When breath comes air:
Eternal Echoes in Seóirse Bodley's 'Wandrers Nachtlied'

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You that seek what life is in death,
Now find it air that once was breath
New names unknown, old names gone
Till time and bodies, but souls none.

Baron Brooke Fulke Greville, 'Caelica 83'

As we stood together on the Gickelhahn, the clouds moving down the mountain top spreading out around Illmenau below, I whispered to Seóirse, 'Can you hear that?" It was the sound of silence. Utter and complete stillness. He could and it took our breath away. There was absolutely no movement. No breeze. No recognition even of air. Only the sound of Seóirse's breath as I stood beside him. It was the sound of nothing and everything. Life and death in one space. We were not just standing in it. We were part of it. It was one of many peaceful, coherent, knowledgeable moments we shared. We stood there for a long time in awe, in silent recognition of the deepest essence of life.

I

Part of the poetry of history lies in the fact that on 6 September 1780, on the same spot of ground, stood the thirty-one-year old Goethe, as actual as we were two hundred years later, looking out over the same amazing landscape. Emerging out from a hunting lodge into a landscape that was just as alive if not more alive than him but in a totally different form, the poet approached the scene with a watchful reverence, and recorded his response on the wall.

Table 1: Goethe, 'Wandrers Nachtlied'[1]

	Wandrers Nachtlied II	rhyme scheme	The Wayfarer's Night Song II
1	Über allen Gipfeln	a	Over all the hill-tops
2	Ist Ruh,	b	It is still,
3	In allen Wipfeln	a	In all the tree tops
4	Spürest du	b	You can hardly feel
5	Kaum einen Hauch;	c	A breath stirring.
6	Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.	d	The little birds are silent in the forest.
7	Warte nur, balde	d	Wait! Soon
8	Ruhest du auch.	c	You too will be still.

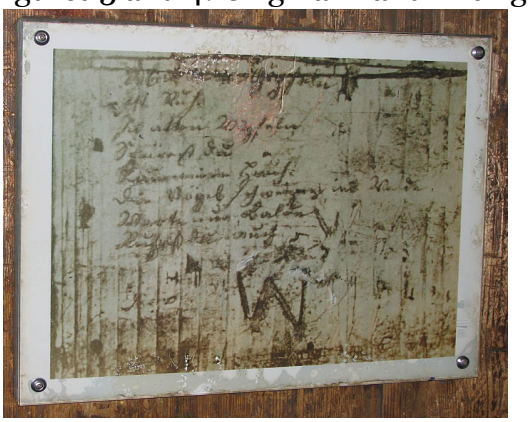
By telescoping an entire scene through a few salient features – the tranquillity on the hill-tops, the stillness of the tree-tops, the silence of the birds in the forest – Goethe related the scene as he perceived it and expressed as it awakened his poetic response. The final lines addressed to himself – 'Warte nur, balde /Ruhest du auch' (the Infinite within) – transfigure the experience into a profound spiritual encounter.

[1] Hans Gerhard Gräf, *Goethe über seine Dichtungen* 3 vols (Munich: Rütten & Loening, 1967), vol. 3, p.64.

Figures 1 and 2: Original Hunting Lodge and Museum, the Gickelhahn Illmenau

On the eve of his eighty-third (and final) birthday Goethe found himself back in the very same place, old loss rekindled as he recognized how that time, and everything associated with it, could never be recaptured. Death weighted Goethe's future, who wept as he reread his youthful words aloud, 'Warte nur, balde, ruhest du auch'. Berginspektor Mahr bore witness to the 82-year old poet's contemplation of the landscape until in the Goethean manner of his prose *Hymn to Nature* (1781) where Death is Nature's reminder to live fully,[2] he turned back to life with the words, 'Nun, wollen wir wieder gehen' (Now, let's go again).[3] At Goethe's request, his handwriting was renewed. When the original hut was burned down on 11 August 1870, it was soon replaced by an exact replica on which the poem was engraved.

Figures 3 and 4: Original Handwriting Renewed and Brass Plaque, Gickelhahn



Even in this earliest frame layers of time are present, the most poignant being an unconscious allusion to a folksong his mother sang to him as a child:

[2] 'und der Tod ist ihr Kunstgriff, viel Leben zu haben', *Fragment über die Natur*, *Hamburger Ausgabe*. *Goethes* Werke ed. Erich Trunz, 14 vols (Hamburg: Christian Wegner Verlag, 1948-60; re-released Munich: C.H.Beck, 1981), vol.13, p.46. Hereafter referred to as *HA*.

[3] James Boyd, *Notes to Goethe's* Poems, 2 vols., (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), vol. 1, p.159. See *Goethe*: *Conversation and Encounters* ed. by David Luke and Robert Pick, (London: Oswald Wolff, 1966), J. Ch. Mahr, 27 August 1831, p.236.

Schlaf, Kindlein, balde! Die Vögelein singen im Walde, Sie fliegen den Wald wohl auf und nieder Und bringen dem Kindlein die Ruhe wieder Schlaf, Kindlein, schlaf![4]	Sleep soon, little child, The little birds sing in the woods They soar into the forest and descend To let children slumber once more. Sleep, little child, sleep.

In a letter to Lavater, on 3 November 1780, two months after he wrote 'Wandrers Nachtlied' Goethe acknowledged our return to Nature in death:

Die Zeit kommt doch bald, wo wir zerstreut werden, in die Elemente zurückkehren, aus denen wir genommen sind[5]	The time approaches when we will be scattered and return to the elements out of which we evolved

At a surface level the poem claims a similar elemental continuity: a view of death as a simple dissolution whereby the body returns to earth and the spirit slips into air to become one with the universe. But it also enters a deeper level of dignity, which suggests that we live in the world but are not simply of the world. Just as our lives are unfolded in a circle of time, 'Wandrers Nachtlied' records an experience where, as we journey through our days, time suddenly deepens and all fragmentation coheres as we slip into a pure refinement of presence that transfigures us. Eternal time dwells deep in ordinary time. Though we, like Goethe, slip back into the breakage of days and moments, we never lose the feel of the eternal. Heaven is not elsewhere. It is here in the unseen. Inside us.

II

Standing in Goethe's footsteps on the Gickelhahn inspired Seóirse's surprise setting of 'Wandrers Nachtlied' for the launch of my first monograph in 2003. Twenty years later, after *Schubert. A Musical Wayfarer* was published, my Beloved took his leave. My biography of Schubert was due to be launched on Schubert's *Todestag*, in the early evening so 'my other favourite composer' could be present.[6] Even on borrowed time, we never know what will land on tomorrow's shoreline, so we are always actively receiving and shaping. Instead of planning my launch, I was planning Seóirse's service of remembrance at which the soprano Sylvia O'Brien would perform this setting. Sitting in the Pro-Cathedral Dublin, listening to Sylvia sing, I realized this was the very last song Seóirse had performed with her in public. It was one of many ways which life had come full circle.[7]

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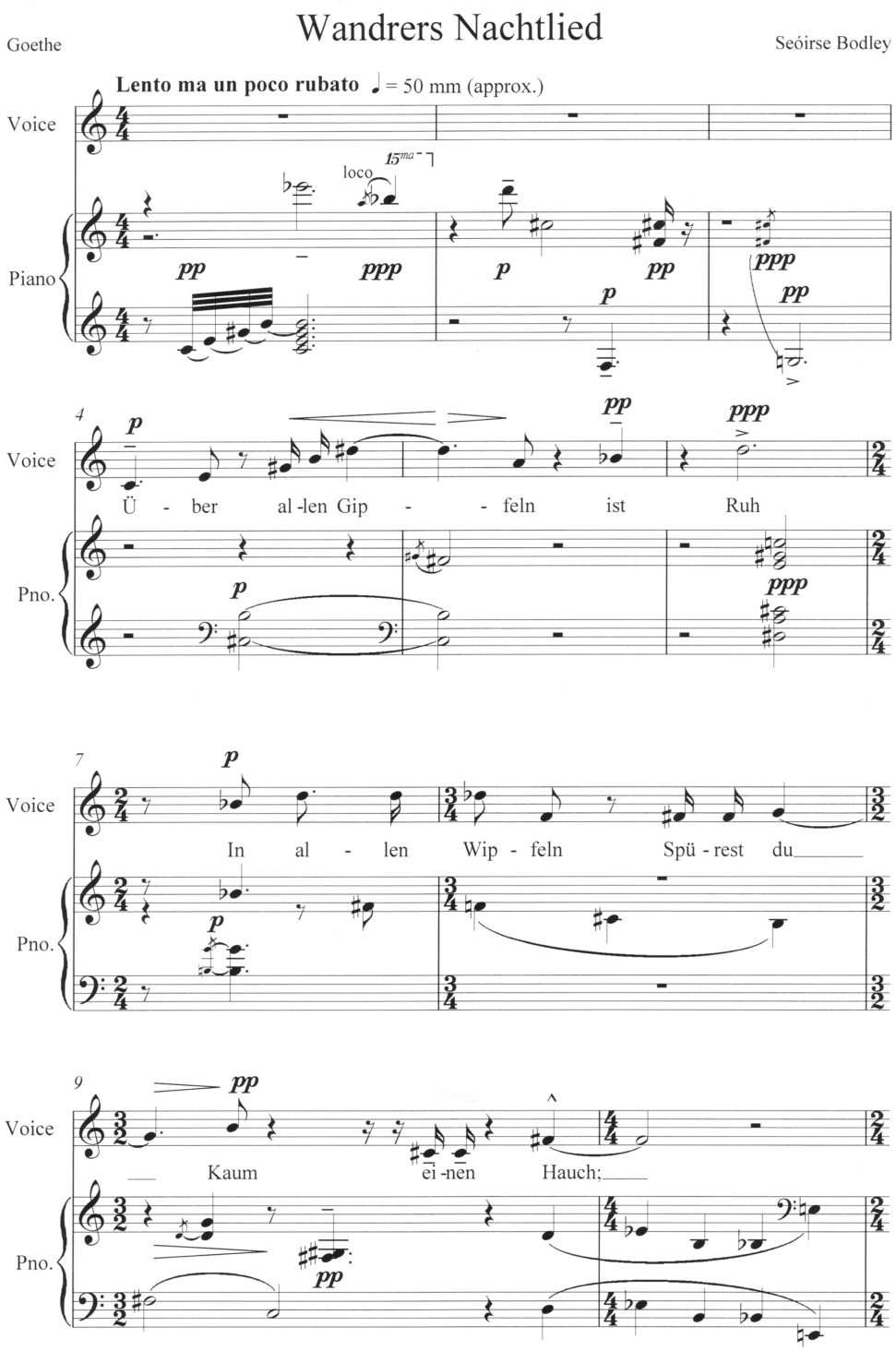
[4] Boyd, vol 1, p. 161.

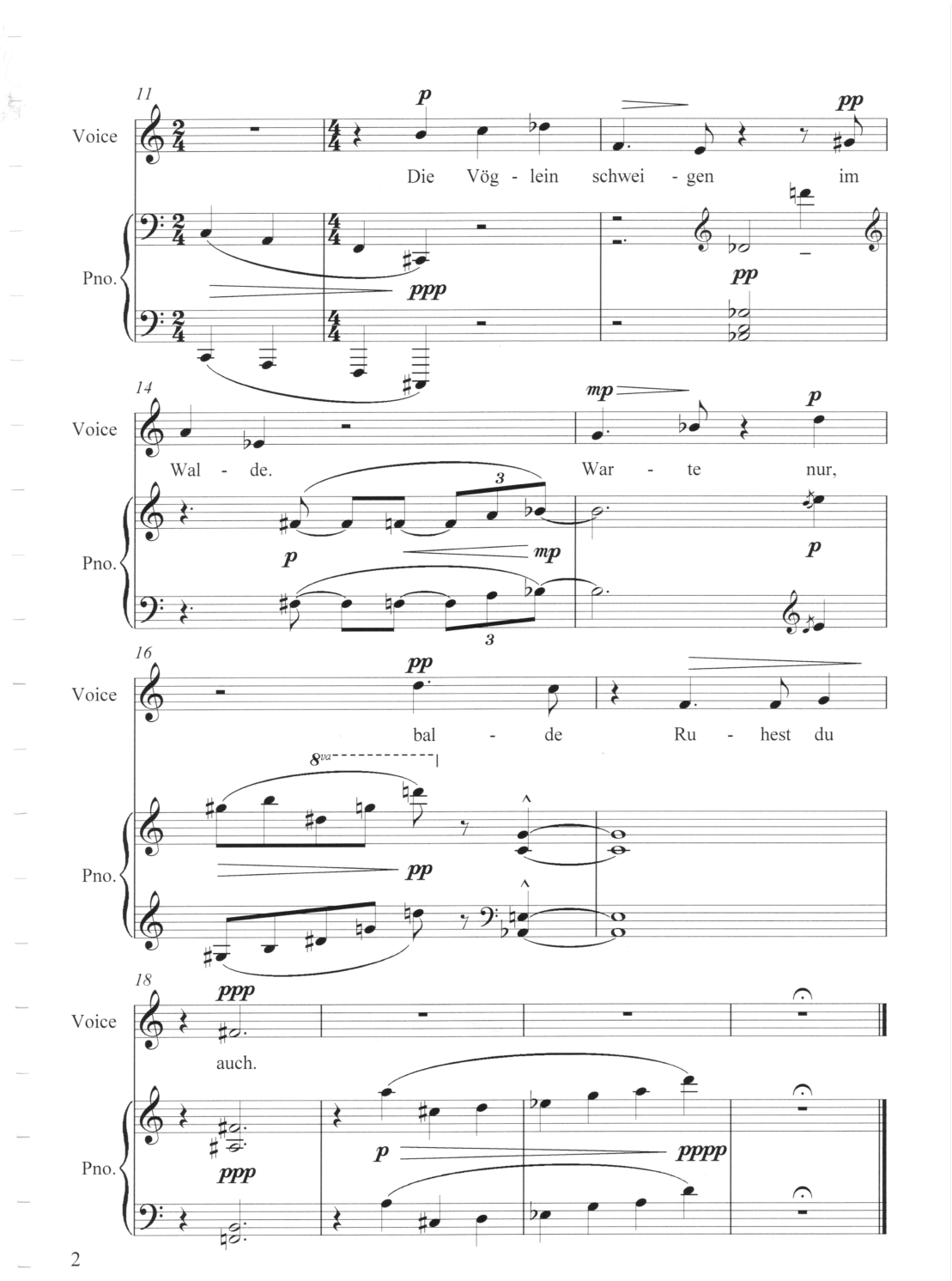
[5] *Weimarer Ausgabe. Goethes Werke* ed. Gustav von Loeper, Erich Schmidt et al, 143 vols. (Weimar: Herman Böhlau, 1887-1919), Letter no.1035, *An Lavater*, 3 November 1780, IV, vol.3, p.329. Hereafter referred to as *WA*.

[6] Lorraine Byrne Bodley, *Schubert. A Musical Wayfarer* (Yale University Press, 2023). The biography is dedicated to [Seóirse] 'my other favourite composer'.

[7] Bodley's setting of Goethe's 'Wandrers Nachtlied' was premiered on 6 May 2003 by Aylish Kerrigan (mezzo soprano) and Seóirse Bodley (piano). Other significant performances include Anne Woodworth (mezzo soprano) and Caroline Senior (piano) at the Festival of New Music, Waterford, 31 January 2005 and the rendition by Sylvia O'Brien (soprano) and Seóirse Bodley (piano), as a fitting encore to their recital of Faust settings on 20 April 2012.

Musical Example 1 Seóirse Bodley's Setting of 'Wandrers Nachtlied'



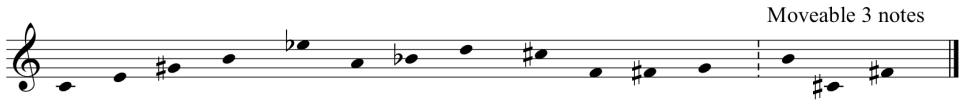


Seóirse Bodley's Lento setting expresses the courage of a contemplative composer who pushed the fragile barque of musical thought out into the anonymous stillness and vacant silence of the abyss. The beauty of that experience on the Gickelhahn is what magnetized the composer and it is the beauty of the contemplative to give beauty away. The recitative-like piano accompaniment in the opening bars and sparse texture of the accompaniment throughout set the stage for Bodley's miniature melodrama. The dynamic range from *piano* to triple *piano* is less a musical image of the landscape and more a communication of the depth-resonance of the quietude in which Goethe's scene

is bathed, a depth-recognition of the poet's surrendered state.[8] The musical journey is into an interior and invisible journey: one day he too would leave and not return. The song is intended to be sung in a very inward manner, almost to oneself, the audience becoming onlookers much like Berginspektor Mahr as he bore witness to the 82-year old poet's contemplation of the scene.

Bodley distanced and intensified this experience through his *Wanderers' Nightsong*'s origins in a twelve-note row with three additional moveable notes:

Musical Example 2: Seóirse Bodley, 'Wandrers Nachtlied', Basic Series



The three-bar piano introduction arises from the basic series 1 (including the three moveable notes (which underscore bars 4–5); the piano accompaniment has its origins in inversion 1 in the accompaniment (bars 6–8); all 15 notes of retrograde 2 (bars 9–12); retrograde inversion 8 (bars 13–16) and all 15 notes of the basic series 9 (bars 16–21). Bodley's melody arises from the basic series 1 (bars 4–10) and retrograde inversion 7 (bars 13–18), where the three moveable notes – C, F and G (bars 16–17) are voiced before the final F sharp on 'auch'.

Unlike the sustained lines of Schubert's setting, Bodley deliberately sets the text in disjointed, yet sonorous, vocal lines which intensify the musical expression of Goethe's poem. As much of the poem's meaning comes from the musicality of its sparse diction, much of the music's meaning arises through the laconic texture of Bodley's setting. An example of this is found in the deliberate placing of rests within key textual phrases 'kaum einen Hauch (with its mirrored diphtongs in bar 9) and 'Ruhest du auch' (bars 17–18), and in particular the very different (poetic) cadences to which those rests give rise when immediately placed before 'Hauch' (bar 9) and 'auch' (bar 18). Although deliberately disjointed, this musical gesture subtly points the end-rhyme in these lines, which Bodley mirrors in the musical rhyme, F sharp.

A second example of very subtle text setting is found in the poet's telescoping of natural images from the mountain tops to the poetic self which is subtly observed through the composer's circling of pitches around 'D'. The natural summit of Goethe's scene is musically observed by placing the vocal climax on 'Gipfeln', D sharp, in the singer's opening bar. As the poet surveys his surroundings moving closer to the poetic self, Bodley's vocal line gradually descends from 'D sharp' on 'Gipfeln' to a sustained 'D' on 'Ruh' (bar 6), falling from 'D' – 'D flat' on 'allen Wipfeln' (bars 4–8) to 'C' on the first syllable of 'Vog'lein' (bar 12). Through this flattened contour, the chromatic reversal C-D flat (on 'Vog'lein' bar 12) rising again to 'D' 'nur balde' (bars 15–16) is thematically well prepared. Through both musical gestures the composer endorses the poetic narrative while avoiding a sense of superficial parallelism.

In a similar vein the musical movement in the piano interludes (bars 10–

[8] The composer's immediately apprehension of the poetic experience was also informed by a similar epiphany in his own life and subsequent artistic expression in a piano cycle he ironically entitled 'News from Donabate'. For discussion of this work see Gareth Cox's biography, *Seóirse Bodley* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2010), p.144f.

12, 14 and 16) and immanent action of Goethe's scene is heralded by ascending quavers A to B flat (bars 14–15) which mark a momentary vista into the nature of experience, whereby the poet calmly recognizes the certainty of their eventual demise.[9] Once again, the poet's embodiment of this truth is voiced in deliberately disjointed lines, whereby the poet's parting words 'warte', 'nur', 'balde' 'ruhest du' 'auch' are intensified by the preceding rests in bars 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18 respectively. Here, once again, Bodley is masterful in his enhancement of the psychological.

III

One of the recognitions of both Goethe's and Bodley's 'Wandrers Nachtlied' is landscape's ability to recall us into a mode of stillness, solitude and silence where we truly can receive Time. In lines of varied metre and length, Goethe illustrates how connecting to the elemental is a way of coming into rhythm of the universe, the inner human landscape and invisible world entwining with what we perceive. In art there is another sense in which that outer presence of landscape can be brought inward as a sustaining experience: that stillness is always available. When I remember standing with Seóirse on the threshold of Goethe's home on the Gickelhahn I can inhale and take myself back to the ascent up the mountain. Grief is too raw to feel that sense of peace but I know that stillness is inside me waiting.

Despite direct experience of pure presence on the Gickelhahn with the composer of this setting, creatures of the earth are (I believe) incapable of the hermetic sealing that Goethe's circle of closure seems to imply. Throughout his life the poet repeatedly affirmed his belief in reincarnation, metempsychosis and the Aristotelian 'entelechy' which is the mature Goethe's term for the immortal 'I' or self of man. In conversation with Eckermann in the final decade of his life, he calmly confided, 'When a man is seventy-five years old [...] he cannot fail to think of death from time to time. This thought leaves me in complete peace, for I have the firm conviction that our spirit is a being of a completely indestructible nature; it is one that continues to work from eternity to eternity. It is similar to the sun, which seems to set only to our earthly eyes, but which actually never sets but continues to shine unceasingly'.[10] A similar belief in the macro-microcosmic periodicity of life is expressed in letters to Charlotte von Stein, in the early 1780s.[11] Already here Goethe's fidelity to the open-ended nature of experience is alluded to in line five 'kaum einen Hauch' (breath at a minimum is intensely alive) and in the closing couplet through the verb 'ruhen', to rest. In conversation with Chancellor von Müller on 6 June 1830, the poet used the term in relation to his own death, admitting, 'Ich bin alt genug, um Ruhen zu wünschen' (I am old enough to desire repose)[12] In

[9] Goethe's reaction to his verse on his final visit to Illmenau supports this reading of the poem. Cf the poet's conversation with Soret on 8 March 1830, *Goethe im Gespräch*, ed. by Eduard Korrodi (Switzerland: Maresse Verlag, 1994), pp.503–04.

[10] Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe*, 2 May 1824 (Houben), p.87; see also 11 March 1828, pp.512–13.

[11] See, for example, *WA* IV/5, Letter no. 1266 to Charlotte von Stein, 2 July 1781.p.161, also his correspondence with Wieland, [n.d.] April 1776, *Goethe Briefe* 1 *HA* p.212. For artistic expressions of the poet's belief in reincarnation see 'Warum gabst du uns die tiefen Blicke' which he wrote for Charlotte von Stein in April 1776, *HA* 1, p.123 and 'Gesang der Geister über den Wassern' (9–11 October 1779), *WA* I/2, p.56.

[12] *Goethe im Gespräch*, p.524.

‘Wandrers Nachtlied’ ‘ruhen’ is presented as part of a concept of circularity. Perhaps acceptance of the completion of the life cycle rings more true.

In his later years, Seóirse embodied the onement and serenity in Goethe’s ‘Wandrers Nachtlied’, as he gathered and refined himself to slip through the door of air. When he accepted Time was limited, an extraordinary beauty surfaced. It was as if the whole tenderness and dispersed beauty of Seóirse’s life focussed in his eyes. His face was luminous, his presence pure essence. This hidden unity was at the heart of the shelter we offered each other as he began to belong to the unseen world.

What saddens me most about Seóirse’s death is how breath becomes air. How someone so deeply loved can become invisible and literally vanish into thin air. Presence which once offered immediate belonging has no frame and is no longer located in any one place I can know or visit. And yet there is a strong sense that while Seóirse’s life has come to an end on the surface of time, his presence, meaning, and effect continue to be held and integrated into the eternal. Perhaps in this sense eternal time will also be deeply intimate, where the unfolding narrative of an individual life is woven and gathered. If eternal life is eternal memory, then it becomes possible to imagine a realm beyond endings where all that has unfolded is not cancelled or lost, but the spirit depths of it are arriving home. Certainly this is what Callimachus in the third century believed when he acknowledged the richness of absence and memory:

‘Now you are lying [...]
long, long ago at rest.
Still are your gentle voices
Your nightingales, awake –
For death he taketh all away
But these he cannot take.’[13]

[13] Callimachus, *Epigrams* ed. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (Berlin: Weidman, 1897). The German translation and Greek original are Poem 2 on the data base preserved by Tufts University:https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0226%3Atext%3Depigrams%3Apoem%3D2.[Accessed 15 March 2024]