

# **An insect on a leaf**

*reading text*

**Lawrence Upton**

In his novel **Headlong Hall**, Thomas Love Peacock has Mr Milestone demand

"you will have the goodness to make a distinction between the picturesque and the beautiful."

And Mr Gall says:

"I distinguish the picturesque and the beautiful, and I add to them, in the laying out of grounds, a third and distinct character, which I call *unexpectedness*."

But he is rebutted:

"Pray, sir," said Mr Milestone, "by what name do you distinguish this character, when a person walks round the grounds for the second time?"

The question is never answered.

*[slide shows start]*

Sitting in the garden, reading The Guardian, confused by the unexpectedness of it, and by the view, I tell my companion that I am Guardianing.

It has been said that originally the word for *garden* and the word for *paradise* were the same word. This is an anachronistic statement. What is meant is that originally there was one word for concepts which in modern English are labelled by two separate words.

When I say "originally", the best that I can mean, is "nearer the origin of things"

Stories start somewhere because we do not know the origin of things or that there was an origin. Stories of origin itself are dangerous to the powerful because they inform; and information is opposed to power when it is not in the hands of the powerful.

The story of creation produces an evasion on the question of the origin of everything else. Those of us who do not accept the literal truth of the story of creation are expected to behave as if everything is at it has always been since the creation we do not believe in.

We know a little bit of history as it has been written. But history

starts somewhere.

British and US soldiers have been quoted asserting that they are in Iraq to restore Democracy though I believe that country has never had Democracy as British and US citizens might define it. In this country, we have Democratic Traditions, surely a nonsense because the system of Democracy we have was still being implemented in the mid twentieth century.

In this country there is a Tradition of Subjection by abused words. While we are told we have Democracy, the democracy we have is incomplete. We do not choose our Prime Minister. We do not make policy. We choose from processed policies as we choose from varieties of breakfast food which are of 2 or 3 kinds dressed up in different ways to appear many.

Changes in the means of production necessitated the cooperation of the subjected, so that the story of a share in government came to be told. Some of those who made that happen, often in the face of opposition from the rich and powerful the story would most benefit, were serious in their endeavours and well-meaning.

There is, as Strindberg pointed out, a character's stand point; and also their point of view. As standpoint changes so one's point of view is informed and misinformed, and likely changed.

Meaning well is an important kind of meaning. It enables some to murder and not be culpable. In really serious matters, as, for instance, being an incompetent gardener for someone important, meaning well does not make it all right to waste a plant; but if it is only Palestinian civilians or Afghans or Iraqis that are being wasted, then clearly there is no problem as long as one didn't mean anything but well.

*[Pause]*

There is a difference between a garden and a paradise. A garden has limits. In the case of the Garden of Eden, these limits may not have been apparent to the occupants until the cool of the day. Until then, the question of what is outside the garden was, though syntactically and almost semantically possible, as meaningless as asking what is outside of the universe. Footnote to "universe": conditions apply.

Outside of the Garden of Eden was the absence of being in the Garden of Eden, which may be why no one has found it. If one found it, one would not be here to tell others; and that may be why a substantial number of people disappear every year.

If so, they show the true spirit of enterprise. They don't worry about where things start. They go off and find what they like the sound of and grab it. They are creating wealth for themselves and should be praised.

I don't know where the idea for that link, between wealth selfishness and praise, came from; but I suppose it had an origin.

Wealth creators, therefore, are as god. The rest of us grub around taking solace in the thought that our children might live on other planets or even whole new universes... One has to be careful here. This is what Adam and Eve accepted...Footnote on "accepted": conditions applied.

Given the situation they were in, maybe they should have been happy to accept what they already had as sufficient; but they were right that there was a lot more to be known about.

Jesus, on the cross, said: "This day you will be with me in Paradise"; yet no one asked "You have another garden?"

How many more does he have? I recall meeting a friend after many years and him telling me of his continuing success. After, he whispered to me: Do not tell my brother that I have four houses; he only knows about three of them..

Another lived behind a tangle of bushes which had been growing for one hundred years, bushes which slowly destroyed the ruins of a small hamlet amongst which his house was set. The bushes obscured his presence from all but the most observant passers by. He liked that.

He had been ill; and no one said that they could cure him. It was thought that he would die young.

He was allowed to live out what was left of his life there, very cheaply, out of sight of most that he thought would hurt him, that he might die peacefully.

But he did not die. His illness, with care and self-care and caution, became an exacerbated form of shared mortality. It may have been the peacefulness. He had his own small stream which kept the air temperature moderate even in hot summer. The house was full of sunlight often. There was rarely an unpleasant or raucous sound.

I envied him. It had a fine garden which he tended in a desultory way in the midst of fields and woods.

Then, one day, he decided it needed tidying up. He must have been watching a gardening programme. Someone had put

dissatisfaction into his imagination. I have cut it back, he said, right to the walls of the property. A very strange thing to say. The reference to “the property”, broke through the barrier between the private and the public, emphasising awareness that one is in part a part of something large and probably oftentimes antagonistic. It acknowledged the outside rather than enjoying the inside. And why cut back everything? What is the point of a garden if everything in it is cut back.

Very soon after, the landlady asked him to leave; and I thought of the story of the expulsion of humanity from the Garden of Eden, following its acquisition of the knowledge of death.

He moved into an urban space and was before long helping to cut other people’s gardens back to the edges of their property. It seemed he did little to remove tripping branches and stones; his energy went on seeing how much space they had. At the direct expense of what was contained by the space, he exposed structural faults in the boundaries.

Later, he was told that his former home had not one garden but a series of them; and he had only had the enjoyment of one. In his fascination and concentration upon boundaries, he had assumed that a hedge is a boundary and forgotten that is only one of its functions. He had lived beside forgotten groves.

He expressed regret at the loss he had not known of and turned his attention indoors, changing everything that he could, whether it was his to change or not. Where he had lived in light, now he and those he affected lived in reflections as he filled emptied rooms with salvaged mirrors to make everything seem larger.

Yet it is as if we all live between multiple mirrors as the same events recur, seeming slightly different as we see them from startling angles and in varying sequences. Experience habituates us to repetition and to change.

One time then I asked him if I might borrow a book that I had seen some years before in the pleasant sheltered house. Yes, he said, that was an interesting book; it was informative; but I threw it away because I have so many books. It is a pity.

*[Pause]*

Now he hardly reads.

*[Pause]*

I was on a tidal island. Twice a day, one could cross a new sand

causeway. Twice a day, the one became two. I was alone.

I had crossed early as the tide was taking back the causeway. I had wandered around a wonder which is full of things one might wish to look at - *each stone a world* - standing stones, burial mounds, hut circles, a kelp pit, flowers of all kinds and many birds.

I sat a little way above the sands and ate late lunch. Then I rested, and sat out what was left of my exile.

When the link was again fully above water, tourists crossed and headed uphill inland or north or south along the coast, purposeful.

Not long after, most of them came back again; and one of them, having looked back at where he had come from, said, as he passed, "There's nothing here, is there?"

*[Pause]*

I walk a lot; without and without others; and I walk most in West Penwith, the westernmost extremity of Cornwall.

Communications are poor. It's easy to get run over. It's hard and expensive to get a bus. It's a muddy landscape. There's too much barbed wire. There's too much vandalism. I don't mean bored kids smashing bus shelters; inhabitants destroying the history of their country and its landscape,

*[Pause]*

My family comes from an island - St Mary's, Scilly – but for me it is too much like a park now. I feel best on a nearby island, Agnes. I like the frequent mechanical silence. The lack of public artificial light. The lack of traffic...

West Penwith is almost an island and can be walked across in a long day. It's being down-sized by the urban; and undermined by sea-rise. The roads are nonsensical. Everything is in the same direction, or opposite-pointing roads go eventually to the same place.

Green roads developed: a quarry or a mill or a mine or a farm. Their purposes ended, they decayed. Time folds and stretches and doubles back as one walks between ruins of 6000 years. Beyond that, it is difficult for the imagination to make ways. Those granite places are part of me even if I don't know what they are. How could I? I don't know what I am. I don't know what Cornwall is. I stand on it much as an insect stands on a leaf.

It is a low wage economy with no legacy of affluence. Those ivy-covered ruins so many take as signs of "romantic Cornwall" have

the silence of absence. Cornish economic migration generally has been as high at least as any country in Europe. When the rest of Britain prospers, Cornwall gets a few closable shop branches and regional depots; and the profit daily crosses the Tamar eastwards.

I walk there; I write poetry - for me, actions uneasily separated. They are my work. It is my work.

When I sought the solar eclipse of 1999, the nearest I've been to church attendance in 40 years, it was far down cliffs at the Crown Mine.

I wrote poems on my search for the eclipse; none about the event. I could describe it in terms of some of what I saw and felt, which included crying. I could attempt explanation of what I saw, why I felt cold when I did etc. I have no idea why I cried. Of that, there is nothing to say. The eclipse is describable, the experience beyond my words. Normally I have so many words, like the streams of the small Penwith moors.

My response, after recovery of equilibrium, was animal. I wanted to do it again and researched how I could be in another total eclipse. It was a little like being chained to an idiot, in the words attributed to Aristotle.

Walking is an engagement with the world. One goes where one wants, barbed wire permitting, and that is consuming. It may make the beginnings of poetry, words outside conversational polity, potentially of it, invigorating memories. Not so much what one might have said as what one wishes had not been said.

Hurtful words are bad enough. Untrue words are worse. It is better to be silent...

Only in the making of poetry is there any chance of not, finally, expressing falsehood.

The speech vandalism which avoids commitment when it is due, expanding self till it is a weight.

There is no future. Only past, and present. But that cannot be avoided by denial. We are made of and imprisoned by our own speeches, and delineated by the pathos of our verbal situation.

Poetry means in a different way to the summarisable.

I take *walking* to mean a great many things other than perambulation. My voluntary sometimes almost compulsive walks exist in tension with the concomitant writing down, involving physical stasis. I take lines of poetry for walks; or they take me.

I try not to go out to write. There is a presumptive quality to that which disturbs my superstition. I think of writing sideways, stalked and stalking, playing coaxing tricks on the inner dialogue which other circumstances mark out as conscience. By habitual observation and concentration, one is familiar with the behaviour of what one seeks, it is possible sometimes to reach out and take hold or be taken hold of as the poet and naturalist Colin Simms describes capturing lizards for study. Poetry hunts us back, haunting us with new making memories

It isn't anything entering the body like external breath, though it may seem like it. A sudden movement will cause the mammal moving between your feet to scurry, as it crosses before the gate you are leaning on; a proprietorial approach to an arriving poem will disrupt its receipt, like a horse shying at a premature swing of the horse box door.

And making poetry is a form of gardening; as gardening needs patience and constant attention.

Don't compel the poem. Don't look for it overtly.

Animals have us sussed. They know our eyes are our eyes, probably better than we do (one suspects they have fewer abstractions cluttering them) and that our mouths are our mouths; and so on. They know our behavioural patterns. They are off before we have commenced the acquisitive lunge.

The mice who set up home in my study, while I was out walking for many days, learned, on my return, how my hands moved over the keyboard. In their curiosity I have had them sitting on the keyboard while I was typing before I caught and exiled them.

Such informal mutual respect involves becoming aware of one's behaviour and learning to disjoint its syntax, so that the capturing / greeting gesture is in one movement with no preamble or other cue, not the last of a sequence of gestural rituals.

It makes for stillness and I am trying to learn that better if only to see what comes to sit beside me. Frequently I don't know what the creatures are; that is not the point. If I could classify them, I still wouldn't know their own names. And that is what I would like to know. I am grateful for their chatterless company.

We howl, like analog radios, discords within and about our selves, jangling; and one must move one's thoughts in non-geometric directions to be rid of it.

The brain quietens too when we are physically active. I don't think



the world seems any less bleak for a long walk; but I am generally less bothered by bleakness. As a firm shake of a frying pan or of a wheelbarrow will restore their contents to the kind of order we recognise, so a fast walk is likely to shake me into shape.

Reading forces one into sitting or lying down and I cannot conceive of making poetry without reading others' poetry. Too much reading and too little reading are disorders for this poet; while some not-walking is essential. When anything is being endured, it is too much.

I spend much of my year on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, an engine of power able to lift and move the heaviest structures. It takes the unwary. It breaks boundaries.

Walking as / and inhabiting and / as reimagining are central to me as I come to know my stretch of land and its history more thoroughly than most of its inhabitants; and differently I expect, more cerebrally, than my direct ancestors knew their own landscapes not far from here; and yet am not of it in other ways, finding myself somewhat outside my chosen community.

*[Try to finish at this point, at the same time as the slide shows finish. Read on, if they have not finished. ]*

**An insect on a leaf:** Subsidiary reading text This garden of West Penwith could not be achieved by what the eighteenth century called improvement. Improvement would destroy it. It cannot be developed without its destruction. Sometimes transformation of the external world is very bad. It is ourselves we must transform.

*[Pause]*

'I should see the garden far better,' said Alice to herself, 'if I could get to the top of that hill: and here's a path that leads straight to it -- at least, no, it doesn't do that -- ' (after going a few yards along the path, and turning several sharp corners), 'but I suppose it will at last. But how curiously it twists! It's more like a corkscrew than a path! Well, *this* turn goes to the hill, I suppose -- no, it doesn't! This goes straight back to the house! Well then, I'll try it the other way.'

*[Pause]*

I have suggested that NAMING is the basic artistic process. It is what Adam did in the garden.

But the archival approach, when one takes the flowers in to press them, in order to defeat the process of death, requires further NAMING – the song, the poem, the sympathy, the painting must have its name so that it may have identity outside of itself.

*[Pause]*

Watch Croft is a place I visit rarely, It is visible for miles along the north coast of West Penwith. It is of course an historically late name. It is in English.

*[Pause]*

Where, on the coast road east or west towards Pendeen, one must necessarily walk on tarmac; above, on the stumps of the Variscan mountains, one must tread on stony ground, on the thick black deep mud, through thorns, between uncapped adits and shafts overgrown. The physical experience affects one's perceptual processes.

*[Pause]*

As one moves through the landscape, the appearances of its parts change. A change of direction changes what one sees. A change of season changes it too; as does a change of climate. A change of speed changes perceived distances.

I used to live opposite a large London common. Unusually for an urban area, there were houses on one side of the road only; on the opposite side, behind the granite kerb, was grass. I told some

children that all the grass and trees that they could see were in my garden. They were old enough to question but not quite old enough to disbelieve. They interrogated me and I replied consistently but increasingly elaborately. It changed how I looked at the world.

*[Pause]*

As I walk along the road west out of St Ives, I see Watch Croft approached for many miles. I have never ascended it from that direction. I approach it from the south, at an angle of perhaps 100 degrees to my habitual walk. One has done the climbing, such as it is, so that the small peaks are little more than undulations; and, the reverse side of what is familiar, do not resemble themselves.

*[Pause]*

Too many made gardens exclude the perceived landscape. And few are large enough to allow it to function satisfactorily]

## **Lawrence Upton**

*Penwith & Scilly, cut down in Surrey, Autumn 2006*

*Copyright © Lawrence Upton 2006*