

also by Will Eaves

FICTION

The Oversight

Nothing to Be Afraid Of

This Is Paradise

The Absent Therapist

POETRY

Sound Houses

The Inevitable Gift Shop

Will Eaves

MURMUR

B editions

He roves not like a runagate through all the world abroad;
This country hereabout (the which is large) is his abode.
He doth not, like a number of these common wooers, cast
His love to everyone he sees. Thou art the first and last
That ever he set mind upon. Alonely unto thee
He vows himself as long as life doth last. Moreover he
Is youthful and with beauty sheen endued by nature's gift,
And aptly into any shape his person he can shift.
Thou canst not bid him be the thing, though all things thou
shouldst name,
But that he fitly and with ease will straight become the same.
Besides all this, in all one thing both twain of you delight,
And of the fruits that you love best the firstlings are his right,
And gladly he receives thy gifts. But neither covets he
Thy apples, plums, nor other fruits new gathered from the tree,
Nor yet the herbs of pleasant scent that in thy gardens be,
Nor any other kind of thing in all the world, but thee.

– Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book xiv, trans. Arthur Golding

The world is given but once. Nothing is reflected.

– Erwin Schrödinger, 'Mind and Matter' (1956)

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PART ONE

JOURNAL

Murmur

Fear of homosexuals is never far from the surface. The few people who have supported me after my conviction must be very strong-minded. I do not think most people are equipped to associate with pariahs. They have a shadowy sense of how frail they themselves would be in the face of institutional opposition and stigmatisation, how utterly cast down if they lost their jobs, if people they knew stopped serving them in shops or looked past them in the street. It is not hatred that turns the majority against the minority, but intuitive shame.

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Do I need to set down the circumstances? The results are in the papers, and once again I am disinclined to 'show my working'. It is strangely more instructive, for me, to imagine other conditions, other lives. But here they are, so that my friends, when they come to these few thoughts, may do likewise.

I had just finished a paper and decided to award myself a pick-up. I met the boy, Cyril, on the fairground. He seemed undernourished and shifty but not unengaging; living, he said, in a hostel, working casually. I bought him pie and chips on the grounds and invited him home for the weekend. He didn't turn up, so I went back to Brooker's, waited for the fair to close that night, and took him home soon after. He was not unintelligent, I found – he'd liked the boys' camp in the war, did some arithmetic there, and knew about *Mathematical Recreations*. Cyril was, I'd say, the product of natural sensitivity, working-class starvation and nervous debility. He wouldn't kiss. We treated ourselves to baths and listened to the late repeat of the *Brains Trust* programme on learning machines, with Julius Trentham opining, not implausibly in my view, that the human ability to learn is determined by 'appetites, desires, drives, instincts' and that a learning machine would require 'something corresponding to a set of appetites'. And I said something like, 'You see, what I find interesting about that is Julius's suggestion that all these feelings and appetites, as he calls them, are causal, and programmable. Even these things, which we're so sure, so instinctively certain, must be the preserve of freely choosing and desiring humans, may be isolated. They can be caused, and they have a cause.' And Cyril was fascinated. He was listening and nodding. I felt so happy and so peculiarly awful. We went to bed and in the morning I unthinkingly offered him some money. He was offended and left in a mood. I then discovered £3 missing from my wallet – he could have taken it at any time, I put nothing away – and I wrote to him at the hostel, calling things off. He turned up on the doorstep the next day, very indignant,

making obscure threats which I did not take seriously. He mentioned an unlikely-sounding suit-hire debt, for £3 of course, and some other outstanding sums and then ended up asking for another £7, which I reluctantly gave him.

A week later, I returned home from the university to find my house broken into, not much taken, £10 from a drawer, some silver plate. I reported the break-in. The police came to the house and fingerprinted it. I also consulted a solicitor in confidence about the possibility of Cyril blackmailing me, and on his advice again wrote to the boy, breaking things off. Cyril subsequently appeared at my house, as before, and this time the threats were not obscure but explicit: he would go to the police and it would come out about the 'Professor' and his chums. We had a row, I mentioned the burglary, and he calmed down and kissed me for the first time, and said that he knew who might have done it – his mate from the navy. He admitted having boasted of his friendship with me and I was foolishly flattered. Cyril stayed the night and I went to the police station in the morning with some information about the likely culprit and a rather shoddy story about how I'd come by it. The fingerprints, meanwhile, clearly identified Cyril's naval friend, who already had a criminal record and needed little prompting to blab about Cyril's 'business' with me.

The King died in the early hours of the day on which two very kind police officers paid me a visit. Seven weeks after my arrest, I was found guilty of gross indecency with a male person and sentenced to receive a course of organo-therapy – hormone injections – to be delivered at the Royal Infirmary. The physical effects of those injections have been marked. Almost at once I began dreaming. I do

not think deeply about Cyril, it turns out, but about others I think as deeply as anyone can.

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Things seem to be sadly lost, put to bed, left on top of golden summits in the past, trailing away until we see what the lines of event and memory have traced: a plane. A loop that encloses all loss, has no beginning and no end.

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I wonder about the coming together of events and people that have produced my crisis. If I were to find a mathematical or topological analogy, I suppose that it would be ‘tessellation’ – where the contours of one form fit perfectly the contours of another. If I had not finished the paper on morphogenesis when I did, I should not have ventured out in search of a reward. If had not had the upbringing I did have, I should not have thought of sexual relations as a candidate for ‘reward’. The very interesting Mr Escher, whose prints have finally awoken my fellow mathematicians to the possibility of an aesthetics of undecidability, has called this coming together the ‘regular division of the plane’, but it is a little more than that, because it is a division that entails change. The world is not atomistic or random but made of forms that interlock and are always interlocking, like the elderly couple in Ovid who become trees. Time is the plane that reveals this interlocking, though time is not discrete. You cannot pin it down. Very often you cannot see the point at which things start to come together, the point at which cause generates effect, and this is a variant of the measurement problem. It must also be akin to asking at what point we begin to lose

consciousness when we are given an anaesthetic, or at what point unconscious material becomes conscious. Where does one cross over into the other? If the tessellation of forms is perfect, do they divide? Or are they one?

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In the third century of the Roman occupation, people buried money for safekeeping, so wary were they of political instability and the possibility of tribal insurrection. Favourite burial places were woodlands, the natural shrines of outcrops and waterfalls; springs and high ground. I read of this in Jacquetta Hawkes’s invaluable history of these islands. The Romans borrowed the traditions of the late Iron Age natives and burying wealth became not merely a rite of propitiation but an act of generosity, not a symbol of something but a self-contained reality, as important as the giving of oneself to the day, every day. Into the ground they went – bags of coins, silver denarii, gold solidi, pots of chaff, figurines of fauns and satyrs, phalluses, antlers, votive objects, brooches, spearheads, bridle rings, weapons and shields, and cauldrons of course. The cradle of the feast. It is difficult, after the cataclysm, to retrieve one’s thinking at the time, but when war was declared I, too, amassed my savings, or a goodly chunk of them, and bought two silver ingots and buried them. I did not find them again. I have them not, and yet I believe that they still exist somewhere and that they are of value. The evidence is lacking and I appear not to be interested in the evidence after all: my belief is that I have lost something of value. If only we could believe we were just carbon and water, we could leave life behind very phlegmatically, but belief gets in the way. Because: what is belief?

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Living on your own makes you more tolerant of people who say strange things. I met a dog-walker on the common recently who greeted me as I rounded the bandstand as if I were a close friend returning to her side after a trip to the toilet. She looked over the misty grass and said casually, 'This is where I scattered my father's ashes.' I suppose she was in some sort of pain. Pain is the invisible companion. At the fairground, where I met Cyril, there were the remains of freaks – strong men and a boxing booth with a poor giant of a man soaking up the most dreadful punishment, but also a woman with hyperextended limbs. Freaks live in pain, as do most sporting types and ballet dancers. So much of real life is invisible.

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These are notes to pass the time, because I am in a certain amount of discomfort. I suppose it is fear, and keeping a partial journal distracts me. But I am also drawn to the pulse of that fear, a beat, an elevated heart rate – and something more than that, which comes through the thinking and is a sort of rhythmic description of my state of mind, like someone speaking quickly and urgently on the other side of a door.

I know that Pythagoras is said to have delivered his lectures from behind a screen. The separation of a voice from its origin gave him a wonder-inducing authority, apparently. Perhaps he was shy. Or ugly. Anyway, I've never had this experience before. This morning I could hear the inner murmuring accompanying trivial actions: 'I'm up early, it's dark outside, the path I laid haphazardly with my own hands is now a frosted curve. I put some crumbs down for the

blackbird singing on my neighbour's chimney pot. Beyond my garden gate a road, beyond that fields speeding away towards the tree-lined hills and crocus light. I wait beside a bare rowan, its berries taken by the blackbird and her brood, the wood pigeons and jays.' And then again, moments later, when I caught myself looking back at the garden through the doorway: 'He passes through the silent streets, across wet roofs and closed faces, deserted parks. He moves among the trees and waiting fairground furniture.'

The error is supposed to be 'looking back', isn't it? Poor Orpheus, etc.

Of course, it has occurred to me that the balance of my mind is disturbed, just as it has occurred to me that I am reckoning with a deliberate retreat from the world, a passing out of sight into, well, invisibility. What lesson might that passage have for me? It is an extension of my preference for anonymity, I suppose. It is commonly said, or felt if it is not said, that people respect others of importance who have achieved things or held office; but it is a curious fact that self-respect is often found to exist in inverse proportion to public status. It has learned to pass nights alone. It does not seek approval because it knows that estimation has nothing to do with achievement.

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Though it is doubtless an impolitic thing for a materialist to admit, I cannot help wondering if the real nature of mind is that it is unencompassable by mind, and whether that Godelian element of wonder – at something we know we have, but cannot enclose – may not be the chief criterion of consciousness.