

Grief

Despair, hopelessness, misery, wretchedness, grief. The catalogue of human woes is lengthy, and so is the list of terms we employ to name those woes. In the midst of woe-naming, naturally, we are not too fine at the distinction of one term from another. In the midst of misery who cares about careful word choice?

The answer is that I do. Well of course I do my best, which is not great, which is a way of stumbling ahead, pain after pain, without ever voicing what I find to be our fundamental sources of pain. But I do care about the language of the situation, because in the end, I think, it is language which brought us into the dignity of being human, and which seems to retain the power, if anything does, to show us the dignity of a clear space out beyond the mumbling of life's locutions. So I will try out the word grief.

Here's a sentence. 'His grief was bottomless.' 'Bottomless' brings with it the credentials of a literary tone and a (completely implicit) suggestion of the nether regions we humans live just barely atop. (The hells of the body, the lifeless infernos of lust). Grief swamps us, pours over us, drowns any ability to cope with it. Grief is what you see all over the face of a Gazan grandmother who has lost her children. Has grief a priority for naming what we see on that face? Does it seem plausible that 'misery' would serve to describe that face? No, too finite, too finite. 'Wretched?' Too circumstantial, too nearly marked by some intense local experience. Again, too finite. Among the several adjectives we are putting in play so far, as descriptors for a wiped out grandmother's visage, only grief seems total and absolute enough to fit the case. It doesn't get any more absolute than grief.

And again why? 'Despair,' 'wretchedness' 'hopelessness' and 'miserable' all declare lacks-of-hope; both hopelessness and despair carry in their roots 'lack of hope' and wretchedness implies in the strongest terms simply 'lack of well-being.' Grief goes far beyond lack of well-being, into areas where the merest credentials for existence are doubted. Milton alone has managed, within English, to substantiate grief, 'that forbidden fruit whose mortal taste brought death into the world and all our woe.' Poetry alone can give us 'the feeling of grief,' and poetry, if anything, can help us overcome grief.