

SIX FACETS OF LIGHT



ANN WROE

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About the Book

Goethe claimed to know what light was. Galileo and Einstein both confessed they didn't. On the essential nature of light, and how it operates, the scientific jury is still out. There is still time, therefore, to listen to painters and poets on the subject. They, after all, spend their lives pursuing light and trying to tie it down.

Six Facets of Light is a series of meditations on this most elusive and alluring feature of human life. Set mostly on the Downs and coastline of East Sussex, the most luminous part of England, it interweaves a walker's experiences of light in Nature with the observations, jottings and thoughts of a dozen writers and painters – and some scientists – who have wrestled to define and understand light. From Hopkins to Turner, Coleridge to Whitman, Fra Angelico to Newton, Ravilious to Dante, the mystery of light is teased out and pondered on. Some of the results are surprising.

By using mostly notebooks and sketchbooks, this book becomes a portrait of the transitoriness, randomness, swiftness, frustrations and quicksilver beauty that are the essence of light. It is a work to be enjoyed, pondered over, engaged with, provoked by; to be packed in the rucksack of every walker heading for the sea or the hills, or to be opened to bring that outside radiance within four dark town walls.

About the Author

Ann Wroe is the Briefings and Obituaries editor of *The Economist*. She is the author of six previous works of non-fiction, including *Pilate: The Biography of an Invented Man*, which was shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Award and the W.H. Smith Award. She lives in north London.

Also by Ann Wroe

Lives, Lies and the Iran-Contra Affair

A Fool and his Money: Life in a Partitioned Medieval Town

Pilate: The Biography of an Invented Man

Perkin: A Story of Deception

Being Shelley: The Poet's Search for Himself

Orpheus: The Song of Life

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ANN WROE

SIX FACETS OF LIGHT



JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

This book is a series of musings on light, compiled from wonderings, observations and associations made while walking the luminous Downs of southern England between Brighton and Eastbourne. It is not scientific, and only occasionally philosophical. It is really just a love song to light, sung by myself and the various poets and painters, of many eras, who have walked along with me.

AW



THE WHITE STONE

Sixty miles south of London, reached by an ambling train that divides at Haywards Heath, lies Eastbourne in East Sussex. Weathermen say it is the sunniest town in Britain, with brightness almost every day. Pensioners know this; they have long colonised the place, shuffling in white cardigans and golf shoes past the glacé-icing façade of the Grand, or sitting on the benches by the Martello tower where the marigolds make a show. Everything dazzles, or is bleached out. A man walking a dog across the lawns becomes a radiant ghost of himself. Teapot, cups and spoons blink blindingly on a table. The sea breaking on Holywell Ledge by the westernmost tea chalet sparkles in sequinned foam, and a single yacht – there is always one – cleaves the sea like a blade.

The artist Eric Ravilious was brought up here in the early 1900s, the tall, floppy-haired son of a man who, appropriately, made his living by selling and fitting blinds. On Sundays you might see him – ‘the Boy’, as friends called him later, in token of that unjaded child’s gaze – arm-in-arm with his parents, walking briskly to the Methodist church where the minister preached hellfire. For hours he would sit there, morning and evening, in a hall darkened by infernal visions, watching through the high windows how the light played outside. He would hear above the wheezing organ seagulls crying light, scrapping for it, keening down the great curve of it, while wood-and-canvas biplanes buzzed them and more boats, sails shining, rode jauntily on

the sea. Or so he painted the scene later, adding – for good measure – vapour trails, clouds, fireworks.

For there was no getting away from it. If he escaped by bike to the Downs to the north and west of town the air was still saturated with light, like a shout. The whole region was famous for it. When Richard Jefferies, Victorian England's greatest nature writer, moved his long lean Wiltshire frame in the 1880s to Brighton, twelve miles west of Eastbourne, hoping for health, he was enchanted by the dryness and clearness of the air.¹ The place was 'a Spanish town in England, a Seville', where light so filled the sky and cascaded off the walls, caressing the blooming, fluttering, laughing girls as it went, that even a northern aspect shone. The sheer 'champagniness' of Brighton light, he wrote, 'brings all things into clear relief, giving them an edge and outline'. Ravilious, cycling out into fold upon fold of clear-edged hills backed by glare, carried Jefferies's books in his mind or his saddlebag. Aficionados of light and chalk tend, like downland starlings, to flock together.

The combination is too strong for some eyes. Chinese tourists on the Number 12 bus, which plies the coast road, not only don sunglasses and sit on the shaded side but pull their caps over their faces to save themselves. It doesn't help. Light lords it here and, besides, the land is built from it. Rabbits kick it up from the banks, white scuts jumping in a rubble of white stones. Poppies catch scarlet fire at the field's edge, each petal glassy with powder of light. Trees are rooted in square-cut walls of it, as if their leaves did not absorb enough from the fiercely gleaming air. Men quarry it; one of Ravilious's favourite subjects was the Asham cement works near Tarring Neville, dug deep into the Downs, where talcum-light lay in drifts over buildings, dolly engines, hedges and trees.

When the topsoil is ploughed or harrowed light shoulders through, bone beneath skin as delicate as that quarried

dust. Real bones also break from it, of rabbit or sheep, or the bleached, strewn ossuaries of birds of prey. Fields that are plain smooth grass erupt with light, in pebbles of chalk or damp mushrooms overnight, with occasional perfect shells flung up by wave and gale, or even with the scattered forms of far sheep grazing – for it is a curious quality of this light that all objects, near or far, are equally intense and clear. The result can be a sense of illusion, almost trickery. W.H. Hudson, another tramper of the Downs favoured by Ravilious, thought he had stumbled once on one of those bright, prophetic fields, singled out by the cloud-fighting sun, where divine words wait to be read: an old ploughed field, it seemed from a distance, completely covered with tall white-campion flowers. But it was only a patch of downland waste strewn with shining flints, blue forget-me-nots misting among them.

In ancient times some downland fields were explicitly dedicated to light. At West Dean, hiding behind a spur of hill barely two miles from the sea, two small pieces, Lampland and Tapersland, were farmed in the fourteenth century to provide candles for the tomb of Isabella Heringod, who slumbers in the church. When Ravilious was teaching at Eastbourne School of Art he would bring his students out here, by bike or bus, to draw. The tiny village, now sunk in woods planted by the Eastbourne Water Board, was then as open to the sky as any other neighbouring place. For centuries, under that brightness, men laboured to farm the soft white stone, leaving what Hudson called their ‘chance hieroglyphics’ in dips, mounds and plough-ridges.² And for those who know where to look, as the low light of dawn or sunset reveals their uneven lines in the turf, the chalk hides prehistoric chambers decorated with spiral mazes in which the sun was believed to disappear and go deep, as a man’s spirit lay within himself.

In chalk all the pathways are laid with light, emphasising the sense that they lead to a higher state. John Bunyan, in his *Pilgrim's Progress*, was perhaps the first to mention this. Above his own clay plains the chalk Chilterns appeared as holy hills blocking off the divine country, and the white tracks that crossed them as necessary pathways for the pilgrim soul. On these Delectable Mountains, shepherds grazed their flocks; from the high ridges they could point out to pilgrim Christian the Abyss of Error, and Mount Innocent, and Mount Marvel, where they saw 'a man at a Distance, that tumbled the Hills about with Words'. They could also show him, through their Perspective-Glass, the Gates of the Celestial City.

Chalk in any case was holy in itself, like 'the Child of God': white, warm, soft, and moreover, Bunyan wrote,

It leaves a white Impression upon those
Whom it doth touch, be they it's Friends or Foes.

This purity is seen most clearly at the shoreline. At Hope Gap near Cuckmere Haven chalk stands in great cubes and rectangles, as if cut by a saw; between these it lies in luminescent eggs and spheres, their roundness cupped by gritty sand. Farther out it spreads itself in plateaus and ledges smoothed by the waves into regular scalloped squares, like an ancient courtyard all men have trodden, or will tread, into the milky blueness of the sea.

Some it has embraced are swept back again. In Friston churchyard, a few miles inland to the east, several are buried under a wind-bleached wooden cross engraved only with the words *WASHED ASHORE*. People have a habit of leaving a few wild flowers there: ox-eye daisies, or buttercups from the glowing field that runs down to East Dean. *Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean*, says the psalm; *wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow*.

*Humble among the old memorials,
a cross of time-grey, weathered, sea-worn wood
and daffodils in grass. They brought him here
for decent burial, as they thought they should.*

*'Washed ashore' the epitaph he's given.
Nothing more complicated to proclaim -
a resting place for anyone discovered
without a face, or clothing, or a name,*

*rolled in the unkind breakers like the chalk
fallen from cliffs, but softer, splaying limbs
loose as the seaweed, pebbles in his hair
and seagulls' fretful squalling for his hymns.*

*Thus rubbed, reduced, wrung out, his whitened
wreck
rocks unlamented on an unknown shore;
or loved, laved, lavendered, is lifted up
in the bright washing he was waiting for.*

Bunyan's Christian cried *Selah*, the word that punctuates many of the Psalms, to invoke God's help on his journey, especially the final stage.³ When Ravilious wrote of painting the bleaching and browning of the winter hills, 'never so exciting as it is this time of year in Sussex', he added: 'I'd like to put *Selah* after this ... if the word means what I think it means.' He thought it meant as good a light as he could hope for.⁴

With easel and brown canvas satchel he walked the chalk paths daily in the mid-1930s, heading up Beddingham Hill to paint the wide vistas north to the Weald and south to the sea. His boots would pick up that 'white impression', light splashed thick as paint or birdlime on leaves, and tread it home afterwards. He also cut these paths into boxwood blocks, their lines swirling across in rhythm with the line of

the hills. But it was in his watercolours that they preserved their mystery. They dipped and curved, always bending out of view, towards the horizon that might never be reached and the country that might never be known. When they made for houses – thick-walled, deep-roofed, crouched against the slanting rain that forced the walker into the hedge – they flowed past, bound elsewhere. In one painting, this time of chalk hills in Jefferies's Wiltshire, two lanes intersected, either route possible, neither certain, nothing marked on signs; a red Post Office van hesitated amid the green and white. In another, of Cuckmere Haven, a white path wound beside the white meanders of the river towards the boundless radiance of the sea. The paths ran beside telephone poles, their deep-worn silence contrasting with the high hum of the wires, and in parallel with barbed-wire fences, smooth beside sharp.

Yet Ravilious did not paint these paths, in the strict sense. He left them as white paper, brushing in the spare grass with thinnest strokes to show the bare scapulae of the hills. For what had to be caught was that underlay of light. Not just the surface play of it, when it moves up a slope as a thumb rubs through velvet or as a teasel cards wool, misting into deep drifts at the field's edge and wisps across the summit – but the kingdom of brightness just beneath the grass, and hollow as a drum beneath the feet.

Four miles north-west of Eastbourne the apparent ruler of such a kingdom, the Wilmington Giant, lay carved in the chalk, reinforced with white bricks, with a tall staff in either hand. Ravilious loved this figure, depicting it again and again, though mischievously he sometimes called it a giantess, seductively shining under sun or moon on the broad flank of the hill. There were gates of light involved here, opening in the chalk: thrust wide by Baldur, the summer god, to let the day begin, or by some far older Neolithic sun god to announce the high season of growth and harvest. The figure lies on the north slope of

Wilmington Hill, underneath the main path, so that it is often in shadow and hard to see; but at its back, or through the gates, lies a southern, sea-bright, scintillating world, continually flashing with new stars.

There was to be a book of such figures. Ravilious, handed this commission, painted half a dozen or so on travels across the chalk Downs of the south, most of them giants or swift-running horses observed from third-class carriages in trains. He worked fast, for with the coming of war in 1939 they were to be blacked out or turfed over, together with all the chalk ways, cuttings and tracks. On a train journey in 1941 he met 'a tall and rather lordly person' who owned the land around the Wilmington Giant, and learned that he had already camouflaged the figure with grass. The god was buried again, a premonition of the deadening and darkness to come.

For within white chalk lay movement and power: a quickening gleam, a declaration from beyond, as when swallows burst out of a fragment of cliff that fell to the beach at Brighton, then Brighthelmstone, during a winter storm in the 1760s. Gilbert White, the great naturalist of Selborne, told the story in his *Natural History*, a work Ravilious eagerly made engravings for.⁵ Both men agreed, as White wrote, that 'there is somewhat peculiarly sweet and amusing in the shapely figured aspect of chalk-hills'. 'There are bustards on the wide downs near Brighthelmstone,' White continued, a statement Ravilious found 'beautiful' and elegantly engraved, with the great bird standing stoutly against the smoothly sweeping scene. Still more marvellous, though, were the Brighton swallows. Many witnessed the wonder of their tumble out of the rock; others, not seeing, wished to believe it, for it might explain why and how these birds disappeared when summer ended. They crept inside the chalk and slept. The man who told White the story, an 'intelligent person', took it to be true

that apparently inert stone could be inhabited by life. People still talk of cutting into the 'living' chalk or limestone in a way they do not talk of granite, sandstone or shale.

Shepherds of the Downs also shared that understanding. Their local name was 'lookers' and their trade 'lookering', as if they scrutinised everything in their realm that lived and moved in light. As they wandered with their sheep they set up flocks of small birds, pretty white-rumped wheatears, which nested in cliffs and rabbit holes and could be taken from the stones, if horsehair springes were set for them. (On a ploughed field of brown-and-white flints the birds are disguised so perfectly that the stones themselves seem to start and fly.) The peeping, fluttering prey were caught, strung on a grass stem and stowed away in a greatcoat pocket, carefully, for they were worth eighteen pence a dozen when sold as dainty mouthfuls for fashionable Brighton supper tables. An old shepherd told Hudson that one couple, laying traps on Beachy Head, snared 1,200 wheatears and, unable to thread them on crow quills as usual, bagged them up in the husband's smock and the wife's billowing white petticoats.

The little birds that sprang from the chalk could also prompt higher pursuits. One shepherd boy and champion wheatear-catcher, John Dudeney of Newmarket Hill near Lewes, hid within the white hillside in the 1790s his home-made pasteboard telescope – a Perspective-Glass through which he had seen not the Celestial City, indeed, but still the transit of Mercury – his *History of Rome* procured at Lewes fair, his Latin primer, his precious store of blank white copybooks and Turner's *Introduction to Geometry*. He called this his 'under-stone library'. All had been bought with money from wheatears and from the lamb and white wool of the single sheep he owned. Had he caught a bustard – for his grandfather had seen one, up on the

Downs where four parishes met – he might have gained a whole encyclopedia.

He did not neglect his flock. He would pace to and fro, reading, as the sheep cropped quietly beside him. One winter, when the whole scene glared white, he could not study, for ‘the snow turned into ice on my eyelashes, and [my father] breathed on my face to thaw it off’. When the turf was dry again, laying out his white paper on the barely grassed white stone, he drew out perfect circles and triangles with an old pair of iron compasses which he had filed down to hold a pen. A valley lies beyond the hill, Cold Coombes, bare and unwatered, scattered with sparse thorns; but the chalk slopes beneath it hold chanted declensions, and elevations of the stars.

Chalk thrown up from the earth is scoured so clean that it seems to have had nothing to do with soil or the spoil-heaps of working the land. Instead it dots the hills as the uncut ore of light. *To him that overcometh*, says the Spirit in Revelation, *will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.*⁷ On the clifftops above Beachy Head hand-sized white stones, perfect for new names, lie everywhere. Passing ramblers string them out on the turf to make the names they already know, with declarations of heart-love that can be read from any small, buzzing aeroplane. Walking there one summer I found, lying among the pearl-pebbles on the short dry turf, a ‘real’ pearl ear stud with a thin gold shaft. Its faint opalescence was mirrored in the sea. If one lay there, how many others did? Or under what trick of the sky or the light would all turn into jewels?

This fascination was encouraged young, when my great-aunt would lead me on walks with the spaniels just below the chalk North Downs at Bearsted, in Kent. Our longest ramble would take us to a muddy track called Button Lane,

once the site – she told me – of a button factory, before the war. Not a trace of it remained, except for the small, flat pearl buttons scattered along the path and in the pasture round it. Most were four-holed, some two-holed, and all slightly mottled on the back with black, green and brown, like a bird's egg. Thirty years after those walks it was still common to find them, trodden only a little deeper, muddied but rainbowed repositories of light. In my dreams they became silver threepences and sixpences, endlessly turning up out of the grass.

Thomas Traherne, ministering to his flock at Credenhill near Hereford in the mid-seventeenth century, would have said that all grains of dirt were destined for transformation.⁸ Indeed, he believed stones were jewels already; as was every tiny 'sand'. ('O what a Treasure is evry Sand when truly understood!') As a child he had seen the streets of Hereford strewn with powder-gold, which his shouting playmates took for common dust. He knew better, he told a friend, for from infancy he could see 'on both sides the Vail or Skreen': what seemed earthly, even dirty, was painted, for him, in heaven-colours.

And Nothing's truly seen that's Mean;
Be it a Sand, an Acorn, or a Bean,
It must be clothd with Endless Glory,
Before its perfect Story
(Be the Spirit ne'er so Clear)
Can in its Causes and its Ends appear.

Jefferies, too, pondered the 'perfect Story' of these inconsequential things.⁹ Lying on the clifftop above Beachy Head, stretching his limbs beside the new-found chalk ways that captivated him in the early 1880s, he would sometimes carelessly rub out little pebbles from the dry, crumbling earth. (Casual observers thought he did nothing but wander and dream, though he also wrote just enough books

and articles to live on.) He considered the pebbles with his large, blue-bright eyes, marvelling at the sand that glistened on them. 'Particles adhered to my skin – thousands of years between finger and thumb, these atoms of quartz, and sunlight, shining all that time.' He found, too, those natural concomitants of chalk, legions of tiny, grey, empty shells that crunched under his boots like hoar frost or fragile beads. These were 'receptacles of ancient sunlight'. A glow could still be seen in them, like that in curved amphorae stacked against a wall slowly moving with gleams of the blue, trireme-rearing sea.

Thousands of similar shells lie in the grass of the surrounding hills. Some curl on themselves like ammonites, some are pointed spirals; none is bigger than a centimetre. All are grey-white; some are edged in black. Whether they are new or ancient is often hard to tell. Perhaps they live and move, earth creatures perilously fastened with a dot of slime to the tall, bending grass stems; perhaps they have worn free long ago from the deep seabed. On a bank they make a show of dozens of points of light, lifted to lie among scabious and pink restharrow and the tiny mauve-flowered thyme – Ravilious's 'wonderful smell of the hill country' – in which Jefferies ecstatically buried his face and his hands. 'There may be an outcome for us that we know nothing of,' he wrote afterwards.¹⁰ 'An outcome for all that has lived: the Eastbourne hill shells for example – the (blue) swallow ...' His own outcome, so devoutly wished for among the natural litter of the chalk hills, was that his soul might come to expand with the whole life and power of the sun: that he might know 'unutterable existence infinitely higher than deity'. The Downs encourage that sort of thing.

The poet John Clare was a shell-man, but of narrower horizons. He especially sought the cases of Northamptonshire field and garden snails. As a ploughboy and ditch-filler in his young years, he turned them up; and

well into adulthood he would go 'pooty-hunting', following the 'silver slimy trails' on his hands and knees. He treasured especially 'a scarce sort of which I only saw 2 in my life picked up under a hedge at Peakirk town-end & another in Bainton meadow its colour is a fine sunny yellow larger than the common sort & round the rim of the base is a black edging'. It was not, he added – surprisingly, since he was so seldom in London – 'in the collection at the British Museum'. Evidently he had visited, and checked. As he held the rare specimen in his big coarse hands it had the light of summer in it, again perhaps an ancient summer, for he had found other shells, 'most of them of the large garden kind', on the Roman bank beside the Roman road, small curved horns that had long outlasted the tramp of the centurions. His shells were often buried in banks, in places screened by bramble-bines and hazel leaves, tremblingly parted as if he spied on the mossy, deep, untidy nest of the dull brown nightingale, from which it sometimes sang. He would edge with a finger the same rounded interior smoothness, the same intricacy of weave and line, but the snail's small house he could carry away.

On a page of his journal around 1825 he drew ten such 'pootys' with his pen. To the untrained eye they all seem rather similar, though not to him. He intended to paint them with some 'cakes of colors' he had just bought. They had the look of Neolithic spirals. And indeed the most striking aspect of the larger, wind-lifted snail shells that also litter the Downs is how they radiate outwards from that raised apex, passing through a gamut of colours – patterned bands of white, blue and purple, tabby-cat markings, skylark featherings that Clare called 'mozzld' – and also spiral inwards, in a line that seems to imitate the curl of the wave, the dip of the hill and the flow of the stars.¹¹ Each seems profound and beautiful in a different way, as they swirl from light to dark and dark to light: air,

earth and sky all enclosed in a coil of calcium carbonate that lodges in a pocket, buffered with leaves and grass.

One morning in spring, 'poking about the hedges' as usual, Clare found objects startlingly different. The dewdrops, he wrote,

on every blade of grass are so much like silver drops that I am obliged to stoop down as I walk to see if they are pearls and those sprinkled on the ivy-woven beds of primroses ... are so like gold beads that I stooped down to feel if they were hard but they melted from my finger. And where the dew lies on the primrose the violet & whitethorn leaves they are emerald and beryl yet nothing more than the dews of the morning on the budding leaves

Clare was by then mad, or taken to be. When his notes on the morning dew were transcribed, by another hand that added proper punctuation, he had been committed to a private asylum at High Beeches in Essex. From there in 1841 he escaped, wandering home to his village of Helpston by going from heartless public house to public house, sleeping in sheds on trusses of clover. Gravel hobbled his feet in his shoes, and his food over several days was nothing but quids of chewed tobacco and half a pint of beer, bought with a penny thrown to him by someone who took him for a broken-down haymaker. It was perhaps with an eye already skewed by madness that he saw the grass full of pearls and gold beads that fell to water in his hands.

Yet he saw too as a peasant-poet, much as he disliked the phrase: one who would 'drop down behind a hedge bush or dyke', like a bird, to write down his 'things' on paper scraps pressed on the hard crown of his hat, and who learned to observe the fields at a sauntering pace as he weeded or ploughed, or minded cows. His publisher hoped, in vain as it happened, that he might write a natural history of

Helpston, like White's of Selborne. Clare's own word for his way of walking was 'saunered', suggesting even more a lackadaisical, whimsical wandering in Nature.¹² He needed to walk slowly to appreciate the golden furze, the thyme-scented hummocks in the sheepfields, the 'sun-tanned green' of the ripening hay, the dragonflies 'in spangled coats' and, in the May woods, lilies of the valley under hooded leaves 'like maids with their umbrellas'.

A slow pace, too, like his, reveals the beauty of stones – the purple and blue interiors of white-robed flints, Ravilious's favourites, the fools'-gold flecks of pyrites, or the strange round flattened stone, marked with a perfect six-pointed star, that lay beside a puddle on a walk of mine. The immense shingle beach at Brighton reveals almost no stone that is not interesting for a hole in it, flecks on it, or some oddity of shape, marbling or coloration. There are said to be semi-precious stones on some southern shores, cornelian and jasper, lying within reach of the red-skinned visitors who quickly hobble over them, or lounge on their beach mats playing ducks and drakes with the waves. Yet the commonest pebble too, Jefferies insisted, 'dusty and marked with the stain of the ground, seems to me so wonderful; my mind works round it till it becomes the sun and centre of a system of thought and feeling'.¹³ It would be just such a common stone, wrote Jakob Böhme in the 1620s, unprofitable and trodden underfoot, that would prove to be the pearl of divine understanding.

The humblest part of Nature, in the eyes of writers like these, might hide unexpected reserves of light. This was true even of the grass, silently robing the earth from generation to generation. Evidently it fed on sunlight and grew towards the source, in the way of all green things. But poets, who tended to fling themselves down unhappily in grass, found closer parallels with themselves. They imagined they heard it growing, singing; they compared it

to men, and its brief season to their own lives. *As for man, his days are as grass*, ran the words of Psalm 103: *For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more*. Jefferies liked to sit on it, buzzed by scarlet-dotted flies, as if he too were a blade of grass, unselfconsciously living and filled with the sun. This seemed the most perfect existence possible for ‘an indolent, dreamy particle like myself’. One blade pressed to his cheek, he claimed, could tell him what all Nature was saying.

Close up, grass is also lovely; and as much so when dead, feathery and dry as when alive. (Ravilious disliked the ‘continually vivid green’ of Essex fields when he lived there, and longed for the subtler colours farther south.¹⁴) Grass dances and ripples under wind-light on the hills; it may be gilded with low sun, silvered with ice, quaking with the glitter of its own seed. The short bristle-leaved bent grass of the Downs makes a surface sprung like a dance floor, lifting the walker’s heart as well as his feet, so that even a shepherd boy like Dudeney feels the wide sky is his province, as much as the curving earth.

The name of downland grass was unknown to me until I found, in a London charity shop, a green *Observer’s Pocket Book of Grasses, Sedges and Rushes*. It was as humble as its subject, damp-stained and battered, costing fifty pence and without its jacket. Yet half its illustrations, surprisingly, were in colour, showing clusters and panicles touched with pink and purple, blue and grey; and the grasses were praised for their beauty, elegance and decorative effect as if they were garden flowers. Relatively few, in the author’s quaint phrase, were ‘of use to the agriculturalist’. Their use was to the artist and the dreamer.

Grasses have a hundred names, as my little book informed me – even without Clare’s ‘feather-headed’, ‘tottering’ and ‘spindling’, which were unofficial. Sweet

vernal grass, whose oil perfumes hayfields; green panick grass, neatly spiked and with no sign, despite its name, of agitation; meadow soft grass, its faint pink flowers spreading mist across the fields; slender fox-tail grass, silky bent grass, false oat whose spikelets glitter like metal; and unlovely couch grass, sprawling and tenacious, whose country names, 'Quickens', 'Quitch' and 'Squitch', all mean 'living', and green life. Both Clare and Traherne referred to 'spires' of grass: the old word, but one that also suggested blades and panicles reaching to heaven, each one 'wholly illuminated' by the sun, wrote Traherne, 'as if it did entirely shine upon that alone'. Jefferies saw grass, untouched by anything but daylight, lit like a torch; William Blake in his *Songs of Innocence* painted its leaping spirals intertwined with flames.¹⁵

A child brought him grass, Walt Whitman wrote (loafing at his ease, world-including, accepting the gift with his enormous, sky-parting hands). The small voice asked what it was. Whitman had one confident answer, in the roaring compendium of poetry he called 'Leaves of Grass':

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of
the stars,
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and
the egg of the wren...

His poem had begun with summer grass, its blades blazing at sunset with 'individual splendour'; and out of those leaves his 'Song of Myself' was woven, making him, too, 'the journeywork of the stars'. Yet his subsequent thoughts were sadder and more tentative. The grass that composed him sprang also from the graves of Civil War casualties he had nursed and mourned in the army hospitals of Washington, those brave, wrecked bodies going open-eyed into the ground with 'the beautiful uncut hair' of those struck down too soon. Blood and bandages,

heartbeats and putrefaction, stars and sweat, were all mysteriously meshed in the grass-universe of himself.

How could I answer the child? I do not know what [grass] is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we
may see and remark, and say *Whose?*

Jefferies adored *Leaves of Grass*. Others were decidedly cautious. One was Gerard Manley Hopkins, who found his own early poems lumped in with Whitman's by the critics, though in his opinion Whitman's did not 'rhyme or scan or construe' and their author was, besides, immoral.¹⁶

Hopkins was thirty or so when he first read him, a committed Jesuit, witty but dogged by exhaustion and bowel trouble, studying theology at St Beuno's in wild Wales; he could hardly have been more different from the brawling, louche newspaperman of Brooklyn and New Jersey. His song was of the glory of God in Christ; Whitman's was the song of Whitman, 'an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos,/Disorderly, fleshly and sensual'. For all that, they strayed close to each other, as Hopkins was painfully aware. Both of them were dazzled by the whole span of creation. In 1882 Hopkins admitted to his friend Robert Bridges that he had always known 'in my heart Walt Whitman's mind to be more like my own than any other man's living'. He added:

As he is a very great scoundrel this is not a pleasant confession. And this also makes me the more desirous to read him and the more determined that I will not.

Nonetheless, he had noted Whitman's lines about the grass. He remembered God's handkerchief 'designedly dropt'. The American had messed about with the dactylic rhythm, he complained, just the sort of 'savage' thing Whitman would do – but for all that the talk of messages, hints and remembrancers was after his own heart. For God left such suggestions in anything which, like the grass, played between light and shade; light being, for Hopkins, the Word.¹⁷

... rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;...
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

Jefferies was less convinced that God was involved. But he too was fascinated by the messages he found, for example, in the depths of a pinewood: the 'spots, dots and dustings' in a foxglove and on a butterfly's wing, on meadow orchids and the rind of oaks. There was nothing, he wrote, that was not 'stamped ... [with] the sacred handwriting, not one word of which shall fall to the ground'. Some 'inner meaning' informed the sun, the wood-wasps, the trees, the grass: all that 'shining, quivering, gleaming ... changing, fluttering, shifting ... mixing, weaving'. Light-script flashed even in wisps of straw, caught up by oak boughs from high-piled wagons that swayed along the country lanes. It shone too in the clover-and-timothy hay tumbled after a journey in Whitman's hair and clothes, prompting his cry: 'I must get what the writing means.'¹⁸

Eager eyes found potential messages everywhere in Nature, for to observe something at all might imply a private summons to read and understand. Everything

demanded notice, as clearly as if it rayed out light; everything spoke, if you could only hear it, and the act of seeing could become a sort of transcendental conversation. It might be natural then, as Clare bashfully recorded of a rural poet rather like himself, to talk back:

And as he rambled in each peaceful round
Hed fancy friends in every thing he found
Muttering to cattle – aye and even flowers
As one in visions claimd his talk for hours
And hed oft wonder were we nought could see
On blades of grass and leaves upon the tree
And pointed often in a wild surprrise
To trifling hues of gadding butterflys ...

As a child I believed fervently in these hidden codes; so much so that at the age of ten I devised with my friends a coded mystery involving a Chinaman. I knew no Chinamen, but had heard they had pigtails and never cut their nails, which they used as pens. The shadow of such a man – no more than that – had been seen on the wall of the infants' cloakroom at school, just at the bottom of the stairs. Then he began to leave messages. The first were odd words and numbers written on scraps of exercise-book paper, folded very small and pressed into window frames. I found several, once under the aged watery eye of Mother Winifred, who paid no attention and was therefore involved. Then the Chinaman dropped on the playing field three coloured cords knotted round a drumstick – a form of communication used, I claimed, by the Aztecs or the Incas. Yet he was a subtler worker, too, and soon his signs were everywhere. I saw his Morse code, or perhaps Braille, on the grey silky bark of every beech tree that lined the playground. It was too high to read, but meant for us, nonetheless. Directions were scratched on stones, and important numbers reckoned by nodes on twigs. Any