

Mountain Thoughts:

A Philosophical Exploration of Snowdonia in Journal Form

28-12-11

Only a god could explain how I feel about the earth. The roomy air into which the raven glides and rises, gliding again, upheld by a hand of the good wind is where I, too, have my silence. And the stars in a Snowdonia night are an anagram for the Word.

29-12-11

There are words and touches in these rock-hard, southwest winds. Up on Y Garn the wind was so strong I could barely open my eyes and my ears seemed to cower in the rippling howl of invisible knives. Engulfed in mist, a million ghosts kiss-chasing ghosts, I stumbled low over a boulder-strewn summit, diving behind a wall of cairns to take a quiet, breathless rest. And beside me was a figure of light, shoulder to shoulder with me, whispering wonder into my ear.

30-12-11

I walk the path slowly up to the lake that, on days like today, is swept flat by the wind. Or on some days like yesterday, the lake is lost from sight in a cyclone of rain. Sunlight rarely fills the crags with gold; there are always clouds to overshadow that dream.

After moving to Snowdonia, I am learning to love cloud and rain, they give the light its unforgettable rarity, clarity. Indigo darkness fumes from inside high fissures down which white waters thrum, drape and fade.

All my life I have wanted to be enclosed by mountains, to shoulder winds that make me feel heroic when I stand upright. It is like learning to walk all over again, crawling on hands and knees through heather, clutching loose rock that crumbles away though a helpless hand put forward like a weakened white flag of peace. Cold and braced, here I stand countless times.

Cwm Idwal. I say the place to myself even when I am not there, summoning it a little to keep myself focused on its moods and atmosphere.

Ravens swing in and out of Cwm Idwal's gorges like a child's night-time mobile. But I am not sent off to sleep. I am awake, and awakening. I am beginning to learn Cwm Idwal by heart but, like the heart, its rhythms arise from depths only a god or a raven could plumb.

02-01-12

I watched a tall figure in the rain stride and limp over Moel Siabod ahead of four dogs. He wore a thin black, unzipped anorak that snapped backward against the cold wind. He covered a great distance of knee-deep heather, bog and rock in a short time, ceasing only once to peer across the Migneint moors, and to grasp the pack of sheepdogs around him. After pulling the small storm of his over his sloping shoulders, then bracing his right arm above his eyes, lightly holding a barbed-wire fence with his left hand, he paced skyward into higher rain, and vanished.

That was almost two years ago. Why did it come back to me today? Since then, I scramble up Moel Siabod everyday, in all weather, knowing my way around her now even in night and snow. But I have never seen that strong, determined figure again.

Even though that figure was no more than a strong, fleeting ghost wandering over the mountain, he, more than any other person demonstrated to me the necessity to turn towards the mountains, the rivers and winds and the rain, to plunge my face into them and walk on, passionately intimate with the surroundings that well up through me like a fear. He has inspired me to be out there, to be a part of things, to share in the emergence and decay of life.

06-01-12

I trudged through ankle deep snow among high pines moving and seething in the wind. Sunset glowed over the distant, Glyderau plateau, and clouds made a pink and red roof over the valley, a glimpse of sky through the clouds, a window of chance for an emerging star. Peace. Still as possible. Listening to as much of the wind as I could, all that my inner ear would permit me. I was at peace with something much larger but thoroughly integral to my own sense of self. Through being present to these moments in Snowdonia, I somehow become aware of a presence that thrills me to the bone. The most pressing issue in my life made itself known here – to be a part of nature. To feel it rush through me like a sweeping emotion, not to be regarded as mere scenery. Snowdonia has taught me this.

07-01-12

Ravens balanced the golden ingots of the sun upon the pans of their wings, measuring its ounces as the weight of one of my gasps, paying it out to the shapeless casts of the wind.

I love to describe these things and events. Focused description inscribes these images into my mind, branding them into my flesh. When I next step out of doors to meet the ravens, they will see that I have made the effort to include them in my life as porters of meaning. Focused description uncrumples the mind to include the dim life of the flesh in its vision of the world, and by including the body and the rocks and wind in its vision, the mind is unhinged from its human anchor. Description becomes revelation of, what David Abram calls, 'a more-than-human-world.' Good poetry can achieve this, and philosophy should.

10-01-12

Evocation of the presentness of a place requires a visionary stamina. A place of things ripen within the obedient gaze of attention so that attention seems to become native to the place itself, and eyes and ears grow out of the place where they have their roots:

Today was my first visit to Garth Farm. Its sits on the top of a nameless knoll in the towering shadow of Snowdon Horseshoe, with the Nantygwyrd river snaking around it like a dark moat.

Warfarin sachets were widely racked on shelves, between them on hooks, hung blunt shears, clippers and crooks. Ships of rain crashed against the barn that shrugged, wind got in through gaps, whipping heaped hay high into golden tornadoes that rose, fell, flurried down everywhere in volumes and flakes.

I was looking for Peter Garth to buy a collie-puppy. I have always wanted one. There were land-rovers, a light was on, but no one was leering about. A black collie dog, thick-set and sly, lay curled up on old coats, snarling as I passed, giving him a wide berth that brought me into a room of tractor parts, ram-leg stumps, an echo of growls, and cages crammed with puppies yelping and clambering.

A raven hopped off, flew down from a rafter, almost brushing my head with his black wing, his feather almost snagged in my hair. I felt the cold pulse of his wing-beat upon my face as he merged like a shadow into the dark world outside swiftly spun into a blur by the horizontal hands of the storm.

Waiting for a man whom I did not know in a place that was new to me, dizzying with the strong smell of use, I did not last long. The puppies quietened, the black dog shuffled like a weight of dust pushed through dust. Tin doors creaked on hinges turned a thousand times by people like me and not like me. Sharp hay whirled around in scattered crowns voices of the indoor wind blew and wore. Out of doors, the rock farm track was a deep stream I could not ford without having wade and swim.

14-01-12

Outside light. The soul grows when its roots are in the earth. It suffocates and dies when its roots are in one's self.

A direct relation to nature is akin to godliness. A crown of mud, of sunlight, eyes immense as the sky, ears as wide as ocean-going winds, fossil feet, leaf hands, river heart on the rise. Breathing is easier than thought. Attend to reality with one's whole being. God is the shape of reality. Snowdonia is a part of that shifting shape.

17-01-12

Thought must live and move among things, it must become a creature native to this place called Snowdonia. A stoat for example, slinking in and out of the ancient walls that necklace the throats of the hills, scurrying through the camouflage of the sea of heather far from the peregrine's daggering eye, is a secret of lithe flesh embedded in this landscape.

18-01-12

In the mountains I feel closer to things, even at the summit. There is no end to how deep I can enter into a relation with a particular thing in this landscape, this home. A boulder on the brink of the Crib Goch ridge is an inexhaustible world of sensory exploration. There is no need to travel to the end of the earth to 'find one's self.' One's self is here and now, it is that which I see, touch, hear, taste, scent. This 'self' then, does not belong to me at all like some exclusive property. It is, rather, my humble abode. I reside within it just as the rocks and streams and clouds and trees do. This self is the boundless lung of the universe.

If there is an end to sensory exploration, then the end is myself. I am in the way. Thought, consciousness, misses so much. To admit one's profound smallness is wisdom.

24-01-12

Snow, egg-shell soft. The moon has been exploding all night, a shower of white ashes. A one-night blizzard, millions of white finger-tips tapping at the windows to come in, falling away into the night on the currents of the icy wind. In the morning, a white world with one raven. The swish and hush of its wings. I dared not step out of the house out of fear of blemishing the silent beauty with the deafening creek of my bones.

25-01-12

Carneddau wind, plateau howl, crashing against my body, slipping around it, bearing the shape of my body into itself, carrying the cast of me away. I was imprinted into the wind, then forgotten, cherished, remembered...

29-01-12

Thought, reflection, should follow the curve of every mountain, the height of rock, the obscure depths of moorland rills, the clarity of granite born streams. Consciousness should take on the shape of the object that is perceived. The object is the mould into which consciousness is poured. After all, our bodies are 75% water.

01-02-12

Today I had the passionate feeling that the mountain was rearing up through me. I was it, walking, breathing, sweating. This disturbing feeling evolved as I walked further into the remoteness of the mountain. Remoteness became belonging. Taking my first step onto the Siabod spur was the most meaningful step I have taken to this date. There is nothing more profound and mysterious than just being here. Here itself is everything. God *is* hereness.

07-02-12

Yesterday I was taught a wonderful lesson in wholeheartedness, commitment and devotion to a moment:

With one hand crimped around the ram's horn, the other hand clutching a wiry twist of neck wool, I wrestled to free the ram from a forked branch poking through and hooked around his horn. He was a heavy cloud of tired thunder that I locked between the weak vice of my knees to tame and subdue, firmly encouraging him to calmly steer forward so that the branch could slot back through, and fling away with its tear-drop shaped end to the sun. The branch was a black bone budging against his eye, blinded with old and fresh blood.

Soft pads of gwynant grass were littered with skulls, sections of vixen, lambs etc. I left the ram for some uncertain moments to go find help. A boulder wall covered in cascades of moss surrounded a cottage. The mountains of the Snowdon range behind the cottage were gone in a haze of mystery. Hanging baskets brimmed full with bits of bone, skeletons of flowers, clogged with ram skulls. The path up to the cottage door was well trodden by something that drags itself along the ground. I was in a commune of relics, fascinated by the lack of present life. But the ram! I ran back to him. He was rollicking, bucking so hard

that with a sudden bolt of strength, the branch snapped free, and he hung his head down in astonishing relief. My hands did not hurt enough. He tottered off to gulp ferociously from a stream.

09-02-12

I have repeated to myself time and time again like a mantra: there is nothing more profound than bare, simplest, sentient being. I will keep letting myself go until the whole of me runs out and fills with nature, and become, like Snowdonia, a part of the shape that is reality. Reality is God. I worship reality. There is nothing so deep as it.

10-02-12

On occasions my need to be out there among living things, moving among the bewildering stillness of rocks, the light bearing wings of ravens, the clear streams that move one to tears – reaches a kind of mania. I get stressed about not being out there. Inwardness is sickness. Imagination, a man's dreams, is a pale fever. I wonder when I am not out there I might have missed the one moment of revelation that will deliver me into the great truth I have always felt dimly flickering on the periphery of my being.

The earth is where we are soul, the soul's vital nourishment are the elements. Snowdonia has them all in overwhelming abundance.

12-02-12

Wordsworth's 'One impulse from a vernal wood may teach you more about man than all the sages can...'

I think I am starting to understand this. It will take lifetimes to fully understand it and live by it.

18-02-12

Today, ravens, for whom playing is all, were held back by a fierce wind from joining in with the dance of the squall. The south-west wind, bred on the Atlantic, blew rain from my hands I pursed together to form a human bowl, to gather the transparency of the sea-bred, mountain-harried rain. But, in truth, I was hungry for the sun, the sun has been gone for days behind storms. Gutters rumble and growl. A birch tree, silver-white, collapsed like an old man across the road flooded by the Llugwy river. So there was nowhere to go except remain in the fever of our new home where mould smiles down on us from the ceilings, the lick of damp chills are young bones into feeling rheumatic. And yet, arcing over

Clogwyn Mawr, a rainbow appeared even though there was no sun, and it could, I thought, stay there for days, refuting my conviction that the God of light only travels in direct lines to the flowers of the heart.

26-02-12

I have managed to locate two selves that constitute my being, which occupy opposing views of existence. Snowdonia has, through my devotion to her, revealed this to me.

One self wants to rush, grab, and break covenants of reciprocation. This self makes itself known when I am not focused on the moment wherein I find myself. I am only focused on my own orientation, my own world.

The other self desires to be still, to witness the awe-inspiring events of things *be*, to find pure joy in letting go, the rivers utterly flowing, the rocks being nothing but guardians of ancient silence, of experiencing the life of things following its own, mysterious course entirely out my control.

One self wants to damn, re-direct the flow towards itself. The other self wants to be attentive to the course of the flow, perhaps now and again, when it's invited, to step into the waters and wade through with open hands. There is no more profound experience I undergo than being a part of things being themselves, growing, flourishing naturally. What richness! And yet, I suppose, without the profane self that thrives on interruption and degradation, this other, blessed self wouldn't have become known.

The task then for me, is to become more fully, this blessed self. Or, more correctly, to let this blessed self become me. At present it is stunted. I must foster it with the wilds of Snowdonia. Every time I step out of doors and open my eyes to the miraculous song of beauty chanting around me, I feel that blessed self grow a little, and its growth cannot be gauged by the mathematics of human measurements. If it is unhindered, if it receives the nourishment of Snowdonia that it deserves, then it will grow and expand just as the universe is growing, expanding beyond the range of the net of our calculations. I have realised that there is no such thing as an 'inner man.' Interior landscapes are illusions that lead us astray from reality. They are landscapes within which we are lost. We must find ourselves out there, in the midst of rocks and ravens and ice. Resist the temptation to go in. Introspection is death of the soul, a dead-end. Must I stop this journal then? No, this journal is part of the process of self-amendment. I will stop writing when I am finally a part of the ineffable, unspeakable, life of things, when I take my place where the language spoken is silence.

01-03-12

I saw Emlyn, the shepherd's son, 'hearing things' today:

Emlyn stood upon his father's humpbacked field, playing fetch with his new terrier that leapt up at him, yapping, and he laughed when it ran in circles around a dead tree. His father's collie-dog called Nel couldn't take its eye off the dodderly sheep, eager to bite at their blister-pustule heels. Emlyn urgently turned to face Clogwyn Mawr, that little scrubby rugged mountain, as though he had heard a strange, interesting sound. He just stood there for ages in an upright delirium as his terrier pestered the blind horse, looking up at the mountain, listening, while fine sunlight touched his eyes then withdrew leaving blank traces of infant gold in a face born old, and getting older. What did he hear that I did not? Perhaps, after years of being here, my ear, too, will turn its spiralling planet out towards the orbit of unknown sounds. Perhaps I will be able to hear the sound of the peregrine's eyelid as she blinks to clear away the blur before a kill.

02-03-12

Everything lives beyond the reach of everything else. And yet there is love.

03-03-12

Plunging my fists into the burning cold waters of the Afon Llugwy today suddenly took me back to my childhood when my brother and I would dunk our little fists into our Grandmother's pond in winter. We would see who could hold their hands like that for the longest. My brother always won.

Today there is only my self to compete with, suffering the ferocious cold, watching the face of my reflection flinch, and my hand turn ghost-white, throb and ache like an open wound. But it still brought me joy to feel the river push and pour through my hand opened out like a fan. What human being is capable of such undivided attention as this river? I closed my eyes and the sunlight sparkling on the river seemed to sparkle upon the darkness of my closed eyes so that I was a part of the river, the cold, the darkness and the light. I was the river dreaming of itself, bourn along, held, as though the river were my older brother, as though natural existence were a continuation of childhood. And to always remain a child, supported and upheld by the earth, trusting as to where life will take you, an unquestionable faith in the operations of the grand and tiny mystery that is life.

Contentment comes from being deeply in place, a place life has allocated for you, the primary place that is opened up for when you are born, not a place in which

you strive to be allocated. We must allow the greater powers of life to move us into place. A child is unquestionably obedient, continuous even, with the current of life. My daily visits to the Afon Llugwy instil within me this code of honour. The river brings with it new revelations of knowledge. I have to make sure that I am present. They can be missed in a flash, a fin-dive, a bubble and eddy.

04-03-12

I would like to write about the nature of family, the mutual interaction between the small community of family and the large community of the earth within which the family lives. There is a secret, visceral story behind the reason for assigning family roles to natural objects. Father Sun, Mother Earth, Brother River, Sister Moon etc. I feel I am almost at the brink of naming the earth as my family. I cannot delude myself in thinking that I am wholly there yet. There is still modernity to deal with, but my body is ancient kin. As long as I am a body then my roots will always be in the earth. Humanity's alleged 'homesickness' can be cured by the antidote of the body that is forever healed by the swabs of grass, the wild wipes of wind, the injections of sunlight that penetrate into blood and bone, the alcohol of rain and rivers and seas.

06-03-12

Clogwyn Mawr- a scrappy lump of grey rock and heather. Dwarf mountain, belittled by the greater neighbouring sweeps of the Carneddau, and the enormous bulk of Mole Siabod. But over time I have come to love Clogwyn Mawr more than any other of the jagged, arresting peaks of Snowdonia.

Today I made a new line of ascent. The east face, a scar of heather-shelves cut in by fat stichings of sphagnum moss that squelched when I grabbed them, steep rocks that forced me to lean back, and gaze upward. My infant hands were ripped to bits on wet thorns, slipping on the skins of luminous lichens, green and pale red lichens bubbling like an ancient acne on motionless faces of agony, - and one raven soaring overhead like a black buzzard, croaking, gurgling the cool air.

I am familiar with Clogwyn Mawr and yet its charm of contact never fatigues, only brightens and buds. And the summit: a mangled platform of goat-nibbled grass and rock slid out like half-risen prayer hands frozen in time. Incredible, really, considering that time allows nothing to freeze in its perpetual eruptions unless time charitably preserves a piece of life for eternity to gather up in its flow. Clogwyn Mawr is a vantage point to view the possibilities for an ever deepening return into the landscape. Clogwyn Mawr offers up to me a view of home. Daunting, beautiful, a necessary walk.

And this is the hill, because of its subdued plainness unmarked on the maps, is avoided, unnoticed by crowds. But it is here, on Clogwyn Mawr, where the flow and shine begins.

09-03-12

Half an hour's amble down to the Afon Llugwy – dark and quite shallow, deep where it is usually deep in the rain-fed and run-off troughs. I kept my eyes open as I threw hand-cups of water over my face; gasped, brief headache in the northerly wind coming up the valley toward the mountains bringing with it more thermals for the buzzards, gulls for the sea, ravens for the heights, gladness for me.

A swallow, first of the year, midnight blue-black, frantic, fatigued, jinking like a butterfly down river, wayward and tipsy. The weight of the Sahara on its mind. Then the dipper came darting, a continual thrust of giddiness, kingfisher-like but plump, a squashed fat arrow clicking, so accustomed to the river's plane and bending course. The swallow seemed to use the river like a blind man would use a stick to forage his way through woodland, inebriated with panic and indecision.

The dipper could see, he flew as though he knew where he wanted to go, desire met and fulfilled, focused, tunnel-vision toward the bulls-eye of rock that becomes his whole world to bob, jive and twist upon. The river is his runway for take-off and landing, his destined and disembarking home. His flight does not speak of rehearsal and boredom. He seems genuinely excited as though what he is doing is for the first time. The swallow was much more adept in the spacious air, agile, in love with the wide wherever-ness.

I looped back up around my favourite oak that was starting to show tails of early leafage, ancient and budding once again, then I stepped over the moss-dribbled wall into the sanctuary of Bryn Engan.

Here is where I listen, here is where I am slow of breathing and soft of tread. New leaves, little green spades shovelling in the golden goodness of the sunlight, trembled. I wondered if the temperatures of their skins altered when I touched them. Bluebells – I knelt down to immerse myself in their scent, sweet but not sickly, fragrant, welcoming. My nose was the year's first bee that I could see up close.

Patches of blue-sky raggedly woven through layers of thick cloud, clouds hardly moving. In the distance, the dark plateau of the Carneddau. A great wall. Sun white-gold, soft-glow.

For half-an hour I did not think, did not let thought steal the lime-light, the gorgeous gentle thunder of sensorial being. I was. The day has meaning now, foundation and a flowing heart of song.

10-03-12

What is my place in this world? I am a part of nature, a part of humanity, but apart from something or somewhere that forces me to question the solidity of my own ground and the fluidity of my perceptions. This missing place or thing, this blankness, makes me feel uncertain about the validity of everything, as though all things that comes before me on my way though this life are only temporary amusements, distractions from something quite magnificent, as though the world constructing itself before was a mere carnival of thieves. This blankness is a black sleep going on outside of the arrangement of my self and which is the keeper of my greater heart.

This blankness needs to be shocked out of itself so that it yields its energy to the pull of the course of my life. Who knows what it may bring with it? It harbours amazing potential. A forced released, a vital strength, driving the course of my life into an ever deepening unity with life itself. It hides the god of harmonies.

Or maybe, I have come to think, that this space of nothing is a figment of my imagination, a fantastical hole. If this is so, then imagination, the culprit of illusion, needs to be dispensed with.

Attending to reality releases the whole pent-up potential of my being. The more I consciously participate in the sensuous world as it presents itself to me there and then point blank, the more I come in to my own. Rather than digging, rooting around for wholeness, I have come to believe I must give in to wholeness, must give in the gift of wholeness that is the peace of reality, the matriarch of belonging, the source of home. Reality is the source I must go back to. It is the death of being lead astray.

11-03-12

Today seven years ago, I first came to Snowdonia. It was those three days on my own here that planted the seed of need to come back here again and again.

Looking out across the Crib Goch, knife-bright ridge in the sharp angular sun-rays struck off the flanks of Moel Siabod, I am reminded of the time when I made an ascent of it. My first proper mountain.

I think it was a Saturday morning, the thickest mist I'd had ever seen, thickets of wet, no wind. Snowdon, as the highest mountain in these parts and the only Snowdonia mountain I'd heard of, it was only natural ascend it, the obvious choice.

With no real idea of the terrain, the weather, the equipment I need to take with me, I took a bus to Pen-y-pass, which was deserted save for a few goats knocking antlers. In ripped khaki trousers, my brother's shower-proof jacket, brasher

boots spilt and worn to slippy nubs, I made my way up the Pyg track. I can't remember much about how I felt or what crossed the path of my mind, but I remember the moment when I reached the point where the path forked either left, right up the steep ridge towards Crib Goch. I looked up at Crib Goch, half-capped in swirling mists, black cliffs falling away like waves from the rising hull of a ship rearing up over me. That was my first experience of meeting a mountain in the flesh.

I tagged along with another man who heading up to Snowdon via Crib Goch. Without him, I would've been utterly lost with no sense of where I was heading and how long it would take. The mist was so thick I could barely make him out three-feet in front of me, a silhouette shuffling from side to side, shuddering forward out of sight, then coming back into range, fading again like a ghost forbidden to enter back into earth and time, a man on the brink of losing it all.

Now when I traverse Crib Goch in clear weather I see what I would've come across: sheer vertical cliffs, towering pinnacles, labyrinths of rocks. Without him, that ghost guide (I didn't even ask for his name), I don't know what I would've done. I was a complete beginner, enthralled but foolish. Luckily that man whom I have never seen again – a dim friend always shrouded in mist – made the mountain accessible to me. I do not think it is too dramatic to say that without him I would've fallen to my death or died of hypothermia.

Now, seven years later, the only way I can thank that man is to remember him as I look out towards Crib Goch, and find my own way through the mountains. At times I think that he was a spirit of this place, persisting on in a hide and seek style of continuity, somehow still here, lingering, - an intelligence my own mind reaches out to be embraced by. But it is better to remember him as real. I owe my life to him and to the life of the reality of which we both are a part.