

Ebb and Flow in *The Excursion*

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What will never do is the lingering notion that *The Excursion* requires nervously self-qualifying apologies. It needs to be stated roundly that the poem is a masterpiece, especially in Books I to IV (the main region of my concern), even if it is a masterpiece that demonstrates the strange intricacy of Wordsworth's imaginative genius. *The Excursion* is rich in writing of a consistently and manifestly high order, whatever the sometimes churlish objections of ideologically motivated adversaries from Jeffrey onwards. Matthew Arnold thought that it (along with *The Prelude*) was by no means Wordsworth's "best work" because, at its most doctrinal, it often possessed "none of the characters of *poetic* truth" (Arnold, xi, xx); in fact, the poem is great because it articulates, as a "*poetic* truth," the need for philosophizing, a need that arises from its sense of the persistent presence in life of "silent suffering, hardly clothed / In bodily form" (I, 669-70; qtd. from Bushell et al, ed.). Such "suffering" is frequently experienced somatically in *The Excursion* in and through the "bodily form" of human beings: a form doomed to experience emotional pain in a physical way, to weaken and to die.

The Excursion knows on the pulses of virtuosic versification about what the Prospectus calls “*solitary anguish*” (77) and “*the fierce confederate storm / Of sorrow, barricadoed evermore / Within the walls of Cities*” (78-80). Wordsworth – and it is typical of the poem’s odd fineness that he should so – works in plangent ways. First, he concedes that neither countryside nor city provides refuge from suffering. He then expresses his hope that he will be able to offer consolation in terms reminiscent of his own vulnerability to despondency: in commenting on such suffering and its “*sounds*” (80), he hopes he will not, and thus simultaneously fears that he may, be “*downcast or forlorn*” (82). The wish is upbeat; the phrasing tends towards a downturn.

Wordsworth’s amply weighed considerations of other states, verging on self-subversion, compose a feature of his work. In *The Prelude* (1805), Book II, he writes of the “infant Babe” (237), “No outcast he, bewildered and depressed” (261; qtd. from Halmi ed.; for relevant commentary see Jonathan Wordsworth, 79). By so doing, he suggests an alternative virtual world of depression and bewilderment, only too likely to be closer to the general lot. Comparably, revolvings round the axis of the blank verse are the source of some of the finest passages in *The Excursion*. This is not to apply a mechanistic practice of deconstruction or to suggest that the poem is good because it annuls its

own affirmations. It is to argue that those affirmations and those annulments cohabit the same poetic space in ways that suggest their mutual dependence. The Wanderer, for example, caps his allegorizing image of the “curious Child” (IV, 1126) “applying to his ear / The convolutions of a smooth-lipped Shell” (IV, 1127-8) with the following translation of the allegory:

Even such a Shell the Universe itself
 Is to the ear of Faith; and there are times,
 I doubt not, when to You it doth impart
 Authentic tidings of invisible things;
 Of ebb and flow, and ever-during power;
 And central piece, subsisting at the heart
 Of endless agitation. (IV, 1135-41)

The writing is so self-inwovenly resonant that “allegorizing” ceases to be a valuable description. Planes intersect and dimensions merge in Wordsworth, including tenors and vehicles. So, “Authentic tidings” brings to mind, given the context, tidal movement (see John Beer, 212); tidings that are tidal are tides that will “ebb and flow,” challenging or redefining what “central peace” might mean. The phrase “ebb and flow” prevents peace from being fixed, and yet is regular

enough in its implication to hold off fluctuating chaos, confirming, indeed, that the Wanderer is one who, in nature, “traced an ebbing and a flowing mind, / Expression ever varying!” (I, 179-80). In the passage above, tidings come of “ever-during power,” where the adjective compacts time and eternity; the “peace” into which the lines pass is one “subsisting at the heart / Of endless agitation,” the more valuable for locating itself “at the heart / Of endless agitation,” but also the more imperilled for being unable to calm the “endless agitation” which has the last word. “[C]entral peace” and “endless agitation” spin round one another in the passage as in some quasi-scientific model of molecular turbulence and purpose. Wordsworth’s “peace” links itself dynamically with “agitation.” Part of the richness of the final four lines in the above-quoted passage is their uncannily prescient accommodation of the fact that, as Gillian Beer argues, in the later 19th century “almost every one of the words in [the] passage underwent transvaluation” (Gillian Beer, 85).

This-worldly at its most yearningly transcendental, *The Excursion* is a congeries of paradox: a narrative poem suspicious of narrative, a dialogue poem that seems to question the very nature of dialogue, a poem that continually swerves away from and returns to the discover of “painful and discreditable shocks / Of contradiction” (V, 358-9), where sound effects knit themselves into waves of chiasmic shock. Distinguished

work in recent years (especially monographs by Alison Hickey [1997] and Sally Bushell [2002]) has recognized in the poem a tale that is far from the unreadable monolith of critical tradition. It is a poem of heights and depths, hope and despair, the private and the public, in many ways the quintessential Romantic long poem, as, in their different ways, Shelley and Keats were quick to see. Harold Bloom finds a “very bitter rhetorical irony” (Bloom, 125) in Keats’s response at the start of *The Fall of Hyperion* to the spirit of lines from Book IV of Wordsworth’s poem, lines that conclude, in Bloom’s extract (125), thus: “The words he uttered shall not pass away / Dispersed like music that the wind takes up / By snatches, and lets fall, to be forgotten.” Bloom is quoting from a – beautifully – revised version that seems to recover an original readiness to mediate between opposites (for the textual detail, see Bushell et al, 165.) He might have shown more explicit admiration for the way in which Wordsworth’s words imagine and enact their own musical dispersal in the act of denying that such dispersal will happen. The very movement from “Dispersed” to “like music” typifies the gentle shocks of mild surprise delivered by Wordsworth’s rhythms and diction; musical dispersal is a very different thing from mere dispersal.

Certainly, Keats responds to the poem’s ability to convey the ebb and flow of feelings as among its chief distinctions. Two echoes in

Prometheus Unbound suggest that Shelley responded with a similar artistic appreciativeness, whatever his overt polemical views of the poem. The first occurs in the first act, when the Fury taunts Prometheus with the “emblem” of Christ on the cross: “Behold, an emblem: those who do endure / Deep wrongs for man, and scorn and chains, but heap / Thousandfold torment on themselves and him” (I, 594-6; Leader and O’Neill, ed.). The Fury recalls the Solitary’s gloomy moralizing over the expiring ashes of “A gypsy fire” (IX, 528): “Behold an emblem here / Of one day’s pleasure, and all mortal joys!” (IX, 554-5). Shelley’s poetry will frequently seek to rekindle those ashes, to advance beyond admonitory emblems. Still, the Solitary’s words have struck home. Such, too, at the other end of the emotional spectrum, is the case with the Poet’s words about the longevity of the Wanderer’s words quoted above: “The words he uttered shall not pass away” (IV, 1280). Shelley, whose Rousseau pleads with the shape all light in *The Triumph of Life*, “Pass not away upon the passing stream” (399), is alert to the way in which “the passing stream” bears human hopes with it. At the close of his lyrical drama, a work preoccupied with the concern to find a language that will last without congealing into fixities and definites, Shelley hearkens back to the Poet’s resolute assertion (with its distinctly optative undernote) when his *dramatis personae* address Demogorgon thus: “Speak: thy strong words may never pass away” (IV, 553).

Shelley has learned from Wordsworth's poem, so his allusions indicate, how to convey different feelings within as well as across passages. This Wordsworthian ability relates to *The Excursion*'s dialogic form, even if Hazlitt's discrediting of Wordsworth's ventriloquism in his review of *The Excursion* still has force: "An intense intellectual egotism swallows up everything. Even the dialogues introduced in the present volume are soliloquies of the same character, taking three different views of one subject." He goes on effectively to annul the concession implied in "different views": "The recluse, the pastor and the pedlar, are three persons in one poet. We ourselves disapprove of these interlocutions between Lucius and Caius as impertinent babbling, where there is no dramatic distinction of character." (Hazlitt in McMaster ed., 116).

Despite the valiant attempts of recent criticism, Hazlitt surely has the last word here, except one would wish to add a proviso. The wittily Trinitarian "three persons in one poet" is better described as a psychomachia of struggling inflections; the result is an overall voice that blends movements towards resistance, instruction, acceptance and resilience, and yet continually threatens to fracture into one of these stances.

For the inflections are stances, attitudes, achieved and sustained through rhetorical devices that foreground awareness of themselves as rhetorical devices. Question, apostrophe, rhapsodic flight, interjection, rumination, analogy are among the means through Wordsworth both maintains a conversation and ensures that it is often univocal. And yet this univocality is neither tyrannous nor dull, as is evident when in Book IV, praising and illustrating the intuition of “a SPIRIT hung” (731) in ancient Greece, the Wanderer evokes a thought

Of Life continuous, Being unimpaired;
 That has been, is and where it was and is
 There shall be, – seen, and heard, and felt, and known,
 And recognized, – existence unexposed
 To the blind walk of mortal accident;
 From diminution safe and weakening age;
 While Man grows old, and dwindles, and decays;
 And countless generations of Mankind
 Depart; and leave no vestige where they trod. (IV, 751-9)

Another poet would have concluded the passage after the first line, but not Wordsworth, a writer here as so often attracted by the possibilities of drawn-out sense, of taking his blank-verse line for an apparently rambling

yet ultimately terrifying walk. That walk begins with near-mystical affirmation and leads itself and the reader, by the end, close to the gates of tragedy's mansion. Or to change the metaphor, appositional lines float on a sea of near-wayward suggestion. Two strong negative epithets bring to mind the conditions of impairment and exposure that they seek to outlaw. The effect is intensified by Wordsworth's manuscript revision from "Of Being unimpaired, continuous life" (Bushell et al ed., 729).

The impression is of assertions fending off anxiety. Wordsworth defines "Life" and "Being" through various modes of the verb "to be" that chase one another across time (and the line-ending) like dots on an optometrist's visual screen tester. Being "has been;" it "is;" and "where it was and is / There shall be;" the final future tense almost accidentally opposes the present tense which is being's preferred dimension – "almost accidentally" because there is, in *The Excursion*, something that does not love an unqualified assertion. The effect of "There shall be" may mean to be lordly, to proclaim continuity, but the phrasing comes across as calculatedly over-emphatic, substituting imagined fiat for certainty.

Moreover, the lines roughen anything too fluent through jagged punctuation – dashes propel the thought sideways as much as forward. Abrupt caesurae, such as the pause after "Depart" in the final line, impart

point and edge to what might else risk complacency. So, too, does the collision between meaning and word order in “From diminution safe and weakening age,” where “safe” does not safeguard the poetry from the threat of the “age” with which it assonantly rhymes and over which it seeks to assert control. That control gives way to its opposite as Wordsworth imagines old age in a series of verbs that have a mind of their own. The very sounds in “diminution” and “age” refuse to be silenced, gaining a paradoxically “weakening” momentum in “dwindles,” “decays,” “generations,” “vestige,” and “they.”

That the passage inspired two of the most affecting moments in two of Keats’s most affecting poems – he imagined the tread of “hungry generations” in “Ode to a Nightingale” (62) and the wasting effect of “old age” on “this generation” in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (45; Allott, ed.) – is itself a tribute to Wordsworth’s elegiac achievement here. The Wanderer’s verse and voice half-answer to Christopher Ricks’s tribute to Wordsworth’s “commitment to those ample relationships which yet do not swamp or warp the multiplicities which they accommodate.” Ricks sums this commitment up as follows: “No fragmentation into separateness; but also no dissolution within a greedily engrossing unity” (Ricks in McMaster ed., 507). “Half-answer” because the Wanderer’s speech here and elsewhere does not occupy the benign via media between

extremes that Ricks's elegant formulations articulate. Instead, "greedily engrossing unity" slugs it out with threatened "fragmentation into separateness" within the very texture of the poetry. Within a moment the recognition that "Man grows old, and dwindles, and decays" has passed into lines that quell fear and yet raise further questions;

We live by admiration, hope, and love;
 And even as these are well and wisely fixed,
 In dignity of being we ascend.
 But what is error? – "Answer he who can!"
 The Sceptic somewhat haughtily exclaimed,
 "Love, Hope, and Admiration – are they not
 Mad Fancy's favourite Vassals? ..." (IV, 760-6)

Speaking here as "a disillusioned rational idealist" (Johnston, 278), the Solitary goes on to ask, "Is it well to trust / Imagination's light when Reason's fails ..?" (IV, 768-9). But the Solitary is more than such a figure, recognizing the dangers of Imagination in the spirit of one only too conscious of Imagination's lure. Here he seems to voice the Wanderer's own doubt, "But what is error?" That is a good question to pose to one who engages in "wandering." It is the question that haunts Wordsworth's (and, one might add, Romanticism's) elevation of

“admiration, hope, and love.” Shelley will write of *Epipsychidion* that “the error, and I confess it is not easy for spirits cased in flesh and blood to avoid it, consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal” (*Shelley Letters*, II, 434). Indeed, the “generous error” (92) of which Shelley’s Preface to *Alastor* speaks suggests empathy with the Solitary. What, indeed, is “error?” What is striking is the Wanderer’s doubly abrupt turn: first on his own expression of sadness at the human lot, then on his attempted advocacy of positive principles. It is in these moments when Wordsworth threatens to expose his fabric of belief in imagination and nature as based on performative rhetoric that *The Excursion* seems the forerunner, not only of Keats’s *The Fall of Hyperion*, but also of a poem such as Stevens’s *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*. So, a section such as IX from “It Must Be Abstract,” the opening part of *Notes*, mocks imagination as the supposed vehicle of a lightly derided “apotheosis,” apparently rejected in favour of reason’s “applied / Enflashings” (Stevens, *Collected Poems*). Yet that way of describing “reason” brings it close to imagination’s gaudy, gorgeous brocade, and in a series of enjambed, appositionally redefining lines that modernize Wordsworth’s handling of blank verse in *The Excursion*, Stevens starts to blur the distinctions round which his meditation is structured; so, “reason” is “lighted at midnight by the studious eye, / Swaddled in revery, the object of // The hum of thoughts evaded in the mind, / Hidden

from other thoughts ...” Stevens’s syntax swaddles reason “in revery,” turns it (this revery-swaddled thought) into “The object of // The hum of thoughts evaded in the mind.” Stevens is clear in his elegantly at-a-remove way about “thoughts evaded in the mind;” Wordsworth gives **us** access to the specific pressures generating such evasions. But in both poets the “hum of thoughts” or the still, sad music of reflection is audible in the very carriage of the poetry, its intricately modulated melody.

“Imagination itself is the illness. It is also, of course, the strength of man,” wrote Geoffrey Hartman (301) in an incisive couple of sentences whose context (he is discussing Margaret’s hope in Book 1 of *The Excursion*) makes it clear that “man” is used inclusively. Variations on this conflicting view of imagination constitute the real centre of the poem and provide something close to the “poem of true spiritual debate” that Hartman senses as an only intermittent possibility (Hartman, 300). The structure in books II to IV attempts to envelop the Solitary in understanding: so, the Wanderer tells the tale of the Solitary, before the Solitary tells his own tale, and the Wanderer responds in would-be despondency-correcting mode. But the poem’s effectiveness is to disrupt anything too pat or moralizing. Indeed, it is striking how the poetry is less interested in didactic point-scoring than in exploring “the passages / Through which the Ear converses with the heart” (IV, 1148-9), moments

when the answer is “yes” to the Wanderer’s question, “Has not the Soul, the Being of your Life / Received a shock of awful consciousness ...?” (IV, 1150-1). The question revolves on itself like so many formulations in the poem: to talk of “Soul” receiving “a shock of awful consciousness” is as though “consciousness” were something done to “Soul” when it seems also to be a mode of the soul’s “Being.” Tucked away in the lines is a Wordsworthian sense of “Being” as a continuum interrupted by heightenings, interjections of awe-inspired and awe-inspiring awareness.

Commitment to the idiom of different faculties is engrained in Wordsworth, as his arrangement of poems from 1815 onwards bears witness. In *The Excursion* such an idiom serves the conviction that the poet has resources on which to draw. “Within the soul a Faculty abides, / That with interpositions, which would hide / And darken, so can deal, that they become / Contingencies of pomp; and serve to exalt / Her native brightness” (IV, 1055-9). The “interpositions” are typically ambivalent: they “would hide / And darken,” but, when harnessed by the “Faculty” (one assumes of Imagination), they turn into “Contingencies of pomp.” Even here, when a positive outcome is assured, “Contingencies of pomp” can rule out neither a suggestion of accident in the first noun nor of showiness in the second. It is as though the Wanderer’s mind is

continually shadowed, constantly alert to threats it seeks to control. This issues in writing that demonstrates keen sympathy with conditions against which it warns and complicates its affirmations with qualifying reminders.

True, in the simile that follows, comparing the power of the imagination with the ability of the moon rising behind trees to convert “the dusky veil / Into a substance glorious as her own” (IV, 1064-5), Wordsworth offers a memorable correlative for the workings of his language at its most charged. But even here there is an air of something close to trickery, even moonshine; the moon “Burns, like an unconsuming fire of light, / In the green trees” (1062-3), where “unconsuming” sways between saying that the imagination’s fires burn in their own virtual way and conceding that the moon’s fire is apparent, not real. When the image is applied to “Man’s celestial Spirit” (1068), therefore, and Wordsworth asserts that “Virtue” (1068) “thus feeds / A calm, a beautiful, and silent fire” (1069-70), there is a transfer of suggestions that have about them an incomplete credibility. This incomplete fit, in a poem so concerned with exquisite fitting between mind and world (see the Prospectus 62-8), has a satisfying authenticity. The poetry generates pathos as well as encouraging admiration for its powers. Wordsworth’s syntax flows one way, while his overt meaning goes another. Here a series of “From”

phrases suggest what the fire consumes, but brings to mind the difficulty of any extended escape “From the incumbrances of mortal life, / From error, disappointment, – nay from guilt” (1071-2).

Longing for release only intensifies the conviction of imprisonment. The “incumbrances of mortal life” find matching expression in Wordsworth’s suddenly weighed-down phrasing. The writing faces up to the fact that it is hard to face down wearisome conditions such as “disappointment, error” and “guilt.” The language is alive to the way in which such conditions form insidiously apt punishments for some underlying fault or sin. The very investigation of fault or sin, the need to probe the wound to its core, threatens always, in the poem, to exacerbate the wound’s painfulness. Communion with “such Objects as excite / No morbid passions, no disquietude, / No vengeance, and no hatred” (IV, 1203-5) may be desirable but the wording suggests how fallible human beings are should they be exposed to other objects. One strong impulse in the poem looks to the “pure principle of Love” (IV, 1207) to supply a *modus vivendi*. Yet another impulse suggests that moods of visionary exaltation, of sublime intuitions, will prove more satisfying. As Alison Hickey notes, in a discussion of the Solitary’s vision of a sky-city in Book II, such moods allow for the imagination to wreak “an effect” “Upon the dark materials of the storm.” She makes the persuasive

observation that “The Solitary is the chief representative of the irreducible particularity of dark materials – both his own and nature’s – as a source of sublimity” (Hickey in O’Neill ed., *Cambridge History*, 484). The Solitary detects the “revealed abode/ Of spirits in beatitude” (908-9), having adumbrated parallels with symbols seen by “Hebrew Prophets” (902). But the attempted wedding of the vision to Hebraic scripture cannot wholly exclude the feeling that the poetry’s imaginative core is its depiction of “an unimaginable sight” (887), a formulation that leads into an energy of kinetic intermingling:

Clouds, mists, streams, watery rocks and emerald turf,
 Clouds of all tincture, rocks and sapphire sky,
 Confused, commingled, mutually inflamed,
 Molten together, and composing thus,
 Each lost in each, that marvellous array
 Of temple, palace, citadel, and huge
 Fantastic pomp of structure without name ... (II, 888-94)

Again, enjambment is the agent of poetic discovery. Discrete items are already losing their distinctness in the commingling of elements implied by the application of “watery” to “rocks” or “sapphire” to “sky.” But it is the appositional run-on of the next few lines, “Each” self-

reflexively “lost in each,” that gives poetic life to the melting and “composing” of which Wordsworth writes. And it is no accident that the on-going present of “composing” suspends before the poem’s eye even as it marvels at the “Fantastic pomp of structure” being reared before us. “Fantastic pomp” hints at a quality at once illusory and imperialist about the “structure” that is coming into being as the Solitary undergoes an unwilling resurrection which he would exchange for death (see lines 910-12). Once more, strangeness offsets grandeur; imagination involves itself with questions of spiritual death in life and life in death.

In explaining the Wanderer’s moments of sympathy for the Solitary, one must remember that he is seeking to address the Solitary’s state of despondency, and thus refers to the conditions paramount in the latter’s account of his life. But his attempt to communicate with the Solitary invites us to discover overlap and connections between the two figures. The passages through which the ear converses with the heart run both ways. Each uses the other’s title in speaking of himself. At the close of Book III, the Solitary comes close to an Othello-like final speech: “spare your pity,” he commands, “if there be in me / Aught that deserves respect” (III, 972-3), where “Aught,” braced at the start of the line, does much to summon “respect.” His following speech (III, 974-98) refuses to mourn as it compares “The tenor / Which my life holds” (974-5) with the

paused motion of “a mountain Brook” (976); as it picks up pace, the passage suggests the Solitary’s life is in a state of change and movement, despite his wish for stilled quiet, and it indicates that he knows this is the case. The rhythms respect his longing for quiet, but they convey in the watery flow they simulate from line to line an alertness to “what perplexing labyrinths, abrupt / Precipitations, and untoward straits, / The earth-born wanderer hath passed” (III, 989-91). That “wanderer” is the stream, but it is also the Solitary, and it is also the Solitary conceding his affinity with his main interlocutor, the Wanderer. Having struck that subliminal spark of fellow feeling, he both generalizes his lot and insists on its private uniqueness, in lines that have the thrilling readiness to go for broke in this figure’s rhetoric of despondency:

Such a stream

Is human Life; and so the Spirit fares

In the best quiet to its course allow’ d:

And such is mine, -- save only for a hope

That my particular current soon will reach

The unfathomable gulph, where all is still! (III, 993-8)

Played out in a subtly modulated version of the movement of the extended passage is the tension between “quiet” and motion; for the

Solitary to “reach / The unfathomable gulph, where all is still” will involve, the image suggests, an increasing velocity and a final descent that is “unfathomable.” Stoicism shrugs off its carapace of frozen calm and achieves a negatively sublime impressiveness here.

Later, when the Wanderer seeks to consolidate his point about the “shock of awful consciousness,” his analogue-hunting works with seemingly unwitting ingenuity to align himself with his ideological adversary: he describes how towards nightfall

is heard

Within the circuit of this Fabric huge,
 One voice – the solitary Raven, flying
 Athwart the concave of the dark-blue dome,
 Unseen, perchance above the power of sight –
 An iron knell! with echoes from afar,
 Faint – and still fainter – as the cry, with which
 The wanderer accompanies her flight
 Through the calm region, fades upon the ear,
 Diminishing by distance till it seemed
 To expire, yet from the Abyss is caught again,
 And yet again recovered! (IV. 1170-81)

The passage is hauntingly metapoetic: in its discovery of “One voice” that arises out of the sounds of nature, and its rendition of this sound, it seems intently to be listening to itself, or to an aspect of itself identified with “the solitary Raven, flying / Athwart the concave of the dark-blue dome” – to, it might be, a version of the Solitary, whose voice sounds its own “iron knell,” a version, too, of the Wanderer: “the cry / With which the wanderer accompanies her flight” identifies, in this mirroring fable, the Solitary and the Wanderer. More than this, the superbly managed blank verse captures the going and returning of “the cry” of the bird in terms that make that cry the lines **we** are hearing. That “cry” threatens to “expire,” hinting at the poetry’s official wish that the cry of suffering should be silenced, yet, true to the poem’s deepest existential convictions, it is continually “recovered” “from the Abyss.”

Recovery here is acknowledgement of the fact and existence of the cry. Everywhere, that cry is in evidence: the agonies of hope experienced by Margaret, with her refusal to forego “A sore heart-wasting” (I, 910), are ultimately affirmed as valuable by the poem – not because they are ethically improving, but because they remind us of the extraordinary fact of “ordinary sorrow” (I, 668). Wordsworth may wish to fit such “sorrow” into a consolatory design; yet his poem avoids trite

moralizing by showing its awareness that it is seeking to find consolation. That awareness animates the Wanderer's memory of the spear-glass that conveyed comfort to him. Again, the poetry is equal to the task of rendering a glimpse of solace, showing that it knows it is undertaking such a task, and revealing, too, its consciousness of grim realities that are only too likely to regather force. The Wanderer speaks of receiving "an image of tranquillity" (I, 976), a way of putting things that allows for the moment's preciousness and second-order quality (this "image" is a product of the mind, the phrasing says, a mind at once heroically sustaining itself and unable not to exercise its capacity for recollected emotion). It "looked so beautiful / Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind, / That what we feel of sorrow and despair / From ruin and from change, and all the grief / The passing shews of Being leave behind, / Appeared an idle dream, that could not live / Where meditation was" (I, 977-83).

Some readers see in the writing a suspiciously dodgy attempt to transcend "sorrow and despair." Yes, there is an attempt to find solace. But it is acknowledged to be that – an attempt. The third and fourth lines ache with grief and sorrow; they cry out with restrained passion about as well as against "what we feel of sorrow and despair / From ruin and from change." The small words, there – "of," "and," "from" – will not let

speaker or reader off the hook; the pronoun “we” expresses kinship. We experience the feelings (“sorrow and despair”), and we know the cause of the feelings: they derive “From ruin,” the “ruined Walls” (I, 951) now a visible emblem of a continual malevolent possibility, and they derive “from change,” a word that has spoken with increasing power of the via dolorosa down which Margaret has walked her way in unhappiness. What is more, the subsequent phrase, “and all the grief / The passing shews of Being leave behind,” tries, in “passing shews,” to adopt a detached perspective. Yet they are the “passing shews of Being” rather than of becoming, and their legacy is “grief.” Wordsworth sets against what is known to be real a moment of near-mystical intuition in which, illogically, imaginatively, consolingly, it “Appeared an idle dream.” The complexity of rival feelings is remarkable.

The Wanderer corrects despondency through acceptance of its inevitable part of mental and spiritual life. *The Excursion* gathers into itself references to other work throughout the period of its composition: allusions to or parallels with the Immortality Ode and *The Prelude* are frequent, while the compositional history is elegiacally bookended, the first book containing Wordsworth’s work on *The Ruined Cottage*, the Solitary’s tale including references to the death of children added in 1812 after the poet’s own losses. The Wanderer in Book IV is the poet of

Tintern Abbey (see Bushell et al, ed., 395): “Those fervent raptures are for ever flown” (IV, 123) tries to bid farewell to a former self, but the work of arriving at recompense taxes him: “Yet cease I not to struggle, and to aspire / Heavenward” (IV, 126-7) are typically suggestive lines. At first reading, they seem to suggest that the struggle has to do with heavenly aspiration, but the struggle is linked to such aspiration by a non-committal “and.” Struggle embroils itself in the very grain of the Wanderer’s understanding of his inner life; he

must needs confess

That ’tis a thing impossible to frame
 Conceptions equal to the Soul’s desires;
 And the most difficult of tasks to *keep*
 Heights which the Soul is competent to gain. (IV, 135-9)

The poetry accommodates recalcitrant difficulty and “the Soul’s desires.” It rocks between crisis and achievement, impossibility and glimpses of attainment. To “*keep* / Heights which the Soul is competent to gain” makes the reader struggle vertiginously with the double-stressed peak-attaining imagined across the line-ending before the more relaxed flow of what follows reaffirms human potential, at once real and unrealizable. The passage suggests that *The Excursion* is far from the

shabby compromise with conventionality it is sometimes depicted as being. Here as elsewhere, it is impressively able, in the same poetically self-aware breath, to acknowledge struggle and difficulty, and the fact and high significance of spiritual “desires.”

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