

**VII**

**Quarantine Notebook**

**WEEK 7 • 9<sup>TH</sup> May 2020**

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**MUSCALIET**

HERODIAS★

*(Variations on a theme from Stéphane Mallarmé)*

Spring lays a fierce perfume  
Over sand-dunes to the north.  
Flowers open and beneath the stems  
Insects are delivered of themselves.

Of graven images that stirred my naïve flesh  
To impious anticipation  
Of idolatrously regal splendour,  
There is little more than rubble.

I succumb instead to voids of azure!  
Haloed by unreachable and lustrous sky  
I am surrounded by a paradise of amethyst  
In whose unyielding radiance

I want nothing of the earth  
Or its ageless gold: born of a malignant century,  
Bone chilled back to bone,  
I burn with the limpidity of what I am.

★ Michael Grant notes that these two poems, 'Herodias' and 'Herodias: Text': "draw on phrasings from Mallarmé. I was trying recreate/reinvent the world, as it were, of the poem for myself, rather than give accurate versions of a preexisting text. So you could call them variations on a theme from Mallarmé; the original poem, 'Herodiade', being very much longer and in the form of a dialogue between Herodias and her Nurse."

TEXT: HERODIAS

*(Variations on a theme from Stéphane Mallarmé)*

As my dream mounts towards you,  
My immortal sister, I invent you  
As you are, at the very point of death,  
Transfigured by empurpled and ancestral grace,

Arrayed in stones  
Of an inviolate purity  
Reflected by the priceless jewels of your eyes,  
And with all the horror

Of my useless flesh  
I feel the scintillation of your pallid brilliance  
Expose me to the trembling starlight  
Of your modesty, and to a night

Of icicles and bitter snow  
In which it is from you that I receive  
The livid boredom  
Of my being, withdrawn

Into a frozen calm  
That consecrates us both  
To the primordial  
And fatal sacrilege that is your name!

DUNCAN MACKAY

ON & OFF

Rereading Marjorie Perloff on *Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms* (1969)

Hoping he's OK out there in the woods

writing through

a scary chaos fills the heart

breathed out through the mask into the world

of time & technique

encroaching hourly on the source itself

the nebulous unwritten hope that may become

no manipulable predictably recurring pattern

but resonance without repeat

of that which belonged before entering words

&

not in the tender block of small stanzas

after the line the word as such the next heave

step over & you're asking for trouble

breaking out making out making a line which side

are you on writing in pages splintered sketches

of sound while the cat turns again into the pit

of the empty

flowerpot

in the saying  
let not what is said be obscured

worked over by stress & counterpoint parts of the larger

oozing from the unevenly

chewed-off

casual quiet lines of unremembered things read

habits of apperception.

LOOKING UPWARDS / LOOKING DOWNWARDS:  
SOME REACTIONS TO CONFINEMENT

III

‘There must be some way out of here said the joker to the thief’

In a short essay about the South Downs which appeared in *The Times* in 1881 Richard Jefferies asserted that ‘a good road is recognized as the groundwork of civilization’ and that as long as there is a ‘firm and artificial track under his feet the traveller may be said to be in contact with city and town, no matter how far they may be distant.’ In his own writing about paths Edward Thomas recognized how they offer the possibility of leading to new landscapes and in his biography of Jefferies he suggested that the writer of those essays charting a picture of the Southern Counties was concerned to ‘map out the obscure country he had discovered, to show its relation to the earth, to build a long airy bridge from one to the other, that he and his fellows might pass over and be blessed’. Pathways connect not only place with place but also one time with another permitting us to recognise how we tread upon a past world which has gone. That ‘airy bridge’ of language permits us, however, to lean a moment to stare at what we once knew and to recognise how there is no return. Orpheus is compelled to witness this as he attempts to escort Eurydice from the land of the Dead. Scents can remind us of what lies beyond our prison walls and Thomas liked best ‘among books the faint perfumes of those old forgotten things’ before going on to quote George Herbert’s ‘The Odour’ in which the ‘broth of smells...feeds and fats my mind.’

There is of course no way out of here and it was Lee Harwood who was asked the question in interview fourteen years ago ‘Is there a home in the distant city or is the home here and now?’ His reply gives the final answer to both joker and thief:

Well, my interpretation is that it’s got to be the here-and-now, whether you like it or not! That’s the real.

ILL MET

Rubbed blank by repetition  
we'll meet again met again  
again  
underneath the arches  
of the rainbow's inescapable  
incompletion  
intangible, see-through ghosts  
in the screen  
avoid interruption interception inference.  
Watch their lips mete out analogies  
and puff out thin calls to arms.