, from thy quiver... The Almighty God himselfe onely knowes the waight of this affliction, and except hee put in that pondus gloriae, that exceeding waight of an eternall glory, with his owne hand, into the other scale, we are waighed downe, we are swallowed up, irreperably, irrevocably, irrecoverably, irremediably.[73]

---

72. Oliver Sacks, Awakenings, second edition (London, 1990), p.234.
73. Sermons, VII, 56-7; no.66 in LXXX Sermons.

The human spirit faces an awful train of absolutes, in which it cannot intervene. This is alien territory, so even though it is his own fate that is held in the balance, his wounds and his lost peace, the 'affliction' strikes Donne beyond conception: 'The Almighty God himselfe onely knowes the waight of this affliction'; and unless God act 'with his owne hand... we are swallowed up, irreperably, irrevocably, irrecoverably, irremediably'. The only remedy is 'that pondus gloriae, that exceeding waight of eternall glory'. There is nothing in between.

In neither Herbert nor Donne is acceptance an end; it is rather the beginning: 'So I did sit and eat' prompts the inconceivable question, and what next? This beginning however looks very different in their poetry. Whereas in Donne the acceptance of God produces a threatening shapelessness, in Herbert, it makes the shape of the poetry itself. It is very strange that Herbert has any coherence, or that he is recognisable at all. Calmly and simply he says things that hardly hold to sense. He has a strong conception of God's infinity - 'Thy will such a strange distance is' ('The Search', 1.41), yet in 'Love (III)', infinity makes a finite form. More than this, it deigns to suffer emptiness:

> Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
> Guiltie of dust and sinne.
> But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
> From my first entrance in,
> Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
> If I lack'd any thing.[74]

Herbert's difficulty in writing about the divine is the reverse of that experienced by Hopkins. It is not to force God into the physical world, to entice him into poetry, but rather to approach Him there.

---

74. GH, p.192; 'Love (III)', 11.1-6.

Herbert has to dare to enter his own 'Temple', because God is there before him. At the 'Church-Porch' he checks himself: 'When once thy foot enters the church, be bare. / God is more there, then thou'.[75] 'Be bare' he says; for conventionally he should remove his hat on entering the church. But the phrase means more that. He must be 'bare', open to God. It is only by this terrifying finality that he can begin his approach.

'Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back'; the beginning of their relationship is lost in time. 'Yet' describes the position of the soul in relation to Love, arranging grammatical space. But it has a second, adverbial function, one of saying 'still'. The moment to approach has long been ripe. The surface of the line gives onto a great span of time. The unrealisable Love is there before him; he has only to step forward and accept, and yet the speaker shrinks from the contact in confusion and shame. As Love pursues him he averts his eyes: 'Ah my deare, / I cannot look on thee' (11.9-10). It's as if by not seeing, he could restore the distance between them. Again though, God is there before him: 'Love took my hand, and smiling did reply, / Who made the eyes but I?' (11.11-12). In truth he cannot look away. 'You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat: / So I did sit and eat' (11.17-18). The nature of this love is simple and unimaginable, and hugely disproportionate. He must in his humility act with bewildering audacity.

Herbert's meanings are planted in trust. Not understanding or feeling, the voices act as if they felt and understood God's meaning. Herbert's silence is governed by both patience and unease. It's as though his poems needed silence to reach their end:

---

75. GH, p.44; 'The Church-Porch', 11.403-4.

> I gave to Hope a watch of mine: but he
> An anchor gave to me...
> Ah Loyterer! I'le no more, no more I'le bring:
> I did expect a ring.[76]

His words are at 'anchor', sure and unmoving, but they are also restless, the speaker looking to his 'watch'. Seeking to plan his departure he finds instead that he must wait, at the very verge of beginning. Herbert's patience has a three-dimensional, stirring look.

Herbert's voice, however, is startling in its directness. Though there are many moods and approaches in The Temple, his poetry has always the look of telling true. In 'The Sacrifice' he writes: 'God holds his peace at man, and man cries out'.[77] The silence of God, indirect and tolerant, calls men to account. In contrast with the forbearance of God, 'man cries out' directly. Kierkegaard observes: 'Silence is the most penetrating and acute questioning... The most frightful torture and yet permissible' (CA, 125). This silence would not bear blank, unknowing words like those of Wordsworth but vivid words of the self. Yet, of course, that self is already accommodated to expect religious meanings whereas for Wordsworth the blankness is himself, an interior happening. Hopkins valiantly makes that selving a universal experience, a struggle by which self in going out to meet the selves of all other beings in a great meeting of 'I' and 'Thou' will also meet God in that exchange of identities. The trouble is that for him the expectation of fullness instils in the poetry in the end a deeper sense of emptiness. The blankness which was an aid to Wordsworth becomes for Hopkins an attribute of God which forces his voice back upon silence as the truer register.

---

76. GH, p.133; 'Hope', 11.1-2, 7-8.
77. GH, p.54; 'The Sacrifice', 1.187.

Chapter 3

Horizontals and Horizons:

Response and the World in Hardy, Shelley and Conrad

I

Behind many of the moments of relationship between the poet and the physical world in Romantic poetry there lies an implicit faith. Wordsworth's poetry is given strength by its unspoken power. It is as though inarticulacy guided him, tacitly at home. Crossing the Alps, this sense of belonging strikes him with the force of vision:

> And now recovering, to my soul I say
> I recognise thy glory...
> Our destiny, our nature, and our home
> Is with infinitude, and only there;
> With hope it is, hope that can never die,
> Effort, and expectation, and desire,
> And something evermore about to be.
> (Prelude VI. 531-2, 538-42)

Hope is both what holds the spirit steady and what makes it move; it is: 'Our destiny, our nature, and our home', both destination and arrival point. Where that 'recovering' comes from, what the justifying faith to that hope may be is never specified. To find the energy to be able to will it into existence is reason enough. But the issue in much later nineteenth century writing is where to turn when the will is not found. Hopkins tries to found the moment of relationship in an increasing both of self-consciousness ('I caught this morning') and of the explicitness of the ground (God), to be both more passionately physical and more doctrinally spiritual than Wordsworth. The immense scale of the ambition may cause him to falter but it forces him, by his very desire for expressiveness, to discover unforeseen modes of poetic silence.

For most writers that was not a possible route, however. This is

maybe less a matter specifically of rationalist objections to received religion than that the Wordsworthian inner disposition to faith came to seem frail, historically no longer available. To Arnold writing his 'Memorial Verses' for Wordsworth, just a half-century on, poetry has lost this power. In its place there is an all too articulate sense of loss:

> Others will teach us how to dare,
> And against fear our breast to steel;
> Others will strengthen us to bear -
> But who, ah! who, will make us feel?[1]

Arnold's words have no internal guidance. Arnold's relation to the world is to dare it, to bear it, or to steel himself against it. His poetry shoulders an external world that offers no direction, only opposition. There is only a remnant of hope, stranded unattached in the anguish of his voice, 'But who, ah! who will make us feel?' The rhetorical echo of this 'who' comes in sharp contrast to the available crowd of the 'others' who can teach us to guard against feeling. Arnold finds a stoic silence is his best response to a deficit of uninterpretable pain though he would often prefer a Byronic response of surplus energy.

This outcast sense is not new to poetry; but the scale of the desolation is. It's as though everyone and everything were excluded all at once. There is no standard left to which Arnold can appeal. In 'The Shrubbery', Cowper too is an outsider: 'How ill the scene that offers rest, / And heart that cannot rest, agree!'.[2] Like Arnold, he lacks the power of response, and his voice too has that spare, discordant sound. Pointedly, 'agree' is the word that does not belong.

---

1. Matthew Arnold, The Poems, ed. Kenneth Allott (London, 1965), p.229; 'Memorial Verses', ll.64-7.
2. Cowper, Poetical Works, p.292; 'The Shrubbery', ll.3-4.

The concurrence of his heart seems added merely to make up the numbers. Cowper, however, wrote to alleviate his own suffering; he alone is disowned: 'Damn'd below Judas: more abhorr'd than he was'.[3] The catastrophe that Arnold faces is general. He is appealing for his age when he cries, 'But who, ah! who will make us feel?'

In this chapter I want to try to see how feeling, beauty and hope can, for some late nineteenth century writers, have changed their ground so entirely. In Wordsworth they are at the centre of poetry, an impulse of life, 'A grandeur in the beatings of the heart'. In 'Memorial Verses' they are a merely helpless eloquence on the very surface of poetry. It's as though all that <u>is</u> life in Wordsworth, were separate from the conditions of existence in Arnold. There is no sense of belonging in Arnold's poetry, no starting point within except in a buried life beyond our apprehension. Although the subjective is all there is, the subject himself, herself, becomes painfully insignificant. Different accounts of the process may be offered by Marxist or by Freudian analysis, or appeals made to cultural or intellectual history, but it is the phenomenon itself and its effect on writing that remains beyond dispute. The human spirit seems trapped and homeless. Thus in 'Empedocles On Etna', Arnold describes the condition of the soul:

> Hither and thither spins
> The wind-borne, mirroring soul,
> A thousand glimpses wins,
> And never sees a whole.[4]

The articulate clarity of Empedocles's vision is of no use to him at all. He can only reflect in random, partial glimpses, spinning 'wind-

---

3. Cowper, <u>Poetical Works</u>, p.290; 'Lines Written During A Period of Insanity', 1.5.
4. Arnold, <u>Poems</u>, p.159; 'Empedocles On Etna', I. ii. 82-5.

borne'. His freedom of movement becomes a form of constraint rather than of capacity, as if he were trapped in freedom. Poetry is of necessity a secondary, reflective effect for Arnold, rather than a primary force. He cannot trace perception to its source: 'A thousand glimpses wins, / And never sees a whole'. In contrast, when Wordsworth sees by glimpses, it is with a full sense of the whole:

> The days gone by
> Come back upon me from the dawn almost
> Of life: the hiding places of my power
> Seem open; I approach, and then they close.
> (Prelude XI. 334-7)

With each glimpse, 'the hiding-places of my power / Seem open'. It is as if the momentary nature of the sight were framed by discovery itself. Yet Arnold seems like a man forever forced to look the other way. He can only catch the peripheries of vision. The effects of this deflection are central however. Thus in 'Empedocles On Etna', he conceives of man suspended by doubt and fear: 'Who knows not what to believe / Since he sees nothing clear, / And dares stamp nothing false where he finds nothing sure' (I. ii. 89-91). It's as if man could not begin for himself. He has no starting point within.

This shift between Wordsworth and Arnold is not to be accounted for by personality alone; there seems to have been a fundamental reorientation in the poetic prospect, which makes certain appeals impossible to the later poet. Whilst the detached impulse is an extra force for Wordsworth, for Arnold, consciousness itself seems to be redundant. This quality of detachment marks the full extent of the disillusion between Romantic and, especially, late Victorian writing. At the same time, however, it provides a vantage point from which to examine their separate states.

It is as though, important as he was for them notionally, such writers had lost faith not so much in the Church as in Kant. Kant

offered them a self-subsisting account of the relation of perceiver to perceptible world, self-subsisting in that it did not appeal to any prior beliefs or assumptions. In its account of the moment of response in the subject (the way the writer writes the world into his writing), Kantian aesthetics are even more illuminating that the Critique of Pure Reason.

In the Critique of Aesthetic Judgement, Kant describes the beautiful as operating precisely from detachment; it is altogether discontinuous: 'Beauty is for itself, apart from any reference to the feeling of the Subject, nothing'.[5] Kant's beauty is purely subjective, yet it has no actual root in the subject. It is rather twice removed, depending on the subject's assumption of an unknown power. The beautiful is as though given by 'an understanding (though it be not ours)' (Kant, 19). The baselessness of beauty is all the more emphatic to Kant, whose world-view rests on a priori principles, that is, on the tenet that the subject has the very template of any possible experience. The aesthetic sense is the exception that he allows. Whereas usually judgement works from a given universal to accommodate the particular, in this instance, judgement is presented only the particular beautiful object, and must pluck the universal from nowhere. Having made this step, however, Kant relies fully on its groundlessness, as Wordsworth does later. The pleasure that we feel in the presence of beauty, he claims, lacks any sensual, moral or cognitive base, it is not even attached to the immediate object. Rather the pleasure lies in the grasp of subjective universality: 'We believe ourselves to be speaking with a universal voice, and lay

---

5. Immanuel Kant, Critique of Aesthetic Judgement (1790), trans. and ed. James Creed Meredith (Oxford, 1911), p.59.

claim to the concurrence of everyone' (Kant, 56). The slight and unexpected contact of beauty thus conveys an immediate sense of belonging, expanding to the 'concurrence of everyone'. Whilst it has no home itself, beauty stores a native spirit.

How can beauty do so much? Far from being a frail effect, it seems to work with tremendous strength. To Kant its power lies in the shape of the active mind itself. It is difficult to find quotations in Kant that sound as momentous in isolation as they do caught up in the movement of his argument. With paradoxical dryness he writes:

> It is the universal capacity for being communicated incident to the mental state in the given representation which, as the subjective condition of the judgement of taste, must be fundamental, with the pleasure in the object as its consequent.
> (Kant, 57)

It is as if in the utter isolation of beauty, the spirit made a shape or adopted a pose which was itself communicative; as if beauty threw the mind into the pattern of community. This, Kant finds, is the shape of the uninhibited mind:

> The quickening of both faculties (imagination and understanding) to an indefinite, but yet, thanks to the given representation, harmonious activity, such as belongs to cognition generally, is the sensation whose universal communicability is postulated in the judgement of taste.
> (Kant, 60)

Imagination and understanding run unhindered towards this 'representation' for which the mind has no original, so that the mind is quickened to an 'indefinite' excess. Yet despite this openness, the mind's activity is also 'harmonious', 'thanks to the <u>given</u> representation'. It is the assumption of 'an understanding (though it be not ours)' that gives finality to the representation, and balances the mind. It is as though the greatest rashness secured the greatest calm; as if the full outpouring of the mind <u>must</u> fall into harmony.

The harmony of Kant's beauty does not depend on a merely fitting order, rather it finds recognition and safety beyond the bounds of human control.

Beauty, according to Kant, exists only in pure detachment. The presence of any prior concept, or desire of beauty, by so much interest, undoes the ground of its occurrence: 'All interest presumes a want, or calls one forth... deprives the judgement on the object of its freedom' (Kant, 49). Beauty thus beckons from an ideal world, arising: 'Only when men have got all they want' (Kant, 49). It cannot coexist with want. This is perhaps the main dilemma facing the Victorian writers. They cry 'Ah! who will make us feel?' and the very <u>need</u> of feeling prevents its return. Cruelly and almost incomprehensibly, 'grace and truth' are only to be won by the abandonment of 'Doubt, chance, and mutability'.[6] The apparently fragile effect of beauty requires an unnerving strength of character.

That the sense of beauty originates within us as a recognition but belongs also in the object circumvents the awkward problem of its final significance, Hopkins' dilemma. The Romantic poet most concerned with the identity of beauty is Shelley; he names it more often than Wordsworth and raises it as an intellectual issue more explicitly than Keats. It is significant may be that it was Shelley whose standing increased in the later nineteenth century, partly because he is concerned with an act of faith in beauty within embattled and degraded circumstances.

In 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' he looks out upon a world from which beauty seems to have fled:

---

6. Percy Bysshe Shelley, <u>Poetical Works</u>, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, second edition, corrected by G. M. Matthews (Oxford, 1970), p.530; 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', 11.31 & 36. Hereafter referred to as <u>PBS</u>.

> Therefore the names of Demon, Ghost, and Heaven,
> Remain the records of their vain endeavour,
> Frail spells - whose uttered charms might not avail to sever,
> From all we hear and all we see,
> Doubt, chance, and mutability.
> Thy light alone - like mist o'er mountains driven,
> Or music by the night-wind sent
> Through strings of some still instrument,
> Or moonlight on a midnight stream,
> Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream.
> ('Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', 11.27-36)

Without the presence of beauty, religion and hope are simply delusory or flat, 'records of their vain endeavour'. For both Shelley and Kant, beauty is more than superficial adornment. It has a central role. So to Shelley it seems the medium of meaning itself, a point of certainty that would indeed 'avail to sever / From all we hear and all we see, / Doubt, chance, and mutability'. This beauty is a force of equilibrium that affects Shelley's relationship to his poetic world in a fundamental way. Without it the 'I' is reeling, caught in a fluctuating perspective of doubt and chance. But if only beauty could take root in his consciousness, then, the speaker feels he could be steady. Beauty seems fleeting but actually offers stability to the mind: 'Thy light alone - like mist o'er mountains driven... Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream'. All fluctuation becomes a glimpse of the single light in the outward movements of the light through all its diverse forms, of mist and music, stream and mountain. The outward world cascades with images, while the self is suspended in inner calm. It is as though the touch of beauty could content the 'wind-borne mirroring soul', give 'grace and truth to life's unquiet dream'.

The difficulty is that whilst beauty appears the indispensable source of hope and meaning, it is frequently absent. Shelley's poem values beauty's gift, but it is the 'unquiet dream' that has the strongest sway in his poetry. Even as he describes the 'grace and

truth' that beauty bring, his eye slips vagrantly from one form to another:

> Thy light alone - like mist o'er mountain driven,
> Or music by the night-wind sent
> Through strings of some still instrument,
> Or moonlight on a midnight stream,
> Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream.

'Thy light alone', he writes, but the light is revealed in no single image. The poetry leaps between Beauty's mediations, between mist and music, moonlight and 'night-wind', finding beauties everywhere. Nor is it simply music or moonlight that Shelley seeks, rather it is the half-phrased, reflective interplay of each, the confusion and clarity of 'moonlight on a midnight stream'. Between the perfection the mind apprehends and its realisation there is a gap which is always on the edge of despair. The restlessness that the voice avowedly is trying to escape, is all the time intrinsic to his phrasing. It's as though the poetry had constantly to catch up with itself simply to keep balance.

Nevertheless Shelley can maintain his act of faith in beauty (partly because for him it is also the spirit of Revolution, it has political resources) and he is seen as ally by the Victorian aesthetes. What seems at first strange is that Hardy should have so admired Shelley; but the presence of 'doubt, chance and mutability' which threatens that sense of beauty is powerfully felt in the world of both writers. What too often gets ignored in Hardy is the extent to which the characters are constantly surprised by moments of pure, indifferent beauty, occurring with inexplicable suddenness. Indeed, if the world were more homogeneous in its oppression of the spirit it would be easier for the characters to cope with.

A susceptibility of feeling is at the base of Hardy's outlook. In Far From the Madding Crowd, for example, Bathsheba loses her

husband's love to the dead Fanny Robin, and she runs from the house, careless of direction: 'A vehement impulse to flee from him, to run from this place, hide, and escape his words at any price, not stopping short of death itself, mastered Bathsheba now'.[7] Her desire is to 'flee', to 'run', to 'hide' and 'escape'; the urgency of flight affects her thoroughly, with a conviction 'not stopping short of death itself'. Yet when the next chapter opens it does not deal with death. In place of the drastic depth of 'escape... at any price', the page swims with a surprising simplicity, as the narrator's attention is claimed by line after line of bird-song. He writes it out, barely with comment, simply observing:

> A coarse-throated chatter was the first sound.
> It was a sparrow just waking.
> Next: 'Chee-weeze-weeze-weeze!' from another retreat.
> It was a finch.
> Third: 'Tink-tink-tink-tink-a-chink!'
> (FMC, 362)

There is something both forgetful and wonderfully heedful in Hardy's attention. He is able to be drawn. Only the page before, experience was intolerable; the cry was Bathsheba's own: 'A long, low cry of measureless despair and indignation' (FMC, 361), yet here overleaf, she can respond as if with an innocent ear. In the narrator's quiet, the whole attention of the book is drawn to the fresh, clear sounds of the birds. The potential for recovery it seems owes less to inward resilience than to Hardy's ability to respond and draw sustenance from the alien voices of which his world is bafflingly composed.

Hardy's writing, like Kant's judgement, uncovers a discontinuity in consciousness, and as with Kant, this break produces an energy of pure suggestiveness. In the short story 'The Melancholy Hussar', the

---

7. Thomas Hardy, Far from the Madding Crowd (1874), ed. Ronald Blythe (Harmondsworth, 1978), p.361. Hereafter referred to as FMC.

narrator establishes the complete isolation of Phyllis Grove thus:

> Before that day scarcely a soul had been seen near her father's house for weeks. When a noise like the brushing skirt of a visitor was heard on the door-step, it proved to be a scudding leaf; when a carriage seemed to be nearing the door, it was her father grinding his sickle on the stone in the garden... A sound like luggage thrown down from the coach was a gun far away at sea.[8]

There is a distance between expectation and eventuality in the sounds, between the 'brushing skirt' of the visitor and the random movement of the leaf. Hardy's books wake up a surplus of consciousness that is not called for by the actual circumstances, as if by a breadth of responsiveness, beyond the attention of the story itself. The receptiveness is unmotivated apparently; its origins are silent, because beyond cause or consequence. It is not just that the expectation survives the disappointment. His extra consciousness goes beyond that. 'A sound like luggage thrown down from the coach was a gun far away at sea'; '<u>the</u> coach', he writes, so that what started in the mind becomes apparent certainty, only to be again discounted. The coach is a term of poetic credence between the expectation and the actual source, that survives the recognition of reality. The distance between the luggage and the sea is embraced into an intimacy in Hardy's mind; his books are rich with such uneven consequence.

Hardy's attention is never quite direct. Despite his often harsh coincidences, the telling impulse of his writing is not really a part of narrative. It is in the sensuousness of his language rather than in the organisation of his plot, that the extra impulse lies. Hardy

---

8. Thomas Hardy, <u>Collected Short Stories</u>, ed. Desmond Hawkins and F. B. Pinion (London, 1988), p.36, 'The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion'. Originally from <u>Wessex Tales</u> (1888). Hereafter referred to as <u>CSS</u>.

has one of the most ready and responsive of eyes. Waking after her night outside, Bathsheba finds she is covered in fallen leaves:

> Bathsheba shook her dress to get rid of them, when multitudes of the same family lying round about her rose and fluttered away in the breeze thus created, 'like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing'.
> (FMC, 363)

It's the flight of the leaves that is interesting. On one level, causation is perfectly natural and clear: 'Bathsheba shook her dress to get rid of them', and so the leaves flew. On another, the origins of their movement are lost entirely. 'When' is pointedly imprecise: the rising of the leaves coincides with her movement as much as she causes them to stir; so that the leaves seem to rise from a separate region. In a careless, sensuous way, Hardy's eye takes root in the strangest of perspectives. His impulse at base is one of intense vitality, bringing incongruities into congruence, as with the final quotation from Shelley.

If Kant believed that 'Doubt, chance, and mutability' disappear in the moment when beauty is recognised, for Hardy they do not. The moment of increased apprehension is another element in an incongruous world. The sense of beauty remains silently alongside the apprehension of pain, which does have a structure of thought to sustain it. Indeed the design of his narratives often carries a beauty of order, a perfection of balance, which exists in ironical relation with the disorder of the characters' experience. Thus in 'Fellow-Townsmen', Barnet discovers within the space of an half-hour, first that he is free to marry, and then that the woman he has loved for years is shortly to marry his closest friend. As the man stares from the quayside, the narrator observes the effect of the news on him:

> The sun blazing into his face would have shown a close watcher that a horizontal line, which had never been seen before, but which was never to be

> gone thereafter, was somehow gradually forming itself in the smooth of his forehead. His eyes, of a light hazel, had a curious look which can only be described by the word bruised; the sorrow that looked from them being largely mixed with the surprise of a man taken unawares.[9]

Though Hardy's events fall absolutely, they do not fall into scale. There is always a tacit otherwise: 'a curious look... of a man taken unawares'. It is from this unassimilable region that the recognisable voice of Hardy comes. His words too look 'bruised' as he describes the record of Barnet's dilemma 'somehow gradually forming itself in the smooth of his forehead'. The sense of 'gradually' in this context is deeply disorientating: as the summary of a life, the line is astonishingly rapid in its formation. But it is fitting that 'gradually' should be the word to reveal the stress of Hardy's meaning. Hardy's silent words would not be glittering and determinate, but wondering and slightly slewed like this.

As with Kant's idea of beauty, the wakefulness of consciousness in Hardy is pure and unattached. Where Kant's beauty comes from detachment and ends in universal community of feeling, however, Hardy's delighted response begins in unexpectedness and ends as a kind of surplus. There is no sense of direction or of belonging in Hardy's 'curious look'. So contrasting with the expansive movement of beauty in Kant, this cognate spirit in Hardy leaves us not able to assess its scale of importance. He succumbs to its provocation. It's as if he had been betrayed into poetry. Surprised by an apparent joy, like that of the Romantics, Hardy finds it a redundant energy which instead of acting as a guide, seems to him a troubling excess. Its profusion is too general to offer direction. On Egdon Heath it is the

---

9. CSS, p.112. 'Fellow-Townsmen' originally published in Wessex Tales.

common condition. The calm of evening stirs with unaccountable intensity:

> This was not the repose of actual stagnation, but the apparent repose of incredible slowness. A condition of healthy life so nearly resembling the torpor of death is a noticeable thing of its sort; to exhibit the inertness of the desert, and at the same time to be exercising powers akin to those of the meadow, and even of the forest, awakened in those who thought of it the attentiveness usually engendered by understatement and reserve.[10]

Both at a material level and in the 'attentiveness' that it calls from the observer, the Heath promotes a vigour that is in excess of its obvious justification. It seems over-burdened with energy. Contradictorily Hardy is rich beyond his means. But why can't he benefit from his discovery? The narrator only comments warily that this vigour is 'a noticeable thing of its sort'. The dramatic energy of the heath, it seems, rises no further than its life forms, to ankle height. It is an exacting energy of 'incredible slowness', only gradually ecstatic, unlike the meadow or the forest whose lives are more immediate. So whilst the heath induces the 'attentiveness usually engendered by understatement and reserve', its words are phrased too slowly to be heard. Hardy stands surrounded by the stirring expanse, both held and frustrated by silence. It seems a waste harvest, yet that experience is founded in this redundancy gives the novels their mysterious vitality.

Perplexingly, it is the living impulse itself that commits Hardy to this austere state. Returning to the heath, the reddleman searches the horizon of rounded hills until his eyes are arrested by a figure standing on the highest line of the barrow. The narrator watches intently in the evening light:

---

10. Thomas Hardy, The Return of the Native (1878), ed. George Woodcock (Harmondsworth, 1978), p.62. Hereafter referred to as RN.

> Such a perfect, delicate, and necessary finish did the figure give to the dark pile of hills that it seemed to be the only obvious justification of their outline... With it the architectural demands of the mass were satisfied.
>
> (RN, 63)

The figure is necessary to the discovery of the aesthetic, the balance and unity of the hills: 'the only obvious justification of their outline'. It is not just that the human form satisfies the 'architectural demands' of the hills, the whole perception acts to balance the perceiver. Eustacia's chance appearance on the skyline lends 'the dark pile of hills' a 'necessary finish'. The momentary whole is received in a mood of stillness and contentment, as the narrator watches the apparent unity of the hills, allowing himself to believe in it:

> The form was so much like an organic part of the entire motionless structure that to see it move would have impressed the mind of a strange phenomenon. Immobility being the chief characteristic of that whole which the person formed portion of, the discontinuance of immobility in any quarter suggested confusion.
>
> (RN, 63)

That the watcher was committed to the spectacle is clear in the reluctant way that he admits movement, as 'the discontinuance of immobility'. It is because he has believed (and must believe) in the value of what he has seen that he is now thrown into disorder. He feels the loss at core; the broken outline does not simply confuse the observer, it suggests confusion, as if helpfully. Confusion seems the appropriate mode. Hardy's experience with these hills is oddly reminiscent of Wordsworth's encounter with the living cliff in the first book of The Prelude. The boy goes rowing at night, fixing a steady view on the top of a craggy ridge. It is the highest point on the horizon, with nothing beyond it but the sky, and Wordsworth measures his speed against it:

> I dipp'd my oars into the silent Lake,
> And, as I rose upon the stroke, my Boat
> Went heaving through the water, like a Swan;
> When from behind that craggy Steep, till then
> The bound of the horizon, a huge Cliff,
> As if with voluntary power instinct,
> Uprear'd its head. I struck, and struck again,
> And, growing still in stature, the huge Cliff
> Rose up between me and the stars, and still,
> With measur'd motion, like a living thing,
> Strode after me.
>
> (Prelude I. 402-12)

Both writers see dependently and expansively, drawn to the 'bound of the horizon' where they find 'a steady view'; and both are disturbed by an unexpected movement, the breaking of an outline, and the sense of a mistake. A second interpretation replaces the first. For Hardy, though, the impression has no powerful aftermath to allure and haunt him, and to pursue him through his dreams; only that rank, dismissive word 'confusion'. His outgoing perception leaves him without direction; Wordsworth is perplexed by an excess of implication, Hardy by a loss of significance.

Hardy's idea of harmony is very different to that of Kant. The wakeful, creative spirit of his eye is reconciled to a philosophy of deep mistrust. Defending himself against the charge of pessimism he writes:

> It must be obvious that there is a higher characteristic of philosophy than pessimism, or than meliorism, or even than the optimism of these critics - which is truth. Existence is either ordered in a certain way, or it is not so ordered, and conjectures which harmonize best with experience are removed above all comparison with other conjectures which do not so harmonize. So that to say one view is worse than other views without proving it erroneous implies the possibility of a false view being better or more expedient than a true view.[11]

---

11. Hardy's General Preface to the Wessex Edition of 1912, RN, p.479.

It is a peculiarly Hardyesque view of harmony that is presented here, in the 'conjectures that harmonize best with experience'. Neither soothing nor beautiful, this harmony rather induces pain; perhaps because of the suspicion embedded in the passage, that in staying true to experience, the spirit is not tapping truth itself, but merely corresponding with its surroundings. Hence when James Richardson writes that Hardy does not attempt 'to close the gap' between perceiver and perceived object, in his poetry in particular, that seems to me both very true and a little wrong:

> The Romantic crisis of perception and identity is seldom evident in Hardy. He accepted, in fact needed, the limits which they, whether quietly or frenetically, sought to disbelieve.[12]

He did accept those limits but not out of a mere modesty; if his perception of the world included 'the gap', that was not entirely a happy experience for him.

By contrast with Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', where beauty was immediately associated with truth, hope and stability, it seems to Hardy that truth and beauty are distinct, as though he must choose between them: 'Indeed, it is a question if the exclusive reign of this orthodox beauty is not approaching its last quarter' (RN, 54). The spirit, he feels, has outgrown beauty, and works now with 'a subtler and scarcer instinct... a more recently learned emotion, than that which responds to the sort of beauty called charming and fair' (RN, 54). Turning from the jarring leap that such beauty would demand, he seeks instead for representativeness, or at least for congruence. Thus he is drawn to Egdon:

---

12. James Richardson, The Poetry of Necessity (Chicago, 1977), p.11.

> It was at present a place perfectly accordant with man's nature - neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly: neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame; but, like man, slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony.
> (RN, 55)

The difficulty is that in seeking to avoid the external jarring of the 'false view', Hardy becomes subject to a dangerously termless condition. A world in which the very forces of coherence - beauty, hope and truth - are divorced from one another, is one of merely relative phenomena. So whilst the heath is plainly seen in negatives: 'Neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly: neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame', what it is, positively, is far less clear. Seeking permanence, Hardy finds only history, so that he is committed to the contradiction of what 'man's nature' is 'at present'. In place of the given 'grace and truth', there is this far more limited design of simply enduring.

Though both Hardy and Kant identify the beautiful with a moment of detachment, which in both cases produces energy, their experiences are dissimilar. The most obvious difference is to do with the direction of the resulting energy. Kant's beauty reaches out to grasp the unknown. In daring to apprehend the silent, the unknowable, in the aesthetic moment, he releases consciousness to tremendous gains on the supersensible. Hardy's surplus on the other hand is domestic in its focus. His imagination can take purchase in the movement of a leaf, or find a warmth in chance phenomena. Or, more darkly, it can fall on 'man, slighted and enduring'. What corresponds for Hardy to the silent transcendent occurs closer to home. The familiarity of its location does not however make Hardy's silence easier to gauge. The slights man can suffer and endure are not rule-governed, in a real sense, cannot be thought. Thus in Henchard's terrible realisation,

his greatest burden is his strength: 'But my punishment is not greater than I can bear'.[13] The forbearance of the negative only lifts his spirit to suffer further.

The trouble is that whilst man is the object of Hardy's surplus of unattached significance, he is not therefore the cause. The responsibility for action rather lies beyond his characters. In the short story 'A Tragedy of Two Ambitions', for example, the dead man's stick grows: 'From the sedge rose a straight little silver-poplar, and it was the leaves of this sapling which caused the flicker of whiteness'.[14] With its 'flicker of whiteness' the tree points itself out, achieves its identity of minor grace and beauty, but marking the crime. Equally though the flickering leaves overgrow and ignore the past. Hardy's meaning is rooted in a region of helplessness. Half, the books attempt to slow down attention, to make us realise what has happened; half they are thankful for the forgetful resurgence of life. Hardy is thus in the paradoxical position of gratefully accepting that meaning and consequence may be an interruption to natural processes, whilst it is, to a great extent this very indifference that wounds him most.

Hardy always seems surprised by meaning. Typically it provokes in him words of unexpected watchfulness, a 'curious look', or an extra 'attentiveness' to what is 'a noticeable thing of its sort'. It is as if his consciousness could not retain the impressions of discovery, so that he is always 'taken unawares'. His relationship with meaning is like that of Eustacia to the Heath, the blanks and recognitions come in close proximity:

---

13. Thomas Hardy, The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886), ed. Martin Seymour-Smith (Harmondsworth, 1978), p.388.
14. CSS, p.454. 'A Tragedy of Two Ambitions' originally published in Life's Little Ironies (1894).

> To dwell on a heath without studying its meanings was like wedding a foreigner without learning his tongue. The subtle beauties of the heath were lost to Eustacia; she caught only its vapours.
> (RN, 123)

Hardy's voice is elastic with the extra attentiveness that comes from being able to endure the silence of things. He also is wedded to the 'foreigner', but he has not learned its tongue. There is no clear divide between known and unknown then, only a wakeful half-state of both anxiety and desire. It is close to what John Bayley calls 'attention and inattention' in Hardy: 'The Hardy who is on duty does not seem aware of the one who unknowingly observes'.[15] It is as though his writing appropriated the shape of discovery, but found nothing. Hope itself has become painful, far from Wordsworth's promise of always being able to start again.

The usual recourse of Hardy at this stage is to material rapture. He has the ability simply to lend his eye or ear to that which is going on around him, and hence to forget himself. Thus he describes Tess's attraction to Angel's playing in the orchard. Her responses seem a liveable world on their own, as Hardy finds sustenance in a Keatsian smallness:

> She undulated upon the thin notes of the second-hand harp, and their harmonies passed like breezes through her, bringing tears into her eyes. The floating pollen seemed to be his notes made visible, and the dampness of the garden the weeping of the garden's sensibility. Though near nightfall, the rank-smelling weed-flowers glowed as if they would not close for intentness, and the waves of colour mixed with the waves of sound.[16]

It is an intoxicating, vulnerable moment, in which the very power

---

15. John Bayley, An Essay on Hardy (Cambridge, 1978), p.31.
16. Thomas Hardy, Tess of the D'Urbevilles (1891), ed. David Skilton and A. Alvarez (Harmondsworth, 1978), p.179.

of the moment is over-wrought, and carried to the point of helplessness: 'The rank-smelling weed-flowers looked as if they would not close for intentness'. Hardy basks in the surfeit of his senses. His ability to relinquish himself in this outgoing, however, is very close to a movement of retreat. This is a passage about forgetting as much as about making the reader remember. When troubles amass in Tess, the narrator's comment is consciously useless. The family has lost the father and now, with him, the home. The narrator's observation is purposely aloof: 'So do flux and reflux - the rhythm of change - alternate and persist in everything under the sky' (Tess, 434). The understanding cannot help, yet Hardy still employs it, catching at its sound and balance to fend off the bare, unbalanced consciousness of Tess's predicament.

In the journal for 1881, he observed:

> The emotions have no place in a world of defect, and it is a cruel injustice that they should have developed in it.[17]

These emotions provide the very basis of his writing, so in effect the more he writes and the more truthfully he writes, the more he distorts and provokes the incomprehensible silence. He cannot stop himself from responding, but he learns instead to watch himself respond. It is an attempt to de-activate the power of silence, that leads to a new and different kind of inarticulacy. It is this, perhaps, that imposes so great a disparity between Wordsworth and Hardy in their dealings with outward forms. Where Wordsworth's encounter with the living cliff leaves him with 'a dim and undetermin'd sense / Of unknown modes of being' (Prelude I. 419-20),

---

17. Thomas Hardy, The Life and Work, ed. Michael Millgate (London, 1984), p.153.

Hardy's meeting with the pile of hills on Egdon Heath leaves only 'confusion'. His disorientation is jarring rather than consolatory; he refuses to follow his thought yet comments bleakly on his own responsiveness.

He cannot keep reminding himself and us of the futility, danger even, of his intense apprehension of the visual world. What look like acts of faith keep escaping from him, because they cannot be dispelled - as he writes of Eustacia's sigh: 'There was a spasmodic abandonment about it as if, in allowing herself to utter the sound, the woman's brain had authorized what it could not regulate' (RN, 106). For all the force of her feeling, Eustacia is helpless in relation to it. So too with Hardy; he too must authorize what he cannot regulate. His silence is, by nature, more disordered than that of Wordsworth. But then, Hardy is responding to a different breed of silence, whose forbears are Shelleyan rather than Wordsworthian.

When Hardy writes 'If way to the Better there be',[18] his faith in a redeeming future is manifestly still more tenuous than Shelley's. But for Shelley also, the condemned, delusory present means that all responses are tainted, that if the mind can have its belief in Intellectual Beauty, that is also another way of saying that sensory beauty is at its best only a fleeting image of that ideal beauty and, at its worst, an irrelevant palliative. The highest response would be a silence since anything else only 'Stains the white radiance of Eternity'.[19]

In his Preface to Alastor, Shelley writes of the Poet's 'contemplation of the universe':

---

18. The Poems of Thomas Hardy, ed. T. R. M. Creighton, second edition (London, 1977), p.117; 'In Tenebris II', 1.14. Originally published in Poems of the Past and Present (1902).
19. PBS, p.443; Adonais, 1.463.

> So long as it is possible for his desires to point towards objects thus infinite and unmeasured, he is joyous, and tranquil, and self-possessed. But the period arrives when these objects cease to suffice. His mind is at length suddenly awakened and thirsts for intercourse with an intelligence similar to itself.[20]

While the Poet desires the individual object as an indication of the infinite, his spirit is filled with a stability and calm: 'He is joyous, and tranquil, and self-possessed'. The 'unmeasured' object is paradoxically shapely in its effect, a source of simplicity and self-possession; 'But the period arrives when these objects cease to suffice'. This is something that neither Wordsworth nor Coleridge could have written. It is not that human capacity falls short, but that the poet's desire itself seems to surpass the infinite! The mind's thirst 'for intercourse with an intelligence similar to itself', leads the Poet from the calm of contemplation. Just as Hardy was to choose truth instead of beauty, so Shelley here desires the intelligible over the apparent infinite. It is a preference that results in an entirely different strain of silence to that of Wordsworth. Through sheer homogeneity and intensity of idea, Shelley breaks through into a language where there can be no clear direction or coherence of meaning because that meaning is both certain and, as yet, unknowable; it is 'at <u>length</u>' that the '<u>unmeasured</u>' objects 'cease to suffice'. The contradiction seems more than accidental, but the tension of Shelley's meaning is difficult to gauge. How can the relative outbid the absolute?

The transformation that Shelley describes in the Preface, can be seen in process in the poetry. In <u>Alastor</u> both strains of silence are there in close proximity. The Poet's final resting place is Words-

---

20. <u>PBS</u>, p.14; 'Preface to <u>Alastor</u>'.

worthian in its bearing:

> The near scene,
> In naked and severe simplicity,
> Made contrast with the universe. A pine,
> Rock-rooted, stretched athwart the vacancy
> Its swinging boughs, to each inconstant blast
> Yielding one only response, at each pause
> In most familiar cadence, with the howl
> The thunder and the hiss of homeless streams
> Mingling its solemn song.[21]

It is the confrontational nature of the passage that provides the common ground. There are the blank words of Wordsworthian silence, the 'naked and severe simplicity', the 'vacancy', and 'the hiss of homeless streams'. As in The Prelude too, common experience opens onto the absolute; so out of a walkable terrain, suddenly the poetry approaches an unsayable depth: 'The near scene... Made contrast with the universe'. The margin here between the articulate and the inarticulate spheres is clearly defined; it is as though the words gathered force from the exposure. The single pine grows 'athwart the vacancy', a spectacle of Wordsworthian calm. But in the landscapes that compose the Poet's life-experiences the response is more fraught; as in the following passage, for example. The Poet leaps into a small abandoned boat, determined to meet his death, and he is carried uncontrollably by a swift mountain river. Caught in an eddy the boat circles on the verge of destruction:

> ...The boat paused shuddering. - Shall it sink
> Down the abyss? Shall the reverting stress
> Of that resistless gulf embosom it?
> Now shall it fall? - A wandering stream of wind,
> Breathed from the west, has caught the expanded sail,
> And, lo! with gentle motion, between banks
> Of mossy slope, and on a placid stream,
> Beneath a woven grove it sails, and, hark!
> The ghastly torrent mingles its far roar,
> With the breeze murmuring in the musical woods.
> (Alastor, 11.394-403)

---

21. PBS, p.27; Alastor; or The Spirit of Solitude, 11.559-67.

Caught in the might of waters, the Poet receives no revelation. With an abyss before him, he is saved by 'A wandering stream of wind'; the slightest of breezes is sufficient to draw him from the 'resistless gulf'. With a typical paradox even, it is a 'stream' of wind that saves him from the stream. The underlying nature of experience here is different to that of the preceding passage. Where before the 'vacancy' was set apart as an unquestionably alien force, here Shelley's words are entangled with the inexpressible. As 'The ghastly torrent mingles its far roar, / With the breeze murmuring in the musical woods', so silence is planted in his words. Almost as in Hardy, the scene responds to an instant beauty which is irrelevant to the horror; so even whilst it is full of the closer sounds, the present word rings with the 'far roar'. Where Wordsworth would dare silence to sustain him, Shelley responds with it, provoked by the distracting irrelevancy of the violent emotions.

Shelley's Romanticism is different at base from that of Wordsworth. It has a more elusive character that stems, paradoxically, from Shelley's greater need of purity:

> Shelley shrunk instinctively from portraying human passion, with its mixture of good and evil, of disappointment and disquiet. Such opened again the wounds of his own heart; and he loved to shelter himself rather in the airiest flights of fancy, forgetting love and hate, and regret and lost hope, in such imaginations as borrowed their hues from sunrise or sunset, from the yellow moonshine or paly twilight, from the aspect of the far ocean or the shadows of the woods.[22]

A sense of belonging might well be reduced when to be at home in the corrupt world of history opens wounds. Contradiction is not productive, but merely painful, and Shelley, on this account, shrinks

---

22. PBS, p.389, 'Note on The Witch of Atlas', by Mrs. Shelley.

'instinctively' from the apparent centre, away from 'human passion' and the 'wounds of his own heart' in preference for a wandering, a permanent exile, pursuing the sunrise, shadows, and twilight which are less delusive than steadier images. Here instead of the '<u>mixture</u> of good and evil', he finds a <u>pureness</u> of effect. Like many of Hardy's characters (Fitzpiers, Tess, or Jude), Shelley seems to find 'shelter' only by exposure, in the 'airiest flights of fancy'. This marks a fundamental development from Wordsworth, where home and silence are closely linked. It is in belonging that Wordsworth finds freedom - Grasmere is at once his limit and his scope:

> Embrace me then, ye Hills, and close me in,
> Now in the clear and open day I feel
> Your guardianship; I take it to my heart.[23]

The hills hold him, embracing and closing him in, just as he holds them, taking them to his heart. Each seems the context of the other and not by superficial ties but rather at the core. Yet for all this closeness, the bond is discovered in 'the clear and open day'. This 'guardianship' of the hills is full of freedom. Wordsworth's poetry is anchored by a deeply native sense. It is a source of stability that Shelley necessarily lacks. The inexpressible is a straying sense for him. At the centre of his vision there is no 'guardianship'. His 'deep truth' is undermining:

> If the abysm
> Could vomit forth its secrets.... But a voice
> Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless;
> For what would it avail to bid thee gaze
> On the revolving world? What to bid speak
> Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance, and Change?[24]

Where chance is in the bitterness of experience the only law there can be no certainty. It grants confidence to neither voice nor image:

---

23. <u>WW</u>, V, 317; 'Home At Grasmere', ll.110-12.
24. <u>PBS</u>, p.238; <u>Prometheus Unbound</u>, II. iv. 114-19.

it is rather silent because of its randomness, where the deeper truth is silent because it is unavailable.

For Hardy too 'deep truth is imageless'. In The Trumpet-Major, for example, the sundial seems to have outlived its use, but tells the 'deep truth' more potently for that reason. It is as if history transpired in rootlessness:

> In the middle of the porch was a vertical sun-dial, whose gnomon swayed loosely about when the wind blew, and cast its shadow hither and thither, as much as to say, 'Here's your fine modern dial; here's any time for any man; I am an old dial; and shiftiness is the best policy.'[25]

The phenomenal effects of chance (the 'hither and thither' of the sundial's shadow) leave no ground for the consideration of source or belonging. But the passage also confirms its contempt for the mere contingent accuracy of that 'modern dial'. Hardy does not have to adopt a special frame of mind in order to reach the silent vein; the sense of a resistant or an absent meaning is all too common. Thus in The Return of the Native, the narrator describes Clym Yeobright:

> The observer's eye was arrested, not by his face as a picture, but by his face as a page; not by what it was, but by what it recorded. His features were attractive in the light of symbols, as sounds intrinsically common become attractive in language, and as shapes intrinsically simple become interesting in writing.
>
> (RN, 225)

The eye turns from the simple, and the common, shapes and sounds, searching instead for the more complex attractions of recorded experience, for the interesting rather than the beautiful. It is as if existence on its own were no longer compelling; the eye is held rather by the indirect effects of experience. It is not the 'picture'

---

25. Thomas Hardy, The Trumpet-Major (1880), ed. Roger Ebbatson (Harmondsworth, 1986), p.96.

but the 'page', the attempt of the individual to make sense of existence, which is in itself impossible, that reveals the strain of silence in Hardy.

The Wordsworthian trust in being understood is gone:

> That old-fashioned revelling in the general situation grows less and less possible as we uncover the defects of natural laws, and see the quandary that man is in by their operation.
> (RN, 225)

This is the perplexing thing for the late Victorian mind; how can it be a common quandary when 'the general situation' is lost? It hardly bears articulation to think that isolation is a shared condition, that no one should belong. There can be no faith or confidence in this detachment. So Hardy writes of Clym Yeobright in his grim realisation: 'In France it is not uncustomary to commit suicide at this stage; in England we do much better, or much worse, as the case may be' (RN, 247). Suicide is presented as the reasonable middle way, a definite choice, whilst life itself seems indeterminate and rash.

In his essay 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', Paul de Man writes of the author in the post-Romantic age:

> The Fall, in the literal as well as the theological sense, reminds him of the purely instrumental, reified character of his relationship to nature. Nature can at all times treat him as if he were a thing and remind him of his factitiousness, whereas he is quite powerless to convert even the smallest particle of nature into something human.[26]

The susceptibility of the spirit, according to de Man, imposes irony. 'Nature can at all times treat him [the author] as if he were a thing', and so he seeks to engross himself in an identity that is purely linguistic. Irony 'transfers the self out of the empirical

---

26. Paul de Man, Blindness and Insight, second edition (London, 1983), p.214, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality'.

world into a world constituted out of, and in, language' (de Man, 213). The detachment of de Man's irony is a self-protective aloofness, a barrier before experience, not a powerful state of discovery and advance like that of Wordsworth's detachment.

Hardy lacks the self-conscious resourcefulness of the ironic voice. His language constantly resubmits him to the pain of discovering the universal emptiness without the capacity for self-protection. Here again he is like Eustacia Vye, rich beyond the resources of convention: 'She had advanced to the secret recesses of sensuousness, yet had hardly crossed the threshold of conventionality' (RN, 149). Hardy is betrayed by his sensuousness, like Tess, into forgetting what his mind knows. The irony in his books is situational rather than linguistic.

In both Hardy and Shelley, nature is levelled with humanity in its beauty and delusoriness. This can be seen most strikingly in comparing the way memory works in Shelley and Wordsworth. For Wordsworth, the memory recollects being itself: 'The days gone by / Come back upon me from the dawn almost / Of life' (Prelude XI. 334-6). Without a pause, the days that had 'gone by / Come back', returning not merely from the ordinary run of time, but from 'the dawn almost of life'. With an awing directness, Wordsworth's memory re-orders nature. The landscape is subordinate to the spirit. For Shelley it is the other way around. In contrast with the hidden, analytic power of Wordsworth, Shelley's meaning is synthetic, bringing forth the past as if untouched by its period of dormancy. In 'Letter to Maria Gisborne' he recalls:

> How on the sea-shore
> We watched the ocean and the sky together,
> Under the roof of blue Italian weather;

> How I ran home through last year's thunder-storm,
> And felt the transverse lightning linger warm
> Upon my cheek.[27]

The event is still open, so that its terms can barely meet, 'We watched the ocean and the sky together'. It's as though the ocean and the sky, like the human pair, were 'together' only momentarily, making even the unchangeable horizon of the sea into a swift and lucky chance. Fleetingly the 'roof of blue Italian weather' appears to be like home, but then the speaker seeks home to escape it: 'How I ran home through last year's thunder-storm'. Shelley recalls with intimate slightness, 'the transverse lightning linger warm / Upon my cheek', yet he does not find or ascribe any meaning to the memory. Only the contact, and the active effect of the lightning, is left still warm on his cheek. The voice asserts neither weight nor centrality for the extraordinary sensation. It's as if meaning itself aspired to the state of the natural element, there for a flash and then off into the silence.

In both Hardy and Shelley, there is this equality of nature and humanity. In <u>Return of the Native</u> the flat of the horizon is balanced by a tantalising sensuousness. Having determined the day of their wedding, Clym watches Eustacia retreat:

> Clym watched her as she retired towards the sun. The luminous rays wrapped her up with her increasing distance, and the rustle of her dress over the sprouting sedge and grass died away. As he watched, the dead flat of the scenery overpowered him... There was something in its oppressive horizontality which too much reminded him of the arena of life; it gave him a sense of bare equality with, and no superiority to, a single living thing under the sun.
>
> (<u>RN</u>, 267)

---

27. <u>PBS</u>, p.366; 'Letter to Maria Gisborne', 11.145-50.

Atmospherically the passage is caught between arousal and abatement. Eustacia joins the 'oppressive horizontality', but she does so in a wonderfully thoughtful concentration: 'The luminous rays wrapped her up with her increasing distance'. Hardy's description of the merging is paradoxically clear. She seems accepted by the distance as much as she is dispelled by light. The 'distance' is both how she fades from view (so that 'with her increasing distance' she grows indistinct), and it is a part of vision (Eustacia is 'wrapped up with her increasing distance'). The remoteness both diminishes her and strengthens her presence in the mind, making there and then 'a landscape <u>plus</u> a man's soul'.[28] This fragile strength is evident too in the way that the sentence ('The luminous rays wrapped her...') loses its thread, or changes its tack. The balance of the first half makes 'the rustle of her dress' seem as if it would be an agent, like the 'luminous rays', but when the sound simply dies away physical presence becomes mental image. It is in a pausing, laden mood that Clym is 'overpowered' by 'the dead flat of the scenery'. Hardy's detachment is a form of horizontality, not depth. Things coexist on the dead level; there are no degrees of priority. For Eustacia simply to continue on that level is a slow form of disaster: 'Her state was so hopeless that she could play with it... take a standing point outside herself, observe herself as a disinterested spectator' (<u>RN</u>, 405).

The 'sense of bare equality' leaves nothing hidden, and seems therefore to threaten Hardy's sense of silence. For de Man this crushing recognition is necessary to the attainment of literature,

---

28. F. E. Hardy, <u>The Life of Thomas Hardy</u> (London, 1962), p.216; note dated 9 January, 1889.

of powerful communication, when the discontinuity is situated in time rather than in space. In space, he believes, there can be no breach. Thus he compares the Romantic symbol and the post-Romantic irony: 'In the world of the symbol it would be possible for the image to coincide with the substance, since the substance and its representation do not differ in their being but only in their extension' (de Man, 207). Meaning here can strike with simultaneous force. The writing which initiates the Modern, however, is constituted by time. Here, in place of what de Man sees as the continuousness of spatial writing, there is the broken state of irony. Image and substance cannot coincide in time: 'Temporality... relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality' (de Man, 222). It is a writing in which meaning is inauthentic: 'It can only restate and repeat it on an increasingly conscious level, but it remains endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world' (de Man, 222).

It is indeed this fracturing of time which intervenes in Hardy's plans. His books and poems are full of missed meetings, untimely messages, or belated feelings. As Boldwood says to Bathsheba: 'Our moods meet at wrong places' (FMC, 259), where 'place' is really 'occasion'. In place of verbal irony, Hardy's language, usually, rejects fixed register, regularity of diction; it is sometimes too sparse and often too full. In 'The Self-Unseeing', the speaker looks back on an earlier time:

> Childlike, I danced in a dream;
> Blessings emblazoned that day;
> Everything glowed with a gleam;
> Yet we were looking away![29]

---

29. Thomas Hardy, Poems, p.91; 'The Self-Unseeing', 11.9-12. Originally published in Poems of the Past and Present (1902).

It is as if he can only see the 'gleam' when it is too late. The worst realisation of all is in the clear sight of himself 'looking away', impatient of the moment. When in The Prelude Wordsworth looks back, it is to find his attention fixed even then on the unknown element. With an unamended fascination he watches the cliff pursue the boy, 'still, / With a measur'd motion' (I. 410-1). The unknown acts paradoxically to secure the spirit. In contrast with this powerful, unchanging silence of Wordsworth, Hardy's inarticulacy is planted in time, not as mere coincidence, useful to the story-teller, but as a diagnosis. In the opening pages of The Return of the Native, time seems instrumental to the peculiar character of the heath:

> The distant rims of the world and of the firmament seemed to be a division in time no less than a division in matter. The face of the heath by its mere complexion added half an hour to evening; it could in like manner retard the dawn, sadden noon...
>
> (RN, 53)

Within the same gaze there are two times. It is not a big lapse, just half an hour, but world and firmament are out of step, committed to their separate ways. Even on the horizon it seems that heath and heaven cannot meet. Detachment is no guarantee of freedom in Hardy, but neither is desire. In Eustacia it is demonstrably ill-advised:

> To have lost the godlike conceit that we may do what we will, and not to have acquired a homely zest for doing what we can, shows a grandeur of temper which cannot be objected to in the abstract, for it denotes a mind that, though disappointed, forswears compromise. But, if congenial to philosophy, it is apt to be dangerous to the commonwealth.
>
> (RN, 123)

It is not that Hardy gives up on hope, but that he feels in advance how wrong-headed, untimely, and dangerous it is; though few of his characters feel that. Silence in Hardy remains his own hidden anxiety but it barely touches the margins of consciousness in his characters;

it is an absolute which has only a relative value within the works, an individual burden that demands recurrent explanation and disclosure. Hence perhaps the vocal, receptive quality of his landscape. All features look as if they would speak and send warning negatives to their beholders.

In Shelley too the nature of silence is governed by the failure of coincidence with the reader. Thus Shelley writes of his attempts to reach the understanding of others: 'I have thought to appeal to something in common and unburden my inmost soul to them, I have found my language misunderstood like one in a distant and savage land'.[30] Unlike the silence of Wordsworth, which _is_ 'something in common', for Shelley, the expected intimacy yields only foreignness and distance. It's as if his understanding of what a true commonness would depend on had set him apart, had denied in effect the fact of his speech. Yet he cannot simply dispense with this corresponding spirit:

> In that deserted state when we are surrounded by human beings, and yet they sympathize not with us, we love the flowers, the grass, and the waters, and the sky. In the motion of the very leaves of spring, in the blue air, there is then found a secret correspondence with our heart. There is eloquence in the tongueless wind... So soon as this want or power is dead, man becomes the living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the mere husk of what once he was.
> (_Shelley's Prose_, 170, 171)

Communication for Shelley must be more than linguistic. The 'secret correspondence' of the heart is for him necessary to life itself: 'So soon as this want or power is dead, man becomes the living sepulchre of himself'. Yet in the Preface to _Prometheus Unbound_, he scorns the efficiency of mere words. Many can imitate the 'form', he writes, but

---

30. _Shelley's Prose or The Trumpet of a Prophecy_, ed. David Lee Clark (Albuquerque, 1966), p.169; 'Essay on Love'.

few the 'spirit' of poetry, 'because the former is the endowment of the age in which they live, and the latter must be the uncommunicated lightning of their own mind' (PBS, 206).

Rather than becoming ironic, Shelley commits himself to future meaning. In an attempt to make misunderstanding the hope, and not the ruin of poetry, he treats his words like seeds, storing an impulse of life. Thus in 'Ode to the West Wind' he addresses the wind:

> Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
> Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
> And, by the incantation of this verse,
>
> Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
> Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
> Be through my lips to unawakened earth
>
> The trumpet of a prophecy! O, Wind,
> If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?[31]

For Shelley here it is neither the shape of beauty, nor an implicit universality, but rather 'dead thoughts' that carry his meaning. He makes incomprehension and isolation into the media of his meaning. Whereas Wordsworth's power lies in the unchanging integrity of his words, for Shelley it is as though meaning itself must develop or mutate before it can take effect. The shock of reading Wordsworth is that of finding his still active power, the tempest still alive. The shock of reading Shelley's poetry is that it is still unwritten. It is as though dependent on an unborn consciousness. 'If Winter comes', he writes, as if Winter, not Spring, were the doubtful season. The rewards of correspondence cannot be present for Shelley.

Nor can they be for Hardy; even less so, because there is really no myth of an eventual Spring. The shocking thing in Hardy's poems is his disgust with the unknown, his knowledge that it is empty. In 'The

---

31. PBS, p.579; 'Ode to the Western Wind', 11.63-70.

Going' he starts in hope, in stanza three, imagining that he has seen his dead wife. He addresses her at first in a domestic vein:

> Why do you make me leave the house
> And think for a breath it is you I see
> At the end of the alley of bending boughs
> Where so often at dusk you used to be;
> Till in darkening dankness
> The yawning blankness
> Of the perspective sickens me![32]

The unpunctuated avenue of the lines draws the attention forward, along the 'alley of bending boughs', to a long suspended pause. 'For a breath' he is held. The semi-colon holds the progress of the verse for an uncharted span. But then there is no way of finishing the lines without force. Breath is in too short supply, and Hardy ends savagely: 'Till in darkening dankness / The yawning blankness / of the perspective sickens me!'

The big question is whether there is any way for writing, after Wordsworth, to take shape in this shapelessness, or draw from silence energies that would make it central again. How can the spirit stand against the blankness of a silence that offers so little resistance? To Hardy it seems that the 'yawning blankness / Of the perspective' offers neither opposition nor agreement. It offers nothing - it merely swallows sense. It yawns like the mouth of Hell once yawned; but now all we find is a kind of metaphysical ennui.

II

In Hardy to live in an unresponding universe to which he passionately responds leaves silence as a kind of hidden burden, present always but usually unspoken. Conrad makes the burden visible, faces

---

32. Thomas Hardy, Poems, p.49; 'The Going', 11.15-21. Originally published in Satires of Circumstance (1919).

the responsibilities of silence directly in his puritanical, unremitting way. Like Jacob, he wrestles with the angel.

In Typhoon, Captain MacWhirr and Jukes cling on deck together surrounded by the storm, effectively deafened and gagged by its force: 'This is the disintegrating power of a great wind: it isolates one from one's kind'.[33] An entirely non-communicative element has taken charge of the ship, stifling conversation, and making each man remote, despite the closeness of the other. To Jukes it seems that they are thrown into absolute negation, and he cries out against it:

> 'Will she live through this?'
> The cry was wrenched out of his breast. It was as unintentional as the birth of a thought in the head, and he heard nothing of it himself. It all became extinct at once - thought, intention, effort - and of his cry the inaudible vibration added to the tempest waves of the air.
> He expected nothing from it. Nothing at all. For indeed what answer could be made? But after a while he heard with amazement the frail and resisting voice in his ear, the dwarf sound, unconquered in the giant tumult.
> 'She may!'
>
> (Typhoon, 47-8)

There may on the surface be very little difference in the tone and implications of 'Will she live through this?' and 'She may!'. Both expressions are held in a shifting balance of doubt and confidence; and it is in truth an ordinary exchange. Yet between the two cries Conrad's verbal resources are strained to an extreme extent. There is a gap in the middle of the dialogue, where experience takes place in a slower time. A voice is thrown against the absolute, a voice which has neither beginning nor end; Jukes' cry was 'unintentional' and 'He expected nothing from it. Nothing at all. For indeed what answer

---

33. Joseph Conrad, The Nigger of the "Narcissus", Typoon, Falk and other stories, ed. Norman Sherry (London, 1974); Typhoon (1903), p.40.

could be made?'. It is a voice which responds with the absolute of the occasion, allowing its influence, poising banality on the brink of comprehensible experience. Beyond this there is no more: 'It all became extinct at once'. Conrad offers the reader a gigantic but casual voice facing 'Nothing at all'. Yet when Jukes addresses the absolute, there comes instead a response from the man at his side, 'the dwarf sound' of MacWhirr simply continuing a conversation. Almost helplessly and unwillingly, the story is reclaimed by the articulate medium, turned back into an ordinary conversation. The recovery is disorientating. MacWhirr's reply is as incomprehensible almost as the nothing he opposes, in its frailty and lack of scale. Jukes hears him 'with amazement'. It is as though the final peril of Jukes offered more stability, more comfort even, than the saving voice of MacWhirr.

The storm, an arbitrary event experienced as though it were indeed malevolent, by just these two oddly assorted characters, MacWhirr, stolid, lucky, inexpressive, and Jukes, over-excitable, superstitious, ironic, is typical of situations in Conrad. Chance that feels pre-determined, gives the tale comparability with the irony of situation in Hardy. The characters share the experience, yet each remains locked into his solitude. The collective 'other', nature, time, whatever category seems to own the storm, is taken by Conrad, as much as by Hardy, as a type of the indifference of things to the human will. Experience for both of them leads back to an area which baffles thought and defeats expression. Yet Conrad more persistently forces his mind and words into that empty quarter; more philosophically instructed than Hardy, he is more drawn to the metaphysical silence.

One of those Conrad characters who act almost at the behest of the silent is the narrator of The Shadow-Line. He is serving as first mate on a steamer in the East. The work is easy, he is liked by the crew, proud of the ship, and respected by his captain:

> And suddenly I left all this. I left it in that, to us, inconsequential manner in which a bird flies away from a comfortable branch. It was as though all unknowing I had heard a whisper or seen something.[34]

Conrad's silence has the potential to displace the human element, the expectation of rationality. Its closeness to him puts the narrator at a distance from himself. His action is as incomprehensible to him as that of a bird, even though it is his own. It is as if he were a spectator of his own existence. The best he can say to explain to himself is that 'It was as though all unknowing I had heard a whisper'. He does not easily surrender explicability; to hear a voice would be absurd but something, yet this is less than that and even this is only an analogy. He has nothing to offer. His departure is like Jim's jump from the 'Patna': 'I had jumped... it seems'.[35]

To find yourself acting thus, without object or reason, implies that there is a pure and imminent significance in the action. It must be for something that you have acted beyond yourself. And yet to the end, the narrator's flight remains, Conrad insists, both inexplicable and unassimilated. His subsequent command does not, of course, explain his 'unknowing' action which stays just as it was, a sudden pitfall. So later when the narrator is asked why he gave up his berth, 'I became angry all of a sudden; for you can understand how

---

34. Joseph Conrad, The Shadow-Line (1917), ed. Jeremy Hawthorn (Oxford, 1985), p.5. Hereafter referred to as SL
35. Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim (1900), ed. Robert Hampson (Harmondsworth, 1986), p.125. Hereafter referred to as LJ.

exasperating such a question was to a man who didn't know' (SL, 14). The common sense of the book can recover and appeal to the sympathy of a reader: 'You can understand...', but the event itself stays isolated. The anger of the narrator does not come even as a consequence of the question; his response is not linear, but rather all at once: 'I became angry all of a sudden'. It is not simply that the narrator has made a mistake in leaving the steamer. Had that been the case he would have been left with some certainty, with the obviousness of what he should or shouldn't have done. But it is entirely otherwise. His action stays pertinent and questioning. It stands in his way, the arbitrary becoming a way of life, as if still to be experienced, cutting him off from the active, useful world:

> I had never in my life felt more detached from all earthly goings on. Freed from the sea for a time, I preserved the sailor's consciousness of complete independence from all land affairs. How could they concern me?
>
> (SL, 19)

He owes allegiance to neither land nor sea, 'detached from all earthly goings on'. He is 'for a time' caught in a loose, unmeaning moment, much more like Jukes at the height of the storm than MacWhirr. From the outside, the sudden produces a drastic appearance, but from within the narrator's experience of it is startling in its formlessness. He does not stand in relation to it so much as it must bear relation to him. With an irritable indifference he spurns all practicalities: 'How could they concern me?'.

Conrad's silence is like that of Hardy, in that both appear to be governed by accident, but for Hardy the law of chance is too daunting to yield any sense of poetic wholeness. It works in his writing at odds with the sense of tenderness or delight, and he is compelled to choose what he acknowledges as truth at the cost of beauty. Kierke-

gaard's leap of faith is not for him and cannot apply to such a despairing sense of pain. The leap of faith is: 'To risk unreservedly being oneself, an individual human being, this specific individual human being alone before God'.[36] It is the commitment of the relative to absolute ends. With the loss of the absolute (drowned in chance), there seems an end to faith. It is as if for Hardy to outgrow faith was to sacrifice also beauty. In Nostromo, Conrad comes extremely close to pronouncing this sentence. Decoud is styled in scepticism, as Father Corbelan reproaches him; his faithlessness makes him worse than a heathen: 'Ten times worse. A miracle could not convert you'.[37] Surrounded by passionate beliefs and dangerous commitments, Decoud has simply decided to hold himself aloof from faith: 'It seemed to him that every conviction, as soon as it became effective, turned into that form of dementia the gods send upon those they wish to destroy' (N, 188). In the turmoil and bloodshed of Costaguanan politics, Decoud's observation is demonstrably true. Yet it is specifically Decoud's lack of faith that destroys him. Left to himself he cannot hold himself intact:

> After three days of waiting for the sight of some human face, Decoud caught himself entertaining a doubt of his own individuality. It had merged into the world of cloud and water, of natural forces and forms of nature... Both his intelligence and his passion were swallowed up easily in this great unbroken solitude of waiting without faith.
> (N, 413)

Decoud does not grow solipsistically strong in isolation, but merges into 'the world of cloud and water', finding no stay. His keen senses of intelligence and passion are 'swallowed up easily in this great

---

36. Søren Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, p.35.
37. Joseph Conrad, Nostromo (1904), ed. Martin Seymour-Smith (Harmondsworth, 1983), p.186. Hereafter referred to as N.

unbroken solitude', their sharpness making no impression whatsoever on 'forms of nature' that have ceased to have the quality of the beautiful. Decoud's first self-awareness here it seems is one of self-doubt: 'After three days of waiting for the sight of some human face, Decoud caught himself entertaining a doubt of his own individuality'. 'Entertaining a doubt'; the oddly pedantic word makes it seem as if the disintegration of his spirit took the place of company. It is precisely Decoud's scepticism that makes him vulnerable. He dare not, to borrow Kierkegaard's phrase, risk 'this specific individual human being alone' in the silence of the Placid Gulf. He has no defence in the 'great unbroken solitude of waiting without faith'; intelligence which might break it is drowned instead.

The description of Decoud's end makes one of the strangest passages in Conrad. We are given Decoud's state of mind, and his final actions are detailed, how he takes four ingots, a gun, and the boat. He pushes out into the waters of the Placid Gulf, 'whose glittering surface remained untroubled by the fall of his body' (_N_, 416). We see the inward and the outward reality of his death: 'The solitude appeared like a great void, and the silence of the gulf like a tense, thin cord to which he hung suspended by both hands' (_N_, 414). Decoud's death is not veiled like the sudden 'whisper' of _The Shadow-Line_; it is clearly described, and it has parallels and repercussions throughout _Nostromo_. Yet it is not easy to understand. Why should the calm torment him so? How can someone die of silence?

There is something Hardyesque in the way that the negative conditions of the Placid Gulf, its blackness and calm, rise to play their part in the narrative. The setting is given a speaking part. Yet the relationship of action and landscape differs significantly in

Hardy and Conrad. Compare, for example, the role of Egdon Heath in The Return of the Native. In Hardy, when the settings grow vocal, they often speak in sympathy with the human players, lending their condition a larger voice. So Eustacia's sigh of 'spasmodic abandonment' that is so out of place, yet fits the mood of the heath. The sigh is general, as the wind sounds in the tiny heath flowers:

> So low was an individual sound from these that a combination of hundreds only just emerged from silence... Suddenly, on the barrow, there mingled with all this wild rhetoric of night a sound which modulated so naturally into the rest that its beginning and ending were hardly to be distinguished.
>
> (RN, 105, 106)

The 'wild rhetoric' of the heath corroborates her feeling, combining so closely with her mood, that the two are 'hardly to be distinguished. The setting speaks in sympathy with her mood.

By contrast, in Conrad, when the setting rises, as in Typhoon, or in the deadly calm of the Placid Gulf, his characters must fight against the scene. They must fight for themselves, in just such a way that Decoud failed to fight, because Conrad's settings are in conflict with the human voice. The imaginative life of Conrad's vision, the ability to be shocked by thought, or to watch an idea mounting in the solitude or the wind, is positioned at large within the book. Thus Decoud can die of silence: 'The enormous stillness, without light or sound, seemed to affect Decoud's senses like a powerful drug' (N, 231). Conrad's imagination does not simply lie behind his tales; it's as if he had placed it, like a challenge, in the path of narrative.

In Hardy, the incomprehensible Darwinian struggle is reproduced by the details of the landscape but it voices the same bleakness (or vitality) that the characters themselves live out. In Conrad there is

a vast spaciousness, utterly empty, with which the characters have positively to struggle, so that the physical circumstances are a part of the story, as with the jungle in Heart of Darkness or the sea in so many of the novels. Yet the characters often do not return empty-handed.

The action often looks like chance, and perhaps even it is, but this is not how Conrad reads it, and not therefore what it becomes. Conrad makes the accident tell. This is not to say that he recovers a Wordsworthian sense of wholeness. He doesn't. His characters rather stand exposed to their silence without boundary. But there is the possibility that they may recover significance at the cost of themselves. Conrad does not allow chance the final word:

> The part of the inexplicable should always be allowed for in appraising the conduct of men in a world where no explanation is final. No charge of faithlessness ought to be lightly uttered.[38]

Conrad is, like Hardy, tolerant of 'the conduct of men', though his forbearance is subtly different in kind. All of Hardy's hope and beauty lie before the recognition of 'a world where no explanation is final', in the attempt to forestall or to soothe that harsh recognition. Conrad's vision starts from the other side, after the event. It is after his rough and sceptical examination that he finds the resilience of faith: 'The part of the inexplicable should always be allowed for...'. In Conrad, unlike Hardy, there is a kind of leap of faith, though it is not as in Kierkegaard, a leap to the absolute; it rather takes the form of his absolute commitment to the relative. He can only say, as if cagily: 'No charge of faithlessness ought to be

---

38. Joseph Conrad, The Mirror of the Sea. A Personal Record (London, 1946), p.35. These two separate works are here included in a single volume. A Personal Record (1912) will hereafter be referred to as PR.

lightly uttered'. The impulse of his faith, however, is fundamentally direct. Conrad's faithfulness is more than anything reminiscent of true sympathy as advocated by Kierkegaard. False sympathy is evasive: 'One saves oneself by sympathy'.[39] True sympathy, on the other hand, does not seek to distance itself from suffering. Thus Kierkegaard describes the sympathetic observer:

> He knows how to identify himself with the sufferer in such a way that when he fights for an explanation he is fighting for himself, renouncing all thoughtlessness, softness and cowardice - only then does sympathy acquire significance.
> (CA, 120)

Conrad takes such an idea of sympathy and enlists it, as with Marlow, in the name of doubt rather than Christian truth. Forcefully and strangely, Marlow says of Jim: 'The less I understood the more I was bound to him in the name of that doubt which is the inseparable part of our knowledge' (LJ, 206). Sympathy is both the point of security and of deepest peril; but it is primarily the source of significance. Truth for Conrad requires commitment. Thus though their subject and style are entirely different, Conrad is akin to Wordsworth. He relies on his recognition, trusting himself to it with the same strange recklessness of attention that Wordsworth gives to silence. Both writers feel that there is something there, worth the daring.

The Shadow-Line is peculiar in its directness among Conrad's writing, partly no doubt because it was written at the start of the war: 'To sit down and invent fairy tales was impossible then', he wrote later.[40] In The Shadow-Line, the roles of observer and sufferer are not so distinct as they are in an earlier book such as Lord Jim.

---

39. Søren Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety, p.120.
40. Jocelyn Bains, Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography (London, 1960), p.404.

It is not that the particular conditions of the book preclude an independent narrator, but that Conrad resists the narrator's role, leaving the book without guard, so that it must take shape from the detached state of the narrator. The poignancy of the narrator's condition is thus realised in a curiously muffled way. The only hold we have in the book is the narrator's own outlook, and he is not in any state to see clearly. Obsessed by his struggle with the silent, he neglects the obvious, so that as far as practical details go, we know the name of neither the narrator nor his ship. It simply does not occur to him to pass these trifles on. This is an inattention that dominates the narrator's approach at every level, both in the relation of his tale, and in the living of it. So, having thrown up his berth, he sits in the Sailors' Home, self-abandoned, or self-absorbed, while Captain Giles reasons with him, persuading him to act quickly for the command. He does not catch even the basics of Giles' meaning:

> A great discouragement fell on me. A spiritual drowsiness. Giles' voice was going on complacently; the very voice of the universal hollow conceit. And I was no longer angry with it. There was nothing original, nothing new, startling, informing to expect from the world: no opportunities to find out something about oneself, no wisdom to acquire, no fun to enjoy. Everything was stupid and overrated, even as Captain Giles was. So be it.
>
> (SL, 23)

The active world lacks force for the narrator. It seems empty of meaning, and inaudible in its monotony: 'Giles' voice was going on complacently; the very voice of the universal conceit'. Giles is offering clear, practical advice, an opportunity that demands prompt and appropriate action. Yet to the narrator it all seems part of the 'universal hollow conceit... stupid and overrated'; as if endeavour itself were affectation. The narrator's 'discouragement' seems to have deafened him:

> 'Ought to do it?' I sat up bewildered. 'Do what?'
> Captain Giles confronted me very much surprised.
> 'Why! Do what I have been advising you to try. You go and ask the Steward what was there in that letter from the Harbour Office. Ask him straight out.'
> I remained speechless for a time. Here was something unexpected and original enough to be altogether incomprehensible.
> (SL, 23)

It is as though there were a natural bottom to the state of indifference into which he has fallen that returned him to the surface. Giles' advice is so ordinary, and needless of explanation, yet to the narrator his words seem 'altogether incomprehensible'. His very disengagement from practical matters transforms them to something 'unexpected and original' and makes him start to see. It is when the continuous practical world resembles for him the silent that the narrator can again take hold of it; when it comes least to hand! The inexplicable seems literally to be an 'original' power in Conrad, a force necessary to beginning. It is a proof of the reality of experience, rescuing consciousness from the 'hollow conceit'. It is as if two realms that are wholly opposed, in Conrad were linked. Thus in A Personal Record, Conrad compares the active and the imaginative spheres:

> If in action we may admit with awe that the Impossible recedes before men's indomitable spirit, the Impossible in matters of analysis will always make a stand at some point or other.
> (PR, vi)

Conrad's books countenance both kinds of Impossible, both the retreating shadow, and the daunting form that returns to command attention. It gives a strange bearing to his writing. At a practical level, he can subdue impossibility, but that then empowers it at another stage. Conrad is not sure, in any case, that it would not be an evasion to do so: 'Only in men's imagination does every truth find

an effective and undeniable existence. Imagination, not invention, is the supreme master of art as of life' (PR, 25). For the sake of truth, perhaps, the impossible must be endured.

The narrator receives the command. He is no longer 'detached from all earthly goings on'. The voyage of The Shadow-Line is not active merely, however; it is imaginative and testing. From being held by an unknown within himself, the narrator is brought to an unknown that encompasses him:

> The darkness had risen around the ship like a mysterious emanation from the dumb and lonely waters. I leaned on the rail and turned my ear to the shadows of the night. Not a sound. My command might have been a planet flying vertiginously on its appointed path in a space of infinite silence. I clung to the rail as if my sense of balance were leaving me for good.
>
> (SL, 73-4)

The openness of possibility is at once absurd, 'a planet', and the defining presence, offering neither restraint nor completeness. The narrator's former detachment is being replayed externally in the immobility of the ship. By contrast with the actual stasis, the narrator's experience is rapid. His perception is over-fluent, reaching beyond the feel of the rail in his hands to the abstract immensity of the planet flying 'in a space of infinite silence'. This silence calls out the full extent of common perception, only to break it. The narrator turns his ear 'to the shadows', trying to make two senses work where one had done before, but there is 'Not a sound' to offer a sense of proportion. The extraordinary thing, however, is that in this context of 'infinite silence' there is still an 'appointed path'. Conrad's vision is at once absolute and contingent. Openness throws back a sense of direction.

Like Conrad himself, the narrator's great love is for the sailing

ship and open seas. In The Mirror of the Sea, Conrad explains his preference for the sail-ship over the steamer thus:

> The steamer, whose life is not so much a contest as the disdainful ignoring of the sea, sickens and dies upon the waves. The sailing-ship, with her unthrobbing body, seemed to lead mysteriously a sort of unearthly existence, bordering upon the magic of the invisible forces, sustained by the inspiration of life-giving and death-dealing winds.[41]

The sailing-ship leads 'a sort of unearthly existence, bordering upon the magic of invisible forces'. It is a responsive, deeply romantic existence, alongside which the steamship's punctual existence seems numb. Where the sailing-ship turns to the sea and wind, finding routes that change or vanish by the hour, the steamer's life is all her own. It lies in refusal, in 'the disdainful ignoring of the sea'. The capacity to work under your own steam, paradoxically, is a form of weakness for Conrad:

> The incertitude which attends closely every artistic endeavour is absent from its regulated enterprise. It has no great moments of self-confidence, or moments not less great of doubt and heart-searching... Such sea-going has not the artistic quality of a single-handed struggle with something much greater than yourself.
>
> (MS, 30, 31)

The 'invisible force', the 'something much greater than yourself', to which Conrad turns his writing is 'incertitude'. His notion is reckless and daunting in the extreme. He does not diminish the scale of incertitude so as to overcome it, rather he allows it full force. It is the case for Conrad, though it hardly makes sense, that safety is a danger: 'The sense of security, even the most warranted, is a bad counsellor' (MS, 18). It is as if feeling wrong were his guarantee of

---

41. Joseph Conrad, The Mirror of the Sea. A Personal Record (London, 1946), p.64. The Mirror of the Sea (1906) will hereafter be referred to as MS.

keeping true. The mere idea cannot however alter the quality of incertitude, or teleologically swamp its unnerving effect. In The Shadow-Line, doubt is crippling and uncontained. On his becalmed ship, the narrator watches land turn to shadow. He has no stable perspective to prevent it:

> I looked ahead, and in the still streak of very bright pale orange light I saw the land profiled flatly as if cut out of black paper and seeming to float on the water as light as cork. But the rising sun turned it into mere dark vapour, a doubtful, massive shadow trembling in the hot glare.
> (SL, 77)

In the first grains of light he sees the land emphatically outlined: 'profiled flatly as if cut out of black paper'. It is intensely clear, too clear cut in fact; it seems to be without foundation, 'to float on the water as light as cork'. This initial clarity of outline is surrounded by words of uncertainty, 'as if', 'seeming', 'as light as cork'. The very distinctiveness of the land seems to lie in the prompting of vagueness. The better light of the coming day does not clarify, but complicates the impression, driving the uncertainty into noun and verb: 'The rising sun turned it into mere dark vapour, a doubtful, massive shadow trembling in the hot glare'. It is as though the 'doubtful, massive shadow' were the true impression; it is what he sees in the clear light of day. The account seems more generally a description of what it is like actually to read Conrad. From afar his themes seem determinate and strong, yet close to, they seem to fade, and it is not easy to recall them.

What is striking though is how these changing impressions tell on the narrator. He cannot look over them, they affect him too completely. On the unmoving ship he has continually to subdue the doubtful shadow, in the shape of Mr Burns, for example, with his supernatural explanation for their plight: 'It gave me a mental shock, but I had

neither the mind, nor the heart, nor the spirit to argue with him' (SL, 93). It is not just that the ship passes through its own shadow line; the whole crew grows slowly ghost-like, wasted by sickness, until they seem to him transformed into its element: 'The shadows swayed away from me without a word. Those men were the ghosts of themselves, and their weight on a rope could be no more than the weight of a bunch of ghosts' (SL, 109). Doubt threatens to become the whole context.

As in Wordsworth's poetry, Conrad's silence is revealed by upheaval, but where in Wordsworth the tumult is confined to one spot, in Conrad's book the whole spectacle loses its footing. Conrad's silence has no distinct form. Instead it looms and gathers force by mass, almost hidden by its own pervasiveness. Famously, in Heart of Darkness, Marlow's mode of narration is described: 'To him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze'.[42] Marlow's words are as if inside out. He does not collect his meaning, rather it arises outwardly, by extension and allusion. Despite the foregrounding of the narrator's role in Conrad's books, there is no direct line between speaker and hearer. Meaning seems to fall beyond the ear. As with Miss Haldin: 'The most precise of her sayings seemed always to me to have enigmatical prolongations vanishing somewhere beyond my reach'.[43]

Where Wordsworth's poetry took in more than it could say, for Conrad it is as though he can never say enough. His language might be

---

42. Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (1902), ed. Paul O'Prey (Harmondsworth, 1983), p.30.
43. Joseph Conrad, Under Western Eyes (1911), ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth, 1985), p.145.

profuse and complex, but it is never merely luxurious. Anything and everything that he says touches the enveloping haze, and is part of the silent meaning. Conrad cannot then grasp or centre his vision because, unlike Hardy, he is always looking so directly at the emptiness. Instead it is viscerally close and immensely distant at once. The slight breezes that can do no more than stir the water about the stationary ship appear to the narrator of the The Shadow-Line thus:

> Slight puffs came and went, and whenever they were strong enough to wake up the black water the murmur alongside ran through my very heart in a delicate crescendo of delight and died away swiftly.
> (SL, 77)

There is an inherent restlessness in the perception, and a displacement of attention. It shows in the prepositions that he uses. The 'murmur' runs 'alongside' the ship, but it runs 'through my very heart'. Energy, when it comes in these 'slight puffs' is ecstatic and intimate. Its close contact implies the surrounding expanse, waking the black water around the ship. It entices movement. The 'delicate crescendo of delight' runs through his heart like life-blood, but it is also unreliable, and dies away swiftly. He cannot, even in this book, hold certainty in focus for more than a moment, and this produces a striking emphasis in his books. In Conrad some movement is always necessary, as if to complete the vision and his books are always caught in the middle of an experience that develops by varying the forms of uncertainty.

Silence is not rare in Conrad's books, of course; everyone seems subject to its influence; but to see it so directly is rare and, having seen it, to commit yourself to it again as the captain in The Shadow-Line does is more rare still. The most ordinary moments are able to disclose the dislocations just below the surface, as in this exchange between first Giles, then the narrator: '"You missed my

point." "Have I? I am very glad to hear it"' (SL, 22). Conrad's power lies in making visible the cryptic possibility in ordinary events.

How then is the narrator of The Shadow Line brought to see? He goes out to join his ship in full confidence, believing in himself, and holding this faith to be necessary:

> I had a general sense of my preparedness which only a man pursuing a calling he loves can know. That feeling seemed to me the most natural thing in the world. As natural as breathing. I imagined I could not have lived without it.
>
> (SL, 83)

'Preparedness' is to him 'As natural as breathing'. Preparation implies confines, discipline and order, but its true boundaries expand into the unknown. This 'calling' carries with it for the man called a sense of belonging, giving the narrator his place in the world. So whilst Giles holds him in conversation on the quayside, reminding him of difficulties, he only longs for the open sea:

> I would feel at last my command swing on the great swell and list over to the great breath of regular winds, that would give her the feeling of a large, more intense life.
>
> (SL, 44)

The openness of the wind and wave is received with an odd impression of concentration, in 'the feeling of a large, more intense life', as if the expanse alone could gather intensity. It is an implicitly faithful existence, and 'I imagined I could not live without it'.

It is part of his 'preparedness' that he should be able to tackle sickness at sea and when fever returns to the ship, he readily puts this faith in quinine: 'I believed in it. I pinned my faith to it' (SL, 88). He has five bottles of the stuff, four of them unopened, but the depth of the supply of course proves to be deceptive; the four fresh bottles are there, intact, and wrapped as they ought to be, except that they contain a compound of sugar and salt rather than

quinine. The old captain had sold their supply. The problem in Conrad is what happens to faith when it proves to be misplaced. In the first shock of the disclosure, the narrator looks with envy at Mr Burns:

> Enviable man! So near extinction - while I had to bear within me a tumult of suffering vitality, doubt, confusion, self-reproach, and an indefinite reluctance to meet the horrid logic of the situation.
>
> (SL, 92-3)

Instantaneously, the terms of his existence seem over-turned. His original preparedness had allowed him to embrace openness; thus the limit of his 'command' could 'swing on the great swell and list over to the great breath of regular winds'. But here, suddenly, the openness comes bursting through, to be faced first, in 'doubt, confusion, self-reproach'. All his margins suddenly seem intolerably distant; so that he feels 'an indefinite reluctance to meet the horrid logic of the situation'. The 'reluctance' itself is only natural; it is the 'indefinite' quality that is disturbing, as if he were reluctant even to feel reluctance. Conrad's characters fear the free-fall into the abyss beneath their preparedness. From his former state of expansive belief, the narrator is brought to a reluctant, retracted kind of living which is his own protection from the abyss.

Conrad's vision cuts into apparently healthy flesh, subverting the wholesome forces of faith and imagination. The narrator starts to avoid himself: 'Neither my soul was highly tempered, nor my imagination properly under control' (SL, 100). He has to struggle like Decoud, against the sense of isolation: 'What I feared was a shrill note escaping me involuntarily and upsetting my balance... The terrible thing was that the only voice I ever heard was my own' (SL, 101). The sudden, involuntary voice is no longer unexpected, as it had been at the outset; it is somehow awfully predictable, and he has

to fight to maintain perspective. His imagination would look for significance in the ship's immobility, as though the book had slowed on purpose for some discovery. The narrator is made instead to see the reverse of this. Without movement, no thought or discovery can be effected.

For Conrad, human purpose is a retrospective rationalisation, in answer to the prompting of an external power, often of emptiness instead of active opposition. A life like a ship needs steer-way:

> 'Won't she answer the helm at all?' I said irritably to the man whose strong brown hands grasping the spokes of the wheel stood out lighted on the darkness; like a symbol of mankind's claim to the direction of its own fate.
>
> (SL, 76)

Without the outward impulse, the symbol is useless. The wheel stands out 'lighted on the darkness', like a failed symbol of 'mankind's claim'. For most of the time, the captain does not even have a man at the helm, there is so little wind. At the time, their immobility fills the captain with frustration, so that he deals with the helmsman 'irritably'. But it is noticeable that in recording the passage, the narrator watches the 'strong brown hands grasping the spokes of the wheel' with an attitude that it is more hard to describe. For Hardy, here, there would be some extra commentary, an excess of feeling lifting away from the given terms, either in hope or impatience. The phrase, 'like a symbol', would be uttered with a certain weight. Conrad's attitude, however, is different. He does not deny the truth of the symbol, or turn from it; he observes it in its failure, patiently. Even in its defeat the faith is there, the narrator maintains his post, waiting for the symbol to work again.

One by one the forces of wholeness, the symbols, faith and imagination, that the narrator imagined he 'could not have lived without',

lose their grip and fail. The ship is idle, and paradoxically, his spirit has no stay. When the weather suddenly looks to change, it is imperative that the sails be raised; yet while the sick men fight for breath, in the very utterance of his command, the captain fights for moral authority:

> One hung over the after-capstan, sobbing for breath; and I stood amongst them like a tower of strength, impervious to disease and feeling only the sickness of my soul. I waited for some time fighting against the weight of my sins, against my sense of unworthiness.
>
> (SL, 109)

His own health strikes him like an accusation, fuelling 'the sickness of my soul' and undermining his 'preparedness'. The order that should come naturally to his lips, is delayed while he fights for moral breath. But then the storm comes suddenly, bringing strong winds and the captain has to steer. The deck is 'full of fever-stricken men - some of them dying. By my fault. But never mind. Remorse must wait. I had to steer' (SL, 126). The benefit of action is that it postpones the thought and feeling which are really primary. After a night of rapid flight the winds drop. Three steam launches come in answer to their signal for medical assistance, and the whole crew is taken off, all surviving.

The terrible, difficult thing about the narrator's predicament is that he cannot 'meet the horrid logic of the situation', not because he lacks the imagination, or that his conscience is at fault, but because he can never catch up with the delayed insight. If there were an eternity, still somehow there would not be time to see. The inner is not answered, but simply overtaken by external contingencies. It's as if there were no need for balance! The end of the story leaves the narrative floating, waiting for a backlash of meaning, or for a recognition of its consequence. On shore once more, the narrator

meets Giles and tells him of his experiences, how they have affected him. Giles' response is simple: 'That will pass' (SL, 131). There is no rush of meaning, instead Conrad plants his story deliberately where its effect has no force, and is even in decline. Significance itself does not seem quite to the point.

Conrad's art lies in offering large revelations which are ironised later into a blankness. At the outset of the voyage, the 'soul of command' speaks thus to the narrator:

> 'You, too!' it seemed to say, 'you, too, shall taste of that peace and that unrest in a searching intimacy with your own self - obscure as we were and as supreme in the face of all the winds and all the seas, in an immensity that receives no impress, preserves no memories, and keeps no reckoning of lives.'
>
> (SL, 53)

For a moment, firm lines of meaning are there. Some strong discovery seems inevitable, with the narrator trapped in a 'searching intimacy' with himself. But then all significance is like a dream in the book. To take a mundane example: Giles' special skill is in navigating the awkward inland stretches, and it is indeed Giles who guides the narrator out to the open seas, but only in a sense. Giles stays self-contained and decidedly prosaic, apparently clumsily unaware. It does not pay to build too much on the confidence. The large revelation on closer inspection speaks of the illusoriness of the triumphs of experience 'in an immensity that receives no impress'. It often looks as if Conrad is drawing to a final statement, only for it to drift away again.

The effect of Conrad's words is precise and momentary, and yet, were he not at the same time aware of the immensity, his words would not be so self-consciously frail, inviting of defeat. The Shadow-Line appears written between two opposing impulses, one that is conscious

of the immensity, and drawn to it; the other that resists this outward pull. Edward Garnett describes Conrad:

> There were two natures interwoven in Conrad: one, feminine, affectionate, responsive, clear-eyed; the other masculine, formidably critical, fiercely ironical, dominating, intransigent.[44]

In the extreme openness of his own power, Conrad finds purchase. His haze-vision does not merely undermine the narrator's faith; it depends itself on a new kind of faithfulness, albeit one that is 'critical' rather than 'responsive'. Conrad's faith is a practical necessity, and it is tough rather than mystical. Every sentence of restraint has to fight for its coherence against an inconsiderable expanse. This marks a decisive stance in his relationship to silence. Whereas in Wordsworth, the silent is taken on trust, in Conrad, the inexpressible is evident all around, and it is trust that must hold him back! Restraint thus has an ironically emphatic role in his writing. In The Mirror of the Sea he writes:

> Both men and ships live in an unstable element, are subject to subtle and powerful influences, and want to have their merits understood rather than their faults found out.
>
> (MS, 27)

To stay afloat, the commitment to the 'unstable element' must be positive, looking to understand merits rather than to find faults. Paradoxically, through unreserved commitment, some stay against immensity is found. Like Ransome with his weak heart, Conrad is careful, but there is nothing circumspect about him. Watching Ransome, the narrator observes:

> With the knowledge of that uneasy heart within his breast I could detect the restraint he put on the natural sailor-like agility of his movements. It

---

44. Letters from Joseph Conrad 1895-1924, ed. Edward Garnett (Indianapolis and New York, 1962), p.10.

> was as though he had something very fragile or very explosive to carry about his person and was all the time aware of it.
>
> (SL, 73)

Ransome is significantly the only man on board, other than the captain himself, who does not succumb to the fever. His limitation seems enabling.

The narrative of The Shadow-Line makes its passage between the narrator's discovery of self-doubt, and the need to trust himself again. It is a massive theme, that works with a purposefully un-transmittable effect. The closest Conrad comes to summing up is in Captain Giles' comment:

> A man should stand up to his bad luck, to his mistakes, to his conscience, and all that sort of thing. Why - what else would you have to fight against?
>
> (SL, 131-2)

Giles' observation is poised between confession and defiance. He assumes a dismissive amorphousness in experience, throwing bad luck, mistakes and conscience in together, 'all that sort of thing', as if all were mishaps that ought to be forgotten. To shed conscience is literally to go beyond account. It is to lose sense of direction, of right and wrong, and even of yourself. But Giles does not mean that conscience should be left behind, or even that it could be, only that you should fight to free yourself from the immobilising sense of past wrong. Standing up to conscience offers paradoxical definition. Self-identity is gained in opposing yourself: 'Why - what else would you have to fight against?'

It is as if in The Shadow-Line, the governing outlook passed from a Jukes to a MacWhirr. The 'dwarf sound' of MacWhirr does not engage with the silent directly, as Jukes does, adventurously approaching the clear edge of 'Nothing at all'. It goes a step further, to find a

way to make the medium habitable. Conrad's books countenance both registers of silence. There is Jukes' approach, the sudden, unmistakable leap of silence; but there is also the MacWhirrean approach that is through its sheer limitation, continuous, and less easy to define. Perhaps more than any other post- (or is it, late?) Romantic writer Conrad finds his books dictated by the inexpressible. Its elusive form torments him with an aggravating physicality, both forceful and fading. So he describes the writing process in a letter to Garnett:

> You know how bad it is when one feels one's liver, or lungs. Well I feel my brain. I am distinctly conscious of the contents of my head. My story is there in a fluid - in an evading shape. I can't get hold of it. It is all there - to bursting, yet I can't get hold of it no more than you can grasp a handful of water.[45]

The story has shape, distinctly it has shape and presence, yet it will not come to hand. Conrad's phrase, 'an evading shape', is telling. The issue his stories so often address becomes here his own experience in writing them; the story itself tries to outwit him, 'an evading shape'. This elusive quality affects Conrad's writing in a number of ways; not least in making important the apparently arbitrary. His characters are drawn into acting out their language, risking everything to make meaning tangible. Conrad is fascinated, for example, by the convert:

> The convert, the man capable of grace (I am speaking here in a secular sense), is not discreet. His pride is of another kind; he jumps gladly off the track - the touch of grace is mostly sudden - and facing about in a new direction may even attain the illusion of having turned his back on Death itself.[46]

45. Garnett, p.135; letter dated 29 March 1898.
46. Joseph Conrad, Notes on Life and Letters (London, 1924), 'A Happy Wanderer', p.61.

The 'sudden' language of the convert is distinctly unsafe, it is impractical and risky, yet it harbours an unavoidable eloquence. Its indiscreet and outcast language is compelling. Temperamentally, Conrad himself 'is not discreet', as Ford Madox Ford relates, comparing Conrad's seamanship and his writing:

> Conrad would indulge in extremely dangerous manoeuvres, going about within knife-blades of deadly shores whilst his officers and crew shivered; but over very small details of the stowing of spars and the like he would go out of his mind and swear the ship to pieces. In the same way, in writing he would attack subjects almost impossible and go mad over a sentence.[47]

This is the central truth and contradiction of Conrad's work: that the sudden 'dangerous manoeuvres', the upheavals and leaps, anchor his mind. Danger is safe whilst security is a danger.

In The Shadow-Line this truth is seen from the perspective of the convert who unconsciously leapt into danger; in Lord Jim, we see it from the point of view of the man who thought for the moment he was playing safe. Though it is not clear in what sense Jim may be said to be 'capable of grace', nor that 'he jumps gladly', yet he too jumps, and he is turned involuntarily 'facing about in a new direction' altogether. With his leap from the apparently humdrum 'Patna' he is suddenly and irrevocably isolated:

> 'She seemed higher than a wall; she loomed like a cliff over the boat... There was no going back. It was as if I had jumped into a well - into an everlasting deep hole...'
>
> (LJ, 125)

He is in an instant, utterly excluded from his former self, 'There was no going back'. The realisation escalates as he watches. The ship at first 'higher than a wall', grows to loom 'like a cliff', before

---

47. Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance (New York, 1924), pp.111-12.

he plunges into 'an everlasting deep hole'. In both time and space, Jim is disjoined from his past life. Again Conrad gives an experience clothed in seeming: 'It was as if I had jumped', 'she loomed like a cliff', 'seemed higher than a wall'; but the quality of the doubt is different here from that of The Shadow-Line. It is not that Jim is uncertain of his object. There are no uneasy margins, and he bears no 'indefinite reluctance to meet the horrid logic of the situation'. He turns to it directly and his uncertainty finds clean edges. All the doubt here is whether clarity can tell enough. The very accuracy of his words is compelling, as at his trial he looks out on the rows of people:

> Enslaved by the fascination of his voice. It was very loud, it rang startling in his own ears, it was the only sound audible in the world, for the terribly distinct questions that extorted his answers seemed to shape themselves in anguish and pain within his breast, - came to him poignant and silent like the terrible questioning of one's conscience.
>
> (LJ, 63)

Far from avoiding expression, this silence seems to shape itself 'in anguish and pain within his breast'. Jim does not 'stand up to conscience' as Giles meant; rather he throws himself to it, 'the only sound audible in the world'. The account of a moment's unknowing action must be settled by the rest of his life. Paradoxically, the arbitrariness of the 'sudden', the gratuitous event, offers more apparent continuity than The Shadow-Line's engagement with the unstable element. The external questions, that are so 'terribly distinct', thus fit immediately, though on other grounds, with his own internal state, chiming in unison with the questioning of his conscience. Significance seems a kind of temptation, a desire that links the convert and the betrayer.

The consequence of Conrad facing the metaphysic of emptiness so directly means that, unlike say Hardy, he is always seeking, for all the solitude of his characters, a social identity for this knowledge of 'the silence'. That is not simply the consequence of being a novelist. His characters, however secure their knowledge, like Marlow on board the Nellie, seek the assent of their hearers, assume a congruence of experience however much it may commonly be concealed. So the 'poignant and silent' voice that comes from within Jim's breast, turns outward to include the listener, 'like the terrible questioning of one's conscience'. Conrad's books urgently need an independent narrator. The observer's role is a vital element.[48] So as Jim imparts his experiences to Marlow, he questions him intently: '"Don't you believe it?" he inquired with tense curiosity' (LJ, 136). Jim is just as fascinated with how Marlow will hear, as Marlow is with Jim. He needs his words to be caught and understood. Marlow describes his conversations with Jim thus:

> It was a subtle and momentous quarrel as to the true essence of life, and did not want a judge. He wanted an ally, a helper, an accomplice. I felt the risk I ran of being circumvented, blinded, decoyed, bullied... It seemed to me I was being made to comprehend the Inconceivable - and I know of nothing to compare with the discomfort of such a sensation.
>
> (LJ, 111)

Even as Jim is struggling to grasp his situation, the thing he wants to say strikes, still unsaid, with an inevitable accuracy. To Marlow it seems as if his own guardedness, not incomprehension, stood between him and the unknown: 'It seemed to me I was being made to comprehend the Inconceivable'.

---

48. Conrad's epigraph for Lord Jim is revealing; he quotes Novalis: 'It is certain my Conviction gains infinitely, the moment another soul will believe it'.

Conrad is concerned with the result, not the origin of this inevitable power. From the first blow, Conrad's urge is to recover. The astringent concern with conscience becomes one of the agents of revival. In the Author's Note to Lord Jim, Conrad describes, without the mediation of Marlow, his first encounter with Jim:

> One sunny morning, in the commonplace surroundings of an Eastern roadstead, I saw his form pass by - appealing - significant - under a cloud - perfectly silent. Which is as it should be. It was for me, with all the sympathy of which I was capable, to seek fit words for his meaning. He was 'one of us'.
> (LJ, 44)

The tempting significance of the sudden and the need of an accomplice occur in the same instance. Jim is both 'appealing' and 'significant', at once seeking and offering meaning. Hearing him is necessary to the fullness of the meaning Conrad ascribes to him on the instant. Together, Jim and Conrad, seem almost to operate with the distinct functions of the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Jim's mode is purely spatial and bare ('I saw his form pass by'), as with the non-linguistic grasp of the right hemisphere; whilst Conrad's is one of temporality and speech (seeking 'fit words for his meaning'), as with the sequential understanding of the left hemisphere. Jim feels that he is on the verge of giving up words. At his trial: 'The sound of his own truthful statements confirmed his deliberate opinion that speech was of no use to him any longer' (LJ, 67). But it is this very detachment from utterance that prompts the vocal in Conrad. His immediate response both overleaps and recognizes the detachment of the sudden in all its condition of isolation. Jim is 'perfectly silent. Which is as it should be. It was for me... to seek fit words for his meaning'. The two states chime with a disturbing harmony, assigning roles.

The rashness of the sudden, of the unforeseen that is also the given, works in an apparently organised way. It is as if the fact that there is no point of contact made Jim recognisable. Marlow comments:

> We exist only in so far as we hang together. He had straggled in a way; he had not hung on; but he was aware of it with an intensity that made him touching.
>
> (LJ, 207)

Detachment itself seems communicative. Jim has leaped beyond the pale: 'We exist only in so far as we hang together... He had not hung on'; but it is as though his very isolation made him 'touching'. Jim's own awareness (from the inside), makes him touching (from without). It's as if incommunicability were so central, so much at the core of experience, that it needed no explanation. It is what we have in common. Conrad's strange intimacy gives the surface of the narrative an awkward and an unpredictable depth. Out of ordinary conversation the page suddenly falls to an awful observation; as when Marlow awakens Jim from 'the fanciful realm of recklessly heroic aspirations' (LJ, 104), by reminding him that he had jumped:

> He turned upon me, his eyes suddenly amazed and full of pain, with a bewildered, startled, suffering face, as though he had tumbled down from a star. Neither you nor I will ever look like this on any man. He shuddered profoundly, as if a cold finger-tip had touched his heart.
>
> (LJ, 105)

Shaken from his aspiration, Jim's eyes are 'suddenly amazed and full of pain'; the reorientation is still a shock to him, and Marlow feels this fully. Yet for all of Marlow's sympathy, the recognition is displaced. Jim turns to him 'with a bewildered, startled, suffering face', caught in a phraseless feeling, in a realisation that is still too present to be conventionalised by thought or manners. Yet in the face of all this feeling, Marlow can add the chilling comment:

'Neither you nor I will ever look like this on any man'. With Jim there before him, Marlow is aware only, as if for all time, of Jim's separateness. He sees all the sides, including the future, of Jim's intensity. Both Marlow and Jim are called to a state of timeless insight, though in utterly different ways.

It is reminiscent of an episode in Sacks' book, The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat. The memory of Sacks' patient (Jimmie G.), is so drastically impaired that he cannot connect one moment to the next. Half of his life is lost to him, and he imagines himself still a boy of nineteen:

> Looking at the grey-haired man before me, I had an impulse for which I have never forgiven myself - it was, or would have been, the height of cruelty had there been any possibility of Jimmie's remembering it.
>
> 'Here,' I said, and thrust a mirror toward him.[49]

Sacks's word 'never' in this context is deeply Conradian. Jimmie cannot remember; it is this precisely which makes him poignant. Yet for Sacks it is 'an impulse for which I have never forgiven myself'. A profound sense of being held to account accompanies the incommunicable state, as if the breach were to be compensated for in the length of memory by which the listener remembers his inadequate response. Time has an unusual role in Sacks and Conrad. Moments and details that quickly pass, dominate the attention and govern the eye with a fascinating strength:

> For love is the enemy of haste; it takes count of passing days, of men who pass away, of a fine art matured slowly in the course of years and doomed in a short time to pass away, too, and be no more.

---

49. Oliver Sacks, The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat (London, 1985), 'The Lost Mariner', p.24.

> Love and regret go hand in hand in this world of changes swifter than the shifting of clouds reflected in the mirror of the sea.
> (MS, 25)

The truthful account for Conrad is not the rendition that comes closest to the material world; the material world is too forgetful to harbour truths. The truthful account has rather to fight against the immediate surroundings to maintain perspective, or to preserve its impressions. Conrad finds a steady point in the exertion of his tolerance: 'For love is the enemy of haste; it takes count of passing days, of men who pass away...'. In this respect, Conrad's approach to his work is more like that of Jim than of Captain Giles. He is unwilling to let the moment pass and so forgive himself. But then he is more often concerned with the likes of Jim than of MacWhirr or the nameless captain of The Shadow-Line.

But what does it mean to record the abrupt, alienating moment? Does the account deny finality of significance to the sudden, or enshrine it? For Jim, still within the consequences of the sudden, this question is paramount. At his trial he runs back through the events leading to his desertion, as if looking for release:

> While his utterance was deliberate, his mind positively flew round and round the serried circle of facts that had surged up all about him to cut him off from the rest of his kind: it was like a creature that, finding itself imprisoned within an enclosure of high stakes, dashes round and round, distracted in the night, trying to find a weak spot, a crevice, a place to scale, some opening through which it may squeeze itself and escape.
> (LJ, 65)

The experience is one of both painstaking accuracy, and furious incomprehension. In one movement, Jim attempts to escape, and creates the imprisoning 'circle of facts'. Implicitly he concurs in his own alienation. It seems that there is no end to the hyperbole of his conscience, or to its futility. It ties all his energy in this

circular pursuit. As Marlow observes: 'What I could never make up my mind about was whether his line of conduct amounted to shirking his ghost or to facing him out' (LJ, 187). All this is true. Jim's 'line of conduct' looks like flight; but his conscience sends him round in circles instead. When he jumps from the ship, for example, it is not for any definite fear. 'He was not afraid of death', Marlow writes, 'I'll tell you what, he was afraid of the emergency. His confounded imagination had evoked for him all the horrors of panic' (LJ, 108). It is not even an imagined panic that directs Jim; it is the fear of the imagination itself, imagination's fear, that is behind his jump.

Outside the court, the same imagination makes him mistakenly bridle when Marlow's companion points out a native dog: 'Look at that wretched cur' (LJ, 94). He takes the comment to himself and he rounds on Marlow, perfectly prepared to defend his name with fists, until he is made to understand his mistake. Marlow comments: 'There had never been a man so mercilessly shown up by his own natural impulse... He had given himself away for nothing' (LJ, 97, 98). The ambiguities of Marlow's phrase are both equally true: it is both that Jim shows himself as 'nothing', a figment of his own imagination, and that he seems to have thrown away his own great worth, that he all too readily himself identified with the cur. It is the interval between these two states that Marlow finds compelling in the figure of Jim. 'Nothing' seems to hold him in balance. Throughout the book, his incentive is unprompted and inexplicable. He is always giving himself away for nothing. When he leaps from the 'Patna', it is not so that he may be saved; he does not even realise that he has jumped, until he looks up and sees the ship. The leap both destroys him yet also is precisely what brings him into being.

Conrad projects Jim's identity against that nothing. Jim is conceived on the brink of nothingness and Marlow cannot see him any other way: 'I cannot fix before my eye the image of his safety' (LJ, 172). As Marlow observes with regard to Patusan, Jim wants 'A refuge at the cost of danger' (LJ, 212). It is not a great idea but a great condition that Conrad's characters seek; yet in seeking it they reveal that what had seemed arbitrary, sudden, is a revelation of the condition of us all. The perilous edge of the negative appears at the very start of life, as Stein remarks:

> Very funny this terrible thing is. A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns - nicht wahr?... No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up.
>
> (LJ, 200)

The dream of individual life, birth itself, and the sea, are all forms of the 'destructive element'. Conrad's language never simply comments on such confusions or strange collocations; the words themselves, and the ideas, share this quality of 'suddenness', are involved in the struggle to cope with an unsteady environment. The real and the ideal seem to change places here; dreaming is not for Stein an ideal or a romantic pursuit; it is a word for what happens to all men and which all men must trust, practically: 'The way is to the destructive element submit yourself...'. The seemingly realistic urge to free yourself from delusion, to live by simple rules, to get on with things, on the other hand, is likened to drowning and represented as naive: 'If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns'. With the utmost conviction, Stein attests that the only way to live is 'To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream - and so - ewig - usque ad

finem...' (LJ, 201). The force of Conrad's writing is to create the sense of a meaning only just gained, though one that it is now impossible to lose once articulated.

What complicates the discovery is that he wants the reader to realise this knowledge and then forget it. There is alongside this conviction, a strain of practical sense, which tells him that the very insights he gains, might yet prove to be deceptive in their effect. Thus Marlow describes the way that Jim confides in him:

> In his careless yet feeling voice, with his offhand manner, a little puzzled, a little bothered, a little hurt, but now and then by a word or a phrase giving one of those glimpses of his very own self that were never any good for purposes of orientation.
>
> (LJ, 296)

In a word or a phrase, as if randomly, Jim gives the silent landmarks of the book; 'one of those glimpses of his very own self that were never any good for purposes of orientation'. They reveal without direction, and disappear again. Marlow pronounces the judgement without impatience though he is a man for whom 'orientation' matters deeply; it is merely an observation, something strongly present in an impression which is realistically phrased and precise. Perhaps at last Conrad's most characteristic view is tolerancy, for all his scrupulousness. It is expansive and tolerant and deeply trusting; he almost persuades us that he knows how to live a life of consistency 'in a world where no explanation is final' (PR, 35).

Chapter 4

Familiar Silences

Yeats and Eliot

Geoffrey Hartman has written that in the great ode the poet invokes the presence of the god, and the poem is a waiting for the moment of the god's entry. In the Romantic ode, that entry is delayed or frustrated, and the poem has to be made out of the absence or the perplexing and illusory momentariness of the presence. Magnificently in Wordsworth the poem depends upon his own ungovernable impulse of recognition: 'Failure or access of emotion (inspiration) vis-a-vis nature was the basis of his spiritual life: his soul either kindled in contact with nature or it died'.[1] What is apparently secondary and unreliable, the response of the soul, is thus for the poet a primary and original force. So too for the later nineteenth century writer; landscape, natural creature or object of perception, all of these offer the physical circumstances within which the god might appear; but all too often he does not come. The absence at the centre, which is more and other than the 'death of God', prompts them into writing with peculiar intensity. Their seriousness makes them like those thinkers described by Heidegger who think the history of Being. By that, he does not mean merely that they reflect upon the history of metaphysics. He means something more daring, that they return to base, to 'the land of the saying of Being',[2] which is for him the realm of the unspoken. Such a writer has to return to the beginning each time and think what it is possible for him to know of Being now. Heidegger stresses the importance of the poet to readers in a post-

1. Geoffrey H. Hartman, Wordsworth's Poetry, p.5.
2. Heidegger, PLT, p.98; from 'What Are Poets For?'

religious age:

> There is, the sole necessity, by thinking our way soberly into what his poetry says, to come to learn what is unspoken. That is the course of the history of being.
>
> (PLT, 96)

It is the changing nature of what cannot be said which determines what particular insight is on offer. Wordsworth too is one of those thinkers who returns to the beginning, as Hazlitt challenges him, who looks around on Mother Earth 'As if she for no purpose bore you, / As if you were her first-born birth / And none had lived before you'.[3] But the nature of experience is not at all the same for Wordsworth as it is for his successors, Yeats's more immediate predecessors. As the nineteenth century progressed the Wordsworthian joy, the something that doth live, was replaced increasingly by a kind of confusion. The simple, unsayable 'something' of Wordsworth gives way in Arnold to an unsayable region of far greater complexity; man 'dares stamp nothing false where he finds nothing sure'.[4]

Early Modernism defines itself by its objection to this notion of the writer as the agent of a distinct vision; he is instead the maker of a distinct verbal image. Instead of attempting vainly to decipher uncertain experience, the writer starts afresh, inventing a new world in the image, even if what the image indicates may be a mysterious reality 'indescribable but not unknowable'.[5] As Frank Kermode has argued, the anti-Romantic already sounds here close to Romantic postulates. Yeats stood on both sides of the divide, both a writer open to the new Symbolist mode and also to older, more openly

---

3. WW, IV, 56; 'Expostulation and Reply', 11.10-12.
4. Arnold, Poems, p.160; 'Empedocles on Etna', I. ii. 91.
5. Frank Kermode, quoting T. E. Hulme, in Romantic Image (London, 1961), p.129.

speculative modes of poetic thought. Yet when he offers the reader a perceived scene or object in his poetry, it behaves much more like and object in his own mind than a revelation from without. The issue here is the degree of resistance being offered by the image.

His poetry works like a dream. It's written without the Hopkins' struggle, in such a way that appearances are seemingly left as they were found. The scene 'discovered' in 'The Wild Swans at Coole', for example, is perfectly calm and level, and the speaker falls in immediately with its mood; because it is a mood:

> The trees are in their autumn beauty,
> The woodland paths are dry,
> Under the October twilight the water
> Mirrors a still sky;
> Upon the brimming water among the stones
> Are nine-and-fifty swans.[6]

He has come upon a restoring place, of quiet energy. It offers what seems an unbreakable calm. Indeed the scene is composed of unbroken layers. The golden colours of the trees 'in their autumn beauty' stand quite separate from the grey of the 'October twilight'. The woodland paths are dry above the 'brimming water'. In the clarity of the relationships between these layers the poetry fills with an expansive calm. For example, the water appears 'Under the October twilight', under not in the twilight, vertically beneath it and distinct. Yet in another plane, without pause, 'the water / Mirrors a still sky'. Suddenly it's as though you see from inside the picture, looking up through the previously defining line. With a cool hand Yeats disorientates the perspective, leaving the upheaval with an even, meditative effect.

---

6. The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats, second edition (London, 1950), p.147; originally from The Wild Swans at Coole (1919). Hereafter referred to as WBY.

This stillness and clarity are not born in bareness or inactivity. Rather everything lives to its optimum, pushing its element as far as it will go. So twilight comes right down over the water, and so the water sees far up into the sky. Every element exerts itself into the over-awing calm.

Yeats has found a genuinely reflective place, that bears the weight of his mind as easily as the 'brimming water' supports the swans. He is 'a man who is emancipated from the ways of perception engendered by action', the artist as contemplative. For nineteen autumns he has counted the swans here, and still the level atmosphere holds him. But this time, before he has finished counting:

> All suddenly mount
> And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
> Upon their clamorous wings.

The perfect level is broken; the quiet, the stillness, and the tradition of counting, all disturbed with the sudden scattering and clamour. The action dissipates the image like a broken dream. Yet, of course, that is what the poem as image was always prepared for; the image was this moment of its shattering.

It would be possible to argue that the question into which the image dissipates is a kind of silence. But I do not think that is so. Yeats is not a silent poet as such. He is too articulate and verbally resourceful for there to be much he cannot say or think. It is rarely he would want to present himself, like one of Conrad's speakers, as a man who cannot think the thought which has come to him.[7] This is not

---

7. Yeats compares the novelist and the poet; the poet 'is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete. A novelist might describe his accidence, his incoherence, he [the poet] must not; he is more type than man, more passion than type'. From W. B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions (London, 1961), p.509; 'A General Introduction for my Work' (1957). Hereafter referred to as EI.

to deny a potent mysteriousness in the poetry beyond even the occult significance he acknowledges. His poetry has a kind of after-taste or a fore-sense, something that only appears in the peripheral vision, but which gives his poetry strength. Here maybe it lies in those 'broken rings' the birds make; while his enumeration seeks to impose an order, they 'suddenly' present an order of their own, unthinkable by him. An ordinary perception can be validated by the field measure of rubbing your eyes and looking again, but this silent sense disappears with the attempt to be sure of it into broken rings. Silence convicts those attentive to it of recklessness or absurdity.

In Yeats's 'The Tower' the voice prays for this power of fascination over his readers, for the ability to draw them beyond verifiable experience:

> O may the moon and sunlight seem
> One inextricable beam,
> For if I triumph I must make men mad.[8]

Yeats offers a way to pursue the dream, though it is foregroundedly a dangerous route. There is a striking contrast between the autocracy of his end, and the gradual and fragile means towards it. The voice petitions 'may the moon and sunlight seem / One inextricable beam', but unequivocally his success 'must make men mad.' It's like Blake's 'Proverbs of Hell' - 'If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise'[9] - very hard to believe experientially, and not safe. Poetry's 'triumph' lies in the abandonment of sense and measure.

Of all the Romantic antecedents to whom he appealed, Blake is the closest to Yeats in his cryptic force, closer than Shelley; even to

---

8. WBY, p.220; originally from The Tower (1928).
9. William Blake, The Complete Poems, ed. Alicia Ostriker (Harmondsworth, 1977), p.183; The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, 'Proverbs of Hell'.

the extent of inventing Irish ancestry for him. It was the mixture of the apparently mysterious with the luminously apparent that seized Yeats's attention: 'There is not one among these words which is other than significant and precise to the laborious student'.[10]

If we ask if there is an identifiable role for silence in Blake's poetry, we know at once that the inarticulate is neither rare nor unpredictable to him. But as with Yeats, it's as though he always knows the place where silence must come, that it has indeed 'a role'. So he describes the origin of the 'Proverbs of Hell':

> When I came home; on the abyss of the five senses, where a flat sided steep frowns over the present world. I saw a mighty Devil folded in black clouds, hovering on the sides of the rock, with corroding fires he wrote the following sentence now perceived by the minds of men, & read by them on earth.

> How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way,
> Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?[11]

He finds silence at the very border of perception, 'on the abyss of the five senses'. The senses act as a door still; at full extent their limitation opens onto the inarticulable, but rather than visual or tangible stimuli entering, Blake, articulate and witty, jumps out. His own body, confined to the senses, becomes leaden and unreceptive - a bleak and immobile ridge, while that of the bird is vividly alive - 'an immense world of delight'. It is made distinct not merely by its own outlines, but by the margins of perception itself; it 'cuts' its airy way.

The difficulty is that whilst Blake's poetry is full of inlets or outlets of silence, it is also 'a flat-sided steep'. There is everything and nothing at once. 'He who sees the Infinite in all things

---

10. Poems of William Blake, ed. W. B. Yeats (London, 1893), p.xxxv.
11. Blake, p.183, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

sees God', Blake writes, 'He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only'.[12] To see the material bird with the ratio of the senses is hardly to see it at all. It is just a mirror of the flatness. Only in grasping the 'Infinite', imaginative bird does the vision become authentic. When the bird reveals the Infinite, the Infinite reveals the bird.

Blake speaks with a huge voice, but the deliberate esotericism turns it to a whisper: 'Rintrah roars & shakes his fires in the burdend air; / Hungry clouds swag on the deep'.[13] For all his scale and volume, Blake's voice is hard to hear. It's more like thunder than a human tone. He writes unappeasably with huge slabs of noun and verb, all pressing on each other to give force to his meaning. The clouds are hungry, the air is burdened, fires are shaken. In noise and weight and appetite the elements make meaning imminent; yet despite their portending roughness, the words appear withheld. The variety of signs effaces as much as it compounds the meaning, by its denial of contextual reference. Rintrah's meaning has force, but it does not implicate the reader.

In Yeats's poems too the voice arrives from an unaccustomed point. His poetry is so accurate and careful and subtle, you might think it impossible to escape his meaning. But still it is not clear precisely in what tone of voice he can write, 'For if I triumph I must make men mad'. It's as though at base the poetry were disengaged from common experience. Yeats's poetry is not recognisable, at least not in the active coincidental way that Wordsworth or Conrad are recognisable in their presumption that the reader shares their concerns.

---

12. Blake, p.76, 'There is No Natural Religion'.
13. Blake, p.180, from the argument of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

What is it then that makes Yeats difficult to recognise? The answer lies largely in the attitude of Yeats to his immediate object. Wordsworth feels his words are equal to the power he finds in them. This thorn, this gentle breeze, these stones are poetry. His silence is there in the disproportion of the imagination held down to a simple thorn. By contrast, Yeats looks past the immediate object, even those wild swans. Neither Blake nor Yeats find poetry justified in the words unless part of a larger magic order, or sustained by the immediate object.

In Yeats's poem 'Towards Break of Day', the voice dreams of a waterfall he has known from his childhood. In the Wordsworthian way this waterfall has grown in his memory:

> 'Were I to travel far and wide
> I could not find a thing so dear.'
> My memories had magnified
> So many times childish delight.

In his dream the waterfall seems real enough to touch:

> I would have touched it like a child
> But knew my finger could but have touched
> Cold stone and water.[14]

At this same moment, if this were Wordsworth's poem, there would be the realisation of the power of recollection. He 'would have touched it like a child', and with that there would be the upheaval and the calm of home. But for Yeats, the material reality of the fall, its 'Cold stone and water', is not enough. He is not satisfied to touch the waterfall when what he desires is the memory itself: 'It was the dream itself enchanted me'.[15] Where Wordsworth would be held profoundly by the memory, and the physical waterfall transformed with an

---

14. WBY, p.208; originally from Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921).
15. WBY, p.392, 'The Circus Animals' Desertion'; originally from Last Poems (1939).

unsayable power, Yeats is left wandering in a reverie the value of which he cannot exactly confirm.

Yeats's desire to touch the memory itself is revealing. Blake and Yeats both look past natural objects, and to this extent they dismiss perception. Blake can write 'I saw a mighty Devil folded in black clouds'! There is no astounding shock, no leap to be made, only the direct contact of 'I saw' and the unremarking detail of the perception - a devil (mighty), folded in clouds (black). Or in Yeats's 'Crazy Jane On God' the speaker sees a house:

> That from childhood stood
> Uninhabited, ruinous,
> Suddenly lit up
> From door to top.[16]

Again there is no shock in the sight itself. Whether these devils and phantoms are real or not is not the question. It is the uncomplicated way they are accepted, finding entry to the page without disturbance, that is impressive. The visionary image is constructed by the mind without resistance by physical reality. The mystery is hidden by the apparent ease with which it is presented to us.

This felicitous, silent eloquence, silent in disclosing its source, as might be expected, gives Yeats's words a very different bearing to the silent words of Wordsworth. The power that Wordsworth finds in his words is there without proof, something that takes him also by surprise. It is an unknown presence there in the middle, between subject and object, and the voice leaps over blindly. Wordsworth's trust in his poetic mission stores this inarticulacy with silent acceptance, so that his lines are unruly, and his objects have a living look. By contrast, this silence of perception in the

---

16. WBY, p.294; originally from The Winding Stair (1933).

Modernist image yields words that are settled and precise. The silence is a resistance to explanation, a mode in which the image is allowed to defeat the reader:

> We who are the opposites of our times should for the most part work at our art and for good manners' sake be silent.[17]

Even what counts as courtesy here is really a kind of hauteur.

In Yeats's final play, The Death of Cuchulain, for example, Eithne brings Cuchulain two messages. One is spoken, telling him to fight:

> No matter what's the odds, no matter though
> Your death may come of it, ride out and fight.
> The scene is set and you must out and fight.[18]

The other message is written, warning Cuchulain that if he goes out to battle before morning, he 'must face odds no man can face and live' (ibid., 695). The same bearer brings both messages, but their meanings run in separate veins, perfectly distinct. When Eithne has delivered her spoken message, Cuchulain challenges her about the written one:

> Cuchulain: What have you there?
> Eithne: I have nothing.
> Cuchulain: There is something in your hand.
> Eithne: No.
> Cuchulain: Have you a letter in your hand?
> Eithne: I do not know how it got into my hand.
> (Ibid., 695)

The dialogue is massively uncooperative. It's as though the actors had to go on without knowing the words, producing non sequiturs like Beckett but in the interest of mythic significance. Their words seem far too disengaged and distinct to act transitively, yet far from the

---

17. W. B. Yeats, Explorations (London, 1962), p.417; 'On the Boiler' (1939).
18. The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats, second edition (London, 1952), p.695; The Death of Cuchulain (1939). The Collected Plays will be referred to hereafter as CP.

futilities of, say, Endgames.

Yeats's meanings are so integral and the actions of his characters so purely characteristic, that there is no role for conversation in the play! Cuchulain hardly heeds the dilemma of the two messages. He has already decided his action. 'You have told me nothing', he says, 'I am already armed' (ibid., 695). Myth does not direct Cuchulain himself; rather his own unthinking impulses find the shape of the myth: 'The scene is set and you must out and fight'.

The strange thing is that the more impulsive, or the more open to myth and prophecy the play becomes, the more definite and pre-determined it looks. Eventually Eithne and Cuchulain seem to be speaking in stage-directions. So when Eithne sees the vague presence she has been sensing, she declares somewhat unapproachably, 'Morrigu, war goddess, stands between' (ibid., 696). Or Cuchulain, on the verge of death, observes the hawk, 'My soul's first shape', close by, and for his last words exclaims dispassionately, 'I say it is about to sing' (ibid., 702, 703). From the disengaged, improvisatory start of the play, their words have grown into pure ritual. Yet the more unerring their sense becomes, the more their words seem unpersuasive to those not already persuaded.

Cuchulain is a heroic, passionate creation. Why should his experience seem so articulate and cold? Whilst in The Death of Cuchulain Yeats sees fluently beyond the common bounds of perception, to myth and magic, the written play itself seems gaunt. This is the mood Yeats especially sought in his writing, one of cold passion. In Autobiographies, for example, he writes that he:

> Deliberately sought out an impression as of cold light and tumbling clouds... and recognising that all the criticism of life known to me was alien and

> English, became as emotional as possible but with an emotion which I described to myself as cold.[19]

Seen from his own perspective, Yeats's clarity is not a barrier, rather it is poised in change. His sharp outlines are clasped in the fluidity of 'cold light and tumbling clouds'. There _is_ movement and passion in his perception, but he deliberately seeks out austerity and economy for a polemical purpose. Cuchulain's unheeding exposure is a chasm effect: 'my "private philosophy" is there but there must be no sign of it'.[20]

Neither Hopkins nor Conrad would have claimed that their vision was a 'private philosophy'. Yeats is self-conscious about his beliefs and sees his writing as the silent enunciation of a highly coherent system. But beyond that, his body of ideas and feelings and subconscious dispositions express themselves in the only viable way, through the literary image, the objective correlative, the Bergsonian 'intensive manifold'.

Henri Bergson himself wrote about perception as involving a kind of silence, a state beyond utterance. He was concerned, for example, to find change itself, time, not as measurement, but as it is experienced in passage. He asks:

> How would it [time] appear to a consciousness which desired only to see it without measuring it, which would then grasp it without stopping it, which in short, would take itself as object?[21]

It appeared to Bergson that to _see_ what cannot really be seen was to be released after being held back for a long time at a barrier of the

---

19. W. B. Yeats, _Autobiographies_ (London, 1926), p.91. Hereafter referred to as _A_.
20. Quoted from the letters in A. Norman Jeffares and A. S. Knowland, _A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats_ (London, 1975), p.297, ref. 691.
21. Henri Bergson, _The Creative Mind_, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York, 1968), p.12. Hereafter referred to as _CM_.

unknown, checked by caution. To see the inexpressible would be to enter 'deep into the realm of the inner life', with a 'direct vision' of our underlying nature. Bergson's tacit vision is one of 'pure, unadulterated inner continuity' (CM, 12). The inexpressible state is not ordinarily seen, he explains; rather it gains force precisely where perception breaks off, gaining power by the restraint. For Bergson this unseen condition is secondary, a mere gap in perception:

> Conceiving is a makeshift when perception is not granted us, and reasoning is done in order to fill up the gaps of perception or to extend its scope.
> (CM, 155)

It is as though the limits of perception cast a line about an empty space, a rift that Bergson sees as lying at the centre of centuries of mistaken philosophy. This empty space has no impulse of its own, only the borrowed energy of frustrated perception, and yet it is compelling. Its bare potential seems to offer the balance of all else! It could be either an infinity or a nothing, running the gamut from rationalism to empiricism. But it is not real for Bergson and so he exclaims:

> Let us have done with great systems embracing all the possible, and sometimes even the impossible! Let us be content with the real, mind and matter.
> (CM, 77)

The real lies rather in the 'pure, unadulterated inner continuity' of perception. The poetry offered by the perception of what cannot be directly uttered must be different at base to that borne by common experience. In place of the common voice, there will be fleeting and individual significances. Perhaps if the inarticulate is to be seen, everyone must be their own poet.

But how can silence be uttered or the invisible be seen? Bergson recognises that there are limits to perception. He does not flinch from the question; rather he states the main argument against him-

self: 'How can one ask the eyes of the body, or those of the mind, to see more than they can see?' (CM, 159). His answer is that this 'more' has already been seen; 'For hundreds of years, in fact, there have been men whose function has been precisely to see and to make us see what we do not naturally perceive. They are the artists' (CM, 159).

Through Bergson it is possible to see the perceived silence as in some way akin to Wordsworth's trusted unknown. Both kinds of silence find this excess, this something more than can be seen. But Wordsworth's 'more' belongs to the spirit, is, ambiguously, attributable to a something other than himself: Bergson is more self-conscious about the artist's mode of seeing. He identifies the artist as the man who sees more forms, in greater detail, and with more marked individuality.

At the limit of perception, and this is the habitual experience, the ordinary trust in language is halted, and gathers force. Silence has a great and tangible energy when it is located at the breakdown of perception. The silence located at this point loses the effect of this energy by converting it into movement. Bergson thus compares the immobility of the empty space with the fluency of perception:

> It is not the 'states', simple snapshots we have taken once again along the course of change, that are real; on the contrary, it is the flux, the continuity of transition, it is change itself that is real.
>
> (CM, 16)

In the 'continuity of transition' there can be no stable terms, 'snapshots', to hold and validate experience, only the 'flux'. The hard finish of the perceived silence is thrown off paradoxically by the incompletable rush of 'change itself'. Change must always go unchecked. It is the unknown, but it is also for Bergson the real.

Bergson's thinking derives from art so it is no surprise that it can so exactly be turned around to describe its conditions. It's not just that the inexpressible is accepted as a part of reality - it is the real and poetry is its expression. The unsayable is at the centre of what the authentic poet has to say. So in the 'Immortality Ode', Wordsworth gives his 'song of thanks and praise' not for the fluency of experience, nor for any continuous sense:

> But for those obstinate questionings
> Of sense and outward things,
> Fallings from us, vanishings;
> Blank misgivings of a Creature
> Moving about in worlds not realized,
> High instincts before which our mortal Nature
> Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised.[22]

For Wordsworth the real lies in what Bergson would perhaps call 'the states': 'Fallings from us, vanishings; / Blank misgivings...'. Yet for both writers, the silent sphere of experience seems the true nature of reality, and the awareness of it a difficult and dangerous advance. So Wordsworth writes of 'High instincts before which our mortal Nature / Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised'. It is as though in silence consciousness achieved its highest level.

Whatever guise it takes, the unsayable sense is compelling, and its influence is hard to erase. Thus Conrad's Marlow holds to the surface of practicality to subdue, not dispel, the reality stirring about him:

> When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality - the reality, I tell you - fades. The inner truth is hidden - luckily, luckily.[23]

It is the depth he feels first and primarily, the silent consequence

---

22. WW, IV, 283; 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', 11.141, 142-8.
23. Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness, p.67.

underfoot, at once unknown and real. To turn consciously from this sense would be terrible. It would be to abandon hope and integrity. It is no wonder then if Yeats's inappreciable silence should be as absolute as the intimate silence of Wordsworth. The unsayable emerges unexpectedly as a source of definiteness, a way of being. It imposes authenticity on experience, or else faithlessness. There are no intermediate terms with silence, to step away from it is to lose the tension of truth.

Yet, though as Frank Kermode and others have argued,[24] Bergson continues and explains the Romantic image, there are differences from Romantic practice, and his very explanation, explicitness, is the foundation much more of the Modernist image. The silence of Wordsworth and Conrad overtakes them, lies in the given, but it lies beyond, distorts, sight or saying. In Yeats, and Blake also, the inexpressible offers a clearly seen image, but it is more made than given. It enforces no recognition. The silence of perception seeks its effect in entirely the other direction to that of Wordsworthian silence. Without the implicit force of the impasse, Yeats and Blake find emphasis outwardly, in external conflict. So Blake writes in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell:

> Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.
> From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy.
> (Blake, 181)

Where Wordsworth finds an original energy in the 'invisible world',

---

24. Frank Kermode, Romantic Image (London, 1961), p.121; cf. the adjustment of the argument in Eric Svarny, 'The Men of 1914' (London, 1988), pp.21-22.

an impulse which seems prior to ordinary experience, this explicit energy of Blake is newly generated and discharged. Far from being an anchor against change, Blake's Contraries are all for progress: 'Without Contraries is no progression'. This 'unconscious' is more knowing, more politically explicit.

The nature of the contact between poem and reader is affected correspondingly. In place of the common voice there is an ongoing, outward contradiction. Yeats engages his audience in antagonism. In 'Poetry and Tradition' he writes:

> All movements are held together more by what they hate than by what they love, for love separates and individualises and quiets, but the nobler movements, the only movements on which literature can found itself, hate great and lasting things.[25]

Through opposition to 'great and lasting things', such movements grow 'great and lasting' too, finding in hatred a common voice. The paradox is specifically Blakean: 'Love separates and individualises and quiets', for all the world as if love were the force of disaffection and limitation. So the voice mourns in 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', 'More substance in our enmities / Than in our love'.[26] Love does not seem able to provide any common ground. The ability of poetry to touch lies rather in revulsion, in the hatred of 'great and lasting things'. The foundations of poetry leave the poet with an unsettled state.

In Yeats, as in Blake, contraries generate an energy for change, but Yeats's poetry seems arrested in the midst of production, poised over a new reality which it cannot find the language to celebrate.

---

25. EI, pp.249-50; originally published in The Cutting of an Agate (1912).
26. WBY, p.231, 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', 'The Stare's Nest by My Window'; originally published in The Tower.

'The Second Coming' is caught between the articulation of the old, and the beginning of a new state. The poem has one of the most tense and yet unallied of voices:

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed.[27]

If Blake's voice is like thunder, Yeats's would certainly make you ask if anyone else had heard it - was that thunder? It flashes between abstraction and a human tone, between destruction and concern. The contraries unleash a powerful force, setting each word at odds with its neighbour. Gentle words only increase the temper. With 'the blood-dimmed tide', for example, the dimming of colour serves only to exacerbate the sharpness that lies behind it. Moderation itself seems counter-productive; '<u>Mere</u> anarchy is loosed upon the world'. Anarchy runs the more violently with 'mere' on its shoulders.

The speaker struggles to clear his view, in repeated beginnings and strong phrases. But it's hard to tell what he <u>wants</u> to see; whether he wants the centre to hold or the annihilating changes to come. The conflict unleashes the voice to a terrible freedom. At one level he has over-articulated, seen and said too much for his peace of mind, but he has also said too little. He has said nothing that he can rely on. 'The Second Coming' is at once expressive in its images and mute about its final response: it can only end with a question mark, as if freedom constrained it.

In Conrad, also, the sense of silence is suppressed by the useful world: 'When you have to attend to things of that sort', he writes, 'to the mere incidents of the surface... The inner truth is hidden'.

---

27. <u>WBY</u>, p.211; originally from <u>Michael Robartes and the Dancer</u> (1921).

But the reverse is also true. When the practical world is forgotten, silence crowds in, as it had crowded in on Kurtz: "The horror! The horror!" which he can scarcely articulate, a whisper, not a cry. But the response is unmistakeable in its feelings.

Bergson might veer away from the empty space of the unrealisable concept, but the break-down of practicality and the resulting access of freedom are essential to his perception of silence. When he explains how there came to be writers who 'see more than they can see', Bergson is as rash as it is possible to be:

> Now and then, by a lucky accident, men arise whose senses or whose consciousness are less adherent to life. Nature has forgotten to attach their faculty of perceiving to their faculty of acting. When they look at a thing, they see it for itself, and not for themselves. They do not perceive simply with a view to action; they perceive in order to perceive, - for nothing, for the pleasure of doing so.
> (CM, 162)

Yeats's description of the origin of poetry is in all respects comparable. In 'Poetry and Tradition', he says that there are three kinds of poet, all three of them 'less adherent to life'. There are the aristocrats whose 'place in the world puts them above the fear of life', the countrymen who 'have nothing to lose', and the artists: 'Providence has filled them with recklessness' (EI, 251). Disengaged, the poets appear fearsome to the non-artists, who 'fear and even hate the things that have worth in themselves':

> It seems to them that those who have been freed by position, by poverty, or by the traditions of art, have something terrible about them, a light that is unendurable to eyesight.
> (EI, 252)

It's as though living an unattached existence, the poet could seize the objective world and render it too sharpened by freedom. But it is significant here that Yeats refers to the poet and not to the poem. It is the poet who is 'freed by position' and who has this unendur-

able light. The poets 'have worth in themselves'; but the poetry does not break free. The poet who has this special gift makes his poem in the light of it, but the poem, the writing itself, is not the record itself of the moment of insight.

In 'The Second Coming', for instance, the voice is thrown free, 'loosed' from all allegiances to the 'best' and the 'worst' that the image enunciates: 'The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity' (WBY, 210). The poetry is held in an unresolved knot of conflict. Thus whilst it is dictated by crisis, the poetry presents a lucid eloquence rather than an uproar: 'Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer'. The lines are balanced to cast falcon and falconer apart. Rather than falling to a whole new state, it is with the old terms of the relationship that the poetry rests. The wonderfully archaic image leaves the reader in doubt about what is actually happening. Is it a break at the periphery - simply that the falcon cannot hear the falconer so that there is need for a louder voice of recall; or a break at the centre, more serious and difficult to reverse - that the falcon cannot hear the falconer? The words of dislocation remain like connective tissue, simultaneously powerfully evocative and rooted in unresolved ambiguity. The Bergsonian symbol, even if it does not seek out such perplexity, feeds off it.

By contrast, in The Prelude, the sense of surprise in the poet is matched by that of the poetry, so that far from being tied to the image, freedom becomes the supportive element:

Oh! when I have hung
Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass
And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock
But ill sustain'd, and almost, as it seem'd,
Suspended by the blast which blew amain,
Shouldering the naked crag; Oh! at that time,
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,

> With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
> Blow through my ears! the sky seem'd not a sky
> Of earth, and with what motion mov'd the clouds!
> (Prelude I. 341-50)

In his more complete detachment, Wordsworth finds something that the freedom of 'The Second Coming' is not attempting, a sense of quiet. 'Suspended by the blast'; an extraordinary calm takes over. Only the fall beneath seems to support him, but rather than struggling back to the slope, there he hangs, until his danger seems almost a distinct era; 'at that time, / While on the perilous ridge I hung...'. From a great distance the wind dashes close, only to return to the distance again. But the momentary acquaintance of the 'strange utterance' pulls the poetry to this extent. Despite the precarious hold in 'half-inch fissures', the poet's attention is fixed on the discovery of a new dimension of space, claiming allegiance with the insubstantial elements. The object is seen 'for itself', but it rests silently within its estrangement. So when Wordsworth analyses or seeks to clarify his meaning, he finds still the same words or ideas, 'the sky seem'd not a sky / Of earth, and with what motion mov'd the clouds!' It's as though the words could not be corrected, only given again intact but intensified by the negative and the exclamation. Silence returns his poetry sharpened and absolute: 'what is sayable receives its determination from what is not sayable'.

By contrast Yeats is far more in control of his poetry. It is far more in his power to affect what he writes. Yeats fights with the wind rather than being 'suspended by the blast', struggling to reconcile the energy of his thoughts with words:

> My thoughts were a great excitement, but when I tried to do anything with them, it was like trying to pack a balloon into a shed in a high wind.
> (A, 50)

Yeats's poetry is more wilful and energetic than that of Wordsworth,

full of 'I summon...' and 'I call...', the declarations and demands of the voice. There seems an unusually high density of auxiliary verbs too, as though the voice held the poetry very close to his chest. To Yeats it seems that the character of the voice is inversely proportional to the inevitability of the poetry. He writes of those 'like Wordsworth, like Coleridge, like Goldsmith, like Keats', who:

> have little personality, so far as the casual eye can see, little personal will, but fiery and brooding imagination... Such men have the advantage that all they write is a part of knowledge, but they are powerless before events.[28]

Yeats sees the advantage of this 'brooding imagination'. Unequivocally he states that these writers 'have the advantage that all they write is a part of knowledge'. Less absolute than Blake, he feels the attraction of this passive wisdom. Equally, though, its powerlessness appals him:

> No matter what I said,
> For wisdom is the property of the dead,
> A something incompatible with life; and power,
> Like everything that has the stain of blood,
> A property of the living.[29]

Less absolute than Wordsworth, he cannot throw himself to so apparently alien a force.

His poetry dramatizes the symbol; the plays and the poetry lie close together. He is always finding himself in a different place from where the symbol would position him. 'I' and icon refuse to coincide and the poetry inhabits the painful space between:

> Yet if no change appears
> No moon; only an aching heart
> Conceives a changeless work of art.[30]

---

28. EI, p.329, 'J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time'; originally published in The Cutting of an Agate.
29. WBY, p.269, 'The Blood and the Moon'; originally from The Winding Stair.
30. WBY, p.228, 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', 'My Table'.

Explicitly but unwillingly he commits himself to change, though it is always with the undertow of indecision, 'Yet if no change appears / No moon'. The effect of the lines is odd, both abrupt and lingering, because his 'aching heart' is really for 'a changeless work of art'. So in 'Blood and the Moon' he looks with longing to the 'incompatible' quality of the moon:

> The purity of the unclouded moon
> Has flung its arrowy shaft upon the floor.
> Seven centuries have passed and it is pure.
> (WBY, 269)

It is a measure of Yeats's masterly control that he can rest so unafflicted in voice by his own uncertainty, and make poetry so graceful when it stems from hesitancy. Yeats denies the horror of the situation by holding it at arm's length. So in the same essay where he wrote of the unendurable light of freedom, and in the face of this great discovery, he writes also of the necessity of control:

> In life courtesy and self possession, and in the arts style, are the sensible impressions of the free mind, for both arise out of a deliberate shaping of all things, and from never being swept away, whatever the emotion, into confusion or dullness.
> (EI, 253)

Perhaps where 'the centre cannot hold', in self-defence the 'free mind' must be decisive, to avoid being 'swept away'. Like Conrad, Yeats must act for his own safety, and resist the strength of his own conception:

> A man should stand up to his bad luck, to his mistakes, to his conscience, and all that sort of thing. Why - what else would you have to fight against?[31]

But where Conrad would grasp the 'confusion' and 'dullness', Yeats's impulse is to transform them also into vital, glittering images.

---

31. Joseph Conrad, The Shadow-Line, pp.131-2.

Calculatedly unperturbed, Yeats magnifies the scale of his imagination in order to reduce the scope of the moment, or vice versa. In 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', for example, the poet opens the door to half-uniformed soldiers:

> An affable Irregular,
> A heavily-built Falstaffian man,
> Comes cracking jokes of civil war
> As though to die of gunshot were
> The finest play under the sun.[32]

Immediately he sees them, Yeats fights to moderate the impression created by the adjective 'Falstaffian'. For the soldier in his activity, war can be 'as though' a play. Without any apparent leap of imagination, he comes simply to the extremity, like Yeats's own Cuchulain, becoming the myth itself of the warrior. For the speaker in his retirement, however, war is still gunshot, death and courage. It's as though the roles of writer and soldier were reversed, the soldier living a heedless poetic existence, the poet taut with realism. Yeats sees all this thoroughly and wonderingly, but he writes a delicate line. By an effort he admits the soldier's casual perspective, dismissing the greatness he has seen in him. So the 'cracking jokes' are left uncommented beside the 'gunshot', and 'civil war' is lifted lightly in the gentle rhyme of 'were'. He looks past the soldier: 'I count those feathered balls of soot / The moorhen guides upon the stream, / To silence the envy in my thought' (WBY, 230). Rather than being 'swept away', Yeats counts and makes poetry a fragile but unbroken line, in this case against the summons of the image.

The precision and clarity of Yeats's poetry appear to have their

---

32. WBY, p.229, 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', 'The Road at My Door'.

source in their close proximity to a recklessness in the creation and discarding of the image. Though he often uses the same vocabulary as the metaphysicians, Yeats is really closer to that critic of the metaphysical, Nietzsche, as scholars have always recognised:

> The philosopher declared that what we know as reality is only a group of symbols, a mythology, Yeats's 'phantasmagoria'. So-called objective philosophies turn out to be merely symbolic expressions of the philosophers' wishes and needs.[33]

It is no good our searching his poetry for an equivalent to the encounter with the inexpressible in the work of, say, Conrad. Instead the equivalent of 'silence' in Yeats lies in the haunting sense of the impermanence of the symbol, its fragile personal resourcefulness and an unknowability which lies beyond the usable fiction it offers the poet.

It is not sufficient then to say that Yeats actually _sees_ the silent; more importantly, he does not see it, but writes _as though_ he did. Absence makes no break in his vision, and there is no call for faith. Yeats is strangely like Nietzsche in this faithless prophecy. Nietzsche thus describes his own writing in _Ecce Homo_. First he quotes himself; 'It is the stillest words which bring the storm, thoughts that come on doves' feet guide the world', and then he comments:

> Here there speaks no fanatic, here there is no 'preaching', here _faith_ is not demanded: out of an infinite abundance of light and depth of happiness there falls drop after drop, word after word - a tender slowness of pace is the tempo of these discourses.[34]

---

33. Richard Ellmann, _The Identity of Yeats_ (London, 1964), p.94.
34. Friedrich Nietzsche, _Ecce Homo_, trans. and ed. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, 1979), p.35. (Nietzsche's self-quotation is from _Thus Spoke Zarathustra_, Part Two, 'The Stillest Hour'.) Hereafter referred to as _EH_.

You are not asked to suffer anxiety or to walk where there is no ground, only to heed the 'stillest words', to follow 'doves' feet' and 'a tender slowness of pace'. The point at which the voice becomes ironical is difficult to decide, as always in Nietzsche, and in Yeats also. Whilst both Yeats and Nietzsche are in earnest, their words are often precisely negligent, richly unwilling to assert the greatness of their undertaking, as at other times vehemently assertive.

Both the sufficiency and the insufficiency of the symbol are with Yeats from his earliest poetry, in the Blakean 80s and 90s. In the second poem in the collected edition, 'The Sad Shepherd', for example, the shepherd:

> Cried all his story to the dewdrops glistening.
> But naught they heard, for they are always listening,
> The dewdrops, for the sound of their own dropping.[35]

The lines are poised minutely. The dewdrops, pausing to hear the exact sound of their dropping, seem suspended almost by their own attention. So all their action is returned on them at the line's end by the verbal nouns. Their whole state is one of 'listening' - there hardly seems room for anything else. 'Drop after drop, word after word', their attention is drawn.

In a deliberate answer to the idea of the pathetic fallacy, Yeats invests the shepherd's thought of mortality with a delicate Keatsian observation of even dewdrops dying. In the Blakean way, the dewdrops give themselves over to the folly, but they don't become wise; and in the meantime their lives are utterly wasted, 'naught they heard'. Accompanying the poem's lush awareness, there is a disquieting sense of waste.

---

35. WBY, p.9; originally from Crossways (1889).

In its companion poem, 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd', the voice declares: 'There is no truth / Saving in thine own heart', and offers this method to secure it:

> Go gather by the humming sea
> Some twisted, echo-harbouring shell,
> And to its lips thy story tell,
> And they thy comforters will be.[36]

The voice draws breath with the long murmur of the sea, and directs its influence along the 'twisted echo-harbouring shell'. Yeats's words seem only vaguely present, half held by a growing realisation. And the sea hums on the verge of speech. Yet this long beginning only hits against its own echo: 'To its lips thy story tell'. This poem is as self-reflexive as the other, but where the sad shepherd gets back from the dewdrops the impercipience of death, this shepherd stifles the lips of the shell by declaring his own mood; 'For words alone are certain good'.

Yeats's images, though they observe the natural closely, often seek its transcendence. The influence of Bergson mixes richly with that of Nietzsche:

> Outside oneself, the effort to learn is natural; one makes it with increasing facility; one applies rules. Within, attention must remain tense and progress become more and more painful; it is as though one were going against the natural bent.
> (CM, 47)

Yeats does not look outside to learn 'naturally'. He looks past natural objects, taking the more painful route.

In what sense does his poetry go 'against the natural bent'? The dewdrops, hanging self-absorbed, or the shepherd, fascinated by his own words, are both set counter to nature. Even the individual life,

---

36. WBY, p.7; originally from Crossways.

in the hero, can become a symbolic utterance against the mere duration of natural existence. In On Baile's Strand, for example, Cuchulain views succession as tantamount to decline. He announces himself fortunate because he has no son 'that marred me in the copying' (CP, 257):

> No pallid ghost or mockery of a man
> To drift and mutter in the corridors
> Where I have laughed and sung.
>
> (Ibid., 256)

His very vigour speaks against the worth of succession. He would rather far survive in renown than 'drift' on, remembered in a degenerate heir. So he challenges Conchubar to recall the great deeds of their past: 'You and I leave names upon the harp' (ibid., 257). It is to the harp, to poetry, that Cuchulain turns to continue his name.

In 'Sailing to Byzantium', the poet, aspiring to that heroic condition, struggles to get 'out of nature' altogether and to enter a world of artifice:

> Consume my heart away; sick with desire
> And fastened to a dying animal
> It knows not what it is; and gather me
> Into the artifice of eternity.[37]

Avoiding the pressing incomprehension of 'It knows not what it is', the voice veers between extremes, hiding from its indefinability, first in the gross physicality of 'fastened to a dying animal', and then in the emptiness of mere form. Yet the syntax itself is unable to give credence to the 'artifice of eternity.' The lines simply run out of breath.

It is this provisionality, experimental character, in the image, kept in being temporarily, with fear and misgiving creeping all

---

37. WBY, p.218; originally from The Tower.

around it, which is the source then in Yeats of what I have called silence. The image exists to act as a barrier to the silence and it is the poetry's strength that the barrier should be so courageously advanced - and that it should be so frail. Coming from the different, more directly abyss-gazing silence of Wordsworth, grown fearsome in Conrad, it seems at first that we cannot quite catch the mutterings of the silence in Yeats's poetry. The problem is maybe that described by Nietzsche again:

> Let us imagine an extreme case... the _first_ language for a new range of experiences. In this case simply nothing will be heard, with the acoustical illusion that where nothing is heard there _is_ nothing.
>
> (_EH_, 70)

There are two variables affecting the worth of this 'nothing'. There is the reader hearing 'nothing', where there is in fact 'a new range of experiences'; and there is consciousness itself unfolding, at the cutting edge of possible experience, through the advance warning of the writer. For both the writer and the reader, this 'nothing' presents a sheer edge, 'simply nothing will be heard'.

Yeats himself realised that he was up against a barrier, the whole nineteenth century language of faith and doubt, largely doubt, and it is testimony to his individual energy and resourcefulness that in this thin air, he devises three strategies with which to assault it. His simplest approach to the barrier is to incorporate it in his poetry. He turns the hidden vision of emptiness to his advantage, dispensing it still unseen with esoteric value. In this way the barrier becomes a lure in his fascination of the reader. So he likens poetry to witchcraft. 'The people', he writes:

> cannot separate the idea of an art or a craft from the idea of a cult with ancient technicalities and mysteries. They can hardly separate mere learning

> from witchcraft, and are fond of words and verses that keep half their secret to themselves.[38]

He sees himself, dallying with images and symbols, waiting for the right combination to unlock his vision: 'I had an unshakeable conviction, arising how or whence I cannot tell, that invisible gates would open as they opened for Blake' (A, 314).

In the meantime, secrecy carries the resisting nothing in algebraic fashion, as an unknown quantity reliably employed. Simply allowing his words to 'keep half their secret to themselves', he gains freedom from them; in 'The Sad Shepherd', for example, when the speaker abandons his attempt to prise open the shell, and simply passes it on. The sad shepherd tries to employ the methods of his happier colleague. First he gathers his shell:

> Then he sang softly nigh the pearly rim;
> But the sad-dweller by the sea-ways lone
> Changed all his song to inarticulate moan
> Among her wildering whirls, forgetting him.
> (WBY, 9)

Shepherd and shell remain self-bound, keeping their secrets. The shepherd told his story to the shell, but she 'Changed all his song to inarticulate moan / Among her wildering whirls, forgetting him'. It's hard not to hear 'forgetting' as a positive word. The very imperviousness of each to each increases the freedom outside them. It's as though, lost in the shell's 'wildering whirls', poetry found a way to draw breath; the emptiness becomes through the mediation of the images mysterious again.

Incorporating silence secretly is one of the strategies Yeats employs against the barrier raised by 'comforters', who are really 'discomforters'. This approach works negligently, drawing in fresh

---

38. EI, p.10, 'What is "Popular Poetry"?'; from Ideas of Good and Evil.

air by denying comfort to the shepherd or the shell. Yeats's second strategy reverses this method. Rather than flinging comfort away, the voice settles down in it, as a purely human resource, borrowing its warmth to hatch poetry. It is a curious extravagance that so few of Yeats's words are what he means. They are not It, but a fertile soil where meaning may grow. So for Yeats the purpose of rhythm is:

> To prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols.[39]

Words are spoken 'with an alluring monotony' neither striking nor in themselves relevant, but merely beguiling; there could hardly be a greater contrast with Wordsworth's fierce and unmistakable words. Yeats's words hardly want to be read at all! They enact a ritual, pronounce a spell, half to assuage, half to arouse, to bring about a frame of mind where vision is possible.

The late, great, poem where he faces this frailty of the image's resources, 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', lets us see the speaker helplessly watching his 'dear', enslaved by her own fanaticism:

> I thought my dear must her own soul destroy,
> So did fanaticism and hate enslave it,
> And this brought forth a dream and soon enough
> This dream itself had all my thought and love.
> (WBY, 392)

She is as a spectacle to him from the start, and he cannot intervene in the destructive cycle of her hate. But, acknowledging the self-absorption, he consciously turns the tragedy into Tragedy: 'And this brought forth a dream'. It's as though the long attended spectacle

---

39. EI, p.159, 'The Symbolism of Poetry'; from Ideas of Good and Evil.

became an 'alluring monotony', to engender a new, equally intense fixation; 'And soon enough / This dream itself had all my thought and love'.

Yeats's dream begins by confessing the frailty, the ironic darkness of circumstance that Hardy and Conrad stay with. 'It is indeed', he writes, 'only those things which seem useless or very feeble that have any power'.[40] At the outset, the dream is almost without expression, though in this state of fragility it exercises tremendous strength: 'A fragment of gold braid or a flower in the wallpaper may be an originating impulse to revolution or to philosophy' (A, 326). As the dream gains weight and grows workable, however, it seems to lose its influence. So Yeats comments warily:

> All those things that seem useful or strong, armies, moving wheels, modes of architecture, modes of government, speculations of the reason, would have been a little different if some mind long ago had not given itself to some emotion, as a woman gives herself to her lover.
>
> (EI, 157)

The power of the dream seems inversely proportional to its physical presence; and it is the delicate strength of the onset, rather than the governments, armies and architecture that Yeats desires.

It is not surprising, then, that Yeats's poetry is caught between an impulse of advance and an impulse of retraction; trusting the resourcefulness of the image, he consciously uses it up and comes close to the silence beyond it:

> My Soul: I summon to the winding ancient stair;
> Set all your mind upon the steep ascent,
> Upon the broken, crumbling battlement,
> Upon the breathless starlit air,
> Upon the star that marks the hidden pole;

---

40. EI, p.157, 'The Symbolism of Poetry'.

> Fix every wandering thought upon
> That quarter where all thought is done:
> Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?[41]

For every advance on the stair, its material base diminishes, giving less and less to stand on; 'upon the steep ascent, / Upon the broken, crumbling battlement, / Upon the breathless starlit air'. The adjectives amass as though to consolidate the stair, but irresistibly they undermine it. Though the poem starts with an outright investment, 'Set all your mind upon the steep ascent', by the end of the stanza, this has dwindled to a vagary - the voice confused over (or confusing?) the boundaries of the self; 'Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?' There is a marked contrast between the end which defies distinction, and the precise temper of the approach. Palpably the speaker is pulling away from his own vision.

But the third and the greatest of Yeats's strategies against imprisonment by his own barrier against silence, the image, that is, is impatience. Self answers the trepidation of the Soul, 'A living man is blind and drinks his drop. / What matter if the ditches are impure?' (ibid., 266). The impatient voice seizes whatever comes, 'a living man is blind'. But what is most typical happens next, 'What matter if the ditches are impure?'; he can with the same eager exasperation grab and squander whatever comfort the image allows him. The next instant may be harsh; 'what matter' then if he finds comfort in the defiance?

In his impatience Yeats angrily grasps after external reality, and with that his poetry is no longer pure image; it is hybrid, fierce and overgrown. Looking back over his life, Self declares:

---

41. WBY, p.265, 'A Dialogue of the Self and Soul'; originally from The Winding Stair.

I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
(Ibid., 267)

His impatience is a form of acceptance! The phrase 'I am content' can rarely have been shouted out like this. His self-forgiveness is energetic and protesting; 'Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!' A sense of account can rarely have been so abandoned! The response may remind us at first of Captain Giles' advice, but Yeats's attitude towards conscience is the reverse of Conrad's. In The Shadow-Line, conscience offers a temptingly large language (it offers an account); whilst standing up to conscience, Conrad finds meaning has to become less appreciable. For Yeats, on the other hand, it is conscience which must speak a diminished language. Throwing self-blame aside, Yeats finds his poetry is written large by the quarrel with himself.

Conscience leaves the speaker straining his eyes ahead; Soul forces 'every wandering thought' to climb 'the steep ascent'. The ground is so slight it is hardly possible even to realise what the voice is missing until, with irritability, Self regains it at the end of the poem: 'I am content to follow to its source / Every event in action or in thought'. It is not just that he retraces what he has been, or what he has done; in so doing he rediscovers the origins of his present impulse - his past and himself. In his anger the poetry discovers a source of energy:

When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blessed by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.
(Ibid., 267)

Instead of cool precision, here Yeats finds extravagant words; 'We are blest by everything, / Everything we look upon is blest'. In fact these words are far more fitting than any more careful words. They're

fully reciprocal. 'Everything' throws back blessing, and everything is 'blest'; but it is the mood, daring us and himself to say anything different, mere assertion as belief, which convinces by its very precariousness. 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul', Yeats explains, 'was written in the spring of 1928 during a long illness, indeed finished the day before a Cannes doctor told me to stop writing'.[42]

Filled with fury, Yeats walks unguardedly. In 'Paudeen', for example:

> Indignant at the fumbling wits, the obscure spite
> Of our old Paudeen in his shop, I stumbled blind
> Among the stones and thorn-trees, under morning light;
> Until a curlew cried and in the luminous wind
> A curlew answered; and suddenly thereupon I thought
> That on the lonely height where all are in God's eye,
> There cannot be, confusion of our sound forgot,
> A single soul that lacks a sweet crystalline cry.[43]

Hardly seeing what is before him, he simply walks away, stumbling 'blind' among the stones, until the curlew cries and is answered. In the exposure of the voice to its extravagant anger, the poetry grows calm, listening impartially. It catches back a momentary confidence when the voice is returned 'in the luminous wind'. Though it is just a curlew that cries, and a curlew that replies, both unseen and barely distinct from one another, yet in the distance between them Yeats finds his way to 'the lonely height where all are in God's eye'. Here the curlew, old Paudeen and Yeats himself respond with a 'sweet crystalline cry'. Yeats too, despite the articulate nature of his poetry, has, characteristically in this angry mood, an unexpected voice, that is, a voice he did not himself expect. With this, the whole impetus of the poetry is changed. At first the speaker went

42. WBY, p.537; dedication to Dulac in The Winding Stair.
43. WBY, p.122; originally from Responsibilities (1914).

stumbling, with 'fumbling wits' too amongst the stones. The assonance makes him in his rage not very different from Paudeen. His poetry is full of obstacles to his hopes until, 'suddenly', all things are collected and drawn in a single direction. Fragments no longer impede the poetry, when 'all' can be gathered by a scrap of sound, when he suddenly trusts the given, however slight.

From the reader's point of view, the importance of the silent trust in the unexpected, the silencing of the initial voice and the underived arrival of the new, cannot be over-estimated. Without it poetry is only a variable mass of constructed meaning. But once this point of silence is found, the point at which the experience is given beyond the personal mood, the poetry starts to give itself. Silence gives a place from which to read. From its vantage, thought is less important than watchfulness.

From the writer's point of view the vantage of silence may be more testing. Its calm is won at the cost of abandonment. This freedom is really the utmost creation, when with nothing to explain or to prompt the spirit, words are found. The unsupported word has a stark authentic pitch: "Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more".[44] The famous recoil in 'Lycidas' comes out of nowhere, apparently unprepared for, literally taking the breath.

The only question, if Yeats has tapped a reckless capacity to stand outside himself, is where the break came from. The naive literalism - between two curlews - isn't immediately useful. What is that to Yeats? His vision apparently depends on continuity. His symbols are to spread, subdividing until they make a:

---

44. John Milton, Poems, ed. Gordon Campbell and R. A. Wright (London, 1980), p.45; 'Lycidas', 1.165.

> Nation-wide multiform reverie, every mind passing through a stream of suggestion, and all streams acting and reacting upon one another, no matter how distant the minds, how dumb the lips.
> (A, 325-6)

There is no break here, only alignment, a 'stream of suggestion' soothing every mind into agreement by the skill of the rhetoric. The shock of the given, of the gift from nowhere, is alien to this dream. If Yeats has found detachment, it must be outside the dream of the fluent, all-embracing symbol.

This breaking of the voice happens late. It comes at the very end of his poetry, notably in 'The Circus Animals Desertion', of course. It is when, in his impatience, he walks indignantly away from himself that he can find his own most authentic voice. It lifts at the very edges of his poetry, and bears little expression. Paradoxically his poetry is most giving, most open and distinctive, not in the fullness of his eloquence, but at its end.

T. S. Eliot too includes an impulse that lies out of the range of language, though in his case it is not an unexpected arrival. Whether in the boredom and hollowness of Prufrock's world, or in the later tantalising vision of the Four Quartets, his poetry phrases and then faces a region that remains beyond the power of articulation:

> Words, after speech, reach
> Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
> Can words or music reach
> The stillness.[45]

Silence is central to his vision and the development of the mode in which the silence appears marks a major shift in his poetry (from the endless waiting of Prufrock to the imminence and enticement of the garden in 'Burnt Norton'). He was conscious of writing at the end of

---

45. T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London, 1974), p.194; Four Quartets, 'Burnt Norton', V. Hereafter referred to as TSE.

an era, to a time in which feeling seemed no longer obvious, a time characterised by emptiness, and in his poetry he addresses this sense of lost significance. To some extent Eliot's is an Arnoldian vision, holding onto lines of beauty, scraps of culture and old security: 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins',[46] but he does this in conscious weakness, to point out the futility of the attempt. By far the most decisive movement of his poetry is away from the old Romantic way. The old eloquence is lost and Eliot does not falsify or seek to hide from the fact. In 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', evening is not ethereal but under ether:

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherised upon a table;
> Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets...
> Streets that follow like a tedious argument
> Of insidious intent
> To lead you to an overwhelming question...
> Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'
> Let us go and make our visit.[47]

It feels almost redundant to compare this vision of evening with older presentations of beauty and calm, so absolute is the transformation. Eliot's evening is solid and inert, 'spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table'. It is presented as large and physical (lumped in two prepositions 'spread out against'); and it is vulnerable, yet the exposure produces no feeling of pity or sympathy. The evening does not draw the eye or invite meditation; it makes you see a surgery open late and it has a claustrophobic effect of prohibiting breath. The very horizon is crowded with commonplace horror, with ordinary life and death; and enticement ('Let us go') from the first is presented as a dull, aggravating monotony: 'Streets

---

46. TSE, p.79; The Waste Land, 'What the Thunder Said', l.430.
47. TSE, p.13; 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'.

that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent...'. They lead the implied reader to 'an overwhelming question', but no disclosures are actually made. The precedent for 'overwhelming' here is 'etherised upon a table'. The attention of the speaker retreats from the question in that wonderful rhyme, 'Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?' / Let us go and make our visit'. A fatigue is set at the very moment of apparent disclosure; yet Eliot sees it all with an alertness that contradicts the blankness; he draws attention again and again in the early lyrics to the central emptiness of his vision: 'Midnight shakes the memory / As a madman shakes a dead geranium'.[48] It is as though the blankness (the lost significance) were relevant to him still. But, correspondingly, that means that the silence in his poetry is always expected, that it is his willingness to speak that faintly surprises. Muteness tempts the poet with its too easy offer of the universal defeat or the ever-ready consolation. The silence does not spring at him with the energy of the ambush to which Conrad finds himself subject.

Later, in 'East Coker', he makes a claim for the blankness as 'the darkness of God'. Again the silence is likened to anaesthesia, and the other analogues corroborate the sense of disengagement from life:

> I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
> Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,
> The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
> With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of dark-
>   ness on darkness,
> And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant
>   panorama
> And the bold imposing facade are all being rolled away -
> Or as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops too
>   long between stations
> And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence

---

48. <u>TSE</u>, p.26; 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night'.

> And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
> Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about;
> Or when, under ether, the mind is conscious but conscious
> of nothing.[49]

This 'darkness' is essentially detached from purposeful action; it is between scenes in the theatre, between stations on the underground, suspended from life on the operating table. Change that will affect the individual directly is taking place unknown by him, unseen. The fact of suspension contrasts, however, once again, with the liveliness of the poet's attention as the blankness is repeated in these many scenes of discontinuity. The 'darkness' which is essentially removed from action in its own sphere, thus yields connections with other sites of darkness. In the darkened theatre when the lights go down, 'we know' by the 'hollow rumble of wings' that the old scene is 'rolled away', but what the new panorama will be remains unknown and strikingly the speaker gives no thought to it. The lines simply begin again with another phrasing of darkness. Half purposeful and half evasive, it's as if Eliot were trying to a achieve a closer expression of the 'darkness of God', but finding all the time that each new phrasing takes him further from it to a state characterised instead by vacancy, 'mental emptiness... the growing terror of nothing to think about'. The attempt to give expression to the reality of this darkness diverts it into mundanity instead of conforming it to <u>The Cloud of Unknowing</u>.[50]

There is in the 'hollow rumble of wings' an echo of the 'darkness of God', as if the dismantling of scenery were a larger, more cosmic

---

49. <u>TSE</u>, p.200; <u>Four Quartets</u>, 'East Coker', III.
50. As often the best critic is Eliot himself: 'One has only learnt to get the better of words / For the thing one no longer has to say ... And so each venture / Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate / With shabby equipment always deteriorating / In the general mess of imprecision of feeling', <u>TSE</u>, p.202-3; 'East Coker', V.

event; but 'hollow' points as much to the unreliability of that connection as to the greater occasion. On the underground, 'waiting too long between stations', the conditions of darkness and stillness are right ('I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you') but Eliot knows this is not the stillness of vision:

> the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence
> And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
> Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about

This state resembles 'the darkness of God', but it is not it, and Eliot does not falsify for grand effect or to content some need of soul.[51] His attention to 'interior dynamics' leaves him strong against the temptation to allow hope a false view of the 'mental emptiness'. The 'darkness of God' turns out to have been an empty dream, almost Prufrockian, but Eliot stays with the truth of the impression. This perspicacity and candour point to something very important in his poetry. Poetry is not for him the place of discovery; it is a place for dwelling, meditating, observing, recording. The view of London here thus contrasts strongly with that of Wordsworth in The Prelude as he walks oppressed by the mass of faces:

> 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.

As with Eliot the speaker allows the dark to grow; 'all stays, / All laws' retreat and leave him isolated in the present scene:

---

51. Hugh Kenner, The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot (London, 1959), p.163, identifies a significant feature of Eliot's poetry, 'the structural principle of all his later work: the articulation of moral states which to an external observer are indistinguishable from one another, but which in their interior dynamics parody one another'.

> And once, far-travell'd in such a mood, beyond
> The reach of common indications, lost
> Amid the moving pageant, 'twas my chance
> Abruptly to be smitten with the view
> Of a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,
> Stood propp'd against a Wall, upon his Chest
> Wearing a written paper, to explain
> The story of the Man, and who he was.
> My mind did at this spectacle turn round
> As with the might of waters, and it seemed
> To me that in this Label was a type,
> Or emblem, of the utmost that we know,
> Both of ourselves and of the universe;
> And, on the shape of the unmoving man,
> His fixèd face and sightless eyes, I look'd
> As if admonish'd from another world.
> (Prelude VII. 601-23)

Wordsworth here is lost in a state comparable with that of Eliot in the darkened theatre, on the underground, or under ether. But from the very depth of this absence he is roused by the chance encounter with the blind beggar: 'My mind did at this spectacle turn round / As with the might of waters'. It is not that Wordsworth falsifies, but he permits (what Eliot does not) a complete reversal. More than this, he allows the shock of the primary encounter to strike again as he writes, even though that shock must now in some sense be anticipated. It is a 'chance' event with a profound result; the sluice opens, the waters rush through and the heavy mill wheel turns. But the image of the water mill is one of permanence; the event activates and in this way makes apparent what was hidden - his mind does turn there and at such sights. The encounter reveals to him the characteristic method of his mind. The insight he gains from the blind man seems negative, phrasing the limitation of human knowledge: 'It seemed / To me that in this Label was a type, / Or emblem, of the utmost that we know, / Both of ourselves and of the universe'; but the insight is conveyed with an energy that entirely contradicts the negative: 'I look'd / As if admonish'd from another world'. The limitation of human knowledge

looks unimportant beside this apprehension of 'another world'. And it is this other realm that holds all the power. Wordsworth allows that he acts in obedience to an unknown law, or in his own terms, is moved by waters he does not command. This is the discovery that recalls him from the 'second sight procession', and it gives him a sense of place and purpose, even one not his own.

In Eliot, by contrast, there are no unanticipated reversals, no crowded reorientations of sense. There is time for 'mental emptiness' to grow, and there is time in 'Prufrock' 'for a hundred visions and revisions, / Before the taking of a toast and tea', but there is no <u>room</u> for the event of silence in his poetry. He is particular, clear, aware - and so truthful and patient with the impression that there is no room for the sudden reversal. He is the custodian, or perhaps the critic of silence, who knows the terrain well, too well to allow it the shock of its nature.

Eliot's poetry is manifestly about silence and yet it is very hard to hear 'the peal of stillness' in his lines, to take Heidegger's phrase. It is not that there is nothing there - there is a great deal - but it is accommodated as the expected guest, there is no violent intrusion. Silence lies to the fore of his poetry, and it is far more frequently before his eye than it is before the eye of Wordsworth; yet it is hard for the reader actually to see what Eliot himself sees so clearly. The closer the idea comes to being expressed, it seems, the more it evades realisation or goes into quotation marks. In these lines, for example, the stillness is maddeningly manifest:

> At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh
> nor fleshless;
> Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the
> dance is,
> But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it
> fixity,

> Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement
> from nor towards,
> Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the
> still point,
> There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.[52]

Eliot sees the 'still point of the turning world' in perfect focus, able to rely upon it while he dismisses familiar reference points one by one: 'Neither flesh nor fleshless, / Neither from nor towards... Neither arrest nor movement... ascent nor decline'. The negatives are in fact misleading. He denies so as to include; the 'still point' is all of these things: 'Except for the point, the still point, / There would be no dance, and there is only the dance'. Throughout the distraction of flesh and future, movement and descent, Eliot is able to keep his eye on the 'still point'. He holds the stillness clearly in view, and yet it is as though unseeable. Perhaps it is that he is too patient, too tolerant in his attention, to be easily understood. In contrast with The Prelude, where the moments of insight are reached by passages of ordinary trudging, Four Quartets is all vision. In Wordsworth, as you clear the next hill or as the weather changes, suddenly there is vision, spectacularly revealed. Eliot's insight, by comparison, is as though continuous: 'There is only the dance'. It is as though he were unable to forget what he has seen, or perhaps, that he dare not turn from it.

Contrast Yeats with his marked impatience:

> Others because you did not keep
> That deep-sworn vow have been friends of mine;
> Yet always when I look death in the face,
> When I clamber to the heights of sleep,
> Or when I grow excited with wine,
> Suddenly I meet your face.[53]

---

52. TSE, p.191; 'Burnt Norton', II.
53. WBY, p.174, 'A Deep-Sworn Vow'. Originally published in The Wild Swans at Coole.

The face comes abruptly to the speaker's eye, though the 'deep-sworn vow' is broken: 'Others because you did not keep / That deep-sworn vow have been friends of mine'. The old connection is broken and lost. 'Yet always', he writes, 'when I look death in the face, / When I clamber to the heights of sleep, / Or when I grow excited with wine, / Suddenly I meet your face'. In its very constancy ('always') the meeting appears spontaneous! The face is simply there in his abandon, full of impulse, and he meets it with a mixture of expectation and surprise. Hence the peculiar effect of the line endings: 'face' / 'face'; where the second 'face' hardly even seems to rhyme with the first. He meets it as he might rediscover a half-forgotten, buried boundary. Curiously, the first face he mentioned, the face of death had not this power to halt him. It is not that Yeats sees more in 'A Deep-Sworn Vow' than Eliot does in Four Quartets, but that his meaning and his focus are instantaneously aligned. Yeats's impatience or his forgetfulness in turning away, seem necessary to the act of recognition.

The perplexing thing is that in quotation, in A Leg To Stand On, for example, the truth of Eliot shows up with sudden clarity. It is as if his poetry needed jump-starting by finding its place within event and situation more particular and defined than the poem ever wants to offer. In quotation, suddenly his words are tremendously strong and purposeful, as for instance, when Sacks struggles to describe the state of Limbo. He quotes from Four Quartets:

> I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
> For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
> For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
> But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

> Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
> So the darkness shall be light, and the stillness the
> dancing.[54]

To Sacks in his Limbo, Eliot has a determinate and clear voice. The negatives to him are mysteriously accurate and full of purpose: 'I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope / For hope would be hope for the wrong thing'. The words seem to Sacks to be offering practical advice - a way forward. Paradoxically, Eliot gains traction in the stripping away of spiritual ground. The spirit is not to focus on anything: 'There is yet faith / But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting'. Eliot is calling here for a transition full of trust. Deprived of the object of love, of faith or thought, the soul must adopt the very form of these things, performing faith; as if the frame of mind would act literally as a door. In many ways what Eliot produces is not the poetry of silence, but a poetry about silence, a criticism of it.

At a related point in 'Burnt Norton', in answer to a passage of despondency and failed disclosure on the Underground ('Distracted from distraction by distraction / Filled with fancies and empty of meaning'), Eliot offers this advice:

> Descend lower, descend only
> Into the world of perpetual solitude,
> World not world, but that which is not world,
> Internal darkness, deprivation
> And destitution of all property,
> Desiccation of the world of sense,
> Evacuation of the world of fancy,
> Inoperancy of the world of spirit.[55]

His answer to futility is to embrace the negative, 'Descend lower'. For those travellers 'empty of meaning' the solution is to face the

---

54. TSE, p.200; East Coker, III. These lines follow on from and attempt to answer the 'growing terror of nothing to think about' on the Underground.
55. TSE, p.193; 'Burnt Norton', III.

negative: 'Internal darkness, deprivation / And destitution of all property... Inoperancy of the world of spirit'. Strikingly, on the Underground his solution is not to reach a terminus - there is no specific end - but rather to deepen the state, to retreat further from those things exposed at the line-endings: 'property', 'sense', 'fancy', 'spirit'. Through this it is possible to understand the strange attraction of Eliot in 'Prufrock', to the point of weary, uneventful disclosure. The negative is mysteriously cogent.

There are no transformations in his poetry; but this does not mean that there is no development. Prufrock says: 'It is impossible to say just what I mean', and the ambiguities are both true across Eliot's career. It is both that it is impossible for him to say exactly what he means, and also that it is impossible for him to say only that, to limit his meaning. If the earlier lyrics could be taken as an example of that first statement, the later poems, and the Four Quartets in particular, are representative of the second. The empty moment in Prufrock's world corresponds in the rose garden of 'Burnt Norton' to a time of teasing enticement:

> Other echoes
> Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?
> Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
> Round the corner. Through the first gate,
> Into our first world, shall we follow
> The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.
> There they were, dignified, invisible,
> Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
> In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air,
> And the bird called, in response to
> The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,
> And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses
> Had the look of flowers that are looked at.[56]

We are called by 'echoes' and 'deception' to a garden which is never clearly located, part actual, part remembered, part anticipated; it

56. TSE, p.190; 'Burnt Norton', I.

is of the present, the past, of the future and of myth. Eliot creates uncertainties which he does not stop to address, does not allow to stop the verse. We are drawn by evidences which are not seen or heard directly but apprehended always in echo or response until the veiled presences are central: 'The bird called, in response to / The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery'.[57] The music itself is 'unheard' and 'hidden'; it is only the bird's response that we catch and respond to. Like the boy in Wordsworth who hangs listening to the owls, we are drawn to something that we cannot hear, but with far less resistance than in Wordsworth, without the stasis and location, so that we hardly realise we're drawn.

Eliot at his best is written in an effacing, tantalising medium, in strong contrast to Wordsworth who is most memorable, most striking at his best. So in Eliot it is paradoxically easier to remember the spiritual lows than the highs, and this perhaps is the key to understanding his poetry.

57. Hugh Kenner writes 'That we are looking at them seems irrelevant, so tactfully have we by this time been effaced, so substantial have the inapprehensible presences become', The Invisible Poet, p.249.

Chapter 5

Oliver Sacks: A Leg to Stand On

'A New Beginning'

The success of Oliver Sacks's writings has been both phenomenal and, apparently, predictable. As a neurophysician, his subject is the mind and the mind as a physical phenomenon. His assumptions are reassuringly material yet he confirms the mysteriousness of mental process for an age in which the mind has attributed to it the old associations of the divine; manifestly in control but incomprehensible. His subjects have the post-Modern grotesqueness of the surreal. People wake up after twenty years of sleep; he has his leg restored to physical function by surgery and at that very moment loses the sense of it; he talks to an apparently sane couple in his New York apartment but, on leaving, the elderly gentleman tries to put his wife on his head as though she were his hat.

But actually these are not the assumptions of his writing. He is much closer to an older tradition of Realist art, closer to Conrad than to Beckett, say. Earnestly, seriously, he seeks to understand the feelings of people, including himself, caught in dilemmas which are externally funny but rendered fearful through the depth of his perception of them. His interest always lies in parts of life which have gone missing, cannot speak to the subject who endures this loss. Significantly, his contribution to Richard Gregory's popular Oxford Companion to the Mind is an article on 'Nothingness', on the total loss of internal time during anaesthesia in particular. He is concerned with the intrusion of silence into life and, if his subjects are often specialised and peculiar, he expects the general

reader to find that fear recognisable and in need of being addressed.

Even his use of literature scarcely conforms to contemporary models of reading: 'Faced with a reality, which reason could not solve, I turned to art and religion for comfort'.[1] He uses literature as something directly engaged with experience instead of as a series of self-referential texts constituting their own order of reality. Instead of working towards deconstruction, he finds himself situated where meaning is destabilised and he seeks to work, with literature's help, towards reassurance. Literature exists in those dark areas because it is always on the edge of the loss of signification and is strong there. The fears of Pope are fulfilled by experience:

> Lo! thy dread Empire, CHAOS! is restor'd;
> Light dies before thy uncreating word:
> Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;
> And Universal Darkness buries All.[2]

The total loss of signification is not a problem, however, that literature can quite attend to, because (as Pope observed) it is too close to the loss of inspiration itself.[3] Both The Dunciad Variorum and The Dunciad in Four Books ended with this passage. A specialised, technical language is needed to describe this unimaginable state - a language tried in adversity, the idiom of the doctor, the specialist. Most importantly of all, the writer would need to have experienced the cessation of this faculty. It is for this reason that Oliver Sacks's A Leg to Stand On is so valuable. It lights up the condition

---

1. Oliver Sacks, A Leg to Stand On (London, 1986), p.81. Hereafter referred to as Leg.
2. The Poems of Alexander Pope, p.800; The Dunciad in Four Books, IV. 653-6.
3. It is striking how the end of the Dunciad resembles the start of the 1805 Prelude in total reverse: 'O there is blessing in this gentle breeze / That blows... it beats against my cheek, / And seems half-conscious of the joy it gives'. The life-giving inspiration of the 'blessing' and the decreasing power of the 'uncreating word' both work on the edge of signification.

of literature without being itself concerned about its claim to be literature.

The question is whether the state of unbroken darkness could not be a paradise, free from the serpent of recognition? This is not what Sacks finds when his capacity for spontaneous reaction disappears. Without the power of unthinking movement, our ordinary silence, he feels all connections failing, until at last he reaches blindness and _scotoma_:

> A _scotoma_ is a hole in reality itself, a hole in time no less than in space, and therefore _cannot_ be conceived of as having a term or ending... The quality of timelessness, Limbo, is inherent in _scotoma_.
>
> (_Leg_, 77)

The margins of the _scotoma_ are difficult to gauge. The hole is clearly bordered by reality itself, yet emphatically it '_cannot_ be conceived of as having a term or ending'. This too is a paradox, a hole without bound. It seems that with the loss of tacit assumption the very idea of entirety fades, as if being unable to see all-at-once meant you could not see the whole. There is, Sacks discovers, a time before instantaneousness, before our innate capacity to respond to the given nature of things, that appears to have no end: 'The quality of timelessness, Limbo, is inherent in _scotoma_'. It's as though the capacity to take for granted on which life rests would phrase itself slowly in the very life of the person the _scotoma_ afflicts, until, paradoxically, nothing has reality. These are the terrible questions of silence: if the sustaining power of silence stems from an unconsciousness of spirit, how long, or how great is the break in consciousness itself when it takes over? How long must consciousness be left to itself before the now silence itself could speak? The experience is real, terrifying, yet there is no point in

dwelling upon it, since these questions cannot be prepared for in advance. There is no point in anticipating the event.

To paraphrase the issues of the book in these terms may seem at first extravagant, and certainly they would be contested by Galen Strawson who reviewed it for TLS. He described the situation, the loss of automatic sensation in Sacks's leg, with sympathy:

> This awareness is something that we take so much for granted that we don't really notice it until we lose it. But when we lose it, even partially, we are utterly confounded.[4]

The use of the plural pronoun is reassuring but misses Sacks's point; at the point of occurrence there is only 'I', the solitude of the unique individual for whom there are no precedents and who feels that 'I' itself under threat. If this were Sacks writing the review, 'utterly' confounded would be the point - without an 'I' utterance is confounded at its source. Strawson wanted the account to be held severely to objectivity: 'that the story is fictionally boosted undermines one's confidence in its accuracy'. But the freedom permitted by 'fiction' to write of the sensations involved is precisely what makes the account more real, if less objectively accurate. It is the enforced submission of the specialised, 'accurate', language in the end to the words of literature and philosophy and the Bible which reminds the reader of the gap between the event as object and as undergone by the subject.

The whole account seemed to Strawson overwrought:

> He lives the whole episode with a gaudy intensity that borders continually on the hysterical, soaring and plummeting on the Brobdingnagian rollercoaster of his emotions.

---

4. Galen Strawson, TLS, 1984, June 22.

The accusation is not altogether unlike that which used to be brought against those parts of Conrad's writing where his characters stare into the abyss. Marvin Mudrick thought that Heart of Darkness would have been better written had Conrad not clung to the realist mode but found access to symbolic expression of the kind used by Dostoevsky and Kafka. As it stands, Marlow's story:

> strains into badness while reaching for verifications of a great and somber theme that is beyond his own very considerable powers.[5]

Strawson's criticism of Sacks for his fictionality and Mudrick's of Conrad for his literalism converge in a common objection; both writers refuse to surrender their realism in a situation which throws doubt on reality's assumptions and so they produce a writing that is under strain, vulnerable, forced into paradox, excess.

This incapacity to articulate straight lies along two axes in A Leg to Stand On. As Strawson says so precisely, ordinary body behaviour is so automatic that 'we don't notice it until we lose it'. What we take for granted lacks a language in which to express it until we lose it and, this is Sacks's point, then we cannot remember it; we recall only that we once had it. There is a level of existence so ordinary that we have no means of describing it, and it is subdued into silence; Sacks can describe over- and in-articulately what it is like to recover it but that is different. It is something there only so long as it is not noticed. But the secondary silence is to fall into the abyss of losing the other, tacit acceptance. The gap between the objective fact of that state and the subject feeling it is so immense that none of the feverish words will quite fill it up. The

5. Marvin Mudrick, 'The Originality of Conrad', in Conrad: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Marvin Mudrick, Twentieth Century Views (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1966), p.43.

significance (or emptiness) of the event calls for language but convicts the words that come of inadequacy, and that both keeps the words coming and intensely alive and also leaves a silent beyond, which makes the writing large but frail.

Wittgenstein would question whether the doubting of bodily function is even imaginable. It falls beyond the remit of philosophy. In his late work, On Certainty, (which Sacks himself quotes from in A Leg to Stand On, Wittgenstein approaches certainty thus:

> It may be... that all enquiry on our part is set so as to exempt certain propositions from doubt, if they are ever formulated. They lie apart from the route travelled by enquiry.[6]

Yet the very tentativeness of this immediately stimulates a sense of ambiguity in the reading. These propositions are 'certain' both in the sense of being specified, but also in the larger sense of being 'exempt' from doubt - so profoundly so that they may never even be 'formulated'. They are literally beyond doubt: 'They lie apart from the route travelled by enquiry'. This is so distinctively Conradian a notion that for all of its indefinition, the metaphor heightens consciousness of what lies beyond consciousness. It is like the description of Marlow's narration in Heart of Darkness. Wittgenstein's certainty does not lie inside (like a kernel), within the scope of possible enquiry, but rather outside, beyond the range of formulation, like Marlow's haze. He gives the striking example: 'Why do I not satisfy myself that I have two feet when I want to get up from a chair? There is no why. I simply don't' (OC, Section 148, p.22). It would not make sense for him to satisfy himself of having

6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, On Certainty, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1969), section 88, p.13. Hereafter referred to as OC.

two feet:

> If I were to say 'It is my unshakeable conviction that etc.', this means in the present case too that I have not consciously arrived at the conviction by following a particular line of thought, but that it is anchored in all my questions and answers, so anchored that I cannot touch it.
> (OC, Section 103, p.16)

For Wittgenstein and Conrad both, the ground of consistency is unutterably 'apart', 'so anchored that I cannot touch it'. The most fundamental assumption lies beyond the speaking. In a letter to Edward Garnett, Conrad rebels against the difficulty of re-writing An Outcast of the Islands, turning all his doubts into a positive stance:

> I am too lazy to change my thoughts, my words, my images, and my dreams. Laziness is a sacred thing. It's the sign of our limitations beyond which there is nothing worth having.[7]

At once he feels his work to be unalterable and yet attributes that to what seems at first just a defeat. In exasperation, however, he exclaims: 'Laziness is a sacred thing', an exasperation that in itself disproves that the refusal to amend is mere lack of effort. This 'laziness' is imposed upon him with particular force.

The writing itself, like the bases of existence, is rooted in assumptions so deeply made that for both Conrad and Sacks they lie beyond the articulation. There are whole paragraphs in Sacks's Preface to Awakenings, his preceding volume, for instance, that could be sidled into an anthology of Conrad's notes and letters, without any fear of discovery. He seems to be trying to reconcile his attention to some pressing idea, something tangibly there that he cannot see:

---

7. Garnett, Letters from Joseph Conrad 1895-1924, p.43; letter dated 24 September 1895.

> I have found the writing unexpectedly difficult, although its ideas and intentions are simple and straightforward. But one cannot go straight forward unless the way is clear, and the way is allowed. One struggles to gain the right perspective, focus, and tone - and then one loses it, all unawares. One must continually fight to regain it, to hold accurate awareness.[8]

Sacks sets off full of confidence, sure of his direction, 'the ideas and intentions are simple and straightforward', yet unexpectedly he finds himself halted. With a careful bemusement he makes his report, 'one cannot go straight forward unless the way is clear, and the way is allowed'. It is on the face of it a strange and illogical delay! The idea is there, it is his idea, so why can't Sacks just say it? Why is he not 'allowed'? It is as though he had reached a point beyond which 'intention' were simply inappropriate. Though he knows where he wants to go, his tone is genuinely exploratory. He is compelled to go with the utmost caution. The words he uses to describe his condition seem metaphoric, but his mood is surprisingly literal and serious. He is wanting to attend to the directness of reality as he sees it and his sense of perplexity grows out of that: the desire for the 'right perspective' grows out of not a self-conscious artistry but a desire 'to hold accurate awareness'. The writing keeps lapsing into silence, 'one loses it, all unawares', because it falters under the impassive gaze of 'accuracy'.

Inexplicably, he finds familiar ground incomprehensible, and then, equally inexplicable, he seems to recognize the shape or method of his incomprehension, and to find it serviceable to the writing. The secondary silence grows out of this breach between facts and words which keeps halting them; the fear is that there may be a breach in

---

8. Oliver Sacks, Awakenings, revised edition (London, 1990); Preface to 1973 edition, p.xix.

what he would call reality itself. Again, I would want to make a comparison with Conrad. Marlow reflects upon Jim, when the ordeal of the inquiry is over and Jim has lost his name. Here again there is the sense of confused familiarity as Marlow watches Jim, determined to help:

> I at least had no illusions; but it was I, too, who a moment ago had been so sure of the power of words, and now was afraid to speak, in the same way one dares not move for fear of losing a slippery hold. It is when we try to grapple with another man's intimate need that we perceive how incomprehensible, wavering, and misty are the beings that share with us the sight of the stars and the warmth of the sun... There remains only the capricious, unconsolable, and elusive spirit that no eye can follow, no hand can grasp.
>
> (LJ, 175)

For Marlow, too, the route is as if 'simple'. His plan to help Jim is definite and strong, and his words represent the steady ground of their relationship: 'I at least had no illusions'. Yet he dare not speak. Faced by Jim, his words grow illusory and dangerous. He is 'afraid to speak, in the same way one dares not move for fear of losing a slippery hold'. Even as he tries for better purchase all material realities are effaced, so that he would have to 'grapple' with an 'incomprehensible, wavering, and misty' being. This outward loss of certainty, moreover, is repeated within himself; as Marlow feels he has to explain, 'But it was I, too'. At the source of Marlow's uncertainty, there is an overpowering and definite fear:

> It was the fear of losing him that kept me silent, for it was borne upon me suddenly and with unaccountable force that should I let him slip away into the darkness I would never forgive myself.
>
> (LJ, 175)

Despite the 'capricious' nature of his awareness here, Marlow finds his focus strangely reliable. It is not that 'the fear of losing him' is so hard an emotion to find; the fear itself is a natural emotion.

It is its conveyance of 'unaccountable force' that is disturbing. The language of explanation, 'for', is used to render the inexplicable in his own feelings. The 'suddenly' removes or at least forbids any easy reasons we might be tempted to give; the force comes from outside, like an external mentor, 'borne upon me'.

The inarticulate sense bears on Conrad and Sacks as a forgotten, or half-gained attitude. In his 1990 Foreword for Awakenings, Sacks comments on the writing of the 1973 edition:

> There was something, assuredly, very strange going on... I could not imagine what this was, in 1972, though it haunted me when I came to complete Awakenings, and rippled through it constantly, evasively, as half-tantalising metaphors.
> (Awakenings, xxxiv)

The unimaginable idea was restlessly close as he wrote then, and it returns to him again in 1990, as he inattentively promotes it in the sentence. So though at first he writes 'it haunted me', 'it' soon breaks free of the pronoun. Somewhere in the middle of the word 'and' it supplants him as the active part of the sentence: 'it haunted me when I came to complete Awakenings, and rippled through it, constantly, evasively, as half-tantalising metaphors'. Even now he is haunted by a meaning other than he knows, or maybe 'half' knows. The other half lies beyond articulation.

Yet Sacks is a practical man! As a physician he has the assurance that his actions are necessary and important, and his words must be directly relevant. Why then does he find himself having to depend for guidance on 'half-tantalising metaphors'? For some reason he is held in complexity, while all the time the simple idea of observation and record prompts him, maddeningly unavailable. It's as though he were being tried, forced to feel the most anomalous and outlandish feelings, to no rationally specified end.

In many ways, then, Sacks is really a Romantic or at least Late Romantic writer, not least in his sense that literature itself is an authentic guide. He has an irrefragable trust in a reality which keeps convicting him of getting it wrong and of being stronger than he supposes or even can suppose. And yet he commits himself back to the circumstances of the case; he is a scientist. The pressure of silence on his words, of what lies beyond their excited, expressive explorations, is different from that silence, inertia, of the material world as described by Bergson, the thinker of early Modernism:

> Hypnotized, so to speak, by the void which our mental power of abstraction is creating, we accept the suggestion that some, I know not what, marvellous significance is inherent in the mere notion of material points in space, that is to say, in an impoverished perception... As well might we imagine that a worn-out coin, by losing the precise mark which denotes its value, had gained an unlimited purchasing power.[9]

Sacks's sense of impending meaning is neither a 'void', nor an 'impoverished perception'; rather his senses are over-full of rippling, evasive impulses. He has to struggle to subdue his experience to reason, to 'hold accurate awareness' against the pull of the growing meaning. It is precisely his 'power of abstraction' that is caught off guard and forces him into the discovery of the inexpressible.

Sacks's attitude is too open and curious to fit into Bergson's model. He is not 'hypnotized' but 'haunted'. He is awake while the unimaginable draws on him, and he responds to it. He cannot help but respond, even when he knows that what he is seeing or feeling is unlike his conception of reality. In A Leg to Stand On, which followed Awakenings, he observes the mind's behaviour from within.

---

9. Henri Bergson, Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays, trans. H. Wildon Carr (London, 1920), pp.206-7.

In the ambulance taking him from the airport, he watches helplessly as dread rises in himself:

> A dread of something dark and nameless and secret ... I felt distortion rising, taking over. I saw it, I felt it, and I felt powerless to combat it. It would not go away, and the most I could do was to sit tight and hold fast, murmuring a litany of reassurance and commonsense to myself.
> (Leg, 27)

This is not just terror but a fear of what is 'nameless', cannot find entry into definable speech. It comes with a daunting power, in words unmistakable and authentic in so far as they describe his response. The rational words he would prefer to use are now reduced, or at least changed in status, to 'a litany'.

'Silence' is one of Sacks's own words for his condition of self-estrangement and alienation from 'the facts'. He comes down the mountain both at first and at the end in 'that quite deathly silence' (Leg, 18); he calls the refusal of his leg to respond to his summons, 'the silence of death' (Leg, 43); he calls his limbo state 'a deadly inner silence' (Leg, 78), and there are many locations too for the negativing of language, as with 'nameless' above, just as, later on, meaning returns to 'verbal forms, which suddenly had sense' (Leg, 118). But the word itself is one among a series of related references between which he does not specify priorities. Typically, he can write of: 'the silence of timelessness, motionlessness, scotoma, combined with the silence of non-communication and taboo' (Leg, 78). Later, though he may not use the specific word, he talks of his recovery as an experience of Grace, silent in its operation: 'Grace entered, as Grace enters, at the very centre of things, at its hidden innermost inaccessible centre' (Leg, 112-13). It is this range of experience then that I shall accommodate to my own major term 'silence'.

'Silence' grows in him, then, with a painful incongruity, feeling 'like nothing on earth' (Leg, 52). He sounds the cliché thoroughly. Sacks has fallen to an odd perspective: he can be sure of 'nothing', and his one meagre reward for this seems to be that ordinarily mundane and empty expressions for him are full of horror. They grow reliable as all else fails, as if uncertainty were the ground of their integrity, though it is a fearful price to pay, to authenticate a commonplace.

He is constantly in the position of finding the words saying something more and other than he had supposed. The immediate meaning is halted and unforeseen implications take their place silently:

> I cannot say exactly what happened. In my plunging flight down the treacherous path I must have mis-stepped - stepped on to a loose rock, or into mid-air...
>
> (Leg, 5)

As with the commonplace above, Sacks puts his foot down on nothing, in his flight from the bull on the mountain. The negative grows more emphatic as he writes. So whilst at first he says 'mis-stepped', he changes the form, committing himself more fully, 'stepped on to a loose rock'. It is striking that though he 'cannot say exactly what happened', his words are precise. He checks his formulation carefully, with a subtle, structural feeling for words; hence 'on to' instead of 'onto'. The division is minutely and massively purposeful. It is not the exactness of the recollection it seems, but its looser import that he cannot gather, the wholesale sense.

Sacks sets off to climb the mountain in Norway, 'strong as a bull, in the prime, the pride... of life' (Leg, 3). He climbs briskly, enjoying his own strength, past a 'rather droll' sign warning 'Beware of the Bull!', following the path up into the mist where boulders seem 'like a vast crouching animal' (Leg, 4). Then he nearly treads

on the bull sitting in the path ahead of him. The writing makes it seem as though, retrospectively, he always knew what would happen. 'Oh horrible! - my nerve suddenly broke'; he runs, 'Blind, mad panic! - there is nothing worse in the world, nothing worse - and nothing more dangerous' (Leg, 5). The words catch up afterwards with what he knew at the time. This is where he misses his footing, metaphorically as well:

> It is as if there is a moment missing from my memory - there is 'before' and 'after', but no 'in-between'. One moment I was running like a madman... the next I was lying at the bottom of a short sharp cliff of rock, with my left leg twisted grotesquely beneath me... Such a change, such suddenness, is difficult to comprehend, and the mind casts about for explanations.
>
> (Leg, 5, 6)

It is as if the 'blind, mad panic' and the empty space beneath his feet, corresponded to the gap in his memory. Medically, he can explain what has happened, in precise and graphic terms. A tendon is completely ruptured, and the leg is effectively paralysed. 'The left leg was totally limp and flail, and gave way beneath me like a piece of spaghetti' (Leg, 6). The damage to his consciousness, on the other hand, is unmoveably steady and intense. So whilst the experience of 'before' and 'after' is allowed to pass into the imperfect tense, 'One moment I was running... the next I was lying', 'in-between', the lost moment remains unyielding and inexplicably present: 'It is as if there is a moment missing from my memory'. The moment is still there like a jolt, and yet it is missing too. It is at this point that the language of the book begins to undergo that deformation into strangeness which is to hold largely throughout.

The lost instant is there before him, he can hold it in strong and certain phrases, 'such a change, such suddenness', like Wordsworth pointing confidently: 'in that breach'. It is objectively there. Yet

he can no more account for it than he can struggle to his feet, 'the mind casts about for explanations'. The old metaphor of the hound casting for a scent makes rational process seem less all-sufficient. As a professional observer of mental process, he is precise in his account of the mixture of control, chance, and blind surrender in a moment of crisis. Sacks's perception seems particularly well-suited to the extremity. It has to do with the way he both keeps and loses his head. He is for example, innately immoderate. His sense of significance escalates rapidly, as when he runs into the bull:

> It sat unmoved by my appearance, exceedingly calm, except that it turned its vast white face up towards me. And in that moment it changed, before my eyes... The face grew huger and huger all the time, until I thought it would blot out the Universe.
>
> (Leg, 5)

Before his eyes it grows 'huger and huger' until it fills his eye, and then his sense of scale mounts with it too, until he feels the object of his gaze could obliterate what is far too vast to countenance, 'I thought it would blot out the Universe'. His eye is not 'made quiet', rather it amplifies events until they roar. Where consciousness might otherwise seem inactive or blank, Sacks sees very precisely, 'vast white face', and yet presents in the same objective terms what is pure mental invention, 'the face grew huger'.

Alongside this loss of control, Sacks has an unshakeably strong sense of reality. That is, he trusts the reality of his senses, and those senses take him into tacitly inexplicable accounts of experience. Whatever his senses show to him, Sacks takes to heart, no matter how unaccountable, or how 'unreal'. As he observes later in hospital:

> The abyss is a chasm, an infinite rift, in reality. If you but notice it, it may open beneath you. You must either turn away from it, or face it, fair and square. I am very tenacious, for better or worse.

> If my attention is engaged, I cannot disengage it. This may be a great strength, or weakness. It makes me an investigator. It makes me an obsessional. It made me, in this case, an explorer of the abyss.
> (Leg, 78)

Once his attention is engaged, he is constitutionally unable to relinquish or temper the consequences of his perception. He sees with a peculiar intensity, and the breaks, the contradictions, the silences within consciousness are observed with raw clarity.

If nothingness itself, the moment of death, cannot be grasped, then the last moments before it descends are particularly precious. In A Leg to Stand On, Sacks's slow intense vision illuminates these final moments. Its words are forced into being by the threat of final silences, death or, later, total despair. What is it, then, in us that neighbours the 'abyss'? What faculty rises to apprehend nothingness? In the immediate shock, Sacks's first thought is 'that there had been an accident, and that someone I knew had been seriously injured' (Leg, 6). The impact seems to throw him out of himself into the role of spectator. Despite his agony, he observes rather than feels: 'No movement at the knee, gentlemen...'. He is the doctor rather than the patient.

This state does not belong merely to the initial trauma, nor merely to a professional detachment. It asserts itself, unsummoned, at intervals throughout the day in which he nearly dies on the mountain and struggles to save himself; and always it has the double aspect of being itself observed. As when, for example, 'neutral, non-committal', he considers the possibility of his own death:

> This strange, profound emotionless clarity, neither cold, nor warm, neither severe nor indulgent, but utterly, beautifully, terribly truthful, I had encountered in others, especially in patients, who were facing death and did not conceal the truth from themselves.
> (Leg, 10)

With a delicate balance, he recalls his patients as he himself faces death, all poised in a 'profound emotionless clarity'. His mood is imperturbable, 'neither cold, nor warm, neither severe nor indulgent'. Something within him stirs 'utterly, beautifully, terribly truthful', about his existence, without involving any of the passionate, very wilful 'I'. He seems put into abeyance. Where he might be most vulnerable and confused, he finds himself instead impartial, held in a quiet independence. Sacks leans out further in this indifference. If it can arise in him, without recourse to himself, it is therefore a general, human condition. 'Terrifyingly and seriously alone' (Leg, 7), he hears a universal cry:

> There was something impersonal, or universal, in my feeling. I would not have cried 'Save me, Oliver Sacks!' but 'Save this hurt living creature! Save life!', the mute plea I know so well from my patients - the plea of all life facing the abyss, if it be strongly, vividly, rightly alive.
> (Leg, 15)

His isolation becomes in itself communicative, like Kant's beauty, poised in community. The 'mute plea' which asks for assistance, is balanced by a great impulse of giving: 'Save life!' It is an all but inconceivable eloquence that life faced by destruction should be balanced, not by the immediate, obvious opposition of life and death, all against nothing, but by this clear, rare feeling of kinship, here between himself as doctor and himself as patient.

Sacks's first sense 'facing the abyss', the absolute silencing, the loss of all responses, then is slight and barely characterized. Yet it is a determinate place or phase in his consciousness, and it holds its own with a tenacity that belies its slender means.

A Leg to Stand On is largely an account of a neurological disorder by a trained neurologist, as though Luria, the great Russian neurologist, had also been one of his own patients. That was why Luria

urged Sacks to write the book. But the opening chapter, often overlooked, is of crucial importance to any interest in how silence gets into writing. If the main substance of the book is concerned with interior silence, this first part is about how Sacks first has to face external, imposed silence, death. It is a kind of extended drowning, a protracted outcry against extinction. What doesn't get through are many thoughts and feelings one might expect; there is no pity for loved ones about to lose him, no regret at incompleted work, no altruistic concern for the safety of possible search parties. Instead, at this pass Sacks finds three such types of experience, all three distinct and autonomous. First there is this still, impersonal sense. But then he finds himself swept along by a mood that is in many respects the opposite of this quiet poise. His spirits resurge, eager and gratefully responsive to all the character and variety he had shunned before. So he grows fiercely aware of the beauty of the day. Like Wordsworth in 'Composed upon an Evening of Extraordinary Splendour and Beauty', Sacks writes:

> An hour passed, and another, and another, under a glorious cloudless sky, the sun blazing pale-golden with a pure Arctic light. It was an afternoon of peculiar splendour, earth and air conspiring in beauty, radiant, tranquil, suffused in serenity.
> (Leg, 15)

The scene stirs with contentment, the words of brilliance running headlong into words of repose. Thus the 'peculiar splendour' and 'glorious' radiance are matched by an air of tranquillity, 'suffused in serenity'. Every impulse of effusion is gathered into the calm. Compare these lines from Wordsworth's poem:

> Had this effulgence disappeared
> With flying haste, I might have sent,
> Among the speechless clouds, a look
> Of blank astonishment;

But 'tis endued with power to stay,
And sanctify one closing day...

No sound is uttered, - but a deep
And solemn harmony pervades
The hollow vale from steep to steep,
And penetrates the glades.[10]

The effulgence that might have 'disappeared / With flying haste', is 'endued with power to stay', in both senses. It is both that it has permanence and that it arrests the eye. The momentary look of 'blank astonishment' is thus waylaid through the span of 'deep and solemn harmony'. But for a man in Sacks's position to have the freedom to see so sharply is extraordinary: 'An hour passed, and another, and another...'. If he doesn't reach the lower slopes before nightfall, he will certainly die, yet with a wonderful negligence he observes 'earth and air conspiring in beauty'. The Keatsian word reveals the peculiar detachment from himself and absorption in the moment, and it is, symptomatically, rash in the extreme.

He extends this heedless engagement inwardly to himself, recalling his past with the same eagerness that he had given to the 'peculiar splendour' of the day, and with the same intense absorption. He watches his memories, caught up in their mood, 'Our big old garden in London, as it used to be before the war. I cried with joy and tears as I saw it' (Leg, 15). This mood is as profoundly and evocatively of the self, as his earlier mood had been indifferent to individual character. With it he re-gathers himself:

> Hundreds of memories would pass through my mind, in the space between one boulder and the next, and yet each was rich, simple, ample, complete, and conveyed no sense of being hurried through.
> (Leg, 15)

---

10. WW, IV, 10-11; 'Composed upon an Evening of Extraordinary Splendour and Beauty', ll.1-6, 21-24.

In contrast with the emotionless stillness of before, this passage is full of movement, both inward and outward. Internal and external times are but barely linked; he actually sees the garden of his childhood. His slow physical descent 'between one boulder and the next' is thus accompanied by his fluent plummeting through memory, leaving in the interim, an uneasy, dislocated sense, despite the fullness of each moment. It is these breaks between consciousness which are to become the whole subject later on.

The assertion of mere vitality becomes an end in itself when, in his descent, Sacks's 'rowing' falls into a rhythm. Before, he writes, 'I had muscled myself along - moving by main force, with my very strong arms. Now, so to speak, I was musicked along' (Leg, 13). He is helped by a music which seems to come from deep within himself:

> I found myself perfectly co-ordinated by the rhythm - or perhaps sub-ordinated would be a better term: the musical beat was generated within me, and all my muscles responded obediently - all save those in my left leg which seemed silent - or mute?
> (Leg, 13)

Rallied by this music he feels himself moving easily, without having to think of his means of locomotion, or to summon energy. With this music he believes himself to be strongly carried to safety, and he is luxurious in his own strength: 'A creature of muscle, motion and music, all inseparable and in unison with each other - except for that unstrung part of me' (Leg, 14). But there it is again. If this music is his music, 'generated within me', then the status of that silent exception, the 'unstrung part of me', is a problem. It weighs on him poignantly, 'that poor broken instrument which could not join in and lay motionless and mute without tone or tune' (Leg, 14). In a world of sound it is mute. Compare the loss of music in Herbert's 'Deniall'. God does not attend to the prayers of the speaker:

Therefore my soul lay out of sight,
Untun'd, unstrung:
My feeble spirit, unable to look right,
Like a nipt blossome, hung
Discontented.[11]

Herbert finds the perfection of the instrument preys upon him fully now it is broken, and as Sacks does, he handles the 'unstrung' part feelingly. The consciousness of disability gives eloquence to the lines. The 'feeble spirit' is 'unable to look right', disconnected in both appearance and perception; the inner and the outer agree, but they cannot meet. The injury is complete. The spirit hangs like a single 'nipt blossome', but it is as if the loss of the individual flower destroyed the whole, leaving it without substance, or as Herbert writes, 'Discontented'. The broken part in both Herbert and Sacks _feels_ central.

Though he nowhere specifies just what makes this a 'neurological novel', this first discovery on the mountain of body-music, so important later, and of the silence of the 'unstrung' probably lies within the permitted range of invention. The word itself with its specific reminiscence of Herbert typifies the way the literary echoes occur in the book. They offer a deeper language at points of crisis but here they occur tacitly; as the need becomes more interiorised and the situation stranger, so the references grow more explicit and the memories of the contexts more developed. Later in the book literature is to provide a cloud of witnesses to a condition that is otherwise solitary and estranging. What is here the 'unstrung' part becomes later powerful enough to unstring the whole of him. What is here apparently a physical problem grows into an existential issue that silences all practical solutions and leaves him alone to make

---

11. _GH_, p.96, 'Deniall', 11.21-25.

what he can of a religious language.

This is the third type of experience, and it is very difficult to say anything about it. It admits the break. Sacks throws a glance at the abyss. At first he merely observes it in the midst of his music, but it grows upon him as he loses hope, until the nameless feeling surrounds him:

> The silence had become intense. I could no longer hear any sounds about me. I could no longer hear myself. Everything seemed embedded in silence. There were odd periods when I thought I was dead, when the immense calm became the calm of death. Things had ceased to happen. There was no happening any more. This must be the beginning of the end.
> (Leg, 17)

Silence is no longer confined to his leg, it has spread to become his whole medium; and Sacks's relationship with it has changed. Where before his leg was the exception, a poor mute in the 'muscle-orchestra' (Leg, 13), now he is the stranger, a little voice 'embedded in silence', observing with his last breath, 'I could no longer hear myself'. This is the darkest attitude. In contrast with the warmth and familiarity of before, this silence is cold and dark and alien; and it is frighteningly powerful. And then, just then, he is rescued.

What are these moods? What status do they have? On the mountain, they arise freely and independently, cutting in and out of one another. Always, however, they come absolutely. Though in this fluctuation it is obvious that each mood is only a part, or a single aspect of consciousness, each yet seems self-sufficient and whole. This stability, indeed, seems the main idea of each state.

It is this unexplained excess of feeling which the TLS reviewer objected to (the 'rollercoaster' of the emotions) presumably in the

interests of medical detachment. But they would also worry the reader in a novel; literature's probability depends upon its command of interior logic, as Aristotle claimed. That is where 'fact' is superior. Without any need to explain, Sacks simply presents the discontinuities of interior existence. The unexplained changes of direction have between them an unobserved silence. The order that a life composes does not lie in a rational account beyond it but in the obdurately present shifts of mood, thought, perception which make it up, rooted in a final silence.

The irony of events, never of voice in Sacks, is that when he is 'cured' and the leg is put together, that is when the suffering really starts because it is no longer suffering, pain, but an absence of feeling altogether. The horror is the usual one; the disproportion between the moment's mishap on the the mountain, the moment 'missing from my memory', and the long consequence for his inner life. It is that treacherousness of the moment which is characteristic of these writers for whom the underlying silence of existence is the painful issue of attention; Eustacia's failure to answer the door in Hardy, Jim's jump in Conrad, or in Wordsworth's The Borderers those lines for which it is always recalled:

> Action is transitory - a step, a blow,
> The motion of a muscle - this way or that -
> 'Tis done, and in the after-vacancy
> We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed:
> Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,
> And shares the nature of infinity.[12]

With this step or blow everything is changed. The fleeting actions and swift decisions of ordinary experience, 'The motion of a muscle - this way or that', all that quickness gives way to an infinite and

---

12. WW, I, 188; The Borderers. A Tragedy, III. 1539-44.

undifferentiated darkness. And the change is irreversible: ''Tis done'. You cannot go back: 'In the after-vacancy / We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed'. The light of betrayal is the only reference point remaining in this obscure darkness.

The break is irreversible, but that surely does not mean that all change or progress is now impossible, only that Marmaduke in the play cannot go back the way he came. The question is how he can find his way forward in this uncharted ground. He left a blind man unguided to die on the moors, and now he too is faced by a profound and infinite blackness. Two things are clear. Honesty is now essential. If the man betrayed provides the sole definition in the vacancy, then integrity itself may be a guide. To be honest at least to the horror is what Sacks also attempts. But what that honesty involves can, maybe, be adduced by a reference to Bishop Berkeley.

Berkeley too finds a break in his perception, and it is a central, fundamental division. For Berkeley, however, this gap is functional and necessary to perception. The completeness of his sense depends upon it. In An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision, Berkeley writes that 'distance, of itself and immediately, cannot be seen'.[13] Sight is not, for him, a direct sense, rather the visual impression of an object depends on 'the mediation of some other idea which is itself perceived in the act of seeing' (NTV, Section 16, 11). The eyes never reach their object, instead vision is mediated by the sense of touch. For Berkeley, touch alone has direct contact with the object. Sight is merely a short-hand representation of tangible experience:

---

13. George Berkeley, Philosophical Works, ed. M. R. Ayers (London, 1975), p.9, Section 2. Text of New Theory of Vision based on Fourth Edition of 1732; first printed in 1709. Hereafter referred to as NTV.

> I believe whoever will look narrowly into his own thoughts and examine what he means by saying he sees this or that thing at a distance, will agree with me that what he sees only suggests to his understanding that after having passed a certain distance, to be measured by the motion of his body, which is perceivable by touch, he shall come to perceive such and such tangible ideas which have been usually connected with such and such visible ideas.
>
> (NTV, Section 45, 21)

According to Berkeley, unless you had touched, walked or otherwise sounded an object, your visual impression of it would be at best unreliable. Encountering something for the very first time, presuming there could be an object so unlike any other in your experience as to be wholly unprecedented, then you would not see it at all. It would be a 'vacancy', without shape or reality. All perception becomes in a way analogical.

In the Berkeleyan world, touch would be the sense to chart this unknown, and to give it reality. It is indeed the sense of touch that is aroused by the unknown in The Borderers. The extent of the 'deep and vast' chasm is sensed familiarly, as if it were close at hand. Somehow, the infinite distance is received intimately. 'Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark / And shares the nature of infinity'. Marmaduke must feel his way forward, guided by his own discomfort. For Sacks too, it is touch that apprehends the abyss. Or rather, more correctly, for Sacks, the abyss is a tangible affliction because in it tangibility is itself apparently lost.

So, in hospital, after the operation to repair his tendon, Sacks becomes aware that there is something wrong:

> Even in coma the muscles retain some activity. They are still ticking over at a very low rate. The muscles, like the heart, never stop during life. But my quadriceps had stopped, so far as I could judge... It was the deadness of the muscle which so unnerved me.
>
> (Leg, 42-3)

The muscle is physically 'unnerved' but the effect of this 'deadness' is to unnerve Sacks. The actual dysfunction contrasts awfully with the life of the metaphor. Touch is an original, pioneering sense for Berkeley. The unknown object may be felt round, mapped and measured by the motion of the body, and thereby claimed for reality. But Sacks's break draws into consciousness what remains in Berkeley a theoretical issue. The unknown object with which he is faced is a part of himself. It is a rift in feeling itself. The crossing of this divide is an inherent contradiction. The only possible direction seems down.

At first the paralysis strikes him as a muscular deafness: 'When I called to the muscle, there was no answer to my call. My call was not heard, the muscle was deaf' (Leg, 43). But then, 'Did this not mean that in fact I had not called?' He cannot contain the idea; it must flood over to its furthest logical consequence:

> What was now becoming frightfully, even luridly, clear was that whatever had happened was not just local, peripheral, superficial - the terrible silence, the forgetting, the inability to call or recall - this was radical, central, fundamental... not just a lesion in my muscle, but a lesion in me. (Leg, 44)

Memory, action and will stop short. Sacks has come upon a precipice in himself, like Hopkins with his mind-mountains, and there is nothing ahead to show him where he used to be unthinkingly certain. It is as though his boundaries had shifted. The new margin is 'frightfully, even luridly, clear'. Sacks reports it with unflinching emphasis, 'this was radical, central, fundamental... not just a lesion in my muscle, but a lesion in me'. He has to accept its phrasing - there is nothing else. He cannot stop saying 'I'. He cannot stop either the rational voice explaining to himself what is actually beyond speech.

Integrity must then remain his guide, and touch still provides the ground of his reality. Only now, their certainties lie behind him, out of view. There is no external thread he can follow across the abyss. He can only edge forward, directed by parameters of unease; literally feeling out the dimensions of his existence.

In effect this 'terrible silence' at the first encounter at least reverses the nature of silence as it was perceived by the religious. The unsayable element, as it appeared before, upheld the self and invested it with an exhilarating sense of wholeness. In George Herbert's poem, 'The Search' for example, the voice has a confidence behind its perception of a dumb and unresponding world:

> I sent a sigh to seek thee out,
> Deep drawn in pain,
> Wing'd like an arrow: but my scout
> Returns in vain.
>
> I tun'd another (having store)
> Into a grone;
> Because the search was dumbe before:
> But all was one.[14]

Out of his helpless upheaval, the absence of response, and despite the apparent indifference of God, the speaker knows, partly by the tone of self-parody, that he has to wait and seek further; this _Deus_ may be _absconditus_ but he is not absent. The poet is in the end unspeakably safe. The sigh he sends is harsh, 'Deep drawn in pain', but it returns more gently, softly, living - not as 'arrow' but 'scout'.

But for Sacks, equally helpless and horrified, the silence is undermining and ruinous. Instead of seeking and detaching himself, Sacks finds the region of unresponsiveness a place of confusion and deep uncertainty. Where Herbert's silence is educative of the soul, Sacks experiences a deficit in things, that interrupts his normal

---

14. _GH_, p.169; 'The Search', 11.17-24.

functioning. In the words of the epigraph from Thomas Mann, 'This world of limitless silences had nothing hospitable'.

The silent discontinuities of experience now become that secondary silence; the dread that the whole adequacy of language to report accurately on the world might be a delusion becomes his most intimate experience. The nurse bursts into his room, waking him abruptly to warn him that his leg is falling off the bed, weighted by the heavy cast. At first he thinks she is playing a practical joke, since, as far as he is concerned, the leg is out in front of him. When he raises himself to look however, 'The leg was not there!' He has to search for it visually: 'I spotted the cylinder of chalk way off to my left, sticking out at a funny angle to my trunk' (Leg, 45). He spots it as if it were a random, indifferent object, with no internal information to assist him:

> I had a sudden sense of mismatch, of profound incongruity - between what I imagined I felt and what I actually saw, between what I had 'thought' and what I now found. I felt, for a dizzying, vertiginous moment, that I had been profoundly deceived, illuded, by my senses.
>
> (Leg, 45)

There is a breach between 'what I imagined I felt and what I actually saw', so that whilst sensation provides him with two independent sources, Sacks can depend on neither. He is rather thrown between them, 'I felt, for a dizzying, vertiginous moment, that I had been profoundly deceived, illuded by my senses'. How can he start to make sense of his predicament when the corroboration of his senses opens onto a 'profound incongruity'? He cannot even say for sure which was the illusion. His very contact with the outside world is likely to likely to delude him. That fundamental certitude of the body which Wittgenstein appealed to has itself become doubt; he the non-Cartesian is having a Cartesian experience.

Spinoza had an intensely positive and optimistic attitude towards Cartesian doubt. He is rather dismissive of it. In On The Improvement of the Understanding he writes:

> Doubt is only a suspension of the spirit concerning some affirmation or negation which it would pronounce upon unhesitatingly if it were not in ignorance of something, without which the knowledge of the matter in hand must needs be imperfect. We may therefore conclude that doubt always proceeds from want of due order in investigation.[15]

He is able to be so hopeful because he sees reality as organized on basic blocks of certainty. There is an Enlightenment confidence to him: certainty is simple, doubt is complex. 'The mode in which we perceive an actual reality is certainty' (Spinoza, 13). Ideas and perceptions need no outward signs or guarantees of truth; Spinoza wants the mind rather to heed and trust its own energy: 'Real doubt', he writes, 'is never produced in the mind by the thing doubted of... The idea which causes us to doubt is not clear and distinct' (Spinoza, 29-30). It is by a partial knowledge, or a confusion of ideas, that doubt arises.

But how is the idea to be made clear when Sacks cannot even 'think' his own leg? Spinoza has a confidence in the capacity of the mind to find its way which at this moment is not available to Sacks. Perhaps he should be more direct in his approach. He should seize the issue directly. As soon as the nurse leaves the room he does so:

> I turned at once to my leg, with a keen, startled and almost fierce attention. And in that instant, I no longer knew it. In that instant, that very first encounter, I knew not my leg.
>
> (Leg, 47)

---

15. Benedict de Spinoza, On The Improvement of the Understanding, The Ethics, Correspondence, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York and London, 1955), pp.30-1. Republication of the Bohn Library Edition, London, 1883.

Sacks turns to his leg with a 'fierce attention', and he meets it as a simple object, not as a part of himself, but as a separate entity. The idea is 'clear and distinct' And 'in that instant, that very first encounter, I knew not my leg.' He's like a Midas blessed with the power of nothingness. The more sharply he concentrates his attention, the more thorough his alienation becomes:

> The more I gazed at it, and handled it, the less it was 'there', the more it became Nothing - and Nowhere. Unalive, unreal, it was no part of me - no part of my body, or anything else. It didn't 'go' anywhere. It had no place in the world.
> (Leg, 49)

This negative behaves with positive force. As Sacks handles the leg, 'Nothing' colonizes his world, swallowing reality. Subject has become object and the only language it is left with to save it from total silence is a succession of negatives.

With his first certainty Spinoza gains a sure footing in every thing else. Speech follows and the silence of uncertainty disappears. For a start certainty grasps reality itself; 'The mode in which we perceive an actual reality is certainty'. His purchase on existence is active, the 'I' drawing its first real breath with hands full of 'actual reality'. World and self are discovered at once, in mutual intensity. More than this though, 'Those ideas which the understanding forms absolutely express infinity' (Spinoza, 39). The more simple and definite the certainty is, the more extensive its potential.

If Spinoza's simple idea gives so much, Sacks's experience of the abyss takes correspondingly. While he tries to limit or to define his experience, more and more of himself falls into negation. Every rescuer that he sends fails to return:

> Could memory help, where looking forward could not? No! The leg had vanished, taking its 'past' away with it! I could no longer remember having a leg...

> There was a gap - an absolute gap - between then and now; and in that gap, into the void, the former 'I' had vanished.
>
> (Leg, 58)

The more precise the phrasing of his dilemma, the more unrealisable its dimensions. The 'absolute gap' is beyond use, thought, or feeling. Sacks cannot find a steady point from which to secure his leg. Wittgenstein comments ominously:

> If a blind man were to ask me 'Have you got two hands?' I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don't know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn't I test my eyes by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? What is to be tested by what?
>
> (OC, Section 125, 18-19)

Once the negative is accepted (or makes its entry) it escalates, so that with the first doubt the whole structure may crumble. No faculty has ground to corroborate another, 'For why shouldn't I test my eyes by looking to find out whether I see my two hands?' It is no longer possible to be sure; the very ground of certainty, as Sacks says, is 'void'.

It is strange, then, how sturdy and coherent his words are here. He recognizes the significance of this gap with all his forceful literalism. He cannot re-member the leg:

> If it went into the gap, the void, the 'blue', it would have to come out of the gap, the void, the 'blue': the eerie, stunning mystery of its going, could only be matched by an equal mystery of coming or becoming.
>
> (Leg, 58)

If he is to recover his leg, it must be a sudden and miraculous cure. There can be no extrapolation from known or stable ground. It must be absolute. Two things here: though I have called this experience 'silence', in none of these writers does it stop them from speaking. If the words are turned to folly by the circumstances, still they keep coming. And again, if he has no sure ground to stand on in the

'gap', unlike Herbert, then he turns the gap itself into a ground. The language comes close to secular prayer in its subjunctive mood, 'would have to', 'could only'.

Sacks is at an impasse. He can do nothing because the hope is too frail to operate as hope. 'The waters became deeper and deeper all the time; I dared not think too much, in case they closed over me' (Leg, 58-9).

The question is how you can return to certainty, to the adequacy of language, from this crisis where speech seems only to articulate its incomprehensibility. How can you recover simplicity? Even if it were not to become a revelation of a permanently changed world, if it were a matter of relative and immediate values alone, the transition from disorder to clarity is what is at that moment inconceivable. The trouble is that in fear and confusion, the purchaseless face of simplicity may seem too unguarded and exposed even to seem desirable. It gives no clear direction, whilst complexity, on the other hand, offers an immediate context. For the devout, for George Herbert, even more for John Donne, there may be comfort in the simple apprehension, in the loss of a purely human and rational order; but it is hard for Donne to realise that this simple understanding is what he really must accept. It is to him a form of terror:

> I cannot look upon God, in what line I will, nor take hold of God, by what handle I will; Hee is a terrible God, I take him so; And then I cannot discontinue, I cannot breake off this terriblenesse, and say, Hee hath beene terrible to that man, and there is an end of his terror; it reaches not to me. Why not to me? In me there is no merit, nor shadow of merit; In God there is no change, nor shadow of change. I am still the same sinner, he is the same God; still the same desperate sinner, still the same terrible God.[16]

---

16. Donne, Sermons VIII, 123-4; no.69 in LXXX Sermons.

On the surface Donne argues for acceptance, strongly denying the urge to approach God by his own means: 'I cannot look upon God, in what line I will, nor take hold of God by what handle I will; Hee is a terrible God, I take him so'. If he is to be received at all, God must be accepted simply. Yet the very insistence of Donne's argument reveals the conflict. When Donne writes 'I cannot...', it is clear that that is, in a way, what he is trying to do. In all of the varieties of resistance he describes he has tried to wrestle free of God's terror to a calm and willing apprehension. It is the voice of experience that says in the present tense: 'I cannot breake off this terriblenesse'. Finally, the only approach left to him is that which is laid down. Donne must return to the point of despair he describes so well, to the simple unchanging relationship between himself and God and proceed from there, 'still the same desperate sinner, still the same terrible God'. The acceptance of these terms in itself is hard, but religious belief at least makes those discontinuities, the silent gap between the subject's desires and its objective situation, comprehensible.

Complexity seems to offer definition and it is very tempting to accept its efficient terms and its different kind of clarity. Simplicity feels altogether too calamitous in its straightforward acceptances. Far from being 'clear and distinct', the simple idea becomes formless and disorientating. It does not even seem to be on a human scale. Perhaps the appropriate question ought not to be how Sacks can return to certainty, but how he may live his uncertainty.

Sacks too, like Donne, whom he often quotes, values the activity and independence of his mind: 'I had always liked to see myself as a naturalist or explorer. I had explored many strange, neuropsychological lands' (<u>Leg</u>, 78). Now however:

> I had fallen off the map, the world, of the knowable. I had fallen out of space, and out of time too. Nothing could happen, ever, any more. Intelligence, reason, sense, meant nothing. Memory, imagination, hope, meant nothing. I had lost everything which afforded a foothold before. I had entered, willy-nilly, a dark night of the soul.
> (Leg, 79)

All of Sacks's handles and lines, to take Donne's terms, his memory, reason, intelligence and so forth, all those powers that would ordinarily make sense of the world, mean 'nothing' here. They cannot gain a hold. It is noticeable, however, that with this realisation, Sacks resumes the phrasings of the mountain. With the loss of the last 'foothold', he recovers the terminology of the fall, as if in some sense, falling off the map, he found again the path. Most strikingly, 'Nothing could happen, ever, any more', echoes Sacks's dark phrasing of chapter one, as the evening had closed on his hope: 'Things had ceased to happen. There was no happening any more' (Leg, 17). Perhaps for Sacks too the way forward is for him to return to the point of despair, to explore not only his own silence but the silence of reality to his expectations and cries for help. Then he was rescued. Now he cannot even persuade his doctors that he is in need of help. He tries to tell the consultant how the muscle has lost tone, that he is experiencing difficulty in locating the leg, but he receives a brisk response: 'Nonsense, Sacks... There's nothing the matter. Nothing at all' (Leg, 73). With an unsuspecting accuracy the surgeon finds the problem. 'Nothing' is indeed the matter. The doctor's own silence and his desire that Sacks in effect 'Shut up' is maybe both the disease and the cure.

It is the homogeneity of the experience that makes it feel so unruly and so exposed in this place of paradoxes, and the fear of having to approach in mind what always threatens destruction: 'How

difficult, how paradoxical, a lesson to learn!' (Leg, 79). The way forward is painfully indeterminate:

> A scotoma is a hole in reality itself, a hole in time no less than in space, and therefore cannot be conceived of as having a term or ending.
> (Leg, 77)

For all the ruinous dislocation of Sacks's experience, however, life is at least reduced to this single problem. The margins of the scotoma could hardly be more drastic; it is 'a hole in reality itself'. This, then, is the simplicity that he faces, a span of timeless nothingness that 'reality' itself cannot conquer, let alone Sacks, now, alone and disadvantaged. Yet eventually, he turns to the abyss, the place which is creative of silence, and enters the 'dark night of the soul':

> This involved, first, a very great fear. For I had to relinquish all the powers I normally command. I had to relinquish, above all, the sense and affect of activity. I had to allow - and this seemed horrible - the sense and feeling of passivity.
> (Leg, 79)

It is like entering the Cloud of Unknowing the wrong way round, not because of what he longs for but because of what he dreads: 'I found this humiliating, at first, a mortification of my self' (Leg, 79). His numbness gnaws at him; the diffuse edges of passivity feel as though they are dismantling him. Nothing could be further from the passive mood of Wordsworth in 'Tintern Abbey':

> ...that serene and blessed mood,
> In which the affections gently lead us on, -
> Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
> And even the motion of our human blood
> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul.[17]

In place of the 'mortification' that Sacks feels in relinquishing his

---

17. WW, II, 260; 'Tintern Abbey', 11.41-6.

powers, passivity here unfolds the 'living soul'. Wordsworth's silence is a place beyond speech, a state that he is led towards. The suspension of the body's vigour makes all else vivid. Sacks's passivity, by contrast, finds no object beyond itself; there is nothing in the silence to gently lead him on; he is in a state beneath speech. Even so, in some sense, he recognises that this undoing is his only way forward:

> To the soul, lost, confounded, in the darkness, the long night, neither charts, nor the chart-making mind were of any service... These active qualities might be valuable later, but at this point they had nothing to work on.
>
> (Leg, 79)

This is an extraordinary insight, one utterly beyond explanation, that Sacks should feel that the erosion of his decision alone can guide him; that weakness is the only strength remaining to him. The problem of writing is that it happens later and the clarity of patience may not have felt so secure actually from within the silence. It is presented here as something like the understanding a chrysalis should have; except that whilst the larva has an internal 'chart', there are no maps for silence.

Horribly, the undermining, destructive nature of this passivity is just what Spinoza, so confidently concerned 'to point the way to human freedom through understanding and natural knowledge',[18] would have expected. For Spinoza, activity does not merely affirm identity, it is the very essence of selfhood. In his major work, The Ethics, Spinoza writes: 'Nothing can be destroyed, except by a cause external to itself' (Spinoza, 136, III, iv). That is, there is nothing in the thing itself inimical to its own existence. Rather, 'Everything, in

---

18. Stuart Hampshire, Spinoza (Harmondsworth, 1951), p.144.

so far as it is in itself, endeavours to persist in its own being' (Spinoza, 136, III, vi). This striving is 'nothing else but the actual essence of the thing in question' (Spinoza, 136, III, vii). For Spinoza existence is affirmative at base. The more wholeheartedly self struggles 'to persist in its own being', the more it is itself.

And Sacks would agree; yet at the point of 'Limbo', the hole in his own consciousness appears also to be a hole in reality. The confident rational voice may explain from outside but he is imprisoned in his silent passivity. He too, urgently, would desire this thriving certainty; it is a fine ideal for a healthy spirit... it's just that action has 'nothing to work on'. This is the trouble with Spinoza, he corroborates Sacks's experience so far, and no further. When they part company, it is Spinoza rather than Sacks, who is in the right. Sacks is in the wrong, quite literally. Unwillingly, perhaps, he goes further than Spinoza.

Spinoza draws limits and capacity of the mind very clearly when he writes: 'The essence of the mind only affirms that which the mind is and can do; not that which it neither is nor can do' (Spinoza, 166, III, liv). With no alternative left to his act of daring, Sacks turns to affirm what he 'neither is nor can do'. He relies upon the negative:

> I had to be still, and wait in the darkness, to feel it as holy, the darkness of God, and not simply as blindness and bereftness (though it entailed, indeed, total blindness and bereftness). I had to acquiesce, even be glad, that my reason was confounded, and that my powers and faculties had no locus of action and could not be exerted to alter my state.
>
> (Leg, 79-80)

He throws himself to this 'darkness', in trust though with nothing to trust in (it is only 'as' divine), accepting the horrific incapacity

of his state, and with this acquiescence the quality of his timelessness changes:

> This, then, was the change, starting on the third day of my Limbo, which moved me from a sense of abomination and despair, a sense of a hideous and unspeakable hell, to a sense of something utterly, mysteriously, different - a night no longer abominable and dark, but radiant, secretly, with a light above sense.
>
> (Leg, 80)

In the broad shape of the experience, everything is the same. There is the same groundlessness, the same silence, the hole-hell of the unspeakable; yet it is 'utterly, mysteriously, different'. The 'unspeakable hell' has given way to 'a light above sense'. The quality of the 'infinite rift' has changed, and it has changed in its infinity, his baseless despair dissolves into an unfounded hope. The very region that Sacks cannot affect, the objective, helpless seam, is transformed. It is as though acquiescence were his way through the objective barrier.

Intuitively and intellectually, Sacks recognises elsewhere that silent acquiescence to the gaps in reality may be more fruitful than activity. In The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat, for example, he compares two men afflicted by the same disorder, Korsakov's syndrome. This is a kind of instantaneous amnesia, awful and profound in effect, that leaves the patient:

> Isolated in a single moment of being, with a moat or lacuna of forgetting all round him... He is a man without a past (or future), stuck in a constantly changing, meaningless moment.[19]

One of the two men affected by the condition, a kind of island in constant silence, Jimmie G., is touchingly alive within this single

19. Oliver Sacks, The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat (London, 1985), p.28.

moment, poignantly aware of his 'moat' of forgetfulness. The other, William Thompson, copes brilliantly with his loss: 'Abysses of amnesia continually opened beneath him, but he would bridge them, nimbly, by fluent confabulations and fictions of all kinds' (ibid., 104). William never realises his loss: 'So far as he was concerned, there was nothing the matter' (ibid., 104). Both men have lost themselves, their past and future, yet they do not suffer similarly. With Jimmie, Sacks notes 'There is an utter pathos, a sad sense of lostness' (ibid., 108). He seems 'brooding' or 'yearning'. There is none of this depth in the case of William, only a 'brilliant, brassy surface' and 'the unending joke which he substitutes for the world' (ibid., 109). All of the generosity of Sacks's attention can find nothing more than this. In his comparison of the two, Sacks's words are unflinching and large: 'It is because Jimmie is "lost" that he can be redeemed or found, at least for a while' (ibid., 109). Sacks is unequivocal; Jimmie 'can be redeemed'. William, on the other hand:

> William's great gift is also his damnation. If only he could be quiet, one feels, for an instant; if only he could stop the ceaseless chatter and jabber; if only he could relinquish the deceiving surface of illusions - then (ah then!) reality might seep in; something genuine, something deep, something true, something felt, could enter his soul.
>
> (Ibid., 109)

If only William were 'lost' helplessly, beyond hope or recovery, then he might be found, 'If only he were quiet... for an instant'. This instant is more, far more than a moment in time. It is an opening of pure freedom. It is as though, could he but loosen his own grip on life, life itself would return to support him, 'then (ah then!) reality might seep in; something genuine, something deep, something true, something felt, could enter his soul'. The silence of passivity, the need to respond with an answering 'quiet', alone seems

capable of vouchsafing reality! Characteristically Sacks appeals to an almost Victorian series of epithets, 'genuine', 'deep', 'true', 'felt' against the playfulness of post-Modernist William.

Though Sacks instinctively values the continuousness of life, the 'living stream' and the 'kinetic melody' (Leg, 167) of Bergsonian inner time, yet with this break he finds a great fund of life. He grows more alive with it and his words grow stronger as he writes, as can be seen in this line from the passage above: 'then (ah then!) reality might seep in...'. The first, merely connective 'then' is an uneventful word, but as Sacks is overtaken by the discovery of truth and feeling, 'ah then!', the word is thrown aloft in celebration. One other thing is clear in reading Sacks; the delight he feels in simple reality does not show up only against the 'blindness and bereftness' (Leg, 79) of the scotoma; the zest for the real is permanent and what gives him the strength constantly to be open to the silent gaps in it.

Then come the first signs of recovery - the first signs of any speech from his leg, 'involuntary flash-like twitches in the previously inert and silent muscle' (Leg, 85). These flashes do not at first involve him in any answering mental activity; they are purely mechanical, 'involuntary', and they affect him as though abstract or elemental:

> I had very much the feeling of an electrical storm - of lightning flashes jumping from one fibre to another, and an electrical muttering and crackling in the nerve-muscle.
>
> (Leg, 86)

These flashes of pain hardly impress him as feeling, even, they are so rudimentary in their organisation. They prove to him how profound the denervation is, as much as they promise recovery. He observes

them and welcomes the sign of returning function. But his spirit still has 'nothing to work on'.

Throughout his Limbo, he writes, 'I yearned - hungrily, thirstily, desperately - for music' (Leg, 78). Finally, at his request, a friend brings in a cassette recorder, and a tape of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, the first to come to hand. The effect of the music is immediate, direct; he responds to it without reserve:

> Suddenly, wonderfully, I was moved by the music. The music seemed passionately, wonderfully, quiveringly alive - and conveyed to me a sweet feeling of life. I felt, with the first bars of the music, a hope and an intimation that life would return to my leg - that it would be stirred, and stir, with original movement, and recollect or recreate its forgotten motor melody.
>
> (Leg, 87)

Music then, not the involuntary spasms, is the first thing to break his silence, his imprisonment in negation. With the music he receives 'a hope and an intimation that life would return'. Music brings him this first active impulse and it seems to him everything. It is inexhaustible. He plays the Concerto again and again. 'I didn't tire of it: I desired nothing else. Every playing was a refreshment and a renewal of my spirit' (Leg, 87). The personal pronouns had been subdued in the Limbo section and now they return insistently with the music; 'Perhaps there had to be, before this, an infinite darkness and silence' (Leg, 87). He hears without intervention, invigorated by the music and rich with his discovery.

> I felt, in those first heavenly bars of music, as if the animating and creative principle of the whole world was revealed, that life itself was music... that our living moving flesh, itself, was 'solid' music - music made fleshy, substantial, corporeal.
>
> (Leg, 87)

It is as though with this first, slight foothold, the spirit could spring to (more than safety) splendour! Suddenly his words have

traction in immensity: 'I felt... as if the animating and creative principle of the whole world was revealed'. After the inexpressibility of Limbo he is now faced with a different kind of pressure upon language. The excess has to be excused by another of his revalued clichés: 'I felt - how inadequate words are for feelings of this sort!' (Leg, 87). He knows, he says these words too, in that knowledge.

As yet he cannot walk. He has had occasional impulses with which he can flex the leg, suddenly remembering what to do; but these impulses depart as quickly as they come. 'I suddenly knew, and then didn't know - like an aphasic with words' (Leg, 95). 'And then' he writes, rather than 'But then'. Unlike William with his Korsakov's syndrome, Sacks does not try to cover up the gaps; he leaves life to be accumulative rather than organised around concessive 'buts'. It is part of the sheer-ness of his experience (both its precipitousness and its absoluteness) that whilst the stages of his recovery are so much alike, Sacks does not think to compare them, or to argue forward by analogy. Here too he is forgetful, or perhaps there is something unlearnable in the change. He finds each transition freshly. Every development comes absolutely and as if without precedent. He is recovering the normal silence of existence, the unconsciousness of things happening as against the over-consciousness of nothing happening.

'I stood up - or, rather, I was stood up, hoisted to my feet, by two stout physiotherapists... I found this bizarre and terrifying' (Leg, 103). Even to put his weight on the left leg seems 'strictly an unthinkable, as well as a fearful, thing to do' (Leg, 103). But this is 'The Day - the appointed day for me to arise, and stand, and walk' (Leg, 98). The commas here leave a far greater gap than usual in such

commonplace verbs. They do not channel the sense so much as they divide remote and static images. The physiotherapists are urging him to move. 'To begin! How could I? And yet I must. This was the moment, the singularity, from which beginning must begin' (Leg, 103).

In terms of what I am calling silence, the difficulty here is that what is performed by us all as tacitly automatic has to be raised to consciousness and performed as an act of mind and will. He has to get from the one silence of the gap in reality to the other silence of taking things for granted, an equivalent to that step that Marlow takes at the end of Heart of Darkness, but here in simple, practical, physical terms. He must make the movement first in his mind, must re-member himself:

> The chaos was not of perception itself, but of space, or measure, which precedes perception... A true miracle was being enacted before me, within me. Out of nothingness, out of chaos, measure was being made. The jumping fluttering metrics were converging towards some average - a proto-scale.
> (Leg, 105)

The terms are not exactly similar, but the relationship of Sacks's measure and perception is strikingly like that of Berkeley's touch and sight.[20] It is for Sacks as though there must be some original advance or contact before sense. The oscillating images seem to be conjecturing space, literally making sense of nothingness: 'Out of nothingness, out of chaos, measure was being made'. In a wholesale, unknowing advance, this outburst claims ground, as if it were the forerunner of reality.

---

20. If Sacks agrees with Berkeley in this, Berkeley anticipates Sacks's experience in an important respect. He wrote that a person possessed of sight but lacking touch, would 'not have any idea of distance, outness or profundity, nor consequently of space or body, either immediately or by suggestion' (NTV, 53). Such a person would be 'pure spirit' (NTV, 54).

The 'fluttering' of Sacks's leg begins just as he is trying to reconcile himself, not to walking as such, but to the raising of his right leg so that the left leg would have either to support him or collapse. It begins, that is, on the verge of 'nothingness', and belief in the reality of action and physical fact.

The analogies he finds to describe the event apparently fall into that category of literary defect that Coleridge identified in Wordsworth as 'mental bombast', 'thoughts and images too great for the subject'.[21] The difficulty of A Leg to Stand On is the gap between its subjective seriousness, the claims made for what something feels like from the inside, and the objective apparent smallness of the event, a broken leg and a severed nerve. Burke's belief that the sublime is an authentic experience of the threat of oblivion, of death ultimately, meant that for him it was associated with images of grandeur.[22] Wordsworth more than anyone re-located it in the self's capacity for a sublime responsiveness, to the sight of Martha Ray, for example, or a child of six or suddenly ceasing to skate as well as to the beacon on the lonely hill. Sacks goes further, as far as one could go, or further for some readers, in claiming the experience of the sublime for learning to walk again. Perhaps even the abyss of non-sensation and the sublime of his re-creation share a common neurological base, certainly their visible qualities are alike. So Wordsworth writes of the sublime:

---

21. S. T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols (Princeton, New Jersey, 1983); II, 136, Chapter XXII.
22. 'All general privations are great, because they are all terrible; Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude, and Silence'; from On The Sublime and Beautiful, II.vi; in Edmund Burke, The Works, 8 vols (London, 1897), I, 99.

> Its grandeur subsists in the naked fact of being conscious of an external Power at once awful and immeasurable.[23]

It is to be aware, simply and unguardedly aware of a power too great, in both senses. Kant corroborates this sense of disproportion in the experience of the sublime. The sublime object seems:

> to contravene the ends of our power of judgement, to be ill-adapted to our faculty of presentation, and to be, as it were, an outrage on the imagination.[24]

For both writers, the sublime is essentially daunting; physically and imaginatively more than the subject can countenance. Hence there are no limits on Sacks's analogies: the uniqueness of his feelings for him would leave him once more with silence or risking the absurdity of comparisons with the Big Bang and God laying the foundations of the earth.

Urged on by the physiotherapists, he finds that he can walk, after a fashion, though he has to calculate every movement tortuously, by visual means. Otherwise the leg shoots off entirely inappropriately, or it doesn't work at all. Its dimensions are still grossly unreliable. 'It wasn't "my" leg I was walking with, but a huge, clumsy prosthesis (or hypothesis)' (Leg, 108). It is awful how casually Sacks can exchange 'hypothesis' and 'prosthesis'! The leg is either lumpen or it is speculative, and there is nothing in between. Sacks does not feel like calling this 'walking'; it is 'pseudo-walking':

> I found it a matter of the most elaborate and exhausting and tedious computation. It was locomotion of a sort, but unanimal, unhuman. 'This is walking?' I said to myself, and then, with a qualm of terror: 'Is this what I will have to put up with for the rest of my life? Will I never get back the

---

23. Wordsworth, Prose Works, II, 353-4.
24. Kant, Critique of Aesthetic Judgement, p.91.

> *feel* of true walking? Will I never again know a *walking* which is natural, spontaneous, and free? Will I be forced, from now on, to think out each move? Must everything be so complex - can't it be simple?
>
> And suddenly - into the silence, the silent twittering of motionless frozen images - came music, glorious music, Mendelssohn, *fortissimo*! Life, intoxicating movement! And, as suddenly, without thinking, without intending whatever, I found myself walking, easily, *with* the music... Suddenly, I was absolutely certain - I *believed* in my leg, I *knew* how to walk...
>
> (*Leg*, 108)

The step before, the change was unimaginable, but then when it comes, it is precisely the imagination which is fired. With a 'glorious', 'intoxicating' intensity, movement returns to him! The return is literally and spiritually liberating. Everything becomes possible again. The term he uses for this is the end of silence, silence as mere 'twittering' and above all immobility, 'frozen images'. There is no gradual change. Sacks's recovery comes all at once: 'Suddenly, I was absolutely certain - I believed in my leg, I knew how to walk'; he finds himself back again in the other silence of spontaneity.

Suddenly he rediscovers his ease. Suddenness is also for Burke among the properties of the sublime.[25] The objective questioning 'I' simply disappears: 'Without thinking, without intending whatever, I found myself walking'. Paradoxically, Sacks recovers himself when the 'I' slips back into place, when it is again hidden. The broken clarity of the 'motionless frozen images' is simply overtaken by the hidden ease and forgetfulness of movement. The silent ease of the habitual 'I' had been lost and the existential crisis had forced it into dangerous prominence.

Despite the fact that Sacks's injury leaves him at a cut edge, a

---

25. Edmund Burke, *Works*, I, 109.

breaking-off point of experience, sense and expectation, the solution comes centrally because a centre has been restored. It appears without direction:

> Grace, unbidden, appeared on the scene, became its centre, transformed the scene. Grace entered, as Grace enters, at the very centre of things, at its hidden innermost inaccessible centre.
> (Leg, 112-13)

The solution, too, is a form of inarticulacy, as far beyond Sacks's intervention as the impasse had been before 'inaccessible'; but this time the silent element is out of reach through being 'at the very centre of things', it is hidden by centrality rather than exposed and confronting him as extraneous. This silence is harnessed as a motivating energy, and Sacks's words are contagiously full of its fluency and unexpectedness. It is as if the unfounded, inward trust that made him whole, immediately became the manifest method of his language. The very impulse that Sacks himself cannot explain or control, thus gives his words a directness and inevitability: 'Into the silence, the silent twittering of motionless frozen images - came music, glorious music, Mendelssohn, fortissimo! Life, intoxicating movement!'. With the music, his words break free of the sentence, coming in short vivid phrases. As surely as the twittering images, these expressions of delight are broken, and their impulse too is discontinuous. But these words are not isolated or 'frozen'. Rather they work effortlessly and unerringly, brimming with trust. With the return of the spontaneous, fluency is restored, seeming almost random, like the effects of intoxication.

It is not that Sacks has recovered from silence, it is that he has somehow gained purchase in it! But how? In many respects the language given by Grace is like that of Wordsworth in The Prelude, in the episode of the owl-boy, for example. Wordsworth describes the boy

blowing 'mimic hootings' to the owls:

> And they would shout
> Across the watry Vale, and shout again,
> Responsive to his call, with quivering peals,
> And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud
> Redoubled and redoubled; concourse wild
> Of mirth and jocund din! And when it chanced
> That pauses of deep silence mock'd his skill,
> Then sometimes, in that silence, while he hung
> Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize
> Has carried far into his heart the voice
> Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
> Would enter unawares into his mind
> With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
> Its woods, and that uncertain Heaven, receiv'd
> Into the bosom of the steady Lake.
> (Prelude V. 399-413)

In broad type, the perception of Sacks and Wordsworth is akin, both in the method and in the effect. Though Wordsworth is surprised by silence and Sacks by sound, the Burkean suddenness, the 'shock of mild surprise', suggest a common root in the Romantic sublime. The 'visible scene' enters inconceivably, like Grace, without any apparent means of conveyance and it travels to the 'hidden innermost inaccessible centre' too, 'carried far into his heart'. Both effects come suddenly, and in both instances the 'shock' seems more than a response to an unexpected insight. It seems instrumental to the perception: 'A gentle shock of mild surprize / Has carried far into his heart the voice / Of mountain torrents'. Wordsworth is wonderfully forgetful in expression here, a heedlessness that testifies to the strength of his impression: the torrents are carried 'far' into his heart as if distance were to convey the depth of his mood, but then it is a 'voice' that is carried, and a voice does not grow clearer with distance.

It is a paradoxical thing, a vivid, vivifying aesthetic carried by an anaesthetic effect, the silent absorption of the continuity of the ordinary, mountain sight and sounds, just waking. The very means of

Wordsworth's apprehension are veiled: 'The visible scene / Would enter unawares into his mind'. Whilst in syntax 'unawares' belongs to the 'visible scene', semantically it is governed by 'his mind'. It's as though the doors of vision could be variously hinged on either side. Though unconsciousness is the point of entry, it has itself no clear attachment. It seems altogether a random element.

The mechanism of perception might be ungrippable, but there are clear points that may be depended upon in the comparison of Sacks's and Wordsworth's experience. In the balance of their attention, for example, both depend wholly on their object, forgetful of their own ground. 'Then sometimes, in that silence, while he hung / Listening'; the boy hangs poised in attention. Implicitly the perception is valued at the cost of everything else. Sacks too is unsupported, hoisted to his feet for his first steps, and he too, for all his terror is overtaken by a mood of stillness, 'that intense stillness which occurs when something momentous is about to happen' (_Leg_, 103).

And then when sense does break through, for both writers it breaks thoroughly. With Grace, everything is changed: 'Everything was transformed, absolutely, in that moment' (_Leg_, 111). The perception somehow clears a path; its single influence drawing everything to coherence. Wordsworth's 'uncertain Heaven' is 'receiv'd / Into the bosom of the steady Lake', as if the divine itself achieved clarity reflected in this span of water.

But where _does_ this steadiness come from? 'Suddenly', Sacks writes, 'I was absolutely certain - I _believed_ in my leg, I _knew_ how to walk...'. But where did this belief take root? It is not as if Sacks has hit the bottom of the abyss. His recovery is as lacking in justification as his experiences of nothingness were. There is no bottom to the abyss which could in rational terms provide a kind of

rebound. But somehow, groundlessly, purchase is found.

Sacks's purchase on the immeasurable either persuades or irritates the reader; there is no third position. His recovery is simple and absolute, the leg comes back to him spontaneously, 'out of the blue'. But its presence does not hide the 'infinite rift', or plug the 'absolute gap'. He retains his sense of the secondary silence even while he enjoys the primary silence of natural freedom. Thus, in convalescence he grows aware of timelessness and of immobility, the qualities inherent in the fearful silence, only, here they are transfigured. Silence is no longer the excruciating deprivation that it was in Limbo, it is rather a saturated, expansive involvement:

> Now, suddenly, I had an immense sense of leisure, an unhurriedness, a freedom I had almost forgotten - but which, now it had returned, seemed the most precious thing in life. There was an intense sense of stillness, peacefulness, joy, a pure delight in the 'now', freed from drive or desire. I was intensely conscious of each leaf, autumn-tinted, on the ground... The world was motionless, frozen - everything concentrated in an intensity of sheer being. A perfect peace and communion lay upon the land. This peacefulness had a quality of thanksgiving and praise, a kind of silent, holy intensity; but a silence which was also thanksgiving and song.
> (Leg, 134)

This 'holy intensity' is the exact equivalent of the 'terrible silence', only in mirror-image. The 'absolute non-recognition' (Leg, 47) of before is thus converted to an effortless familiarity; 'I was intensely conscious of each leaf'. Again, despite the tranquillity of the perspective, the transformation is severe: 'Now, suddenly, I had an immense sense of leisure'; as if the spirit had been jolted into calm! The sharp line of the absolute here is no longer austere and single however; rather it is scattered and transposed over the entire scene. Every thing, individually, 'each leaf', is rendered in brilliance, 'concentrated in an intensity of sheer being'.

Sacks's perspective is static, 'motionless, frozen', and timeless, characterised by 'a pure delight in the "now"'. As with the scotoma, this stillness also has the nature of an 'infinite rift'. Sacks is quite specific in his description of this calm: 'A magic realm of timelessness had been inserted into time, an intensity of nowness and presentness, of the sort usually devoured by past and future' (Leg, 134). He has again fallen into a lost moment, except that here, unlike with the scotoma, the inexpressible seems to underpin rather than undermine. Far from being a hole into which you might fall, out of reality, this moment is connective; it seems to be the medium of reality. The blessed silence of ordinary existence has been raised to consciousness by the alternative silence and what is normally 'taken for granted' is now noticed as a gift. The existential silence is for the moment in full voice.

What is so strange about Sacks as a contemporary writer is his unguardedness, his lack of a Yeatsian mask. His claim to be writing a case history even if this case is his own means that he must face the silence, both the discontinuities in experience and the further silence, that life may have at its centre a fact which defeats expression altogether, without 'literary' resources of its own, though always able to use literature itself as a resource. What is still stranger in the end is that he can make the 'given' conditions of life, the contingency which makes it always a beginning, a matter for celebration, 'All gratulant, if rightly understood' (Prelude XIII. 378).

Wittgenstein also is fascinated by such beginnings:

> I look at an animal in a cage. I am asked: 'What do you see?' I answer: 'A rabbit.' - I gaze into the countryside; suddenly a rabbit runs past. I exclaim: 'A rabbit!'
>
> Both things, both the report and the exclamation, can be called expressions of perception and of

> visual experience. But the exclamation is so in a different sense from the report; it is forced from us. It is related to the experience as a cry is to pain.[26]

Whilst the caged rabbit fits into the report, neatly and without exertion, the exclamation is 'forced from us... related to the experience as a cry is to pain'. The recognition here is primary, and it must make a leap. Somehow in the cry 'A rabbit!', both the speaker and the perceived object are enlivened. Wittgenstein calls connections such as these: 'the dawning of an aspect' (LW, Section 433, 58). The exclamation is inherently inexperienced; as Wittgenstein insists, you must see in surprise: 'Astonishment is essential to a change of aspect. And astonishment is thinking' (LW, Section 565, 73). It is as though for Wittgenstein, true recognition demanded the unknown, an element of unfamiliarity across which vision must leap. He gives a further example: 'Suppose a child suddenly recognizes someone. Let it be the first time he has ever suddenly recognized anyone. - It is as if his eyes had suddenly opened' (LW, Section 572, 74). This 'dawning' is more than the first recognition of someone, it is for the first time, to be able to recognize: 'It is as if his eyes had suddenly opened'. The potential is born.

But also for Wittgenstein it is as though that were a limitation. The mind would really prefer to precede by rational stages, to work from the category to the specific, from 'caged animal' to 'rabbit'. The sudden response to the unforeseen wild creature is enforced, 'as a cry is to pain'. For Sacks, the constant issuing of the unexpected out of the preceding silence of inattention is festive, gracious.

---

26. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. I, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. C. G. Luckhardt and Maximilian A. E. Aue (Oxford, 1982), Section 549, p.71-2. Hereafter referred to as LW.

Such is the nature of perception in A Leg to Stand On, where Sacks recovers his leg, or in the preamble to The Prelude, where Wordsworth stands amazed at his own consistency. Astonishment unlocks an innate potential; but how much more so when the 'rabbit!' is yourself! Both Sacks and Wordsworth see with an original eye, in the deepest sense. It is for them as though the return to a beginning were a return to the beginning.

Thus Sacks comments on his weeks of convalescence:

> I felt that this was how one should find the world - how the world really was, if one were not jaded or tarnished. I felt the gaiety and innocence of the newborn.
>
> And if this was 'the truth', or how things should be, how could one find the world dull? I wondered if what one normally calls 'normal' was itself a sort of dullness, a deadening of sense and spirit, if not, indeed, a very closure of their doors. For myself, now, liberated, released, emergent from the dark night and abyss, there was an intoxication of light and love and health.
>
> (Leg, 144)

The passage reads like an answer to Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode', and his exclamation of dismay: 'Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?' (11.56-7). In his recovery Sacks has found 'the glory and the dream'. He has faced the abyss, and known the terror of Hopkins' terrible sonnets: 'O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed';[27] and he has returned. Sacks can offer no justification for his intoxicating vision of 'the truth', he simply writes: 'I felt that this was how one should find the world - how the world really was'. Silence in one of its forms would become a 'deadening of sense'; deafness makes us mute. He writes with a confident abandon, stamping his feet down surely on a vagrant reality, decisively, with

27. GMH, p.100, 'No worst there is none', 11.9-10.

the 'gaiety and the innocence of the newborn'. He is suddenly, as sure as Wordsworth, exclaiming:

> O joy! that in our embers
> Is something that doth live,
> That nature yet remembers
> What was so fugitive!

The point that it is important to see, is that Sacks's certainty is as groundless as his doubt had been before. The rejuvenating 'light' and the 'dark night' alike are without basis in 'reality'. It is as though the very foundations of life and thought and action, the floor of all else, were necessarily insupportable. In Wittgenstein's graphic phrasing: 'I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house' (OC, Section 248, 33). The certainty that grounds all other convictions is itself without foundation.

Sacks's work, with all its weaknesses of expression upon it, steps outside the limits of genre and speaks in the usually separated discourses of scientific observation, of literary fiction and of speculative thought. The originality of the method allows it to keep faith with the old Romantic seriousness and commitment. It stands with the confidence of still older religious texts but without specific religious definition. For the most obvious and sympathetic of reasons Sacks never, apparently, refers to the thought he is in some ways closest to, the late writings of Heidegger. In Nothing Is Without Ground (Der Satz Vom Grunde, 1957), Heidegger quotes Meister Eckhart, that life 'lives without why'. There is no 'why' because it never answers. I quote the summary of Versényi because it puts the case economically:

> In the face of such silence we must abandon the life of reason and human understanding, the life of care and concern, of seeking and questioning 'why'? We must abandon ourselves totally, with the whole

> of our Being, to Being, the Mystery, the self-grounding Ground... 'Through this leap thought arrives in the wide (open regions) of the play on which our human essence is staked. Only insofar as man is brought into this play and is at stake in the play can he truly play and remain in the play'.[28]

For the ever-concerned Sacks, reason and understanding are not surrendered but they are remade by the adventuring into silence.

28. Laszlo Versényi, Heidegger, Being and Truth, p.153; Versényi dislikes late Heidegger so there is here a slightly suppressed indignation at its anti-rationalism.

Conclusion

The writing motivated by silence is marked formally by what seems to some readers as a vague emptiness at the centre of a lot of verbal noise and to others the reality of a quiet undersense at the heart of all activity, whether encouraging or discouraging. The problem was there from the start in the poems of Wordsworth, as Hazlitt noted:

> they either make no impression on the mind at all, seem mere nonsense-verses, or... they leave a mark behind them that never wears out... To one class of readers he appears sublime, to another (and we fear the largest) ridiculous.[1]

As in Conrad or Hardy or Hopkins or indeed Sacks, out of the excess of clamour comes the silence. The Boy of Winander could be taken as an image for the effect of a literature attendant upon silence. The birds respond to his call: 'With quivering peals, / And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud / Redoubled and redoubled; concourse wild / Of mirth and jocund din!' (Prelude V. 401-4). Surrounded by noise in every shape and form, notes smooth and harsh, quick and prolonged, coming from bird and boy, and from the hills themselves, in 'screams, and echoes loud / Redoubled', the speaker is yet most profoundly roused by the 'pauses of deep silence' that grow, baffling his skills of mimicry.[2] The span of silence provokes his notice past the immediate cause, leaving him poised in bare attention ('Then sometimes, in that silence, while he hung / Listening...'). The strange thing is that whilst the pause engenders an intense responsiveness in the speaker, his mood is unconscious too. Both

---

1. Hazlitt, The Spirit of the Age; from Collected Works, IV, 274-5.
2. For the source of these quotations please see p.304 above, where the passage is quoted in full.

vivid and blank, 'the visible scene / Would enter unawares into his mind'. Though standing still, the speaker seems advanced to a mental pitch beyond all call; and it is this advance and stillness, this calm and upheaval, that lies at the heart of Wordsworth's experience.

The twentieth century thinker most consistently attentive to silence is Heidegger and it is notable that his writing provokes in many professional analysts a similar queasy sense that it makes a lot of noise around nothing at all. Inarticulacy for him lies at the centre of speech, and holds the spirit at centre too. He writes: 'Only as men belong within the peal of stillness are mortals able to speak in _their own_ way in sounds'.[3] Silence is, for Heidegger, the common ground, the root and source of every communication. So whilst the individual's words might be understood thereafter, true comprehension lies in the 'peal of stillness' alone, in a common strain that survives and predates sound. Stillness is the formative state, as Heidegger observes: 'Language speaks as the peal of stillness' (_PLT_, 207).

In the lectures and articles translated into English as _Poetry, Language, Thought_, Heidegger is concerned not merely to demonstrate that we speak 'as the peal of stillness', but to turn about and find the very source of language. It is the point of stillness itself that he seeks, and he looks for it in poetry. Perhaps it ought to be the obvious route, but it is an unaccountably daring choice to seek the origins of language in original writing. It's as though the most spontaneous moment would also be deeply encoded with the past, as if our own forgotten history were brimming on the surface, still to be

---

3. Martin Heidegger, _Poetry, Language, Thought_, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971), p.208. Hereafter referred to as _PLT_.

enacted! As Eliot writes:

> There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
> And found and lost again and again.[4]

As I have argued, Eliot knows this with a wonderful clarity which means however that he talks of the fight rather than fighting. His poetry is great criticism of the literature of silence rather than that literature itself. Whereas, poetry is for Heidegger a pure language and it makes a special call. He quotes from 'A Winter Evening' by Georg Trakl:

> Window with falling snow is arrayed
> Long tolls the vesper bell.

And he questions the lines:

> What is this naming? Does it merely deck out the imaginable familiar objects and events - snow, bell, window, falling, ringing - with words of a language? No. This naming does not hand out titles, it does not apply terms, but it calls into the word. The naming calls. Calling brings closer what it calls.
>
> (PLT, 198)

By this call, Heidegger means a genuine evocation: 'The naming calls' literally, summoning presence. It is not the mere fitting of word to object that the poem requires: 'This naming does not hand out titles, it does not apply terms, but it calls into the word'. Decisively, it is not enough that the mind should understand. If the poem is to sound at all, the imagination must re-call. Heidegger spells it out doggedly:

> This speaking names the snow that soundlessly strikes the window late in the waning day, while the vesper bell rings. In such a snowfall, everything lasts longer. Therefore the vesper bell, which daily rings for a strictly fixed time, tolls long.
>
> (PLT, 198)

---

4. TSE, p.203; Four Quartets, 'East Coker', V.

The eye is not simply to read 'Long tolls the vesper bell'; rather 'long' conjures the muffling effect of the snowfall, creating the pace and the habit of snow. In this way, the dulling of the bell actually accentuates its tone, making it 'call' in another sphere, so that it makes an active demand on the reader. The words reach impossibly to do more than they can, which is the nature of words, but in a poem conscious of silence it registers that impossible meeting. As Sacks found in trying to summon his leg, a response is necessary to the fact of the call. Without the reply he cannot even guarantee that he has called. Response marks the difference between a dead silence, the failure of language, and the living call, which comes out of a living silence. Heidegger's poem too demands response, except that here the call is not located in a body but rather planted in words. It's as if the poem needed to be read. It is only thus that 'Calling brings closer what it calls'. This closeness, however, is not to be one of simple proximity. It represents far more of an upheaval than that, and the result is more uneven. The element that is summoned does not finally belong in this context:

> Calling brings closer what it calls. However this bringing closer does not fetch what is called only in order to set it down in closest proximity to what is present, to find a place for it there. The call does indeed call. Thus it brings the presence of what was previously uncalled into a nearness. But the call, in calling it here, has already called out to what it calls. Where to? Into the distance in which what is called remains, still absent.
>
> The calling here calls into a nearness. But even so the call does not wrest what it calls away from the remoteness, in which it is kept by the calling there.
>
> (<u>PLT</u>, 198-99)

The call draws out of, but also into, the distance, not so as to tame or diminish its depth, 'to find a place for it here', but rather so

that the voice of the distance itself is heard. The ordinary level of the line is charged with a spectacular depth. It is as though the call that commanded the distant object to be near, also allowed the spirit to expand to the 'remoteness'.

This calling which makes present both nearness and absence is reminiscent of that passage in The Prelude, where Wordsworth hangs 'Suspended by the blast'. There is a catch in his voice that fills with the distance:

> Oh! at that time,
> While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
> With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
> Blow through my ears! the sky seem'd not a sky
> Of earth, and with what motion mov'd the clouds!
> (Prelude I. 346-50)

It is the closeness of the 'loud dry wind' that makes the 'strange utterance' audible, yet it is primarily the distance that we hear, the estrangement, the utterance that has to remain also silent, unexpressed except by exclamation. This is where Wordsworth stakes his allegiance as a poet. The ordinary features of the world are received, transformed. So whilst the sky and the motion of the clouds are as they were, they are at the same time utterly unlike themselves: 'the sky seem'd not a sky / Of earth, and with what motion mov'd the clouds'. Between 'motion' and 'mov'd', there is a massive and inconspicuous transformation. His attention is commanded beyond the influence of words.

It is in a kind of forgetfulness to ordinary significance that the spirit advances thus, abandoning the common sense. As in Hardy's poem 'The Voice', for example, where the speaker hears the woman's voice in the breeze, impossibly calling to him from a former time. He hears, and forgetting himself, he responds to her call:

> Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,
> Standing as when I drew near to the town
> Where you would wait for me.[5]

The striking thing is that whilst he is drawn from the common perspective, Hardy needs no specialised language to deal with the change. His advance is not marked by an alteration of idiom, far from it. Without pause, his words take up the new sense, instantaneously realigned. So his half-doubting, reasonable 'then' ('Let me view you, then') is simply overtaken by the immediate moment, the speaker suddenly abandoning both consequence and reason. All caution is lost in the specificity of the demand: 'Let me view you, then, / Standing as when I drew near to the town / Where you would wait for me'. The woman is no longer left behind, belonging to the past, instead she is ahead of the speaker, awaiting his return.

Even when the speaker has dispelled the impression, recollecting the sound of the breeze and the death of the woman, still the voice has power to call. As he walks, he is reclaimed by a present specified now by clear boundaries:

> Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessness
> Travelling across the wet mead to me here,
> You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,
> Heard no more again far or near?
>
> Thus I; faltering forward,
> Leaves around me falling,
> Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,
> And the woman calling.
> ('The Voice', 11.9-16)

The speaker appears suddenly, framed in reality: 'Thus I; faltering forward, / Leaves around me falling'. In both time and in substance, it is a rude awakening. Roused now, he sees that the harsh conditions

---

5. Thomas Hardy, Poems, p.57; 'The Voice', 11.5-7. Originally published in Satires of Circumstance.

of the present journey explain the origins of the call. Yet even so, they cannot dispel it. In the very teeth of the explanation, the voice comes again, worse than before, side by side with its actual source: 'Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward / _And_ the woman calling'. The silent proximity is one of uncharted (and unchartable) remoteness; the wind and woman meeting only to reveal how far the spirit has strayed. Hardy is too susceptible to the call to be subdued by sense. What is clear, however, is that the silent span disrupts the surface of the poem, yet holds the mood of the poem. It's the wondering space between the breeze and the call that is most vocal in 'The Voice'.

For Heidegger too, the break seems necessary to the whole. He considers the last stanza of Trakl's 'A Winter Evening':

> Wanderer quietly steps within;
> Pain has turned the threshold to stone.
> There lie, in limpid brightness shown,
> Upon the table bread and wine.
>
> (_PLT_, 195)

The calling here is curiously abrupt, both in its inclusions and in its exclusions. Heidegger catches both eagerly: '"Wanderer quietly steps within". Where to? the verse does not say. Instead, it calls the entering wanderer into the stillness' (_PLT_, 203). Again, when the poem makes an unexpected disclosure, Heidegger observes: 'Suddenly and strangely the call sounds: "Pain has turned the threshold to stone"... It names pain. What pain? The voice says merely "pain"' (_PLT_, 203). He finds the emphasis of his call both in tacit and explicit forms, and in each case it's the simplicity of the naming, the quality of 'merely', that seems to challenge his eye. He is fascinated by the prompting of the apparently random utterances, and his questions are both pertinent and unguided: 'Where to?', 'What pain?'. Beyond the margins of the words, darkness hits the eye.

Though he is left with questions, however, Heidegger is strangely sure of the ground ahead. In the stillness and pain he comes upon a rift and without hesitation, he asserts that this is the centre of the poem:

> Pain rends. It is the rift. But it does not tear apart into dispersive fragments. Pain indeed tears asunder, it separates, yet so that at the same time it draws everything to itself... Pain is the joining of the rift.
>
> (PLT, 204)

Like Sacks's scotoma, the rift calls reality and possibility to itself, governing with a voiceless strength: 'Pain indeed tears asunder, it separates, yet so that at the same time it draws everything to itself'. The span of painful awareness rejects and collects the 'fragments' at once, preserving in the break-up a still sense of the whole. It's like Herbert's poem, 'Affliction (IV)', where even as the speaker pleads to be released, he is held: 'Lord, hunt me not / A thing forgot'.[6] In the mirroring of the forget-me-not, his phrasing folds a keepsake.

There seems to be an ingrained duality in the rift, which can be seen also in Wordsworth's exclamation, 'the sky seem'd not a sky / Of earth, and with what motion mov'd the clouds!', or in Hardy's 'Let me view you, then'. The inexpressible seems to summon tautology, and meaning takes place in the region between. Wittgenstein discusses this manner of tautology, giving the example of someone simply declaring what is before him:

> 'I know that that's a tree.' Why does it strike me as if I did not understand the sentence? though it is after all an extremely simple sentence of the most ordinary kind? It is as if I could not focus my mind on any meaning. Simply because I don't look

---

6. GH, p.105; 'Affliction (IV)', 11.2-3.

> for the focus where the meaning is. As soon as I think of an everyday use of the sentence instead of a philosophical one, its meaning becomes clear and ordinary.
>
> (OC, Section 347, 44)

Wittgenstein uncovers here a strange bearing of incomprehension. The confusion strikes him directly, and yet vaguely too. He asks: 'Why does it strike me as if I did not understand?'. He is emphatically undecided. It is not so much that he cannot see, as that he is unable to concentrate: 'It is as if I could not focus my mind on any meaning'. Of course this is part of a more general argument that meaning depends upon use, upon the activity of a context. But for the moment trusting to the movement of the bare words, it sounds here as though, at the point of meaning there would be a kind of fatigue. It is as though he could not make up his mind to see, as though to think in the most general way possible ('philosophical') evacuates significance to silence instead of intensifying it. Meaning here loses its context; any amount of effort could not pierce this darkness. But this is to read Wittgenstein as though he were closer to Heidegger than he is.

Compare this to the dreams of nothingness in A Leg To Stand On. As Sacks lies in hospital, these dreams come to dominate him with an awful consistency:

> At the centre of each was this immovable, blank somewhat. None of the dreams seemed to tell any 'story'. They were fixed and static, like tableaux or dioramas, solely designed, as it were, to exhibit their appalling-boring centre piece, this nothingness, this phantom, of which nothing could be said.
>
> (Leg, 65)

The dreams assault him with 'this immovable, blank somewhat', rousing him incessantly to witness this blatant and yet unreachable meaning. The 'phantom' is both shocking and anodyne, an 'appalling-boring

centre piece', jarringly present and impossible to gauge. Sacks is left only with voice enough to observe his helplessness before this phantom, clearly and singly aware that 'nothing could be said'.

Sacks has a horror, understandably, of the silence as great as Wittgenstein's, but he stays with the silence, because he has to, for longer and wants to find a voice for it. The writers I am concerned with do not breathe a sigh of relief only when they recover a meaning 'clear and ordinary'. The tautology evacuates significance momentarily for Wittgenstein until he can find a practical context to explain it.

But is it necessary to seek another context? What would happen if we were to allow the apparent loss of meaning full force, to look for the focus here, without seeking another context? This is what Heidegger does with the sentence: 'Language speaks'. He seeks meaning in the context of the tautology alone:

> Language speaks. If we let ourselves fall into the abyss denoted by this sentence, we do not go tumbling into emptiness. We fall upward, to a height. Its loftiness opens up a depth. The two span a realm in which we would like to become at home, so as to find a residence, a dwelling place for the life of man.
>
> (PLT, 191-2)

Heidegger's tautology is not the site of boredom but of sudden, dazzling conviction. The repetition does not, as might be expected, underpin or ground the sentence. Precisely the reverse, for between the words Heidegger finds an abyss: 'If we let ourselves fall into the abyss denoted by this sentence, we do not go tumbling into emptiness. We fall upward, to a height'. The groundless meaning rises on its own conviction, completely assured. This is the topography of silence, self-given and absolute. It is striking, however, that in spite of the prospect of 'loftiness' and 'depth', and without any

attempt to justify his view, Heidegger wants to call this home. Startlingly, he writes: 'The two span a realm in which we would like to become at home, so as to find a residence, a dwelling place for the life of man'. Heidegger struggles to locate his sense of belonging, naming it many times; and yet for all of his difficulty with the naming, the repetition does not impinge on his sense of the absolute. His meaning is intact and quite specific. It is not just that we may be at home in this depth, but that the height and the abyss should be the 'dwelling place for the life of man'.

The rest is always involved in process; it is what 'we would like', not quite where we are. But it would be to find in this span of loftiness and depth, a stillness that lies at the heart of metaphor, tautology and paradox. It is the process in which Wordsworth wants also to find a silence behind and through the noise:

> The immeasurable height
> Of woods decaying, never to be decay'd,
> The stationary blasts of water-falls,
> And every where along the hollow rent
> Winds thwarting winds, bewilder'd and forlorn,
> The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
> The rocks that mutter'd close upon our ears,
> Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
> As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
> And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
> The unfetter'd clouds, and region of the heavens,
> Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
> Were all like workings of one mind, the features
> Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
> Characters of the great Apocalypse,
> The types and symbols of Eternity,
> Of first and last, and midst, and without end.
> (_Prelude_ VI. 556-72)

In the fury of the scene there is a perceptible calm, and not just in the majestic syntax, a sense that is gathered curiously in the outrage of perception, for example, in 'the immeasurable height / Of woods decaying, never to be decay'd'. The bare elevation of 'the immeasurable height' contrasts with the descent of 'woods decaying';

and yet the two ideas are planted very close. Wordsworth does not refer to the immeasurable height of woods which are also decaying; his meanings strike far closer than that. Rather it is: 'The immeasurable height / Of woods decaying'. The high and the low pass one another, and disorientate the sense. Somehow through the surge of life and death, Wordsworth glimpses the overriding, tacit sense of 'never to be decay'd'. In the thick of the confusion, he sees this steady point. Or again, he sees 'The stationary blasts of waterfalls'. Wordsworth's silence here is heard in a roar; there is an interchange between movement and sound by which stationary also implies an abiding quiet.

The description hardly seems on a human scale. First the eye is called upwards to a distance, to the 'torrents shooting from the clear blue sky'. Then immediately, bluntly, as if they were jostling in his way, Wordsworth describes 'The rocks that mutter'd close upon our ears'. It is as if, to gather the impression of the scene, consciousness would have to ascend to the height of the 'clear blue sky', so that hearing not sight became the situating sense. In this passage Wordsworth's footing is forgotten entirely. The eye and the ear do not even corroborate each other, but seem called rather to separate spheres. While the eye looks up, the ear is lured to the way-side, attracted by the 'close' muttering of the crags. All parameters of perception, of near and far, above and below, darkness and light, seem to have lost track of their ordinary scope. So it is significant that the rocks do not speak in sound alone. They mutter 'close upon our ears', pressing their meaning home with tangible force. Though they have a voice, they do not have words.

The disorientation of the perceiver is clear in the uncalculating way that the diverse elements run into one another, locating regions

side by side that are utterly apart:

> The sick sight
> And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
> The unfetter'd clouds, and region of the heavens.

Like the 'gentle breeze / That blows from the green fields and from the clouds / And from the sky' (<u>Prelude</u> I. 1-3), the 'giddy prospect' hardly knows the top from the bottom, and treats it all as one, seeing in one sweep, 'the raving stream, / The unfetter'd clouds, and region of the heavens'. The passage is full of such perilous mistakes and strange commitments of vision. As with the 'sick sight / And giddy prospect', for example, where the perceiver's response is thrown out to merge with what he sees. The sickness and the giddiness that belong more properly to the speaker are transposed onto the landscape, much as the human quality of 'raving' is given to the stream. It is as though the intensity of vision committed the speaker to the 'prospect' of the stream. There is no purchase in this chasm. And yet here, in this abyss, this 'hollow rent', Wordsworth finds his home:

> The unfetter'd clouds, and region of the heavens,
> Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
> Were all like workings of one mind, the features
> Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
> Characters of the great Apocalypse,
> The types and symbols of Eternity,
> Of first and last, and midst, and without end.

Wordsworth, like Heidegger, finds poise in the abyss. The turmoil is simply resolved into this steady view 'Of first and last, and midst, and without end'. So perfect is the reorientation of perspective that it would be hard indeed to tell where it began. Certainly there are no clues in either syntax or exclamation to herald the calm. Commas provide the only punctuation in the passage (save the full-stop at the end), and they offer no obstacle to the 'raving stream', rather adding to its impetus, until at some hidden point, the outrage is

gathered in equanimity: 'Like workings of one mind, the features / Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree'. This stillness is not the mere absence of movement. It is an active and a powerful calm, that seizes the spirit with a sense of quiet. It comes mid-stream, in the midst of the confusion and in the middle of The Prelude itself. And this is the astounding thing, that stillness should possess strength to wreak a wholesale reorientation! Simply the calm recentres the perspective. It is far more than a stillness perceived, the vision has the power bring the spirit calm.

To Heidegger this stillness is innately poetic, and he values poetry highly. The poem is a powerful and original force:

> Poetry proper is never merely a higher mode (melos) of everyday language. It is rather the reverse: everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer.
>
> (PLT, 208)

Poetry is not the refinement, but the source of language and by poetry he means literature as such: 'Pure prose is never "prosaic". It is as poetic and hence as rare as poetry' (PLT, 208). But what is the nature of this 'call'? Perhaps the easier question to approach would be why ordinary, habitual language does not issue a similar call. Heidegger explains: 'Everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem'. It is as if ordinary speech were too well connected, too 'used-up', to have a note of its own. It is like a bell that is held, that cannot sound. Poetry, however, calls to us from a state of detachment, barely held in its newness, and it tolls with a clear unerring tone. Far from being used-up, 'Poetry proper' has barely started.

Yet still there is something here that does not fit. That everyday language is a poem we have forgotten presents few difficulties. The

idea carries the logic of time. But how is it that the poetry of silence is so deeply available to recall? Heidegger is quite specific in his study of causation. The 'everyday language' is not 'used-up' and therefore 'forgotten'. Rather it is the other way around - language dries up because it is forgotten. By this logic, it follows that the 'peal of stillness' calls as a consequence of being remembered. This is the idea that it is hard to balance. In some way, the silent, unheard word speaks to us from source. The very word that we could not have heard before seems to come from deep within human nature itself. Perhaps this is the closest that it is possible to get to a definition of silence, that it is precedence without antecedent. So it is significant that when Wordsworth attempts to describe the spots of time in all their daunting freshness, he settles on the 'dawn almost / Of life' (Prelude XI. 335-6). The immediate, physical margins of spots of time cannot be found, as Wordsworth attests:

> I should need
> Colours and words that are unknown to man
> To paint the visionary dreariness
> Which, while I look'd all round for my lost guide,
> Did at that time invest the naked Pool,
> The Beacon on the lonely Eminence,
> The Woman, and her garments vex'd and toss'd
> By the strong wind.
> (Prelude XI. 309-16)

Despite the blatant and exposed conditions, 'the naked Pool', and the 'Beacon on the lonely Eminence', one starkly revealed, the other designed especially to be seen; and despite flashing movement of the woman's garments in the wind, Wordsworth finds the scene signally unseeable: 'I should need / Colours and words that are unknown to man / To paint the visionary dreariness...'. All that is certain is where the vision began. Thus Wordsworth addresses the greatness of his feeling:

Oh! mystery of Man, from what a depth
Proceed thy honours! I am lost, but see
In simple childhood something of the base
On which thy greatness stands, but this I feel,
That from thyself it is that thou must give,
Else never canst receive.
(Prelude XI. 329-34)

This is how the spirit may be stilled. It is when the 'I' loses purchase on itself, when 'I am lost' and can do no more, that Wordsworth starts to 'see'. It is as though silence, the 'lost guide', led the speaker home. This is where the power of silence lies, it belongs with our beginning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Texts

Arnold, Matthew, The Poems, ed. Kenneth Allott (London, 1965).

Poems of William Blake, ed. W. B. Yeats (London, 1893).

Blake, William, The Complete Poems, ed. Alicia Ostriker (Harmondsworth, 1977).

The Cloud of Unknowing and other treatises by an English Author of the Fourteenth Century, ed. Dom Justin McCann (London, 1936).

Coleridge, S. T., Poetical Works, ed. E. H. Coleridge, 2 vols (Oxford, 1912).

Coleridge, S. T., The Friend (1818), ed. Barbara E. Rooke, 2 vols (Princeton, New Jersey, 1969).

Coleridge, S. T., Lectures (1808-1819): On Literature, ed. R. A. Foakes, 2 vols (Princeton, New Jersey, 1987).

Coleridge, S. T., Lay Sermons, ed. R. J. White (Princeton, New Jersey, 1972).

Coleridge, S. T., Biographia Literaria (1817), ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols (Princeton, New Jersey, 1983).

Coleridge, S. T., Marginalia, ed. George Whalley, 3 vols (Princeton, New Jersey, 1984).

Conrad, Joseph, The Nigger of the "Narcissus", Typhoon, Falk and other stories, ed. Norman Sherry (London, 1974). The Nigger of the "Narcissus" (1897); Typhoon, Falk and other stories (1903).

Conrad, Joseph, Lord Jim (1900), ed. Robert Hampson (Harmondsworth, 1986).

Conrad, Joseph, Heart of Darkness (1902), ed. Paul O'Prey (Harmondsworth, 1983).

Conrad, Joseph, Nostromo (1904), ed. Martin Seymour-Smith (Harmondsworth, 1983).

Conrad, Joseph, Under Western Eyes (1911), ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth, 1985).

Conrad, Joseph, The Shadow-Line (1917), ed. Jeremy Hawthorn (Oxford, 1985).

Conrad, Joseph, The Mirror of the Sea. A Personal Record, (London, 1946).

Conrad, Joseph, Notes on Life and Letters (London, 1924).

Letters from Joseph Conrad 1895-1924, ed. Edward Garnett (Indianapolis and New York, 1962).

Cowper, William, Poetical Works, ed. H. S. Milford, fourth edition with additions by Norma Russell (Oxford, 1967).

The Life and Works of William Cowper, ed. Robert Southey, 15 vols (London, 1836).

The Sermons of John Donne, ed. G. R. Potter and E. M. Simpson, 10 vols (Berkeley, 1953-62).

Donne, John, The Complete English Poems, ed. A. J. Smith (Harmondsworth, 1973).

Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation by R. B. Blakney (New York, 1941).

Eliot, T. S., Collected Poems 1909-1962, (London, 1974).

Hardy, F. E., The Life of Thomas Hardy (London, 1962).

The Poems of Thomas Hardy, ed. T. R. M. Creighton, second edition (London, 1977).

Hardy, Thomas, Far from the Madding Crowd (1874), ed. Ronald Blythe (Harmondsworth, 1978).

Hardy, Thomas, The Return of the Native (1878), ed. George Woodcock (Harmondsworth, 1978).

Hardy, Thomas, The Trumpet-Major (1880), ed. Roger Ebbatson (Harmondsworth, 1986).

Hardy, Thomas, The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886), ed. Martin Seymour-Smith (Harmondsworth, 1978).

Hardy, Thomas, The Woodlanders (1887), ed. James Gibson (Harmondsworth, 1981).

Hardy, Thomas, Tess of the D'Urbevilles (1891), ed. David Skilton and A. Alvarez (Harmondsworth, 1978).

Hardy, Thomas, Collected Short Stories, ed. Desmond Hawkins and F. B. Pinion (London, 1988).

Hardy, Thomas, The Life and Work, ed. Michael Millgate (London, 1984).

Hazlitt, William, The Collected Works, ed. A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover, 12 vols (London, 1902).

The English Poems of George Herbert, ed. C. A. Patrides (London, 1974).

The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie, fourth edition (Oxford, 1967).

The Journals and Papers of G. M. Hopkins, ed. Humphry House and Graham Storey (London, 1959).

The Note-books and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. Humphry House (London, 1937).

The Correspondence of G. M .Hopkins and R. W. Dixon, ed. C. C. Abbott, second edition (London, 1955).

Johnson, Samuel, Lives of the English Poets, ed. John Wain (London, 1975).

Keats Letters, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford, 1970).

Milton, John, The Complete Poems, ed. Gordon Campbell and R. A. Wright (London, 1980).

Newman, J. H., A Reason For The Hope Within (1843), (Denville, NJ, 1985).

Newman, J. H., Apologia pro Vita Sua (1864), ed. Maisie Ward (London, 1976).

Newman, J. H., An Essay in aid of A Grammar Of Assent (1870), (Westminster, Md., 1973).

The Poems of Alexander Pope, ed. John Butt (London, 1963).

Sacks, Oliver, The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat (London, 1985).

Sacks, Oliver, A Leg To Stand On (London, 1986).

Sacks, Oliver, Awakenings, second edition (London, 1990).

Shelley, Percy Bysshe, Poetical Works, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, second edition, corrected by G. M. Matthews (Oxford, 1970).

Shelley's Prose or The Trumpet of a Prophecy, ed. David Lee Clark (Albuquerque, 1966).

The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols (Oxford, 1940-49).

Wordsworth, William, The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind, the 1805 text, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, second edition, corrected by Stephen Gill (Oxford, 1970).

The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser, 3 vols (London, 1974).

Wordsworth, William, The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth, ed. Stephen Gill (Ithaca, 1975).

Wordsworth, William, The Prelude, 1798-1799, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca, 1977).

Letters of William Wordsworth, ed. Alan G. Hill (Oxford, 1984).

Yeats, W. B., Autobiographies, (London, 1926).

The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats, second edition (London, 1950).

The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats, second edition (London, 1952).

Yeats, W. B., Essays and Introductions (London, 1961).

Yeats, W. B., Explorations (London, 1962).

Secondary texts

Arnold, Matthew, the Preface to The Poems of Wordsworth, [1879], in Norton's Critical Edition of The Prelude.

Bains, Jocelyn, Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography (London, 1960).

Bayley, John, An Essay on Hardy (Cambridge, 1978).

Bergson, Henri, Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays, trans. H. Wildon Carr (London, 1920).

Bergson, Henri, The Creative Mind, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York, 1968).

Berkeley, George, Philosophical Works, ed. M. R. Ayers, (London, 1975).

The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition, ed. Dom Bernard Orchard and the Revd R. C. Fuller (London, 1966).

Bradley, A. C., 'Wordsworth', from Oxford Lectures on Poetry [1909], in Norton's Critical Edition of The Prelude.

Burke, Edmund, The Works (8 vols), vol. I (London, 1897).

The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 3 vols (London, 1973).

Coleridge, S. T., Selected Letters, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford, 1988).

Curtins, E. R., European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (New York, 1953).

Davie, Donald, Articulate Energy (London, 1955).

Doody, Margaret Anne, The Daring Muse (Cambridge, 1985).

Ellmann, Richard, The Identity of Yeats (London, 1964).

Empson, William, 'Sense in The Prelude', in Norton's Critical Edition of The Prelude.

Fish, Stanley E., *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley, 1974).

Ford, Ford Madox, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (New York, 1924).

Freud, Sigmund and Breuer, Joseph, Pelican Freud Library, Volume 3, *Studies On Hysteria* (1893-1895), trans. James and Alix Strachey, ed. Angela Richards (Harmondsworth, 1974).

Hamilton, Paul, *Wordsworth* (Brighton, 1986).

Hampshire, Stuart, *Spinoza* (Harmondsworth, 1951).

Hartman, Geoffrey H., *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven, Conn., 1964).

Hartman, Geoffrey H., *The Unmediated Vision*, second edition (New York, 1966).

Hartman, Geoffrey H., *The Unremarkable Poet*, foreword by Donald G. Marshall (London, 1987).

Heidegger, Martin, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971).

House, Humphry, *All in Due Time* (London, 1955).

Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (1790), trans. and ed. James Creed Meredith (Oxford, 1911).

Man, Paul de, *Blindness and Insight*, second edition (London, 1983).

Jacobus, Mary, *Romanticism, Writing, And Sexual Difference* (Oxford, 1989).

Jeffares, A. Norman, and Knowland, A. S., *A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (London, 1975).

Kenner, Hugh, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (London, 1959).

Kermode, Frank, *Romantic Image* (London, 1961).

Kierkegaard, Søren, *Fear and Trembling* (1843), trans. and ed. Alastair Hannay, (Harmondsworth, 1985).

Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), trans. and ed. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton, 1980).

Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), trans. and ed. Alastair Hannay, (Harmondsworth, 1989).

Lindenberger, Herbert, *On Wordsworth's Prelude* (Princeton, NJ, 1963).

Marshall, Donald G. (ed.), foreword to Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Unremarkable Poet* (London, 1987).

McGann, Jerome J., The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation (Chicago and London, 1983).

Newey, Vincent, Cowper's Poetry (Liverpool, 1982).

Nietzsche, Friedrich, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, trans. and ed. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, 1969).

Nietzsche, Friedrich, Ecce Homo, trans. and ed. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, 1979).

The Norton Critical Edition of The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York and London, 1979).

The Oxford Companion to the Mind, ed. R. L. Gregory (Oxford, 1987).

Onorato, Richard J., 'Metaphors of Beginning', in Norton's Critical Edition of The Prelude.

Plimmer, Martin, 'The Budapest Method: A Cure for Damaged Brains?', Observer Magazine (12 July, 1992), pp. 40-2.

Ray, William, Literary Meaning from Phenomenology to Deconstruction (Oxford, 1984).

Rice, Philip and Waugh, Patricia, (ed.), Modern Literary Theory, a Reader (London, 1989).

Richardson, James, The Poetry of Necessity (Chicago, 1977).

Ricks, Christopher, 'Wordsworth: "A Pure Organic Pleasure from the Lines"', in William Wordsworth, Penguin Critical Anthologies, ed. Graham McMaster (Harmondsworth, 1972).

Robinson, John, In Extremity: A Study of Gerard Manley Hopkins (Cambridge, 1978).

John Ruskin: Selected Writings, ed. Philip Davis (London, 1995).

Schulz, Max F., Paradise Preserved (Cambridge, 1985).

Sheats, Paul D., The Making of Wordsworth's Poetry, 1785-1798 (Cambridge, Mass., 1973).

Spinoza, Benedict de, On The Improvement Of The Understanding, The Ethics, Correspondence, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York and London, 1955). Republication of the Bohn Library edition, London, 1883.

Strawson, Galen, (rev. A Leg to Stand On), TLS, 1984, June 22.

Svarny, Eric, 'The Men of 1914' (London, 1988).

Thompson, M. Guy, The Death of Desire (New York and London, 1985).

Thomson, A. W. (ed.), Wordsworth's Mind and Art (Edinburgh, 1969).

Versényi, Laszlo, Heidegger, Being and Truth (New Haven, 1966).

White, Norman, Hopkins: A Literary Biography (Oxford, 1992).

William Wordsworth, Penguin Critical Anthologies, ed. Graham McMaster (Harmondsworth, 1972).

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, On Certainty, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1969).

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. I, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. C. G. Luckhardt and Maximilian A. E. Aue (Oxford, 1982).

Wordsworth, Jonathan, 'The Two-Part Prelude of 1799', in Norton's Critical Edition of The Prelude.

LIVERPOOL
UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY