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Quarantine Notebook

WEEK 5 • 26TH APRIL 2020

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MUSCALIET

CRITIQUE OF THE IMAGINARY

Combining splintered marble
 With an opaque blue
 Framed by tarnished gold,
 Colour laid on colour

Between an elegiac spacing
 Of capriciously dilapidated splendour
 And a solitude of debris,
 You have reduced the summary magnificence

Of intemperate presumption to a multitude of shades
 Seen through ritual duplicities
 Of stained and frosted glass
 Burnished by the twilight's dwindling brilliance.

As for all the rest of it, the nacreous icons
 Of transfigured trash all but hidden
 By distorting agitations
 Of damp air, the frivolous

Inversions and deep-vaulted labyrinths,
 You consecrate the lot,
 Along with the oblivion of unending night,
 To repetition and the lethal rhetoric of time!

BALANCING ACT★

Slow collage
 clouds, sun, buds, birds
 earthen ware
 slightly out of focus spent belief
 in traceable threads
 of detail not exactly
 safety ropes of text and image.

Does it really matter
 that I've got my yellow boots on, Sidney Graham,
 slipping off the little stepping stones,
 scrabbling for a hand hold
 on the moss and celandine,
 while this current slides
 time over the lip of the world?

*This poem about the unreliable relationship between lockdown and reality refers in part to W. S. Graham's poem 'The Stepping Stones' and to a contemporaneous letter from him to Roger Hilton. The former can be found on page 235 in *W. S. Graham: New Collected Poems*, ed. by Matthew Francis, Faber, 2004, the latter on page 230 in *The Nightfisherman: Selected Letters of W. S. Graham* ed. by Michael and Margaret Snow, Carcanet, 1999.

LOOKING UPWARDS / LOOKING DOWNWARDS:
SOME REACTIONS TO CONFINEMENT

I

For the furze-cutter on Egdon Heath there are two different worlds: looking upwards he 'would have been inclined to continue work', looking downwards 'he would have decided to finish his faggot and go home'. Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* opens on the heath in November and thirty-six years after its first publication Edward Thomas's early poem, 'November' contemplates a similar sense of different perspectives.

In his poem from December 1914 Thomas alerts us to 'the prettiest things on ground are paths / With morning and evening hobnails dinted, / With foot and wing-tip overprinted'. The path itself is trodden into earth where 'Twig, leaf, flint, thorn, / Straw, feather' are all 'Pounded up' and the shift from 'straw' to 'feather' is itself a reflection of the relationship between a Now and a Beyond: one, downward looking, the other upward. The sky is perceived as shining 'above the earth so old' and 'men stare' upwards at it:

One imagines a refuge there
Above the mud, in the pure bright
Of the cloudless heavenly light

The idea of a 'refuge', an ideal place of safety and security, is what can prompt the walker of paths to continue a relentless search for a place that is unchanging. The poem's focus at its conclusion is upon the ground on which we live and walk:

He loves even the mud whose dyes
Renounce all brightness to the skies.

For Edward Thomas, walking was a way of seeking release from imprisonment and in 'Recollections of November', published in *Horae*

Solitariae in 1902, he suggested that in his suburban street almost every month was 'marked as it were in heavy black letter at its entrance':

Nature here uses a brief language, like the hand at
Belshazzar's feast, and I know that it is November by the
dull, sad trampling of the hoofs and feet...

From his 'mean street' in Balham Thomas recognised a sense of release by spying 'a seagull from my window – spreading her great wings in flight at altitudes whence perhaps she beholds the sea – an emblem of that liberty I boast, but do not feel'. This is followed by another image of release from confinement as a leaf blown into his room by the wind prompts 'such a feeble knocking' that 'will throw open many doors of memory.' The clouds which he sees trooping toward the west are 'all moving in one path' and he wonders 'to what mysterious shrine, were they advancing – to what shrine among the firs of an unseen horizon, with the crow and the bat?'

PHILIP TERRY

MR UBU

A SKETCH TOWARDS A COVID-19 FANTASY

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

MR UBU, MRS UBU.

MR UBU [*washes his hands, while singing the National Anthem*]: Pisschitt!
Fuck the lot of 'em!

MRS UBU: Ooohh! Wash out your mouth with soap, while you're at it!
You should mind your manners!

MR UBU: Bollocks to that! If I didn't know the neighbours were listening
I'd give you a good old slap for the nonce.

MRS UBU: I'm not the one you should be thinking of duffing up, Old
Ubu. No, Sir! There's someone else for the high jump.

MR UBU: By my Boris bike, I'm not with you.

MRS UBU: What, you mean to say you're happy with your lot?

MR UBU: By my Boris bike, pisschitt, dearie. Yes, by God, I'm perfectly
happy. Who wouldn't be? Prefect at Eton, President of the Oxford Union,
Mayor of London, Foreign Secretary – keeping all those piccanninies in
their place – and now I'm Prime Minister. Who can cap that?

MRS UBU: So what! Just because you saw off that Jezzar Corbyn, you're
content to spend your time getting Number 10 refurbished with velvet
curtains, when you could get your loaf measured for the crown of Great
Britain?

MR UBU: Huh? I don't understand a word you're saying, dearie. And

now we've lost Ulster to the Republic, and Scotland's devolved, we're
no longer Great Britain, strictly speaking, more Lesser Britain, Smaller
Britain, Diminutive or Petite Britain.

MRS UBU: How stupid can you get? Didn't they teach you Macbeth at
Eton?

MR UBU: By my Boris bike, Queen Lizzie is still alive, isn't she? And even
if she does kick the bucket, hasn't she got lots of children, or have they all
gone off to Canada?

MRS UBU: Why shouldn't you finish off the lot of them, they're not the
most robust of people, in fact your slow start in tackling Covid-19 will
probably do the job for you! Then you can call a National Emergency, and
put yourself in their place, just like Cromwell if you remember that crook.

MR UBU: Ha! Now you're going too far, dearie. And you shall very
shortly be beaten up good and proper.

MRS UBU: You fat slob, if I get beaten up, who'll patch the seat of your
pants?

MR UBU: So what! Haven't I the right to show off my bum cheeks like
everybody else in times of crisis?

MRS UBU: If I were you, I'd try to get that bum perched on the throne.
You could become enormously rich, eat as many bangers as you liked, and
roll through the streets in a limousine.

MR UBU: If I were King, I'd get them to make me a nice bonnet.

MRS UBU: And you could get yourself a nice new umbrella, and some
sock suspenders, then your socks wouldn't trail round your ankles when
you went for a jog for the cameras.

MR UBU: It is more than I can resist! Pisschittabugger and buggerapisschitt,
if ever I come across Lizzie again with her gloves off I'll give her a firm
handshake, and a big slobbery kiss to boot.

MRS UBU: Well done, old man, now you're talking like a true Etonian.

MR UBU: Oh, no! Me – a Prime Minister – take out the Queen of England! I'd rather die! [*Washes hands again, singing the National Anthem.*]

MRS UBU [*aside*]: Oh, pisschitt! [*Aloud.*] So you want to stay poor as a church mouse, Mister Ubu?

MR UBU: Corbyn's bones, yes, by my Boris bike, I'd rather be poor as the measliest mouse than rich as the cruellest cat.

MRS UBU: And your bonnet? And your umbrella? And your sock suspenders?

MR UBU: And then what, you scheming bitch?

He leaves, banging the door behind him.

MRS UBU [*alone*]: Pfarrrt, pisschitt, what a stingy bastard, but pfarrticles and pisschitticles, I think I've got him cogitating all the same. Thanks be to God and myself, in a few weeks I may be Queen of England.

CHRIS McCULLY

CHILD, IT IS A WEPYING DALE

*Lullay, my herte and my swetyng,
Born under a defaulted star
And mad Herod's infected pout.
Sleep for this moment far
From hobgoblin, mania's drum,
From gun-lobby and self-doubt
And from all to come.*

*Child, it is a wepying dale.
Most of the mirror's tears have term,
Nor is there anything like fate —
Just choice, and consequence, and germ.
Lullay, lullay, reste thee a throwe.
The selfie-stick can wait
While the vaccines grow.*

*Lullay, lullay, wel myghte thou crie
For germ and time and the harde bonds
Of love-longyng that once compiled
Uniqueness from their wounds,
Whose logic can't be wished unborn
Even when most reviled,
And dust its crown of thorn.*

Call it an astronomer's lot
 between linewidth & luminosity
 manifolds without metric to keep us close
 with or without an emoji jacket to reflect mood

after all its live capture out of the clutter
 a tasty rap with primal bass beneath

 & by tilt of the head
 always the error
 of accuracy & precision

in that snub-nosed shocked H-alpha stream
 the dusty smoke of a receding star
 in brittle & spiked ionized air
 tough to catch the short-lived

hence this
 when bliss it was & to be young

 spatial resolution linked by the elongated
 delineated by the rotational
 immersed in gigahertz continuum

at first without thought
 unwritten
 unread
 before building word for word
 in rhythms of perception

 now tracking west dropping south
her line as gauge & pace for meaning

 whether of observation
 measure felt of thought
 the act is of recognition
& redistribution
 smudges circled arrowed even unmarked
 marking the mood
pinning down a central dusty filament
 in greyscale clear as day
 bipolar red & blue lobes shifting.

ALL OTHER LOVE IS LIKE THE MOONE

Needles won't float.
The moon's gone bust.
Sink or swim, wax or wane:
Gravity and dust.

Sun hard to trust,
Flower nipped in bud.
Fair and fallow, wop and wo:
Autoclave and blood.

Milk turns to mud,
Dazzle to dross.
Graph and graphic fail to prove
A light-splintered cross.

All other love
Is like the moone.
Tide has fled, needle's red —
Not tomorrow. Soon.