The Countenance Divine

&

'nothing more important than trifles':
Critical Reflections on *The Countenance Divine*

(2 volumes)

Michael Edward Hughes

London Metropolitan University

2013

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of
PhD in Creative Writing.

Volume II

'nothing more important than trifles':
Critical Reflections on *The Countenance Divine*

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[N.B. Page references to *The Countenance Divine* are given as '*TCD* p.x'.]

Abstract

In 1666, poet and revolutionary John Milton completes his epic Paradise Lost amid a fever of prophetic speculation: is this the year God will finally deliver a terrible judgement on London? In 1777 an apprentice engraver called William Blake has a defining spiritual experience; thirteen years later this vision returns, and leads him towards a daring act of creation. In 1888, five women are brutally murdered and mutilated in the East End by a troubled young man in thrall to a mysterious master. And in 1999, as the walls between past, present and future collapse, and the end of time itself approaches, a computer programmer working on the Millennium Bug discovers he might hold the key to the coming apocalypse.

This Creative Writing PhD comprises a complete novel (86,495 words) and a critical commentary (32,269 words), plus appendices (c. 10,000 words).

The Countenance Divine is an original work of prose fiction composed of four parallel narratives, each grounded in extensive historical and literary research. The accompanying commentary takes the form of a series of critical reflections which investigate and contextualise the process of composition. In particular, they provide new perspectives on the ethics of using and abusing historical facts in imaginative writing, and on the place of the fantastical in contemporary British literary fiction. They also consider the specific formal and stylistic challenges of this project, and offer a uniquely frank and detailed account of the creation of a novel from first inspiration to final draft.

The appendices include extracts from early drafts, as well as the first modern transcript of one of the novel's key historical sources: a rare pamphlet which describes the disinterment of John Milton's remains in 1790.

"Now, ladies," said Mr Trumbull, taking up one of the articles, "this tray contains a very recherchy lot—a collection of trifles for the drawing-room table—and trifles make the sum of human things—nothing more important than trifles—(yes. Mr Ladislaw, yes, by-and-by)—but pass the tray around, Joseph—these bijoux must be examined, ladies. This I have in my hand is an ingenious contrivance—a sort of practical rebus, I may call it: here, you see, it looks like an elegant heart-shaped box, portable—for the pocket; there, again, it becomes like a splendid double flower—an ornament for the table; and now"—Mr Trumbull allowed the flower to fall alarmingly into strings of heart-shaped leaves—"a book of riddles! No less than five hundred printed in a beautiful red. Gentlemen, if I had less of a conscience, I should not wish you to bid high for this lot—I should have a longing for it myself. What can promote innocent mirth, and I may say virtue, more than a good riddle? ... "

from *Middlemarch* by George Eliot, p. 592

1 *these bijoux must be examined*

In 2001, I attended one of a year-long series of weekly events curated by artist Mark Francis at a gallery called Fragile House in Soho. London art magazine *Frieze* (2001, issue 58) later described the scenario: "The writer Will Self ... spent the entire week in the gallery composing a short story based on those who visited. Sat in the centre of the room, his laptop was wired to a wall-mounted monitor, allowing visitors and literary groupies (including a stalker, apparently) to observe his every digression and deletion." In this temporary literary zoo, the explicit intention was to conjure a sort of inverted *mise-en-abyme*: Self should include his audience in the story we were there to witness him write.

I think of this piece now as part of a mini-movement of similar work: in 1995, actress Tilda Swinton slept inside a glass box in the Serpentine Gallery for Cornelia Parker's piece *The Maybe*; for his 2003 endurance stunt *Above the Below*, illusionist David Blaine spent forty-four days without food suspended in a transparent box thirty feet above the south bank of the Thames; and most conspicuously, in 2000 Channel 4 broadcast the first series of the hidden-camera gameshow *Big Brother*, initially intended as a ludic spin on the techniques of serious psychological experiment.

The room at Fragile House was crowded, and along with many others, I joined in, as respectfully and tastefully as I could, the licensed game of trying to catch the writer's attention in the hope of finding myself written into the work we could see taking shape, painfully slowly, on a large screen behind

the transparent perspex cube he sat in. With some discomfort, I realised that I desperately wanted to be chosen. After four years' residence, and not far off thirty, I was still uncertain if I really belonged to London, or to anywhere other than my childhood home town. To be fictionalised, objectified, weighed up and summed up and put down in words, might allow me a firmer sense of a new identity. It might confer some sort of permanence on my presence here, even a promise of ultimate immortality.

The game wasn't all. Will Self was then, and remains, one of the few British literary novelists with a face and persona recognisable to those who have never read him, and I was among their number. Still, I knew his work was successful, critically and commercially. To an aspiring writer, he represented exactly what I wanted to be. So I had come on a pilgrimage, hoping for a glimpse behind the curtain of the Great and Powerful Oz. I was looking out for a hint, an insider tip, a clue to whatever occult knack he possessed, to the esoteric trick of literary achievement. I wanted to see with my own eyes what such a writer – or any writer – actually *does*.

The answer was disappointingly close to my own failed attempts to write anything substantial. During most of my short visit, Self didn't write at all. He just stared ahead, his eyes hidden behind opaque arthropodal sunglasses, languidly chain-smoking, unflappably oblivious to the chatter and nervous laughter from us visitors. There was no certainly interaction, no taking of notes or close observation of the specimens in front of him. But I couldn't see what might be happening instead. Apparently, nothing at all was happening, and I was thoroughly confused. I asked myself: can such a writer

really make it all up out of his head? Does he not just copy down a version of what he sees in front of him? *Which one of these is cheating?*

Occasionally he typed a sentence or two, which I scrutinised as it appeared, trying to see what that particular combination of words had over the infinity of others he could have chosen at this point. I still hoped to anatomise the very moment of inspiration. I hadn't lost faith in the promise of this unique opportunity: I would find out the secret of *how to do it*, remove the persistent fog of mystique from the creative process itself, discover the tangible necessary chain of causality between the physical world the writer inhabits and what ends up printed on the page.

A frisson ran through the gallery once, when we realised the latest sentence to appear on the huge screen – the letters scrambling out, then jerking back as he revised, then out again – was an unflattering description of one of our number, a badly-behaved teenage tourist. But if this was Self's idea of revenge, it was a hollow one. It smacked of pettiness, and of success for the loutish youngster.

After half an hour or so, I left, disappointed. I had seen very little to connect what appeared on the screen with our shared circumstances that day. There was nothing much special in the previous half-page or so I'd been able to read at any given time of the work-in-progress. I never read the finished story. I have no idea if it was published, or even completed.

My visit to this peculiar experiment often returned to mind as I began to find some confidence as a writer, and an experience which felt hollow at the time turns out to have been rather revealing, and perhaps valuable. It may even have helped me feel less bad about my own lost afternoons spent staring into

myself, dying to get started on *something*, if only I could figure out what. So often, I lit out with the naïve confidence of an amateur hiker, eyes peeled for the contours of a story I could commit to mapping and cultivating, for the outline of a character in the mist, for a paragraph or two which feels firm underfoot, only to wander and wander, turning in circles, watching the sky get dark, disoriented, fed up, sore. Writing fiction, I discovered, is an entirely contingent activity; it need not happen in any particular way. It need not happen at all; yet when the work is done, my highest hope is that it might one day feel inevitable, part of the landscape.

And the memory returned to me again when I considered the obligation to frame the creative element of my PhD with an extended apologia, this auto-exegesis I have now begun. I anticipated this process too without any map of the territory ahead, but with a clear sense that it should be both a record of how a novel comes together, and a reflection on this process. It ought to reveal a writer conscious of the wider cultural and critical context in which his work exists. It should, in other words, be an account of what usually, and properly, stays just at the edge of my field of vision: the fuzzy network of chance and choice which has led to the eighty-six thousand words of *The Countenance Divine*.

So this account is not offered as an extended doctoral abstract, the articulation of an academic research question which is then examined and developed in fictional form. Rather, the reverse: it is the novel which remains the primary artefact, and one I have always intended to stand alone. The commentary will not explain its hidden meaning, any more than the work itself does. I believe in leaving pockets of air where readers can imagine what

else might be going on, space for them to look up facts, to make their own connections. In the age of handheld Google, fiction need not even contain everything necessary for its own appreciation. A novel, in that sense, is not a closed system; it is made from – if not quite part of – the world outside.

But left to my own devices, I would prefer all the messy stuff to stay hidden behind the curtain. For there really is very little to show. Just like Will Self, I have no killer trick to demonstrate, no sparks of inspiration to flaunt. Writing this novel has been labour, and little else. And I think now of how brave, and perhaps even foolish, Self was to expose the impassive banality of the physical activity of writing, to willingly and wilfully banish the mystique of artistic inspiration and purity of intent. Anyone at all might think they can do it...

At best, this impressionistic, episodic series of reflections might function as a sort of talking cure for the novel's neuroses, rooting out a few clues to how it ended up as it did. At times, I put together my text more like a record album than a sequential narrative: getting used to different sections, feeling my way into which might go well next to which. I can only hope that the temptations of self-disclosure do not lead me to invent plausible versions of absent memories. I might muddy waters that are perfectly clear by giving a partial and reductive account of processes which remain mysterious even to me.

And I worry too that whatever little I have in the end achieved will shrivel in the light, that anything significant and resonant in my work will be diminished, shown up as merely accidental or lazily expedient, once the back is opened and the wires are showing. I worry that I will inevitably reveal how

far short this novel falls from the impossibly magnificent initial vision it is a failed attempt to make manifest. I worry that discussing my artifice will reveal what is artificial. Above all, I worry about exposing my own private self to scrutiny. This is no *roman a clef*, but I'm sure I am in there somewhere, and I might be lurking in corners I would prefer not to find myself. I may not like the look I find in my own shifty little eyes.

I hope I remembered my sunglasses.

2 *a sort of practical rebus*

In his wide-ranging survey *In The Reading Gaol*, critic Valentine Cunningham introduces a discussion of game-playing in literature with a reference to an auction described in Chapter Sixty of *Middlemarch*, part of which scene appears as the epigraph to this commentary. In particular, Cunningham seizes on that mysterious little shape-shifting toy flourished by the auctioneer, the "practical rebus" which hides a collection of improving riddles, as a useful emblem of George Eliot's novel, and indeed of the nature of fiction itself: a serious-minded game, one often misread (these days, by post-structuralist critics) as simply self-referential amusement, but which always in the end also refers to, and is full of, the wider world of actual stuff, of physical matter and human matters: "rebuses inevitably embrace or straddle the word-world, word-game/world-game dualism ... carnivalesque word-games with serious moral intentions". (Cunningham 1994, p. 297)

The Countenance Divine was born from a purely ludic proposition, with no intention, even privately, to fictionalise my own person or experience of the world. The initial impulse was an exercise suggested by the tutor of my Creative Writing MA workshop in 2005, five years before I began any work on the novel: to identify a moment in history, recent or distant, which had not yet been exploited as a scenario for fiction. I thought; and I remembered the anxiety and confusion which surrounded the Y2K Problem at the end of the

twentieth century, the so-called Millennium Bug which threatened to bring our civilisation crashing to a halt exactly at midnight on New Year's Eve 1999.

Almost immediately my mind's eye played with the digits, and I saw they could be inverted, to read 1666. The pure visual symmetry was all that appealed to me; I neither sought nor found any other connection between the two years. But I knew 1666 was the year of the Great Fire of London; and when I looked again, and considered the spooky presence there of the apocalyptic number 666, I wondered if that co-incidence might have appeared significant at the time, if such a huge conflagration could have seemed like an end-of-the-world event to some of those within and around it, as I thought I remembered the Millennium Bug had to so many.

Then, something obsessive-compulsive in me demanded I complete the sequence of years: 1666, 1777, 1888, 1999. The nonsense symmetry of such pure pattern-as-meaning immediately appealed to my perverser instincts. Here, I decided, was a novel. I thought of Iain Sinclair, and of David Mitchell, and I wondered if I could find a narrative form which linked the London of the present to the London of the past through four stories, illuminating different ideas of what the end of the world might mean at these four different moments in its history. I would look for human life and depth within the bounds of this arbitrary frame. The challenge was set: to find chaos in the order.

And that was it. I still had absolutely no idea what stories the middle two years might offer, and no hint at all of Milton or Blake or any of the real-life figures available to me in those periods. But the rhythm of that neat historical structure was enough. I was sold; I was in love.

The chronological backbone of the novel was intended to be, and has remained, a playful gesture. Everything since has been an attempt to find a human story in this essentially meaningless progression, to build a plot and characters and an internal logic to justify that first delicious instinct. I hoped I might construct a satisfying puzzle, and provide a certain sort of fun for a certain sort of reader, but I had nothing profound I wanted to say. The subject was to be London, the mode would be comic, and the genre what I might call Historical Fantasia. It was a whimsical notion taken to its conclusion, perhaps ad absurdum. It was just a game.

For me, writing is always a ludic activity first, in spirit and intention. No matter how faithfully rendered the reader finds it, the world of the fiction never pretends to be the world we live in. Yet our experience in the former may well inform our understanding of the latter, for we use play, both as adults and as children, to model and modify our engagement with the conflicts we must negotiate in everyday life.

The pioneering cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1944), the father of the modern study of the ludic, defined play as an activity with six essential characteristics: it is voluntary, not-real, ordered, exclusive, temporary and profitless. By these standards – and especially the last – writing a novel certainly qualifies as play. That is not to diminish its potential for significance; in fact, for Huizinga, play is the fundamental impulse behind not just culture, but civilisation itself.

I would not go so far, but I believe play is a solid and proper point of origin for fiction-writing. I find little fun in trying to wring entertainment out of an attempt to chide or to educate; I prefer to draw out some truth or heft

from an act of imagination for its own sake, an attempt to scare or confound or delight my reader. And if I fail, then at least it might still be fun.

Once such a ludic frame is established, though, it is inevitably filled by the matters which interest me, and worry me, and fascinate me, and by what I do indeed take seriously. I fill up the container with the recognisable stuff of real life, much of it from my own experience; and with luck, those who like their fiction worthy and improving will find enough to enjoy, and never see the joins. For the rest, the very ambiguity becomes central to the game, as one writer on the literary ludic has noted: "this confusion of logical types – of the defining frame with what is inside the frame – pervades human life and can produce great pleasure". (Nardo 1991, p. 10)

Often the stuff of my own life finds its way in through a twofold process. At first it happens unconsciously; and then once I recognise which area of my life – personal experience, family history, my own secret fears or fantasies – has suggested material for character or dialogue or incident, I might begin to exploit it consciously. An unusually clear example: I wrote the first draft of Allgood's confrontation with his father about his religious beliefs (*TCD* pp. 8-11) entirely unaware that I was fictionalising a very similar conversation I once had with my own father, in the equivalent context of a Catholic family in late-twentieth century Northern Ireland. Once I had realised, I reflected on what I could usefully draw from this memory and from my wider experience of that situation, personally and culturally, to add emotional detail to this scenario, and to hint at the irony that what is half-forgotten history to the English is still everyday politics in another part of the

United Kingdom, whose intractable conflict they so often claim they are unable to comprehend.

In his stimulating essay 'The Play of the Text', critic Wolfgang Iser (1989) breaks down the logical steps which allow him to see any fiction-writing as essentially ludic in nature:

> The traditional notion of representation assumes that mimesis entails reference to a pre-given 'reality' that is meant to be represented in a text. A quite different, conflicting view is possible, however, if author, text and reader are thought of as interconnected in a relationship that is the ongoing process of producing something that did not previously exist (p. 249)

In other words, fiction will be, and ought to be, fictional. Seen in this way, it is never supposed to be 'real'; there is, in effect, no such thing as realism. But fiction still refers to the real world, and exploits our relationship with it:

> since the [text] is fictional, it automatically invokes a convention-governed contract between author and reader indicating that the textual world is to be viewed not as reality but as if it *were* reality. And so whatever is repeated in the text is not meant to denote the world, but merely a world enacted. This may well repeat an identifiable reality, but it contains one all-important difference; what happens within it is relieved of the consequences inherent in the real world referred to. Hence in disclosing itself, fictionality signalizes that everything is only to be taken *as if* it were what it seems to be, to be taken – in other words – as play (p. 250)

Iser borrows the categories of play identified by sociologist Roger Caillois (1958), and suggests their application to fiction: *Agon* – the fight or contest; *Alea* – chance; *Mimicry* – mimesis, or role play; *Ilinx* (Greek for whirlpool) – subversion of reality, or altering of perception. And I can choose to read my own novel (wilfully? *ludically?*) as a sequence enacting these different types of game-playing: *agon* in the conflict between Milton and Cock, which anchors the 1666 section but echoes throughout; *alea* in the chance encounter between Blake and the rib of Milton, which could be read as the inciting

incident of novel's overall plot; *mimicry* in my own attempt to ape the style of a real letter sent "From hell" in the name of the Whitechapel murderer, which letter may itself have been a playful fiction, an attempt to role-play the perspective of a killer; and *ilinx* in the final collapse of straightforward narrative naturalism in the later stages of the 1999 section. For the text-game, Iser suggests, is always one step ahead of you, anticipating your attempts to pin it down, and teasing you with already-existing reflections and subversions of what you hope to find there:

> Since play strives for something but also undoes what it achieves, it continually acts out difference. Difference, in turn, can be manifested only through play, because only play can make conceivable the absent otherness that lies on the reverse side of all positions. Thus the play of the text is neither winning nor losing, but is a process of transforming positions, thereby giving dynamic presence to the absence and otherness of difference ... the more the reader is drawn into the proceedings by playing the game of the text, the more he or she is also played *by* the text. (pp. 257-258)

In the end, Iser suggests, the true nature of fiction is to conjure that which does not and cannot exist: "Transformation ... allows us to have things both ways, by making what is inaccessible both present and absent. ... we can conceive what would otherwise elude our grasp". (p. 260)

Valentine Cunningham too delights in novels which know it is all a game, and suggests (1994, p. 260) that recent critical approaches have elevated this kind of self-conscious, post-modern writing, and its most famous prototype, as archetypal of fiction itself:

> *Tristram Shandy*, dismissed by the sober-sides critical tradition that reigned bossily from Dr Johnson to Dr Leavis as too freakishly jokey for a permanent residence permit in the House of Fiction, is now taken as the quintessential novel of the English tradition precisely because it exists as *Spiel* – a game of fiction-making, fiction as game

Yet here is the real world again, butting in just as I want to play down its significance and purify my intentions from any trace of the confessional. It was Valentine Cunningham who taught me English at university, and his discussion of the "practical rebus" from the auction in *Middlemarch* was the centrepiece of one of his most exhilarating lectures. It is partly as a tribute to him that I chose to give that name to the little wooden puzzle which pops up in my novel.

But the object I describe there was not taken from George Eliot's novel. It has both a more mundane, and more mysterious origin, and one which I confess further undermines my desire to see fiction-writing as just a conscious and deliberate word-game.

Roughly half-way through the three years of my PhD, I woke one morning from a vivid dream: of a hexagonal wooden puzzle. I had a clear vision that, though I couldn't quite understand what it was or how it worked, nonetheless this little toy was central to what I was writing. I made notes, and kept it available to me, waiting to see where it might fit.

I eventually placed it in Chris's hands in 1999 (*TCD* p. 72), and only very late in the composition did I decide to give it an earlier existence too, as a gift from Cock to Milton in 1666 (*TCD* p.118). Its appearance in this earlier time-frame allows it to function as a foreshadowing tease, intended as a hint that the four discrete stories will eventually come together, and priming the reader for the later suggestion of several time periods physically co-existing.

But these are *post hoc* rationalisations. Really, I included such a thing exactly as Cunningham suggests George Eliot may have: as a mischievous emblem of the whole novel, a bit of self-conscious meta-fictional play. But it

is serious play, a two-part private joke referring beyond the novel to what I find personally meaningful: an oblique reference to one of my favourite pieces of fiction from the "sober-sides" High Realist tradition, and a grateful nod to a mentor who taught me to see beyond the outward trappings of that tradition.

And, in ironic honour of how the item came to my imagination, I see it now too as a sort of inoculation, a private talisman for myself against grandiose ideas of creative inspiration, of unconscious but significant dream-symbol, which have so rarely visited me as I wrote, leading me (bitterly? jealously?) to have my fictional Milton deny what the real poet claimed in *Paradise Lost* was the divine source of his own creativity:

> Many of the ancients held that all the blind are prophets and have second sight, said *Ellwood.*
>
> When the Lord sees fit to bestow these gifts, said *Milton*, then I am ready. In the meantime, I compose.
>
> You are coy, said *Ellwood.* We know that the form of the statue is already in the marble, and the artist must only free it.
>
> A fine story for children, said *Milton*, but a plain lie. There is no form in any marble but I carve it out. Human craft and artistry, study, reflection, imagination, application, are what is required. To put it another way: plain work. Or, thus: if there is a perfect form within every marble, why is there so much bad statuary? If God placed the forms of beauty in marble, who placed the poor forms within? Satan, I suppose. (*TCD*, p. 115)

3 *a splendid double flower*

> As man can affirm and deny both the presence of that which is present and the presence of that which is absent, and this they can do with a reference to times that lie outside the present, [then] whatever a man may affirm, it is possible as well to deny, and whatever a man may deny, it is possible as well to affirm.
>
> (Aristotle, *The Organon*, p 125)

The ending of this novel was a temptation, and I gave in. Anxious about disorienting a reader who had bought into my realities, I resisted for a long time even drafting a finale which would knit the four threads neatly up. It was enough that parallels between the sections were implicit, suggested. Readers would draw them together in their own way, tastefully and vaguely. Even when I did first experiment with an ending which united the discrete stories, my instinct was to leave the nervous reader an escape hatch. Was it all in Chris's head? Or Allgood's? We must never know for sure...

It offends postmodern sensibility to suggest that life makes sense. We know that any explicit intention can be deconstructed, and so reveal its contradictions. We like to feel resonances and make connections, but we are not so innocent as to think anything has *meaning*. Even just the suggestion of a super-villain controlling the history of the last three hundred years requires a leap of imagination from an indulgent reader. A definitive final-act summing-up is allowed these days only from the most rickety genre narratives, the kind of thing mocked in Carl Reiner's film-noir parody *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (1982), whose climactic scene features a running dispute between the gumshoe detective and the Nazi villain over who has the right to a speech tying up the loose ends of the ludicrously complex plot.

The reader of the literary novel, like the art-house film, like the lover of abstract or conceptual art, like the devotee of indie or atonal music, wants to be shocked, to be challenged, to be told life is fractured, chaotic, contingent, intransigent. God was a reassuring as a punchline for our fathers, but the joke itself is no longer funny. Any such fiction of absolutes will encourage people to impose their vision of order upon others, and we all know where that leads. The best we can manage is respect, and if not that, then tolerance. Liberty must be enforced. Resolution shall be resisted. Hypocrisy is the only real sin.

I have a lot of sympathy, in life. But in fiction, or at least in this one, I felt that such suggestive ambiguity would cheat the reader. There was a promise in my overtly ludic structure, an old-fashioned suspense I had established which simply had to be resolved. I didn't want the cryptic question-mark ending: the author stroking his chin and murmuring, 'Or was it...?', the posh version of *then I woke up and it was all a dream*, that cop-out aftertaste from too much having-your-cake-and-eating-it (as succinct a definition of postmodernism as I know). I wanted to play quite innocently with the prelapsarian genre tropes I loved in my younger reading. My challenge was to achieve the satisfaction of a good *Doctor Who* story, that thrill of pleasure when the bits of a plot fall suddenly into place, surprising yet inevitable. Above all, I wanted to shirk the pseudo-rigour of polite literary fiction, of box-ticking authenticity of experience, to flee the Baconian Enlightenment itself, and regress into an ancient Aristotelian universe, a visionary mode of writing, which sees the truth most clearly with eyes firmly closed against the fallen world outside.

Francis Bacon's collection of aphorisms *Novum Organon* (The New Organon), first published in 1620, is widely considered to be the founding document of science as we know it today, and arguably of the modern world itself. Unfortunately, this sort of sweeping, unsupported assertion, however arresting, is precisely what Bacon condemns in its pages: received wisdom repeated without any foundation in primary research, conclusions reached by mental deduction rather than direct experience and observation of the world in action. So to defend and atone for my self-conscious faux pas, I offer the peer-reviewed wisdom of the introduction to the standard modern scholarly edition: "the early Royal Society in London ... modelled their own programmes for an experimentally based science directly on Bacon's writings on methodology". (Jardine & Silverthorne 2000, p. xviii)

The title of Bacon's project refers to its stated purpose as a successor and antidote to the keystone of medieval scholarship, Aristotelian logic, which was familiar to Bacon and his contemporaries through a compilation of Aristotle's works on the subject known as *The Organon* (Greek for 'instrument'). In this ancient method, detailed conclusions were gradually reached by debating and resolving syllogisms drawn from existing knowledge of the world. New knowledge could be achieved solely through logical reasoning, from an established basis of unquestioned common assumptions and previous conclusions.

Bacon critiques this approach, and insists on exactly the opposite: reliable knowledge can only be acquired through direct personal experience, gathered without preconceptions. He proposes a systematic method of experiment, to jettison first principles and gradually draw any general

conclusions only from repeated and detailed observation of the external world. Nothing but an open-ended process of dispassionate enquiry into measurable phenomena will provide useful solid facts; everything else is fantasy, hearsay and guesswork. Lisa Jardine (2000, xii), in the introduction to her edition of *Novum Organon* (co-edited with Michael Silverthorne) sums up the intention:

> Where Aristotle's inferential system based on syllogisms could reliably derive conclusions which were logically consistent with an argument's premise, Bacon's system was designed to investigate the fundamental premises themselves. Aristotle's logic proposed certainty, based on incontrovertible premises accepted unquestioningly as true; Bacon proposed an inductive inference, based upon a return to the raw evidence of the natural world.

The scientific method, then, is a cautious, patient, puritanical project: perfectly appropriate when investigating precise physical phenomena, but potentially corrosive when its principles become applied to the wider culture.

What is fiction for? Is it useful? Should it be? With so much competing audio-visual entertainment on offer, some of it also claiming the status of art for itself these days, why should we bother with a novel? Non-fiction is fine; we accept that long-form prose is appropriate for the detail of history or biography. But why take the trouble to read someone else's makey-uppey stories about people who never lived, doing things that never happened?

David Shields's shrill and silly manifesto *Reality Hunger* (2010) – calling for writers to embrace the self-exposure of the literary essay and abandon any claims for the value, or even the possibility, of imaginative fiction – is only the most direct and over-exuberant manifestation of a tendency which quietly bubbles under our literary culture, and it is one which met with considerable approval: "it urgently and succinctly addresses matters that have been in the air, have relentlessly gathered momentum and have just

been waiting for someone to link them together" (Luc Sante, *The New York Times Book Review*, 2010). Authors are routinely asked by journalists and even critics to identify points of connection between their work and their own experience, as though only the latter makes the former legitimate. Purely imaginative genre writing is dismissed from the same basis Bacon rejected Aristotle: it is full of unchecked assumptions, leaps of logic, flights of fancy, a love of pattern and style for their own sakes. We fetishise data, both the quantitative and the qualitative. Statistics never lie, and neither does the phantom of 'authenticity', the assumed perfect vantage provided by emotional engagement with a social issue. Politicians from a wealthy background are told they are unqualified to speak about poverty if they have never known it themselves. It is insisted our institutions must be representative above all else, as though the constructed identities we currently call gender, ethnic background, or sexuality endow absolute wisdom in themselves. Trauma confers the privilege of direct witness, while imaginative sympathy is suspected of manipulative fakery. Personal experience equals truth. Anyone can make stuff up; only reality has value.

I suggest that this view, if not often articulated openly, is increasingly second-nature for literary critics and even readers, as our wider culture has privileged Baconian knowledge over Aristotelian wisdom. Just as any unverifiable belief is dismissed or ridiculed today by those who claim to speak for science, the purely imaginary in literature is sidelined from the respectable mainstream as genre fiction of one kind or another.

> The mind loves to leap to generalities, so that it can rest; it only takes a little while to get tired of experience. (Bacon, p. 36, aphorism XX)

The gap I identify between what is considered literary fiction and what is labelled as genre writing is defined as much as anything by this perceived authenticity of experience. The narrative tropes which fuel adventure, crime, erotica, fantasy, horror, romance, science fiction and thriller rely on the incompatible Aristotelian virtues of compression and imagination: archetypal character, heightened narrative suspense, abundance and exuberance of incident, and a warm embrace of the melodramatic, the speculative or the supernatural.

Too often, genre writing is valued only as harmless escapism. There is no explicit criticism of its inauthenticity, for we do not ask such stories to remind us of the detail and texture of our lives, and most of us do not wish to recognise ourselves in such a dense concentration of violent crime or sexual adventure (not our outer selves, at least...). We want the delightful shock of the exotic, the intense chilli hit of a thrilling experience we know can never be our own. We are happily aware that these events and people have been invented; their function – especially in their most potent recent manifestation, as popular cinema and the video game – is quite simply to let us play out our dreams and our nightmares.

The Leavisite yardstick for canonical writing, in contrast, demands fidelity to an idea of common or universal experience, and recognisable, or at least plausible, psychological and physical detail. It is by these stubborn double-standards which literature is still judged.

> For just as several accounts of the heavens can be fashioned from the *phenomena* of the air, so, and much more, various dogmas can be based and constructed upon the phenomena of philosophy. And the stories of this kind of *theatre* have something in common with the dramatist's theatre, that narratives made up for the stage are nearer and

> more elegant than true stories from history, and are the sort of thing people prefer. (Bacon, p. 50, aphorism LXII)

What we in contemporary Britain call 'literary fiction' is a comfortingly Baconian mode, a modernist-inflected naturalism which privileges observed or researched detail of the cultural, psychological and physical realms. It denies a world created between the writer's ears; it requires "the raw evidence of the natural world". It promises the reader authentic experience of real life as it is really lived. It values the introvert confessional above the extravagant picaresque. Occasionally it makes room for the exotic and the exploratory, but only in the anthropological and vaguely colonial sense of opening up territory new to the Western eye; the whimsical extravagance of magical realism has never really taken hold in England itself, encouraged only among writers with a hinterland in a culture of which we declare a certain kind of folk-fantasy to be authentically intrinsic. At bottom, we rate modest plausibility of incident above wild invention, fidelity to known facts above the openly imaginary conjuring of what ought to be. The ideal of literary fiction is sight, rather than vision, and proud to be so.

> The subtlety of nature far surpasses the subtlety of sense and intellect, so that men's fine meditations, speculations and endless discussions are quite insane, except that there is no one who notices. (Bacon, p. 34, aphorism X)

It wasn't always this way. What we now call The Novel was once simply known as Romance. The word itself is worth unpicking. Its use today is usually as an adjective, referring to a tale centred on the development of sexual love, or to the European artistic project of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries which valued emotion before reason and subjective experience above received wisdom. Originally, though, a romance was a story

of chivalry: the idealised adventures of a brave and honourable knight on horseback, a *chevalier*. The word 'romance' itself simply indicated that the tale was written not in scholarly Latin, as serious literature was, but in the local lingo which had long ago diverged from its origin as a dialect of the ancient tongue of the Romans: what was known then, and still is today, as a Romance language. Romance, then, was the genre fiction of its day, an un-literary yarn written in the everyday language of its readers.

All imaginative prose writing once fitted this definition. 'Literature' was, even in the vernacular, usually written in verse. Over the course of a couple of centuries, narrative fiction did become a predominant cultural form in the West, but hardly a respectable one. The novel itself, when it eventually emerged (still keeping its old name, the *roman*, in most Romance and Germanic languages), never quite shed the silent suffix '-ty' which we could easily imagine on the end; it was disposable, popular entertainment, just something to pass the time until the next one came along, the equivalent of cinema through much of the twentieth century, of television even today. It certainly had nothing much to do with literature, and even less to do with reflecting and investigating the everyday texture of actual life. The point was quite the opposite. Prose fiction was not expected to be improving, and indeed was often condemned as corrupting, especially of the morals of its largely female readership.

> The syllogism consists of propositions, propositions consist of words, and words are counters for notions. Hence if the notions in themselves (this is the basis of the matter) are confused and abstracted from things without care, there is nothing sound in what is built on them. (Bacon, p. 35, aphorism XIV)

It is tempting to suggest that nothing much changed until the early twentieth century, when the proto-Leavisite literary modernists sought to claim a certain manifestation of the novel – the holy High Realist – as a vehicle for serious art and intellectual insight, even if they played jazzy inner-monologue solos over its steady moral riffs. And the works today which take their inspiration from this project are what we now call literary fiction.

Literary modernism proper, in the sense of a self-conscious break with tradition via formal experiment and transgressive subject-matter, has not taken root in the in the Anglophone fiction world as it seems to have done elsewhere in Europe, though the battle is far from over, thanks to the continuing efforts of writers like Tom McCarthy, Ali Smith, China Miéville and Toby Litt. I would tentatively speculate that the sparing of England from blood shed into its soil on an industrial scale in the first half of the twentieth century allows our culture to retain a naïve Romantic belief in the intrinsic value of individual personal experience, and to keep faith with good prose as a vehicle for authentic expression of this inviolable human subjectivity, rather than as an inherently unreliable discourse which we know manipulates both the world and the reader, and so which can no longer pretend to objective truth.

The English language still is the omniscient narrator of its own literary landscape. The academic heritage of an Anglophone Protestant exegetic tradition of literal Biblical interpretation, the undeniable achievements of Bacon's successors in Victorian industry and technology, and the extraordinary success of the political and military project to offer – and sometimes impose – England's version of civilisation on the entire world, encourages even (and perhaps especially) the most liberal of modern British

readers to believe that their empirical, Imperial 'we' hovers above competing perspectives. Reading itself is often viewed as little more than armchair tourism to enrich its own pseudo-universalist subjectivity. It assumes itself to be the blank, Baconian scientific gaze, unencumbered by cultural prejudice or historical contingency. It can spot subjective truth, and turn it into objective truth; and what's more, it actually believes these exist, and might be hiding in the pages of a book.

> There are, and can be, only two ways to investigate and discover truth. The one leaps from sense and particulars to the most general axioms, and from these principles and their settled truth, determines and discovers intermediate axioms; this is the current way. The other elicits axioms from sense and particulars, rising in a gradual and unbroken ascent to arrive at last at the most general axioms; this is the true way, but it has not been tried. (Bacon, p. 36, aphorism XIX)

If we think we are now good postmodern relativists, in the upper-middle-brow elite of British cultural society, it is not because we believe no truth is possible, but exactly the opposite: because we believe many are. The sacred nature of truth itself cannot be doubted, nor can its value. Life has meaning. Progress is possible. Games are all well and good in their place, but we mustn't mistake them for the genuine article. Children play; adults work. Real literature takes itself seriously. If it's having too much fun, it can't really be worth much as art. In fact, that's exactly how we know the difference.

In our innocence, we have put away childish things.

4 *an ornament for the table*

It's no fun playing unless you know what the game is. And no game is really possible until the rules are established. In writing fiction, I find it difficult to commit to more than notes and exploratory doodles until I have defined the texture of the voice and the parameters of the tone and the style.

My previous attempts at fiction writing have all ended up narrated in a first-person voice. Though it was never a strategic choice, I suspect that I fell into first-person because it permits and encourages strong choices, clarity about what the narrative voice can and cannot know, and so freedom from the oppressive shadow of omniscience. What's more, I find it very difficult to write as a third-person 'me'. I don't think I have 'a style'. I have no idea what 'my voice' sounds like, and if finding such a thing is the key to literary achievement, then I am an abject failure. I console myself that I have never had a very strong sense of my own identity anyway. I'm always happy to borrow another perspective, to see the world through someone else's eyes. One reason I write, I like to think, is to try on other people's lives for size.

Very early in this process, though, I decided that the 1999 section ought to be third-person. This wasn't my idea; it was a suggestion from a prospective supervisor at another institution when I first discussed the idea for this novel as a PhD project. (The final proposal I submitted is reproduced as Appendix 1; I was unable to take up the place which was then offered, and I did not in fact begin work on the novel for another five years.) He was worried about a character who thought he was the Second Coming of Christ, as this

early prototype of Chris unambiguously did, and he felt a reader might shrink from emotional engagement with a novel told in the first person from such a perspective. Ironic distance was advised.

Ever pragmatic, I accepted his judgement; but I also felt it suited my plans. At that point, I intended the 1999 section to make up at least half of the novel, and to act as a framing narrative to the three other historical fragments, each of which would be told in the first person. The tone I envisaged for the modern story was gothic melodrama, and a few notes of this remain in the deadpan counterfactual fantasy it eventually became: Lucy's self-harming and suicide attempt; Chris's apocalyptic visions; the strange old house at the centre of the mystery, complete with omniscient presiding genius who explains all in a climactic speech...

When I eventually decided that the novel would instead be a more-or-less equal balance of periods, it was obvious to me that I ought to vary the perspectives, even if only to allow my readers to orient themselves quickly when I moved from one voice to another – something I initially envisaged might happen much more frequently than it does in the finished work. I saw no reason to look further than the obvious balance of alternating first- and third-person narratives, two of each. And since I had already committed to 1999 as third-person, this meant 1666 would be first-person, 1777 told in third-person (though present tense), and 1888 in first-person again. Only later again did it become clear that the first-person narratives might each have a form which allowed them potential material presence as documents, and so the option – in the end, unused – that these could appear as such in one or both of the other sections, in the manner of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004).

Primary research was the key to establishing four persuasive voices. I began at the beginning, in 1666; but the decision to write the Milton section in the first person left me with a particular challenge of tone and style. Since I first encountered it as an undergraduate, I have loved the exuberant verve of early modern English writing, and I hoped to catch something of its headlong tumbling quality, without trapping myself in slavish pastiche. I needed to find a touchstone, an exemplar of narrative prose from an age before the novel properly existed. I was looking for a text to seed my imagination, to allow me the freedom to invent without agonising about meticulous fidelity to a stylistic template.

I found a possible model in Milton's own prose writings, especially the polemical pamphlets he put out in the 1640s. But I soon lost confidence in the tentative notion that I might write from the perspective of the poet himself. I feared that his dense, Latinate prose style would defeat me – or at best, if I even half-succeeded with a pastiche, might defeat many readers. I doubted too the wisdom of attempting to inhabit the persona of such a well-documented literary figure. Though there are enough lacunae in the record to allow me scope for invention, I suspected I would feel trapped by the need to continually check against the facts, and by the fear that those who knew his work well would find the voice unpersuasive, a self-fulfilling prophecy which might cause me a fatal loss of confidence. However much I wished to ground this section in documented history, I could only attempt a first-person narrative in the literary voice of a figure who did not leave his own available for comparison.

In addition, the inconvenient but inescapable truth: that during the period in question, my central figure couldn't actually write. As I read into the later Milton, I became intrigued by his blindness, and the concomitant fact, rarely explored by critics in much detail, that he did not put a single word of *Paradise Lost* on paper. The poem was physically written by a number of amanuenses, and while one or two left memoirs identifying themselves (Ellwood 1714; Milton's nephew Edward Phillips, reproduced in Darbishire 1932), the presumed others remain anonymous and are very likely to stay so. I concluded that my narrative voice could lie here, in the person of a fictional secretary, a student at Milton's knee.

I read widely in the religious pamphlet literature of the mid-seventeenth century. From roughly 1640 to 1660, censorship of printing was ineffective, indeed for a time formally abolished. In that time and place, there was no real gap between the religious and the political, and one result was a boom in religious tracts from now-obscure preachers (p. 14, Hill, 1972). Long dismissed as marginal eccentrics, these figures have in the last few decades seen increasing scholarly attention, since scholars like Christopher Hill and E. P. Thompson helped move the focus of historical scrutiny away from the deeds of Great Men, and on to the experience of the masses.

Among the many competing sects at the time, I was especially struck by the Fifth Monarchy Men, a group of radical fundamentalist soldiers who believed it was their duty to bring about the biblical Millennium through political and military action (Rogers 1966, Capp 1972). They were briefly close to the heart of the new regime, but as the realities of power drew Cromwell into increasingly pragmatic politics, they withdrew their support

and fell out of favour. But they did not die out with the Restoration; on the contrary, they staged a remarkably successful rebellion only months later, which was used as an excuse for the new King to crack down on the fringe elements whose toleration had been a cornerstone of the settlement which brought him to power. Five years later, in the middle of a sporadically destructive European conflict, only a couple of generations after the Gunpowder Plot, the Great Fire itself was popularly – if not officially – believed to be an act of what we could now call terrorism, directed by religious enemies of the state.

In the standard work on the Fifth Monarchy Men (Capp 1972, p. 215), I noticed a familiar place-name among the records of those involved with their congregations: "Henry Cock was prominent in a meeting at Chalfont St. Giles, Bucks". It is the town where Milton lived when he left London in 1665 to avoid the plague, a stay organised by his sometime amanuensis, the Quaker activist Thomas Ellwood. The year of this record was 1669, close enough to let my imagination fill in the blanks with a clear conscience. If Henry Cock was a local resident, I found it at least plausible that he would have encountered Milton. This man would be my antagonist, the voice of the young militant radical, haunting the mature quietist poet.

I read on into contemporary tracts, still in search of a voice for my fictional amanuensis. What I found was far in excess of what I dared expect, a cornucopia of revelatory detail. I was especially struck by the vivid imagery of Abiezer Coppe (Hopton ed. 1987, p. 17) describing his own conversion experience, worth quoting at length:

> I was thrown into the belly of hell (and take what you can of it in these expressions, though the matter is beyond expression) I was among

> Devils in hell, even in their most hideous hew. And under all this terrour, and amazement, there was a little spark of transcendent, transplendent, unspeakable glory, which survived, and sustained it self, triumphing, exulting, and exalting it self above all the Fiends ... Upon this the life was taken out of the body (for a season) and it was thus resembled, as if a man with a great brush dipt in whiting, should with one stroke wipe out, or sweep off a picture upon a wall, &c. after a while, breath of life was returned into the form againe; whereupon I saw various streames of light (in the night) which appeared to the outward eye; and immediately I saw three hearts (or three appearances) in the form of hearts, of exceeding brightnesse; and immediately an innumerable company of hearts, filling each corner of the room where I was. And methoughts there was variety and distinction, as if there had been severall hearts, and yet most strangely and unexpressibly complicated or folded up in unity. I clearly saw distinction, diversity, variety, and as clearly saw all swallowed up into unity. And it hath been my song many times since, within and without, unity, universality, universality, unity, Eternall Majesty, &c. And at this vision a most strong, glorious voyce uttered these words, *The spirits of just men made perfect*

But I found the model I sought in Laurence Clarkson (sometimes called Claxton), a minor preacher who left a detailed memoir of his life as a Ranter, a loosely-defined term then and now, but which suggests someone who preached a doctrine so individual or extreme that it was unacceptable to any sect. Clarkson worked his way through the gamut of Christian beliefs of the time, and wrote in detail about both his spiritual and geographical journeys. He was almost too convenient a model for my purposes; and I blush now to re-read the opening of historian A. L Morton's chapter on Clarkson in one of the first modern studies of the Ranter movement (1970, p. 115), which may well be where I first encountered him: "No novelist, setting out to create a typical figure to illustrate the development and variety of religious life in the seventeenth century, would have dared to invent anything so fantastically made-to-measure".

I did not lift Clarkson wholesale. The character he inspired, Thomas Allgood, lacks his wise-cracking, rumbustious amorality, tending more to the

cautious, reflective obedience I remember from my own Catholic childhood. But from him I took some stylistic tics, among them the idiosyncratic convention of the whole-paragraph sentence, using a semi-colon to link what might otherwise be broken up as separate sentences, with the occasional use of a colon followed by a capital letter to bridge an impossible gap. As a reader I find the high-wire act of an expertly-handled long sentence to be an intoxicating thrill, and I grabbed the chance to practise that skill, under the cover of a pseudo-authentic period style whose unfamiliar quirks, I hoped, could cover a multitude of sins if I fell short.

Here Clarkson (1660, p.4) describes an early encounter with travelling preachers, in a sentence which continues for a further two pages in the facsimile edition:

> in that year 1630 being the Age of fifteen yeares, and living with my Parents in the town of *Preston* in *Amounderness*, where I was born, and educated in the Form and Worship of the Church of *England,* then established in the Title of the *Episcopal*, or Bishops Government; then, and in that year, my heart began to enquire after the purest Ministry held forth under that Form, not being altogether void of some small discerning, who preached Christ more truly and powerfully, as I thought, than another, and unto them was I onely resolved to follow their Doctrine above any other, and to that end my brethren being more gifted in the knowledge of the Scriptures than my self, and very zealous in what they knew, that they did often prevail with Mr. *Hudson* our Town-Lecturer, to admit of such Ministers as we judged were true laborious Ministers of Christ, who when they came, would thunder against Superstition, and sharply reprove Sin, and prophaning the Lords-day; which to hear, tears would run down my cheeks for joy

I copied out great chunks of this pamphlet in an effort to get his style under my skin and into my bones, and in the end I semi-consciously borrowed certain resonant phrases and images too. As well as his distinctive punctuation, I permitted myself to adopt Clarkson's tendency to digress into narrative cul-de-sacs – whose very futility I hoped would misdirect the

suspicious reader (*surely nobody would make up something like that*) – as well as his frustrating tendency to throw away what might to a modern reader seem very significant information in a passing remark. Here, Clarkson (1660, pp. 6-7) reflects on the religious beliefs he held as a young man:

> my God was a grave, ancient, holy, old man, as I supposed sat in Heaven in a chair of gold, but as for his nature I knew no more than a childe: and as for the Devil, I really believed was some deformed person out of man, and that he could where, when, and how, in what shape appear he pleased; and therefore the Devil was a great Scar-croe, in so much that every black thing I saw in the night, I thought was the Devil: But as for the Angels, I knew nothing at all; and for Heaven I thought was a glorious place, with variety of rooms suitable for Himself, and his Son Christ, and the Holy Ghost: and Hell, where it was I knew not, but judged it a local place, all dark, fire and brimstone, which the devils did torment the wicked in, and that for ever; but for the soul at the hour of death, I believed was either by an Angel or a Devil fetcht immediately to Heaven or Hell: This was the height of my knowledge under the Bishops Government, and I am perswaded was the height of all Epsicopal Ministers then living

I freely acknowledge the debt of an equivalent passage from my first chapter:

> I did not sleep many a night through from dusk to daylight one wink, but lay abed in great fear of my soul that for want of true faith it might burn in Hell, which under-ground place I thought to be a dark local cave with a great smith's furnace, and the Devil a mighty black fist thrusting the unholy sinners deep into the coles till we burned red or white, then beating us flat with a clanging hammer for all eternity; so that after many sweating nights of fearful wrestling within, I determined to attempt a prayer after my own form (*TCD* p. 5)

Now that I had a stylistic model for my narrator, I began to set the parameters of his character. It would be through his eyes alone I would describe Milton, the Great Fire, and possibly some quite fantastical events, so my first decision was to establish the very opposite of an unreliable narrator, a voice of integrity in whom the reader could have complete confidence as a clear lens, indicated by his name: Allgood.

My incongruous model here was *The Great Gatsby*. Through a few self-deprecating vignettes of *Bildungsroman*, Fitzgerald takes great care to

establish the novel's narrator Nick Carraway as a reflective, morally serious voice: a trusted keeper of confidences, a conscious innocent in a corrupt world, and so a man who is "inclined to reserve all judgments" (p. 19). This thread of character-building culminates in his crucial declaration, just before we hear the history of Gatsby and Daisy's relationship: "I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known" (p. 66). The occasional reliance of the forthcoming plot on co-incidence and melodrama is then skilfully camouflaged by the persuasive perspective of a reliable and sympathetic eye-witness, someone we are confident simply cannot help telling us the truth. I attempted to establish a similar smokescreen for my novel's more ambitious lurches into the unlikely, which I hoped to pull off without betraying the texture of ersatz authenticity I had so worked to establish. I wanted to have my cake and eat it.

Two further decisions helped. The fact that Allgood is writing a retrospective account rather than a continuous diary allowed me, like Fitzgerald, to compress events and include only what was relevant to my story, especially important since I had only one quarter of a novel's length in which to establish my narrator, his fellow characters and their world, and to set up and resolve what plot there was. Second: the fact that this was a private account, written, as Allgood's opening remarks make clear, with small chance of ever being read, and then only after the author's death, allowed me to permit my narrator a greater level of frank reflection than I encountered in many of the contemporaneous published tracts I read; and this, I hoped, would further reinforce the perceived reliability of his voice.

And all this set-up was simply scaffolding for the hunch I was still following, that the bare fact of Milton's living in London during the Great Fire held the seed of a good story. From histories of the disaster, I discovered that the intense heat of burning paper in the bookmen's store in St. Faith's, a church in the crypt of St. Paul's, was one persuasive theory of the cathedral's destruction. *Paradise Lost* first appeared only months later, but its composition history and preparation for publication are not well documented. I thought it reasonable to speculate that Milton's completed manuscript was present in the store as its contents spontaneously combusted, allowing me to include the suggestion that Milton's hubris in rewriting Scripture had brought down the wrath of God, that "his poem had burst out into flame as though the very hell he inscribed pushed itself into our world" (*TCD* p.202).

I committed to that incident without knowing how the poem might eventually be recovered, beyond a vague suspicion that I could exploit the peculiar circumstances of its composition by an amanuensis, whose memory might be relied upon, in combination with Milton's own. Blake's intervention came to me only very late, when I realised Allgood could not survive the fire.

And his ultimate fate was necessary for purely expedient reasons: to allow me to include a fragment I had written early, a description of the books in the St. Faith's store bursting into flame (*TCD* pp. 201-202). I needed Allgood as a witness, since I did not believe the imagery I had chosen in this passage as reported speech.

But something in the scenario didn't ring true, and I soon found what: very little research showed me that no one could easily survive the temperature required to heat paper to the point of spontaneous combustion.

That is the sole reason why I changed my original intention – that Allgood is writing as an old man, recalling events from decades before – and had him composing his memoir only shortly afterwards, on the point of death, an ultimate moment the novel never quite reaches, as it loops back upon itself, the first words of Allgood's account coming after the end of the Chapter Twelve by the novel's unruly chronology.

The beginning turns out to be the end, as I might have guessed.

5 *a very recherchy lot*

In his gorgeously illuminating essay 'Dingley Dell And The Fleet', W. H. Auden (1963, p. 409) identifies two contrasting impulses in literature and in life: the Arcadian and the Utopian, a dichotomy he pithily characterises in Christian terms: "Eden is a past world in which the contradictions of the present world have not yet arisen; New Jerusalem is a future world in which they have at last been resolved".

This latter view of life is scarce at the moment, in both our literature and its social and political context. Dystopias are plenty; but they are by their nature Arcadian: things-are-bad-and-getting-worse means they were undoubtedly better in the past. I shouldn't be surprised. We are supposed to have given up on our own Western Enlightenment inheritance, or those who read serious fiction are. Progress might be possible, but there's no sign of it. We are resigned to the knowledge that the best is behind us. The middle-class fetishising of organic food, wooden toys and posh camping is little more than expensive pre-industrial role-play. At some time just beyond living memory, we resentfully suspect, life was pretty well perfect. Fiction, in particular, hit its zenith during the fifty years either side of 1900, and it's been downhill ever since. Life today is too complicated for the poor novel to cope with; stuff changes too fast. Email and texting ruin the plotting, which had been inherited in full working order, only one careful owner (Austen or Dickens). It's just too hard to write about someone spending the day at their computer, or on their smartphone. There is no common experience any more; all those competing

identities mean you can't appeal to one lot without alienating another. Best stick to what's always worked.

Auden chooses as epigraph for his essay an aphorism of Nietzsche's: "To become mature is to recover that sense of seriousness which one had as a child at play". The bestseller lists reveal that we've got the message in our reading matter too: to return post-haste to a simpler time, and play dress-up. The past is where it's at.

But historical fiction is a doubly ludic activity. The readers understand they are not reading an authentic contemporary account, or a work of history. They know perfectly well the writer does not have supernatural insight, or a time machine, only imagination, discipline, and access to the scholarship of others. So not only are they participating in the usual fiction-game of 'as-if' with invented characters and events, they are doing so within a fixed framework of events that both writer and reader accept did really happen, and pretending these fictional people and their doings are part of the same fabric. It would be very confusing for all concerned, if it wasn't so much fun.

The historical is properly a mode rather than a genre, though it is one which Anglo-Saxon literary scholarship has only recently begun to address directly. Critic Jerome de Groot (2009, p.2), in his recent study, has a go at summing up its capacity: "[It] manages to hold within itself conservatism, dissidence, complication and simplicity; it attracts multiple, complex, dynamic audiences, it is a particular and complex genre hiding in plain sight". Marxist critic Georg Lukács makes a useful distinction in his classic study *The Historical Novel* (1962), between two kinds of historical fiction. On the one hand, there is a narrative of explicitly fictional characters and events, which

happens to be set in a recognisable period of the past. On the other hand, there is a narrative which faithfully dramatises significant and recognisable events and persons from history, and uses fiction only to fill in the blanks in the record, whether factual or psychological, and to give the shape and texture expected of imaginative writing. It is the latter which is Lukács's subject, epitomised for him by the virtual inventor of the genre, Walter Scott.

In the mainstream of British literary culture today, the distinction is rarely dwelt upon. Both these are respectable manifestations of 'historical fiction', since both carefully avoid explicit betrayal of established facts. Academic scholarship is avidly digested, and occasionally brought to a wider audience, by novelists keen to claim their work as a reliable, if not authoritative, representation of another time and place. Readers hungry for the comfortably exotic can delight in vividly imagined versions of half-remembered school lessons, uptight National Trust pageantry re-peopled with frothy life, and gory death. For Lukács, history has an objective reality, and historical fiction is characterised by "the complex interaction of concrete historical circumstances in their process of transformation, in their interaction with the concrete human beings, who have gown up in these circumstances, have been very variously influenced by them, and who act in an individual way according to their passions" (p. 58). Herbert Butterfield (p. 6) attempts a more elegant summing up in his charming 1924 essay: "A historical event is 'put to fiction' as a poem is put to music".

But the more obviously ludic stuff, in the form of counterfactual historical fiction, is a riskier enterprise. The very basis of the historical mode is a common understanding between writer and reader of an established frame

of history, within which they can permit themselves the occasional what-if; to subvert this very frame is to enter an aporia, a vortex of relativism, full of endlessly echoing why-nots. To take one recent example, though in another medium: Quentin Tarantino's film *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) gleefully mucks around with the Second World War and the Holocaust in a manner some critics and viewers found thrillingly post-modern, and others rejected as disrespectful and irresponsible: "a violent fairy tale, an increasingly entertaining fantasia ... a completely distinctive piece of American pop art" (Todd McCarthy, *Variety*, May 20th 2009); "an uneasy nowheresville between counterfactual pop and trashy exploitation ... ridiculous and appallingly insensitive" (David Denby, *The New Yorker*, August 24th 2009).

George R. R Martin, writer of the 'A Song Of Ice and Fire' series of novels, identifies one of the genuine problems of the conventional mode: "the frustration in writing real historical fiction is that if you know history you know how it comes out" (Johnson, 2012). Martin has found his own solution: to restore the thrill of the present-time contingent by inventing a familiar pseudo-historical world where our expectations can be suddenly subverted. (In a publishing landscape which gives us *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), it is surely only a short hop to full-on revisionist Tudor fantasy, or inter-period mash-ups imagining face-offs between our favourite megalomaniacs. Anyone for *Henry VIII: Revenge of the Undead Wives*, or *World War Never: Caesar vs. Hitler*?)

In writing *The Countenance Divine*, I found myself torn between the two poles Lukács identifies. I was excited by the vivid detail and ready-made dramas that my research into well-known figures and events offered me, but I

remained aware that I had set out to write what I could only call a fantasy, a shaggy-dog story spun around a few fixed points from the record, but which made no claim to the reliable narration of authentic historical events. Yet I was reluctant to wade into the moral and ethical quagmire of overt counterfactual history, especially as I was one of those who felt an instinctive revulsion for the liberties taken by Tarantino's film. The solution presented itself only gradually, as my research progressed.

Though my novel is inspired by certain documented details, it does not in the end seek to play with major events – except to invent them where they did not occur, but plausibly could have according to my reading of the historical facts, and the internal logic of my fictional realm. I avoided close engagement with those who had their hands on the levers of power, and only in my exploitation of the Whitechapel murders did I enter territory which left me queasy about using and abusing the well-known facts of real lives and deaths, even though I altered nothing I found in the archive.

I allowed each of the four sections to follow the same pattern: a ludic fiction around a noisy but weightless historical event. The Y2K problem, my original subject, was big news at the time, but in retrospect it is historically insignificant, except to specialists in computers or systems analysis, since the feared catastrophe did not occur. Even the tenth anniversary went by without much fuss, and there are no books on the subject listed in the British Library catalogue with a publication date later than 1999. In dealing with such recent history, I had a second source available: my own memory and that of others I could personally consult. So I relied much less on published material, except for technical information on the issues behind the crisis. This is the only

section which contains no 'real' people as characters, and little in the way of specific contemporary cultural reference.

The 1888 section deals with a series of real murders, but committed by someone about whom nothing else is known. It takes as its starting point a real letter (which I included as the first in the 1888 section; *TCD* p. 62), but one currently considered by serious students of the case to be a likely fake, a view I am in no position to challenge, though the evidence in not conclusive. (The letter itself, I should note, is no longer extant; it survives only as a photographic copy, having disappeared from police archives along with the kidney which accompanied it.) The remaining letters in the first part of this section do address themselves to genuinely prominent names of the time: Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Charles Warren, George Bernard Shaw, the Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, Queen Victoria, 'Sherlock Holmes', Robert Louis Stevenson, William Gladstone, Oscar Wilde, and the reforming clergyman Samuel Barnett. But these are presented only as public figures unknown to the correspondent, without agency within the novel, and filtered through an idiosyncratic voice and perspective which we might expect to be not wholly reliable. And the murders themselves, while an endless source of fascination in popular culture, have little substance historically, except as they led to innovations in police work, and were catalysts for social change when the living conditions of the victims were exposed to wider public scrutiny. In spite of the profusion of theories, the meaning of these apparently random killings is as foggy as the gothically picturesque Victorian streets where we imagine they took place.

Even John Milton and William Blake, though seen now as central to the English literary tradition, were not truly figures of any wide import in their day. Blake was certainly sympathetic to the liberal and revolutionary movements of the time, but he had no documented active involvement, beyond his arrest and trial on charges of treason following a drunken soldier's claims to have heard him insult the King. And Milton, in spite of his period in senior government office, and his still-cited contributions to debates on censorship, divorce, and Christian doctrine, would barely register on even the academic radar today were it not for his poetry, and especially his later epics.

Though both the Milton and Blake sections have at their heart a verifiable event, neither is one which turned the course of history in the sense Lukács understood it. The Great Fire of London, while a major disaster, and ever-present in folk memory, appears to have had little attention from academic historians for its own sake. Despite the precipitous trial and execution of an unlikely scapegoat, it is now – and was then, at the highest levels – widely accepted to have been accidental, with very few documented deaths; and though it inevitably transformed the built environment of London, it had no equivalent impact on politics or culture. Historically speaking, nothing much happened when London burned down. It was built up again, and things went on as before.

And the disinterment of the dead poet's coffin is a very minor incident by any standards, of only passing interest to even the most ardent Miltonists; indeed David Masson, whose exhaustive multi-volume work on Milton's life, times and legacy remains the bedrock of biographical scholarship in the area, does not mention it at all (Walker Read 1930, p. 1050).

Yet it was the discovery of this peculiar non-event, the digging up of Milton's corpse, which led to my most difficult ethical dilemma. Was it acceptable to knowingly change documented facts to suit the structure of my novel? Did it matter if I messed with history that no one knew?

The novel's central sequence of years –1666, 1777, 1888, 1999 – may not be significant (or even apparent) to every reader of the competed work, but it solidly anchored the process of writing. This was the backbone of the project from its earliest days, and only later did I light on the concomitant historical figures and events of Milton and the Great Fire, William Blake, 'Jack the Ripper', and the Millennium Bug. Everything and anything else was up for grabs, but those fixed chronological points were unquestionable. They defined the quiddity of what I was writing. Changing one of them would flick a finger at a very delicate house of cards; and as the image suggests, even if the result would bother no one else at all, I knew it would cause disproportionate and very real distress to me.

Within this structure, I was determined that the texture of each section should by informed by the historical record, and in the first months of my PhD, I researched Milton and Blake in parallel. The two sat neatly together in my imagination, as they did in Blake's own. I felt a strong instinct that long and deep immersion in their major writings would pay off (as a fellow writer, I felt a real duty to approach them first through the work they chose to leave), and both required by far the most biographical and historical research, which I decided to undertake first of all, while I had plenty of time. I thought at this point that the 1999 section would be the easiest to write, and the safest to leave till last; in any case, it made very basic sense to me to build up in

chronological order the layers of history I intended to excavate, however they might finally be arranged. And I was seduced by the initial illusion of eternity offered by the first weeks of a PhD, my final deadline an event horizon so distant that it was very many months before I saw I had to move beyond research alone, and into first attempts at composing a narrative.

My ambition was never to write a fictionalised version of history; this novel was to be a fantasia on historical themes. Still, I was determined that I would not consciously change historical fact, though I remained aware there might still be information on the record beyond my own research which would contradict something I invented. But I only dug up what I needed to build a solid world I could invent within, assuming a reader who began where I did: who had heard of the Great Fire, of Milton and of *Paradise Lost*, but little more; and who had only a vague idea of the headlines of seventeenth-century English history: Protestant-Catholic conflict, wars in Europe, trial and execution of the King, restoration of the monarchy.

I hoped to supply enough context within the text to allow a reader to take pleasure in my fiction, but this does not mean I tried to explain everything. I firmly believe that the inclusion of unfamiliar but unglossed detail allows readers to confidently enter and enjoy the ludic space of a self-contained virtual reality which will not betray its own principles. They know, even if not consciously, that a first-person voice from that period does not pause to explain what is second nature to a contemporary. The more I might parade my research, and strain to actively persuade readers of some fake authenticity, the more they become distractingly aware of the self-conscious fictionalisation at work. In any case, the reader is always already in on the

game, fully aware that Thomas Allgood has not actually written this text; for one thing, another name is on the cover of the book itself.

It was during my initial research into Milton that I came across an article discussing Philip Neve's contemporaneous pamphlet which describes the disinterment of the poet's coffin. (A full transcript of this pamphlet is included as Appendix 3.) At first it struck me as nothing more than a vivid and disturbing metaphor, a shamefully accurate analogue of the posthumous indignities we inflict on the memories of our great figures, and especially that literary critics inflict on the writers they claim to celebrate. I was aware that the disinterment happened during Blake's lifetime, and I thought this might make an interesting nugget for that section. He was a Milton obsessive, and the scandal was big news for a few days; I allowed myself to believe it was at least plausible that the young engraver heard of the incident.

Then, as I read into Blake's own favourite reading, I came across the recipe for artificial life in the works of the sixteenth century arch-alchemist known as Paracelsus, otherwise remembered as a proto-Baconian pioneer of modern medicine, and arguably the father of chemistry as we know it today (Jacobi ed. 1951, p. 318). A few details from Neve's account now began to suggest themselves as the basis for something like a plot. I felt the shadow of a complete story just out of sight, teasing me with little flashes of potential: the rib; the actor; the homunculus; the persistence of the past in the rebuilt city; Blake's resurrection of the shade of Milton in his later eponymous poem...

When I began to draft the Blake section, I hesitated. I knew Will would come to possess the rib – but what then? He might attempt to use it as the basis for a homunculus, but could I really allow him to succeed? I wasn't sure

I had the nerve to take my novel so far into the territory of fantasy. Although I wanted to believe my approach was joyfully ludic, I was still troubled by the insidious desire to be taken seriously as a literary novelist. This sort of thing, I feared, might scupper my chances. It stank of children's fantasy, of comic-books, of *Doctor Who*. It was just too silly.

On the other hand, I dared myself to believe that caution would ruin the whole enterprise. My initial premise was itself wildly ambitious, but if I had bitten off more than I could chew, then the only way to get the jaw crunching again was to bite off more and more. I envisaged a novel which was disciplined, especially in form (the short sub-chapters, the regular structure), and in length (I was aiming for 80,000 words), but not timid. I would be into my own fifth decade by the time the work was complete; I wouldn't get another crack at this. I might as well push it as far as I could.

But one fundamental problem remained. The disinterment happened in 1790, not in 1777. It knew it would be a simple matter to place the incident thirteen years earlier instead, and have it witnessed or investigated by the twenty year-old poet and engraver instead of the obscure lawyer Neve; this was an event very few scholars even referred to, and I could be confident no reader would know or care if I changed the date. But I really wasn't sure I could do it. It just didn't feel right.

I agonised over the decision. It kept me awake at night. The story's value to me was that it really happened. I would never have dared invent such a thing, even had I the imagination. However insignificant, it had to be a true fragment of history, accurate and intact, just as much as the fire, the killings, the Y2K problem, as much as Blake himself. That was the point. Wasn't it?

And I knew how easily I could get away with such a minor sleight of hand. While approaching the Blake section, I had taken care to respect the available facts of my protagonist's biography, and the scholarly speculation about his working methods. It was Blake who gave me my title, the only other anchor I had, and what I thought I knew of his beliefs and work seemed perfect for the themes I intuited in my two bookend years. But I discovered that his life as a whole is poorly documented, a reflection of his relative obscurity as a poet and artist during his lifetime and for at least century after, notwithstanding the enduring popularity of a handful of short lyrics and engravings. Especially little is known about these early years, bar a few of his own anecdotes. By age twenty, Blake seems to have written some poetry, but though it later became his first published work, it is juvenilia, out of sync with the rest of his oeuvre. He was still one year away from completing his engraving apprenticeship, and the images of his which can be identified from this period are skilful, obedient hack work, with none of the exuberant flair he is venerated for today.

Yet this absence of documentary evidence, which might be considered a gift to a novelist, only led me to more anxiety. I felt no traction; I could not connect this obscure young student with the startling visionary verse he was to produce. Everything that interested me about Blake came years later, but I would have to pretend to find it in embryo here in 1777, some trace of it at least. My only clue was the America Revolution then in full swing, which I could dimly see as the summation of the millennial beliefs of the Puritans who had fled there in Milton's day – something Peter Ackroyd deals with in his own counterfactual fantasy, the now-obscure 1996 novel *Milton in America.* I

wondered if I too could find some thematic resonance there, as Blake himself did in his later work. Yet every time I tried to approach this subject, I shied. The quantity of scholarship available was dauntingly huge, and I just couldn't find a way in.

But when I looked at Blake in and around 1790, the actual year of the Milton disinterment, I found a much more appealing personage. He was thirty-three years old, married, established in a career but using this stability to write and engrave an extravagant spiritual satire like *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, to privately publish editions of his hauntingly lyrical *Songs*, ambitious for his own art but hemmed in by his household obligations, admired by friends who were closer to the centre of things, but who could or would do little to advance his prospects in a highly competitive and fashion-conscious cultural marketplace. This was a man I could understand. The impoverished, mocked obscurantist I had expected to find is the sadder figure he became in his last decades. In 1790, the chant of liberty from Paris was fresh in the air; history was on the march, and it was only a matter of time before it reached England. The younger Blake was a vigorous, combative revolutionary, a man who felt certain his time had come.

So my 1777 section, I concluded, had to take place in 1790. I am still very unhappy with this fudge, though it is the only solution I found possible, and I have no reason to think a single reader will ever be bothered by it. But all the same, I did my best to cover my tracks. I knew that the complete sequence of four years would not acquire its full significance until the novel's final chapter, so I had space and time to let 1777 establish a place in the overall structure of the narrative. And I used the loose threads left hanging to

tie up the wider plot, to suggest the centrality of this phantom fifth year to a story taking place more than a decade later.

I placed a formative spiritual experience, remembered by Will while at dinner with Johnson (*TCD* p. 43-44), in this earlier year. The power of that elusive waking dream would drive him to create a homunculus of his master, risen to teach him his true destiny; but his overreaching ambition, in the person of the impish little man he had made from bone and clay, would ultimately defy the bounds of temporality, and unravel the future history of London. That seminal 1777 vision became the whistle-blow I had so far lacked, to set my whole fictional game in motion.

If the novel remains flawed in my mind as a result of this compromise, it is a flaw which in the end defined the work which grew up around it. It twisted my intentions out of their strictly schematic shape, and into something more expansively fanciful. The house of cards wobbled, but it stayed standing.

6 *if I had less of a conscience*

When I stand at my front door and look left, some quirk of the local topography means I see the tiny, perfect silhouette of a distant church hovering above the rooftops as the street curves to the right. When I walk the dog on Walthamstow marshes, the same church dominates the East London skyline just north of Springfield Park, where Clapton meets Stamford Hill. At first glance, it looks like a standard late-Victorian gothic parish church in heavy grey granite, only conspicuous by the size of its spire. But on closer inspection, one or two anomalies mark it out. The wooden doors are decorated with curling metal vines, painted bright red. Above the doors is a cryptic, and defiantly non-scriptural, motto: 'Love In Judgement And Judgement Unto Victory'. And most startlingly, each of the four turrets around the spire is topped by a huge bronze sculpture, tarnished to vivid unearthly green, of one of the imaginary creatures which flank the throne of God in the final book of the bible, the Apocalypse (Rev. 4:7). This is the Church of the Ark of the Covenant, the location of a brief, strange, and barely-remembered episode of late nineteenth-century religious mania.

In 2005 this long-neglected building was adopted as the London cathedral of the Georgian Orthodox Church, but it was built one hundred and ten years earlier as the metropolitan headquarters of a small Christian sect called the Agapemonites, named after their original base in Spraxton in Somerset, the Agapemone or Abode of Love, intended as a utopian

community preparing to welcome the Second Coming. The church contained a golden throne instead of an altar, ready for the physical return of Christ. When the group's founder died, an ambitious Irish clergyman called Smyth-Pigott took over, and one Sunday in 1902, the congregation arrived to find the Reverend Smyth-Pigott seated in the throne. He announced that God was no longer in heaven, but was present in him; the Second Coming was imminent, and would occur within that very building. The clear implication was that he himself was the returned Christ. The following Sunday a large crowd gathered, and challenged Smyth-Pigott to walk across Clapton Pond. He demurred, and retreated to his neo-Gothic home (later inhabited by Charles Saatchi, and later still by Vanessa Feltz), and eventually to the Abode of Love itself, where he died in 1927. The sect finally died out with its last surviving members a few decades later.

I first stumbled across this story as a few lines in a guidebook to London eccentricities. Brief entries on the web and in encyclopaedias gave me further information, and I invested in second-hand copies of the handful of works I could find devoted to this peculiar movement (McCormick 1962, Mander 1976, Barlow 2007). I visited the church; and only then did I discover it was the same building I saw from my front door.

And I knew: this was the missing piece of the third narrative, a perfect manifestation of my suspicion that the apocalyptic tradition which briefly flourished in the mid-seventeenth century persisted within respectable Victorian English Christianity. It allowed me to spread the London where I would locate my drama out of the endlessly fascinating but exhausted, over-trod East End and Shoreditch, and into its once-rural hinterland. And it gave

me the basis of a fictional context for the historical killings I had decided would be central to the 1888 section.

The Whitechapel Murders were carried out, my story would suggest, at the command of an apocalyptically-minded clergyman. As I researched the killings themselves, I discovered that the womb of the victim was pierced or removed in the mutilations which followed each of the five murders, all of which were likely to have been quick and relatively painless. I imagined a fictional mirror-image of the historical sect: a clergyman who wanted to prevent the Second Coming of Christ, and believed that one or all of these women might be a new Virgin Mary. I was vague on how to justify this theologically, but as I researched more, I realised that many of those who propound such fringe beliefs are equally vague. Theology may be the first prompt, but it often ends up as a post-rationalisation for the localised megalomania which follows.

But as I tried to shape a narrative, I became increasingly uneasy. Smyth-Pigott has a grand-daughter still alive, whose memoir of her early life in the Spraxton centre was one of my sources (Barlow 2007). It is one thing to faithfully dramatise an obscure historical event which is not well-known, like the disinterment of Milton's coffin, and invent fictional consequences which do not contradict the record; it is quite another to bring such an obscure event to attention only in a form which absolutely betrays the beliefs of those involved, however bizarre they may seem. And it was too much, I decided, even in fiction – especially in fiction: just a word-game, a ludic fancy – to accuse an identifiable figure recent enough to have living relatives who

remember him, a man my father could quite easily have known, of complicity in one of the most famous crimes of all time.

I retained the shadow of the idea for quite some time. The killer in my novel still addressed his mysterious master as 'Reverend', but little by little I dropped the references which linked this figure, even if only in my mind, to the historical building I saw from the end of my street. The idea was too neat a mirror of the Fifth Monarchists, and I saw no virtue, for myself or the reader, in a second round of trying to wring drama from obscure theological arguments. In the end, I removed even his designation as Reverend, and no trace now remains of my original plan, bar a few thematic echoes in the final chapter. I do not miss it; and I don't think the novel does either.

7 *printed in a beautiful red*

It was always at the back of my mind to visit the graves of the victims of the Whitechapel murders. I intended it as a private act of atonement for exploiting their deaths. It was for my benefit, not theirs. It troubled me that I was adding another shovelful to the mountain of fantasy on the invisible killer, while the five women whose deaths gave him his fame are rarely treated as more than an afterthought. Yet we know exactly who they were, while he is a blank. They were real people, close enough to us that they might feasibly have grandchildren still living today. Their graves are all in public cemeteries in East London, where I live. I had no excuse.

But as the novel neared completion, I still hadn't managed the trip. I knew it was too late to expect it to feed into the creative work, but I wondered now if I could make the journey as a sort of fieldwork for my commentary, a way of forcing out something to say on a subject I found it very difficult to articulate. The 1888 section of my novel was the easiest to write, once I began, but was then and is now the hardest to think about with any clarity.

I had avoided starting even research on the murders for months and months, telling myself I had to get things straight with Milton and Blake first. I couldn't see how to make the subject work, or why it was worthy of scrutiny at all. For a while, I toyed with the idea of a playful and learned genre pastiche, with George Bernard Shaw as a Sherlock Holmes figure on the trail

of the killer. More often, I just wished I had chosen something else. I was in denial.

Eventually, I ran out of excuses. I read a couple of the more reliable, documentary accounts. There, I found transcripts of official documents, coroners reports, newspaper accounts. And I discovered just how little is known about the figure we call 'Jack the Ripper', a name invented by the writer of one of the hoax letters sent at the time, probably by a journalist to boost his paper's circulation.

Another of these letters hung about the edges of my mind as I read on, one less easily dismissed as a hoax. It is known among Ripperologists as 'the Lusk letter', after its recipient, or 'the From Hell letter', after the return address given, and it is reproduced verbatim in my novel as the first in the sequence of letters which make up the 1888 section (*TCD* p. 62). Something in this brief note nagged at me. Was it the suggestion of the killer's simplicity, even innocence? The hint of an Irish accent in the crudely phonetic "Sor" and "Mishter"? The suggestive future echoes of Leopold Bloom and Hannibal Lecter in the faux-gauche description of the delicious cooked kidney?

I looked elsewhere. I worked my way through a dry, heavy pre-war volume on the history of the period (Ensor 1933), keen to avoid a modern revisionist take. I saw just how much was going on: in London, in England, in the Empire. I read into the remarkable clutch of iconic works published just then, or shortly after, giving us the figures who still define our collective nightmares: Dracula, Dorian Gray, Jekyll & Hyde. Looming above them all is Sherlock Holmes, their equally angular counterpoint, the triumph of the

rational against the gothic, and the archetype for every troubled loner detective since, from Philip Marlowe to *Doctor Who*.

But that letter wouldn't leave me alone. Its peculiar voice crept around my imagination every time I tried to think about the killer. It offered me a figure at once knowing and servile, both guileless and utterly corrupt. An appalling idea formed. Could I write the whole of the section in this voice? I was sure I could not; but I dared myself to try, as an experiment, a way to break ground, to kick-start some kind of momentum. It was all I had. It was better than nothing.

I couldn't write it at home. The material was just too difficult. I didn't want anything of that lingering where I lived. I had to go away, for a few days at a time. The first section was written in a tiny single room overlooking the sea in a cheap B&B in Margate. The second – the killings themselves – was drafted in the Upper Reading Room of the Bodleian Library in Oxford, whose stolid grandeur promised to absorb the worst excesses of my subject before they could contaminate me. The rest I composed in Folkestone, in a discounted executive double on the sixth floor of a vast coach-party hotel shaped like an ocean liner. Nothing came more easily to me in this novel than this voice, and these letters. They have hardly been revised, in part because I can barely stand to re-read them.

The exercise of writing in that voice was undoubtedly absorbing, and yet what troubled me most was the fact that I found it so compelling to investigate a perspective I find entirely repellent, even – perhaps, especially – as an imaginative pose: the psychopathic serial killer so familiar now from genre novels and TV series. I do not read crime fiction, I am increasingly

squeamish about screen violence, and when the TV news or the internet warns me about images I might find disturbing, I navigate away. Much pious nonsense is talked by writers, artists and film-makers about pushing your imagination for its own sake, about investigating the darker reaches of human behaviour, as though it were obviously a worthy undertaking to invent uncommitted crimes and lay them before the world. I have never been persuaded that dramatic violence encourages the real thing, but I do believe that writers bear a responsibility towards what they choose to present. Under the guise of fantasy, they may conjure possible futures which could not otherwise take quite that shape. Once it's said, you can't unsay it.

So I did not begin work until I had studied the real details of the historical murders. It was important to me that nothing in the killings I described would be invented. Every incision is from the coroner's reports, the press accounts, the medical examiner's descriptions. The details of the dead women's appearance and character are as I found them in my research into contemporary sources. All I have invented is the persona of someone who claims to be the killer, extrapolated from that extraordinary little document, the fifty-six misspelled words of a grotesque tease.

The fact that history has found my source to be the most plausible of the letters received, while all others are easily dismissed by serious students of the case as silly hoaxes, suggests there is something in us which likes to see these killings as a product of lack of education – not of an absolutely unsophisticated perspective, not an idiot, but of something like an overgrown toddler, for whom lack of exposure to the great liberal glories of our culture and history, and the unquestionable rationalism of science, has left him an

ignoble savage, an amoral creature of pure impulse and desire. But the likely truth remains that this letter was also a hoax, and the kidney included was a stolen medical specimen; so I console myself that the voice I have adopted is only the voice of someone who claimed to be this killer, who invented the macabre details which make it plausible, borrowed the known facts of a real murder to tap into latent primeval fears, deliberately or by chance, and achieve something resonant and almost mythic.

But even so: someone killed those five women. A real human being did it, and the truth is that after more than a century of detective work, no one has the faintest idea who or why. And that is what makes these killings so frightening. We can understand violence which has a motive, or at least a rationale. It is so often possible to work out the identity of a murderer, in both fiction and life, precisely because we *can* quite easily imagine why someone would do something like that. In this case, a hundred years of failure tells us we cannot, unless we enter the territory of the deranged. Conspiracy theories abound, positing secret knowledge which linked the five women, or a killer involved in occult practices. Modern psychology inevitably points towards sexual thrill as motive, a carefully nurtured misogynist fantasy finally enacted.

But in the end, there may have been no reason at all. The whole thing served no purpose, not even private pleasure. It was simply an act of confounding brutality for its own sake. It is this scenario which is most terrifying, for if such a thing is possible, then none of us is ever safe. The urge to find an explanation for the genocides of the twentieth century, and the ideologies behind them, is precisely the same as the continued compulsion to

make sense of the anonymous nineteenth century crime which holds a hint of those horrors to come: the alternative is too awful to contemplate.

I do not pretend that I dared to broach that scenario in my novel; on the contrary, I give the murders an impossibly baroque rationale. But what I do now admit, though not even suggested to myself as I wrote, is the possibility that the letters which form part of this novel are a genuine continuation of that single historical letter: written not by a killer, but by someone who wishes to convince the reader that he is the killer of these women; someone, perhaps, who wishes he had dared to killed them, or who wishes he could have, or who enjoys entertaining brutal fantasies, or simply making things up for others to enjoy. And though I am unwilling to look it in the eye, I cannot escape the fact that the person who has written them is me. I composed these fake letters, pretending to be the notorious killer of these women, just as the original hoaxer did over a century ago. And I can't say why.

As I assembled the first draft of the whole novel, I still hadn't made my peace with the victims. I remained troubled by what journalist Maria Margaronis (2008, p. 138) calls "the moral implications of taking someone else's experience, especially the experience of suffering and pain, and giving it the gloss of form". I had to admit that the historical victims were not very present to me. I knew their names, I had imagined the last minutes of their lives from post-mortem photographs and eye-witness accounts, but I wasn't sure I knew, really knew, in my bones, that they had been real people. Mary Ann Nichols, born in London; Annie Chapman, born in London; Elizabeth Stride, known as 'Long Liz', born near Gothenburg in Sweden; Catherine Eddowes, born in Wolverhampton; Mary Jane Kelly, born in Limerick,

Ireland. All were killed within ten weeks, and each corpse subjected to increasingly intricate mutilations, performed with remarkable speed and skill. No one knew why. No one would ever know.

For all I had thought that paying my respects in person would draw a line under the whole awful business, still I kept putting off this pilgrimage, uncertain of my own motivation. It was a contrived, ghoulish ritual, I worried, too self-conscious to be of any use to either my conscience or my commentary. Or worse: I was just trying to ape Iain Sinclair, embarking on a whimsical expedition in the hope I could contrive some patchwork of meaning from the absences and failures of the journey.

But on the other hand: Sinclair was certainly in my mind in the early stages of the writing; and if the novel owes little directly to his writing, then it is certainly heavy with a couple of his preoccupations, including these murders. And it is through his work that I first came to see London as a heap of ever-provisional layers, a crowd of pasts clamouring for attention, if only you stop to listen for them. A homage to him, I had to admit, would be honest and appropriate. I couldn't think of a better way to do it.

In the end, I got on with it. I wasn't the first, I discovered. On a website dedicated to research into the killings, I found traces of other such expeditions: a couple of images of their memorials, and sparse instructions how to find them. I copied and pasted these, printed out my own pocket guide. I figured out a circular route, refigured it, abandoned it. As far as I could tell, the five graves were distributed over three cemeteries, each a short tube or train journey from Stratford in East London. That would be my hub.

I take the bus to Stratford at two, telling myself I haven't really started yet. The place still has its post-Olympic glow, not yet a hangover. The sheen hasn't worn off the posh shopping centre, thronged with fellow idlers, flush with undue pride in their plush surroundings. A pit beside the new bus station stands ready to be filled by a huge new tower. An ossified steam locomotive is mounted nearby, catnip to tourists desperate for something old to point their cameras at.

It's warm, the sun is in and out. Will it rain? I'm not dressed for it, and the forecast said not till six. Surely I can be home in four hours? I always feel edgy on an unfamiliar train platform. Some half-remembered panic, when I ended up going the wrong way on a too-tight schedule. Maybe a memory from my first weeks in London: a teenager ran riot through my train spraying everyone on board with a fire extinguisher. He didn't even look like he was enjoying himself. Just blank; dead-eyed. One woman tried to stop him, and he used the heavy metal cylinder to break her jaw. It hung sideways, swollen, her face dripping blood. She didn't scream, or faint, as I'm sure I would have written. She was livid. She yelled after him, as best she could: "Fucking little bastard!" When the train pulled in, I didn't stick around. He was long gone, and I was in a hurry. Someone else would sort it out.

As I linger, I am more than usually aware of the posters declaiming at me. YOUR LIFE PLANS. HIT BY LOW RETURNS. TIME TO CHANGE? I try to imagine what the women would think, could they see the old place now. A SAMARITAN HELPED ME FIND MY STRENGTH. I wonder if this is intended to deter the suicides inspired by the poster beside: 'Be careful and

stay safe!', it says, above a woman tumbling to the ground, about to fall onto the rails. The shriek and crunch seconds away.

Prevention is better than cure. But would any of this have helped them? Maybe it would. This place had no central voice back then. London as such, a unified legal entity, as I know it now, only came into existence after the killings, with the foundation of the London County Council in 1889. This version lasted just shy of a century, before it was dissolved by the Thatcher government to exorcise the red threat. I first lived, like them, in a city that didn't officially exist, on the eternal margin, only just beyond the ancient kernel: in Shoreditch, glossed in my novel as the sewer-ditch, in a leaky mouse-ridden flat at the end of a tumbledown row on Hackney Road, the home of all who are for hire. I got the 26 bus almost every day through the roaring dragons and empty police booths which still mark the boundary to the Square Mile. I lived round there, took that bus, on and off for nine years. One nice July day I decided to walk instead, for a change. My bus exploded at the bottom of the road, the last and feeblest of the now-forgotten attempted sequel to the 7th July attacks two weeks before.

I'm listening to a podcast discussion about the rise and significance of UKIP. The bins here on the platform are see-through plastic bags, so we can spot a likely bomb. People did try, for a while: "Is this your bag?" No one seems to remember now. The inner shrug. One of those things. The price of a free society: you can't stop everything. If you're British, someone will always want to get you. Let them. Anything else is giving them what they want.

Then: I think I spot the man himself. A poster for the London Dungeon: Guy Fawkes holding a fizzing fuse, a couple of conspiring royals,

and on the right, Saucy Jack whispers to a scarlet-frocked hussy. A square-jawed model with stuck-on sideburns and a stovepipe hat. How could she resist? Her eyes are wide with shock and delight; we can only imagine the indecency he's offered to tempt her off her beat. And the caption, slapped on as though graffitied in white paint: 'Fear is a funny thing. ALL NEW. Now next to the London Eye.' I try to ignore it. I tell myself I won't write that up. It's all wrong, before I've even started. No one would buy it; too convenient.

The train arrives. Trundling through Maryland station, we pass an image of dozens of candles, arranged in the shape of a sinister mask. 11,000 PERFORMANCES OF PHANTOM OF THE OPERA. What better fun night out than a weirdo who preys on vulnerable women?

More posters inside the train. TEXT DODGER TO 60006. I think of the chocolate box version of the Dickens East End, the oom-pah-pah of knees-ups and grinning urchins. We trundle past a line of containers marked MAERSK SEALAND. Long Liz would have felt a glimmer of something, a fellow Scandinavian doing her best to get on in London.

I get off at Manor Park station, squint at the map on my phone, looking for my first stop: City of London cemetery. Out of the station, left, left again. I pass a resting bus, a couple of rows of impassive council flats. I wonder if they're very aware of living at a cemetery. What you might see, and hear.

I check the map at the front gate. I have a grave number for Mary Ann Nichols, the first of the victims. I feel it is important to visit them in order, even though it makes no sense: the first and fourth are here in the same cemetery, the second in another, though I'm no longer sure which. Details are

sketchy about Annie Chapman's final resting place. I'm not even certain there is a grave of hers to find.

The cemetery is stubbornly unkempt, and busy with the futile buzz of strimmers. A man lies back on a gravetop, weeding behind him. A woman stares at a fresh mound of clay, as though listening carefully. I pass a quarter-size BMW carved from polished black granite. I try to orient myself. I can't relate the six-digit grave number to the numbered areas on the map by the gate. Is a Square the same as a Block? Where is the memorial garden I'm supposed to be looking out for?

The place is huge. I walk into the cackling remains of a West Indian funeral, the ladies crowing a parodic invocation of Saint Thomas, the men stone-faced beneath baseball caps, thick black shades. I tramp the paths for an hour, more. I am annoyed. I am bored. I've been making notes, but now my pen is running out. So is my phone battery, and my patience. I circle back on myself, stubbornly looking again where I know there is nothing to see. Ninety minutes in, and nothing to show for it. I should have done what Sinclair would have, and taken a companion, an unwitting straight man, a flint to spark off. I don't dare ask the staff for help, scared of what they would think of my errand, what I would think of it myself.

Instead, I am approached for help. Two women ask me for a cab number. They have just discovered they're in the wrong place. They were looking for a funeral in City of London cemetery, and this is Manor Park. I laugh indulgently, make a joke. "Whoever it is, they'll never know you were late." I can sympathise. I've noticed Manor Park Cemetery on some of the

signs here. It's confusing, I tell myself. Anyone could think this wasn't City of London.

No, hang on. Did those women say they were looking for City of London? I stop, my stomach clutching. I thought I was in City of London.

I'm in the wrong cemetery.

This is Manor Park Cemetery. City of London is somewhere else. I check my home-made guide, realise it is garbled. I've been over-enthusiastic in my cutting and pasting. I couldn't find anything because there is nothing here to find. The women have eluded me again.

I do what I swore I would not: google 'Mary Ann Nichols grave'. I find an account by someone who tried to make the same pilgrimage I have. He returned home to the States (of course) without having located a single grave. This suddenly seems depressingly likely. I am back in the headache fog of the novel's early days: *what if I come up with nothing at all*? The joke is on me all right. I should forget the whole thing, go home. Just pretend I saw the graves. Write it up anyway, invent the day's adventures. Who would know, or care?

I look again at my cheat's guide, the online version. One ray of sunshine: accidentally, I have found myself in the cemetery where Annie Chapman was buried. Her grave is unmarked, but I perhaps can find the right area, salvage something from the afternoon.

I follow the directions, back the way I came. Over there? It looks suitably neglected, the old graves I can see leaning drunkenly.

And there she is: right by entrance, facing away. I walked right past her as I arrived, and she never said a thing. Cheeky. A couple of plastic bunches, some withered daffodils, and a cheap plastic plaque, black with gold

print: 'A victim of the infamous JACK THE RIPPER'. It looks new, but it won't last. Someone will have it for their garden. Of course it's Annie I find first, the only one with real personality to me. I regret now I made my letter-writer dislike her. It was just to vary things, really. Mixing it up. Sorry, Annie.

Back on track, I find City of London, just a short walk away. Right station, wrong graveyard. The gates are monumental, a uniformed steward directing traffic. Inside, all is manicured and respectable. Everything here is bigger, nicer, slicker. I meet what I think is a SWAT team, striding like Reservoir Dogs. Special Forces funeral? But it is the groundsmen finishing a shift, grimly unsmiling in their sweaty City-logo black T-shirts, like Hollywood roughnecks in a slow-mo walk of triumph from an explosion they are too cool to look back on.

It starts to rain as I find the two plaques, one for Mary Ann, one for Catherine Eddowes, either side of the same path, almost neighbours. Two iron circles embedded each in a square of cement, next to fussy rose beds: the name and the date of death, glossed as part of a Heritage Trail; a frisson for the tours, but no explanation to the uninitiated. Not what we want to think of in a graveyard: death. The graves themselves long gone; re-used. I get the impression of reluctance to acknowledge these crimes, a diffidence about celebrating them, embarrassment that one might visit here for that reason, but the obligation to do what cemeteries do: tell us there were people here before us, remind us we will soon be yesterday's news, and we should be so lucky as to have a visitor once in a while.

I am way behind schedule. Back in Stratford, I take the Jubilee Line one stop to West Ham. Elizabeth Stride is waiting, in East London cemetery.

As soon as I step from the station onto the street, I know I am in Injun country. This is the London the boom forgot. Gentrification dare not be fantasised here; it's not even a wet dream. The place is utterly defeated, sourly skulking. The only life is around the tanning salon, 'The Bronzed Age'. Women and kids queue, a bit of glamour to cheer us up. The old East End, alive and well; I thought it had all moved out to Essex. Good for you, girls. I tell myself this is where Long Liz would have hung out. I don't really believe it.

I reach the gates, and curse. It is ten to five, and the sign tells me my doom: the place closed at half past four. I see someone behind the gates; he must clock my expression, for he chides me with: 'We are closed, you know'; and then I know I'm okay, he's going to let me in. He unwinds the chain pretending to keep the gates locked. 'I won't be long,' I tell him, but I have no idea where I am going. I check the account my predecessor left online: if the oval drive is a clock face, she's at nine or ten. But which hour is the entrance at: six, or twelve? Anyway, I see no oval drive, just a straight path ahead, a junction left and right. I light out for the far corner, obeying some frantic hunch. No sign. I pace and wander. I google the image of the stone on my phone. I see nothing like it nearby. I walk back the way I should have come.

Seconds before I give up: there it is. The only one that looks like a proper grave, with an oblong surround marking out a neat rectangle, but far too small for an adult frame, never mind lanky Long Liz. A simple Gothic headstone, just the name and the years. Geraniums planted, and a fat blue teddy bear toppled against the stone. Someone tends this grave. I'm not sure what to think about that.

I have no time to linger, to listen to my emotions and note them down. I don't want to be locked in. I have to try to make it to the last.

Mary Jane Kelly. I look her up, back in Stratford; to be on the safe side, I have legged it into Westfield, to the Apple Store, to get some charge into my phone. And my luck has run out: it is six o'clock now, and her cemetery closed at five. I have to accept I'm not going to do it.

I try to process the failure, to make it okay. It's appropriate, I tell myself. Her murder was the one I couldn't bring myself to write, during that trip to Oxford. I just didn't have the stomach for it, and I still don't. Those photographs. The heap of meat. Her hipbone.

I copped out, and added it in a different form, in the final chapter. The long dashes of Victorian prudery, to stand in for the humiliation of her warm cadaver. Bad form on my part, a little insult to the memory of her suffering. But she was Irish, from Limerick; she could take it.

Still, I should go. Just to say I did. And you never know. I might be able to climb over a wall. It's on my way home anyway. Maybe, like the previous, they'll let me in, or by some freak chance it will be open.

And it is. Good old Catholics. So many rules, you can't possibly be expected to keep them all. The side gate is lying wide open, no sign of anyone around, so in I march.

I study my instructions: walk around the church, find the rubbish collection point. I pass a huge blank grave: Available For Lease carved into the headstone. I can't see a rubbish collection point. I check my phone again. This might be difficult, I am told, if there is no rubbish waiting to be collected.

But another clue is offered: I am looking for a statue of a footballer. I scan around. There he is, foot poised on the ball. And a few graves to the right: her.

A jumble of bits, like a child's play-grave: a makeshift little square of bricks with a low headstone, a wooden cross, and an old iron marker, thick-crusted with rust, shoved in the soil behind. I investigate this last. It looks authentic. It might be the only remnant of the original five graves. I steal a flake of rust, to add to the bark I took from the tree by Blake's grave and the plaster I pocketed from wall of the church Milton is buried in. These two relics have sat on the bookshelf in front of me as I wrote, an attempt to stop me forgetting these two were also just people once. For all the good it did.

A few cutesy offerings have been placed: a plaster cat, a wire-work butterfly. The tiny grave, one foot square, is a flower bed, the same geraniums I found on Stride's grave. Does the same someone look after them both? The ground is uneven, as though recently dug. A peculiar heap of stones to one side. And the inscription itself: "IN LOVING MEMORY OF MARIE JEANETTE KELLY – NONE BUT THE LONELY HEARTS CAN KNOW MY SADNESS – LOVE LIVES FOREVER".

For the first time, I feel released. A burden I wasn't even sure I had been carrying is off my shoulders. Hooray for me. But something small, and significant, has clicked into place. If my transgression is harmless enough, then a token atonement will suffice. But it's between me and the women, and I feel it's settled now. I have nothing left to prove, to myself or to them.

8 *an elegant heart-shaped box*

I grew up with Tom Baker in title role of *Doctor Who*. His final story was *Logopolis*, written by Christopher H. Bidmead, and originally broadcast in 1981, when I was eight years old. I must have known the end was coming, for I recorded all four episodes of the story with a tape recorder next to the TV speaker. I had never done so before, and never did it again. This was a historic moment, and it had to be preserved.

It is hard to overstate the importance of this event in my life at the time. *Doctor Who* was an obsession; my alternative religion. I never missed an episode. No one was allowed to speak while it was on. In the days before frequent repeats and home video, I built up my understanding of the series's history by reading novelisations of the old stories, probably to the exclusion of anything else; and it is likely these books, most adapted from self-contained four-part serials, which first gave me the conviction, manifest in *The Countenance Divine*, that a proper novel should divide neatly into twelve chapters.

So I knew well that every few years, another actor took on the mantle. But this was the first time I would experience the sacred ritual first-hand. The curly-haired, ferociously intelligent eccentric I adored would be no more; but at the moment of death, like the proverbial cat he would escape, by means of 'regeneration', the quasi-miraculous transformation into another form which allowed his people, the Time Lords, to live for centuries.

I had suffered no bereavements in my childhood worse than the death of kitten we had taken on only a few days before, and this farewell to a beloved mentor was a hugely significant ending. Accepting this expression of transience felt like a moment of maturity. But the show's inventive mythology meant the trauma was only temporary. It allowed me both to grieve and to hope for rebirth.

In the months and years that followed, I listened to that muted, hissing cassette, or to parts of it, over and over again. Some of the dialogue became scriptural to me. "Entropy increases," a brooding Doctor tells his young maths-genius companion Adric early in the first episode. "The more you put things together, the more they keep falling apart, and that's the essence of the second law of thermodynamics and I never heard a truer word spoken. Come on." Decay was inevitable, scientifically proven, an unstoppable force. There was no point in fighting it; yet we did.

I was some way into writing this novel before I realised it had echoes of Bidmead's story. I'm still not sure if they are co-incidence, or the irruption of a long-buried seminal influence: the suspicion that mathematics and computers might shape the very reality they are part of; the ghostly, faceless figure who hovers in the background, dispensing secret wisdom; a patient sect quietly devoted to postponing Armageddon. In *Logopolis*, the Doctor travels to the eponymous planet to use its inhabitants' mathematical prowess to repair his Tardis. He discovers that the calculations chanted by the monk-like Logopolitans are the only thing holding the very cosmos together; the relentless law of entropy means that "the universe long ago passed the point of total collapse".

Once I saw the parallels, I quietly buried fragments of a few lines of dialogue I remembered – those I have quoted here – as an act of respectful homage, including Baker's final resonant words in the role. I gave this line to the golden-masked figure who appears as Chris feels the fabric of the city he knows come apart, without yet knowing why, at the end of Chapter Eight. The Doctor spoke it with his broadest smile, as own his past came rushing back to him, enemies and friends alike, and the mysteriously lurking Watcher, his blank-faced future self, approached his dying body, to blend with it in a dazzle of electronic light: "It's the end, but the moment has been prepared for". They are words we all might hope to find on our lips when the time inevitably comes.

9 *an ingenious contrivance*

From the Trojan wars, to the Greek city-states, to the Roman Empire, to the rise of Islam, to the court of Charlemagne, to Renaissance Venice, to Shakespeare's London, to the American colonies, to the French Revolution, to the Industrial Revolution, the basics of communication didn't change all that much. If you wanted to get somewhere, you walked; to travel somewhere farther, you needed a horse; for a longer journey, you took a boat. If you wanted an image of something or someone you had never seen, a person had to draw it first. To get information to someone out of earshot, you had to physically go to them, or have someone else bring a message. To hear music or watch a drama, someone or something had to perform it live.

A few things had changed, of course. The printing press allowed knowledge and literature to be reproduced cheaply and quickly, and so distributed more widely, though both reproduction and distribution still had to be physically done by people. And in war, it was increasingly possible to kill someone without getting near enough to give them a chance to kill you first. This was one of the most significant changes in human history; recent anxiety over drone technology is only an extension of the same phenomenon. As arrows and swords were replaced by muskets and cannons, physical strength and individual skill became ever more irrelevant to how likely a soldier was to score a hit. What mattered more was mathematics.

Given a certain amount of gunpowder, and a certain weight of cannon-ball, and a certain angle of the barrel, any target could be hit with great

precision. But the necessary calculations were complex and time-consuming, and easy to get wrong. So they were computed in advance, by specialist mathematicians known as computers, who arranged them into tables and sent them off to the battlefield with the artillery. Similar tables of ready-made calculations were used in navigation, in architecture, and especially in finance. The more basic tables could be learned off by heart; indeed, schools still teach the most basic multiplication tables today.

Unfortunately errors still crept in, with potentially serious consequences. Tables of corrections had to be sent out later; and then later still, corrections to these corrections. So it occurred to one man, Charles Babbage, at the height of the mechanical and technological revolution of the nineteenth century, that a machine could be designed to do these sums automatically, faster and more reliably than any person could. What he invented was what we now call the computer (Goldstine 1972, Campbell-Kelly & Asprey 1996, Davis 2000, O'Regan 2008).

But there have always been computers: a few stones; an abacus. A computer is anything we use as a physical, real-world stand-in, to help with the abstract, mental process of doing sums. Your hand is one, if you add up on it. If I want to know how many fingers I have, I go ahead and count them. But if I want to know how many brothers and sisters I have, I can count them on my fingers. Then, I am using my fingers as an analogue computer.

The same reasoning Babbage used has allowed computers to gradually take over so many complex and tedious processes through the twentieth century. These miniature mechanisms were simply more reliable than people, and often faster. They never got tired or bored, and so could never make

mistakes. As long as the mechanism was sound, the only possible errors were in the information we fed in.

Over the subsequent decades, the computing part of the computer got smaller, and even faster. And as it did, we developed other ways to make use of a little machine which adds up numbers very quickly. For that is all it does. We translate the task into sums, it does the sums, and we translate the answers back again. It is a mathematical proxy, a battalion of brain army which can fight the mental wars we find too boring, and reliably remember the things we are scared to forget (Randall ed. 1973, Shurkin 1996, Barrett 2006).

Yet there is something uncanny in the mystery of the operation of the modern personal computer. Until quite recently, even the industrial world has run on human-scale mechanisms whose operation was visible to the naked eye. An unfamiliar machine could be opened up and explored, to see which part connected with which, giving anyone a decent chance to work out what was going on.

But so much of the technology which is fundamental to the smooth running of the western world is based on electricity, and so invisible. We can't see electrons pulsing through wires, or inside a transistor, or TV and radio signals in the air. We can't see the information stored on a video tape or a floppy disc as a pattern of magnetic waves, or the pattern of tiny holes on the surface of a CD waiting to be read by a laser. These microscopic mechanisms, and the science behind them, remain mysterious to most of us. It is just too complicated, too small, too removed from our intuited everyday experience of the world.

A couple of generations ago, everyday technology took a major leap and left most people behind. We trust that a clever few understand it, make sure it will work, and is safe. We hope it can be fixed if it breaks down, but we don't know how to ourselves. We wouldn't even know where to start. And this was exactly the problem with the Millennium Bug. The people we trusted had made a mess of things, in a very stupid fashion. (Even the name was wrong: the new millennium didn't actually start till the following year.) It shook our confidence in the basis of the whole project.

One thing I promised myself when I began this novel: I would find out how computers work, and explain this within the text, from first principles, in language a non-technically-minded reader could understand. I fantasised that this might even be a service to society, to help bridge that divide between the minority who understood these things, and the rest like me, who simply didn't. Even the minority, I suspected, fell into camps of those who knew how to program computers, and perhaps grasped the basic principles of their operation, and those even fewer others who properly understood what was happening on the microscopic level to allow them to operate. This latter was what I wanted: not the usual folksy analogies and metaphors, but a clear description of their actual physical workings, in simple terms.

I did my research. I wrote the material up, several versions in fact. At one stage I thought to include it at the end of Chapter Twelve, as the ending of the whole novel, in a version of Chris's childhood daydream from the opening paragraphs of his story (*TCD* p. 75): he would have to explain how computers work to Blake and Milton in person. Later I thought of inserting some of it late

in Chapter Four, as Chris and Lucy talk computers in the garden with a drunken party guest (*TCD* p. 96).

But in the end, it didn't fit. It slowed things down before they had properly begun. It was too much information which wasn't actually relevant to the stories I had chosen to pursue. It had been one of my initial prompts, one of the fixed points which guided me as I set off, but it just wasn't the novel I ended up writing. If it is always true that the map is not the territory, then it is doubly so that the instructions, even when self-imposed, are not the task itself. The work acquires its own mass and form, and once a certain tipping point has passed, everything else must subordinate to making it the best possible version of itself, however far from the original intention.

10 *innocent mirth*

For each of the three historical sections of *The Countenance Divine*, I set myself a programme of research before I began to write, or even think about what I would write. For the novel's fourth and final section, I did the same. I read lots of technical stuff about the Y2K problem (Keogh 1997, Ulrich & Hayes 1997, Brownlee et al 1999, Porlier 1999), and contacted a few of those who worked on it, and were willing to share their memories. But in the end I used little of this. It was only the 1999 section which had anything like a plot outline in my mind from the outset (see Appendix 1), and because the period fell within my lived experience, I reassured myself that no real forward planning was required. I knew the territory; I spoke the language. I decided to just start, and see what happened.

My first sketches (reproduced as Appendix 2d) show that much of what I first put down ended up present in the final novel in some form. The most immediately apparent difference between this first draft and the finished section is the style, which took many weeks of work to establish.

At the time, my reading tastes were bent towards what I thought of as postmodern minimalism. I had recently stumbled across the young American writer Tao Lin, the central figure in a self-described online community known as Alt-Lit. The spare, deadpan style of his cheekily-titled novel *Richard Yates* (2010) delighted me. There were intimate details of sexual feelings, petty frustrations, vain daydreams and banal anxieties, wrapped up in a writerly

self-consciousness which sails very close to the wind of excruciating preciousness. To me, though, this was all part of the fun. And it was funny, very funny, as Beckett is funny, as death itself is, just the fact of it ahead, waiting, arms folded. I wanted a tone to strike which said late-twentieth century, and I felt I was on its trail.

I began to look for something of this flavour elsewhere. I had glimpsed it in the anxiety-dream surrealism of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* (1995), and I found it again in the semi-detached self-loathing of Ben Lerner's novel *Leaving The Atocha Station* (2011, p. 19), the meandering musings of an American poet frittering away his time on a fellowship in Madrid, exhaustively cataloguing his own self-regard, laziness and failures:

> My plan had been to teach myself Spanish by reading the masterworks of Spanish literature and I had fantasized about the nature and effect of a Spanish thus learned ... and watching the faces of the others as they realized their failure to understand me was not the issue of my ignorance or accent but their own remove from the zenith of their language ... so that henceforth even my silences would seem well wrought, eloquent. But I couldn't bring myself to work at prose in Spanish, in part because I had to look up so many words

I found it in the cold grey sentences of Peter Stamm's *Seven Years* (2010, p. 112), the story of a successful architect's compulsive affair with a young immigrant woman slavishly devoted to him, but for whom he feels no attraction:

> That evening I went to Ivona's. I told her to take her clothes off, and I sat and watched her. When she was completely naked, she lay down on the bed, like a patient on a doctor's table. I stood by the bedside and asked her when she was going back to Poland. She tried to cover herself up, but I pulled the blanket away. She wasn't going back, she said, and she looked at me as though she expected me to be overjoyed about it. I can't see you anymore, I said ... You wouldn't get along with my friends. What would you talk to them about? Do you understand? Ivona was stubbornly silent the whole time. When I was done, she said in a quiet, firm voice: I love you. Well, I don't love you, I said.

Unlike in previous sections, there was no single model I could choose to cleanly represent the literary style of the late twentieth century, but I found these affectless sentences, full of numb detail of banal daily life, struck the right note to conjure a technical imagination, to suggest the slightly obsessive-compulsive quality I sensed appropriate for Chris. And, as with Allgood, I felt a quality of transparent honestly – in style, if not character – would stand in my favour when it came to persuade the reader of what I thought might be a fantastical finale.

Belatedly, I found what I identified as the source of the creeping unease I so enjoyed in these writers: Kafka (Underwood ed. 1981). I had only ever read 'The Metamorphosis' (pp. 91-146), and understood it then as just a startlingly weird fantasy fable. Now, I saw it clearly as a heartfelt satire on the offensiveness to industrial bourgeois sensibility of being unable to get out of bed on a weekday morning. I was stunned by the torture-porn hilarity of 'In The Penal Colony' (pp. 149-178), a breathtakingly savage comedy of a traveller who awkwardly watches a prison officer's obsessive demonstration of a horrific punishment apparatus, reluctant to offend his hosts by voicing any objection. In his shorter stories, I found the same quality: embarrassment or numb detachment at the torment of others; the guilt of the suffering individual at the irritating disruption he causes to an otherwise efficient bureaucratic process.

I began to strip back the prose of my 1999 section drafts. I broke it down into short sentences, often with no more than three clauses in each. I removed any hint of subjective judgement from the third-person voice. I cut out anything that smelt of imagery, or even 'good writing'. I stripped away

conjunctions, as far as possible, a ludicrously ambitious attempt to subtly suggest the abandoning of faith in Newtonian causality in twentieth century science. I pulled away from the temptation to ape some kind of Woolfian inner life; I ran in the other direction. I tried to use style to construct a character who lives through systems and numbers, who values what is unambiguous and unchallenging, who is scared to step outside his comfort zone and engage with those who might disrupt him. I wanted to place a subtle distance between how the character sees himself, and how he comes across to others. And like a Philip Glass score, I decided that the slightest ripple in this smooth texture would have significant effects. I could modulate a lot with very little.

But above all, I wanted it to be funny. I had always seen the mode of this work as comic overall, but I did not set out to write what we understand today as a comedy. Yet to me, Chris especially became a deadpan comic character. The long section which describes his armpit-hair fetish (*TCD* pp. 167-173), and in particular his sexual fantasies, exists to underline his obsessive character, to suggest a cause for his inhibitions around intimacy, and to playfully indicate the shift to the late twentieth century by what can now be freely discussed in imaginative prose; but most of all, I include this material because I think it is funny. I am aware this is a dangerous assertion, since even readers who enjoy this passage may do so for entirely other reasons.

The final chapter is an experiment in collision between this numb deadpan and the extravagant fantastical I have raised elsewhere. There is a mutual incomprehension between Chris and Oliver, indeed between Chris and the greater structure he belatedly finds himself to be part of – in a sense, the novel itself. This section, I eventually saw, had to narrate my own crisis of

faith, in how I could end the story. I did not know if I could believe in Oliver's beliefs about the end. I did not know if I could demand this of the reader, and carry it through with conviction, however much I wanted that as an all-stops-out finale. I found I could not easily recover my own innocence.

My only way through this was to offer the reader, in Chris, a character who shared my disbelief, who took every opportunity to invoke a materialist Occam's Razor and find banal, quotidian, plausible alternatives for the lavish explanations Oliver and the novel wished to offer. It is what the twentieth century has done to the fragile sense of wonder it inherited, and this as much as anything is the story I narrate in this novel: a world struggling to re-enchant itself, in the face of massive indifference.

Or perhaps it is a writer struggling with a vision of himself he wishes to make manifest, against the odds and his own better judgement. It is Milton, and Allgood, and Blake, and my letter-writer, just as much as Chris: all versions of me, past and present, adrift in London, struggling to make their mark, to negotiate the needs of others, to find a balance between inner and outer worlds, between the unearthly breadth of the imagination and what is actually possible.

11 *the sum of human things*

Though it is common to use the term as a shorthand to refer to an end-of-the-world moment, the word 'apocalypse' only means 'exposing that which is hidden', and in the Christian scripture which bears that name, what is revealed is our human destiny: a vision of events leading to the final establishment of a theurgical utopia for the prepared elect, eternal damnation for the rest, and the ultimate end of time itself. The crisis of the Y2K problem was just such a vision: a modern, secular manifestation of apocalypse, but one which has all but vanished from our cultural memory since the end of the twentieth century.

In the late 1990s, businesses and government became increasingly aware of something the I.T. industry had known of for at least a couple of decades: computer programmers had long written year values into their software as two digits instead of four. Using the format YYMMDD, May 24th 1997 would appear in standard computer code as 970524. Early computer memory was bulky and expensive, and it had once made a significant difference to save the space which would otherwise be allocated to the two endlessly repeated digits '19'. No one ever bothered to change the practice.

The problem was twofold. First, most major industrial and commercial systems in developed economies were at least partly controlled by computer software, and when they used this format to calculate which of two dates was earlier, the date in the twenty-first century would seem to come before that in the twentieth. I was born in 1972, so to calculate my age on 31st December

1999, the computer would subtract 72 from 99, giving it correctly as 27. But to reckon my age in 2013, the computer would subtract 72 from 13, making me minus 59. This would be a nuisance in many cases, and rather more serious in others: one IT consultant I spoke to remembered the possible implications for a blood bank, where a computer program used calculations like these to determine which stock was out of date.

Secondly, most electrical and electronic devices, both domestic and industrial, have small computers built into them known as embedded chips, and these too might use dates to regulate their operation. If the software in an affected chip could not be updated, it would have to be replaced, or it may stop working just as the year rolled over from 99 to 00; inconvenient in a washing machine, but potentially disastrous in an aeroplane or a power station.

The fix was on the surface straightforward: engineers would comb through the software looking for date values, and correct them. The real crisis, both in case of the software systems and the embedded chips, was that by the time the problem had been widely publicized, there simply weren't enough working hours left to fix it. It was a slow, unpredictable and labour-intensive process; and even if you worked to ensure your systems were all compliant, could you ensure your suppliers and distributors had done the same thing? If you depended on the smooth functioning of businesses based in the many countries where the issue was widely ignored, would you fall victim to their lassitude? (Gregori ed. 1998, Yourdon & Yourdon 1998, Webster 1999)

It remains a question of great controversy even among industry experts whether systems were in fact fixed in time, or whether the problem had been over-hyped – though the fact that countries like Italy and South Korea took

little or no action to address the issue suggests that the potential for danger was exaggerated. But it is valuable to observe the level of fundamental disagreement and uncertainty, before and since, over the behaviour of man-made systems designed to be nothing other than absolutely predictable. How could a machine we have built to observe only arithmetic and logic potentially malfunction so spectacularly? Information technology embodies the virtues of Weber's Protestant work ethic: it is efficient, ascetic, hard-working, reasonable, and obedient. It is our better selves. But as the Garden of Eden myth suggests, those who create something in their own image must accept the challenge that its flaws might be their own. We are inefficient, depraved, lazy, sensual, illogical creatures: will our own creations, our little microcosms, not contain and reproduce these sins?

The co-incidence of this issue with the threshold of what we called a new millennium, already the focus of apocalyptic speculation from some evangelical Christians, especially in the U.S., caused a moment of particular cultural anxiety and excitement (Boyer 1992, Hutchings 1998, Landes 1998). Much of the uncertainty was rooted in the fear that we had left systems vital to our survival as a society in the hands of new and vastly complicated machines controlled by an esoteric knowledge and its geek priesthood, which most of the rest of us – and perhaps a few of them – did not appear to fully understand. Computers had taken over our lives at extraordinary speed, and we had not stopped to question the wisdom of giving them such power; as a result, our whole civilisation might crumble, quite literally overnight. How had such a thing been allowed to happen?

Classically, computers fall into two categories: analogue and digital. An analogue computer uses a physical property to represent the calculation it needs to perform; counting absent objects on my fingers makes my hand into a computer, with each finger analogous to the abstract idea of a discrete unit. From the ancient abacus, to the medieval clock, to Babbage's own modern inventions, we have a long history of devices which model the complexity of the required calculation as an equally complex mechanism.

But computers are only useful if they save time and money, and Babbage discovered that building huge mechanical models of very complex calculations did neither. What we use today is the digital computer. Whatever information we wish to process is translated using an agreed code into binary numbers, and this allows the physical analogue to be a simple on-off switch representing 1 or 0, a binary digit, abbreviated to a 'bit'. This switch can be duplicated over and over, in many linked blocks, allowing the most intricate calculations to be represented on a mechanism which is extremely simple, extremely reliable and, given the right materials, extremely fast.

Computer software, then, is a series of instructions from the programmer to the computer, which are carried out as calculations: add the two numbers *a* and *b*, and if *x* is the result, then do *y*. This depends on *x* being a predictable, logical outcome of the calculation of *a* and *b*. Computers have no initiative; all the potential *x*s have to be foreseen and built in. The computer processor itself is only a series of pathways, a schematic map of predictable future events, physically rendered as a miniature landscape of logic, made up of metal threads linking blocks of silicon (White 1999, Barrett 2006).

It is unlikely the programmer has foreseen an age value of minus 59, so the computer has no instructions for this outcome. It will either recognise an error and stop working, or feed inaccurate information into its subsequent calculations, with equally unpredictable consequences. So the crux of the problem we called the Millennium Bug was not that all computers would stop working, or give out inaccurate information: it was that we didn't know whether they would or not. An entirely predictable disaster could be planned for; but how could we judge if it was worth spending billions and provoking social panic for something which might very well not happen?

The fact that this came at the end of a calendrical epoch, the second millennium A.D., considerably added to popular anxiety. Yet erudite commentators, even if they were a little nervous of technological breakdown, ridiculed the idea that there could be anything inherently significant in the turn of the numerical year from 1999 to 2000 (Gould 1999, Eco et al 1999). It was an arbitrary convention, with no analogue in the natural world. As an event, it was utterly meaningless.

But that remains an unsatisfactory conclusion, not least because it fails to explain why it *was* in fact such a significant moment for so many. Our conventions of time measurement may not be absolute, but neither are they arbitrary; we are part of the natural world, and they have significance to us. A day is a natural period of time: the sun rises, and sets. A year is an imprecise measure of what once seemed to be movement of the stars, but we now know to be the movement of the earth around the sun: the length of time since the world as a whole was last here. And the division of that year into twelve months springs at least in part from our observations of the moon (Borst

1990). From a perspective beyond the earthly, these may indeed be arbitrary and insignificant; but we do not have such a perspective.

A century, then, was a standardised version of a reasonable guess at the outside span of a human life; even today, when we talk about a hundred years ago, we can be reasonably confident we are beyond the reach of living memory. And if it was only our base ten system of counting, originating from the ten digits on our two hands, which encouraged us to find significance in a period of ten centuries, then the teachings of the Christian church significantly reinforced that conclusion.

Western theology of the medieval and early modern period often saw the Bible as God's cryptic instructions to his people, a code of symbol and analogy, to be deciphered with the aid of human scholarship and divine inspiration. Twice, the Christian scriptures tell us that a thousand years is as a day to God. John's Apocalypse itself, the final book in those collected scriptures, tells us of the millennium to come: a thousand year period of saintly rule before the ultimate harmony of human and divine existence. So, many exegetes came to the same conclusion: God created the world in seven days, and each of those days represents a period of one thousand years, with the final millennium as the day of rest. Ordinary earthly existence will therefore constitute a period of six thousand years.

In the seventeenth century, leading scholars – including Isaac Newton – devoted much of their time to calculating the period which had already elapsed since the creation of the earth, taking the events described in the Bible as historical record. Results varied, but the consensus was around four thousand years from Creation to the birth of Christ. This led to the inevitable

conclusion that the Millennium would begin at roughly 2000 A.D., though it remained in dispute – as it still does, between Christian denominations – whether Christ would return in triumph at the beginning of this period, or at the end of it. Either way, it is only very recently that we have questioned the idea of a profound transformation in human society to come in the near future (Cohn 1970, Baumgartner 1999, Hunt 2001, Landes 2011).

What form this would take, though, was extremely controversial. The tendency in current biblical scholarship is to see Jesus and his immediate followers as an apocalyptic Jewish sect, expecting to see the Last Judgement in their own lifetimes. But as this failed to arrive, mainstream Christian theology from Augustine onwards encouraged believers to view the imagery and language of the Apocalypse as symbolic of the internal spiritual conversion necessary to establish a true Christian society on earth.

Yet there has always been, and continues to be, an influential heterodox undercurrent insisting these events are to be interpreted as prophecy, or indeed as literal historical prediction (though in the case of the Apocalypse itself, somewhat selectively: the earthquakes have to be real earthquakes, the battles are real battles, but for some reason the Whore of Babylon is never an Iraqi prostitute). It is this strain of Christianity – the prophetic, the visionary, the revolutionary – which has profoundly influenced our cultural sense of time itself. Indeed, some scholars have traced the very Enlightenment idea of historical progress, in many ways still the motor of Western civilisation, to a secularisation of this belief in final perfection: the classic Utopian perspective (Taubes 1947, Blumenberg 1966).

But in the last century or so, another view has gained cultural prominence: the Arcadian, which believes that change is inevitably for the worst, and the best we can hope for is to slow down the rate of decay. From the Arcadian perspective, the ultimate end of things is a final collapse into degeneration, what we now call a dystopia, through which we just might be able to recover the pastoral simplicity of our distant past. It idealises a vision of our lost innocence, and wishes to return there.

And it is fascinating, now, to look at an archived internet forum devoted to the Y2K Problem (Anderson, 2000), which reveals the reflections in January 2000 of some of those, especially in the U.S., who had tried enthusiastically to prepare their local communities for the coming chaos. I quote two contributors here:

> While I, like everyone else is very happy nothing *big* happened I have to say I am slightly disappointed. I know that sounds strange. No, I didn't want anything horrible to happen and for there to be starving people everywhere but I was looking forward to being forced into a simpler way of life. A time of life where families sat around the wood stove to stay warm and because of the close proximity became closer as a family

> I too had a hard New Year's Day as people mocked my preparations and took a moment to say, "I told ya so". It felt like a big football game and my team had somehow "lost".... though, like you said, it was nothing like that in our hearts at all. If our "team" had "won," I know we wouldn't have stood there jeering... we'd be too busy helping those who mocked us by sharing all that we had. I'm VERY thankful we have power and water, but my initial morning's reactions were SO weird... my husband thought I was actually sad that more hadn't happened

The beauty, and indeed the genius, of Christianity is its attempt to construct a narrative which allows both Arcadia, in the Garden of Eden, and Utopia, in the New Jerusalem. We came from perfection, and we will return there; this miserable life is just an interlude. Indeed, the Christian history of

the cosmos from the moment of creation to the end of time can be read as a paradigm of each individual human existence: we have our origins in the sharing of physical matter between a man and a woman; we are innocent in our early days on earth; we lose this innocence and enter into an experience of life which is less than we would wish it to be. We strive to improve, or simply to survive, with the promise of a final period of rest, when all will be settled. For Christian believers, this is the afterlife in heaven, or the New Jerusalem on earth; for others, this has become secularised and domesticated as retirement: when we finally get to read all those books, potter about in the garden, play with the grandchildren. The crux for both is that God, or nature, might spring the final punchline on us when we are not quite ready.

And the secular scientific creation story can be read in similar fashion: it tells us we developed from a single-celled organism which became more and more sophisticated, emerged from the water to breathe the air, learned to adapt to its environment; but what we are describing sounds very like the individual development of every human, from a sperm and egg to infancy.

To push it even further: we think of our distant historical past as a time of a simpler understanding of the world: we were certain all-powerful beings were in charge; there were supernatural forces at work; we believed ourselves to be the centre of the universe; then we stopped idealising those who came before us, and developed the confidence that we could do better ourselves. But in our more recent history, there have been crises when we have lost this confidence, and wondered if our lives have any meaning at all. This too, sounds familiar: the development of the human creature from child to adult. Could it be that the stories we tell ourselves about our origins, both scientific

and religious, are little more than dressed-up macrocosms of individual subjective experience? Is that, in the end, all there is?

Apocalypse is everywhere today. And it is significant that a word meaning no more than 'revealing the future' has, in secular discourse, shed its optimistic, utopian gloss, and come to mean only 'absolute annihilation'. For sooner or later, our individual subjective experience achieves its own personal apocalypse: the revelation that each of us is going to die.

It was this which the Y2K Problem forced us to confront, at a moment when it was briefly claimed that the grand historical narratives had run their course. One day, it will all be over; the mechanism will stop working. This is not a speculation of mythology, a hypothetical teleological projection. It is, in fact, the only thing we all know for certain. A mere two centuries from now, everyone I could ever possibly meet will certainly be dead. The world we know, and which knows us – and what other is there? – will indeed have come to an end, as it has many times before, as it always must. That, I suspect, is why the apocalyptic vision of final annihilation refuses to go away: in the most fundamental sense, we know it is true.

12 *a good riddle*

The most difficult discovery I made during this PhD was that I am not a good writer. It was also the most liberating.

I want my writing to come out already perfect. I don't want to have to cover it in ketchup so it is even edible. I don't mind the messy old slog of the reading, the researching, the thinking-up, the rethinking, the making notes. But when I come to write, I want to write well.

But I don't. I write badly. And so, much of the time, I don't write at all, which is frankly preferable. But then I am just where I was already, and I didn't like it there. I have to come up with something.

So I go through my notes and the few awful attempts I have made to begin, and I look for a sentence or a few words with something like the right tone. I try to make the words and sentences on either side more in tune with that. And then I hold it up to the light and look at it from different sides, and see if I can catch the flaws. If it still has a glow to it, I put it away wrapped in tissue paper.

Then spew out some more banal plodding literal repetitive over-written under-plotted meandering repetitive nonsense. And tinker with it. Cut a bit here, expand a bit there. Keep at it. Keep at it. There's nothing else to do.

Until it finally dawned on me: this was writing. This is all it is. This is all it ever would be. This wasn't some inferior version forced on me by my

inadequacy. This was the beginning and the end; I was already living the dream.

But as long as something came out of it, no one would ever know. My readers would never see the joins. They wouldn't know the Polyfilla from the plaster. As long as the food tasted good, what matter if it was home-cooked fresh from my garden, or heated up leftovers with a sprig of parsley on top?

The passage from *Paradise Lost* I chose as the epigraph for this novel served as a touchstone for the project, and could for any desire to write fiction. I wanted to express the inexpressible, and I chose to attempt it through the human figures of imaginative prose, "By likening spiritual to corporeal forms"; a sort of extended analogy, as Raphael provides for Adam in his epic account of the battle in heaven. This passage anticipates and answers the criticism of Milton that his celestial figures are too earthy, whether in appearance or behaviour; the story Raphael will tell, the fall from heaven, is not in fact literal, he explains, but explicitly couched in these allegorical terms.

But Raphael reveals himself to be a postmodernist too (as well as a neo-Platonist – which may very well turn out, in due course, to be the same thing). He has his cake and eats it. Raphael first insists it is not possible to accurately describe to Adam "the invisible exploits/Of warring spirits", nor indeed that it might even be permitted to reveal "The secrets of another world"; so for that reason, he will put the story in terms a mere human can understand. But he doubles back on his own defence, and leaves Adam with a hint that this may all be a double-bluff; the eternal beings he describes could be more like us than we might wish to think; "what if earth/Be but the shadow of heaven"? What if the map is the territory after all?

In spite of my resistance to the thought, I know there is flattery in the insistence that if fiction is convincing, it must be authentic. We are spooked by the idea that something genuinely affecting might be made up. Reality and truth are not quite the same thing; but if it feels real, we want reassurance that it actually is, otherwise we bristle at the thought we have been duped, emotionally manipulated. It is comforting to know we can only be truly touched by the authentic lived experience of another person, and not by the inky hand of a scheming writer.

This is where the historical novel finds itself in queasy territory. We know perfectly well it is not rooted in experience. But we expect another sort of fidelity, to research, to the facts, and to the spirit of place and thing, a sort of shamanistic medium-ship we invest certain writers with: the Peter Ackroyds, the Hilary Mantels. They enter into a blessed state which allows them to commune directly with the dead. Whether they claim any such thing is irrelevant; the culture endows them with this pseudo-magical power. Readers value what we consider authentic, even when this is actually impossible.

And my novel, I think, refuses to play that game. Even as I wrote, I anticipated that the turn to fantasy, to explicit fictionality, might be uncomfortable for some readers. But this only made me want to force it even more. If it's fiction, I want it to be undeniably so, impossible to mistake for the real thing. This is my vice: extravagance for its own sake.

But I allow myself some restraint. The prison of the title is one. I found it long before I started to write, and I knew straight away it was a keeper. I remember meditating on the words of the lyric 'Jerusalem', the national hymn, just about all I knew of Blake's works when I started the novel, and seeing

phrases which have become part of our idiom: 'dark Satanic Mills': 'Englands green & pleasant Land'; and then the thrilling shock when I checked my *Complete Writings* and discovered that these stanzas were not after all taken from his poem called *Jerusalem* – but from another I had never heard of, called *Milton*...

And one more resonant phrase was lying spare. I checked on Amazon, and in the British Library catalogue. It was free. I had no idea what it would offer me, but it was mine. These three words were now the other fixed point, alongside my sequence of four years. It meant something to do with God, and something to do with a face, and something to do with Blake, and something to do with Milton, and something to do with England. In the darkest moments, when I thought I was producing a pile of witless, pretentious nonsense, I consoled myself that this title, on the right cover, could still probably shift a few copies to the right sort of punter. At one stage I was so bogged down in research for the seventeenth and eighteenth century sections that I seriously considered abandoning the later two, and simply writing a novel about Blake and Milton. Perhaps I should have.

I wrote about God only because those two men did. But as someone raised with a supernatural worldview, and in a culture which accepted this as normal, I wanted to remind the sceptical English literary reader that up until recently, perhaps only a century and a half ago, and much less for many people, most of us thought about God a lot of the time. This kind of thing used to be absolutely real, and central to many people's lives. It was the background hum of everything.

And it doesn't matter to me that it isn't any longer; expect that it means so much of the stuff around us, the physical fabric we inherit and the history it offers, especially in a city like London, becomes opaque, alienating, confusing, when we don't understand just how immediate these ideas once were to every single person alive in that place.

My game has been to fold each past into its future, and mould all together into a vision of our present city. I would say I have certainly failed, except that I get to make up my own rules, by which I let myself believe I haven't done too badly. But in the end, I know I am obliged to leave the final judgment to my readers, whoever they may be. I am more than happy to do so.

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Appendix 1

First outline, submitted with Creative Writing PhD application c. 2005

The Countenance Divine

The proposed creative work will take the form of a novel I will research and write during the course of the degree, from which an excerpt of 60,000 words will be presented as part of the final submission. Titled *The Countenance Divine*, it will comprise a main narrative set in 1999, interspersed with three parallel historical episodes, set respectively in 1888, 1777, and 1666. Through this novel I intend to explore the meaning of London, and how its history influences the present of those who live there, as well as contemporary responses to ideas of apocalypse and religious messianism and millenarianism. I will also consider the status of the 1990s as an apparent 'Golden Age', between the end of the Cold War and the September 11th attacks, when many believed that the narrative of modern history as we knew it had come to an end.

The main narrative, set in 1999, focuses on Northern Irish Catholic Chris McCann, a thirty-three year-old computer programmer employed to fix the millennium bug - caused by previous programmers having entered years into computer code as two digits ('99') instead of four ('1999'), with the result that when 2000 dawns, the computer will understand the year to be 1900. Chris is one of the many who believe that the resulting worldwide computer malfunctions will lead to a global catastrophe, and he takes very seriously the burden of responsibility to avert this. Troubled by a series of apocalyptic visions – blood, fire, the face of God – in the streets around his East London home, he is re-awakened to his childhood obsession that he may be the Second Coming of Christ, whose role will be to save the righteous from this coming apocalypse. Aware that Christ died on the cross at age thirty-three, he becomes consumed by the belief that his own life parallels the Gospels, and that before his thirty-fourth birthday on New Year's Eve, he will be called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice to save mankind. The use of third-person narration in this portion of the novel will invite the reader to reflect with irony and detachment on Chris's preoccupations and experiences, and permit me the wider focus necessary to fully explore the specific culture of this millennial moment.

Told in parallel with this story, and linked to the visions Chris has, are three historical episodes, each narrated in the first person: the Whitechapel Murders of 1888 attributed to Jack the Ripper, and the subsequent foundation of the London County Council, the first time the city of London as we know it today was defined in legislation; the religious visions of the 20 year-old William Blake as the American War of Independence rages in 1777; and the Great Fire of London, destroying the capital just as John Milton, exiled by plague to Chalfont St. Giles, is completing *Paradise Lost* in 1666.

Appendix 2

(a) unedited first rough draft of Milton section opening

I was born in the village of Farrowford in Kent, the youngest of three and the only boy. I was raised a secret Catholic, as any in those days who professed the Roman faith had to be. My father was an Irishman by birth, and had fled his native land during the revolts against the King's rule there, in 1641. He said he had hoped to find more liberty of conscience in England, which was later a cause of great mirth among his Catholic friends here. But he was a well-liked man. I fancy many around the locality knew of his private faith, but none saw fit to censure him, displaying the great English virtue of toleration, something sadly forgotten by too many during the late revolts and troubles which have rent our land.

Seeing I had a quick mind and a love of learning from an early age, he sent me at the age of seven to Canterbury, at no little expense, to be instructed in the Latin tongue.

He often spoke of a wish to send me in secret to Italy to be trained for a priest. I think he believed this an easier matter than I fear it would have proven, but it was not to be, for as my learning grew so too did my curiosity to learn more, and at last I made my way to the source of all learning, the true light of Scripture. I was shocked to see it spoke in plain terms against many of the corruptions of every kind of Church, and especially the Roman.

But even when I did see the light, I could not bring myself to hate those of my family and friends who still worshipped by the Roman way. It grieved me greatly to know their error and to imagine the great fire it would certainly draw them into, and I tried my best to hate them, as the local preachers enjoined me. But when I saw how lightly they took my casting off their beliefs, how little it seemed to matter to their personal opinion of me, I softened in my approach. Even in those of antichristian beliefs, it is possible to find much Christian virtue.

The reckoning with my father was another matter altogether. He believed if I had been baptized a Catholic then a true Catholic I remained. Faith, he said, was a matter of inheritance and not of free choice. He imagined he worshipped in one fixed true faith, unchanged since established by Christ himself – no doubt with incense and rich vestments and garish coloured saints all ready to worship. On one occasion I regret an excess of passion led me to dash to the ground his plaster statue of the Blessed Virgin, and when I said I would happily trample underfoot the consecrated communion bread itself to prove to him my sincerity, why I thought his face would burst from the blood I saw rise there. But instead his eyes melted to tears and he turned his back upon me. In a calm small voice he asked me to leave his house and never to return.

Of course seeing him so pitiful brought out my own tears, for I was yet only fifteen years old, and I begged for him to relent, that I would replace his statue if it meant so much to him never again speak of matters of faith at home, that all I cared for was the good of his eternal soul. But he left the room

in silence, and in the days to come he ignored me as much as it is possible to do. He left a chamber I entered, made no more reference to me in my hearing, and his eyes never settled on mine, but look right through me as though I were a mere ghost. My pity for him soon hardened again to fury, then to resentment, than to weariness, and in the end my sisters asked me if I could not find some employment away from home that might restore some peace to the house.

I wrote him a letter before I left, explaining my desire to make my way in the world and cease being a burden to his spirit and to the family, then I packed a bag with what few books and clothes of my own I possessed, and took a hackney to Cantebury, where my old schoolmaster, one Elijah Piper, on hearing the sort history agreed to take me on to teach the basics of Latin to the younger boys he took in.

But he finally understood. He was an Irishman by birth, and carried that people's fearful sentimentality and servile cast, that a greater power had better organise their lives. And true it was. Though I have sometimes wondered if our leaving them alone all these centuries might not have raised in them a hardier spirit more inclined to see the truth in things. The day came when I resolved to leave his house and make my life among those of my spiritual kindred. Tis was during the time of the Commonwealth, when my father had a great dilemma – he always spoke against the English kings for their savagery in wars in Ireland, yet could not bring himself to ally himself with a Protestant revolution. Indeed this turn of events raised a great nostalgia in him for the good old days as he saw them of James and Elizabeth, when the Irish were welcomed at court. His one hope had been the time of Mary, when he had been appointed a justice. The harshness of his judgements in those days led him to be a fearful man the rest of his days. We moved from where we had grown up and settled elsewhere, and he forever looked over his shoulder for one man in particular, in whom his conscience must have told him he had acted with excessive zeal. Ears cut off, the punishment meted out to Prynne. [make it that this man will catch up with our hero later, the father being out of action. It is Cock?] his own actions were a osrt of vengeance, and now he must suffer for that too. But it was declared he should not be tried, but simply told to leave the town. He pitched up in this farm with a Jew and an Ishmaelite, that is one of those who follows Muhammed. And a ranter who held there was no God but man, heaven and hell are hear on earth, and we are God. There is no heaven but women, and no hell but marriage. I progressed through it seems al the Protestant and dissenting traditions of the day. We had to pose as Anglicans in the new village, with the result I was sent to the local school and made a special project of by the vicar. By degrees I slipped form there to Presbyterianism, then through a raft of sects till I was accounted a sort of quaker, a seeker I would sooner call myself for I felt my journey in faith was incomplete. Yet I had the light of Christ in my heart, and my conscience and Scriptures told me all I needed. This was all before I was born. I was a late child, and we lived now in relative comfort, though still private in our worship, as others were. Many a Frenchman or Italian was directed to our little parish on their way through the country, turning up quietly to be present at the Mass and receive communion, hearing the familiar Latin of the Vulgate, my father said.

(b) unedited first rough draft of Blake section opening

Milton Golem Homunculus

Blake hears the story. The tragedy of it.
At night he and Catherine count their ribs. Giggling, in bed.
Next day he hears it.

Genesis 2:21-24
And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed.

O Catherine! Catherine! he cries.
And he reads the verses again, tracing his finger along the words.
They are naked, in their chamber. Stretched out on their backs upon the counterpane. The late sunlight scatters its gold across their skin.
To be unclothed, says he, and to be unashamed!
Yes Will, says she.
And that, you know, is why you have one more rib than I, my dear. You have even pairs, and I have one less.
She smiles. I think you do not, says she.
I'll wager I do, for the Bible says it. Would you make Moses a liar? And he reaches over, strokes with his fingers the ripples beneath her breasts.
And she giggles.
Shall I count them for you, my dear?
He tickles, and she shrieks. High and wild, flushing her skin.
He cannot resist when he hears that sound. Like a child. The unaffected voice of simple joy.
O Catherine! Catherine!
He climbs upon her, and they make one flesh.
My emanation, says he. The nakedness of woman is the work of God.

He writes: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.* Does an angel come to him?
It does.

All the talk in the street is of the bones of the poet, hawked around the town.
Tooth for a shilling, hair for sixpence.
What's that? says Will, hearing the chatter.
An idling gent among a small group at the corner takes up the tale:
They've dug up old Johnny Milton, goes the word around. It's sixpence for a peek at his rotten old skellington.

(c) unedited notes and first rough draft of 1888 section opening

[The first group of letters are all to Lusk, and include details of some of the murders. The second group are to dignitaries of the day. The third group are to the women themselves. Don't panic about word count here. Intensity is more the thing.]

[Blake's house in 28 Broad Street, Golden Square was now a shabby butcher's shop – work this in]

[we want there to be a reason, we can't bear that there wasn't]

[did he want to be caught in the act?]

[was he practising for a particular killing? And these women were the only way to do it? On the queen, perhaps? The womb of her who would produce the Christ or Anti-Christ. Do they find these letters traced back to him, in 1890? Or is this happening in parallel? As a journal of Prince or Smyth-Piggott?]

[or is he trying to provoke a wave of this kind of killing? That all men will turn and slay all women, a kind of ending for the thing?]

From hell
Mr Lusk
Sor
I send you half the Kidne I took from one women prasarved it for you tother piece I fried and ate it was very nise. I may send you the bloody knif that tok it out if you only wate a whil longer

signed
Catch me when you can Mishter Lusk

The idea might be that people at the time are just as aware of the apocalyptic nature of these murders, trying to understand them and what they represent as much as who did it, as we are.

The fact is, old chap, it doesn't matter who the killer is. The killer could be any man of us, isn't that the point?

But it isn't, John. It's one specific individual who has taken upon himself to do this. One single person is wreaking havoc with this whole city, the greatest city there has ever been, terrorized to dementia by this loon. It won't do. We must show that we outweigh him, you see. We have to catch him, or we're lost. He's won.

But he *has* won, old chap. We can't catch him. That's the whole point.

If I thought that –

I know, I know. You'd give up on the idea of civilisation, and go off to live with the cannibals and hunga-bungas. Well, perhaps you better had, old chap. Progress makes a nice bedtime story, but it's simply not real. I'm as savage as Attila the Hun. As this chap.

(d) unedited notes and first rough draft of 1999 section opening

Lucy Mills was going to kill herself, I stop her, I then become a special one for her. She becomes his responsibility. It makes him feel like he is someone special, because she insists he is. 'I think you're Jesus.' She hasn't encountered much kindness, so its appearance in the world must mean God. But Lucy doesn't know about his thoughts. She doesn't know about the things he sees. Blood. Fire. The Face of God.
He looked at his feet, and saw a puddle of blood. Tarry sticky clinging. Little bubbles in it. Spilled life. One and zero. Here, and .

It was under his nails. He couldn't get rid of it. The smell was in his nose. Thick-sick gurgling juice. The memory of it, even though it had not happened. Not to him. But the throb of it in his throat. The disgust.

Ash in his hair. Smuts in his nose. Glow-flakes shuddering in the breeze. Roar cloaked in the thick black. Shuddering flame, molten air.

Every brick was His skin. The evening light was His hair. River His lips. Kiss me.

Chris knew what was going on. There was another sign. On the way in, he had passed a poster for a band called Bucket Of Blood. He knew there was no such band. It was a sign, to him. Blood is earth and water. Light is Fire and Air. God is Love.

He had to kill again. He didn't want to. He really didn't want to. But it was the only way to get through it.

His job was fixing the time. He added centuries. He shifted the clock back and forth.

He used to imagine explaining his job to someone from the Olden Days. 'Just imagine a clock which drives a bell.' No, that was no good. What matter if a bell didn't ring? 'Imagine a clock-face with only 10 numbers.' That wouldn't work. 'Imagine there's a little clock inside everything you own.' 'Imagine you train a horse to walk in a circle to drive a mill. And then you ask the same horse to pull a cart, but it only walks in a circle. You see?' He didn't even see. It was bullshit.

'People have got machines to do a lot of the heavy work. Very complicated machines to do some of their thinking for them. The really boring stuff, that a machine can do faster and more reliably. Counting up. Looking for patterns. Working out speed. It doesn't know what it is doing. It doesn't care. Like a brain army. Instead of everyone attacking everyone else, most of us can stay at home and send out soldiers to do the fighting. So now we send out these little machines to do our calculating for us. They are called computers. They save us from thinking about boring thoughts, remembering things.' He liked

thinking this way. It made him feel clever. Cleverer than people in the past, who he felt sure were simpler. In a good way, and a bad way. Their thoughts were more pure, but their lives were dirty. Their minds were open and flat, like a meadow. Ours are busy and full with spires and holes.

He didn't know what to do with himself when he finished university. It was supposed to be the start of his life, but it felt like the end. He went travelling for a couple of months, but he hated it. He wanted to be back in London. He knew one or two people, and he asked around. One of them had an attic in her parents' house. They were having it done up and they wanted someone to live there, to deal with the builders and keep an eye on the garden. He jumped at it.

He ended up there for two years. He was signing on, and they offered him a computer course. He took it, and sat in a wide white room with fifteen no-hopers. He learned how to operate the thing, but not what the thing was. The nature of it escaped him. But he was good at it.

This was 1997. The people running the course were setting up a business in Y2K compliance. He asked what this was. They explained.

The first computers could only do one thing. They might count up the results of a census. They might work out your life insurance premium.

He turned down this street. The smell was on the air: burning. There was a huge fire somewhere. He'd put on the radio when he got in. Radio Five might have something, or News Direct. If not, there was always Ceefax.

The smoke was thick over his head. Shit, this was serious. Maybe it was a bomb. The I.R.A again. Weren't they on ceasefire now? He couldn't think of anybody else who'd want to bomb London. It smelt like wood smoke. He'd try and find a Dixons and look at the TVs in the window. One of them might have News 24, or even Sky. If there was anything important happening, they'd probably have it soon enough.

A haze of grey now, in front of his eyes. People were coughing and wiping their eyes. Were they? That man was. But that woman seemed fine. She was laughing.

Bits of stuff floating in the mist. This was serious. He turned the next corner.

Jesus! A wall of fire. He pulled his jacket over his head, sure his hair was about to catch fire. The heat was ferocious. Something enormous was burning, some kind of building. He couldn't really focus on it. But people were just walking around. Was it a stunt? Some kind of a bonfire? Maybe they were making a film, and it wasn't real fire. When he was a child, his cousin had told him about a thing called Hollywood Fire that was used in films: it looked just like real flames, but it didn't actually burn you. He had sneered at the time, and mocked his despondent cousin for his credulity, but maybe it was true.

Appendix 3

Transcript of *A Narrative Of The Disinterment of Milton's Coffin...*
by Philip Neve (London, 1790)

from a British Library copy at: General Reference Collection 1164.l.3.

[page numbers in the original are given in square brackets]

A

NARRATIVE

OF THE

DISINTERMENT

OF

MILTON'S COFFIN,

IN THE

PARISH-CHURCH OF ST. GILES, CRIPPLEGATE,

ON WEDNESDAY, 4TH AUGUST, 1790;

AND OF

THE TREATMENT OF THE CORPSE,

DURING THAT, AND THE FOLLOWING DAY.

THE SECOND EDITION, WITH ADDITIONS.

—nec mortuis parcunt, quin illos de require sepulturae, de asylo quodam mortis, jam alios, jam nec totos, avellant, dissecent, distrabant

TERTULL. Apologet. Cap. 37.

LONDON:

Printed for T. and J. Egerton, *Whitehall.*

MDCCXC.

[5] Having read in the Public Advertiser, on Saturday, the 7th of August, 1790, that *Milton's* coffin had been dug up, in the parish church of *St. Giles*, Cripplegate, and was there to be seen, I went immediately to the church, and found the latter part of the information untrue; but, from conversations on that [6] day, on Monday the 9th, and on Tuesday, the 10th of August, with Mr. Thomas *Strong*, Solicitor and F. A. S. Red-cross-street, *Vestry-Clerk*; Mr. John *Cole*, Barbican, Silversmith, *Churchwarden*; Mr. John *Laming*, Barbican, Pawnbroker, and Mr. *Fountain*, Beech-lane, Publican, *Overseers*; Mr. *Taylor*, of Stanton, Derbyshire, Surgeon; a friend of Mr. *Laming*, and a visitor in his house; Mr. William *Ascough*, Coffin-maker, *Fore-street,* Parish-clerk; Benjamin *Holmes* and Thomas *Hawkesworth*, journeymen to Mr. *Ascough*; Mrs. *Hoppey*, Fore-street, *Sexton*; Mr. Ellis, No. 9, Lamb's-chapel, comedian of the royalty-theatre; and John *Poole* (son of Rowland Poole) watch-spring-maker, [7] Jacob's-passage, Barbican; the following facts are established.

It being in the contemplation of the some persons to bestow a considerable sum of money, in erecting a monument, in the parish church of *St. Giles*, Cripplegate, to the memory of *Milton*, and the particular spot of his interment, in that church, having for many years past, been ascertained only by tradition, several of the principal parishioners have, at their meetings, frequently expressed a wish, that his coffin should be dug-for, that incontestable evidence of its exact situation might be established, before the said monument should be erected. The entry, among the burials, in the [8] register-book, 12th November, 1674, is "*John Milton*, Gentleman, consumption, *chancell.*" The church of *St. Giles*, Cripplegate, was built in 1030; was burnt down (except the steeple) and rebuilt in 1545; was repaired in 1682; and again in 1710. In the repair of 1682, an alteration took place in the disposition of the inside of the church; the pulpit was removed from the second pillar, against which it stood, north of the chancel, to the south side of the present chancel, which was then formed, and pews were built over the present chancel. The tradition has always been, that *Milton* was buried in the chancel, under the clerk's desk; but, the circumstance of the alteration in the church not having of late [9] years been attended to, the clerk, sexton, and other officers of the parish have misguided enquirers, by shewing the spot

under the clerk's desk, in the present chancel, as the place of *Milton*'s interment. I have twice, at different periods, been shewn that spot, as the place where *Milton* lay. Even Mr. *Baskerville*, who died a few years ago, and who had requested in his will to be buried by *Milton*, was deposited in the above-mentioned spot of the present chancel, in pious intention of compliance with his request. The church is now, August, 1790, under a general repair, by contract, for 1350*l.* and Mr. *Strong*, Mr. *Cole*, and other parishioners, having very prudently judged that the search would be make with [10] much less inconvenience to the parish at this time, when the church is under repair, than at any period after the said repair should be completed, Mr. *Cole*, in the last days of July, ordered the workmen to dig in search of the coffin. Mr. *Ascough*, his father, and grand-father, have been parish-clerks of *St. Giles* for upwards of 90 years past. His grand-father, who died in February, 1759-60, aged 84, used frequently to say, that *Milton* had been buried under the clerk's desk in the chancel. John *Poole*, aged 70, used often to hear his father talk of *Milton*'s person, from those who had seen him; and also, that he lay under the common-council-men's pew. The common-council-men's pew is built over that [11] very part of the old chancel, where the former clerk's-desk stood. These traditions in the parish, reported to Mr. *Strong* and Mr. *Cole*, readily directed them to dig from the present chancel, northwards, towards the pillar, against which the former pulpit and desk had stood. On Tuesday afternoon, August 3rd, notice was brought to Messrs. *Strong* and *Cole*, that the coffin was discovered. They went immediately to the church; and, by help of a candle, proceeded under the common-council-men's pew, to the place where the coffin lay. It was in a chalky soil, and directly over a wooden coffin, supposed to be that of *Milton*'s father; tradition having always reported, that *Milton* was [12] buried next to his father. The registry of the father of *Milton*, among the burials, in the parish-book, is "*John Melton*, "Gentleman, 15th of March, 1646-7." In digging through the whole space, from the present chancel, where the ground was opened, to the situation of the former clerk's-desk, there was not found any other coffin, which could raise the smallest doubt of this being *Milton*'s. The two oldest, found in the ground, had inscriptions, which Mr. *Strong* copied; they were of as late dates as 1727 and 1739. When he and Mr. *Cole* had examined the coffin, they ordered water and a brush to be brought,

that they might wash it, in search of an inscription, or initials, or date; but, upon its [13] being carefully cleaned, none was found. The following particulars were given to me in writing, by Mr. *Strong*, and they contain the admeasurement of the coffin, as taken by him, with a rule. "A leaden coffin, found under the common-council-men's pew, on the north side of the chancel, nearly under the place, where the old pulpit and clerk's-desk stood. The coffin appeared to be old, much corroded, and without any inscription, or plate upon it. It was in length five feet ten inches, and in width, at the broadest part, over the shoulders, one foot four inches." Conjecture naturally pointed out, both to Mr. *Strong* and Mr. *Cole*, that, by moving the leaden coffin, there [14] would be a great chance of finding some inscription on the wooden one underneath; but with a just and laudable piety, they disdained to disturb the sacred ashes, after a requiem of 116 years; and having, as far as might be, satisfied their curiosity, and ascertained the fact, which was the subject of it, Mr. *Cole* ordered the ground to be closed. This was on the afternoon of Tuesday, August the 3rd; and, when I waited on Mr. *Strong*, on Saturday morning, the 7th, he informed me, that the coffin had been found on the Tuesday, had been examined, washed, and measured by him and Mr. *Cole*; but that the ground had immediately been closed, when they left the church:— not doubting that Mr. [15] *Cole*'s order had been punctually obeyed. But the direct contrary appears to have been the fact.

On Tuesday evening, the 3rd, Mr. *Cole*, Messrs. *Laming* and *Taylor*, *Holmes*, &c. had a *merry-meeting*, as Mr. *Cole* expresses himself, at *Fountain*'s house; the conversation there turned upon *Milton*'s coffin having been discovered; and, in the course of the evening, several of those present expressing a desire to see it, Mr. *Cole* assented, that if the ground was not already closed, the closing of it should be deferred, until they should have satisfied their curiosity. Between 8 and 9 o'clock, on Wednesday morning, the 4th, the two overseers, (*Laming* and *Fountain*) [16] and Mr. *Taylor*, went to the house of *Ascough*, the clerk, which leads into the church-yard, and asked for *Holmes*; they then went with *Holmes* into the church, and pulled the coffin, which lay deep in the ground, from its original station, to the edge of the excavation, into day-light. Mr. *Laming* told me, that, to assist in thus removing it, he put his hand into a corroded hole, which he saw in the lead, at the coffin

foot. When they had thus removed it, the overseers asked *Holmes* if he could open it, that they might see the body. *Holmes* immediately fetched a mallet and a chisel, and cut open the top of the coffin, slantwise from the head, as low as the breast; so that, the top being doubled backward, they could see the [17] corpse: he cut it open also at the foot. Upon first view of the body, it appeared perfect, and completely enveloped in the shroud, which was of many folds; the ribs standing-up regularly. When they disturbed the shroud, the ribs fell. Mr. *Fountain* told me, that he pulled hard at the teeth, which resisted, until some one hit them a knock with a stone, when they easily came out. There were but five in the upper-jaw, which were all perfectly sound and white, and all taken by Mr. *Fountain*: he gave one of them to Mr. *Laming*: Mr. *Laming* also took one from the lower-jaw; and Mr. *Taylor* took two from it. Mr. *Laming* told me, that he had at one time a mind to bring away the whole under-jaw with the [18] teeth in it; he had it in his hand, but tossed it back again. Also, that he lifted up the head, and saw a great quantity of hair, which lay strait and even, behind the head, and in the state of hair, which had been combed and tied-together before interment: but it was wet; the coffin having considerable corroded holes, both at the head and the foot, and a great part of the water, with which it had been washed, on the Tuesday afternoon, having run into it. The overseers and Mr. *Taylor* went away soon afterwards; and Messrs. *Laming* and *Taylor* went home to get scissors to cut-off some of the hair: they returned about ten; when Mr. *Laming* poked his stick against the head, and [19] brought some of the hair over the forehead; but, as they saw the scissors were not necessary, Mr. *Taylor* took up the hair, as it laid on the forehead, and carried it home. The water, which had got into the coffin, on the Tuesday afternoon, had made a sludge at the bottom of it, emitting a nauseous small, and which occasioned Mr. *Laming* to use his stick to procure the hair, and not to lift up the head a second time. Mr. *Laming* also took out one of the leg bones, but threw it in again. *Holmes* went out of the church, whilst Messrs. *Laming*, *Taylor*, and *Fountain* were there for the first time, and he returned when the two former were come the second time. When Messrs. *Laming* and *Taylor* had [20] finally quitted the church, the coffin was removed, from the edge of the excavation, back to its original station; but was no otherwise closed, than by the lid, where it had been cut and severed, being bent down

again. Mr. *Ascough*, the clerk, was from home the greater part of the day; and Mrs. *Hoppey*, the sexton, was from home the whole day. Elizabeth *Grant*, the grave-digger, and who is servant to Mrs. *Hoppey*, therefore now took possession of the coffin; and, as its situation, under the common-council-men's pew, would not admit of its being seen without the help of a candle, she kept a tinder-box in the excavation, and, when any persons came, struck a light, and conducted them under a [21] pew; where, by reversing the part of the lid which had been cut, she exhibited the body, at first for 6d. and afterwards for 3d. and 2d. each person. The workmen in the church kept the doors locked to all those who would not pay the price of a pot of beer for entrance, and many, to avoid that payment, got in at a window at the west end of the church, near to Mr. *Ascough*'s counting-house.

I went on Saturday, the 7th, to Mr. *Laming*'s House, to request a lock of the hair; but, not meeting with Mr. *Taylor* at home, went again on Monday the 9th, when Mr. *Taylor* gave me part of what hair he had reserved for himself. [22] *Hawkesworth* having informed me, on the Saturday, that Mr. *Ellis*, the player, had taken some hair, and that he had seen him take a rib-bone, and carry it away in paper under his coat, I went from Mr. *Laming*'s, on Monday, to Mr. *Ellis*, who told me, that he had paid 6d. to Elizabeth *Grant* for seeing the body; and that he had lifted up the head, and taken, from among the sludge under it, a small quantity of hair, with which was a piece of the shroud, and, adhering to the hair, a bit of the skin of the skull, of about the size of a shilling. He put them all into my hands, with the rib-bone, which appeared to be one of the upper ribs. The piece of the shroud was of coarse lined. The hair, [23] which he had taken, was short: a small part of it he had washed, and the remainder was in the clotted state, in which he had taken it. He told me, that he had tried to reach down as low as the hands of the corpse, but had not been able to effect it. The washed hair corresponded exactly with that in my possession, and which I had just received from Mr. *Taylor*. *Ellis* is a very ingenious worker-in-hair, and he said, that thinking it would be of great advantage to him to possess a quantity of *Milton*'s hair, he had returned to the church on Thursday, and had made his endeavors to get access a second time to the body; but had been refused admittance. *Hawkesworth* took a tooth, and broke off [24] a bit of the coffin; of which I was informed by Mr. *Ascough*. I

purchased them both of *Hawkesworth*, on Saturday the 7th, for 2s.; and he told me, that when he took the tooth out, there were but two more remaining; one of which was afterwards taken by another of Mr. *Ascough*'s men; and Ellis informed me, that, at the time when he was there, on Wednesday, the teeth were all gone; but the Overseers say, they think that all the teeth were not taken out of the coffin, though displaced from the jaws, but that some of them must have fallen among the other bones, as they very readily came out, after the first were drawn. — Haslib, son of William Haslib, of Jewin-street, undertaker, [25] took one of the small bones, which I purchased of him, on Monday, the 9th, for 2s.

With respect to the identity of the person; any one must be a skeptic against violent presumptions, to entertain a doubt of its being that of *Milton.* The parish-traditions of the spot; the age of the coffin; none other found in the ground, which can at all contest with it, or render it suspicious; *Poole*'s tradition, that those, who had conversed with his father about *Milton*'s person, always described him to have been thin, with long hair; the entry in the register-book, that *Milton* died of a consumption, are all strong confirmations, with the size of the [26] coffin, of the identity of the person. If it be objected, that against the pillar, where the pulpit formerly stood, and immediately over the common-council-men's pew, is a monument to the family of *Smith*, which shews that "*near that place*" were buried, in 1652, *Richard* Smith, aged 17; in 1655, *John* Smith, aged 32; in 1664, *Elizabeth* Smith, the mother, aged 64; and, in 1675, *Richard* Smith, the father, aged 85; it may be answered, that if the coffin in question be one of these, the others should be there also. The corpse is certainly not that of a man of 85: and, if it be supposed to be one of the first-named males of the *Smith*-family, certainly the two latter coffins should appear; but none such are found; nor [27] could that monument have been erected until many years after the death of the last person mentioned in the inscription; and it was then placed there, as it expresses, not by any of the family, but at the expense of friends. The flatness of the pillar, after the pulpit had been removed, offered an advantageous situation for it; and "*near this place*", upon a mural monument, will always admit of liberal construction. *Holmes*, who is much respected in that parish, and very ingenious and intelligent in his business, says, that a leaden coffin, when the inner wooden

case is perished, must, from pressure and its own weight, shrink in breadth, and that, therefore, more than the present measurement of this coffin, [28] across the shoulders, must have been its original breadth. There is evidence, also, that it was incurvated, both on the top and at the sides, at the time when it was discovered. But the strongest of all confirmations is the hair, both in its length and color. Behold *Faithorne*'s quarto-print of *Milton*, taken ad vivum, in 1670, found years before *Milton*'s death. Observe the short locks growing towards the forehead, and the long ones flowing from the same place down the sides of the face. The whole quantity of hair, which Mr. *Taylor* took, was from the forehead, and all taken at one grasp. I measured, on Monday morning, the 9th, that lock of it, which he had given to Mr. *Laming*, six inches and a half by a [29] rule; and the lock of it, which he gave to me, taken at the same time and from the same place, measures only two inches and a half. In the reign of *Charles* II. how few, besides *Milton*, wore their hair! *Wood* says, *Milton* had light brown hair; the very description of that which we possess: and what may seem extra-ordinary, it is yet so strong, that Mr. *Laming*, to cleanse it from its clotted state, let the cistern-cock run on it, for near a minute, and then rubbed it between his fingers, without injury.

Milton's coffin lay open from Wednesday morning, the 4th, at 9 o'clock, until 4 o'clock in the afternoon of the following day, when the ground was closed.

[30] With respect to there being no inscription on the coffin; *Holmes* says, that inscription-plates were not used, nor invented, at the time when *Milton* was buried; that the practice then was to paint the inscription on the outside wooden coffin; which, in this case, was entirely perished.

It has never been pretended that any hair was taken, except by Mr. *Taylor*, and by *Ellis*, the player; and all which the latter took would, when cleansed, easily lie in a small locket. Mr. *Taylor* has divided his share into many small parcels; and the lock, which I saw in Mr. *Laming*'s hands, on Saturday morning, the 7th, and which the measured 6 [31] inches and a half, had been so cut and reduced by divisions among Mr. *Laming*'s friends, at noon, on Monday, the 9th, that he then possessed only a small bit, from two to three inches in length.

All the teeth are remarkably short below the gum. The five, which were in the upper-jaw, and the middle teeth of the lower, are perfect and white. Mr. *Fountain* took the five upper-jaw teeth; Mr. *Laming* one from the lower-jaw; Mr. *Taylor* two from it; *Hawksworth* one; and another of Mr. *Ascough*'s men one: besides these, I have not been able to trace any; nor have I heard that any more were taken. It is not probable that more than ten should have been [32] brought away, if the conjecture of the Overseers, that some dropped among the other bones, be founded.

* * *

In recording a transaction, which will strike every liberal mind with horror and disgust, I cannot omit to declare, that I have procured those relics, which I possess, only in hope of bearing part in a pious and honorable restitution of all that has been taken:— the sole atonement, which can now be made, to the [33] violated rights of the dead; to the insulted parishioners at large; and to the feelings of all good men. During the present repair of the church, the mode is obvious and easy. Unless that be done, in vain will the parish hereafter boast a sumptuous monument to the memory of *Milton:* it will but display their shame in proportion to its magnificence.

I collected this account from the mouths of those, who were the immediate actors in this most sacrilegious scene; and before the voice of charity had reproached them with their impiety. By it, those are exculpated, whose just and liberal sentiments restrained their hands from an act of violation; and the blood [34] of the lamb is dashed against the door-posts of the perpetrators, not to save, but to mark them to posterity.

PHILIP NEVE.

Furnival's Inn,
14th of August, 1790.

FINIS.

[35]

POSTSCRIPT

As some reports have been circulated, and some anonymous papers have appeared, since the publication of this pamphlet, with intent to induce a belief that the corpse mentioned in it is that of a woman, and as the curiosity of the public now calls for a second impression of it, an opportunity is offered of relating a few circumstances, which have happened since the 14th of August, and [36] which, in some degree, may confirm the opinion that the corpse is that of *Milton.*

On Monday 16th I called upon the Overseer, Mr. *Fountain*, when he told me, that the parish-officers had then seen a Surgeon, who on Wednesday the 4th had got through a window into the church, and who had upon inspection pronounced the corpse to be that of a woman. I thought it very improbable, that a Surgeon should creep through a window, who could go through a door for a few halfpence; but I no otherwise expressed my doubts of the truth of the information, than by asking for the Surgeon's address. I was answered, "that [37] gentleman begged not to have it known, that he might not be interrupted by enquiries." A trifling relic was, nevertheless, at the same time with-holden, which I had expected to receive through Mr. *Fountain*'s hands; by which it appeared, that those in possession of them were still tenacious of the spoils of the coffin, although they affected to be convinced that they were not those of *Milton.* These contradictions, however, I reserved for the test of an enquiry elsewhere.

In the course of that week I was informed, that some gentlemen had, on Tuesday the 17th, prevailed on the Churchwardens to suffer a second [38] disinterment of the coffin, which had taken place on that day. On Saturday the 21st I waited on Mr. *Strong*, who told me that he had been present at such second disinterment, and that he had sent for an experienced Surgeon of the neighbourhood, who, upon inspection and examination of the corpse, had pronounced it to be that of a man. I was also informed on that day, the 21st, by a principal person of the parish, whose veracity no one can doubt, and whose

information cannot be suspected, that the parish-officers had agreed among themselves, that from my frequent visits and enquiries I must have an intention of delivering some account of the transaction to the world; and that, therefore, [39] to stop the narrative from going forth, they must invent some story of a Surgeon's inspection on the 4th, and of his declaration that the corpse was that of a woman. From this information it was easy to judge what would be the fate of any personal application to the parish-officers, with intent to obtain a restitution of what had been taken from the coffin; I therefore, on Wednesday the 25th, addressed the following letter to Mr. *Strong:*

"Dear Sir,

The reflection of a few moments, after I left you on Saturday, clearly shewed me, that the [40] probability of the coffin in question being *Milton*'s was not at all weakened, either by the dates, or the number of persons on the *Smith*'s monument; but that it was rather confirmed by the latter circumstance. By the evidence, which you told me was given by the Surgeon, called in on Tuesday the 17th, the corpse is that of a male: it is certainly not that of a man of 85: if, therefore, it be one of the earlier buried *Smiths*, all the later coffins of that family should appear; but not one of them is found. I, then, suppose the monument to have been put there, because the flat pillar, after the pulpit was removed, offered a convenient situation for it, and "*near this place*" [41] to be open, as it is in almost every case where it appears to very liberal interpretation.

It is, therefore, to be believed, that the unworthy treatment, on the 4th, was offered to the corpse of *Milton*. Knowing what I know, I must not be silent. It is a very unpleasing story to relate; but, as it has fallen to my task, I will not shrink from it. I respect nothing in this world more than truth and the memory of *Milton*; and to swerve in a tittle from that first would offend the latter. I shall give the plain and simple narrative, as delivered by the parties themselves: if it sit heavy on any of their shoulders, it [42] is a burthen of their own taking up, and their own backs must bear it. They are all, as I find, very fond of deriving honor to themselves from *Milton*, as their parishioner; perhaps the mode, which I have hinted is the only one, which they have not left themselves, of proving an equal desire to do honor to him. If I had thought

that in personally proposing to the parish-officers a general search for and collection of all the spoils, and to put them, together with the mangled corpse and old coffin, into a new leaden one, I should have been attended to, I would have taken that method; but, when I found such impertinent inventions, as setting-up a [43] fabulous surgeon to creep-in at a window, practised, I felt that so low an attempt at derision would ensure that whatever I should afterwards propose would be equally derided, and I had then left no other means than to call in the public opinion in aid of my own, and to hope that we should at length see the bones of an honest man, and the first scholar and poet our country can boast, restored to their sepulchre.

The narrative will appear, I believe, either to-morrow, or on Friday: whenever it does, your withers are unwrung, and Mr. *Cole* has shewn himself an upright churchwarden. [44]

I cannot conclude without returning you many thanks for your great civilities, and am, &c."

The corpse was found entirely mutilated, by those who disinterred it on the 17th; almost all the ribs, the lower jaw, and one of the hands gone. Of all those who saw the body, on Wednesday the 4th and on Thursday the 5th, there is not one person, who discovered a single hair of any other color than light brown, although both Mr. *Laming* and Mr. *Ellis* lifted up the head, and although the considerable quantity of hair which Mr. *Taylor* took was from the top of the head, and that which *Ellis* took was from behind it; yet, from the accounts [45] of those who saw it on the 17th, it appears, that the hair on the back of the head, was found of dark brown, nearly approaching to black, although the front hair remaining was of the same light brown as that taken on the 4th. It does not belong to me either to account for, or to prove this fact.

On Wednesday, September the 1st, I waited on Mr. *Dyson*, who was the gentleman sent for on the 17th to examine the corpse. I asked him, simply, whether from what had then appeared before him, he judged it to be male or female? his answer was, that, having examined the pelvis and the skull, he judged the corpse to be that of a man. I asked [46] what was the shape of the head? he said, that the forehead was high and erect, though the top of the head was flat: and added, that the skull was of that shape and flatness at the top,

which, differing from those of blacks, is observed to be common, and almost peculiar, to persons of very comprehensive intellects. I am a stranger to this sort of knowledge; but the opinion is a strong confirmation, that, from all the premises before him, he judged the head to be that of *Milton*. On a paper, which he shewed me, enclosing a bit of the hair, he had written "*Milton's hair.*"

Mr. *Dyson* is a surgeon, who received his professional education under the late [47] Dr. *Hunter*, is in partnership with Mr. *Price*, in Fore-street where the church stands, is of easy access, and his affability can exceeded only by his skill in an extensive line of practice.

Mr. *Taylor* too, who is a surgeon of considerable practice and eminence in his county, judged the corpse, on the 4th, to be that of a male.

A man also, who has for many years acted as grave-digger in that parish, and who was present on the 17th, decided, upon first sight of the skull, that is was male: with as little hesitation he pronounced another, which had been thrown up out of the ground in digging, to be that [48] of a woman. Decisions obviously the result of practical, rather than of scientific knowledge; for, being asked his reason, he could give none, but that observation had taught him to distinguish such subjects. Yet this latter sort of evidence is not to be too hastily rejected: it may not be understood by every body; but, to any one acquainted with those who are eminently skilled in judging the genuineness of ancient coins, it will be perfectly intelligible. In that difficult and useful art the eye of a proficient decided at once: a novice, however, who should enquire for the reasons of such decision, would seldom receive a further answer than that the decision itself is the result of experience and observation, and [49] that the eye can be instructed only by long familiarity with the subject: yet all numismatic knowledge rests upon this sort of judgment.

After these evidences, what proofs are there, or what probable presumptions, that the corpse is that of a woman?

It was necessary to relate these facts, not only as they belonged to the subject, but lest, from the reports and papers above-mentioned, I might, otherwise, seem to have given either an unfaithful or a partial statement of the evidences before me: whereas now it will clearly be seen, what facts appeared

on the first disinterment, which preceded, and what [50] are to be attributed to the second, which succeeded the date of the narrative.

I have now added every circumstance, which has hitherto come to my knowledge, relative to this extraordinary transaction; and conclude with this declaration, that I should be very glad if any person would, from facts, give me reason to believe that the corpse in question is rather that of *Elizabeth Smith*, whose name I now only from her monument, than that of *John Milton*.

P.N.

F.I.

8th of Sept. 1790.

[Pasted into the back of the pamphlet is the following cutting:]

For the St. JAMES's CHRONICLE

MILTON

Reasons why it is improbable that the Coffin lately dug up in the Paris Church of St. Giles *Cripplegate, should contain the Reliques of* MILTON.

First,– Because Milton was buried in 1674, and this coffin was found in a situation previously allotted to a wealthy family, unconnected with his own.– See the mural monument of the *Smiths*, dated 1653, &c. immediately over the place of the supposed MILTON'S interment.

Secondly,– The hair of MILTON is uniformly described and represented as of a light hue; but far the greater part of the ornament of his pretended scull, is of the darkest brown, without any mixture of grey*. This difference is irreconcilable to probability. Our hair, after childhood, is rarely found to undergo a total change of colour; and MILTON was 66 years old when he died, a period at which human locks, in a greater or less degree, are interspersed with white.

**The few hairs of a lighter colour, are supposed to have been such as had grown on the sides of the cheeks, after the corpse had been interred.*

Thirdly,– Because the scull in question is remarkably flat and small, and with the lowest of all possible foreheads; whereas the head of MILTON was large, and his brown conspicuously high. See his portrait so often engraved by the accurate *Vertue*, who was completely satisfied with the authenticity of the original.

Fourthly,– Because the hands of MILTON were full of Chalk-stones. Now, it chances, that his substitute's left hand had been undisturbed, and therefore was in a condition to be properly examined. No vestige, however, of

cretaceous substances was visible on it, although they are of a lasting nature, and have been found on the fingers of a dead person, almost coeval with MILTON.

Fifthly,– Because there is reason to believe that the aforesaid remains are those of a young female (one of the three Miss *Smiths*) for the bones are delicate, the teeth small, slightly inserted in the jaw, and perfectly white, even, and sound. –From the corroded state of the Pelvis, nothing could, with certainly, be inferred.

Sixthly,– Because MILTON was not in affluence, –expired in an emaciated state, –in a cold month, –and was interred by direction of his widow. An expensive outward Coffin of Lead, therefore, was needless, and unlikely to have been provided by a rapacious woman, who oppressed her husband's children while he was living, and cheated them after he was dead.

Seventhly,– Because it is improbable that the circumstance of MILTON's having been deposited under the desk, should, if true, have been so effectually concealed from the whole train of his Biographers. It was, nevertheless, produced as an ancient and well-known tradition, as soon as the parishioners of Cripplegate were aware that such an incident was gaped for by Antiquarian appetence, and would be swallowed by Antiquarian credulity. How happened it that Bishop *Newton*, who urged similar enquiries concerning MILTON, above thirty years ago, in the same parish, could obtain no such information?

Eighthly,– Because we have not been told by *Wood*, *Philips*, *Richardson*, *Toland*, &c. &c. that Nature, among her other partialities to MILTON, had indulged him with an uncommon share of Teeth. And yet, above a hundred have already been sold as the furniture of his mouth, by the conscientious worthies who assisted in the plunder of his supposed carcase, and finally submitted it to every insult that brutal vulgarity could devise and express. Thanks to Fortune, however, his corpse has hitherto been violated but by proxy! May his genuine Reliques (if aught of him remains unmingled with common earth) continue to elude research, at least, while the present Overseers of the Poor of Cripplegate are in office! Hard indeed would have been the fate of the Author of Paradise Lost, to have received shelter in a Chancel, that a hundred and sixteen years after his interment, his *domus ultima*

might be ransacked by two of the lowest human beings, a Retailer of Spirituous Liquours, and a man who lends six-pences to beggars, on such despicable securities as tattered bed-gowns, cankered porridge-pots, and rusty-gridirons *,– *Cape faxa manu, cape robara Pastor!* – But an Ecclesiastical Court may yet have cognisance of this more than savage transaction. It will then be determined whether our tombs are our own, or may be robbed with impunity by the little tyrants of a workhouse.

"If charnel-houses, and our graves, must send
Those that we bury, back, our monuments
Shall be the maws of Kites."

It should be added, that our Pawnbroker, Ginseller, and Co. by deranging the contents of their ideal MILTON's Coffin,– by carrying away his lower jaw, ribs, and right hand,– by employing one bone as an instrument to batter the rest,– by tearing the winding-sheet to pieces, &c. &c. had annihilated all such further evidence as might have been collected from a skilful and complete examination of these nameless fragments of mortality. So far indeed were they mutilated, that, had they been genuine, we could not have said, with Horace,

Invenies etiam disjecti Poetae.

Who, after a perusal of the foregoing remarks, (which are founded in circumstantial truth) will congratulate the Parishioners of St. Giles, Cripplegate, on their discovery and treatment of the imaginary dust of *Milton?*– His favourite, *Shakespeare*, most fortunately reposes at a secure distance from the paws of Messieurs *Laming* and *Fountain*, who, otherwise, might have provoked the vengeance imprecated by our great dramatick Poet on the removers of his bones.

From the preceding censures, however, Mr. *Cole*, (Churchwarden) and Messieurs *Strong* and *Ascough*, (Vestry and Parish Clerks) should, in the most distinguished manner, be exempted. Throughout the whole of this extraordinary business, they conducted themselves with the strictest decency and propriety.– It should also be confessed by those whom curiosity has since attracted to the place of *Milton's* supposed disinterment, that the politeness of the same Parish Officers could only be exceeded by their respect for our

illustrious authour's memory, and their concern at the complicated indignity which his nominal ashes have sustained.

**Between the creditable trades of the Pawn-broker and Dramseller, there is a strict alliance. As* Hogarth *observes, the money lent by Mr.* Gripe, *is immediately conveyed to the shop of Mr.* Kill-man *who, in return for the produce of rags distributes poison under the specious name of Cordials. See* Hogarth's *celebrated Print entitled,* Gin-Lane.

Sept 4. 1790. [handwritten]