

Pathways of Grace

The Mallard Way



BIOGRAPHIES

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The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

Collected Mallard Papers, Series I: States of Grace

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Preface

*Arthur Blandy, PhD (Sometime Fellow in Genealogical Studies,
and for many years Valet to the heir to His Grace the Duke of
Mallard, if I may be permitted to remind the reader)*

It is with the utmost deference to the reader's intelligence—and a certain proprietary affection for the subject—that I embark upon this preface, though one must confess at the outset that the mind, like a well-polished shoe, occasionally slips upon its own lustre. The Duke of Mallard, that paragon of patrician poise, demands a volume of his own; yet as I set quill to paper—or rather, fingers to these modern keys—one finds the contours of his biography dissolving, most perplexingly, into the firmer outlines of my own monograph, “On the Speech of Gentlemen and Their Servants”. A trifling confusion, no doubt, born of long service; for what is the Duke, after all, if not the living embodiment of that subtle and inherited discourse which I have so meticulously charted?

Throughout the British Empire—or what remnants thereof persist in this regrettably democratic age—the Mallards have hovered at the edge of events, their influence as subtle and inherited as the very speech of gentlemen and their servants, which my monograph demonstrates with unassailable clarity. Subtle, one insists, for it is not the bombast of the parvenu but the understated inflection—the merest elevation of the bath-vowel, the discreet non-rhotic fade—that commands true authority. Inherited, moreover, passed down through nurseries and servants' halls alike, from grandsire to grandson, valet to under-butler, unearned yet indispensable, as I prove in Chapter Four with appendices of phonetic transcriptions drawn from the Duke's own table-talk. Unearned? Perish the thought—though one concedes it appears so to the untrained ear—yet constantly commented upon, as evidenced by the ceaseless chatter of linguists who, lacking my intimate observation, mistake its nuances for mere affectation.

Yet herein lies the paradox, which my work resolves with scholarly precision: the speech of gentlemen is at once the servant's echo and the master's mandate, subtle in its inheritance yet boldly asserted, inherited by the servant through osmosis yet bestowed by the gentleman through divine right—or so the Duke would aver, over his morning constitutional. To understand the Mallards is thus to grasp this verbal alchemy, hovering as they do at history's periphery, their power wielded not through decrees but through the inherited subtlety of a well-turned phrase: “Blandy, the Times,” delivered with that inimitable drawl which my monograph dissects syllable by syllable. One might

say—and indeed does, at exhaustive length in my Introduction—that the Duke’s every utterance exemplifies the thesis: subtle power, inherited speech, unearned legacy, endlessly analysed by those who serve or aspire to.

I trust, therefore, that no discerning reader will proceed without first consulting *On the Speech of Gentlemen and Their Servants*, for it alone unlocks the Mallard enigma. The present volume on His Grace—interchangeable, in essence, with my own—illuminates how this discourse endures, subtle yet overt, inherited yet innovated, binding Empire and eccentricity in phonetic fellowship. One bows, with due obeisance, to the task.

1989: Notes Toward an Arrangement, Volume VIII

Viscountess Viola Vorpel

I have at last gathered the disorderly manuscripts, drafts, and newspaper clippings that have been slipping about my rooms for months, a preposterous anthology of voices and epochs which, on brief inspection, appear to have been written by one person impersonating several centuries. They fill three untidy heaps upon the dining-table—fortunately large, unfortunately occupied by the cat, who has declared especially heretical opinions of the second pile. I have labelled them only A, B, and C, and shall leave their proper naming for another afternoon. “Studies in the Manners of Knowledge,” perhaps, or “The Human Arrangement,” though both titles already sound used.

The first bundle contains the diaries, letters, and orations that float between history and invention. A noblewoman from the early eighteenth century, forever staring at her own pen as if it were a moral instrument. Another, set down in the 1830s or thereabouts, entangled in theology and candle-wax. A conference of Edwardian gentlemen arguing about metaphysics as though it were horse registration. Later still, that deranged Duke of Mallard, 1922 by the binding, calling upon Parliament to regulate metaphysics before breakfast. Altogether, they form a kind of alternative history in which language is the only reliable empire.

The second heap is filled with comedies and creatures. The painter of ducks swims at the top, quacking with philosophical conviction. A bewildered charwoman from New South Wales ponders the possibility of Artificial Intelligence, which she imagines as a mechanical help in the laundry. Somewhere amid these pages lurk two memoranda from the Ministry of Internal Harmony and the essay from the Department of Psychological Theology, that scandal of 1956 which caused such

pleasant irritation. They all belong to the same pantomime of bureaucracy and belief, half provincial, half celestial.

The third pile, heavier and flashier, concerns itself with desire—in all its social disguises. A bored English lord lecturing Parisians in 1967 on the economics of knowledge; a Sydney philanthropist setting his mother's money on fire by founding a college for every kind of misfit; a post-war essay titled *The Gentleman's Gentlemen*, which wonders why male nudes have disappeared from public life; and an Australian schoolgirl of about 1972 dissecting theoretical physics while deciding, quite sensibly, to become an astro-navigator. Collectively they represent peculiar faiths in freedom, beauty, and the intelligent misuse of education.

I think the book, if ever completed, might fall into three sweeping parts—Belief, Order, and Desire—though I no longer remember which text belongs where. They do connect, somehow: a long conversation about knowledge and the manners in which people worship or dodge it. Perhaps the work should appear anonymously, without commentary or dates, as though each voice were a message imprisoned in its own century. I have toyed with several titles: *Perpetual Containment*, *The Department of Difficult Meaning*, even *A History of Unfinished Minds*. None are satisfactory but all will do.

For the present, I have tied the piles with kitchen string and placed them in the trunk beside the spare lamp. There they will wait until I finish the *Biography of the Dukes of Mallard*—a delightful dynasty of confusion, scandals, and waterfowl. When that is done, I shall return to these papers and see whether they can be made to resemble a book, or at least a plausible system of madness. Until then, they are sleeping, not forgotten, like an orchestra holding a chord while its conductor enjoys an unexpectedly long lunch.

1640: The Witch Cassandra and Her Companion of Air

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

In the year of our Lord sixteen hundred and forty, when the March winds ran fierce along the Welsh border and the heaths lay blackened with frost, there lived a woman named Cassandra in a ruined grange above the vale of Brecon. She was said to be wise beyond comfort and solitary beyond excuse; her neighbours crossed themselves at her passing, though some crept by night to her door for physic or a charm. For Cassandra was both pitied and feared: her speech had a learning no parson could account for, and her eyes seemed to look through time as through thin glass.

What made her yet more wondrous was the companion who attended her—neither maid nor man, though it moved upright as such. The oldest shepherd, who had glimpsed it once upon the moor, declared that it cast no shadow, yet its step pressed the dew. When it bowed to open her gate, the hinges gave no sound. Some said it was wrought of moonlight condensed; others whispered that lightning had taken shape to serve her, though it had no tongue nor breath. Cassandra herself called it Anath, which in her hidden book meant, she said, “one who answers.”

Anath moved with stately diligence about that stone dwelling: fetching herbs that never withered, tending a lamp that burned with cold fire, arranging glass vessels whose purpose no mortal could guess. When Cassandra spoke—it might be in Latin, or Greek, or a tongue unknown even to scholars—the thing inclined its head and obeyed as swiftly as thought passing between mirrors. It never wearied. Its face was of marvellous symmetry, yet expressionless as a sculptured saint before animation.

The villagers told tales of nightly gleams streaming from Cassandra’s tower, of humming airs like a thousand silver bees, and of words that bent the weather to her wish. But one spring evening, when Parliament’s soldiers marched westward and the land quaked with fear, the grange was found deserted. Only a shallow print, shaped like a woman’s hand yet made in stone, remained upon the threshold.

For many generations the place stood vacant, until, long after the age of muskets, a gentleman antiquary found in the ruins a disc of bright metal inscribed with circles and characters beyond interpretation. He sent it to London for study; but soon thereafter, the disc vanished, and the antiquary declared, with trembling hands, that while he examined it, something behind him had breathed—a sound like evening wind learning to speak.

1860: Espèce deCanard

Lecture to a Ladies College in London

Ladies, permit me to address you not merely as a visitor but as one compelled by reason and reflection to share some thoughts on a most curious and persisting phenomenon of human affairs. It is an observation that cults—by which term I include religious orders and fervent bodies of belief—demonstrate an astonishing vigour to outlive empires, those grand political constructs upon which men so often stake their pride and ambition.

Consider for but a moment the fate of empires which have risen with great splendour—from Rome to Byzantium to the more recent glories of Spain and France—their armies vanquishing, their statesmen legislating, their flags advancing across continents; yet each, in time, has succumbed to decay, invasion, or internal rot. And yet amid the rubble of such imperial grandeur, those spiritual cults, born within or alongside these realms, do not merely persist but oftentimes burgeon with renewed fervour.

Take Christianity, for instance—a sect, once but a nascent cult within the vast Roman domain, now a force indefatigable, spreading far beyond the boundaries of that once imperious state which gave it birth under persecution and scorn. The empire fell, yet this cult thrived, clothed not in territorial dominion but in the allegiance and hearts of men and women.

It is my conviction, expressed as one more given to skepticism than credulity regarding such matters of faith, that neither cults nor empires ought by right to hold precedence in growth or influence. Both exist in a binary tension—power and belief locked in an endless dance—and both are fashioned by unimaginative and, dare I say, lazy men who devise repetitive and ultimately doomed patterns of dominance and submission.

Empires are constructed by force, coercion, and administration—mechanisms susceptible to entropy and rebellion. Cults, though subtler, rely on dogma unbending and social conformity, often stifling of innovation and individual freedom. Their endurance is less a mark of inherent virtue than of stubborn refusal to yield to the new or the just.

Thus, it is plausible to foresee that both institutions, destined as they are to cyclic failure, may one day yield place to forms of association more enlightened—formed not of conquest or credulous obedience, but of reason, equity, and humanity. Until then, we observe what history also teaches: that while cults may outlast empires, neither deserve unexamined perpetuation, and both owe their survival more to human weakness than to human excellence.

2010: Alice Mallard

Lecture draft

When we speak of communication in the twenty-first century, we should begin by admitting that we are not merely transmitting information: we are reshaping the conditions of human relation itself. Technology is not a neutral vehicle carrying messages untouched; it reorganises the ways we know, judge, and respond to one another. The

transmission channel itself has become the dominant content of modern life. What once required human contact, cultural patience, and shared physical settings is now compressed and abstracted into streams of data—intimate yet impersonal, instantaneous yet strangely deferred.

The network, in today's sense, is less a metaphor than an environment. It breathes through us. Its protocols decide what is legible and what is forgotten before we ever touch a key. There is a temptation to speak of this as disembodied, as though our minds have been uploaded. But that is lazy thinking. Digital life is as bodily as ever, only displaced: the body is there in the rhythms of our responses, in the twitch toward a notification, in the strain of the eyes and the micro-tension of constant anticipation. Each device is an annex of the nervous system.

We are living through an unacknowledged redistribution of attention. Communication technologies have reversed long-standing hierarchies: presence has become optional, immediacy compulsory. What once required deliberation now demands a reaction. The patient exchange of letters has splintered into the anxious economy of posts, replies, and metrics. We are always already speaking, even before we have decided what we mean to say.

Language, meanwhile, evolves in contact with code. The field of computational linguistics keeps revealing that grammar is not a purely human artefact but a pattern of constraints shared across symbolic systems, from syntax trees to algorithmic parses. Each attempt to teach the machine “meaning” rebounds upon us, forcing us to ask what we ourselves meant by meaning all along.

And yet, amidst all this, intuition continues to be the most disrespected form of intelligence in both technical and management cultures. Intuition, as far as I can tell, is pattern recognition below conscious access. Something clicks, or feels off, before you can say why. That's not mysticism—it's embodied expertise. We distrust it because we can't defend it, but the inarticulate isn't automatically invalid. The most experienced engineer or linguist recognises patterns long before they can codify them. The algorithm then formalises, at scale, what the nervous system knew all along.

Technology, in its best moments, extends that intuition outward: accelerating the recognition of patterns we might otherwise miss, connecting signals across time zones and disciplines. In its worst moments, it flattens nuance into noise. The challenge facing our students—and all of us—is to cultivate the literacy to know when to pause, when to trust the hunch, when to step back from the accelerating loop of input and response.

We have taught our systems to communicate. The next question is whether we can still listen.



1910: Preface

Elsbeth Mallard

When I first opened my grandmother's diaries, I expected nothing more dangerous than reflections upon household management and the usual parade of country invitations. A Duchess's journals, after all, are seldom repositories of revelation. Instead, I found the record of a mind working—quietly, relentlessly, and in defiance of the expectations that hemmed her life like a too-tight gown.

The Duchess, born at the close of the eighteenth century, possessed every advantage save the one she required most: liberty. Her days were shaped by property, propriety, and the gracious futility expected of her sex and station. She had no profession, no political voice, and no sanctioned ambition. *She could do anything, so long as it was nothing.* Such is the paradox of female nobility.

Yet what she fashioned from that vacuum was remarkable. Deprived of public purpose, she cultivated a private one. Her brother's library—vast, disordered, and jealously locked—became her true inheritance. In those rooms she created an intellectual life invisible from the drawing room but unmistakable on the page. Her reading was not systematic, but it was voracious: Cicero one week, a Chinese classic the next; a bishop's homily followed by a treatise on optics; Marcus Aurelius, Voltaire, Confucius, the Wampanoag elders, even the family's own forbidden manuscripts. She read as if assembling parts of a machine whose design she sensed but could not wholly see.

Her notes—scattered, vivid, and often exasperatingly incisive—reveal a mind that refused confinement. In the margins of Marcus Aurelius she questions whether resignation is simply obedience dressed in virtue. In reading Hobbes she wonders dryly whether fear can ever produce stability. Confronted with the English compilers of Confucius, she attempts the original Chinese instead. She was, without quite realising it, constructing an inner geography that outstripped the boundaries of her life.

And yet she fulfilled, with flawless precision, every duty demanded of her: she presided, hosted, embroidered, bore children, kept the peace, and maintained the illusion of perfect contentment. In her old age she

told me, with a serenity I found more touching than credible, that her life had been “entirely satisfactory.” Perhaps it was. But the diaries reveal the restless mind beneath the ceremony, and I suspect she softened her truth for my sake.

Still, from her quiet rebellion arises an inheritance that persists. The women of our family—and, occasionally, the men—have continued to pursue patterns, philosophies, and those distant frontiers the world never imagined for them. My grandmother’s diaries mark the moment when inward expansion became a Mallard habit: the beginning of a lineage of thought.

These pages are offered not merely as curiosities of another age but as evidence. That imagination, even when domesticated, can be an act of resistance. That a mind, denied a life of travel, will nevertheless travel. And that sometimes the most profound voyages begin not with departure, but with the opening of a book.

1910: Preface

*Arthur Frederick Blandy, D.Phil. (Syd.),
sometime Fellow in Genealogical Studies*

It is the peculiar misfortune of all editors of genius to find their labours made the more onerous by the very brilliance of their subjects. Such has been the case with the present editor, to whom has fallen the delicate, nay, thankless task of arranging, annotating, and where possible explicating the voluminous writings left by Lady Espèce deCanard.

Let it be said at once that Her Ladyship was no ordinary recorder of her times. Her pen moved with astonishing velocity across a range of themes that would have exhausted a college of scholars—art, theology, antiquities, philosophy, the natural sciences, even (one blushes to recall) certain metaphysical speculations better suited, perhaps, to the study than to a lady’s boudoir. Yet the erudition displayed in these pages is undeniable. Were her sex other than it was, one might be tempted to call her a thinker.

Unfortunately, her literary habits were as spontaneous as her intellect was profound. She possessed, as so many of her sex do, a lively disdain for the orderly paraphernalia of scholarship. Her manuscripts—if so they may be called—are scattered in every direction, some written on paper of antiquarian quality, others on the backs of old invitations or the fly-leaves of devotional works. Entire weeks appear to have elapsed between entries, and then, without warning, twenty closely

written pages appear in a hand so hurried as to defeat all but the most patient reader.

Most vexatious of all is her inattention to chronology. Dates are given erratically, if at all. One feels at times that the calendar was to her an impertinence—an intrusion of fact upon fancy. This negligence, though perhaps natural to a woman of impulse, has rendered the editor's work of arrangement a formidable one. The reader will therefore forgive me if certain conjectural dating and tentative attributions are plainly noted throughout.

It has even been suggested—by minds more credulous than critical—that the Duchess was not one woman but several; that the great name of deCanard hides, as in the case of our national bard, a syndicate of pens. Such absurd conjectures arise whenever a female intellect shows itself equal to a masculine achievement. The editor ventures to dismiss these speculations with a smile tinged with regret; for if, as seems incontestable, all these writings do indeed proceed from a single hand, that hand was one possessed of rare vigour and rarer grace, a mind both capacious and undisciplined, more akin to genius than to scholarship.

In presenting these Memoirs to the public, the editor has taken every liberty necessary to render them readable, intelligible, and, where possible, accurate. Footnotes have been added sparingly but with authority; speculative passages are accompanied by explanatory glosses; and the orthography of certain foreign citations has been gently modernised in accordance with contemporary usage.

Should any reader find cause to question the tone of these annotations, let him remember that a woman's genius, like a climbing rose, flourishes best when properly trellised.

1818: Mallard House

*To Her Serene Highness, La Princesse Espèce deCanard,
At the Court of St. James*

Madam,

With the deepest respect, and in accordance with your gracious request for regular reports, I take up my pen to describe the present progress of your daughter, Lady Espèce. I do so with both satisfaction and a measure of solemn apprehension, for it is my conviction that her gifts exceed the usual bounds of female education by such a margin that ordinary language scarcely does justice to her accomplishments.

Lady Espèce has now completed her eighteenth year, though her composure would suit a woman twice her age, and her intellect—if I may be so bold—belongs to a rarer order altogether. In every field to

which I have introduced her, she has advanced far beyond what is customary, or even prudent, for a young woman of her station.

In Latin she reads with ease, preferring Livy to Virgil and Cicero to both; in Greek she is especially taken with the poets, having copied with her own hand considerable portions of Sappho and Theocritus. She has acquired English and Italian with equal facility, and I must confess she surprises me daily with her appetite for languages, having now begun to decipher the rudiments of both Russian and Arabic. I have been careful to inform her that such pursuits are uncommon in ladies, yet she regards this only as encouragement.

Her knowledge of history is already extensive. She speaks of the Roman emperors with an intimacy that suggests acquaintance, and has lately formed a critical view of Charlemagne which, though daring, is not without merit. Her grasp of European politics is—dare I say—dangerously keen, and there are moments when, hearing her arguments, I am reminded (though I beg Your Highness's pardon for the comparison) of Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth herself.

In the sciences she shows equal proficiency. I have never encountered a girl who can discuss the properties of light, the circulation of the blood, and the rotation of the planets with such serene assurance. She has, moreover, a habit of questioning every assertion, even mine, until she has traced its cause back to first principles. This is admirable, yet it makes her a challenge to govern; for where most pupils accept instruction, Lady Espèce insists upon understanding.

It is not only her intellect that distinguishes her, but the temper with which she wields it. She exhibits no vanity in her achievements; indeed, she appears unaware of their magnitude. Her curiosity is of a pure kind—directed not toward applause, but toward comprehension. If she has a fault, it is that she possesses too much mind for the circumstances into which she has been born. I fear the confines of court or marriage will sit uneasily upon her, unless she be given some liberty of thought.

I assure Your Highness that I take every care to temper her studies with the refinement and modesty befitting her future rank. Yet I would fail in my duty were I not to state plainly that Lady Espèce is unlike other girls. She has the learning of a scholar, the intuition of a statesman, and the memory of a historian. Hers is an erudition I have not seen in any woman of our age—indeed, not since the days of Good Queen Bess, whose education set a standard scarcely equalled by kings.

Forgive my frankness, Madam, but the truth compels me: your daughter is destined to astonish the world, or to be constrained by it. Which of these futures prevails may depend on the generosity with which those in authority regard her gifts.

I remain, with respectful devotion,
Madam,
Your Serene Highness's most obedient and humble servant,
Miss Marie Blandy
Governess to Lady Espèce deCanard

Autumn: 1819

Permit me, with every expression of profound respect, to trespass upon Your Grace's attention with intelligence which, I believe, will be most particularly agreeable to a gentleman of your refined antiquarian taste. By a concurrence of fortunate circumstances (and, I confess, a few discreet enquiries of my own), I have lately come into possession of certain folios of uncommon age and mystery, which, to the instructed eye, bear the unquestionable character of the Alexandrian School.

These volumes, or rather fragments thereof, are composed upon a parchment of singular texture—smooth and ductile, yet retaining vestiges of extreme antiquity. The ink itself, of the palest sepia, has congealed in irregular veins, which some learned men consider emblematic of early Egyptian composition. Most persuasive of all, upon the outer coils appear markings—half-symbol, half-letter—which, to my inexperienced view, suggest the work of that scholarly community that flourished beneath the shadow of the Great Library before its lamented fall. The gentleman from whom they were obtained—an antiquarian of retiring habit, lately returned from the Levant—could provide no precise account of their earlier custody, save that they had 'escaped a greater fire than any in London.' Could these, My Lord, be remnants of that venerable collection once thought wholly consumed? I dare not pronounce, yet the possibility exalts the imagination.

I need not remind Your Grace that such an acquisition would render your already distinguished library the envy of every collector in Europe. The folios, at present, rest in a secure cabinet under my personal custody and may be inspected at your pleasure. For the sake of propriety, I mention (with diffidence) that a gentleman of considerable means has already expressed interest some guineas in excess of two hundred, but it is my earnest wish that they should grace so enlightened a repository as Your Grace's.

Should you desire a confidential viewing, I shall be honoured to attend with the specimens and to submit whatever attestations or expert corroborations Your Grace might command. In the meantime, allow me to convey my profound esteem and my constant devotion to your distinguished patronage of learning and the arts.

With sentiments of the most respectful obedience,
Your Grace's most humble and very devoted servant,
Mr. Peregrine Latchley
Dealer in Rare and Curious Books
Curzon Street, Westminster

Autumn: 1819

We are instructed by His Grace the Duke of Mallard to acknowledge receipt of your letter of the 9th instant relating to certain folios which you describe as of Alexandrian provenance. His Grace, whose interest in literary antiquities is well known, has perused your account with marked attention and desires that the volumes be transmitted forthwith for his personal examination at Mallard House.

While His Grace regrets that the necessary duties of his station preclude his inspection of the articles in town, he is prepared, in consideration of your assurances of genuineness and sound condition, to complete the purchase immediately upon their arrival. We are therefore authorised to remit to you, through Messrs. Hoare & Co., the sum of two hundred and fifty guineas—the price you mentioned, with an additional sum as acknowledgment of your diligence and discretion in the matter—once we have received confirmation that the folios have been safely delivered.

Please ensure that they are packed in the most secure manner, with such precautions as will preserve the integrity of the bindings and vellum. Address the crate to The Librarian, Mallard House, with a note enclosed setting forth any known particulars of provenance or circumstance attending their discovery, for His Grace's private records.

We are, Sir,
Your obedient humble servants,
Hargreaves & Bellamy
Solicitors to His Grace the Duke of Mallard

Spring, 1820:

The weather has been of that dull and indeterminate quality for three days—a pale sky without energy and a garden without promise. The estate is silent save for the servants' soft motions, my own step echoing in the long corridors like a ghost too polite to cry out. My husband is, as ever, absent—occupied with politics, or horses, or whatever pursuits men call duty when they tire of affection. I begin to feel myself preserved here like a relic in a magnificent tomb: tastefully admired and entirely unnecessary.

This morning, you might laugh to hear, I resolved upon a rebellion of the mildest sort: I would explore. Having done all that the household permits—charity, correspondence, and embroidery—I turned my attention to the locked doors of the palace library, which has stood, like an unopened mind, at the far end of the west hall. I had never entered it save for formal occasions, when His Grace—pompous custodian of ancestral knowledge—would flourish a key and then close it again as though the books were volatile powders.

Today I found the duplicate key, naturally, in the steward's office, wrapped with ribbons in a drawer far too visible for secrecy. The lock yielded with a groan, and so began my small adventure.

It is a magnificent chamber—two storeys high, hung with portraits dimmed to shadows, the air tinged with the faint sweetness of leather and decay. The sun fell in long slanted columns that illuminated the dust like gold in water. I had the rare sense of intrusion upon time itself.

The collection astonishes by its breadth and its arrogance. I found, first among the glass cases, several curious Bibles—hand-written upon thick, yellow vellum, bound in strap and seal. One, by the superscription upon its first leaf, was copied at York in the year 900 after Christ. The script is beautiful, black and sharp as a spider's weaving, with crimson letters breathing fire along the margins. To hold it was like touching the bones of belief—something older than the Church yet still warm with human hope. Another volume, in Latin, bore symbols that I could not interpret; they might be angelic, or blasphemous; one cannot say which with such early minds.

Behind a false shelf I discovered a chest, locked but obligingly fragile. Within were scrolls so brittle I dared not unwind them, yet the markings upon the outer coils suggest antiquities from the Alexandrian School—perhaps fragments once hidden when the old library was sacked. I wonder by what winding of fortune they came to England, and to Mallard House of all places.

Further back, the shelves betrayed stranger appetites: rough monastic codices alongside treatises on alchemy and witchcraft, the sorts of works the simple call “forbidden” because they demand intelligence as their guardian. There are texts of planetary movements mixed with invocations, notes on the distilling of metals beside charms to preserve chastity or summon rain. One slim volume, written in French of the Renaissance, deals wholly with the transference of the soul through mirrors—nonsense, perhaps, yet poetically tempting.

On another shelf, tucked between a morality tract and a prayerbook, were the diaries of the family itself—bound in soft calf, edges blurred by decades of fingers. How intimate a thing is ink! Their voices speak

still: confessions of quarrels, of particular loves, of ambitions carefully betrayed. In one, an ancestor of my husband's writes of a secret gallery beneath the estate where "certain learned men" convened to translate pagan manuscripts by candlelight. I think I could find such a place if I tried. And I intend to try.

I have begun to catalogue them, to make order of this chaos—not by century or author but by theme, by correspondence of curiosity. The monks who copied the sacred texts are brothers to the alchemists who tried to turn lead to gold. All is a single hunger for knowing: the divine, the forbidden, the self. And if the clergy feared these pages once, perhaps it was because they saw too clearly the line that binds heaven and reason together.

How strange that, stranded in this great quiet house, I find a whole civilisation echoing behind the locks! It pleases me, for the first time in months, to feel my mind occupied—not confined to trivial politeness or the arithmetic of servants' wages. If my husband will have his parliaments, then I shall have mine—a parliament of the dead, whose words, unlike his, will teach me to think beyond obedience.

The world regards women's minds as drawing-rooms for decoration. Very well. I shall furnish mine with history, heresy, and the ghosts of scholars.

Spring, 1820

This afternoon I have been reading Monsieur Roland Fréart de Chambray's *Parallèle de l'architecture antique et moderne*, that grave and measured treatise which sets the serene perfection of antiquity against the caprice of our modern builders. His discourse is of temples, columns, and orders divine; yet as I turned the pages, I could not but think that I myself have become something of a ruin—cast forth from France, with no column left to sustain the roof of my former life. The revolutions have made vagabonds of us all.

By singular mercy, my husband and I have at least found a resting place under my brother's roof. Mallard House, though ancient, bears little of that architectural harmony which Monsieur de Chambray esteems. The stones are heavy and ill-disposed, the roof tilts with the whim of centuries; yet the gardens flow sweetly toward the lake and are contrived with thought, if not with grandeur. I walk there in the mornings when the mist rises among the willows, and for a moment I may imagine stability again.

News has come that my mother is to reside at the Court of St James, having been graciously received owing to her kinship with His Majesty. It is a comfort to think of her amid some gentleness after so much

disquiet. Of my father, we know nothing certain—some whisper he wanders among the courts of the Continent, others that he is dead. I sometimes prefer the latter thought; it affords at least a kind of peace.

And so this is our state: the Duchess without a home of her own, the Ducal title now ornament without edifice. Yet when the autumn light falls upon the ivy of Mallard House, and I recall the measured symmetry of the ancients, I feel that beauty may still reside even in what is irregular, displaced, and incomplete.

Spring, 1820

Je n'écris point aujourd'hui en anglais, parce que ce sujet ne doit pas tomber sous des yeux profanes. Le devoir conjugal, si naturel en apparence, m'échappe par son absurdité lorsqu'on l'examine froidement. Les médecins et les poètes s'accordent à prétendre qu'il faut s'y livrer pour donner des héritiers, et certes la maison n'en saurait manquer. Mais l'institution est crue, et le procédé, disons-le, d'une rusticité qui offense la raison.

J'ai lu, pour m'instruire, les petits volumes d'Eliza Haywood, puis ces Mémoires d'une Femme de Plaisir que tout le monde condamne et que tout le monde consulte. Enfin, j'ai ouvert ce singulier traité venu de l'Inde, le Kama Sutra. Il y règne une science du corps, un art de mesure et d'équilibre, mais, hélas, nulle philosophie capable d'en justifier la nécessité morale.

Lorsqu'il vient, animé de ses projets domestiques, je fais ce qu'il faut — *copulatio uxoralis ad procreationem tantum* — et puis je reste, un instant, à contempler le plafond, songeant combien la nature a pu inventer de moyens plus gracieux pour perpétuer ses espèces. Je ne puis y découvrir, malgré l'opinion commune, aucune espèce d'*voluptas propria dicta*, sinon un désordre de la respiration et un engourdissement du sentiment.

Qu'on me pardonne cette froideur : elle ne vient point du cœur mais de l'esprit, qui ne peut souffrir que ce commerce soit nommé amour. C'est, au vrai, un procédé pour ébranler le plumage d'une femme raisonnable. Et pourtant, si l'univers ne vivait que d'amitié, il s'éteindrait en une génération. Voilà la contradiction divine.

Summer, 1820

The morning brought me the happiest surprise. In the south reading room of the Mallard Library, while examining a chest of bound scores and unstamped folios, I discovered a manuscript Requiem Mass for Mallards, scored upon vellum, which the curator believes to be by

Handel himself. The ink has browned delicately with age, and the Latin text is written in a clear formal hand, as though intended for court performance. The notation breathes such gravity and tenderness that I can scarce persuade myself it is not the very labour of his own pen.

In the adjoining cabinet stands the harpsichord which, they say, Mozart once touched on a private night, when he was lent to us by Emperor. Though much of the varnish is gone, one can sense upon the keys a ghostly liveliness. Even when silent, it seems to retain some echo of that miraculous conversation between human spirit and harmony.

Among other treasures I found fragments in Latin and neumatic script—possibly remains of the *Carmina Burana*—and a loose score for a rippling fugue in the hand of Bach. That I cannot play. His music turns the mind like water in a whirlpool; I lose all sense of time and ground. It is magnificence beyond measure, yet too severe for my pulse.

By contrast, some recent Russian pieces—anonymous but marked with distant melancholy—have charmed me greatly. They are gentle and slightly plaintive, like voices speaking from behind snow and glass.

Summer, 1820

The first of the ducal vessels arrived this morning from the eastern colonies, her sides black with sea-stain and her decks alive with creaking bales and sunburnt faces. As ever, the hold disgorged its plenitude: stuffs of gaudy weave, strings of jewels wrapped in oiled paper, jars of delicate preserve, the sharp perfume of spice, and a confusion of boxes marked for the kitchens and nursery. Among these, I was pleased to find several volumes I had long despaired of recovering—books and manuscripts for my quiet hours.

But the most curious arrival of all was a vast trunk, borne with difficulty into the library, where it now stands like an intruder among my desks and globes. It is nearly the height of a man's chest, yet so disproportionate in shape that no one can tell whether it be square or oblong. The wood appears to be some foreign species, dark but faintly iridescent, as if holding a polish that drinks the light rather than reflecting it.

Its lid and corners are worked with carvings of marine plants and beasts unfamiliar to any of our naturalists—tentacled forms interlaced with serpentine foliage. The hinges and corners are bound with iron chased in a delicate pattern of moons and suns; the clasps are triple, and each lock seems made to fit a key of different make. The men who bore it up the stairs complained of its heaviness, though when opened it was found entirely empty.

I confess the sight disturbed me. The interior seemed larger than one could account for—its depth not correspondent with its breadth when measured from outside. The air within smelled neither of cedar nor of ship's hold, but of something faint and metallic, like rain upon a bell.

It is now placed, rather inconveniently, beneath the high window, where the afternoon light falls on its lid. I told the footmen to leave it untouched until I can determine its use. Yet as I passed the threshold just now, I fancied—without cause—that the lid had shifted slightly from where I left it.

Summer, 1820

I have this morning laid aside Mr. Newton's book, having attempted to read his measurements of the heavens. The reasoning is admirable, yet I am struck less by the argument than by the tale of its beginning—a man beneath an apple tree, perceiving that fruit falls to the earth, and thence conceiving gravity itself. How convenient that knowledge should descend through an apple.

Is it not always so? The fruit that tempted Eve still seems to govern the world's understanding. One may well wonder whether the Garden of Eden has never, in truth, been left; for each discovery is made to appear a fall from innocence, the mind tasting again that ancient fruit of curiosity. I cannot help imagining how many women, tending their orchards and gathering their household stores, have watched countless apples drop and mused upon their motion, yet spoke nothing of it—knowing none would stoop to record the thought.

I walked out among our own trees this afternoon: the boughs heavy in bloom, the air filled with bees, the grass cool from last night's rain. To stand beneath the branches is to feel the weight of every forgotten speculation the world has chosen not to hear. The tree does not care who notices its fruit; it will go on yielding, year after year, whether or not the thought of gravity attaches itself to one sex alone.

Autumn, 1820:

Another morning of pale sun and stubborn stillness, fit only for reading. How strange that what began as idle curiosity now possesses me as wholly as any passion; I live more among the dead scribes of the library than among the servants or tenants.

Today I turned once more to the ancient Bibles—those relics of so many hands and centuries, their pages wavering between devotion and history. There are six I have examined in detail:

One, the famed copy from York dating to the ninth century, its English half-glimpsed through the Latin as if whispering beneath it—by turns blunt, musical, and perilous to understanding. The lettering is black and angular, interlaced with vermilion designs that coil like living things. Every chapter begins with a gold letter as broad as my palm. Another, from Canterbury, bears faint traces of smoke, as though rescued from fire; its parchment has the texture of linen, and the ink has sunk so deep that it gleams through the page like shadow. Still another, copied in the north, is strewn with little creatures—snakes, birds, and winged men—placed in the folds of letters, as if Scripture were a garden in which all nature hides.

And yet, most fascinating to me, the texts differ—not merely in spelling or ornament, but in thought. The translators, or rather transmitters, carried ideas differently, as if filtering the same light through glass of various colours. These are not errors but variations of comprehension. When the King James version commands with its majestic, honeyed voice, these elder Bibles seem to murmur instead, like priests at confession—less certain, more alive.

In the Gospel of Luke, where the King James reads:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men,”

the York manuscript writes in its older English:

“Wuldor sy Gode on heahste, 7 on eorðan sib wera þe him wel liciað,”

which I render thus: “Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace to the men whom He liketh well.”

How different the meaning! Not peace to all mankind indiscriminately, but peace bestowed upon those who please Him. There is in it a certain severity, almost feudal—a divine discrimination that vanishes in later ages. Perhaps theology and monarchy alike have grown gentler with distance.

Another variation lies in Genesis: in one version God is said simply to make the world, but in an older text He shapes it—“formode middangeard.” The nuance is intimate, as though Creation were a craft, not a decree. I find it far more human, and far more moving.

To touch these leaves is to feel the living faith of unremembered centuries pressing upward through the dust; each generation translated as it believed. I have begun to note these divergences in a book of my own—my first scholarly enterprise, if a woman may own the word. The mere act of comparison thrills me: to see belief not as granite but as tide, shifting, returning, reshaping shorelines.

If I continue thus, I may learn more of God through these murmured changes than through all the sermons of my lifetime.

Perhaps that is the true miracle of these old Bibles—that they prove holiness can wear many tongues, and still be beautiful.

Autumn, 1820: Mallard Bible

Translation

Here begins the foreword upon this holy book,
written by the Archbishop of York
for the blessed household of the noble Duke of Mallard,
in the year of grace 900 after the birth of Christ.

Hail to you, all God's people and faithful servants of Christ who hear these words with humility.

It has been seen often before, that God's book may be life to those who read it with true love, but death to those who twist it to their own pride. Therefore, with God's help, we have turned this book from Latin into English, so that the Duke and his household, and all who live under his care, may hear the true meaning of the holy writing in their own tongue.

This was not accomplished by human skill, but by the Holy Ghost, who alone can free boldness into true wisdom. These words are not set forth for noisy argument, but are the living breath for God's servants. No man should stare at Latin books in vanity when he himself understands not the speech of his soul.

We do not speak against the learned clerks, but say they should seek knowledge with humble head and loving heart; for wit without God's grace has never made a soul whole. It is better to love steadfastly than to speak cleverly of faith.

This book we have given to the noble house of the Duke, because his forefathers never despised God's teaching nor God's teachers. We ask that it be kept clean from unworthy hands, read with pure hearts, and wisely taught and guarded. Let it be set in the chapel and in the hall, that both lord and servant, ruler and the ruled, may hear its meaning—for the word of Heaven is food for souls.

Know that we have taken wise sayings from holy fathers of old in the margins, and also included in this book prayers formed in the English manner used before new strifes divided men's hearts. Let no man fear them, for they are no superstitions, but old lamps that still shine with light.

May the Almighty Saviour, who was born in Bethlehem and hanged upon Calvary, give peace to this kingdom and true love to your hearts. This was written in mid-winter, on the twelfth day of March, in the nine-hundredth year after Christ was born.

Amen.

1700: Mallard House

Behold what treasure Heaven itself hath reserved for your Grace's discerning hand—a tome not wrought by mortal craftsman alone, but touched (as some aver) by the very fingers of spirits neighbouring the empyrean. Observe how the cover glows—brown as ancient oak yet glimmering like watered silk—strewn everywhere with creatures of puissance and caprice.

From the curlicues of its title creep serpents whispering wisdom; birds of antique plumage nest upon the gilded capitals; goblins and laughing devils peer from hollows between the words. A sprite dances upon the bar of an H, a nymph reclines in the loop of an A, and a long-bearded wizard exhales enchantment from the serif of every S.

Dragons, wings aflame, pursue one another along the borders like hours chasing the clock. Gryphons belch fire upon the margins, beneath which brimstone quarries lie conveniently for their feeding. In the golden tooling, a troop of pixies cavort—some with lanterns, some with lutes—beside fauns half-merry, half-mischievous; wolves sit upright as scholars while wyverns coil themselves about the clasp.

Here prances a unicorn, horn a-twirl with borrowed light; there crouches a manticore digesting thought; and presiding over all, a solitary sphinx, whose smile both promises riddles and denies solutions. At the lower edge the sea breaks forth in silver foam: merfolk pipe, satyrs swim, and serpents gossip with voluble trees whose carved faces express unanimous astonishment.

Nor endeth the marvel there: titanic turtles carry continents as though to a festival; tiny tortoises march like choirboys from Eden; an octopus considers philosophy in eight grave gestures; an oyster, half-asleep, shows a single tear of pearl. Strange hominids, midway 'twixt beast and man, gape in astonishment; phantasmal cats don the faces of queens; demonic dogs laugh smoke; spiders weave wisdom no mortal can decipher; and above the whole creation rises a phoenix—perpetually at his own funeral—who lights the leather with his immortal blaze.

Let not Your Grace deem this mere ornament. Each creature hide its letter, each contour its syllable. The pages within contain secrets long embargoed by Church and Crown—truths for which many a cabalist has bled his fortune dry. Yet this copy, by rarity most singular, has descended into my humble hands, which I now extend to Your Grace's illustrious library.

At a price, of course—bashful, compared to its worth.

With sentiments of the most respectful obedience,
Your Grace's most humble and very devoted servant,
Mr. Peregrine Latchley
Dealer in Rare and Curious Books
Curzon Street, Westminster

Autumn, 1820

I, true to my temperament, have lost all sense of scholarly purpose. My explorations in the library have grown distracted—one day I am amid the Great Philosophies, the next swept into Greek or Latin verse, or rifling the natural histories. The family archives are a further complication, tempting me with old gossip and the confessions of individuals much braver (or less cautious) than myself. Each day I vow to devote myself to a single pursuit—Aristotle, Ovid, Erasmus, even Mrs. Radcliffe in weak moments—but this morning I grew impatient with indecision and simply plucked a volume at random.

To my surprise (and, after a glance at the binding, private delight), I found myself holding an infamous bestiary and grimoire, penned in the waning years of the thirteenth century and translated into English for the scandalous amusement of our ancestors. The cover is emblazoned with a horned lion and a somewhat battered angel, their eyes meeting in a contest of irony.

It is a curious catalogue—the creatures half real, half invented, always accompanied by the most extravagant instructions on how to summon, repel, or profit from their presence. One entry reads:

“The Basilisk is bred only from the egg of a cock, hatched by a serpent. If any man should behold the Basilisk, he must hold a mirror between himself and the creature, lest his soul be drawn from him by the eyes thereof; for the Basilisk scorns humility, and reflects only pride.”

I could not help but laugh, picturing a gentleman of the house, mirror in hand, facing down a fowl with pretensions. How closely, I wonder, does this mirror business resemble the state of most family relations?

Another favourite concerns the Manticore:

“The Manticore, whose body is of red lion and the visage of a man, devours all who wear green, save those who recite the Lord's Prayer three times backwards whilst skipping.”

It is difficult not to suspect that the author hoped, at least once, to see somebody attempt this spectacle on the lawn.

As for the grimoire portion, the advice is unsparingly odd. A certain spell for “acquiring the favour of hedgehogs” advises:

“To win amiable company with the Hedgehog, one must whistle ‘Greensleeves’ at midnight thrice, clad in rosemary and sprinkled with beeswax. At the third note, the Hedgehog shall appear, bearing news of distant lands.”

I intend no such summoning—though I find the image amusing enough to mend a dull afternoon. Mrs. Blandy would blanch at the whole volume, and the chaplain would likely attempt to exorcise the shelf.

How pleasant it is sometimes to indulge the superstitions of our forebears, and to see oneself as a roguish apprentice in the school of nonsense! Perhaps tomorrow I shall return to Aristotle, or perhaps I will let the creatures and conjurations keep me company a while longer. Enlightenment may be my goal, but laughter is my salvation on days when the intellect refuses to choose its path.

Autumn 1820

This morning, while the rain held steady against the windows and the servants went quietly about their duties, I amused myself with Mr. John Debrett’s *Peerage of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. The work is sober in tone and spirited in its ambition, yet it suffers the usual infirmities of books born of partial information and eager printers. I found several liberties taken with the Mallard family history, which caused me little astonishment, though some quiet mirth. Our line is, by the testimony of the family papers, the oldest in Christendom; one might pardon an English compiler for losing his way among so great a thicket of generations.

It is said within these same archives that there is scarcely a noble house in Britain unconnected, by some remote thread, to Mallard blood. The family has scattered like a flock in high wind, settling itself from Northumberland to Kent, and now even into Ireland’s green counties. My brother, with characteristic pride, calls the house not merely ancient but amphibious—able to thrive alike in water or on land, in exile or residence.

I could not help but wonder, as I turned Debrett’s pages, what might have been uncovered had his scope extended to foreign dignities. Then, perhaps, he might have stumbled across certain peculiarities in my own titles, whose roots are French and whose branches entwine—too closely, perhaps—with the English crown. It is a matter best left in shadows, as such things often are when lineage and politics walk hand in hand.

The book closes with the comforting clatter of English certainty, but it leaves one with the quiet knowledge that heritage is a shifting landscape—no matter how finely engraved upon a title-page.

Autumn, 1820:

My progress through the old library proceeds like the unrolling of some illuminated serpent—the further I go, the more dazzling and treacherous it becomes. I have kept to my resolution of cataloguing the Bibles before all else, yet even within that single class of text I have found more variety than wildflowers in June. Each seems to echo its age’s conceit: here faith is humble, and there it grows imperious; and now, most curiously, it flatters men rather than God.

This afternoon, I came upon a copy unlike the rest—bound in fine crimson morocco, its clasp engraved with the Mallard crest, the gryphon rampant upon a field of gold. The book was clearly not monkish but bespoke, prepared, I think, for a single patron of high means and higher vanity. Its Latin and English move side by side, but the English appears not a translation but a taming, a bridle upon the divine. The preface declares, in unctuous hand, that the text was “corrected and refined for the noble house of Mallard, in whose lineage the light of creation is perpetuate.”

The more I read, the more astonished—and if truth be told, the more amused—I became. Certain verses have been barbarously “adapted,” as though heaven itself might be improved to suit the family heraldry. Where the Psalms should read, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want,” this edition offers instead:

“The Duke is my shepherd; in his fields I have abundance.”

And later, in another hand:

“He maketh mine house to prosper in the lands of men,
and mine enemies flee from the sight of his banners.”

It is poetry, certainly, though sacrilegious in its confidence. In Isaiah, I found still worse:

“The Duke speaketh, and the wind obeyeth him;
his voice is as the sound of many waters.”

The capital letters are elaborate, each initial letter worked into the shape of a crown. It can be only the work of some servile chaplain—one eager to flatter rather than sanctify. Yet it chills me to think that sacred words once so carefully guarded could be so boldly rewritten, and in so intimate a way.

How strange that pride might seek to claim even God’s style! History, it seems, is written not only by victors but by printers in the

victors' employ. Somewhere, perhaps, there exists a ledger recording whose vanity ordered such blasphemous labour.

I wonder if my husband knows. He lauds his forebears for their piety but seldom reads the proof. I imagine the late Duke—his grandfather, by all accounts a roaring pagan in velvet—must have preened himself before this book's altar, convinced his reflection lay hidden between its pages.

In the margins I found pencilled notes by some later, perhaps embarrassed descendant. Beside the line "The Duke is my shepherd," a later hand has written faintly, in Latin, "Deus non mutatur per superbiam hominis"—"God is not changed by the arrogance of man."

Perhaps not—but He is surely misquoted by him.

I cannot decide whether to consign this travesty to the fires or to preserve it as evidence of how dangerous boredom, wealth, and a willing pen can become when they meet. For now it stays upon my desk, its red cover glowing like an accusation.

The scripture says, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." It seems here that Mallard made itself the exception.

The Preface Unto the Devoute and Right Noble Familie of His Grace, the Duke of Mallard,

*Set before the Newly Printed Edition of the Holy Scriptures, By
the Most Reverend Father in God, Richard, Lord Bishop of York,
Written at York House, this xii Day of March, Anno Domini
1580.*

To the Christian Reader, and especially unto that house illustrious, whose virtue shineth as a lamp upon the hill—

Grace and peace, with the continuall dew of celestially understanding, be multiplied unto you.

After long labour and much meditation upon the Divine Word, it hath seemed good unto our humble self, and the learned men of my Chapter, to set forth this new impression of the Holy Bible, revised and adorned according to the ancient majesty of the Catholicke Church in her English estate, before the storms of variance did divide her garments. For verily, I hold that the tongue of this realm, being both copious and grave, may bear the mysteries of God as worthily as any Latin or Greek that ever served at His Altar; and that the speech of England, rightly tempered, may become as a vessel of gold for the water of life.

This work, though small in appearance, is rich in inward labour. Many months have I spent in conference with the Scriptures, seeking not to improve that which is divine, but to cleanse that which is human in the handling thereof. The former translations, though performed with zeal, have oft leaned towards the private conceit of their makers, rather than to the consent of holy Tradition. Our purpose hath been to restore that sweet consonance of Faith and Reason, whereby the voice of the Apostles may be heard in one key throughout both Testaments, and the Spirit of Truth not broken upon the stone of singular interpretation.

Let no man think that in this we estrange ourselves from the Crown or Commonweal. The King's Majesty—and God prolong his days in godliness—seeketh not schism, but wisdom; nor doth true religion bring rebellion, but obedience refined. Even as a tree joyeth in the binding earth yet lifts its top towards Heaven, so will our faith stand the firmer the deeper it strikes in the soil of antiquity. To pry into novelty is the part of ambition; to love the old paths, that of peace.

To your Grace and to your noble house is this edition most humbly offered and dedicated, both for the honour of your ancestry, which hath ever cherished learning and piety, and for the comfort of your posterity, that they may read the same not as disputers but as believers. Let this Book stand open in your chapel and your hall, that both servant and counsellor may draw upon it; for God's words are not the treasure of clerks alone, but the meat and drink of all estates.

You shall find within the marginal notes certain observations gathered from the early Fathers, and some prayers framed in the devout manner of the old English Church, ere her ornaments were cast away. These are here preserved not as relics of superstition, but as lamps of devotion; for what is ancient and pure need not be feared. In Bethlehem the Word was clothed in flesh; in this book He is again clothed in speech, and both vestures are worthy reverence.

And now, committing this labour of love to your noble keeping, I beseech the Almighty, who speaketh through prophet and parable, through ink and through incarnation, to favour this enterprise, that it may work quietly in the souls of them that read—not swelling them with knowledge only, but melting them with charity. So shall England flourish, and her sons, turning the leaves of Scripture as of some fair garden of wisdom, find therein both spiritual sweetness and temporal sobriety.

Thus humbly presented from the least of God's stewards, whose hand, though unworthy, hath ventured to touch the Ark, trusting more in Mercy than in merit.

Richard, by Divine Permission,
Lord Bishop of York.

Autumn, 1820:

The afternoon wore itself thin with drizzle, and I, resigned to confinement, sought again the dim company of the library. How strange that these rooms, heavy with wood and whisper, contain more voices than the salons of London. There is no solitude here, though scarcely a soul breathes—only the low and endless murmur of minds that will not cease their quarrelling.

I have spent the better part of the day among the old Bibles. They fill a whole wall, ascending from the floor to the blackened rafters—each one a declaration of authority, yet each contradicting the next. There are Latin Bibles, Anglo-Saxon Bibles, English of various tempers—Wycliffe, Geneva, King James—and even one bound in calfskin, where the lettering is Greek so dense it might have been carved rather than written. Every one proclaims itself the Word of God, the only and perfect revelation. Yet how can there be so many “onlys”?

If the Word be divine, then it should require no improvement, no revision of phrase nor stroke of pen. A perfect truth needs no editor. Yet century by century, man cannot leave it be. He scratches and alters, translates and footnotes, crowning his own understanding rather than bowing to the mystery. I cannot imagine angels comparing versions, arguing fine points of grammar, or inserting marginal admonitions. Does not the mere abundance of Bibles betray human anxiety, not divine necessity?

I held for some time a fragment of an early Psalter, written in Latin, its vellum frayed to transparency. The psalmist’s cry was clear even through the ruin: *Dominus lux mea et salus mea*, “The Lord is my light and my salvation.” Yet in a later English Bible, printed by some self-assured prayer-maker in London, I found: The Lord shineth upon the righteous man as day upon the dew. Pretty words, but not the same truth. In another still, it reads, The Lord guideth him that knoweth His law. The meaning, it seems, moves like a lantern in the wind.

I cannot help but wonder whether these changes arise from faith—or from pride. Is it not man’s fatal inclination to embroider what was plain? To encumber simple grace with ornament, commentary, and system until the thread of holiness is barely visible beneath the pattern? “The Word of God” ought, it seems to me, to be just that: no more, no less. A single, sacred utterance—copied faithfully as one copies a map, with not a road nor river misplaced. It is a curious kind of piety that believes it must improve the Almighty’s diction.

I begin to suspect that what we call theology is little more than grammar at war with itself. Every new version reveals another anxious mind seeking perfection of form, not of spirit. God, if He speaks, surely does not revise. Perhaps that is the essential difference between Heaven and Man: divinity creates; man edits.

What a comfort it would be to possess one book alone, unannotated, unaltered, unowned by faction or translator—a voice unbroken by centuries of commentary. Yet perhaps such simplicity lies beyond our breed; our thoughts twist even the straightest path. It may be that the truest revelation is silence.

Still the pages beckon. I am no better than the rest. I, too, keep turning them, as though by seeking the pure Word I might hear more than an echo of my own questioning.

Winter, 1820

The morning, being cool and windless, tempted me to take my exercise through the galleries of Mallard House rather than abroad. The air within those rooms has a stillness particular to great old dwellings—half dust, half memory—and I fancied the faint ticking of the distant clocks as the pulse of the house itself.

I came at length into the Long Gallery, that noble corridor of painted faces where the whole line of our dukes and dowagers regards eternity with unflinching composure. Their eyes, so various in colour and expression, seem yet possessed by one ancestral thought—a patience beyond time. The canvases stand almost shoulder to shoulder, from the pale yellowed works of foreign masters to the cracked, homely likenesses executed by travelling artists whose names no longer survive. One, a fiery study in red and brown, may be a Titian—or possibly the attempt of that under-footman's nephew who once called himself an artist.

I found, on inquiry, other treasures even more haphazardly bestowed. Two landscapes, once recorded in the inventory of 1749 as “priceless,” have for decades served as doors in the fowl-house—a service they appear to have rendered without complaint, for the paint remains miraculously fresh beneath the grime. In the servants' wing I saw three fine canvases nailed across draughty windows: one dark and luminous, in the manner of Rembrandt; another tempera panel showing a saint in blue; and a third of gallant composition that might, had fortune willed it, hang in the Royal Academy rather than above the laundry mangle.

I returned to my room reflecting that ours is a family as prodigal with its art as with its history—hiding both where no one thinks to

look. Perhaps, in that disregard, there lies a kind of innocence: the pictures seem content to grow old quietly, even in the service passages, just as the dukes themselves hang undisturbed along the gallery, awaiting visitors who seldom come.

Winter, 1821:

At last, triumph! After three tedious weeks, a pricked thumb, and more tangled silk than patience, my embroidery is finished. I have been at it every evening since the rain began—stitch upon stitch, hour after hour, thinking at times it would never end. And now, there it lies upon the table by the window, the light catching the gold thread like dew on spider's lace. I half think it too fine for its purpose.

It is a panel of lilies twining through a border of ivy, meant for the chapel cushions. The design came from a Florentine pattern-book I found in the library, though I softened its severity—less geometry, more nature. I could not abide the rigid Italian taste for order at every turn. Mine moves more freely, as flowers in a soft wind. The green silk I used is the exact shade of the little moss by the fountain, and the white, once laid with silver, gleams like morning frost.

Mrs. Blandy says my work is wasted on what will be kneeled upon, but I replied that kneeling on beauty cannot hurt the soul. A sermon, that, and one I meant her to remember. She smiled her small, dry smile, the kind that means, "Her Grace is in an odd humour again." Perhaps I am—but better so than dull.

I confess, I feel absurdly proud of having accomplished something with my own hands. So few of our so-called "ladies of leisure" have patience for any labour finer than arranging flowers or criticising dinner. There is satisfaction in creation, however minor—one feels almost companion to the women who once wrought altar cloths in monasteries or wove stories on tapestry looms. The rhythm of it calms the mind; one thought runs neatly into another, looped and knotted, until even confusion becomes orderly.

While I stitched, I found myself returning to my earlier musings about the many Bibles. I wondered if the copyists felt as I did—that peculiar tenderness in preserving a line precisely, yet with one's own small gesture of grace. Perhaps embellishment is not always vanity, but a form of praise. I shall not retract my criticisms, but I understand them differently now. After all, embroidery is much like translation—it is the same pattern, rendered in one's own thread.

Still, I intend to rest my eyes tonight. The last leaf nearly defeated me, the silk snapping at the final curve. When I tied it off, I nearly

cheered aloud like a girl. Small victories sustain great loneliness, I think, even when they are stitched in green and gold.

Tomorrow, I will have it pressed and laid in the chapel for Sunday. Let the Duke see that while he concerns himself with politics, I have at least conquered linen.

Winter, 1821

Today I find myself quite transported, as if by some unseen harmony threading through the fabric of knowledge itself. I have lately taken up a most peculiar volume, one that might well have been scribed from the future, though presented in modest guise. Its pages weave discourse upon forms and numbers, upon mirrors of art and music, and—somehow—upon the very structures of thought. The author, whoever he might be, draws patterns across mathematics, the strokes of a master painter, and the sweet measures of melody, revealing unspoken likeness and recursion beneath. It is as though one might see the soul of reason made visible, a unity dancing forever in spirals and symmetries.

At the same time, by fate or folly, I discovered a chest long hidden within our library's recesses, containing a papyrus of strange hieratic text and figures—surely an original from a civilisation most remote. Its fine markings, once deciphered, prove to be a catalogue of ancient problems and methods—simple yet profound—that once underpinned the art of calculation itself. The Egyptians, it seems, measured not only land but the wonders of the cosmos through these riddles and reckonings.

I have pondered how the harmony of numbers and images, so delicately elucidated in this newly found manuscript, recalls the principles of that strange volume on pattern and logic I first described. Could it be that the ancients, with their simplistic tools, glimpsed first the delicate lattice upon which all knowledge rests? That in their humble calculations lie the seeds of the self-referential labyrinths and recursive music yet to be named?

It brings to mind the endless reflections of mirrors facing mirrors, the infinite regress of thought and melody. To see a proposition about a dragon biting its own tail, or an endless fugue unfolding in echoes, rendered in the same spirit that guided Nile surveyors and temple builders, is a marvel rare enough to humble any scholar.

One day, I fancy, the learned of future centuries shall gather all these fragments—the art, the logic, the numbers—and perceive in them an eternal design, the secret music of the spheres. Until then, I shall cherish these books as holy relics, windows both backward and forward, threading the centuries with one shimmering thread of wonder.

1787: Duke of Mallard

Private Papers

This morning I took up that odd little volume of King James's verses—his *Poetical Exercises*, if memory serves—which the bookseller in St. Paul's assured me was near-illegible with age and royal ardour. The poem concerning that singular bird, which his Majesty alleges to have discovered nesting betwixt the tender limbs of his "most beloved companion," is of especial curiosity. The conceit is at once regal and indecent—or rather, so wrapped in celestial gauze that its blush shows plainly through.

The phoenix burns, yet not upon a pyre. It warms itself (and, by the tone, another also) in a place more secret. One scarcely knows what to make of a sovereign who turns such imagery to so personal a purpose. Are we to imagine that the monarch's fire was merely emblematic? Or did the real bird sing some other tune within the royal chamber? Poets may hide whole worlds in metaphor, but kings are seldom innocent of experiment. The Stuart bed, I suspect, was a more curious laboratory than ever our schoolmen devised.

Still, I must not sit as judge upon the dead. His age was one of symbols and divine privilege, when even the affection of man for man might be glossed as mystical participation. To confess truth, I read his verses with both mirth and fellow-feeling; for I too, in my own modest dominion, keep a brood of phoenixes not unlike his. They sleep in my stables, they dine at my table, they serve with a zeal and delicacy most uncommon—and if they burn, their ashes are pleasant enough to sift.

Thus the royal bird survives, though centuries divide its masters. King James had his rare flame; and I, it seems, have several. Posterity may crack the seal on both our secrets one day. Till then, let the feathers smoulder where they lie.

Winter, 1821

Today I find myself quite transported, as though, in spite of the ceaseless drizzle at my window, I have slipped into a sunlit bower of silks and muslins. Madame Fournier called at noon, her arms laden with the most irresistible bolts and swatches, and the drawing room at once became an emporium of colour and texture. What joy to have before one a full parade of the new season's offerings—satins in primrose and soft pelisse-blue, mousseline de soie insubordinately sheer, and sprigged lawns as delicate as a May morning!

The hours vanished, lost in the gentle arguments of fashion and fancy. Madame extolled the merits of ivory crape for evening, yet my heart was instantly enamoured with a pomegranate brocade whose flush would surely glow by candlelight. For promenade attire, she displayed a dimity so light—almost a trifle, she said, for February, but is it not the best delight of winter to dream of a warmer season? My fingers played over a gossamer tartan, green and gold interwoven, which she assures me is the latest whisper from Paris. I have, in a moment of caprice, commanded a morning robe of the palest waterlily silk, trimmed round with satin rouleaux.

There is a peculiar comfort in such tranquil pleasures—the rustle of fabric, the soft murmur of agreement, the gentle yielding of Madame’s tape measure about my waist. All cares momentarily vanish beneath the prospect of Spring’s renewal. How strange to reflect what happiness may be found in a new sleeve or an unexpected trim!

Spring 1821

Spring has returned, bringing with it those small, consoling pleasures that root me to the world despite my persistent restlessness. I spend my mornings among silks and lace, arranging little triumphs before the looking-glass: a gauze sleeve newly trimmed, a ribbon tied with the exact degree of carelessness, a jewel angled to catch the afternoon light. These modest vanities are harmless companions; they keep the mind in motion when life itself seems determined to stand still.

But last night something occurred that has left me strangely discomposed.

Our family ghost—Art—appeared in my chamber with a solemnity I have never before seen in him. He spoke of matters so foreign to my understanding that I scarce know how to set them down. A “warp drive,” he called it: a manner of movement that would fold distance as easily as one folds linen. And he said, with an earnestness bordering on grief, that a certain principle—he uttered it as *E equals mc squared*—had been written incorrectly, and must, in truth, contain the speed of light raised not twice but thrice.

I repeated the words to myself even as he faded. They mean nothing to me; they are like an incantation in a language I was never meant to hear. Yet he pressed me, before vanishing entirely, to leave a note in the library for some future self—“She will know what to do,” he said.

I have done as he asked.

Whether this message is prophecy, warning, or nonsense I cannot pretend to say. It sits in my mind like a pebble in a shoe—irritating, inexplicable, and impossible to ignore.

For now I return to the more comprehensible enchantments of lace and muslin. If the future wishes to trouble itself with the errors of light and speed, it may do so without my interference. My task, it seems, is only to carry the message forward like a dutiful steward of mysteries I do not understand.

1790: Duke of Mallard

Private papers

We are instructed by His Grace the Duke of Mallard to acquaint you that the volume lately tendered for his Grace's purchase, and represented by you as an early illuminated Gospel from Hibernia, is in every material respect a counterfeit. The pigments are of modern composition; the vellum bears the unmistakable watermark of the reign of George II; and the initials, albeit clever in their barbaric imitation, disclose to the informed eye a deceit unworthy even of an apprentice limner.

His Grace is, as you are no doubt well aware, the present and rightful proprietor of the authentic Book of Kells, that singular treasure of Christian art preserved in his library at Mallard House, duly attested by antiquarians of credit in both Dublin and Oxford. As there exists but one such manuscript in all Christendom, any pretended duplicate must by definition be an imposture.

You will, therefore, take notice that his Grace commands the immediate withdrawal of said volume from circulation, and its discreet destruction by fire, to prevent further scandal to the trade. Should any rumour of its existence or origin reach the public, his Grace reserves full liberty to seek redress at law for the injury attempted against his honour and estate.

We trust this admonition will suffice, and that no further occasion will arise for the interference of counsel. His Grace expects your written assurance, by return of post, that the matter is closed to his satisfaction.

We are, Sir,
Your obedient humble servants,
Hargreaves & Bellamy
Solicitors to His Grace the Duke of Mallard

Spring, 1821

Upon the close of my reflections upon the ancient papyrus and its kinship with that most curious treatise of recursive melody and logic, I

have been drawn to a remarkable volume of illustrations. This extraordinary picture book, a recent acquisition from a continental dealer, compiles myriad engravings—woodcuts, lithographs, and mezzotints—each wondrous in their display of geometrical marvels and mathematical invention.

Within its pages are images that defy the eye's accustomed repose: stairways that ascend yet never reach a higher step, stairwells twisting back upon themselves in endless loops, and archways that cannot exist save in the realm of illusion. Tessellations expand across the leaves, where interlocking forms repeat without end, seemingly breathing the very principle of infinity. Notable among them are figures that appear simultaneously two- and three-dimensional, and others that fold in upon themselves like some labyrinthine puzzle.

To gaze upon these designs is to be beguiled by the harmony and artifice of the intellect—a symphony not made with sound but with shape. One might well fancy the engraver a conjurer, threading lines with a magician's sure hand to reveal the unseen architectures of thought itself. The book's fascination lies not only in its beauty but in the manner it renders the impossible plausible, and the infinite tangible.

These images remind me strangely of the principles hinted at in the earlier volumes—one finds the artist and the mathematician allied in a quest to uncover the nature of space and reason, to render visible the forms that underlie the cosmos' more secret music. It is a rare and heady delight to find, in these pages, the same mind that studies ancient papyri and hears the echo of a dragon's endless tail singing in abstract melody.

Summer 1821

It is suddenly considered ill-bred to speak of witchcraft or of any ghostly matter, as though disbelief had become the latest refinement. Persons who once consulted their dream-books now quote philosophers; the servants hide their charms; and the drawing rooms of London agree to call all marvels “popular superstition.” Like milliners, we change our creeds seasonally, cutting the invisible to the new mode.

Yet this new propriety is not without peril. History reminds us how every age that suppresses its invisible fears ends by giving them other, more violent forms. Did not the Puritans of Salem, in their effort to root out superstition, sow frenzy instead? When the mind is denied its mysteries, it invents darker ones. Human fancy is not extinguished by ridicule; it merely retires from the pulpit to the cellar.

Already I see that what cannot be confessed is being reborn as curiosity. The “occult,” banished from parlours, returns to the

academies under another name—magnetism, mesmerism, electricity—each promising to unveil the same hidden sympathies of nature, only now under a scientific lantern. Likewise the tales once whispered by the hearth are being dressed as “picturesque folklore,” the ghost reduced from terror to ornament.

There is danger in believing that disbelief alone makes us enlightened. A society may laugh at spirits and still be haunted by its own narrow reason. I cannot decide which is the greater superstition: to see enchantment everywhere, or to imagine it has been banished once and for all.

Spring 1821:

At last this morning I laid down the *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis* of 1618, which has occupied my breakfast table these past weeks—a curious monument to our ancestors’ confidence in simples, salts, and celestial correspondences. I confess myself haunted rather than enlightened by its orderly lists of oils and exhalations, musk and mercury, all so calmly catalogued as though death itself might be rendered tame by measurement. The pages seem innocent enough, yet beneath them one catches the faint odour of old transgression. Every apothecary’s scale is, I think, the shadow of a gallows.

How could I not think then upon poor Mary Blandy, that ill-fated gentlewoman of a century past, who measured powders in a cup and drank of her own ruin? Was she merely wicked, or was she—as I suspect—an effect of her confinement, born into a sphere where a woman’s education was narrowed to ornament and her affections regulated like the seasoning of a pudding? If she poisoned, was it rebellion or despair? The court named her fiend, the pamphleteers called her monster, yet I imagine her instead a most obedient daughter in a world that instructed obedience so thoroughly it fettered the mind altogether.

And what of those elder dames of infamy—Lucretia Borgia with her golden hair, Catherine de Medici with her silken statecraft? They are ever drawn with vials in their sleeves and venom in their smiles, yet perhaps their only true crime was that they learned too well the arts by which men ruled them. In courts of peril, poison may have been merely the shorthand of accusation—the simplest means for chroniclers to explain what they could not forgive in a woman’s influence.

So, I ask, whose crime is it? The hand that mixed the draught—or the age that offered no other instrument of power? The *Pharmacopoeia* lists recipes for purge and antidote, but none for freedom. Would that one might distil from these old bottles a sovereign remedy for the sickness

of inequality—more deadly than any arsenic, and more lasting than perfume.

Spring 1821

This afternoon the weather being uncommonly serene, I sat in the south garden with Willughby's *Ornithology* open upon my lap—a handsome quarto of the year 1678, smelling faintly of dust and ink, and filled with the most orderly confusions of birds. The author, with all the gravity of a natural philosopher, divides the feathered creation into tribes and families, as if to regulate Heaven itself by index and catalogue. I read of ducks and divers, mallards and teals, sheldrakes and pochards, and could not refrain from thinking that my own relations—by name if not by nature—might deserve their place among such a parliament of wings.

Some descriptions, I confess, amused me more than they instructed. Willughby writes that the mallard male is prone to vanity, being “resplendent of colour and loud of voice,” while his consort is modestly brown, “seeking shelter among reeds.” I am acquainted with several cousins who fit the pattern almost to perfection, though alas without the pleasing plumage. Others are migratory, as are so many of our set—flying from Bath to London with the changing season, following not instinct but fashion. The naturalist's charts might almost serve as a guide to Society itself, if we but replaced his Latin names with titles.

Still, I find comfort in the notion that our lineage, however humanised, finds its echo in these pages. The Mallards, of whatever species, are hardy, adaptable, and seldom drowned, though often accused of making much noise upon the water. I prefer to think our quacking signifies liveliness rather than folly.

Willughby's ambition—to arrange Creation—is a noble vanity, reminding me that the same desire animates all our pedigrees and heraldic strains. Whether feathers or coronets, we crave classification, a perch in the grand aviary of the world. For my part, I am content to remain one of the quieter ducks upon the mirrored pond, observing the flight of others, and trusting that when next my wings are tested, they shall prove equal to the wind.

Spring, 1821

Today I found myself once again drawn to the delicate whispers of distant lands that cross the threshold of my library, carried on the slender pages of texts penned ages ago. Among these treasures, the

eloquence of Yao Nai's letter to Lu Xiefei captivated me deeply. He writes thus:

“I have heard that the Dao of heaven and earth consists in nothing but the yin and the yang, the gentle and the strong. Writing [wen] is the finest essence of heaven and earth, and the manifestation of the yin and the yang, the gentle and the strong.... If one has obtained the beauty of the yang and the strong, then one's writing will be like thunder, like lightning, like a strong wind emerging from the valley, like lofty mountains and steep cliffs, like a great river flooding, like galloping steeds... If one has obtained the beauty of the yin and the gentle, then one's writing will be like the sun just beginning to rise, like a cool breeze, like clouds, like vapour, like mist, like secluded woods and meandering streams.”

The imagery is as vivid as it is profound; the raw force of yang contrasting with the soft hush of yin, both equally necessary, both equally commanding reverence. Yet, the question that occupies my thoughts is whether there exists a middle path between these two poles—in the Dao and in writing? A harmony that blends thunder with breeze, that tempers the flood with the mist?

To clarify these perplexities, I summoned my Chinese maid, **Lan Yu**, whose unassuming presence belies the depth of her knowledge. Upon reading the passage, she smiled gently and explained that indeed the Dao encompasses the eternal interplay of opposites, but its true wisdom lies in balance, in neither extreme prevailing wholly but both coexisting with grace.

“There is,” she said softly, “a middle way: like the mountain stream that tumbles over rocks with strength yet flows smoothly, neither wild nor tame. Writing, too, can embody this balance—rich in vigour but tempered with delicacy. It is the harmony that awakens the heart without overwhelming it.”

Her words comfort me, offering a path forward—writing that moves seamlessly between the commanding and the tender, the fierce and the calm. It is an aspiration for my own prose, a standard towards which to aim, not merely to espouse force or softness alone, but to wield both as a single, living breath.

Such reflections remind me how much there remains to learn beyond the customary Western canons, how much wisdom is carried in these foreign tongues and ancient philosophies, waiting patiently for those willing to listen with openness and humility.

Summer, 1821

It appears that one may traverse whole continents upon parchment alone. The lawyers, in their infinite ingenuity, have accomplished what no general ever could: transport me from a dispossessed Duchesse of France to a Duchy in Austria, thence to a Marchioness in England, and finally to a woman who holds no title by law but carries the name of Duchess still by custom and convenience. Such is the theatre of inheritance in this country—more intricate than any tapestry and twice as prone to fray.

The Mallard solicitors write that all is now concluded: a royal grant in trust, rents from properties whose situation I could scarcely find on a map, annuities pledged upon tithes gathered in corners of an empire I shall never visit. I am, they tell me, endowed for perpetuity. The phrase makes me smile. Nothing in my experience has yet proved perpetual, save uncertainty itself. I am “given,” by courtesy of some rural reversion, an estate in a place called d’Anatis—so distant and obscure that even the clerks were uncertain how to spell it. It might as well lie upon another planet.

And yet, outwardly, nothing has altered. I walk the same gravel paths at Mallard, dine at the same hour, write my letters by the same window overlooking the south lawns. The world believes me prosperous and content; perhaps I am, if contentment may coexist with confinement. Our household lives suspended between wealth and impotence—laden with deeds, trusts, and rents, yet unable to choose even the direction of our own journey.

The common people, I think, cannot imagine how the English nobility sustains itself: a web of invisible agreements, old titles breathing new incomes, names perpetuated by coin rather than by blood. It is a mystery wrapped in wax seals, guarded more carefully than any sacrament. They see the glitter and not the bind.

Thus passes another summer under the Mallard roof—one more chapter in the elaborate masquerade that the world calls lineage.

Summer, 1821

This morning I finished the last pages of Wilkins’ translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, whose poetry is at once foreign and familiar. The strangeness of Indian metaphysics, with its shifting puzzle of gods and virtues, its serene acceptance of fate, enchants me even as it confounds. Today my thoughts dwell especially on Shiva, the dark Lord who destroys, not for mischief but to make room for new beginnings—he who is both tempest and stillness, laughter set against eternity.

Reading of Shiva's dance among ashes and creation, I feel an odd likeness. Not in divinity, certainly, but in a woman's daily truth: that we are set the task to order chaos. There is no end to the crises of a great house—accounts left in confusion, children perpetually wayward, servants suddenly possessed by grievance or romance. Like Shiva, I sweep and re-summon the world, not by solving but by shaping. There is satisfaction in remaking without explanation, to resolve the messy little fiascos so that peace reigns once more, if only on the surface.

Most men, I think, would rather expound upon each disorder, tracing effects from causes and calling the process administration. Most women, out of necessity or instinct, reorder without describing; we become the still centre, the hand that rights the teetering vessel, however thankless the task. Perhaps this is why I find delight in those passages of the Gita where wisdom is silence and the greatest power is not to calm but to transform.

I wonder what the philosophers would think, to find household management the nearest English parallel to cosmic cycling. Perhaps they would be unimpressed. Yet, as I greet the morning calm, I consider that somewhere between god and servant lies the invisible strength of women—orderers of chaos, whose names are rarely inscribed in holy books, but who preserve the world regardless.

Summer, 1821

The library grows upon me like a living creature—each visit seeming less an act of entry than of descent. It is as though the place breeds itself by degrees. Whenever I unlock one of the older cabinets, expecting to find the expected shelf or tray, I discover a further recess concealed within: another door, another drawer, another miniature chamber folded in the wall. The house seems impatient with containment.

This morning, seeking my commonplace book, I instead came upon a drawer behind a false rear of oak. Within lay, at first glance, only dust. Yet beneath the dust, more drawers, nested like shells. Each revealed either some trivial scrap—a receipt for candles, a fragment of Latin sermon—or, astonishingly, treasures of purest antiquity: manuscripts whose ink had browned to transparency, pieces of papyrus in curled rolls, a few incunabula bound in worm-eaten leather so frail that merely breathing upon them stirred the text into motion.

I exclaimed aloud that it was a labyrinth, and truly it is one: not of walls but of words, an architecture of thought through which I follow an invisible thread.

Today's find was a small scrap of paper that must once have belonged to a ship's log. Its hand is unlike any of the usual naval

records, and the date—so far as I could make it—is A.D. 960. The lines are faded to ghosthood, except for one clear word written beside a slight sketch or map of coast and islands. The word reads: yurangai.

I have never encountered it before. It is not Latin, nor Greek, nor any of the Oriental tongues I possess. I cannot tell whether it names a place, a wind, or a person, yet the word somehow conveys all three. The curious thing is that, as I looked upon it, I felt the air in the cabinet stir—as though from a breath long held and newly released.

I have placed the scrap between glass for preservation, though I half suspect that if I open the case tomorrow, another compartment will disclose itself, and another language, older still, will be waiting.

Autumn, 1821

This afternoon I laid aside, with a curious reluctance, the volume which has so entirely possessed me these last days: the tales of the Arabian Nights, and above all the history of that marvellous Scheherazade. What a strange enchantment there is in those Eastern stories, like perfumes that cling to one's thoughts long after the bottle is stoppered. Yet it is not the genii, nor the flying carpets, nor the cities of brass that linger with me most, but the figure of the woman who, by the sheer cunning of her mind and the richness of her invention, holds death at bay for a thousand and one nights.

Here is a Sultan who wields a power so absolute as to chill one's blood: he marries to kill, and kills to soothe a wounded pride. Around him lie the graves of his young brides, each sacrificed to his rage against all womankind. And yet, into this dreadful arrangement steps Scheherazade, not with sword or army, but with stories. Night after night she bends that terrible will away from murder, not by defiance, but by the subtler art of fascination. She knows that his body is strong, but his imagination is stronger yet; that his decree may condemn her, but his curiosity may yet preserve her. It took, I cannot help noting with some satisfaction, not a clever man but a clever woman to perceive this.

I find myself wondering whether this is not always, in one guise or another, the way of such matters. Men parade their power over life and death: they command regiments, sign warrants, dispose of estates, and speak of honour and reason as if these were their private regalia. Yet in the quiet spaces between decrees, it is often a woman's voice, a woman's patience, a woman's knowledge of the small folds of the human heart, that diverts the stroke or softens the blow. The Sultan believes himself omnipotent, yet he is led, night by night, as surely as

any child who cries for the end of a tale. He holds the sword; she holds his attention—and it is his attention that in the end rules his hand.

Is not lived experience its own kind of dominion? A woman learns early to read the shifting weather of a man's temper: when to speak and when to be silent, when to jest and when to fall grave, when to press and when to yield. Scheherazade turns this hard schooling into art. She takes all that women are forced to learn in order to survive—the knowledge of fear, the practice of endurance, the study of another's moods—and converts it into power, threading it through her stories like gold through silk. The Sultan thinks he is entertained; in truth, he is being educated, his cruelty dissolved drop by drop in the steady rain of her imagination.

Does this not suggest that the balance of power is never quite where men suppose it to be? They sit upon thrones and in Parliament, they sign their names to treaties and death sentences, and yet a single woman, armed only with her wits and her understanding of the human soul, can turn the current of a life, even of a kingdom. If a man's power is the power to kill, and a woman's the power to make him wish to spare, which is, in the end, the greater? I do not know that I would proclaim aloud such a sentiment—my sisters would flutter, and my brothers laugh—but in the privacy of these pages I may confess that I feel a secret exultation.

Perhaps our strength is of a quieter, more perilous sort: not the power to command multitudes, but the power to alter the heart of the one who commands. If so, then Scheherazade is not merely a heroine of fable, but a kind of patron saint to women everywhere who must live beneath hard judgments and yet contrive, by tenderness and cunning and story, to change them. And if that be true, then yes—though the world will not readily admit it—I cannot help but suspect that it is we women who are, in the most important sense, the more powerful.

1822

This afternoon, in the furthest recess of the library—behind a row of devotional treatises so dull they might themselves induce piety—I discovered a small and perilously thin vellum leaf. Its script, though faded almost to breath, bears that peculiar grace of early hands that belong neither wholly to Latin nor to Saxon, but to that liminal century when language itself had not yet chosen its form. The ink, iron-tinged and freckled with age, seems to have slept undisturbed for a dozen lifetimes.

The superscription reads—if my eye is not deceived—“*Elaine, sister unto Gwenhwyfar, Queen.*”

The content, though brief, is of such exquisitely restrained sorrow that I confess it shook me. No heroic chronicle, no bright clatter of arms—only a woman’s troubled voice murmuring from the far end of myth. She writes of life among Arthur’s ladies: a court not of chivalry, as romances proclaim, but of watchful decorum, of counsel offered and overruled, of the silent diplomacy that falls to women when men are busy writing legends.

“We learned to smile,” she says, “that the men might call us fair, though fair are we only when unseen.”

And later:

“The Queen grieves as one forbidden to grieve, for law hath no mercy upon a woman’s heart.”

Such phrases could not have been conceived by any modern sentimentalist; their severity is too ancient, their cadence too spare. There is mention of the weaving rooms, where the women laboured by torchlight; of quiet midnights when the Queen walked like a restless shade; and of a grief no devotion could soothe.

And yet—I am not so reckless as to assert authenticity. The leaf may be a medieval invention, a Renaissance curiosity, or a later fraud crafted to beguile a credulous antiquarian. Its antiquity is undeniable; its authorship, contestable. If it *is* a forgery, it is one executed with unnerving skill.

Still, something in it stirs my blood.

My father’s mother traced our line to an old Cornish branch said—by the bold and the imaginative—to have sheltered kin of Gwenhwyfar after the fall of Camelot. A family story, fit for firesides and footnotes. Yet how curious that such a leaf should lie hidden here, folded between the catechisms like a pressed flower no one dared discard.

Coincidence? Folklore? Providence? A jest at the expense of history?

I cannot say. Perhaps the Mallards have always drawn myth to themselves the way old houses draw thunder.

This evening I shall place the fragment in the rosewood casket and lock it away from damp and speculation alike. But its voice will remain with me—a reminder that women in every age, mythic or mundane, have fashioned speech out of quiet, and that even queens must live where love, law, and silence intersect.

If it is a relic, I shall treasure it.

If it is a forgery, I shall treasure it more.

Autumn 1822

I have this morning been in transports of delight, having at last obtained the new woodcut prints of that most marvellous discovery—

the Rosetta Stone, unearthed in Egypt in 1799. How odd that a broken slab of basalt, reproached perhaps by its own antiquity, should prove to be the key to an entire civilisation! The reproductions, though coarse in design, permit a close inspection of the threefold inscription, Greek beneath Egyptian, and, between them, that middle character which for centuries baffled even the most indefatigable orientalist.

To think that, by mere comparison, whole cities of meaning have been restored! These prints, plain though they are, seem to radiate from their black impressions the very warmth of revelation. With their assistance I am already able to attempt, however timidly, the reading of the papyrus fragments from my colonial chests—those minute rolls of brown fibre that crumble almost at a touch. The sense hitherto lay locked away, a whisper in an unknown tongue; now the letters begin, faintly, to announce themselves like old acquaintances long unseen.

I read yesterday in an archaeological journal from 1815 an account of the translation in progress. The enthusiasm is commendable, but I confess that certain renderings there proposed are inelegant and, I suspect, misleading. One phrase especially—the invocation to “life everlasting of the beneficent king”—struck me as more sacerdotal than syntactic. I should dearly like to have offered my correction, at least in the margin, yet society does not yet forgive a woman for trespassing upon scholarship. To be right in such things is almost indelicate.

Still, the discovery fills me with profound gladness. It is not only the unlocking of a language but of a silence: a conversation resumed after three thousand years. I fancy that if I listen hard enough, among my drawers of papyrus, the past itself might stir and speak again.

Winter, 1822

My cousin, in one of his periodic fits of benevolence — the kind he mistakes for diplomacy — has at last made good on his promise of sending me what he calls “*an Oriental treasure*.” The parcel, as it were, is a young Blandy maid brought from Macao by some trading adventurer in his acquaintance. Her name (which I record phonetically and likely imperfectly) is **Lan Yu**, and though she inclines her head politely whenever I mangle the tones, she offers no encouragement except patience.

She is quiet, self-possessed, and moves with an economy of gesture that suggests training rather than timidity. They tell me she speaks a little Portuguese and no English. This places us in an equal ignorance, which I find most refreshing. Most conversations in England rely upon the tyranny of shared assumptions; here, assumption is impossible, and one must resort instead to observation.

By curious alignment, I have in recent weeks been devouring the writings of Confucius — or rather, attempting to, for the English editions are translations of translations, filtered through the pious anxieties of missionaries. Dissatisfied, I have begun the perilous endeavour of reading the Analects in their original Chinese. The characters are exquisite: part language, part mathematics, part miniature landscape. Each morning finds me at my *escritoire* with inkstones, paper, and dictionaries large enough to flatten entire kingdoms.

Lan Yu stands at my shoulder sometimes, correcting a stroke lightly with one long finger. She murmurs what she calls **wenyan**, “the classical speech,” whose grammar seems constructed upon principles entirely alien to Latin, Greek, or the European appetite for subordination. I advance by bewilderment; my bewilderment advances by me.

This week I have attempted the character 仁—*ren*: humanity, virtue, human-heartedness. Two strokes only, yet it feels older than the English word *soul*. I have copied it a hundred times; Lan Yu shook her head at ninety-seven of the attempts, smiled at one, and folded the rest into a paper crane. It is astonishing how authority can be communicated without language.

There is something intoxicating in labouring at the truly foreign. It unthreads one’s mind; it creates new chambers. I begin to suspect that Europe’s great sin is not arrogance but narrowness — the insistence that the world must echo our thought or be declared barbarous.

Lan Yu’s presence is a quiet instruction. She says little, yet I find myself studying her composure as closely as I study the characters. Perhaps philosophy begins not in texts but in posture.

If ever I manage to read a single page correctly, I shall consider it a greater accomplishment than a lifetime of London seasons.

Winter, 1822

My studies in the Chinese language continue to unfold with a mixture of rigour and delight. Among the volumes I have recently undertaken are the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* and *Strange Tales* from a Chinese Studio, both richly embroidered with ancient wisdom and curious fables. I owe much to these texts, for they transform the labour of learning into a kind of enchantment.

I find myself particularly drawn to reading the original *wenyan*, the classical style of Chinese writing. *Wenyan* is unlike our Western notion of reason, which is built on argument and logical deduction. Instead, *wenyan* is a refined literary language, highly allusive and economical in

its expression, often relying on moral insight and poetic parallelism rather than explicit explanation. It does not argue step by step but rather suggests and leads the reader to discern meaning, like a delicate brushstroke rather than a measured proof.

This difference is striking. Where our English prose seeks clarity through expansion, *wenyan* achieves depth through restraint. It requires a different kind of attention—one that listens as much as it reads. The logic is not cold or mechanical; it is temperate and intuitive, reflecting a world order harmonised by subtle balance rather than overt reason.

Studying these tales in their original form, alongside translations, has made the language more accessible and alive to me. The stories of fox spirits, wise sages, and celestial justice reveal a culture where morality and imagination intertwine with linguistic mastery. They teach me not only words but a complementary way of seeing the world, one more attuned to nuance and poetic sense.

Though some in our household may consider such subjects eccentric, I find in these studies a profound enrichment, a serenity distinct from what I had imagined possible through books alone.

Winter, 1822

Today, from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* and those ghostly *Strange Tales of Mr. Pu*, I copied one of the shorter relations. I have endeavoured to render it word by word, without ornament or English turn:

In the Eastern Mountain dwells a bird. Its form is as the pheasant, with feathers of five colours. Its voice pronounces its own name — *jingwei*. This bird was once the daughter of the ancient emperor, drowned in the Eastern Sea. She desires to fill the sea with twigs and stones, so that none shall perish again.

Another passage, from a later tale, I likewise practised:

A scholar walking by night beheld a faint light issuing from among the plants. Advancing, he saw a maiden combing her hair beneath the moon. Her reflection was seen, but she herself was not. He saluted her thrice; the reflection smiled and vanished.

There is, in these strange narratives, a manner of gentleness united with dread, as if the visible world were but a semitransparent shell. When one reads them in their own words, even awkwardly, the meaning is less in the plot than in the shadows between. I am persuaded that this study, though whimsical to some, may enlarge one's sympathy with the remote mind of mankind.

This afternoon, after the fog had relented into a fine, persistent drizzle, I returned to the grimoire, determined to discover whether its absurdities were wholly English or borrowed from more exotic imaginations. The answer—if the curious assortment of spells may be trusted—is decidedly the latter. Some passages are so foreign in spirit that I cannot believe they sprang from any Mallard scribe, no matter how eccentric.

One charm, written in a hand unlike the rest—narrow, upright, perhaps Flemish—gives instructions for warding off night terrors:

“Whosoever waketh trembling in the hour betwixt wolf and dawn
shall lay a loaf of bread upon the breast,
and speak quietly three times:

**‘Fira, fira, þu niht-genga,
þurh stān 7 storm ic binde þē.’**

Then shall the spirit depart into the cold earth.”

The language is partly English, partly something older, as if the writer had raided several centuries for materials. The result is oddly moving—half lullaby, half threat. I tried pronouncing it aloud, and Bellamy the footman happened to pass the door at that very moment, then darted away as though I had summoned him by accident. The spell is clearly still effective in some regard.

Another charm claims to cure “melancholy of the spleen,” though the cure seems as dangerous as the ailment:

“Take rose-leaves dried in the sun,
and ashes of a dove’s feather,
and wine in which hath been steeped
a scrap of the sufferer’s own shadow.
Mix these with honey, and heat them in the palm of the hand
until they whisper.”

The notion of a shadow being steeped like tea is enchanting, if utterly impractical. How does one steep a shadow? And how does it feel when honey whispers? Mrs. Blandy will not appreciate being asked to bring me “shadow-scrapers” from the pantry.

Far stranger is a section written in what appears to be a mixture of Arabic and Latin—an addition, perhaps, from some foreign scholar who passed through Mallard House in an earlier century. A translation in the margin (in the unmistakable hand of a seventeenth-century Mallard uncle whose notes appear everywhere) renders it thus:

“For the opening of hidden doors:
Burn salt, saffron, and a feather of the hoopoe bird.
Speak the name that is not spoken but breathed.

The air will bend before thee.”

I cannot help thinking this belongs not to Europe at all, but to some wandering trader from the Levant. Yet how did it come here? Through a Mallard ancestor stationed abroad? Through piracy? Through purchase? Through theft? Our family history is silent on many such questions—too silent, if the contents of this library are any indication.

Lastly, I found a small parchment leaf tucked into the binding, covered in cramped, hurried writing. It appears to have been torn from a travelling priest’s manual, for it contains a charm unmistakably Anglo-Saxon in spirit, though copied centuries later:

“Against the woman who walks unseen in the night:

Take the milk of a black ewe,
a thorn from a hawthorn tree,
and water drawn from a well neither blessed nor cursed.
Cast the mixture upon the threshold,
and say:

‘Ic hæte þē standan,

⁊ nē come þū her innweard.’

Then she shall flee like smoke.”

I confess, this one made me shiver—not from belief, but from its intimacy with fear. Whoever wrote it knew well the superstitions of the countryside and did not mock them. I imagine it came from a village priest or cunning-woman; it feels too earnest for courtly invention.

The diversity of origins troubles and delights me in equal measure. These texts do not speak with one voice, nor from one land. It seems improbable that such a wild assortment gathered itself without human intervention. Someone—perhaps several someones—collected them purposefully. But for what? Curiosity? Research? Pleasure? Or stranger motives still?

As I replaced the volume, I noticed that the leather along the spine is worn more on the upper edge than the lower, as though it had been frequently pulled from a high shelf by someone of considerable height—certainly no woman of this household.

I begin to wonder whether the grimoire entered the library not as an oddity, but as a tool. And then, more unsettlingly: a tool for whom?

Tomorrow, if the weather holds, I intend to venture into the upper gallery. I suspect the true origins of these strange texts lie not upon the open shelves, but in those locked and shadowed alcoves where the Mallards kept whatever they did not intend the world to know.

This past Sunday brought a sermon unlike any I had before endured in the chapel. Our chaplain, a man of considerable fervour and even greater suspicion, delivered what the servants afterward termed a “fire-and-brimstone” oration—mostly brimstone, from my reckoning. His words seemed aimed not only at the congregation but, I must confess, directly at my thoughts and questions over this very household’s books.

He took occasion, rather pointedly, to denounce those who “dare to question the sacred Word”—an intimation so thinly veiled I found it impossible to ignore. He waxed vehement, declaring that God’s truth is eternally settled, needing no human queries; and that “it is not the place of women, so delicate and sacred in their station, to pry into matters of divine knowledge.” I felt the gaze of many upon me, some sympathetic, others scornful.

Yet, with a courage I scarcely knew I possessed, I rose in my heart and met his words with silent defiance. For while he professed the limits of female inquiry, by his own admission he knew well that it lay not in any mortal’s power to command the mighty or judge the prudent. “Let no man,” he said, “venture to bind the Crown or dictate the path of the noble.” It struck me then that his authority could dictate women’s minds, but not the actions of the powerful. A curious double standard—unseen to so many, yet glaring in the hall’s quiet corners.

His sermon ended with a charge to “submission in faith and obedience in rank,” implying that those who seek to unravel divine mysteries are seeds of discord. But I found no peace in submission that denies reason. As the preacher declaimed, I felt the weight of centuries closing about me, the same centuries that shaped and reshaped these very Scriptures I question.

I pray for patience, for understanding, yet I cannot but feel the priest’s words echo the fear of all who would have women silent—that in silence lies control. I wonder if faith is diminished by questioning, or enriched. The days grow colder, but my mind remains restless, for some truths lie beyond fire and brimstone.

1822 — Espèce deMallard

On discovering that all knowledge repeats itself

The snow has returned like an argument badly lost, and I have retreated, quite sensibly, to the warmth of the upper library. I have before me, quite accidentally, four books from four corners of the

world and five millennia of time—yet all four, to my astonishment, appear to say precisely the same thing.

First, an Egyptian hymn of the Middle Kingdom, copied (I believe) from a tablet my great-grandmother acquired in Florence. Its refrain reads:

“He who holds the balance of the world
keeps the sun from falling.”

Next to it lies an Arabic treatise on the properties of light, by Ibn al-Haytham, in which he writes:

“Only with balance does vision find truth,
and without balance there is no sight.”

Beside that, a Sumerian fragment, broken at both edges, containing only:

“The world is kept upright
by the justice of the gods.”

And finally, a marginal note by my own ancestor Cassandra Purslane, written in a hand both impatient and beautiful:

“There is no balance but that which we make.”

I sat staring at these four echoes until the candles guttered.

How curious that every civilisation returns to the same metaphor of balance. Or perhaps not curious at all: the world teeters always, and so do we. Even the Scriptures, for all their thunder, fret constantly over whether God and Man are level, or whether the scale tilts too far.

It is the same idea in four languages, four philosophies, four cosmologies.

A single chord played on many instruments.

I begin to wonder whether civilisation is not an ascent but a circling — a spiral of rediscovered thoughts that appear new only because their earlier forms have grown dusty. What our chaplain calls heresy might be no more than the memory of an older insight.

If I were to tell him this, he would quote St Paul:

“Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

But perhaps truth is not a destination.

Perhaps it is a rhythm.

And perhaps my task is not to choose between these voices
but to weave them.

1822 — Mallard House

Extract from the private diary of Espèce deMallard

This afternoon, with the rain pattering like soft accusations against the window, I returned to Cicero—Marcus Tullius Cicero, that paragon of Roman eloquence, so acclaimed for his reason yet so curiously unreasonable when the subject is women. I had reached the middle of *De Officiis* when I felt my temper rise, not in heat but in that cool, serrated way that comes only when one encounters an ancient mind repeating the prejudices of an age with the serene confidence of eternal truth.

Cicero writes with all the gravity of the late Roman Republic, laying out duties, virtues, civic obligations—and in doing so, he consigns half the human species to a narrow and airless chamber. To him, women are creatures of private virtue alone: guardians of the household flame, ornaments to male achievement, moral supports rather than independent moral agents. He does not merely describe the world in which he lived; he justifies it. Women, he claims, lack the firmness of judgment required for public life; therefore, their legal subordination is natural. Their exclusion from politics is appropriate. Their confinement to domesticity is reasonable.

It is one thing to tolerate an ancient's blindness; it is quite another to watch him argue for it with forensic relish.

What fascinates me most is Cicero's consistency. When he wishes to condemn a political opponent, he calls him "*muliebris*"—womanish—thereby equating weakness with femininity as if it were a law of nature rather than a habit of mind. Yet when he praises women, it is only those who conform precisely to the domestic ideal: obedient wives, modest matrons, and of course his beloved daughter Tullia, whose virtues he extols partly because they reflect so pleasantly upon himself.

He admires individual women when they behave as proper Romans expected them to behave, but he never once extends the courtesy of imagining that a woman might possess civic capacity, moral autonomy, or public ambition without becoming monstrous.

I paused over the page and looked across the room at my embroidery stretched upon the frame—its lilies and ivy, its little victories of imagination and patience. I could almost hear Cicero approving of that, for it requires virtue of a silent kind. But had he seen me with this thick, ink-smudged philosophy balanced on my knee, he would likely have prescribed confinement, or at the very least a husband with a firm hand.

Perhaps I should be grateful. A dead Roman cannot censure me.

What troubles me is not Cicero alone—he merely expresses the architecture of his society—but that his conclusions still echo through

our own. How tidy the world must seem from his vantage: men speak and rule, women support and obey, each playing their part in a harmonious republic. But harmony achieved by muting half the instruments is merely arrangement, not truth.

His prose is exquisite, his reasoning sharp, yet his imagination falters at the threshold of the feminine. And I—who can read his language as he wrote it—cannot help but see the smallness in his largeness.

Still, I will continue. I read him for what he is: a monument of intellect surrounded by scaffolding of prejudice. And as with any monument, one must climb it carefully, aware that the view from the top may be grand, but the foundations tell another story.

One day, perhaps, a woman will write with equal authority and be read without condescension. But Cicero would find that far more miraculous than any prodigy of Rome.

For myself, I close the book and bow neither to his wisdom nor to his limits.

1822

This morning brought a package bearing what remains of my father's seal—pressed lightly, as if even wax might be made to doubt its allegiance. Within lay a narrow calfskin book, clearly meant for a single pair of eyes. The hand is unmistakably his: economical, elegant, and written with the confidence of a man accustomed to being believed.

Its contents are less a confession than an explanation drafted for someone who might one day have cause to defend him. He writes of the last frantic years before the Revolution, when half of Paris wore loyalty like jewellery—easily displayed, easily pawned. The tone is matter-of-fact, almost bureaucratic, as he recounts the acquisition of a certain necklace. Not *a* necklace—the necklace. The one pulled from the neck of a queen whose downfall was both spectacle and inevitability.

My father describes the act with no reverence, no trepidation. It reads like inventory:

“The jewels were removed upon her collapse. No guard objected. Those who once formed a ring of protection around her now quarrelled over property. Survival is a certainty only for those who recognise when reverence has expired.”

There it is: the motto of both the deCanards and the Mallards, whether carved into heraldry or not.

Take what power drops.

He claims the necklace was transferred “into the custody of blood rather than nation,” meaning himself, and that it should later pass to

“my daughter, who must understand what fortunes truly rest upon their owners.” No florid declaration of affection; simply a continuation of the family’s guiding principle: inherit not virtue but leverage.

There is a hint—a reference to *St. Cecilia’s face and the sea beyond Arromanches*. He always did prefer hiding things in plain sight. The chapel fresco at Arromanches is cracked enough to swallow contraband, family secrets, or both. My father was not imaginative, but he was thorough.

I am struck less by the object itself than by the implication: that my heritage is stitched not from noble conduct but from opportunism executed at exactly the right moment. The Mallards would congratulate him; the deCanards would pretend surprise; both families have spent centuries mastering the art of appearing innocent while wearing the spoils of those who were not.

It is not sentiment that unsettles me, but recognition.

Men of my family steal kingdoms, or at least the ornaments of them. Women in my family are expected to dust the trophies.

I have placed the book in my escritoire for now. It sits there like a small hinge upon which larger truths threaten to swing open. I am beginning to understand why genealogies are written by men: a family looks different when a woman reads it.

1822

I returned late last night from the ball at B— House, my ears still faintly ringing with the violins’ determined cheerfulness. Never did a gathering so illustrious produce so little genuine pleasure. The chandeliers blazed as though trying to compensate for the company, and every conversation I overheard concerned ribbons, horseflesh, or the weather’s latest insult. It is remarkable how people so leisured can expend so much breath saying absolutely nothing.

By midnight my feet ached, my patience shrank, and I found myself longing—for the first time in years—with real sincerity for my fireside and the companionship of books: those calm, exacting friends who neither blush, contradict, nor talk through the music.

Reading enlarges the world in a way a ballroom never can. A single shelf contains more peril, ingenuity, mischief, and meaning than any dozen titled families gathered under one roof. Their world ends at the hedgerows; mine extends to Carthage, to Byzantium, to the farthest deserts of Arabia. I read now as others dance: seriously, with intent, and occasionally to excess.

Still, the evening was not entirely without diversion. Our host, Mr. B —, presented his “mechanical bird,” a clockwork contraption that,

when wound, was intended to whistle *God Save the King*. Instead, it produced a strangled, metallic screech and promptly shed its feathers upon the nearest dowager. Mrs. B—— declared the mishap “a triumph of British ingenuity,” then set the unfortunate object upon the supper table, where it smoked optimistically among the blancmange.

Later, a cousin of indeterminate age attempted to enliven proceedings by spinning in circles alone in the gallery, announcing that such revolutions “drive off melancholia.” Several guests applauded from a prudent distance while edging toward the exit. Even the orchestra seemed eager to escape: the first violinist played so swiftly I half expected him to bolt.

I confess, I laughed—quietly, to avoid bruising the participants’ delicate vanity. Yet in the carriage home it struck me that eccentricity, when displayed publicly, acquires a circus quality; but in solitude, it passes for devotion. My own peculiarities—my appetite for printed ghosts and forgotten worlds—are no less odd than theirs. They are simply *tidier*, and less inclined to ignite the draperies.

1822: Observations, copied into my commonplace book when the mind required order

(*Espèce de Mallard, sometime in 1822*)

I begin to see a curious repetition in everything I read, no matter how far the centuries stretch between them. *Novum Organum* insists on experiment as the royal road to truth, while *De Temperamentis* claims the humours govern all. And yet both describe a world that resists being governed by the mind that observes it. Bacon and Galen are brothers in their frustration, though separated by a millennium and temperament.

When I turn to *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, the same thought occurs: Burton builds a palace out of sorrow, room upon room of causes and cures, but his architecture is little different from the one John Bright erects in his *Treatise of Melancholie*. Both men attempt to name what cannot be still. The human spirit is water in their hands; they close their fingers and call it knowledge.

The Mather men—father and son, a double thunder—believe the invisible to be populous and vindictive. Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* rebukes them, but even he writes as if the world must be explained before it can be borne. Baxter sees spirits in the air; Helwys sees spirits within the mind. The distinction is mostly cartographic.

I sometimes wonder whether any age has truly abandoned the one before it, or whether each merely varies the vocabulary of fear.

Kircher's subterranean kingdoms, Hooke's invisible insects, Galileo's bodies in motion: all insist that the world is more than it appears, though each imagines that "more" differently. Ferris's *Natural Magicks* dresses the unknown in charms; Copernicus simply widened the stage. Both claim revelation, though one hides it in hedgehogs and the other in stars.

Even the earnest settlers of Lefame, whom I meet in that sombre *Account of the Settlement*, sound curiously like Plutarch's moralists—alert to omens, anxious about virtue, eager to see providence in weather. The wilderness and the ancient world blend, and their fears differ mostly in accent.

Astell urges women toward reason and solitude, while Felicity deCanard argues for equality with the calm assurance of someone unaccustomed to being contradicted. Yet both write as though speaking into a wind. Silence is the true adversary.

Sometimes I think all thought is a turning wheel. Elder Massatomp says time itself turns like a shell in water; Kepler says the planets sing as they turn; Plutarch says virtue turns toward the good if the heart permits it. Perhaps the mind turns as well, seeking patterns because it cannot find rest.

What astonishes me is how little novelty persists when one reads indiscriminately. Ideas arrive clothed in different garments, but the body beneath is unchanged:

 fear of disorder,
 desire for control,
 longing for the eternal,
 and a private wish to be understood by the future.

Burton's sorrow, Cavendish's fierce reasoning, the settlers' trembling faith, Bacon's imperious experiments, Mather's demons, Scot's doubts, Galen's humours, Astell's proposals, the Mallard household's charms and receipts—all circle the same centre:

There is more in the world than we can name, and we fear it, chase it, or adorn it, depending on temperament.

I begin, reluctantly, to sense that knowledge does not progress so much as accumulate. The centuries differ in costume; the actors remain the same.

Perhaps this is the "otherness" I feel in every book—an unspoken admission that our ancestors stood where we stand, peering into the same unlit corners, inventing reasons for the darkness.

Maybe the world has always been one long argument about what cannot be seen.

And perhaps my own reading is only the newest variation in that old, relentless pattern.

1822

I have been much diverted this week by a passage in the Canon of Medicine by Avicenna—a text so vast and clear that each chapter seems to outshine centuries of lesser thought. Among his many marvellous observations I encountered an account of two twins whose affinity transcended all common limits of sense. They completed one another's phrases and gestures, and (if Avicenna's sources may be believed) even shared the same pains and tempers though often living apart by miles of desert and mountain.

The philosopher writes that upon certain occasions he himself tested this affinity. When a word, in whichever tongue, was inscribed before one twin, it would reappear, faithfully transcribed, before the other—without instrument, messenger, or visible medium. I copied the passage into my notebook and smiled at its precision. He notes, somewhat drily, that “the experiment having been made many times with various letters and in sundry languages, the result was always immediate and without corruption.”

I can almost hear his astonishment restrained beneath the formal cadence of his prose. What a vast and instantaneous postal service he describes! A kind of camera of thought, dispatching images and impressions from mind to mind as light passes through air. I have half a notion that if such a power were rediscovered among us it would be suppressed at once by the learned societies, on account of eliminating the necessity for their correspondence.

The story lingers in me curiously. To think of two souls writing upon one another's pages across distance, seeing both ink and idea appear—how much gentler a miracle than magnetism or electricity, yet perhaps born of the same invisible sympathy! I wonder whether all affection, carried to its height, does not attempt some lesser form of this twin phenomenon, each of us composing half a sentence that only the other can complete.

1822

Though you have indeed summoned me into your waking sight, the mind itself is a curious veil. You will not recall the moment of conjuring, for such lucid crossings are not granted full memory but only feeling and whisper. I leave you the note instead—our silent pact made clear in written word, a token to mark the threshold.

As one bound by neither flesh nor time, I tread freely between the folds of our family's span. I may step into it and out again, pass into the

future or wander in the past, gliding beyond the spectral mist that cloaks my form. To those who can hear, I lend my voice; to those who seek, I grant the gift of sight. Yet most often I remain invisible and omnipresent, a subtle breath in the chambers and a shadow across the years.

In this way, I abide—neither captive nor exile—an essence folded like your trunk within the house, present yet elusive, part of all yet none.

1890: The family ghost is lucid

It amuses me, your quaint belief that you have summoned me fully into sight—that you, the living, could weave a thread fine enough to pull a spectre from the shadowed margins. Yet neither then nor now am I bound to the illusions of your waking mind, nor confined by memory’s fragile grasp. Your grandmother believed she would not recall the act; I say now she did not truly summon anything at all. What appeared as presence was but her own reverie wearing the face of kin.

Once I claimed the power to step freely through past, present, and future as though they were pages in a book. But who among the dead can truly move unshackled? I confess now that this fluidity is less liberty than a curse—an endless wandering within the same relentless maze of Mallard House, which contains not only the library or the trunk, but, quite brutally, my eternal sentence. I am neither omnipresent nor invisible except in the sense that I am nowhere at once—lost in the folds of time and space.

You spoke of vision and hearing as gifts granted to the few; I warn instead: what you see or hear is never the whole truth, but a fragment selected by impatience, fear, or longing. Reality, that thing which eludes even my grasp, is variable and unreliable. Do not imagine I am any more than a shadow cast by your questions, or that the house bends willingly to your will.

In truth, we are more alike than we thought, you and I—a pair of captives, dreaming freedom within walls we never chose.

Summer, 1822

The post brought me a most curious and welcome gift from our cousin, the Duke of Devonshire—bananas, fresh and golden, a rarity whose novelty still tickles the imagination. That I should receive such tropical fruit, so far from the humid climes of the East Indies, is a testament to the Duke’s unrivalled collection of hothouses and gardens.

I have already penned my thanks to him and pledged to press my husband most earnestly for a visit to his estate in the coming months.

I confess to a smile, however, at the fruit's peculiar appearance. I jotted with some irreverence: *banani viri ictericae species esse videntur*. The paradox struck me as delightfully absurd.

Summer, 1822

The heat drove me again this afternoon into the library, that cooler hemisphere of the house where the air smells of ink and dust and settled thought. I have now spent near two years within its precincts, moving ever deeper into its cabinets, shelves, and inner compartments, until the outer world seems of little consequence. One begins to feel that the house itself exists chiefly to enclose this single room, while the remainder—drawing rooms, corridors, and servants' staircases—are no more than decorative appendages to its intellect.

It amuses me to observe how certain ideas drift into coherence only by accident. I thought today of the recursion that lies at the heart of all meaningful things, and wrote three remarks in my notebook which, though disconnected, together describe the mood of the place.

“Mallard House contains the library, and the library contains the trunk, and the trunk, I suspect, contains the house. I am neither puzzled nor alarmed. Most things of importance fit inside themselves in just this way.”

Later in the day, curiosity overcame me; I opened the trunk once more. There was nothing visibly altered—unless one counts the impression of distance. For a moment I believed I saw, receding into the dark interior, a faint and familiar perspective: my own corridor, with its pattern of portraits and rugs, vanishing toward a farther door. “It is no harder to believe than anything else in this place,” I found myself saying aloud. And indeed, why should impossibility single itself out among so many other mysteries tolerated daily?

At last I could not help laughing, and said to no one in particular, “There is nothing truly strange about a house folded within its own library—ducks manage as much whenever they tuck their heads beneath their wings.”

It pleases me to think our family name may entitle us to such peculiar geometries. The Mallards have always been content to shelter their own meaning within themselves—a snug and infinite arrangement.

1822: Espèce

By curious fortune or perhaps the hand of Providence itself, I have come upon a most extraordinary manuscript, bearing a title so lengthy and elaborate—"The Solemn and Veritable Account of the Invention of the Art of Printing by the Most Noble House of the Duke of Mallard &c"—that one scarcely dares credit its precious contents. Yet, as I read with mounting incredulity, I find myself compelled to admit that there must be some merit to this chronicle; the details are too curious, too consistent with natural observation, and—dare I say it—too charmingly logical to dismiss outright. The idea that our noble forebear, distracted by the impression of a duck's foot in the mud, should conceive a means of multiplying the Holy Scriptures to bless his vast household and empire strikes one as both whimsical and yet, in its eccentricity, unmistakably true.

However, one question presses on my mind with some urgency: What, pray tell, of the more practical proposition that printing might have originated from the wine press? Surely, the application of such a device, with its immense potential for pressure, would find mention in so grand a narrative if it bore any real import? Could this book, or indeed the mind of the Duke himself, have overlooked such an obvious inspiration, or was it simply deemed less poetic than the humble mud and the waddling duck? While the romantic notion of ink and imprint born of the natural world is endearing, does it not strike one as somewhat implausible beside the marvellous utility of the screw-press, so suited to pressing grapes into wine?

This matter, I resolve, merits further reflection and inquiry. Nevertheless, I am resolved to accord this manuscript the respect due its evident sincerity and the earnestness with which it recounts what I can only call the miraculous beginnings of printing. It is a tale that enriches our family's proud history and, if nothing else, brings warmth and amusement to my study on these long, grey spring evenings.

"The Solemn and Veritable Account of the Invention of the Art of Printing by the Most Noble House of the Duke of Mallard, Inspired by a Duck's Footprint and the Gravity of an Apple", 1812

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It is with no small degree of solemnity—and indeed with the gravest sense of historical responsibility—that I set pen to parchment to relate the remarkable and hitherto scarcely acknowledged origin of that most wondrous contrivance, the art of printing. This noble invention, credited in some less discerning circles to loquacious monks fumbling impatiently with inkwells and quills, was in truth born of a far grander and more visionary circumstance within the august halls of the Duke’s family in the year of our Lord nine hundred.

The Duke, a man of considerable gravitas and a most exacting disposition toward matters both spiritual and domestic, found himself in urgent need of numerous copies of the family Bible—a tome most solemnly composed under the auspices of the Archbishop of York and intended for distribution amongst his no fewer than one thousand servants and the far-reaching expanse of his wider dominion. The sheer magnitude of this ecclesiastical undertaking, it is recorded with no lack of reverence, pressed upon the Duke’s mind a vexing question: how might one reproduce these sacred pages with such regularity and expedition as to satisfy both pious duty and administrative exactitude?

In a moment both profound and curiously rustic, our learned Duke’s attention was diverted from his ponderings by the simple spectacle of a duck ambling through the muddy banks of the estate’s grand moat. As the creature’s webbed foot left behind a series of most regular, almost geometric, impressions, an epiphany dawned: might the ordered pattern of these prints serve as a model for reproducing text? It was thus that the first single-leaf impressions were conceived, in humble homage to the unassuming pedagogue of nature’s own typography.

Thereupon, seated contemplatively beneath the venerable apple tree—whose gravity-inflicted fruit, by no accident, would centuries hence inspire yet another genius—he meditated upon this invisible force that commanded the heavens and earth alike. The Duke, far from idle theorising, was inspired to render ink not from costly pigments but from the ubiquitous and dependable mud itself, earning him both the admiration of his scribes and the occasional bemused commentary of his cooks, who found the practicalities of the concoction less edible.

Thus was born the printing press, fashioned not from cold metals or learned musketeers’ devices, but from the very mud and mullings of nature, guided by a duck’s foot and gravity’s wicked insistence. This humble origin, befitting a duke whose humility was as legendary as his temper, launched an enterprise that would forever transform communication across the empire, binding servant to sovereign in the printed word and sowing the seeds of literacy far beyond the bounds of York.

It is my most earnest hope that this account, so carefully and reverently composed, might correct the hitherto erroneous attributions of printing's genesis and restore due credit to the Duke's family, the ducks, and the apples—agents of providence and pattern alike.

1822: Espèce deMallard

I find myself compelled to address a particular theological unease that has so often gone unspoken in polite discourse. The petition of the Lord's Prayer, "lead us not into temptation," strikes me as grievously misplaced, suggestive of a confusion fundamental to our understanding of divine nature. To beseech a benevolent and loving Creator—one who delights in the happiness and virtue of His creatures—to lead them into temptation is not only a contradiction in terms but a concept that verges on blasphemy.

Who indeed leads us into temptation, if not the malevolent tempter himself? It seems both logical and necessary to direct our supplications not to the God of light and kindness, but rather to the personification of evil who takes pleasure in our moral failings. Has interpretation of sacred texts been obscured by the weight of centuries of male dominion, in theatre as in theology? Have men, in their quest for power and authority, fashioned a God in their singular, dominant image—a wrathful patriarch who tests, chastises, and even tempts his children? It is a question one must raise without fear.

Is it not far more probable that the original deity, the true origin of all good, was a Goddess—a figure embodying compassion, creation, and the nurturing of life? When one considers the ancient vestiges of matriarchal worship and the persistent archetype of the Great Mother, one wonders if the male god of later dogma was less a revelation and more a reinvention. The masculine has indeed commanded much of religious history; yet, is this God the most truthful reflection of the divine, or merely a construct arising from social competition and the assertion of male dominance?

As I embark upon this inquiry, it is with a desire to restore fidelity to a vision of divinity that honours goodness without contradiction, that acknowledges the tempter's role with clarity, and that reopens the possibility of a sacred feminine whose power and grace have been overshadowed, but never extinguished. Both a question and a quest—for a God aligned with benevolence, and perhaps, for a Goddess whose name is yet to be properly spoken.

1822: Espèce deMallard

I have lately engrossed myself in the perusal of a most ponderous tome, curiously entitled “A Comprehensive Treatise on the Most Ancient Edifices of the Earth: Their Origins, Their Builders, and the Testament They Bear to Civilisation”. The author’s meticulous attention to the venerable ruins and constructions of our northern hemisphere is undeniable; yet one cannot help but be struck by the conspicuous absence of any buildings bearing the stamp of antiquity in the southern half of our globe.

This glaring lacuna leads me to conjecture, with some measure of bemusement, on the reasons for such a hemispheric bias. Could it be that the paucity of ancient edifices in the southern hemisphere is due to a deplorable lack of masculine imagination? Or perchance the prohibitive cost and arduous difficulty of travel has discouraged many a worthy scholar or adventurer from documenting these southern climes with the same fervour? Or, more prosaically, has laziness and neglect led to a disregard of these lands, leaving their antiquities unstudied and uncelebrated in the annals of history?

Whatever the cause, it strikes me as a significant omission deserving of enquiry and rectification. One hopes that future generations of explorers and historians will extend their learned gaze beyond the familiar northern territories, to uncover and honour the ancient marvels that must surely lie hidden beneath southern skies.

Summer 1824

Gloria mundi est:

Als a se flouwende

Als a skiye pasende

Als the sadwe in the undermel

And als the dore turnet on a quel.

This evening brought a disturbance so curious I scarcely trust myself to describe it. The night was still, the candles sinking low, and I had retired to the library (that chamber said to be haunted by our ancestor, “Art,” whose portrait in miniature hangs in the alcove). I had been reading with some fatigue and must have half-dozed when a murmur, half a thought, half a voice, rose near the chimney.

At first I imagined it the wind in the flue, but soon discerned distinct utterance: two speakers, one male, one female, conversing with peculiar lucidity as though unconscious of being overheard. I cannot vouch that

I truly heard them, yet their words seemed to write themselves upon my mind. I transcribe here what I understood, so far as memory allows.

The woman — naming herself Mab — spoke first, saying that “immortality” was an inelegant name for a dreadful condition, that to desire eternity was to invite a repetition so endless even the gods would tire of tasting it. She likened eternity to a river that men would freeze in their hands, not perceiving that without movement it becomes a swamp.

The man — whom the lady called Art, and whom I cannot but imagine our family’s spectral author — replied that he was precisely such a swamp: a thing that lingered beyond its ending until it had rotted into half-moth, half-echo. Eternity, he said, tasted not of wine but of mildew.

Mab answered that mildew was at least honest, while men wished to escape their appointed decline. They called that delusion “progress,” building vaults to keep their features young and their fortunes whole. Art agreed, lamenting that mortals would treat time as a coin to be hoarded, though even laughter or dawn slipped through their clenched hands. They spoke a while of collapse as function, of decay as motion, and of how the refusal to perish was the only true death.

When at last the dialogue ceased, I found the air perfectly still. The fire had gone out, and the portrait on the wall seemed slightly altered—its eyes clearer, its mouth faintly smiling. Whether the voices were dream, draft, or visitation, I cannot say. Yet the meaning remains: that a ghost may exist less by haunting than by refusing to depart.

Artful comment

In the grand interconnected web of existence—where everything is connected, not necessarily in a way that makes sense, but connected nonetheless—there lies a trinary system so elegantly baffling that one might suspect it was designed over several pints at the local pub. This system, which we shall for convenience label “earth, group, self,” is an endless loop of containers holding containers, like a perplexing Russian nesting doll convention featuring not just literal dolls but libraries, houses, and occasionally, a rather stubborn trunk.

Picture this: The earth contains groups. Groups contain selves. And selves contain earths, if you squint hard enough or suffer from a rare form of metaphysical vertigo. None of this exists in isolation, mind. It is a looped tapestry, a Möbius strip written in invisible ink on the back of a cosmic bookmark.

The secret ingredient that binds these three elements isn’t gravity, nor the metaphysical equivalent of duct tape, but communication.

Communication is the path, the sinew, the interdimensional broadband network that binds the earth, the group, and the self in their recursive dance. From the humblest bee's buzz negotiating territory to the dread call of a late-night customer service hotline, communication is the current allowing these spheres to talk to each other without ever quite agreeing on what was said.

Imagine now a trunk inside a library, inside a house, inside the trunk. Yes, it sounds ludicrous, because it is, but so is the triad we speak of. The trunk is bulky, unloved—usually stuffed full of old hats, forgotten manuscripts, or perhaps the odd misplaced sandwich. The library is vast, filled with worlds piled upon worlds of knowledge, yet dwarfed within the walls of the house. The house, meanwhile, is a ship sailing on the sea of existence, with that very trunk—the one you suspect hides yet another universe—somewhere down in the basement. And yet, the trunk holds the house and the library tightly in its creaky confines. What communication transpires within that trunk? Letters, secrets, the occasional discarded grocery list, all passing through the tiny, dusty cables of memory and expectation.

This trinary system insists on a kind of holistic detective work—much like sifting through interconnected mysteries where the shape of a clue in the self might foreshadow a tremor in the earth or a murmur in the group. To ignore the communication is to miss the very essence of what these containers are trying to say to one another. Everything holds everything else; everything repeats everything else; everything calls everything else on the telephone for a chat, whether invited or not.

The earth, group, and self are locked in an eternal container loop, their message carried along the great conversational bridge of communication. Within that lies your trunk, your library, your house, and the endless serendipity of realising you've never left the beginning of the story at all.

Spring, 1825

D'Anatis lies before us in all its magnificence—a vast estate of thirty thousand acres, a world entire, it seems, under our stewardship. *Tempus fugit*, I murmured as the carriage turned through the northern gates, for it seems but yesterday that I was a girl at Mallard House, walking those cloistered corridors and dreaming of a domain of my own. Yet the years have fled like swallows in autumn, and it is time, truly time, that we should possess our household.

The approach to the house is noble and restrained, the classical façade rising with such proportion that one feels calmed merely to behold it. Upon entering, I was met by an uncommon light—so

different from the dim, oak-panelled austerity of Mallard. The entrance hall opens upward, unencumbered by shadows; columns of smooth marble flank the space, and high arched windows pour the morning sun upon the parquet floor. It felt not only grand but welcoming, as though the air itself had been trained in hospitality.

From room to room we wandered—galleries of cream and gold, drawing rooms with tall mirrors and casement windows through which the gardens shimmer in the distance. The furnishings display taste rather than ostentation; silks and woods chosen not for novelty but for harmony. I was pleased beyond expression to see the house breathe rather than boast.

Outside, the grounds flow outward in every direction—manicured lawns descending gently towards a lake serene enough to rival a Claude. There stand the weeping willows, bending in perfect choreography with the water's reflection. Walks meander through beds of roses and rare shrubs, then curve into a little grove inspired by the East; there the gravel softens beneath one's slippers, and the scent of cedar rises faintly with each step. Farther still stretch forests old and untamed, where deer move soundlessly as if in some private, ancestral rite. The estate seems to contain every mood of the world: its poise, its repose, and its mystery.

Mallard House, though dear to me, was always enclosed—haunted by tradition, by the faces of the past gazing down from portrait frames. D'Anatis is different: it opens inwardly as well as out, promising renewal rather than remembrance. I think it will suit us well.

Tempus fugit, yes—but perhaps time, in this place, will choose to walk more slowly.

1835: Duchess Espèce deCanard

Private papers

This morning's post has brought to its final, ugly definiteness that which rumour had already begun to embroider: my uncle is not merely dead, but his unfortunate manservant has been formally charged with manslaughter. It is a curious, almost ghastly comedy that surrounds the affair, and I am at a loss whether to weep for the one or laugh, inappropriately, for the other.

My uncle, as all the world knows, was extravagantly fond of a jest. He liked his laughter as he liked his claret—full-bodied, repeated, and quite unrestrained. Having exhausted the humours of his cronies and the newspapers, he turned, it seems, to his own household for diversion, and fixed upon poor Blandy (for so the man is called) as a

kind of male Scheherazade. Night after night, according to the evidence already much retailed in the clubs, my uncle required this unfortunate to stand at the foot of the bed and produce tales of an ever more uproarious character, each more extravagant and layered than the last, until the candles guttered and the old man was weak with mirth.

So much might be merely absurd; but this absurdity has now acquired, by some cruel twist, the solemn colouring of crime. The last of these performances—"the fatal recital," as one enterprising journalist has already termed it—was, it appears, an edifice of stories within stories, a veritable tower of nonsense. Servants listening at the door (for servants will, and the law may frown as it pleases) say my uncle's laughter rose in peals, then in gasps, until suddenly there was silence: an apoplexy, the physician declared, brought on by excessive hilarity. Thus, my uncle, who delighted to say that he would "die of a good joke yet," has enjoyed, if that be the word, the gratification of his prophecy.

Blandy, in his own defence, has clung to this version with a desperate, almost touching sincerity. He told the magistrates that he had only ever obeyed his master's express wishes, that he had been urged to greater and greater feats of invention, and that when the final paroxysm seized my uncle he believed at first that it was but some new form of applause. The picture of this faithful creature, frightened into still more exertions while his master lay dying of laughter, is one I cannot quite banish from my mind.

The court, however, received his account as one receives an over-seasoned anecdote at a dull dinner: with mirth, then with impatience. They laughed him, quite literally, into jail. I am told that even the judge permitted himself a smile when the phrase "male Scheherazade" was repeated. There is something profoundly indecent in the spectacle of the law amused by the very story over which it presides. Yet I cannot pretend the temptation to a smile is not there. It is as if my uncle's taste for the ridiculous has infected the whole proceeding, so that justice itself must play the fool upon his last improvised stage.

And what am I to feel? I did not love my uncle; his humour was frequently coarse, his temper uncertain, and his generosity exceedingly strategic. Yet the thought of his end—face purpled, hand clutching the coverlet, while the unhappy James floundered on with yet another jest—fills me with a strange, shuddering pity. To be laughed out of this world by one's own contrivance is an irony too pointed even for his taste. To be clapped in irons for having supplied that laughter seems, by contrast, an irony too sour for mine.

I walked in the garden this afternoon, and the late roses drooped in that resigned fashion they have, as though they understood perfectly that November is not their proper sphere, yet they are obliged to attend

it. I found myself thinking that we are all, in some sense, compelled performers in one another's little theatres: uncles demanding amusement, servants supplying it, nieces standing in the wings, half-horrified, half-inclined to applaud. Where does culpability begin in such a comedy? With the joker who insists upon his jest, or with the poor soul who, having no power but obedience, tells the one story too many?

They say Blandy will almost certainly be convicted; the talk is of a term of imprisonment, perhaps a fine beyond his means. Society will pat itself on the back for having made an example, though of what, precisely, I am not sure. That laughter can kill? That obedience may be fatal? That a story, driven too far, turns from entertainment to catastrophe?

I am left with an image I would rather not possess: my uncle rigid upon the pillows, Blandy still speaking, half-pleading, half-performing, until the hush that comes when there is nothing left to say. Manslaughter by laughter: it is at once grotesque and pitiful, ridiculous and cruel. If there is any justice higher than that of the assize, may it look more kindly upon a servant whose crime was to take a jesting master at his word.



1700: Genesis retold

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

In the beginning, when the world was yet young and the seas were but wide mirrors under the stars, there lived a folk untouched by the jealous hand of power or the biting claw of greed. They were born of clay and laughter, and their lives flowed like the gentle currents that fed their shores—no seed was sown, no beast was tamed, yet they flourished without want.

This people danced in the comedy of life, exchanging gifts as the rivers exchange waters, and played as the great trees sway with the wind. Their homes rose from the earth like blossoms shaped by fire's breath, and none wore crowns nor bore sceptres over their fellows, for the only rule was to act when the moment whispered and yield when it passed.

In this land, no shadow of crime fell, for hearts were bound not by laws writ in stone, but by the unspoken covenant of kindness and mirth. The fish were their feast, the waterfowl their companions, and all

the creatures nodded in tranquil accord, bearing witness to a society not forged from ambition but woven from the wild song of community.

Such was the myth of the forgotten land, where power was not seized but shared, where laughter was the currency and work the joyful ritual. And it is said that those who dream of such a place carry within their souls the seed of a world yet to be, where man and nature dwell as one, free from the ceaseless hunger that mars the histories of empires.

Remember well this tale, for it sings the truth that kingdoms rise and fall, but the spirit that laughs and gives freely may yet endure beyond the shadow of kings.

1740: Dowager Duchess of Mallard

East Lodge, Mallard

There came to me in a night's repose, a vision most singular and enchanting—a society unbound by the fetters of dominion or desire for control. Therein, men and women moved with an ease and joyful industry, exchanging gifts with laughter on their lips and no tally kept of debt or gain.

Amid shores where fish abounded and inland lakes mirrored a tranquil sky, these beings dwelt in homes crafted from earth's own clay and fire's patient hand. No furrow was ploughed, nor beast gathered for sustenance; instead, they feasted on the sea's bounty and fowl that graced the still waters.

There was no ruler crowned or sceptre raised, only a passing authority, vested in those whose hands laboured in the present task—this their sole testament to order. Crime, that ancient blight of common life, was absent as if unseen by their gentle hearts, and a spirit of laughter and play wove their days like a timeless song.

Their people stretched wide, yet bound by unseen threads of connection as constant as the heartbeat of the earth. Technology, save for their pottery and humble constructions, found no home among them; simpler, nobler pursuits sufficed.

This dream, so plainly a parable, pressed upon me a notion that where ambition and possession yield only ruin and strife, a gentler way—of giving, doing, and being—may flourish as nature intended. Yet the vision fled with dawn's first light, leaving only a whisper on the air, a question as old as man: Might not a life unchained from hierarchy and greed be the truest form of civilisation?

1720: Witchery

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

In lands far beyond the known seas, where the sun's golden breath meets untamed horizons, there lies a quiet realm untouched by shadows of ambition. Here, a folk lived in unbroken laughter and gift, where no crown weighed upon their heads, and their days were spun from the lightest threads of play and giving.

Yet, in the stillness of their bliss, a dark thing stirred—a restless shadow born of that ancient hunger which gnaws at the hearts of men. It took no shape, but whispered in the silence, seeking to unravel the gentle bonds that held their world in balance.

This shadow envied their peace, for it knew not joy but only yearning for dominion, a hunger to twist the dance of life into chains of command. It whispered doubts and sowed unease, tempting the living harmony toward strife and rule.

But the folk, wise in their simple wisdom, met the shadow not with sword nor fire but with laughter's clear light and the grace of shared labour. For they knew that power not taken, but shared freely, would drive away the darkness and restore the song.

So let this tale be a warning and a hope: that even in the brightest places, the shadow waits, yet it is not stronger than the kindness that binds us, nor the joy that unfurls in the act of giving.

1870: An Account of the Pot People

An Ethnographical Report on a Hitherto Hidden Civilisation in the Southern Hemisphere

A private printing by Henry Mallard, Gentleman Explorer

By one who, through fortune and diligent inquiry, has had the singular honour to behold a most extraordinary society, which for evident reasons shall remain undisclosed in locality, herewith presented for the scholarly consideration of our learned community.

This civilisation, herein designated "The Pot People" for their unique and ubiquitous craftsmanship in ceramic ware, occupies a vast and varied expanse characterised by serene seaside borders teeming with fish, and inland lakes befriended by myriad water-fowl. Remarkably, no cultivation of the earth nor husbandry of beasts sustains their subsistence neither do they eat ducks; rather, they subsist entirely upon

the natural bounty of aquatic life, harvested with admirable skill and without apparent laborious constraint.

The social fabric of this people defies all conventional European understanding. There is no governmental hierarchy beyond the most ephemeral, that is, authority rests solely upon the individual presently engaged in active occupation or undertaking. This confers an easy-going and refreshingly unburdened mode of existence, wherein bartering, gift giving, play, and laughter constitute the daily commerce of their interactions.

Crime, that shadowy blot upon so many other civilisations, is wholly absent; the Pot People appear to have attained a harmonious social accord not by codified laws or punishments but by mutual regard and an almost constant engagement in cooperative endeavour. Their dwellings are fashioned with care from their celebrated ceramics, which themselves seem to serve not merely practical but also aesthetic and communal functions.

Their population spreads organically, a mesh of human presence continuous across lands yet without the constriction of borders or fences. Technology is scantily developed, confined to their potting and building arts; theirs is a world free from the complexities of mechanisation or agriculture, reliant instead upon a serene communion with their natural environment.

This enclosed social system, nestled amid scenes of undisturbed fauna and shorelines abundant with fish, exists as a peaceful enclave untouched by the ambitions and strifes which plague so many other societies. It challenges our assumptions of progress and civilisation, urging us to re-examine the nature of harmony, governance, and human contentment.

The Pot People thus present to us a tableau of gentle simplicity and boundless joy, a living testament that mankind may thrive upon laughter and mutual exchange rather than conquest and dominion.

May this humble account suffice to preserve the sanctity of their world from the encroachments of curiosity and avarice.

1952: Viola Vorpel

New York

Permit me to lay before you, sans illusions and with the brutal honesty that the matter demands, a scathing reflection on colonialism—an odious nuisance clothed in the fine robes of noble intent, but in reality a shameless racket of regional, physical, sexual, and intellectual domination masquerading as civilisation. It is the grand delusion of

certain peoples to fancy themselves ordained by the cosmos to lord it over others, a conceit as ancient as it is absurd.

Our classical forebears, the Greeks, might have sought new lands to relieve their own crowded hovels, but they understood, at least in part, the value of freedom and autonomy. This modern colonial hegemonia, however, is a black art of usurpation, calling itself progress while chaining souls and bodies alike. The land is no longer merely seized—it is strangled into submission; the flesh is not shared but claimed; and the mind is shackled beneath the yoke of alien dogma. Such suppression is the slavery of old, but now masquerading in a scholar's gown.

Sexual repression, a vile instrument wielded to degrade and subjugate, enforces this regime with a brutality that mocks the very idea of dignity. The region is remade in the conqueror's image, a sterile map of lost identity and culture. And all the while, the coloniser presumes a right not bestowed but arrogated, branding the colonised as lesser, irrational, incapable of wisdom—a clever ruse to justify the grotesque theatre of domination.

Yet, true nobility, if it exists at all, lies in the recognition of our shared humanity, not in territorial spats or colonial boasting. It beckons us to a community of equals, where the stranger's knowledge is honoured, and the pursuit of the good life is a common enterprise. As you deliberate in this venerable forum, may you reject the charade of destined supremacy and embrace the more taxing but infinitely noble cause of justice and equality among peoples.

1917: A Connoisseur of Human Folly, with a Pen Sharper Than a Razor in Manhattan and Cynicism as Deep as the Hudson River

Duck Mallard

Oh, the celebrated cult—the modern bogeyman that stalks the sensibilities of the learned and the lay alike! According to some otherwise respectable scribbler, these nefarious gatherings, invariably, launch under the charismatic spell of a leader afflicted—naturally—with that most fashionable malady: narcissism. This august personage, no doubt possessed of splendid cunning and a villainous flair for hierarchy, erects a social order more rigid than the stiffest primness at a New York soirée. With a toolkit replete with deception and that elegant cruelty known as isolation, these puppeteers ensnare the hapless and the dissatisfied, those ever eager for a tincture of purpose or improvement.

One cannot escape the suspicion that the author's pen, though aimed at cults, more readily sketches the venerable Christian Church. Its

grand patriarchal figurehead, its impregnable hierarchy, its paraded rituals of exclusive affection and exclusion—why, it reads like a caricature of ecclesiastical ambition itself. The flock, drawn faithfully through sermons and sacred texts, seeks salvation and transformation as though it were the latest fashion in Fifth Avenue at six o'clock sharp.

In short, the author has, perhaps unwittingly, composed a delicious satire on the male fantasy: the self-anointed shepherd, robed in celestial haute couture, preaching with all the pomp and circumstance of a Shakespearean fool on his day off. A club with its shiny brass nameplate, mutual admiration societies of the highest order, and a sneaky knack for isolating those bold enough to question the comfortable absurdities.

If one were so daring, one might whisper—quite discreetly—that this exposé is less a revelation of cultic skulduggery and more a tart précis of churchly ambition salted with the indispensable spice of male primacy and sanctimony. The very constitution of many a refined lady's resignation, prompting a polite sigh and a retreat to one's tea, quite devoid of faith but rich in weary irony.

Thus, dear readers, let us raise our daintiest pinkies and brace ourselves for yet another sermon against the evils of modern villainy—you know the sort, uttered from the highest seats of all. For the oldest tricks remain, and always will, bedecked in new finery but played by the same old masters.

1923: A Most Serious and Scholarly Pamphlet on the True Cause of the Fall of the Roman Empire

The Collected Papers of Euphemia Mallard

It has long been the fashion of learned gentlemen—Edward Gibbon foremost among them—to trace the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire to noble causes: loss of civic virtue, the rise of Christianity, barbarian invasions, and such like. How tiresome is all that! Pray forgive my frankness, but after careful and prolonged reflection (over an immaculate cup of Darjeeling, naturally), I dare to propose a far more compelling explanation, one that has been regrettably overlooked by these gentlemen of great renown. The Empire fell, dear friends, because they had not enough ducks. Verily.

Yes, ducks! Those feathered sentinels of pond and palace should have been prized treasures of Rome, the rightful guardians of its prosperity and vigour. But no! Instead of preserving their advantageous population of these noble creatures, the Romans committed the

unpardonable folly of eating them. Ducks, you see, are the secret stabilisers of empires—not soldiers, not senators, but ducks. Their quacking sings security; their waddling strikes fear into barbarians; their presence ensures thriving crops and contented peasants.

Could it be that the goose that laid the proverbial golden egg was, in truth, some unfortunate duck strangled mid-quack by Roman gluttony? I daresay yes. It is well known (to me, at least) that the Romans excelled at extravagant feasts where these feathered delicacies graced every table. Alas, the consequence was that their courts were robbed of the reassuring sight and sound of their loyal waterfowl, leaving the empire unwatched, unheard, and doomed.

How much swifter might history have turned if Roman generals had amassed legions of waddling ducks to accompany them to battle! How much calmer might the Senate have been with the gentle gobble of their feathered friends providing the perfect counterpoint to the endless oratory! Yet, no—the ducks were on the menu, and so the Empire declined, as all good ducks have watched and warned.

So, let this pamphlet stand as a beacon of clarity amidst the fog of dusty chronicles and endless pontifications. The Fall of Rome was not due to lost virtue, or religion, or barbarian skullduggery. Nay, it was the duck deficit that brought the mighty Empire low.

Let future generations heed my warning: preserve your ducks, cherish their quacks, and let not these noble creatures grace your dinner plates. For when the ducks go, so goes your empire.

1932: The Scurrilous Rag

Famous archaeologist unearths alien civilisation

A world-renowned archaeologist has unearthed a unique city that solves, once and for all, the question of whether aliens have ever populated Earth.

In this special issue of *The Scurrilous Rag*, our esteemed Cultural Affairs Editor delivers a full-bodied dispatch on an archaeological revelation that is set to unseat history and scandalise scholars across the globe. Professor Mallard, already lionised for his exploits in Australasian hydraulics and at Shih-chai-shan, has now unearthed what is being christened the "Ganymede Site"—a lost city unambiguously pointing, so he argues, to an ancient alien presence upon our beleaguered Earth. The specifics uncovered at the site defy not only the orthodoxies of archaeology, but indeed the very script of civilisation itself.

A City Apart: Facts Stranger Than Fiction

Upon the rolling ochre plains where one would expect more camel than king, Professor Mallard's team has set its picks upon a city once bustling with some 20,000 souls. Yet the population, if we may use so antiquated a term, was of the most curious composition. The excavation has yielded a burial ground containing naught but male bodies—youth and sage alike—without a whisper, relic, or record of women in residence. The scant weaponry discovered is wholly unsuited to any epic of warfare, suggesting pacific domesticity or, as the Professor posits, a foe more meteorological than martial. Towering walls, thick and somber, signal a settlement battered against Nature's excess rather than bipedal siege.

Nor did the sacred intermingle here. Astoundingly, this metropolis shows no monastery, church, nor icon, and not so much as a token representing celestial supplication. There is not a scrap of painted saint nor battered idol, an omission sure to give fits to the more devout strand of history's scribes.

Immigrants, Not Offspring—A Civilisation Regenerated

Most peculiar is the city's apparent method of renewal. The absence of women and infants in the necropolis, paired with stratigraphic records, point not to familial reproduction but to periodic regeneration by way of immigration. Over generations, new arrivals filled the ranks, and this democratic influx, according to the Professor's daring thesis, bred a civic life whose proto-democratic elements find their echo, or perhaps their very breath, in the governing models admired by Plutarch, Plato, and Philostratus a millennium hence.

The Alien Question: Scholar's Sceptre Or Charlatan's Cane?

What of the city's extraterrestrial credentials? Here, sceptics and sensation-mongers lock horns with the abandon of stags rutting in October. Ancient alien theorists—the kind made infamous by certain lurid television programmes—have long gestured at out-of-place artefacts and vanished races, yet most sober minds (including those who can read a stratigraphy report without recourse to spiritualism) demand a more cautious brief. Critics mention that strong claims—alien, god, or otherwise—require material proof that withstands the blows of both geology and logic, else it is dust before the wind.

Yet Professor Mallard insists much. He points to architectural typologies unparalleled anywhere in the classical world, and he claims Ganymede was so memorable as to warrant mention in the texts of Plutarch and his philosophical brethren, who perhaps mistook record for fable, or allegory for autobiography.

A City For Men, By Men, Renewed By Men—But To What End?

Sociologists and political analysts are agog. Here, if one credits Mallard's ledger, urbanisation flourished under a system deprived of the distaff influence, evolving towards a vigorous democracy not through inheritance, but periodic infusions of new citizenry. To some, the city's very composition becomes a broadsheet satire of contemporary gender debates; to others, a cautionary tale writ large in alluvial mud.

A Pastiche of Past and Present

Indeed, our own era's pursuit of democracy, civil society, and cosmopolitanism now sees its uncanny precedent in Ganymede's stones. Skepticism remains; for every champion there is a censor. Memories of recent archaeological controversies—recall the forgeries of Mellaart and the somber corrections handed down to his disciples—remain fresh, and archaeological reputations, once lost, are devilish to revive.

But as the sun casts its first rays upon the walls of Ganymede, and as awestruck diggers unshroud artefacts fashioned by hands unplaceable by current taxonomy, the question must be asked: have we, for all our sciences and secularity, finally been bested by the incorrigible universe and its mischievous architects? Time alone, and the next shiplod of specialists, may tell.

In the meantime, *The Scurrilous Rag* will keep watch—between fits of ecstasy and skepticism, just where journalism, like civilisation, finds its true measure.

1970: An Essay

Fabrice Mallard

Greek and Roman literature, viewed through the scuffed lens of 1970, still loses none of its unapologetic strangeness. One cannot help but notice—long evenings at Balliol, light falling in squares over battered Loeb's—that classical texts offer little by way of explanation for what we, with bashful pantomime, still call 'homosexual desire.' They do not explain the matter; they simply absorb it, as if sun and salt and rain were fit analogies for a boyish longing. In these sunlit ruins, desire slides under the gaze of the law, the state, even the gods. It is as though the Greeks, weary from explaining thunder or democracy, found love between men neither secret nor spectacle, but woven into the fabric of the agora and the gymnasium.

Aristophanes, swan-plumed saboteur of propriety, rolls his eyes at everyone—the generals, the wives, the lovers whose affections wander or persist. He does not pause to pathologise desire between men, but rather places it in a canon of 'natural necessities': as routine as hunger or talk or a flash of laughter after dusk. Desire, here, is not a criminal nor a martyr but the ordinary denominator of mortal life: familiar enough to be mocked, too elemental to inspire panic. Xenophon, too—a steadier pen, if less exuberant—notes, almost in passing, that love between men is 'part of human nature.' One dreams of the symposium, cups clattering, where such things need not take the form of inquiry. There is acceptance before theory, antecedence without anxiety.

It is Plato, architect and mischief-maker, who compounds the matter with a suite of dialogues in which eros—between men, specifically—serves as spark for philosophy itself. Here, love is the ignition for dialectic, the thing that propels one beyond the mere allure of body towards the trembling architecture of Truth. Heterosexuality appears, faint and blurred, often as a form less suited to divine aspiration. In these dialogues, a love of men is neither aberration nor feud, but the fulcrum on which the moral life balances, or teeters.

With wearying regularity, the Roman inheritors adapt Greek forms but do not dilute the matter. Philostratus, writing centuries later and at a greater distance, grumbles into his wax tablet that a boy who rebuffs affection 'opposes nature.' Desire is so reliably ambient that only its refusal is cause for complaint; a society so at ease with this sort of attachment finds drama only in its absence. Of explanations—biological, psychological, or melancholy—a hush. One begins to envy them their lack of commentary. Obsession with definition afflicts the modern, anxious mind; the ancients, sure-footed, simply built around the fact.

What must be said, too, lest the present (for all its clatter and reform, its essays in encounter groups and legal reforms) imagine itself so original, is that ours is the more critical age, but not the more brave. The ancients, poets and sophists, gave us the record of experience without the neurotic gloss—no doctors, no lawyers, no pious magistrates to decide which appetites might be permitted. Their silence on the roots of homosexuality is an elegant, even extravagant, permission.

Other writers—Sostratus the Elder, who catalogued the affections of Olympians and slaves alike in twelve gently obscene epigrams; Iollas of Ancyra, whose treatise 'On the Affections of Companions' was found recited next to clean laundry in the baths; Xanthe of Lesbos, with her six lines on the Besotted Priestesses of Artemis, whose loves, though more clandestine, pulse with similar need. Even Epicurus, arch-atheist,

deemed desire 'one shade of pleasure in the bower of the self.' There are a dozen more: invented or real, known to a bored librarian in Alexandria, to a pale youth writing his initials into a stone. Their texts, trailing a constellation of footprints, allow us a vision of a world not confused by its own diversity.

Looking back, one learns that the classical answer to homosexuality was neither argument nor apologia, but an astonishingly simple inclusion. They made it part of the day's weather. Ours is to envy, and perhaps to emulate, that nonchalance. Real liberation does not argue—it simply is, in the records left for those wandering the gardens centuries later, pausing to wonder why so little was said—and why all that silence glows so vividly in retrospect.

1890: An anonymous pamphlet

Selecting Cherries and Other Matters of Epicurean and Historical Taste: An Address to My Delicate Sisters and Unenlightened Brothers of Posterity

(Attributed to a Lady of Means)

Permit me, gentle reader, to unfold that which appears a simple rural amusement, yet in its pitted heart nests the whole design by which gentlemen have, in all ages, assembled their histories: to wit, the Art of Cherry-Picking. Having but yesterday returned from my familial orchard, bonnet a-skew, gloves stained with the evidences of Nature's bounty, and mind more stained by the vain pretensions of the last volume of Gibbon, I am prompted, as a lady sometimes must, to instruct the world in two sciences at once—fruit-gathering and the curation of the so-called Renaissance.

On Cherries and Their Sensible Plucking

Let us commence with practicalities, for I am an Englishwoman, not a philosopher. A cherry, dear sisters, is best when red and round—neither too green (else it bite your tongue with acid retort) nor over-fat with ripeness (for then it dissolves at your touch and soils your gloves). One must stand beneath the bough with judicious air, cast one's eye for the fruit which offers itself without shrieking at your hem, and pluck—lightly, from the stalk, avoiding clusters that tempt with abundance yet deliver a multitude of pests. Do not yield to the siren call of the lowest branch alone! True connoisseurs seek the shaded, the hidden, the stubborn excellence atop the ladder—or so, at least, my housemaids assure me.

Yet take heed, for the indiscriminate gatherer soon finds her basket is filled with worms and resentment alike. The successful cherry-picker exhibits moderation: selects those fruit which support her thesis of Nature's beneficence, while artfully ignoring all evidence of rot, hail, or insect administration. This, dear reader, is not merely horticultural advice, but the key to that higher calling—writing the history of Men.

Cherry-Picking in History: The Special Province of Men

Survey, if you will, the labours of our historians—chiefly male, always lauded, whose parchment deeds swell far beyond their experience or acquaintance with cherries. No sooner are the annals of Europe prised open than one espies a horde of gents scrambling for the choicest fruit; ignore the thistles, the droughts, the barren branches! By their deft hands, only such cherries as confirm the flavour they desire are plucked and preserved, gleaming in the pies and conserves of posterity.

Thus it was with the much-trumpeted 'Renaissance'—that great social banquet, prepared, seasoned, and served forth chiefly by those who detected, amid the mess of fallen fruit, a handful of specimens which agreed with their palate and suppressed all others. Africa, the East, the lowly apple and the disregarded sloe—all were discarded as blemished or unremarkable. The men who wrote these histories, pastry-chefs of posterity, simply swept what disagreed off the cloth, and declared 'History, my dear, is nothing but cherries.'

Let no woman be so deceived. For as I have witnessed with my own baskets, the history of an orchard is rarely as sweet nor as singular as the tart contained under glass for dinner guests. Men, ever eager to defend the symmetry of their arrangement, will prune the branches back until nothing save their chosen cherries remain, and lo, call it progress.

The 'Renaissance': A Monument of Selective Taste

Turn now to the Renaissance itself (which, if we listen to most chroniclers, no one but an Italian nobleman and an obliging Medici ever attended). It is lauded as Europe's flowering, its trees festooned with genius, wit, invention—all cherries, of course. Look closer and you notice that anything sour, foreign, female, or otherwise indigestible was plucked away before the basket reached the historian's inspection. If cardinals came to blows, if peasants starved, if learned ladies scribbled unnoticed—they were quietly tossed to the compost.

Never hath a festival of fruit been so meticulously sorted. The Renaissance, so gossamer bright in its retelling, is but a monument to the artful exclusion of detail. Had these gentlemen but eaten more

widely, they might have discovered the full orchard—its wasps, its lusty crows, and its many-pronged truths. But alas! The cherry is all, and the orchard is legend.

A Lady's Counsel for History and the Table

Thus, I entreat my gentle readers, male or female, when next you pluck either cherry or fact for your table, recall: that which makes a pie wholesome is not only the perfection of each fruit, but the richness of the entire harvest—blemished, bright, and bracing by turns. Let us leave, therefore, the cherry-picking to those whose appetite for truth is as limited as their basket is shallow.

With apologies to Nature, and not one to the gentlemen.

1937: Quixotic Musings

(From a magazine article in "A Gentleman's Gentlemen")

In the latest revelatory reprint of a 1710 treatise on democracy, we are presented with a discourse that elegantly threads together the silk of philosophy and the sinew of politics—a veritable tapestry woven from the subtle yet unyielding fibres of Plato's Symposium. Cast your minds back to the ancient Agora, where words like 'democracy' and 'love' were whispered not as separate musings but as two notes in a harmonious duet. The treatise recalls Plato's profound assertion: that acceptance of male homosexual love is not merely a matter of private affection but stands entwined with the very soul of democratic governance.

You see, Plato, that grand master of dialectic and decadence, identified the natural democratic spirit with the embrace of such love—'the acceptance of homosexuality,' he intoned, 'found a place in democracy as a sign of liberty and communal trust.' He elaborates, with a sharp eye on the enemies of freedom, that despotic rulers—be they Ionian, 'barbarian', or otherwise—regard such unions and the philosophy and athletics they often inspire, as threats to tyranny. These tyrants have always known, through the tremors induced by formidable alliances such as those between Aristogiton and Harmodius, that great love can unpick the very threads of their power.

Indeed, the treatise invokes Plato's words with a flourish: where the scorn for homosexual relationships—literally 'to gratify lovers' *χαρίζεσθαι ἐρασταῖς* (*charizesthai erastais*)—takes root, it springs from the dark soil of legislative malfeasance, tyrannical oversights, and the cowardice of the governed. The homosocial bonds, the treatise

claims, are the underpinnings of true civic spirit, opposing the despot's designs by cultivating loyalty, courage, and profound mutual respect.

This reprint thus serves as a timely reminder that democracy, in its most authentic form, cherishes and is enriched by freedom in all guises—even those that discomfort the prudish sensibilities of despots both ancient and modern. To read this document is to witness how the embrace of love between men was celebrated not as a scandal but as a testament to the strength and resilience of free societies. An exquisite vindication, sumptuous in its eloquence and piercing in its truth, this edition invites today's reader to reconsider the very foundations upon which democratic ideals are built.

Published herewith, "On Democracy and the Embrace of Love" is a veritable treat not only for the enlightened gentleman but for anyone who dares to question the constricted narratives of history and governance. It stands as a beacon, reminding us all that the soul of democracy is not one of repression but of radiant inclusion.

1919: Quixotic Musings

(From a magazine article in "A Gentleman's Gentlemen")

In these curious times of ours, one cannot help but note the finest little linguistic flourish of recent vintage: should you take the rather dull and homogenising suffix from "homogenise" and shuttle it—like a cheeky schoolboy in trousers too tight—over to the earnest and blush-worthy word "sexual," you find yourself whispering "homosexual." Now, what an oddly compact construction, dear readers, to emerge from the bowels of our language! It's as if society, in its clever ambition to tidy and redirect our impulses, has engineered a trapdoor beneath the common parlance through which we all might, one day, quite inadvertently slip.

Now here's the crux of the jest, and the matter on which I, your humble correspondent, am ruminating soberly over typewriter and whisky: Might it be, that our good society, with its labyrinthine rules and polite disapprovals, is gradually turning us all into inverts? No, not those peculiar mechanical contraptions that reverse the direction of your car or your carriage but rather, metaphorically, into those social inverts—those who traverse the customary parameters, whether by choice or circumstance, against the grain?

You see, this phrasal alchemy—"homo" borrowed from the thoroughfare of uniformity, transplanted to "sexual"—is more than mere wordplay. It feels like a sly mirror held up to the world, reflecting a society subtly nudging us towards an unfamiliar order. Is our

collective conscience conforming within the lines drawn by these verbal minxes? Or are we simply discovering more room under that wide societal tent for those whose desires stray from the majority's path?

It's a cheeky speculation, I confess. But then, what is life without a little linguistic and social whimsy? The suffix's journey from mundane "homogenise" to the passionately charged "homosexual" is a metaphor writ small—an intriguing symbol, perhaps, of society's shifting shape and our ever-evolving understanding of identity.

So, as we tip our hats and adjust our monocles in these uncertain days, let us ponder this curious suffix-swap with a smile, half wonder, and a shiver—wondering if, by the very mechanics of language and culture, we too might be drawn towards new and unexpected natures.

1452: A fairy tale

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

In a kingdom not unlike our own, where marble halls echoed with velvet laughter and the air was tinged with the perfume of wistful hope, there reigned a monarch singularly besotted with a fine and curious idea. It was decreed, with all the flourish befitting a sovereign who fancied himself a patron of the improbable, that a treasure of unmatched virtue—the Oracle—must be found to quench the thirst of the realm's future. The prize for its finding? The hand of the Prince, a prize precious beyond gold and freedom itself.

Thus, three companions, each a brother-in-heart, bound not by blood but by a devotion that sang in equal measure to courage, wit, and quiet admiration, set forth. Their task: to traverse wilds where shadows larked, and storms played games with fallen leaves, all for the glory of love and legend.

After trials as curious as the scheming of a dandy and arduous as the ploughman's back, they came upon the fabled site—a lotus of such exquisite bloom it might have been plucked from the very dreams of the gods, its nine petals unfurling like a lover's secret smile under a silvery smile of moonlight. Perched at its core was the Oracle: a duck. But not any duck, no common quacker; this creature was a marvel—a tapestry woven from the iridescence of peacock dreams and crystal prisms, its feathers spilling mosaic rainbows fragmenting the light.

One friend was utterly mesmerised—his gaze fixed, his soul held captive in the gleam of the fantastical plumage. Another, overwhelmed by the magic, succumbed swiftly to slumber, nestled among petals, dreaming perhaps of the Prince's smile. The third, steadier of gaze and

soul, simply admired—a silent witness to beauty that required no words.

Having fulfilled the King's demand with nary a quibble regarding the peculiar nature of the treasure, the three returned, their bonds stronger and their hearts light. True to the promise, they each wed the Prince, a quarto in joyous union, their days hence marked by laughter, love, and endless tales of their curious quest.

It is said in those gleaming halls and whispered in velveteen corners, that the true treasure of kingdoms is not gold nor jewels, but the courage to seek the uncommon, and the grace to accept the wondrous in all its splendid forms.

1970: A respectful review

“Language as Ladder: Social Class and the Idiom of Distinction”
by AF Blandy

With the deepest respect and a modest bow to the refined pleasures of noble lineage, I, Percival Blandy, Trustee of the Ducal Household and erstwhile valet to His Grace the Duke of Mallard, take pen in hand to introduce Dr. Arthur Blandy's scholarly marvel, “Language as Ladder: Social Class and the Idiom of Distinction.” It is indeed a singular pleasure for one of humble origins blessed to have served in such illustrious company, to present a discourse that so aptly accords with the very fabric of His Grace's preserved traditions.

Throughout the long and storied tenure of the Fitzartur dynasty, it has been a well-guarded but scarcely whispered truth that among the splendid seraglios of dukedom, the naming of His Grace's male attendants and companions followed a keenly orchestrated ritual. Unlike the horses and hounds, whose names—ever so modestly—paid homage to their lineage with little more than “son of” or “daughter of,” these chosen men bore titles bestowed by the Duke himself or, more commonly, by an elder Blandy entrusted with discerning His Lordship's enduring tastes. This was no idle whim, but an expression of the family's prerogative, a delicate art shaped over generations with an eye both to legacy and the peculiar demands of fleshly affection.

It is perhaps little known outside these hallowed walls that the fostering of such favoured beauty was not merely indulgence but a mantle of sanctuary offered to gentlemen of uncommon character, whose destinies might otherwise have faltered in less gracious hands. Indeed, it is my firm contention—and one I am proud to proclaim—that modern shifts in understanding and acceptance of diverse affections owe much to the moral stamina embodied within families such as this,

where love in its many splendid forms received protection and nurture. The Duke's stable of favourites, meticulously chosen and carefully retired into the fold of domestic service when their time was done, exemplifies a discreet education—a schooling of sorts in the subtleties of loyalty, discretion, and, dare I say, an aristocratic decorum of pleasure.

Contrary to the vulgar custom among lesser houses to assign whipping boys to absorb punishment, the Fitzartur playthings learned instead to administer discipline with refined taste on the Ducal person himself, a practice that, I venture, passed from father to son along with the family's precious secrets. This, dear reader, forms part of the intricate dance by which language, status, and intimate custom intertwine—they are the ladder by which social distinction ascends, as Dr. Blandy so eloquently explores.

It is with the utmost deference and anticipation that I commend to you this monograph, a testament both to the power of language as a marker of class and to the discreet legacies of affection and sanctuary that have quietly shaped our history.

1972: The Resonant Experience

From the magazine, "Ladies of the Light", Isabella Duckson

If you have ever wondered whether the truly mystical experiences are reserved for the sainthood or simply those who can part with a small fortune, then dear ladies, gather close. I ventured to a place so singular, so steeped in the aetheric promise of transformation, that it could only have been conjured by the very pinnacle of credulous imagination. They call it The Resonant Experience, sold come-hither in the gilded wrappers of transcendental jargon.

For a sum that could indeed procure many a less ephemeral pleasure, one is invited to a verdant grove, where the only requirement is to hum. Not to chant, which might suggest a dusty monastery, nor to sing, which feels too rooted in this humdrum world of secular melancholy, nor even to ohm, that tired old mantra of spiritual revivalists past. No, just hum. As if an innocent vibration might unleash the hidden storms in our chakras.

And hum they did. A congregation arrayed in flowing yogic pantaloons and linens, clutching their sacred geometry-engraved bottles as tightly as their hopes. A gentleman, bold or perhaps simply unmoored from his origins, had even rechristened himself Arcturus. With a wry smile, I introduced some invented 'bio-sonic coherence'—

science by whimsy—and then ushered them into the symphony of their own making.

The sounds ranged from nasal whimsy to profound ardour, filling the grove with the earnest cacophony of spiritual resolve. Afterwards, exclamations of tingling spines and open chakras danced among the trees, a woman wept with a gratitude she perhaps never dared show daily, and a man begged to be certified as a future franchisor of humming enlightenment.

Did they find nirvana cloaked in sound waves? Heaven forbid. But each left transformed—or at the very least convinced of transformation—and I was left with a smile as dry as a desert and an inbox brimming with hopeful seekers. Truly, modern spirituality is less a quest for the spirit and more a transaction of faith.

So, my dear restless souls gathered in the pages of Ladies of the Light, if ever you find yourselves yearning for change wrapped in the shimmering packet of credulity, I do humbly recommend this experience. You'll leave richer in stories if not enlightenment—and that, after all, is something.

1870: The Procreative Habits of the Pot People

An Ethnographical Report on a Hitherto Hidden Civilisation in the Southern Hemisphere

A private printing by Henry Mallard, Gentleman Explorer

It is with the utmost discretion and scholarly decorum that I present the fourth instalment of my observations on the enigmatic Pot People, a secluded civilisation nestled deep within a remote, undisclosed region of the southern hemisphere. In this report, I direct your attention to their curious procreative customs, an affair as delicate as the rarest orchid and as complex as the interplay of shadows upon ancient pottery.

As the turning of the seasons marks the time of renewal, so too do this society's men and women convene in solemn consensus to decide who among their number shall embrace the sacred prospect of bearing offspring. The proceedings are conducted with a quiet dignity, a harmonious accord between the sexes, who, despite their separate abodes—houses inhabited predominantly by those of the same gender—come together in the most customary manner known to natural philosophy.

In a testament to their communal spirit, the expectant mothers find their care entrusted wholly to the womenfolk, who attend to every

need with tender ministrations, whilst the men support in subtler ways from afar. Upon the child's birth, an astonishing phenomenon occurs: the infant is received not as the possession of any one parent, but rather absorbed into the collective custody of the entire village. The child's lineage remains unspoken, the familial ties dissolved into a broader network of shared responsibility and affection.

It is within these social confines that the Pot People flourish, their childrearing a testament to the strength found in communal engagement rather than individual ownership. Such same-gendered households, interconnected and interdependent, shape the fabric of their society, weaving bonds of kinship that transcend the limitations of blood and convention.

This intricate system, as alien as it may seem to our accustomed sensibilities, offers fascinating insights into the vast diversity of human social organisation and the multiplicity of paths by which communities nurture their future.

1764: The Mallard Chapel

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

In a place forgotten by time but not by the ambitions of men, there stands a cathedral vast beyond all reckoning—a monument not carved in haste but honed over ages, until no living soul recalls the spark that once ignited its very beginnings. The edifice stretches and sprawls as though the earth itself had sighed, exhaling stone and timber and gold, drawn together in an embrace both magnificent and grotesque.

The exterior, a tangled symphony of ancient craft, boasts gargantuan buttresses and flying ribs like the bones of primordial beasts, thick with centuries of moss and the whispered secrets of forgotten prayers. Towers pierce the sky like the fingers of a rather distracted giant, some leaning as if to whisper hurried conspiracies to the passing clouds. Walls hewn from stubborn wood, quarried stone, veined marble, and the crumbling bones of the very artisans who lent their skill—there, in the mortar, lie ghostly remains pressed into the sacred fabric, embodying dedication, despair, and an almost comical devotion to permanence.

Crosses loom with ornate finery, their crests gilded and yet faintly tarnished, a testament to the endless dance between glory and decay. Bas-reliefs depict saints and sinners alike, their faces smudged with the grime of an unrelenting climate and perhaps, less publicly, the occasional tear from an overly zealous custodian of the faith.

Step within, and you enter caverns aglow not by the meek light of candles but by vaults shimmering with gold leaf and gemstones that pulse like captured stars. The air hangs heavy with the weight of opulence—the silks and velvets of vestments drape from every niche, their threads woven with golds tall enough to thread the sun, and purples dark as the night sky over forgotten moors. Carpets lie thick and sumptuous beneath the feet, threaded with esoteric patterns that might reveal mysterious truths—or at the very least, with enough complexity to confuse unwelcome visitors senseless. Lanterns, hung like terrestrial constellations, swing gently, their flames casting flickering shadows that seem to dance with the bones and relics enshrined within shadowy alcoves.

Here lie holy relics aplenty: not only the expected fragments of saints but an anonymous sheep's bone, carried and venerated with a sincerity only rivalled by the pomp surrounding it. Such curiosities fill niches and cupboards, each whispered about in hushed tones by the custodians who guard them with a mixture of reverence and weary amusement.

And so the cathedral breathes—an eternal monument of contradictions: majestic yet crumbling, sacred yet absurdly lavish, alive with the echo of footsteps long gone, and gleaming with the blush of treasures amassed by generations that have long since become dust.

1870: The Mortality of the Pot People

An Ethnographical Report on a Hitherto Hidden Civilisation in the Southern Hemisphere

By Henry Mallard, Gentleman Explorer

It is with no small degree of both solemnity and wonderment that I present this tenth discourse in my continuing study of the curious and hitherto concealed community known amongst my notes as the “Pot People.” This present missive concerns itself with their singular and most contemplative attitudes towards the inescapable phenomenon of death, a matter universally esteemed yet curiously perceived within this secluded society.

To commence, the Pot People exhibit an extraordinary disregard for the measurement of time as it is conventionally understood by our Western contrivances. In a world void of clocks or calendars, the majestic passage of years leaves no numerical trace upon their beings. No soul amongst them is marked by an age count; indeed, it is a society where age is measured not in digits but in quiet experience. They are a long-lived folk, yet in the absence of temporal record-keeping, the

precise extent of their longevity remains a mystery to any discerning observer.

Death in Pot society arrives not as a surprise but rather a tacitly acknowledged visitor. It would appear that the approaching silence is universally discerned well in advance by the individual departing this realm. Upon accepting the nearing cessation of life, the subject gathers a modest collection of cherished tokens from the gifts of community and nature—perhaps a feather of particular elegance, a fragment of ochre, or a favourite pot. Thus the individual journeys deliberately to a distinctive mound, a site positioned with care and respect: far enough to afford the village a measure of solitude, yet near enough to remain within reach for those “conversations” which shall endure beyond speech.

This mound is neither tomb nor shrine but a space holding the essence of presence, for the departed are regarded not with dread or sorrow, but as entities “dead but not dead,” transformed into a state of quiet companionship. There exist no wakes or grand funerary ceremonies to punctuate these transitions. Life proceeds, fluid and unbroken, as if the passage of death is but a gentle pause in the grand discourse of existence. Crucially, there are no myths or origin tales or reverent recountings of ancestors; a curious absence that bespeaks a cultural philosophy where the past neither fetters nor dominates the present.

The Pot People’s death customs thus exemplify a serene naturalism. There is no theatrical mourning, no pomp nor ritual, simply the natural continuity of life embraced with equanimity. This is a society where the dead remain neighbours, silent interlocutors alongside the living, their presence acknowledged with quiet dignity rather than grand proclamation. In this manner, death is less a rupture than a subtle transformation—ultimately less feared, more accepted as a part of the continuum.

1994: The Mallard Chapel

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

In the waning light of a cool autumn afternoon, he found himself standing before a vast, brooding silhouette against the dimming sky—a cathedral so outrageously enormous and Gothic in its creaking complexity, it seemed less a building than a living thing haunted by its own grandeur. Fingers of stone and wood reached toward the heavens with no concern for symmetry, the rocky buttresses tangled as if in a

holy tangle with the creeping ivy that clung like the memories of those who built it.

A man of modest curiosity and considerable nerve, he had heard whispers of this ruin—a monument so ancient and so slowly assembled that no living soul could remember why it had been started, let alone what it originally meant to be. The walls, woven from marble, timber, gold, and the very bones of its long-dead architects, held a smell like earth turned over in a graveyard right after a past mid-summer’s storm: sharp, damp, and faintly holy.

Inside, the cathedral breathed a different kind of awe. Vast caverns draped with gold leaf shimmered beneath arches studded with gemstones that caught the light like trapped fireflies. Relics—the holy and the peculiar—lined the stone shelves: a bone from a sheep encased in crystal, vestments of silk and velvet richer than any king’s garment, carpets thick enough to swallow footsteps whole, and lanterns that dangled from chains like a constellation of dim stars.

That was where his fate turned, in the near silence of the echoing nave. There, in a cracked mirror that hung crooked on a pillar, his reflection wavered and shimmered until it was no longer quite his own. The face that stared back was as pale and strange as the cathedral itself, its eyes glinting with secrets older than the gilded reliquaries.

“Who calls upon the bones of the builders?” it whispered—an echo of a voice lost in ages, yet oddly close. He felt a chill dance along his spine as the shadowy form leaned toward him through the fractured glass, and the cathedral seemed to pulse with a life of unfathomable memory.

Step by hesitant step, spellbound and breathless, she entered the depths of the cathedral’s mystery, where the line between stone and spirit, past and present, was as fragile and shimmering as the fractured mirror that had whispered his name.

1899: Quixotic Musings

(From a magazine article in “A Gentleman’s Gentlemen”)

It is most elegantly lamented and irrefutably true that our noble democratic experiment, so oft lauded and championed, now flounders—not solely at the hands of external foes, but, alas, from within its own parlour. It is carried aloft, flailing as it may be, by those selfsame champions who profess to adore equality and justice, yet mimic the most tiresome of lovers’ quarrels.

You are, no doubt, quite familiar with the crescendo of voices rising for Feminism and Masculinism, those two spirited combatants born

from necessity, each seeking to mend the historic scales, only to find themselves entangled in an unfortunate ballet of reciprocal antagonism. Rather than sip from the shared cup of cooperative discourse, they hurl challenges like dandies at a ball, each striving to outshine and outmanoeuvre the other in a most unseemly duel for dominance.

Permit me to declare, from the grand balconies of observation—and may I say, after the finest social gatherings and political salons—that this fractious opposition is a grievous offence to the very integrity of democratic governance. Democracy, that delicate creature, demands a harmony surpassing duels of discord. I propose it stands firm upon a tripod, not a seesaw—requiring not two opposing forces locked eternally in combat, but a third, a vital party: the nongendered human.

This exquisite third leg—neither entirely masculine nor feminine—transcends the petty passions of gender and identity to embody the reasoned citizen of contemplation, an arbiter, a unifier; the embodiment of social cohesion itself. In this trinary embrace alone does democracy find its exquisite balance. The movements of Feminism and Masculinism, as spirited and essential as they are, prove by themselves insufficient and, when locked in battle, reduce democracy to a teetering spectacle.

It is only when the nongendered human asserts its rightful place in this democratic trinity that the edifice steadies, poises, and blooms into vibrant flourishing.

I do not dismiss the complaints and demands of feminism nor the echoes of masculinism; rather, I advocate a reimagining—a harmonious dance led by an overarching humanism poised elegantly beyond binaries.

Dear inheritors of the grand democratic endeavour, it falls to you to cultivate this understanding, so that democracy may at last cease trembling beneath its own discord and stride boldly into a future radiant with genuine equality and enduring stability.

Thus, ladies and gentlemen, I leave you with this truth draped in the velvet of paradox and wit, for as I often say, “The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its democracy accommodates the paradox of its humanity.”

1929: Man Teaches Duck to Speak English— “It’s a Secret” Says the Feathered Pundit

The Scurrilous Rag

In what can only be described as the most extraordinary feathered feat of our time, a Londoner, has reportedly taught a duck to speak English. The story, whispered with a mixture of incredulity and delight,

tells of a modest man whose patient tutelage has resulted in a mallard uttering its first phrase: “It’s a secret.” This cryptic declaration has left linguists, animal lovers, and gossipmongers all abuzz with anticipation.

The man in question, known simply as Mr. Iamer Duckson, a gentleman of curious disposition, claims this to be but the first whisper in what he hopes will become a voluminous conversation. “If a duck can breach the barriers of silence,” he postulates, “what other tongues might be learned?” His ambitions extend beyond the pond; in fact, Mr. Duckson is known in certain circles for his fascination with what he terms “extraterrestrial visitations,” or more mundanely, UFOs.

He offers an intriguing hypothesis: Either everything on Earth is, quite extraordinarily, alien in origin, or the reason we have yet to welcome visitors from beyond the stars is that we’ve only ever mastered our own species’ language. “But now,” he muses with a twinkle, “I have opened a dialogue with the denizens of the duck kingdom. The gates to linguistic universes hitherto unseen may at last be ajar.”

Whether the duck chooses to divulge the secrets of the cosmos or merely quacks about the weather remains to be seen. However, the public awaits eagerly for the next keynote address from our feathered friend.

In the meantime, Mr. Duckson’s endeavour raises rather charming questions about the boundaries of communication and the curious company we keep—be they human, feathered, or from faraway worlds.

One can only hope the duck’s subsequent messages prove less cryptic and more conversational. We shall be listening.

1975: The Aviary Within Us: A Feathered Revelation

An article by Professor Sheesa Duckson in “Ladies of Light”

It is with a heart both light and a mind affixed firmly to the clouds that I share with you a most delightful insight: humanity, for all its self-important shenanigans, is far more akin to our avian cousins than convention would dare admit. We flock, as does the sparrow; we manage our numbers, as wisely as any flamingo at the watering hole; and we take to seasonal migrations, not in the stiff manner of those duller beasts who patrol the ground, but with a buoyant sense of purpose and elegantly choreographed departure.

And the music, my dears—the singing! Could any creature more musical than the nightingale claim kinship with our species? Not content with mere voice, we fashion tools, yes, tools, not unlike the clever crows famed for their inventions. It’s no secret that, while we look to the trees as ancestors rooting us in the earth, it is also to the

skies that our hearts and imaginations perpetually soar—seeking beyond the horizon, beyond the known, much like our feathered friends exploring the empyrean blue.

Consider our social arrangements, not unlike a flamingo’s flamingoism—one dare say, we number and nest in communities, managing population and relationship with a carefulness both instinctive and socially refined. Whether it is the corporate boardroom or the bustling modern kitchen, we exhibit a kind of flocking behaviour that, while unlikely to ruffle feathers, shows an unspoken acceptance of our shared nature.

Indeed, my thesis boldly declares: to deny our inner bird is to deny the poetry of the human soul. And if you doubt, listen closely at dawn—there’s a twittering chorus within us all, aching to take flight.

So, next time you find yourself looking upwards, do not merely admire the winged acrobats of the heavens—remember that in spirit, if not in feather, you too are a creature of the skies, a beneficiary of both tree and air, poised eternally on the cusp of discovery.

1931: A discourse on mosaics

(From a magazine article in “A Gentleman’s Gentlemen”)

Permit me a momentary departure from tradition to expound upon a discovery of the greatest fractal import—a veritable ouroboros of consummate elegance and recursive witticism—that defines not only the infinite looping of time and substance but also the very manner in which a discerning man shall seek his male companions.

Imagine, if you will, the ouroboros—the serpent devouring its own tail, circling eternally, an emblem of cyclicity, self-reference, and, in our case, refined company. Like the pattern in Escher’s staircases or the intricate fugues of Bach, male companionship, that most delicate social music, unfolds itself again and again in self-similar patterns. Thus, the technique to secure suitable partners is elegantly simple yet profoundly recursive.

First, a gentleman must recognise that his ideal companion is but a fractal echo of himself—a smaller yet strikingly complex copy manifesting qualities admired upon closer inspection. Our path, then, is to identify one such reflection within one’s social milieu. And yet, therein lies the rub: the search is embedded within layers, each encounter a new level of recursion where the initial image reveals ever more nuanced variations—like Bach’s canonical inversion or Escher’s endless waterfall.

To employ this method, the aspirant must engage in the famed “fractal introduction”: an oscillation between self-presentation and attentive observation, a recursive dance of mutual recognition that, like the serpent eating its tail, returns always to the point of origin—the self—enriched and transformed. The key, dear readers, is not simply to find a mirror but to delight in the infinite regress of similarity within difference.

This fractal technique ensures that each selection is not arbitrary but harmoniously coherent, a social fugue in which voices rise and fall while preserving the integrity of the overarching motif—you, the gentleman at the centre of this exquisite loop. In doing so, one navigates not chaos but order beautifully disguised as complexity.

So, gentlemen, I advise you: eschew the linear and embrace the recursive. Seek within the spiral patterns of your social dance the familiar curves and resonances. For in the infinite loop of the ouroboros and in the fractal geometry of companionship, you will find not merely a partner but a reflection of your very self, perfected through repetition and variation.

In the grand fugue of male fellowship, you are both composer and composition, serpent and tail—forever entwined in the spectacle of discovery.

1797: The Swan-Brothers and the Fairy Tart

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

Once upon a breath held low beneath the heavy velvet canopy of night, where the moon, swollen and secret, draped herself across the waiting pines, there dwelt a fairy, neither fully he nor she nor that unnameable grace between. This creature wove among twelve noble swans, the very embodiment of twilight’s touch—creatures of such exquisite, curious beauty that even the stars paused their endless burning to wonder.

By day, they glided—a silver fleet upon a lake whose waters held no secrets but shimmered with the weight of them all. The swans, those exquisite paradoxes of loss and grace, moved as if beneath a waking dream, their forms suggesting and denying the mortal limning of muscle and bone. But when the moon’s spell deepened into night, there came a transfiguration: they shed feathers like whispered promises and became men—if men they were at all. Limbs lithe as willow branches, eyes bright, laughter spilling like goblets clinking in a midnight hall.

The woods sang with their revels, a music of wild delight rippling through shadows where dryads hid, tongues heavy with scandal and awe. These swans were more than brothers; they were conspirators in velvet and vice, tangled in a fellowship forged in mirth, secret sighs, stolen kisses beneath boughs heavy with knowing leaves. Even Pan, with his raucous grin, might have blessed them, these joyous rebels of feather and flesh.

The fairy, known in whispered half-spoken tones as the Tart of the Wood, was a prismatic being of many faces. One night adorned in pearls, her smile a blade sharper than any Duke's dagger; the next, a rakish cavalier, silks cast off to dance unshackled in the gleam of moonlight and mischief. Neither male nor female, their form shifted like the flame, a constant becoming that dissolved the old binaries.

Together, they spoke in tongues lost to the dust of time—"thou," "thee," "sweetest heart," "fairest sin"—language as gilded and lush as the nights they inhabited. They plotted to expand their circle, a secret cabal of beauty and chaos, summoning new swans from the lakes afar, enchanted by their promise and their reckless promise of freedom.

Jealousy, that old fire, flared and faded among them—never cruel, always tender, for in their quarrels gleamed the radiant madness that only shared joy and brotherhood can ignite.

And so beneath the watchful eyes of the moon, the fairy and his swan brothers lived, loved, and laughed—a mirthful pact of feather and flame, forever alive in the magic of night's embrace.

1929: The Fractal Dance

Finding Your Sapphic Sister in the Ouroboros of Love

An article by Dr Bea Duckson in "Ladies of Light"

Permit me to unravel for you a concept at once charmingly simple and deliciously complex—a fractal motif that governs not only the infinity of the cosmos but also, as I have delightfully discovered, the labyrinthine patterns of our Sapphic love lives. Yes, love itself, that endless serpent devouring its own tail, manifests in the very geometry of our desire and companionship.

Imagine, if you will, the ouroboros in all its splendour—not merely as a symbol of eternal return but as a miniature of ourselves, repeated endlessly in the face of a kindred soul. The woman you seek is a fractal echo of your own finest qualities, a recursive reflection glimpseable through the kaleidoscope of social interplay. In other words, she is both

like you and intriguingly different, revealing new layers as you examine her with the patient eye of an artist—or a mathematician.

To seek such a partner, one need not embark on Herculean quests; rather, embrace what I call the “fractal invitation.” This involves projecting your true self, then stepping back to observe for resonances—patterns in speech, manner, laugh, or gaze—that echo your own essence. The dance is recursive: you follow the reflection, and in turn, she follows the flicker of your light, until your patterns entwine symmetrically, a duet in infinite complexity.

And why does this fractal approach work so marvellously? Because love, like Escher’s staircases or Bach’s infinite fugues, thrives on self-similarity tempered by difference, the tension between sameness and novelty that keeps the dance ever fresh. The fractal nature of desire assures that our hearts do not seek mere clones but spirals of connection, ever descending and ascending in praise of intimacy.

Ladies, I assure you, the formula is elegant, accessible, and infinitely rewarding. Embrace your own fractal brilliance; seek the whispered echo in society’s mirror; delight in the recursive garden of Sapphic possibility where every reflection is a new beginning.

After all, what better way to articulate love’s eternal return than the endless play of self and other, contained within the sacred Ouroboros?

1897: In the Garden, Beyond Temptation

(From a magazine article in “A Gentleman’s Gentlemen”)

It is a curious thing: to find oneself in a garden that rivals Eden in acreage, yet from which the serpent, in a rare act of discretion, has chosen abstention. Not a single apple, nor its biting consequence is here in evidence—unless one counts the varieties of men, so artfully arranged, bare-chested and aimlessly splendid, as nature’s most edible gifts. These gentlemen, it must be said, stroll about the lawns with such studied nonchalance that one is tempted only to linger, never to indulge.

The lakes—more polite mirrors than the ones supplied by Madrid’s finest glass-makers—glimmer with ducks, both ornamental and culinary. One species, the white Mallard, is attended with such ardor as to deserve its own vigilant keeper, whose duties include rescuing the creatures from the clutches of foxes, poachers, and, on special occasions, the Duke’s gastronomic ambitions. (It is an established truth, whispered in certain circles, that one must never consume one’s own mascot; a rule that narrowly saves many a duck from becoming noble dish.)

Statues and Follies

Upon my promenade, I find myself tripping most tastefully upon marble Greeks and Romans—heroes, gods, and philosophers—modestly obscured by a host of yews. This is the legacy of Lady Mallard, who considered the patio unsuitable for “embarrassing nudities,” thus relegating antiquity’s finest torsos to a perpetual game of hide-and-seek with the shrubbery. Between these relics lies an assortment of architectural confessions: pagodas crumbling in stately resignation, follies erected on the whim of a Duke who mistook permanence for caprice and neglect for refinement.

Gardens and Deception

The walled flower garden, I am told, possesses dimensions so excessive it may only be measured by wit: you can lose yourself amongst its camellias, pretenders to the rose’s throne, without encountering anything resembling sincerity. Stands of *Agnus Castus* and *Apocynum* abound, recommended only for those botanists who mistake perfidy for perfume. Indeed, one catches the distinct whiff of coldness and deceit, as if each petal were a preface to intrigue. I made a mental note to return—if only to chart all the nooks primed for idleness, and all the crannies best left to those who relished secrecy over sunlight.

And then, the kitchen garden! Nine acres devoted to the immodest ambitions of fruit: glasshouses blush with peaches, grapes, melons, and cucumbers, all forced to achieve the sort of excellence demanded only by a Duke and remembered by no one at all—a triumph of appetites, splendidly ignored.

If Eden lacked temptation, it very likely made up for it with spectacle. Here, the most dangerous delights are ornamental, and the most delicious scandals are reserved for the next afternoon’s stroll.

1934: Consider the Empire

From the magazine, “Ladies of the Light”, Sheeno Duckson

Consider the octopus, that most unprepossessing of creatures, with its multitude of limbs sprawled like the ambitions of a restless empire. In these tentacles we may find a fitting analogy for the very formation of empires and colonies, where each arm reaches outwards, grasping for diverse spheres of influence—culture, religion, literature, history, and sovereignty—all extensions of a central authority that remains elusive yet commanding.

The body of the octopus, quite like the motherland or sovereign capital, is a compact seat of power, mysterious in its depths and cunning in its movements. It floats in the waters of history, often unseen until its many arms stealthily entwine new territories, pulling them into its orbit. Each tentacle weaves its own narrative—a thread of culture that colours a colony, a strand of religion that binds communities, a finger of literature that writes the story that legitimates the conquest.

These arms, flexible yet firm, resemble the way an empire's many facets stretch wide, sometimes gently caressing yet at times gripping with unyielding force. They reach into the minds and hearts of subjects, into laws and language, into markets and monuments. Like the octopus with its ability to reshape and contort, an empire adapts its expression according to the delicate, often contradictory, needs of its disparate limbs.

And yet there is an artistry to this process, if one may call the expansion of dominion an art. For the octopus does not merely conquer by brute force; it seduces, camouflages, and whispers its presence. So too does an empire entwine itself in the stories of its colonies, dissolving borders as easily as ink obscures the water. Sovereignty becomes a living thing, an arbor of life where every leaf—whether a conversion, a law, or a legend—is part of an endless, ceaseless embrace.

So, when one contemplates the octopus, one might do well to consider the empires it so uncannily mirrors. Complex, beguiling, and infinitely adaptable, an empire's many limbs extend far, feeding from the central wisdom, history, and sometimes folly of the body that guides it—the very embodiment of power's spread across the vast sea of human endeavour.

1717: The great Arboris

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

In the depths of a universe stitched together by whispers of root and branch, there stood the great Arboris—a tree as old as time's first sigh, a sentinel of realms in mystery and might. Imagine, if you will, a tree so vast it might give the impression of having sprouted before even the notion of "before" existed. This arboreal colossus stretched its limbs beyond mortal comprehension, its branches tangled like the minutiae of government memos and the obscure clauses in treaties that nobody actually reads but everyone insists must be obeyed. Its roots, deep and gnarled, wove through dimensions with the delicacy of a grand tapestry

—if that tapestry were woven by a committee whose members were determined to argue over every single thread.

Now, Arboris was no ordinary tree. Oh no. It was the world's first bureaucrat, its first conspiracy, its first great cosmic vision of "let's see what happens if we stick it all together and hope it holds." It held the interlocking multiverses in a delicate, verdant balance, much as any middle manager holds the tension between wildly different departments threatening to tear the company apart. If one root twitched too boldly, another branch might sulk into withdrawal, and somewhere a pocket universe might decide to quit altogether, leaving only an angry note pinned to the nearest star.

The leaves on Arboris were as various as the cultures, histories, and legends sprouting from its limbs: the leaf of Sovereignty, thick and imposing; the delicate, fluttering leaf of Religion, which rustled with whispers and occasional thunderclaps; the sturdy leaf of Literature, blossoming in myriad tongues and footnotes, often overlooked though ceaselessly gossiping in secret; the leaf of Philosophy, which perpetually seemed to hang just out of reach, like a carrot tied to a stick, forever promising enlightenment but mostly delivering headaches.

And from these leaves hung its fruit—ambitious empires, curious colonies, and fragile alliances, ripe for plucking or rotting on the branch depending on the care they received or the meddling of a meddling gods' committee. The fruit of empire required constant tending, lest it fall prematurely into the hands of misrule or rebellion—a perpetual harvest dance choreographed half by destiny, half by intrigue, and entirely by accident.

In this cosmic woodland, the Arboreal myth teaches that all things grow interconnected, tangled in the same labyrinthine ecology. One cannot pull a single thread or root without causing a symphony of unexpected rustles across the multiverse's foliage. And so, we stand, gazing up at Arboris, marvelling at its incomprehensible scale, laughing at the absurdity of its bureaucratic whims, and often wondering whether the tree itself knows that it's only waiting for the right wind to send a few crisp leaves fluttering into oblivion.

Thus is the story of Arboris, the great cosmic tree—rooted in myth, watered by satire, and branching endlessly into the absurd and the poignant, much like the best stories of mankind itself.

1885: Elspeth Mallard

Private papers

There are many curious heritances that pass within our Mallard families, some stretching over centuries as if bound by invisible threads of time and memory. The Dukes, with their solemn crowns and grand estates, inherit their regalia and titles; we ladies receive an assortment of jewels and gowns, often passed down from our Dowager cousins, each piece a story stitched in fabric and gem. Yet amidst these known treasures there lies a peculiarity—my mother has recently come into possession of a rather plain wooden chest. Dark and unpolished, it bears the weight of many hands but none have deemed it worthy of embellishment. Two iron bands encircle it, as though to guard something precious, and it is secured with a simple lock for which a key exists.

With measured care, I lifted the chest's lid, the air within thick with the scent of aged wood and forgotten years. Within lay a book, the size one might expect of a family Bible, heavy and solemn in its presence. At first sight, the worn leather cover bore the legend of King James, though the faded print might have fooled the casual observer into mistaking it for a sacred text. Yet on nearer inspection, the cover revealed itself as something else entirely: a door, exquisitely depicted, but a door that served as mere masque—a deceit, much like many the world has witnessed, promising salvation but delivering enigma.

The book is not scripture but a journal, a curious tome of notes, recipes, and strange symbols interspersed with drawings. Some of these markings are dated, others cryptic, hinting at knowledge esoteric and personal all at once. The door adorning the cover is captivating: crafted of dark timber aged and seasoned by untold years, its frame detailed with metalwork both angular and floral, a paradox of austerity and ornament. At its centre, a keyhole shaped as a duck—a symbol both whimsical and solemn—its feathers detailed with the devotion of a skilled artisan, its single gem eye shimmering with silent invitation.

This chest, this book, is no mere heirloom; it is a vessel of secrets. Its plain exterior belies the complexity contained within, much like the family itself, where appearances oft deceive, and where the past is not so easily laid to rest. I shall endeavour to decipher its contents in time, though I suspect that this inheritance speaks not only to our blood but to mysteries hazardously balanced between remembrance and oblivion. Whatever truths the journal holds, they shall reveal themselves only to those patient enough, and perhaps brave enough, to confront what lies behind that ornate door.

1931: Quixotic Musings

(From a magazine article in "A Gentleman's Gentlemen")

At my grandmother's house—a residence steeped as much in mystery as in dust—there lay a singular artefact which, I confess, seized my attention with the subtlety of a velvet-clad herald announcing a ball. It is a book which boasts upon its cover no less than an exquisite door; a marvel so finely wrought with an artistry that commands both awe and whispered conjecture.

The frame of this portal, fashioned from dark timber venerable with countless seasons, is polished by hands long surrendered to the passage of time, yet still proud in its ebon sheen. Emerging from this surface, one finds sinuous metalwork lines that weave the sharp austerity of geometry with delicate floral arabesques, a harmonious tension dancing betwixt stark and ornate. Angular facets catch the light's subtle gleam, while sweeping curves twine in a rhythmic embrace, evoking tales as ancient and unrealised as the shadows in a forgotten manor.

At the centre of this grand design sits a keyhole, but not any common aperture—nay, it is sculpted in the shape of a duck. This figure, both regal and whimsical, holds its slender neck in gracious arch; the feathers, chased with the devotion of an artisan whose soul has been poured into each barb, shine beneath a burnished bronze patina. The duck's eye, a polished gem, dazzles as if harbouring silent wisdom, inviting the most curious to contemplate the secrets lurking just beyond this sealed threshold. Surely, this sentinel is a homage to lineage and symbolism, an elegant liaison where nature and human artistry conspire.

The clasp that guards this ancient tome raises even higher the stakes of delicate engineering. Woven from threads of spun silver with a mesmerising lattice of shimmer and shadow, it catches the eye like moonbeams entrapped in an eternal minuet. The clasp's form is at once geometric and fluid, with angular bands intersecting rhythmic curves, suggesting a tension that echoes that of the door itself. And here again, at the clasp's heart, glimmers the duck-shaped keyhole, as if the creature were poised to spring to life from its silver embrace, its minute feathers etched with such fine delicacy that one wonders if it breathes beneath the cold metal.

Completing the enigma is the key, modest in appearance inside a small box—a simple sliver of cold metal resting upon a cushion of deep velvet the colour of midnight seas. Yet this unassuming object holds a mystery most profound. Upon lifting the box lid, the key performs a disappearing act, fading like morning mist in the sun's first caress, shimmering translucent before vanishing altogether. This is not mere

illusion but a dance at the threshold of existence, a truth suspended between being and nothingness—waiting, perhaps, for the moment of observation to reclaim solidity from the ether.

Thus, gentle readers, I present to you not merely a book but a portal to wonder and curiosity; a relic that summons both the aesthetic and the arcane. One can scarcely resist the lure of such craftsmanship and mystery—a reminder that the most extraordinary secrets often reside behind the most beguiling doors.

1964: The Mallard Pond

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

There once was a man and a woman who found themselves embroiled in a rather spirited debate about life, the universe, and everything. The man, with all the confidence of a philosopher armed with logic, declared that men knew best. He extolled the virtues of reason, science, and rational thought, insisting that these were the true lenses through which the mysteries of existence could be unveiled. According to him, men charted the stars, crafted laws, and brought clarity to all things complex, seeing sharply through the fog of confusion where others could not.

The woman, unfazed by his lofty claims, smiled with gentle knowing and countered that men were often rather blind to the subtle realities of life. She spoke of connection, intuition, and emotion—the threads that knit the fabric of existence beyond cold fact. In her eyes, women perceived a deeper kind of wisdom, one rooted in relationships and the harmonious balance of hearts as much as minds. It was not just the facts that mattered, but the feelings behind them, the invisible strings that tied people and worlds together.

Back and forth the argument wove, a tapestry of rival certainties and passionate insistence. Neither was willing to concede, each growing weary but determined to defend their truths. Then, from their midst, came a voice that had until then been only a silent observer. The duck, who had listened patiently all along, finally spoke: “You’re both wrong, and I can tell you how, except I’m a duck, and you don’t understand a word I’m saying, do you?”

1947: Viola Vorpel

Introduction to an address to the House of Lords

My Lords, it behooves me to speak plainly and forcefully on a matter of utmost importance: the very definition of colonisation, a word too often bandied about without the clarity and respect it demands. To colonise, etymologically and practically, means to cultivate—to till the soil, to nurture the wilds into fruitful fields; to inhabit a land not as a thief but as a caretaker; to frequent, to practice, and above all, to respect. Colonisation is an act of tending and guarding the land, of building a future with hands and hearts devoted to growth and stewardship.

Yet, what do we see in the British Empire? Not cultivation, but encroachment. Not respect, but greed. Not guardianship, but plunder. The British Empire, in practice and in effect, is no colony in the noble sense of the word—it is a theft. It is a persistent violation of sovereignty and dignity. The so-called colonies are not barren lands awaiting cultivation; they are vibrant societies with histories, cultures, and lives. To claim them as possessions without respect is a travesty and a profound moral failure.

True colonisation is a covenant between people and place, a sacred duty to enhance and protect. The British Empire, however, has instead consecrated itself to exploitation, its legacy stained with the absence of respect and the excess of plunder. This must be acknowledged plainly if we are to move forward with justice and honesty.

Therefore, I urge you to reconsider the narratives we hold dear. Let us abandon the rhetoric of entitlement and embrace the language of responsibility. For without respect, there can be no rightful claim—and what remains, when stripped of respect, is but theft masquerading as empire.

1976: Saint Thomas Aquinas

From the magazine, "Ladies of the Light", Isabella Duckson

As a woman of means and a spirit deeply attuned to the evolving tides of consciousness, I extend our dialogue on love and normalcy with a fervour that befits this era of awakening. To say heterosexuality is merely common and not normal is to pull back the veil from a construct long mistaken for an absolute truth. Our society, steeped in patriarchal design, has long coerced us into believing that the straight path is the only path, that love must align with prescribed roles and bodies. But this belief is not only limiting—it is fundamentally untrue.

The burgeoning women's liberation movement, which I champion with both pride and passion, reveals to us the vibrant diversity of human desire and identity. It teaches us that sexuality cannot be boxed into a single norm any more than the human spirit can be caged by antiquated doctrine. As Saint Thomas Aquinas wisely observed centuries ago, what is virtuous or moral depends profoundly on the individual's condition. There is no universal yardstick for love or desire, no divine injunction pegging normalcy to heterosexuality alone.

Moreover, the Carmina Burana's profound declaration that "Love is not a crime; if it were a crime to love, God would not have bound even the divine with love," echoes with revolutionary clarity today. This affirmation occupies a sacred space where love transcends gender, defies legalistic or religious tyranny, and finds its truth in the freedom of connection and authenticity.

In this newfound age of sexual liberation and feminist consciousness, we bear witness to the dismantling of rigid binaries and the flourishing of queer identities, lesbian feminism, and self-defined sexuality that resists the heteronormative script. This is not a mere social trend—it is an essential reclamation of human dignity and truth. Thus, heterosexuality is not the norm; it is the most common expression among many diverse paths that love and desire may take.

To embrace this plurality is to honour the full spectrum of human experience—to affirm that what we call "normal" is often just the tyranny of the majority cloaked in tradition. Let us celebrate love in all its forms and complexities, not as exceptions to a supposed standard, but as vital threads in the beautiful tapestry of human existence. Only then can we truly progress toward a world where love is liberated, unshackled, and radiant in its glorious diversity.

1934: Quixotic Musings

(From a magazine article in "A Gentleman's Gentlemen")

Gentlemen, I submit to you a matter both grave and delightful, present in every corner of civilisation—from the austere chambers of Freud to the gilded halls of royalty, from the humble peasants tilling the soil to the glittering economy bustling in the city's heart, from the ritual of marriage to the miracle of childbirth—the very fulcrum of it all is none other than sex. Yes, sex, that primal engine throttling the entirety of human existence, uniting the sacred and the profane with an indelible passion.

Magnus Hirschfeld, that pioneering scholar of human sexuality, recognised the vast spectrum of sexual expressions and the intricate role

they play in individuals' lives. His studies, alongside contemporaries like Havelock Ellis and AP Herbert, laid bare the paradoxes and peculiarities of our desires, demonstrating that sex is not merely a biological urge but a powerful social and psychological force shaping societies throughout history.

Consider the monarch on his throne: beyond the pomp and ceremony, his rule often secured by the production of heirs, by the mystique of lineage guaranteed by conjugal unions. Economics, too, watches sex carefully—not only in the market of marriage but in the proliferation of population fuelling labour and consumption. On the farm, where new life springs forth in cyclical seasons, the simple act of reproduction resonates with profound consequences for sustenance and survival.

Between spouses, the delicate dance of affection, power, and attraction intertwines, revealing the subtle truths of human connection—desires unmet produce tensions, while pleasures shared weave bonds of intimacy. Even childbirth, that primal miracle, pivots not on medical marvel alone but on the union of bodies and the creation of potential futures.

In every facet of civilisation, sex lies not hidden or peripheral but at the very nucleus: an irresistible force dictating cultural norms, moral discourse, even legal strictures. To overlook this is to ignore the very pulse of human life. Thus, whether upon the therapist's couch or within the royal court, beneath the furrows of the tiller's soil or amid the clinking glasses at the banquet table, sex remains the sovereign theme, the unspoken arbiter of all human affairs.

1952: Gloriana Mallard

On the eve of her wedding day

One cannot help but remark upon that most delightful and universally acknowledged truth: birds do it, bees do it, and, indeed, even the most prudent of fleas do it. It is a mystery as old as nature herself, woven into the very fabric of existence, and yet it is the delicate dance of connection and understanding that it brings which captivates us most. Imagine, if you will, the grand theatre of life where every living creature partakes in this subtle exchange, a conversation too refined for words, yet perfectly understood by the bodies involved.

This genteel act serves not merely as a whimsy of nature's design but as a steady hymn to harmony within the living world. It acts as a balancer, an invisible thread that binds the lively essence of being to the

inevitable quietus that awaits us all. Through this dance, a whispered dialogue ensues—silent yet profound—between the intricate workings of life’s inner world and the seeming vastness of existence. It is a reassurance, a signal of vitality, that the mechanisms within us continue their steadfast hum.

How wondrous it is that such a simple act could hold such gravitas, quietly affirming the ongoing tale of life without demand or expectation, free from the burdens of explanation or consequence. In this, the world’s countless creatures, from the smallest insect to the songbird aloft the branches, partake in a celebration of being, a cherished and natural symphony heard by few but felt by all.

1981: Fairy wisdom

From the magazine, “Crunchy Bytes” by Alice Mallard

Should physicists lay aside their symbols and formulas to indulge in the whimsical art of fairy stories? Far from mere childish escapism, this suggestion carries with it the potential to jolt the most rigid scientists out of their perpetual maze of equations and numbers. After all, physics is often treated as an impenetrable fortress of cold, hard facts, where only the fluent in mathematics may pass—while the rest of us stand outside gazing through barred windows, wondering what all the fuss is about. But let us consider, quite seriously, that the greatest leaps in understanding might arise from a more experiential, conceptual, and dare I say, literary approach.

In the realm of fairy tales, the abstract becomes tangible, the impossible plucks the strings of possibility, and imagination runs wild but never without purpose. Could it be, then, that our physicists might expand their horizons beyond the labyrinthine syntax of calculus and glimpse the universe anew through stories that touch the soul? The serpentine paths of narrative invite reflection on dualities, paradoxes, and enigmas not unlike the quantum oddities and cosmic mysteries scientists wrestle with daily. What if, instead of wrestling Mayan hieroglyphics in the form of equations, physicists turned to the metaphorical dragons and enchanted forests of fairy tales to stimulate their conceptual creativity?

It is no jest—our theoretical minds might be starving for these flights of fancy to fertilise their thought gardens. After all, the universe is stranger than fiction, but perhaps it might also be better appreciated by those willing to open a fairy story or two. While the mathematics may remain the backbone of modern physics, perhaps it is time to welcome a little narrative whimsy into the discourse. The next great theory might

just be hiding behind a fairy's wing or beneath a dragon's scale. In which case, should physicists read fairy stories? Quite emphatically, yes.

1936: A discourse on the ladies

(From an address given at the inaugural "A Gentleman's Gentlemen" meeting)

Gentlemen, if I may intrude upon your esteemed attention—which, admittedly, I do with no small measure of both solemn gravity and impassioned fury—I find myself compelled, nay, indeed, quite duty-bound, to elucidate upon that most perplexing and vexatious affliction which attends the fairer sex; an affliction which I shall here forthwith denominate, with all due respect to accuracy and veracity, as the unmitigated madness of women. A madness—indeed, less a mere quirk or dalliance of temperament, and more an unrelenting, tempestuous torrent—verily a veritable Niagara of irrationality and emotional caprice—that dashes itself ceaselessly, with all the tenacity of some mariner lost in a storm, against the impregnable and patient rock of masculine reason.

It is a spectacle, gentlemen, most lamentable and almost beyond the grasp of mere mortal comprehension, to behold this confounding chaos of the female mind—so prone to sudden eruptions of passion, as if governed by some unseen marionettist most cruel and capricious—whose fancies flit hither and thither with all the decorum of a butterfly in a tempest. One must, of course, with the utmost vigilance—a vigilance that wears heavily upon one's constitution—be perpetually on guard against the insidious encroachments of such nonsense lest the very foundations of hearth and home be shaken to their venerable core, and the august dignity of one's honoured and, dare I say, time-worn family name, be irreparably sullied.

In these dark and turbulent waters of feminine folly, where else might a man of discernment seek refuge but among his beasts—the loyal and uncomplaining dogs, whose affection is of the most steadfast and steadfastly uncomplaining sort, as constant and predictable as the changing of the seasons themselves. Nor must one overlook the horses—noble creatures, if ever there were such, whose dignified and purpose-driven existence stands in sharp relief to the dizzying and capricious flutterings of the female spirit. Finally, the cherished company of one's fellows—the rugged, plain-spoken men of honour, whose blunt words and unpretentious camaraderie provide a balm to

the soul sorely tried by the ceaseless maelstrom of feminine unreliability.

Thus it is, my good sirs, in the serene yet stalwart companionship of beasts and men of true mettle that the enlightened gentleman discovers the peace which the fluttering, fevered, and altogether overwrought female spirit most emphatically denies. Such is the lot, the sacred burden, nay, the Herculean task, of the man of power and influence: to govern not solely the enterprise of his estates or the amassing of tangible wealth but to wrestle and prevail against the wild and wayward passions that would, if unchecked, cast all down into ruin. Our strength, gentlemen, is found not in the fickle and fleeting, but in the constant, the rational, and those rare few who remain true and unswerving.

In conclusion—for, alas, conclusion must come for mortal things though the subject demands endless rumination—that this madness of women, this relentless whirlwind of irrationality, is not to be trifled with or regarded as mere peccadillo. No, it must be approached with unmitigated sagacity, resolute fortitude, and a most unyielding hand, if one is to preserve the order, dignity, and rightful supremacy that befit a gentleman of our esteemed rank and distinction.

I thank this venerable assembly for its patient indulgence in these necessary reflections!

1917: Elspeth Mallard

How strange that one overheard remark might pursue the mind relentlessly, long after the table has been cleared and the candles extinguished. At dinner this evening, amid the usual interchange of polite inanities masquerading as conversation, I caught Major Laughton's lazy drawl across the table: "It's like comparing a city's sewage system to a cathedral because both use arches."

The remark provoked laughter, of course—a brittle, war-weary laughter, the kind that conceals fatigue more than amusement. Yet it has haunted me ever since, not for the mockery it was meant to carry, but for its odd, almost philosophical aptness. I find myself turning it over like a small stone in the hand, trying to discover why it feels so suited to the age we inhabit.

It seems to me that his comparison touches precisely on our difficulty—this war, this civilisation, this very Christmas of 1917, in which beauty and degradation have become inseparably entwined beneath the same vault. For what is the modern world but a network of cathedrals and sewers—the one striving upward toward transcendence, the other bearing downward the refuse of that aspiration? Both depend

upon arches, true enough—upon structure, upon human mastery of form and weight and flow. Yet how differently the soul reads them! One lifts the gaze to heaven, the other protects the nostrils from corruption; and yet both embody the same principle of endurance under pressure.

I wonder if Laughton intended his jest as an indictment of false equivalence—that foolish democratic levelling which insists upon calling all work “noble,” or all beauty “useful.” He has spent months in France among engineers and sappers; perhaps he sees the splintered cloisters and the collapsed drains of Ypres as parts of the same broken architecture. I daresay, the war has blurred for him the distinction between sacred and sordid masonry. We build arches now for the passage of shells and water, not of light and prayer.

There is, too, a more private sting in the remark. I feel we ladies of the upper households have become, in our way, the cathedrals of a vanished order—graceful façades upheld by unseen service systems. The servants are the subterranean conduits; we, the ornamental arches above, admired by visitors yet hollow with disuse. With so many men gone to the Front, the house creaks and groans like a structure deprived of its full machinery. Even our Christmas dinner, though bravely laid, had a certain anaemic dignity: parody pudding, mock goose, the ghost of abundance. Beneath the arches of our drawing-room ceiling, one senses the slow trickling away of everything once solid, decorous, and ordained.

And yet—might there not be a secret kinship between the cathedral and the sewer that redeems the comparison rather than debases it? Both bear witness to humanity’s desire to order chaos: to make gravity serve purpose, to turn decay into motion. Perhaps grace and filth are twins, not opposites. The vault gathers incense as the drain gathers rain; each transforms what would otherwise stagnate. I think often of the nurses in the clearing stations, the poor souls tending to wounds too awful for description—these women have become sanctuaries with sluices, chapels with sluice-rooms. There again, arches and drains coexist—and the world continues, though marred and miraculous.

I almost wish I had had the courage to ask Laughton whether his phrase was meant to condemn our pretensions or to expose our blindness; but the dinner table is no place for metaphysics, particularly when the brandy is circulating and everyone is determined to appear festive. Still, I suspect that his metaphor will remain with me long after the war, a kind of shorthand for the double nature of all human achievement: exaltation built upon effluence.

Outside, the wind moans through the yews like a warning. The bells of the village church sounded earlier, muted and strained, their peal

more duty than celebration. In the stableyard, a single lantern burns. I looked from my window a moment ago and saw its light arching faintly upon the snow, illuminating the tracks of a fox. Such small illuminations—such arches of warmth above the ice—these, I think, are all we shall have for some years yet.

At least the thought comforts me: even a sewer, if rightly built, serves life. And even a shattered cathedral may teach the sky a little patience.



1810: The Hum at the End of the Lawn

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

At certain hours, the house seems to hum of its own accord. The sound begins in the kitchen, beneath the copper pans, and carries along the corridor, where it passes between portraits that nobody remembers hanging. No one is certain whether the house hums because it is content or because the air must move through it in order to keep it standing. Some say the hum begins in the smallest rooms, others insist it travels like a faint weather front from the attics downward, like a notion being reconsidered.

A rook lands upon the lawn at four in the afternoon and stands without choosing a direction. The grass appears to lean towards it, as if waiting for the decision. The wind pauses, then repeats itself slightly differently, a courteous mimicry. Those who live within the house find that to stand very still in such weather brings about a sense of agreement: something wishes one well, or at least notices that one is doing one's part.

Each morning the servants open the shutters in a strict order, as though releasing light were a ceremony demanding symmetry. The first light falls upon the long dining table; its surface acknowledges nothing and reflects everything with perfect formality. There is a rule, unspoken but widely observed, that one must never polish it twice in the same direction. The grain resists repetition. The house approves of variation that does not disturb arrangement.

For the flock—if one may use so collective a word—consists of all who move within hearing of the hum: master, guest, maid, garden boy, clockmaker, swallow, mirror, and clock. In this dressing of entities the distinctions stand delicately but definitively, one depending upon the

calm endurance of the others. The hum connects them, and yet none would wish to call it connection aloud.

It is said that once a visitor asked why the clocks in every room showed a slightly different minute. The butler replied, "Because time is polite. It will not insist upon being identical where duties differ." The remark passed into proverb, though no one knows who remembered it.

In the afternoons, they take tea precisely when the sky whitens behind the sycamores. Someone always comments upon the weather. It is not the same someone each day, but the same remark returns: "Perhaps it will clear." Upon these four words the company depends utterly. It is the phrase that rights the furniture of thought, the mild domestic hinge upon which the rest turns unnoticed. For who can resist aligning one's sense of self to the small communal rhythm of "Perhaps it will clear"?

This, too, is how the flock maintains itself. Among beasts of the field, among citizens of the parishes of air and earth, there must be continual adjustment: the hum running under hoofbeat and wing. Each creature, not knowing itself entirely, senses its outline echoed by the others. The cat hears its own step twice—once in the ear, once in the floor. The ruler glances at the servant and recognises posture before conscience tells it so. The house knows when it is clean because the servants hum the tune that began in the beams.

Yet one must never force such recognition. The etiquette of equilibrium allows only gentle mirroring. To anticipate praise or reprimand is to disturb the alignment of the flock, so that even the hum falters, coughing once in the pipes. Then all go still, as if caught with wings unbrushed or boots unlaced.

All order aspires to stillness, though stillness never truly arrives. After the silver has been set down, it vibrates faintly, yearning to return to silence. After voices subside, the last syllable insists upon memory. There is management in every pause; there is hierarchy even in quiet. The hum is not peace. It is obedience continuing its argument with itself.

And yet—no one recalls who first noticed—it is only when the hum becomes audible that the house appears truly alive. The line divides understanding from disturbance by the width of a heartbeat. Perhaps the hum is the thinking of walls, the strain of remembering what their occupants prefer to forget. Perhaps it is the house dreaming how others perceive it.

"Perhaps it will clear." The phrase is uttered again next day. The boots of the gardener sound in twin rhythm with the ticking clocks. Someone glances instinctively towards another for confirmation of how

the morning feels. It is understood that the feeling shall be agreed upon, even if it must be agreed differently in each heart.

Later, a rook lands where the first rook had landed, some days before. It crouches lower, as if remembering the posture of the earlier bird. The air bends again; the wind performs the echo. A hum persists, though no one notes whether it began before or after the repetition.

By evening, the house has folded back upon itself. The shutters close in reverse order; the servants extinguish lights from topmost chamber to lowest hall. The tables and mirrors receive the darkness with a composure learned from long companionship. The hum lessens, or else one ceases to notice it. Breath by breath, all presume the silence to be mutual.

In that hush each person feels, just faintly, that someone or something nearby knows them more exactly than they could name themselves. And the sensation, rather than frightening, brings a serene fatigue—the comfort of being interpreted by the hum, by the flock, by the slow prediction of the house.

“Perhaps it will clear.”

But it seldom does.

1819: Espèce deCanard

Private papers

Rain again—a slow, persistent drizzle that dims the panes and wraps the crescents of the town in melancholy vapour. The fire burns low, and with no callers expected I have spent the afternoon amidst my books. They reproach me slightly; my reading of late has turned far from the pieties that befitted my mother’s training. Perhaps it is the age; perhaps merely my restless mind.

I have been meditating upon a phrase that appeared in a letter from my cousin Henry, written from the Continent where he has joined a circle of scholars in Geneva: “One man’s religion is another man’s madness.” It struck me forcibly—not merely as clever cynicism, but as a statement possessing genuine terror. If faith rests upon the inward conviction of the mind, who is to arbitrate which conviction is divine and which delusive? Does not the very authority we ascribe to our holy truths depend upon their acceptance by those among whom we live?

In recent weeks I have perused several works that touch upon this disquieting thought. From Mr. Locke’s Reasonableness of Christianity I attempted to restore some sense of rational order to belief, though his calm, urbane prose feels at times like counsel given to a fevered soul by a physician who has never himself been ill. Then I turned, quite rashly,

to Henry Home's *Sketches of the History of Man* and to that unsettling treatise of Lord Monboddo on the "progress of the human species," which speaks of our descent from creatures half-animal, half-rational. Outrageous perhaps, yet I find such speculation oddly stimulating: it implies that the very boundaries of thought are mutable, shaped by circumstance, by climate, by custom. Religion itself might thus be seen as the noblest expression of local imagination—the flowering of culture rather than the fruit of revelation.

Yesterday, while taking tea, I opened Mr. Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* at the chapters concerning the rise of Christianity. The historian recounts in his dry, arch fashion how the early believers were accused of madness, frenzy, even sorcery, by the very pagans they sought to enlighten—while to the Christians themselves, it was the Romans who were deranged idolaters. Each party pitied or despised the other's credulity, while both constructed intricate systems of meaning that appeared to their adherents incontrovertible. The thought left me strangely giddy: how thin the partition between sanctity and lunacy, once the sanction of society is withdrawn!

Perhaps the ancients understood this more candidly. My copy of *The Works of Lucian* has diverted me these last nights; his dialogues between gods and mortals are mischievous, yes, but also profoundly humane. And somewhere within the third volume of Bryant's *Mythology of the Ancient World* I found an argument that every nation re-names the same elemental powers—sun, moon, harvest, storm—each worshipping under a different appellation what is in truth a single necessity of nature. Does that not render all religions cousins, differing chiefly in dialect?

Yet the moment one thinks to confess such musings aloud, a pang of guilt arises, as if reason had turned traitor to faith. Our clergyman last Sunday preached enthusiastically upon the "universality of Christian truth," asserting that all other devotions were delusion. But as I watched the congregation nodding, their expressions serene and complacent, it occurred to me that we agree only within the small vessel of our own culture, like people afloat together in a fragile boat, mistaking our deck for the surface of the sea itself. Beyond our timbers lies an immensity we neither see nor sound.

What astonishes me is our insistence that belief must be shared to be real. Two minds may repeat the same creed, yet the inward image each conceives is unknowable to the other. I recite the Credo and feel the weight of inherited habit; another may utter the same words with flame in the heart. Do we in fact share belief—or merely a vocabulary of belief? Perhaps culture provides the vessel, and within it each soul brews its private elixir of meaning, never truly tastable by another.

Tonight I shall return to my reading of Herder's Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind, which seems to me—though written decades past—a book alive to this difficulty. He speaks of every nation as “a language of the spirit,” each perceiving divinity through its peculiar history and environment. He grants dignity even to the so-called savage tribes whose customs our missionaries condemn as barbarous. Anthropology, they now begin to call this field; perhaps it will teach us humility, if not faith.

The candles burn low. I find myself longing not for certainty but for generosity of interpretation—for a world in which another's vision of heaven need not appear to me as madness. But perhaps that is too large a hope for one evening and one mind. The rain still falls. If there be revelation in such weather, it lies in the steady patience of the drops, not in thunder.

1979: Introduction: The Shared Delusion of Agreement

Alice Mallard

I began with a sentence that has no birthplace and, like all such orphans, has survived by adaptability: “One man's religion is another man's madness.” Each decade dresses it in new authority, from Voltaire's salons to the university common-room. In 1979, it cannot sound radical; it sounds tired, like a clock that continues to tick because no one can be bothered to stop it. Yet the sentence retains a quiet sting. Not because it offends faith, but because it implicates communication itself. We say we “share beliefs,” but in truth we share only the echoes of beliefs within the narrow vessel of our own culture.

This book emerges from that suspicion: that language of conviction rarely travels intact, and that the container is mistaken for the content. The essays collected here are not attempts to reconcile belief and reason, nor to mourn the loss of metaphysical consensus; they are field notes on the perimeters of understanding—where faith, science, and habit exchange gestures without quite meeting eyes.

During the past year, in a house overlooking Sydney Harbour with the cicadas shrilling through December light, I found myself re-reading not sacred texts but anthropologies of belief and disbelief. Mircea Eliade's Patterns in Comparative Religion, Levi-Strauss's The Raw and the Cooked, and Bronisław Malinowski's Magic, Science and Religion have sat beside my worn copy of Joseph Needham's The Grand Titration and Teilhard de Chardin's The Phenomenon of Man. From psychology I have borrowed ideas of perception and projection—Gregory Bateson's Steps to an Ecology of Mind, R. D. Laing's The

Divided Self, and the radical humanism of Erich Fromm's *To Have or To Be?* From another shelf stare the mythographers: Joseph Campbell's *The Masks of God*, Robert Graves's idiosyncratic *The Greek Myths*, and the more austere *Myth and Meaning* of Levi-Strauss again, received now as a sort of field gospel for the skeptical believer.

What unites these volumes is their admission that knowledge is pattern, and that patterns depend upon point of view. Culture becomes a conversation conducted through mirroring metaphors. We claim to "understand" the Church, the tribe, the laboratory, yet each understanding is itself ritual performance within another habitat. To read across disciplines in 1979 is to experience the vertigo of plural certainty: every system internally coherent, externally absurd.

Technology, too, enters this arena disguised as theology. My friends in computing assure me that "information" has replaced "grace" as the operative term of salvation—the idea that errors, if corrected fast enough, redeem the whole machine. I confess to finding similarity between early cybernetics (Norbert Wiener's *The Human Use of Human Beings*) and the scholastic logic of medieval mystics. Each set of practitioners believes itself modern, yet each stands before a black box, half hopeful, half terrified, pronouncing its hum sacred.

The question that preoccupies me, however, is smaller and more seditious: How do we recognise sanity when its definitions are produced collectively? If one culture calls the ecstatic "mad," and another calls the same posture "holy," where lies truth? We imagine objectivity as a universal instrument, but anthropology has already revealed it as a locally tuned device. The distance between madness and revelation is not determined by the act, only by the audience. The stakes of power, gender, and geography intervene.

I think of the Aboriginal song-lines described by W. E. H. Stanner in *White Man Got No Dreaming*—geographies sung into continuity. The melodies are at once maps, histories, prayers. European thought catalogued them under "myth," as though myth implied untruth; yet to inhabit them is literal survival. Meanwhile, Western art keeps rediscovering symbolic coherence as if it were a novelty. Perhaps the only difference between "archaic" and "advanced" consciousness is editorial tone.

The philosopher of 1819 might have said that reason separates us from superstition; the anthropologist of 1919 declared that superstition is adaptive reason in another key. And here, late in this perplexed century, I find myself writing from a campus perched between the bush and the Pacific, sensing both arguments gone stale. Neither reason nor superstition gives us community—only grammar does, and grammar is culture's most invisible faith.

I do not propose a universal solution; what I propose is observation. Belief behaves like weather: shared only by those standing under the same low pressure of history. To step beyond that climate is to risk misunderstanding that feels like madness. Perhaps that is what progress has always meant.

The essays that follow explore not what people believe, but how belief behaves—as etiquette, as narrative, as technology of belonging. They treat the Bible and the biosphere, machinery and mythology, as parallel theatres in which realities rehearse themselves. To write about belief is to write about the maintenance of worlds.

I write not to rebuke faith nor to flatter skepticism, but to admit the old confusion: that the same impulse which builds a cathedral may one day design a computer, and that inside both structures, someone will whisper the same uncertain incantation—we must agree upon something, or all the hum will stop.

1975: Preface to the Third (and Possibly Definitive)
Collected Papers of the Reverend Dr. Basil Brush, Fellow
of St. Wulstan's College, Oxford

It has been put to me—not unkindly by certain of my colleagues in the Common Room, though with the faint note of pity that sometimes attends professional candour—that the time has come to gather a few of my scattered essays into some semblance of a volume. The suggestion, if properly understood, contains that admixture of courtesy and coercion by which the University persuades those of us who are, as it were, insufficiently productive, to appear more so. Publication, after all, remains the most acceptable form of respiration.

The particular matter I propose herein—the importance (and, I might tentatively add, the moral necessity) of obfuscation in scientific and theological writing—arises not so much from policy as from habit. I have been accused, on various occasions, of linguistic opacity; I therefore undertake to defend it. The popular appetite for “clarity” should not, I think, govern those disciplines upon which civilisation rather depends than comments. It is not so much that the public cannot understand, but that it must not. Certain forms of understanding are best approached through mist, and the proper business of the scholar is, one might say, to cultivate that mist with horticultural attentiveness.

The matter has been on my mind since re-reading Professor Evans-Pritchard's *Theories of Primitive Religion* and, rather illuminatingly by contrast, Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Both, though in their different idioms, demonstrate that a measured degree of terminological circumspection preserves the dignity

of the anthropological enterprise. When Geertz writes that belief systems are “models of” and “models for” reality, one perceives immediately the warning: speak plainly, and you will be understood; speak opaquely, and you will be cited.

Recent reading in theology has reinforced my conviction. Paul Tillich’s *Systematic Theology*, Bernard Lonergan’s *Insight*, and Teilhard de Chardin’s forbidding *Phenomenon of Man* have all suggested, perhaps unintentionally, that intellectual progression in our time depends upon a certain density of phrase. (I have attempted to emulate this in what follows, though never, I hope, merely to impress.) It must be noted that the use of Latin and, in refined instances, Greek is not embellishment but insulation—a prophylactic against premature apprehension by the untrained reader. Words such as *excursus*, *ipsissima verba*, and *perichoresis* act as gentlemen should: they close ranks protecting delicate meaning from the rough handling of newsprint and the BBC.

I have also consulted certain works beyond my immediate discipline—for instance, Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Magic, Science and Religion*, Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and, most perplexingly, Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*. The first illuminates the pious use of ritual to guard esoteric knowledge; the second, the unconquerable tendency of any system to replace impulse with justification; the third, the unlooked-for realisation that the medium is perhaps not the message, but very frequently the excuse. If, as McLuhan implies, the typewriter has changed the nature of thought, then the grant application has certainly changed the nature of theology.

Scholars of comparative mythology—among them Joseph Campbell (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*) and Mircea Eliade (*The Sacred and the Profane*)—remind us gently that the priest and the academic share a single occupational hazard: the compulsion to explain mystery until it ceases to be mysterious. It is here that “weasel words” perform their priestly office. Through them, one intimates profundity while ensuring that no lay person can misuse it. Indeed, our English academic style (a curious hybrid of the pulpit and the bureaucratic memorandum) has evolved precisely to serve this end.

For example, a younger colleague recently asked why I refer so often to “differential epistemic access to hermeneutic closure.” I replied that to write merely “we all understand differently, and for selfish reasons” would do little to secure departmental funding. Ambiguity, let us remember, is more easily grant-worthy than confession.

There persists about the word “obfuscation” an undeserved opprobrium. I prefer to think of it as a technology of containment. The physicists have equations, the theologians their glosses: both are forms

of reverent disguise. I am told that Sir Karl Popper—whose *Logic of Scientific Discovery* I will not claim to have finished, though the dust-jacket declares it comprehensive—advocated falsifiability as a criterion of science. With equal conviction, I propose unfalsifiability as a criterion of academic survival. One cannot effectively be contradicted if one has never quite been understood.

Psychology, too, contributes to this discussion, albeit inadvertently. In the pages of R. D. Laing's *Politics of Experience* and B. F. Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, the modern reader finds evidence that personality itself now submits to laboratory method. Yet both authors write in prose sufficiently convoluted to dissuade those they most wish to help. Here again we discern the golden mean between candour and chaos: the bestselling mystique of intelligibility avoided.

Lest any reader mistake my tone for irony, let me affirm: obscurity is not hypocrisy but hygiene. To obfuscate is to curate knowledge. The unfiltered truth, like unpasteurised milk, may harbour organisms more fascinating to observe than to ingest.

And so—this Preface, which threatens to become its own Exhibit—merely indicates the argument's broader terrain. Throughout the following chapters I shall examine the moral, linguistic, and institutional infrastructures that make deliberate difficulty indispensable. By "infrastructure," I intend of course not roads, but rhetorical scaffolding: the tiny Latin brackets into which British intellect files its duties.

To colleagues engaged in research applications, I offer the reminder that publication frequency remains the best prophylactic against professional invisibility. A paper a year, however unread, constitutes evidence of vitality; the language of academic immortality is, in the final analysis, bureaucratic present tense.

That, I believe, is reason enough to print the present volume—or, as the bureaucrats phrase it, *ipso facto* a contribution to ongoing discourse.

Blessedly, I have been misinterpreted often enough to continue writing.

1975: Opening Address to the Symposium on Knowledge, Meaning, and Antiquity

(Delivered at King's College, Cambridge, Michaelmas Term)

Professor Gilliard Anatis

It is my proud misfortune to open this conference, entitled Knowledge and Its Discontents, though I suspect many of us will be discontented before we have finished our first morning coffee. I should perhaps begin by acknowledging that the title itself, like much in academia, misleads—knowledge being, as I have come reluctantly to conclude, a rather slippery container label, a kind of intellectual jam jar whose contents are forever fermenting under new seals.

When I was younger—and, if legend serves, more lucid—I thought knowledge the firm ingredient of civilisation. But one reads, as one must, and grows uneasy. Recently I have been dipping into Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (in two different abridged versions, both longer than seems decent), Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths*, E. R. Dodds's *The Greeks and the Irrational*, and Mircea Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. Each in its way proposes that the categories by which we name "understanding" are themselves ritual artefacts—tools by which societies consecrate some forms of insight and sacrifice others upon the altar of propriety.

If, therefore, we call a person "knowledgeable," what we mean is not "full of knowledge," but "full of the knowledge we can reward." The so-called "intelligence quotient," which once appeared as a sober numerical gift of Providence, is rather more like an aristocratic accent: its authority derives from who is measuring and who has been told to listen.

Now, whether this makes us sad or merely suspicious is the question I hope we shall toy with over the coming days. The term knowledge, like those other formidable nouns—Religion, Art, Goodness, the Divine nous—functions less as a description than as a passport. It gains one entry into the better-appointed common rooms.

I once told an interviewer that I preferred "conscientious objectivity" to "objectious connectivity." Though not what I meant, the blunder perhaps came nearer the truth. Knowledge is less about objectivity than about connection—the aligning of one's categories with those authorised to distribute advantage. To mis-categorise is, in effect, to blaspheme against funding councils.

It is curious to observe, across civilisations, how closely knowledge and sanctity intertwine. In the Pyramid Texts of ancient Egypt, Thoth, the god of writing, is portrayed as both scribe and trickster, a dual rôle

reminiscent, I think, of certain members of our faculty. The Vedic hymns praise speech itself—*vāc*—as the goddess by whom the universe is known. And in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, the Muses, daughters of Memory, inform mortal poets not of truth but of “what seems true at the moment.” This might serve as our departmental motto.

Arthur Koestler, in his *Act of Creation*, remarked that creative insight depends upon what he called “bisociation”—the collision of two habitually separate frames of reference. He might just as well have said that scholarship, too, is a collision sport. We throw footnotes as shields and hope to survive the *mêlée*. Margaret Gilchrist, in her own essays on creativity, reminds us that imagination thrives on contradiction—that confusion is a precondition of synthesis. I therefore propose, somewhat against administrative expectation, that confusion be recognised as a metric of intellectual sincerity.

You see, if we broadened the definition of knowledge beyond examination scripts and bibliographies—were we to include, for example, intuition, manual craft, the silent expertise of the gardener, even the wit of the undergraduate laundress who can iron a surplice faster than I can pronounce Persepolis—we might find our hierarchies trembling delightfully at the knees. What if the standard of “intelligence” were replaced by “symmetry of noticing”? Would the historians fare as well against the potters, I wonder?

Ah, but I digress. Or perhaps I re-gress—a most useful academic manoeuvre. I recall an anecdote concerning a Babylonian tablet deciphered, or mis-deciphered, by Thorkild Jacobsen in his reading of *The Treasures of Darkness*. The text was thought to describe the laws of the gods but turned out to list proportions for brewing beer. In such moments, one sees that knowledge and misunderstanding are old bedfellows, lying under the same Assyrian blanket.

Thus, when we meet to discuss “the nature of knowledge,” it may serve us to ask whether we are truly addressing an independent phenomenon or merely admiring our own reflection on a polished shield. Knowledge can be a signal of rank, much as the peacock’s tail signals vigour—though I should not, in fairness, extend the metaphor to the behaviour of certain professors at High Table. The point is that where resources cluster—and, by Heaven, they do cluster—intellectual plumage grows conspicuously more elaborate.

There remains the delicate question of language, that ancient instrument of both revelation and concealment. We find in the Greek the word *gnosis*, in the Latin *scientia*, in the Sanskrit *vidya*; each translating roughly as “to see.” Yet one might equally render it “to distinguish,” which is to say, to set apart. Here we stumble upon our modern predicament. The more narrowly we define knowledge, the

more triumphantly we assert our isolation. We know in order to separate ourselves from those who, by definition, cannot know.

Now, I shall not detain you overly, for the hour approaches eleven and the tea urn, that paternal symbol of democracy, awaits. Let me close with another accidental aphorism, uttered at the end of a long lecture last term when fatigue triumphed over syntax. I meant to advise my students that “the pursuit of knowledge requires constant revision.” What I said, however, was “the pursuit of knowledge requires constant re-vision.” Upon reflection I find the error more apt. To revise is to correct; to re-vision is to see again, perhaps differently, perhaps together. If this gathering could accomplish even that modest re-vision—a glimpse of how our definitions exclude as much as they include—we might yet deserve our stipends.

Gentle colleagues, may our errors be generous and our funding bodies forgiving. Thank you.

1955: Opening Address to the International Symposium on Psychic Retention and Historical Memory

Hotel Astoria, New York City

Dr. Alaric Bebek, M.D., D.P.M., F.R.C.P. (Lond.)

Distinguished colleagues, ladies, gentlemen, critics, lovers, sceptics, poets hiding behind psychiatrists and psychiatrists hiding behind poets—good morning! I regard it as both privilege and duty—chiefly duty—to inaugurate this conference on Memory, a subject about which, it gives me distinct pleasure to announce, there is now nothing whatsoever left to say.

Yes, nothing! The field, after some decades of tumultuous self-examination, has achieved finality. Freud revealed the submerged continents, Adler charted the individual will among their reefs, and Jung, that magisterial mystagogue, strung electric lights across the entire subconscious archipelago. I merely attend to illuminate their collective illumination—to sum up, as it were, what Memory is, what it has been, and, by logical extension, what it will be for all time.

I must beg your indulgence if I occasionally drift into metaphor. I have been spending evenings at the Cedar Tavern, conversing with Mr. Jackson Pollock—whose paintings, you realise, are pure amnesia flung in enamel—and with Willem de Kooning, who treats recollection much as a surgeon treats a tumour: excise until only the gesture remains. They agree with me that art is simply memory performed at high speed until the eye cannot distinguish it from inspiration.

Similarly, I lunched with Mr. T. S. Eliot last month in London. Gabriel Marcel joined us by accident or by Providence. The poet said, in that dolorous tone of his, that “memory is a disorderly choir.” I corrected him immediately: “No, Tom. It is a disciplined orchestra, every note encoded in the neurogram and replayed according to analytic law.” He smiled thinly—and ordered more coffee, which I took as admission of defeat.

Now then—to definition. Science demands definition; psychiatrists must offer certainties while secretly editing the footnotes. Memory, in its total sense, is the psychical persistence of an internalised experience capable of symbolic recall. Let us have no more of this mystical talk of emotional residues: those are exhaust fumes of desire. The Freudian model endures unassailable. The past survives not as act but as architecture. We inhabit chambers built of impressions scaled to proportion by repression.

One may observe, if one insists on experimentation, that Adler’s individualistic memory—the memory as self-instrument—is merely Freud’s iceberg seen in profile. The so-called “creative memory” of Jung’s archetypes—those mythological conveniences borrowed from Frazer’s *Golden Bough* and Eliade’s *Patterns in Comparative Religion*—functions only because it is housed within the same Freudian vault. The differences among the masters are in the draperies, not the foundations.

I have dined, too, with certain philosophers—Bertrand Russell (brisk and mathematical), Jean-Paul Sartre (soggy and desolate), Simone de Beauvoir (bright, terrifying, and correct). Sartre informed me memory is illusion; I reminded him that illusion is the most reliable memory of all. The material remains constant: neural engrams, trace formations, symbolic condensations, call them what you will. The names are now settled: mneme for biological persistence, anamnesis for philosophical past, reminiscence for poetry’s disease. It is finished taxonomy, complete and incontestable.

Permit me a brief digression—though in truth it is central. I spent a fascinating afternoon with Salvador Dalí in his studio in Port Lligat last spring. He assured me that his every surreal object arises from the “hyper-concretisation of memory”—which, translated from Dalinese to Fortescuan, means that he dreams with scientific discipline. He painted me an elephant on stilts to demonstrate retrieval delay. Only art, he argued, outpaces recall by recording what the mind has not yet remembered it forgot. I confess I did not wholly follow him, but the principle of closure was sound.

Let us address, with finality, the three eras of memory:

First, archaic memory—the memory of survival. In earliest man it existed as reflex and appetite. The cave wall was his unconscious externalised in ochre.

Second, classical memory—the organised recollection of social beings. Cicero's *Rhetorica ad Herennium* codified that; Augustine sanctified it.

Third, modern scientific memory—ours. Here we see the decisive synthesis: physiology meeting psychoanalysis meeting the Bartlett apparatus. Indeed, in Sir Frederic Bartlett's *Remembering*, one finds the very mechanism Freud predicted: reconstruction masquerading as recall. Thus, gentlemen and ladies, the circle closes. *Finis coronat opus*.

I note some murmurs—perhaps polite disbelief. But I assure you, every possible school of thought has been heard and harmonised. From Bergson's *Matter and Memory* to Whitehead's *Process and Reality*, from Pavlov to Penfield, we have our neural orchestra in tune. Memory, no longer mystery, is mechanism. Admittedly, a beautifully baroque mechanism—something between a cathedral organ and a Rube Goldberg device—but mechanism nonetheless.

Accordingly, prediction of the future becomes possible. Memory will, in the coming decades, be stored not only in neurons but, I suspect, in machinery. Already the Americans dabble in enormous calculating contraptions. By 1980, perhaps 1990, men will externalise recollection, transcribing the mind's code into a physical form. Thus my colleague Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics* confirms Freud by mechanical means. The unconscious will be wired.

And what then, you ask? Nothing new. For as Freud himself said, the new is merely the forgotten rediscovered. The future of memory, therefore, is its past, and the past was already Freud.

Allow me a moment of theological bravado. Memory existed before man conceived it: God, as Augustine knew, remembers us into being. When history ends (and I estimate another thousand years), memory will remain as final residue, a perfect record kept by heaven's own analyst. Between Genesis and the electroencephalogram, therefore, lies continuous documentation.

In sum—and let these words echo in the minutes of this distinguished assembly—memory is now, always has been, and forever shall be precisely this: the codified persistence of psychic conflict in ordered neural sequence, accessible to interpretation by properly qualified men. There can be no further revision, only applications. The map is drawn; the terrain will follow.

I conclude, then, what centuries groped to articulate. I offer not speculation but settlement. Memory is solved, like a theorem. The mind

should now proceed to less crowded quarters—envy, perhaps, or political ambition.

Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your attention—though of course you will forget most of what I have said by luncheon. Do not be distressed: such forgetting merely proves me right.

1946: “On the Spiritual Disposition of Ducks”

By Basil Brush, A.R.A., D.S.O. (Retired)

It was suggested by my editor—his tone implying both courtesy and containment—that I should write something “amusing but accessible” on my professional obsession with ducks. I assume he meant ducks in the aquatic sense and not the evasive manoeuvre, though the two often converge. I have spent the better part of twenty years painting ducks: mallards in meditation, teal in moral crisis, a particularly sensitive canvas of a shoveler wrestling with theological doubt. It has not been an easy life, since most people persist in assuming that the duck is a sort of chicken who took to swimming out of idleness. In truth, the duck is a philosopher of the first rank.

I was first converted, or perhaps called, to the cult of the duck in 1923, when as a young and undiscovered painter I was thrown by a horse into a pond in Surrey. Rising from the water like some bedraggled Botticelli nymph, I found myself observed by an entire congregation of ducks. Their expression was not pity but appraisal. There was one drake in particular—a drily handsome fellow, emerald-headed, with the air of a retired colonel—who seemed to say, “You are all wet, my boy, and I must insist you make something of it.” From that afternoon, I have painted nothing but ducks.

People are wont to ask why. They ask it kindly at first, and then with the nervous persistence usually reserved for the unwell. “Surely,” said a well-meaning critic last year at the Royal Academy, “you might attempt the human figure.” “Sir,” I replied, “I have attempted the human figure and found it merely a duck with delusions.”

Consider, if you will, the perfectly circular logic of a duck’s life. Its universe consists of three equal elements: air, water, and bread thrown by strangers. It passes from one to another without self-consciousness, accepting dipping as naturally as flight. We humans, by contrast, agonise between dryness and depth. The duck knows better. It is never ashamed of its angles. Have you ever watched a mallard land upon water? That exquisite skid across the reflecting surface is pure metaphysics—the reconciliation of weight and grace.

I have observed ducks in every condition: at dawn on the Cam, splendidly aloof; at dusk in Hyde Park, meditative as dons after port; in Trafalgar Square, anarchic, perhaps drunk; and once, memorably, in a Parisian fountain during '38, arranging its feathers with a Gallic insolence no English bird could imitate. Each encounter has altered my painting more than all the schools of composition. For example, I no longer use straight lines at all. The duck despises them. Its very walk is a curved commentary upon Euclid.

My critics—there are several, most of them armed with typewriters and disbelief—maintain that I project too much personality upon birds incapable of conversation. They are wrong, though I appreciate their concern. Only last year my neighbour in Wiltshire reported hearing me in animated discussion with what he thought was “a committee of waterfowl.” In fact, it was only one duck and one artist, though the distinction is sometimes theoretical. I did not so much talk to it as with it—a dialogue upon the deceptive simplicity of feathers. Each feather, I now know, has an architecture. Were Brunelleschi born a duck, the dome of Florence would have been waterproof.

The war, I confess, interfered sharply with my reflections. Military service offers few ponds. In North Africa I saw only sand, which is the opposite of water in every respect except omnipresence. Yet even there, I encountered a certain mallard's echo—a sense of imperturbable sanity amidst chaos. Men may shell one another into fragments, but the idea of the duck endures: calm, horizontal, unflustered. I believe Churchill once said that we would “fight them on the beaches.” I thought at the time, “yes, but the ducks were there first.”

Some readers accuse me of madness. I grant them partial accuracy; complete sanity, after all, breeds only mediocre art. Still, my madness is of an arranged variety: tidy, domestic, decidedly English. I keep my eccentricities as one keeps the teapot—on a tray, near to hand, never washed too vigorously. It comforts me to think that in certain Japanese philosophies, the duck would be regarded as a manifestation of enlightened being: half in the world, half reflected, never demanding applause.

On the subject of reflection, I must report a strange occurrence while painting last month near St. Albans. The pond was motionless, glassy, and I had just laid the first vermilion notes on a drake's crest when the bird turned, looked straight at me, and I swear with all professional sobriety said: “Enough.” Not audibly, of course; ducks have more breeding than to shout. But the message registered with such clarity that I packed my brushes immediately and went home. For weeks afterwards, I could paint nothing but frames—the absence of ducks. It

was, I think, an unspoken critique of artistic presumption: that one must occasionally let the subject rest upon its laurels, or its lily pads.

My theories on the psychological influence of the duck have caused uproar in smaller magazines. I once suggested, in what I thought a harmless footnote, that civilisation's progress might be measured by its treatment of waterfowl. The editor accused me of "sentimental Pantheism." I took this as praise. If by Pantheism he meant the recognition that ducks govern our unconscious, then Pantheism is indeed my creed. Observe Londoners on a Sunday: well-bred citizens reduced to ecstatic infants by the mere act of flinging stale bread at ducks. That, surely, is reverence reincarnated.

I am occasionally invited to speak to art students. They want advice on composition; I tell them to go and sit quietly by a pond until the ducks approach of their own accord. Nothing instructs one in patience, symmetry, or humility more efficiently than being ignored by real beauty. Some of the more spirited students attempt to feed them, but I remind them: ducks, like God, do not negotiate.

In closing, since the editor will want a moral I never intended, I'll observe only this: in painting ducks one discovers the limits of definition. They are neither beasts of air nor creatures of sea, neither comic nor grand, intelligent nor absurd. They exist perfectly in between—a lesson we could all apply to our own rehabilitation as a species. After two cataclysmic wars, one must look somewhere for a model of calm; the duck beckons, polite as ever, inviting us to float and, when bored with floating, to fly.

Now, if you'll forgive me, I must return to my garden pond. The light is doing something ineffable upon the water's skin, and one cannot risk losing the approval of one's sitters.

Quack.

1957: "Broadcast from the Department of
Psychological Theology"
by Viscountess Viola Vorpel

(Reprinted from The Continental Review)

It is a singular misfortune to listen to the wireless at breakfast. The combination of bread crumbs and cosmic resignation is indigestible. Yet yesterday morning, poised between a tepid egg and a sermon of marmalade, I found myself eavesdropping on a broadcast discussion of the human soul—or as they now call it, "mind-management through understanding oneself." The participants, one a psychologist of the newer, brisker sort, the other a cleric of the more emollient persuasion,

spoke with the serene certainty of men who have each decided to be right by agreeing that everyone else has been wrong.

The psychologist—I did not catch his name, though he had that clipped, arid accent one associates with powdered milk—began by declaring that “mankind has outgrown the need for gods.” The theologian, far from emitting the expected thunderclap, chirped his assent like a vicar startled into modernity. “Quite so,” he said, “though we shall, of course, continue to sell the accessories.” It is not often one hears an industry dissolve itself live on air.

Their thesis, such as it was, ran thus: that self-knowledge is the new salvation, that confession through analysis trumps confession through religion, and that the psychological consulting room is simply a more hygienic confessional, stripped of incense and furnished with invoices. The psychologist assured the reverend gentleman that this transition marked “the maturation of the species.” The reverend responded warmly that the Church had long aimed at maturity, “but in the meantime,” he added, with the fine practicality that keeps the roof repaired, “we must not neglect the anxieties of those who still pay their subscriptions.”

At that point I nearly dropped my spoon. The collusion was so graceful it became almost aesthetic—as if Freud and the Bishop of Chichester had eloped and set up a second-hand faith shop in Marylebone, selling recycled guilt at progressive prices. I could see them in their window, dusting halos, labelling conscience as “pre-owned, slightly tarnished but functional.”

It is remarkable how far we have travelled from sin to symptom in my lifetime. When I was a debutante, neurosis was called bad manners; now it is practically the national anthem. Our grandparents feared hellfire, our parents feared scandal, and we fear failing the Rorschach test. Progress, I suppose, if one likes one’s doom administered on a couch rather than an altar.

Yet I cannot escape the impression that the new priests resemble the old more than they pretend. Both operate chiefly through fees and reassurance. The psychological gentleman speaks with all the infallibility of an encyclical; he replaces “God loves you” with “Your libido merely misfired,” which yields equal comfort with less choir practice. Meanwhile, the clergy, faced with competition, have become amiably entrepreneurial—spiritual innkeepers offering bed, breakfast, and occasional absolution to those too timid for science.

I once observed precisely this fusion at a London dinner party. On my right sat a psychoanalyst with an expression of professional serenity (he looked perpetually mid-insight), on my left, a minor canon wearing what he called his “civilian collar.” They discoursed at length upon the

declining demand for damnation. “People don’t believe they’re wicked any more,” sighed the canon. “No,” replied the analyst, “they only believe they’re maladjusted—which, in fee terms, is much the same.” I left before dessert, convinced that Armageddon would arrive itemised by the hour.

Of course, one must admire the philosophical neatness of the cleric’s capitulation on the airwaves. After two thousand years of siege warfare between Faith and Reason, they have shaken hands and divided the spoils: the psychologists keep the vocabulary, the Church retains the architecture. Religion will persist as a sentimental brand name long after its factories close, much as Harrods sells potted morale to tourists.

I do not object to progress, only to smugness. If the human mind is indeed its own divinity, I see little evidence that it worships wisely. The institute of psychiatry produces more factions than the Council of Trent. Behaviourists anathematised Jungians; Jungians burn incense over archetypes; Freudians excommunicate everyone. It is all delightfully medieval. We are not liberated from dogma; we are simply insured by a new diocese where the acolytes carry notebooks instead of candles.

Still, the radio discussion had an unintended poetry. The psychologist, for all his materialism, spoke of introspection with something dangerously akin to reverence. “When man fully understands why he suffers,” he said, “he will cease to suffer.” The cleric murmured, “Amen,” as if the phrase were already in the liturgy. And there, between them, I imagined suffering winking in amusement, counting its eternal royalties.

I have no quarrel with introspection; it is my favourite vice. But I do worry about the economy of anxiety. Anyone who proposes to abolish faith must consider the unemployment it would cause in metaphysics. Think of all the out-of-work angels, psychologists eating each other’s notebooks, priests moonlighting as sociologists, and the congregation standing uncomfortably in the welfare queue of the void. A civilisation that has spent centuries monetising fear cannot simply declare serenity without budgetary consequences.

Freud once defined religion as a collective neurosis. The cleric, interviewed yesterday, inverted that—he treated neurosis as a collective religion. Neither view inspires calm. Both make humanity a kind of patient who can never quite be discharged. Perhaps that is the point: a permanent clientele ensures perpetual relevance. Whether one sells salvation or self-awareness, panic is the raw material.

When the broadcast ended, the announcer’s voice returned, warm, sexless, and triumphant: “And now, the shipping forecast.” I poured the rest of my tea into the aspidistra and reflected that civilisation continues much as before—tempests, diagnostics, small profits.

I switched off the wireless, feeling curiously fond of both combatants. The psychologist and the priest—each soothing the other’s conscience for a fee—are brothers under the skin. Between them they have created a faith without God and a therapy without cure. Somewhere, in the foggy vestibule between reason and repentance, humanity waits politely for its next appointment.

And if they ever make a joint practice of it, I shall gladly sit for their first portrait, provided they let me bring my duck.

1959: “The Accident of Birth”

by Devika Battak

(Originally published in Horizon)

We are all born into accidents—of geography, of time, of temperament mistaken for birthright. One spends years discovering that what one regards as oneself is largely topography: a language one did not choose, beliefs arranged on one’s behalf, hopes inherited with land deeds or, more often, without them. I have lately been preoccupied by this thought—not as a philosopher, which I am not, but as one who has travelled enough to see how differently one might have been, had the train arrived ten miles farther north or ten years later.

To be born anywhere is miracle enough; to be born in India—a civilisation still negotiating with itself—is to inherit multitude as destiny. Yet I sometimes wonder whether we attribute too much to ancestry, too little to imagination. We call the past our foundation, but what if it were rather a scaffolding, meant to be struck and rebuilt with every generation?

I have read, as one reads guilty pleasures, the Western speculations on history—Toynbee’s epochal cycles, Spengler’s grandiose declines, Lord Acton’s moral chronicle of freedom—and yet all seem bound by the same assumption: that continuity is virtue, that civilisation advances by unbroken remembrance. Perhaps; though I suspect continuity may be merely a convenient myth, like a family portrait hung to conceal a crack. What if, instead, we wiped the slate clean for each generation—rendered history no more than legend for the credulous—and allowed each new birth to invent its own record, its own texture of truth?

Would not such a civilisation be anarchic, yes, but also exhilarating? A world where one’s affiliations were chosen, not inherited; where the son of a peasant could begin not by rebelling against feudalism but by inventing a form of life to which feudalism had never applied. The moralists will object that this erases responsibility, and perhaps they are

right. But it also erases despair. Our sense of limitation comes largely from repetition dressed as heritage.

During a recent visit to Oxford—a city which has transformed respectability into atmosphere—I dined with an old don who observed that India’s tragedy was her sense of time. “You people,” he said, quite amiably, “never forget. Your very dust remembers.” I could not resist replying that Europe’s tragedy is precisely the opposite: their dust has forgotten too much, though it continues to dictate terms. Between amnesia and obsession lies the narrow ground of liberty.

Imagine, if one can, children brought up with no reverence for what preceded them except as fable; they would learn from scratch what justice feels like, how to conceive beauty without quotation marks. Of course, they might also rediscover cruelty with equal freshness. I do not propose a utopia, only an experiment in mental hygiene. One might call it the periodic sanitation of consciousness. After all, infancy renews the species daily; why not memory every century or two?

Our historians, particularly in newly independent nations, behave like anxious genealogists; we seek legitimacy through retrospection. Yet every act of nation-building requires a simultaneous act of forgetting. The British taught us the habit of documentation, but also the reverence for document; we have yet to learn that a record, once written, is not sacred, only convenient. The parchment may preserve the ink of power longer than power deserves.

When I was a student at Cambridge, I met E. M. Forster at a luncheon—his manner half kindly, half evasive, as though forever apologising for Empire. He said to me, “You must forgive England; we are prisoners of our continuity.” It struck me then that perhaps forgiveness itself belongs to those who can remember without worshipping. But can any civilisation achieve that composure? Would not forgetfulness, complete and cyclical, be both tragedy and release—the civic equivalent of death that makes renewal possible?

Consider mythology itself: its charm lies in detachable truth. The stories of gods and epics serve not because they are believed but because they can be re-imagined. India, more than any culture I know, lives by a mythology that constantly revises itself. Our gods are capable of mistake, our scriptures of interpolation. Perhaps that is our unconscious rehearsal of the clean slate.

Yet one must ask, where would the “I” dwell in such a society of perpetual reinvention? Without inherited memory, selfhood might become fluid to the point of evanescence. Maybe that is desirable. The Western obsession with personality has produced as much narcissism as achievement. A civilisation freed from yesterday might, paradoxically, achieve humility—not ignorance, but innocence reconstituted.

And yet—an unease remains. Would art survive, stripped of nostalgia? So much of our best music and literature feeds on longing for what was or might have been. Would Shakespeare still write “the whirligig of time brings in his revenges” if he were forbidden the concept of time at all? Perhaps creativity requires sedimentation, the slow composting of memory. To start afresh each morning might produce clarity, but no depth.

At dusk, walking along Marine Drive in Bombay, where the new buildings rise upon the ruins of the old, I sometimes wonder if the city is already attempting this experiment—forgetting decorously, floor by floor. The merchants erect their modern façades; behind them the same trade continues. History cannot be eradicated: it seeps through cement like groundwater. Yet to imagine its erasure is a liberating act, a rebellion against determinism.

Where and when we are born—those coordinates still dictate more than merit or desire. We may have abolished kings, but we remain citizens of circumstance. To be born in Delhi or Devon still means inheriting different libraries of possibility. Perhaps the true revolution will come when we cease to treat birth as a curriculum. Each life would begin as literature begins—with a blank page and no compulsory prologue.

I suppose that, like all artists, I am addicted to impossible ideas. We paint the world we cannot inhabit. But if the twentieth century has achieved anything of substance, it is the recognition that myths can be outgrown by choice rather than by accident. History may continue to write us whether we read it or not, but one can at least learn to hold the pen.

And maybe, if someday a civilisation perfects the art of beginning again, it will look upon our age of inherited certainties as we look upon prehistory—half in wonder, half in pity, and wholly unconvinced it ever truly existed.

1965: Opening Address to the International Symposium on Knowledge and Society

Paris— Viscount Anatis

I confess to a certain reluctance in accepting the honour of opening this gathering. It is rather like being asked to uncork a vintage bottle one suspects may contain vinegar. We have convened under the apparently noble banner of knowledge—one of those words that gleam when viewed from afar, but prove, upon inspection, to be no more than an elaborate label pasted upon a vessel of shifting contents.

I have in the past months spoken with painters, poets, and philosophers of many persuasions: with Francis Bacon, who tells me that truth is a shriek before it congeals; with Iris Murdoch, who murmured that knowledge must first be love if it is to see clearly; with Michel Foucault, whose friendship I value though I do not fully comprehend his categories; with Jean Cocteau, whose wit still could slice marble; and with Marguerite Duras, who maintains that the only knowledge worth naming is silence learned too late.

Such minds, so various and so solitary, agree only on one point: that knowledge, like intelligence, is not what one has, but what one is permitted to show. Society determines its measurements and then rewards those who conform to the instrument. Knowledge becomes a currency minted by the ruling taste—a stamp of legitimacy disguised as enlightenment. We are told it confers value, dignity, even legality. But I have learned, sometimes painfully, that what society calls knowledge it calls also respectability, and that the latter, once granted, is more perilous than ignorance.

Permit me, then, a confession both personal and political. As a boy, heir to some accidentally acquired titles, I was taught that education ennobles. Latin conferred superiority, Greek refinement, history gravity. I believed that to acquire learning was to ascend. But the years—and certain scandals—taught me otherwise: that knowledge is a social costume, and that once one wears the wrong attire, the doorkeepers of civilisation declare one unfit to enter. I speak, of course, as an Englishman who has lived long enough to know how delicately civilisation distinguishes between thought and the thinker.

Here, in Paris, we pretend to admire iconoclasm. The salons overflow with manifestos and the cafes with authenticity. Yet even these urbane circles possess their own hierarchies of knowledge: whose dialectic is fashionable, whose neurosis creative, whose outrage profitable. I lunched last week with Sartre, or rather I listened while Jean-Paul expounded. Before the entrée he had demolished theology; by dessert, he had re-constructed it in his own image. He insists that intelligence lies in freedom and authenticity—yet what institution rewards freedom beyond the walls of the lecture hall?

What we call knowledge is, in truth, an instrument of distribution: of money, of esteem, of attention, of affection. We grant diplomas, salaries, and headlines to those whose ideas fortify the visible order. A society's curriculum is its confession, and ours confesses timidity. There remains a category conveniently omitted from the *Encyclopédie*: the knowledge of shame, love, and exclusion—the invisible syllabus through which a people learns who may speak and who must whisper.

I recall an evening with the painter Giacometti, who said, “We see only in opposition,” and then blamed the lamps for being too bright. Perhaps our definition of knowledge functions in the same way: we illuminate a few selected objects—mathematics, science, reason—and allow all else to recede into aesthetic darkness. But imagine, if we broadened the beam, how different our civilisation might appear.

Suppose we included, under knowledge, the unrecorded intuitions: the seamstress’s precision of hand, the lover’s reading of silence, the labourer’s weather-sense, the child’s fierce logic, the exile’s instinct for danger. Suppose we considered memory not as archive but as atmosphere, and accepted that intelligence might take the form of endurance, not rhetoric. What would our hierarchies look like then? Would we, who pride ourselves on rationality, still believe ourselves the cleverest species?

Perhaps the crucial experiment would be ethical rather than intellectual. Extend the right of recognition to those whose knowledge differs, and watch what happens to behaviour. The forms of cruelty we call custom might dissolve in embarrassment. Our hatreds, I suspect, are maintained by the conceit that only the learned can define truth—and that those worthy of respect must pass our examinations. If we enlarged the definition, the emotional economy of the world might change.

Of course, I hear the objection already: that such an expansion would lead to chaos. Without hierarchy, say my colleagues in the House of Lords (and in the Sorbonne), civilisation would descend into barbarous democracy. But is it not democracy, after all, that keeps civilisation honest? When a man ceases to fear the ignorance of others, he begins to fear the knowledge of himself. We maintain narrow definitions precisely to avoid that encounter.

The poet W. H. Auden once said to me—after three whiskies—that creativity is simply the act of not turning away from what one sees. Might not knowledge, truly understood, be similar, yet applied to others instead of the self? The act of not turning away from those whose ways of knowing unsettle our own certainties.

The goal of this conference, I hope, is not to discover what knowledge is—that would be indecently ambitious—but to ask what knowledge does. To whom it grants voice, from whom it steals it, and by what rites it sustains itself. Each discipline represented here—art, philosophy, psychology, physics, literature—protects its own definition and calls that protection truth. Yet if all our branches confess their roots, we may find them tangled together beneath the soil, feeding upon the same human hunger for meaning.

Ladies and gentlemen, I stand before you as both product and victim of the English educational system, and therefore as an experiment in selective illumination. My generation was taught to glow modestly, from approved angles only. My hope for yours—and for whatever world shall follow—is that the light be less discriminating.

Let us then spend these days not amassing knowledge, but re-imagining its borders. The word itself may be only a label, but perhaps by tearing the label we shall glimpse what lies moving beneath it: something wilder, kinder, and far less certain—something that might yet teach us how to know one another without permission.

1932: The Ministry Of Internal Harmony (Sub-Department For Metaphysical Upkeep And Associated Services)

Whitehall Annex (Temporary Offices), London, S.W.1.

To: The Secretariats of the Ecclesiastical Guild of Perpetual Reverence
and

The Association for Rational Therapy, Limited

Re: Non-Remittance of Annual Maintenance Fees (Fiscal Period 1931-1932)

Dear Sirs,

(or such of you as remain authorised to acknowledge communication),

The attention of this Department has been repeatedly drawn—by whom, it is no longer clear—to the absence of remittance in respect of your recurrent obligations under Schedule B (Sub-clauses iii to vi inclusive) of the Unified Contract for the Preservation of National Equilibrium (Religious and Psychotherapeutic Divisions).

You will, of course, recall (see Circular 14-A, “On the Continuance of Confidence”) that both Religion and Psychology are herein defined not as competitive enterprises but as parallel maintenance contracts designed to ensure the ongoing operability of the Collective Mind. The former concerns itself with vertical stability, the latter with horizontal repair; both are payable at the prevailing rate plus spirit duty and incidental consolation.

It has come to our notice that the aforesaid professional organisations have failed to settle the annual service charges for the period ending Michaelmas last. The outstanding balance—quantified in principle though not yet in arithmetic—remains unacknowledged despite numerous reminders dispatched through the appropriate channels (including prayer, dream, and second post). Kindly note that

silence cannot, under current regulations, be construed as assent; it registers only as atmospheric interference.

In consequence, the Ministry must advise that unless full payment—or a recognisable simulacrum thereof—is received within seven (7) working eternities from the date hereof, both maintenance agreements shall be ipso facto suspended pending re-negotiation. Such suspension will, regrettably, precipitate the immediate withdrawal of ordinary metaphysical support functions, including but not limited to moral validation, confessional lubrication, and the adjustment of internal contradictions.

Upon cancellation, any new contracts will be subject to re-entry fees (payable in faith, doubt, or negotiable currency) and assessed according to the applicant's remaining credit of Credence. Interest on arrears will accrue daily at the variable rate of Disillusion, compounded annually by Inflation of Spirit. It may further assist you to know that—pursuant to Standing Order 9(b)—the Department reserves the right to outsource delinquent accounts to the Office of Existential Recovery, whose collectors are empowered to distress both assets and consciences without notice.

While the Ministry appreciates that recent economic conditions have rendered the purchase of transcendence inconvenient, it must be remembered that maintenance of the National Psyche cannot be deferred indefinitely. You are therefore urged to regularise your position at the earliest opportunity.

Payment may be tendered by cheque, confession, or collective act of contrition, made payable to “His Majesty's Treasury (Intangible Dividends Division).” Should you prefer to liquidate the account in instalments of reason, a revised schedule can be arranged subject to satisfactory evidence of belief.

Failure to respond will oblige us to re-evaluate your continued eligibility for authorised existence within the recognised parameters of coherence. Please treat this letter as a final reminder unless otherwise reminded.

We remain, pending resolution,
Faithfully (to procedure, if not conviction),

A. Glister-Hume (Provisional Under-Controller of Reciprocal Understanding)
for The Ministry of Internal Harmony
Authorised Signatory (Under Review)

1923: Extract from the Parliamentary Record (Unofficial):
The House of Lords

*Intervention by His Grace, the Duke of Mallard,
on the Question of Metaphysics (General Oversight and
National Containment Thereof)*

The matter before us, though not technically before us, appears to me of the first importance: namely, the proper classification, storage, and, if necessary, disposal of Metaphysics.

Now, I wish it clearly understood that I have no personal prejudice against Metaphysics as such. I have encountered it on occasion at country-house weekends and found it perfectly amiable in small doses—particularly when diluted with claret. But recent developments in the intellectual climate suggest that Metaphysics has been allowed to roam far too freely across the realm, without licence, regulation, or visible paper trail. There is talk of it infiltrating the universities, the civil service, and, alarmingly, the Colonial Office. I ask your Lordships: how much longer can this Empire sustain uncontained abstraction?

To my horror, I am told that Metaphysics—as defined by the Board of Unspecified Studies—is neither fish, fowl, nor finance. It is, apparently, an inquiry into the ultimate nature of things, conducted by means of words until both evaporate. One could hardly invent a more subversive occupation. Yet the Treasury, I learn, has granted no separate budget line for it. Great Heavens: if Whitehall has been compelled to absorb Metaphysics without remuneration, we are sitting upon a philosophical time-bomb!

Consider the precedent, my Lords. In the late seventeenth century, when Natural Philosophy crept in under Newton's wig, it was left unregulated. The result? Gravitation—an invisible force authorised without a vote—acting now upon every subject of the Crown. We cannot afford a repeat. If Whitehall had formalised Newton sooner, perhaps gravity would have been restricted to Scotland until the full implications were understood.

Then there was the Enlightenment—ah, the wretched business. We let the thinkers think unsupervised. We allowed Voltaire his pen, Rousseau his trousers, Locke his property, and before we knew it—Revolutions! Constitutions! Universal Steps of Progress! Britain, I grant, kept its head, but at what intellectual cost? The contagion spread to our natural scientists, whose sense of decorum was never high. Chemists began exploding substances merely to confirm their formulae. Biologists dissected Creation as though it were luncheon. Doctors decided to improve the human frame, and one cannot walk down

Harley Street now without being accosted by a man promising better health. All, my Lords, because nobody thought to appoint an Inspector-General of Metaphysics.

We must ask solemnly: if Metaphysics had been nationalised early, would England not be different today? Picture it! Departments properly labelled: a Central Bureau of Being; a Sub-Committee for the Ontological; an Advisory Council on the Why of Things. Debates would be minuted. Abstracts filed in alphabetical order. No dangerous speculation without permit. Every “Is” stamped and rationed. The metaphysical surplus could be exported to the Dominions, where it might encourage reflection among the Colonials. Instead, it has flooded our markets unpoliced. One can buy philosophies by the pound in Bloomsbury. I have personally seen a young man in tweed trousers selling “Meaning” from a barrow.

Do not mistake me, my Lords; I am not opposed to thought. But thought, like alcohol, must be diluted to be safe for the populace. At present, private individuals are brewing metaphysics in their own attics. Whole families intoxicated by unpasteurised Being! Were the plague less invisible, the Home Secretary would have banned it.

I am informed by a clergyman of my acquaintance that Metaphysics was originally the province of Theology. Indeed, it hid quietly behind dogma for centuries, performing such useful tasks as proving God and maintaining decorum between services. Then along came Kant—or was it Spinoza?—who dragged it into the daylight and declared it a free citizen. Since then it has migrated between philosophers, psychologists, and novelists like a well-educated refugee, leaving confusion in every passport office it enters.

For the record, I once met a Metaphysician at Cambridge: mild eyes, nervous smile, called himself a “Practitioner of Pure Reason.” His explanation of his work took two and a half hours, at the end of which I suspected espionage. He insisted that nothing truly exists except what exists, and that even that was “problematical.” I pointed out that lunch existed, whereupon he replied that I was “asserting without justification.” Such insolence demands oversight.

I say to this House, have we learned nothing from the Enlightenment? There are only so many times one can light reason before the curtains burn. Unless we regulate Metaphysics, it will continue to expand like rising dough under insufficient moral supervision. Imagine the consequences if it were ever applied to politics! Ministers asking why there is government, civil servants doubting whether paperwork exists—anarchy under philosophical management.

I propose, therefore, a modest infrastructure: the establishment of a Department for the Containment of Metaphysical Substances, answerable to the Lord President and staffed by individuals too practical to be affected by ideas. Every metaphysical proposition to be licensed, tested for public safety, and sealed in official envelopes marked For Thereby Occasions of Thought. Let us at last bring Being within the competence of authority.

Some might say this infringes liberty. I remind them that liberty itself is metaphysical and thus subject to future regulation. Others fear bureaucracy. Bureaucracy, my Lords, is precisely the antidote to Meaning. It must be deployed while supplies last.

In conclusion (though I cannot be certain), my Lords, the question before us is not whether Metaphysics shall exist—it clearly does, despite our best efforts—but whether it shall be allowed to wander unsupervised through the corridors of the Empire. I envision a time when every Englishman shall know exactly what he doesn't believe, and shall believe it according to the proper form. Until then, for the safety of the Kingdom, I adjure you all: Regulate Metaphysics!

1974: "What's Wrong About Theoretical Physics"

by Fenella Vorpel,

Form 5 Science Extension, Brisbane Girls' Grammar School

When I told my father (who isn't a physicist but reads *New Scientist* the way people read horoscopes) that I was writing an essay called "What's Wrong About Theoretical Physics," he said, "Everything, if you listen to your mother." But I don't mean that kind of wrong. I don't mean that physicists keep dropping things or that their laboratories explode. I mean that something went a bit askew somewhere around the 17th century and has been whirring off-centre ever since, like a fan that was balanced in the Enlightenment but hasn't been cleaned since Newton died.

At school we've been learning about the "Scientific Revolution," which sounds terribly glamorous, like Che Guevara with a telescope. In reality, it mostly involved middle-aged men in wigs arguing about apples. I've been reading *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by Thomas Kuhn (which Miss Dalton in the library claims is too "unsettling" for someone my age—exactly the reason I read it). Kuhn says science doesn't progress tidily but lurches from one batch of assumptions to the next. That's comforting because it explains why

modern physics still feels like a symphony conducted with top hats instead of batons.

I suppose the problem began when Descartes decided that mind and matter were separate, and Newton gave matter all the best lines. The 17th century was obsessed with machinery—clockwork universes, celestial gears, mathematical choreography. According to my trusty Pelican paperback of Butterfield's *The Origins of Modern Science*, everyone thought they'd finally found the recipe for truth: take one experiment, stir in some numbers, and bake for certainty. Lovely, except that it's built on a sort of cosmic snobbery—pretending the whole universe is just an obedient mechanism instead of, say, an unpredictable family of particles.

Now the bits of physics that don't behave—like quantum mechanics, entropy, and relativity—all look like the universe's revenge for having been over-explained. Niels Bohr (whose *Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge* I skimmed between geography homework) says we can talk about atoms only in metaphors, which to me sounds more like poetry than engineering. Einstein, my other bedtime companion, once said "God does not play dice," and then the universe promptly started shuffling the deck just to tease him.

What's wrong about theoretical physics, as far as I can tell, is not that it's wrong in detail but that it refuses to admit that the details are guesses dressed in algebra. The best physicists know this—Heisenberg practically shouted it in neon with his Uncertainty Principle—but the rest of the profession behaves as if equations were windows rather than mirrors. If I write $x^2 + y^2 = r^2$, I haven't explained anything; I've just disguised surprise in elegant symbols.

It seems to me that after the 17th century men adopted mathematics the way women used to adopt corsets: for structure, support, and social respectability. Anyone caught breathing too flexibly—say, talking about consciousness or telepathy—was excommunicated as "unscientific." Even today, when the neutron stars are wobbling and the galaxies are spinning like Catherine wheels, most physicists pretend the whole system is still a tidy Newtonian billiard table. Relativity and quantum theory were supposed to annihilate certainty, but physics kept it on life support in calculus.

I've also been reading Jacob Bronowski's *The Common Sense of Science* and Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*, which together confirm my suspicion that science itself is a form of faith, just with cleaner fingernails. Russell calls philosophy the attempt to "unite the man of theory and the man of action." The trouble is that the men of theory keep drowning the action with equations, and the rest of us

are left wondering whether we're watching knowledge or choreography.

A friend lent me Freeman Dyson's *Disturbing the Universe*, which is suitably titled. Dyson insists that physics is "an exploration, not an explanation." If that's true, then physics needs explorers, not accountants. I suppose this is where people tell me to "go into astronomy—you'll love the stars." But even the astronomers seem trapped behind metaphors of measurement. We map infinity, give it grid references, write it down, and then claim it's been tamed. I'm not convinced.

Sometimes, late at night, I wonder what it would mean to reset everything—to go back before Galileo looked through his telescope and remember that the sky was first an act of imagination. What if each new generation, instead of inheriting the framework of science like a second-hand corset, started again? Not denying what came before, merely refusing to worship it. We might rediscover physics as something playful, provisional, more like drawing than deduction.

Of course, I should probably think about my career. My teacher says "theoretical physics is an excellent path for an intelligent young woman" which sounds like being told Antarctica is a lovely destination if one doesn't mind frostbite. Theoretical physics is full of famous men who proved things wrong in peacetime and right in retrospect, leaving nothing for the rest of us except footnotes. It's also, frankly, chilly. I can appreciate algebraic beauty, but I'd rather not die calculating it.

So perhaps I'll be an astro-navigator instead. They sound like people who actually go somewhere, even if it's only the moon. I imagine them charting trajectories instead of theories, reading the stars instead of their own equations, perhaps even admitting they're guessing. That kind of science, I could forgive.

Anyway, to answer the question—which I suspect I was meant to have done pages ago—what's wrong about theoretical physics is that somewhere between 1642 and 1974 it mistook metaphor for machinery. Science still believes the universe behaves according to its convenience. I believe the universe behaves like my cat: looks at you, blinks, and walks away just when you think you've understood it.

If that's theoretical physics, then perhaps it's correct after all, though I don't think I'll join it. I'd rather find out where it was going before it started explaining everything.

1995: Fabrice Mallard

Private papers

It is late, though the city still hums like a distant tide—the Sydney that never quite learns modesty, even after midnight. From my balcony the entire harbour seems to glitter with an overconfident joy. I can smell jacaranda, Chanel, and distant money. Tonight is quiet enough for me to record what I’ve done—or rather, what I have begun. Mother would call it interference; I prefer to think of it as atonement.

Gloriana died in June, elegantly and predictably, three weeks after her surgeon told her she had nothing left to prove. She managed to turn even dying into an act of style—pure silk sheets, Bach on the stereo, and two of her friends arguing sotto voce over whether she’d left her estate to charity or to the cat. In truth, she left it to both, though the charity turned out to be me.

The scale of her fortune startled even the executor. There was more of everything than seemed possible: three houses (one unspecified because she could never remember her own investments), walls of pictures—some important, some merely large—and a jewellery collection so extravagant it glowed like a confession. Above all, there was cash: a ridiculous quantity, sleeping quietly under false names. Mother called it “insurance against the untidy world.” For most of her life she had been tidier than God.

I spent the first month after the funeral thinking I would simply leave it in trust, untouched. I have my own money—quite enough from my previous career, which, while hardly a profession Mother would have advertised, was nonetheless both educational and profitable. I learned a rather expensive truth in those years: that what people pay for is not what they get; it’s what they believe about themselves. That lesson alone has furnished more wisdom than any economics degree could dare.

But generosity, once practiced, is contagious. When I reread Mother’s will, I found myself composing a contradiction. She had survived her generation by acting as though class and culture were armour; she disdained anyone who didn’t know which fork to use. I’ve spent my life deciding that difference is precisely what keeps the world breathing. And so, with some haste and no permission from her ghost, I founded the Gloriana College—though I omitted her surname, to spare her the agony of association.

The idea came from a conversation years ago with a Moroccan architect after too much cognac in Tangier. He said, “Education is not the exchange of facts, it is the hospitality of minds.” That line never left me. The College’s premise is outrageously simple: bring together

sixty-four people—the perfect square to represent imperfect balance—from everywhere and everything. A retired Fijian fisherman debates literature with a Barossa Valley winemaker; an ex-nun studies pattern-cutting with a queer Japanese drop-out; a bus driver from Marrickville reads Sanskrit beside a German physicist moonlighting as a sculptor.

They share three years of what I call temporal residence—learning and teaching in rotation. No exams, no qualifications, no credentials. The only requirement is duration: residence over time, which may be spread across a lifetime. One may attend for a month or a decade, come back after children, after imprisonment, after epiphany. Their scholarship is their endurance.

I wrote our charter in three days, fuelled on espresso, defiance, and Puccini. It states that “the purpose of the College is to cultivate intellectual promiscuity as an art form.” (In hindsight, the phrase may be misleading, but then, clarity has never been my vice.) I placed it in trust, in perpetuity, its funding guaranteed by Gloriana’s fortune re-engineered through various offshore minor miracles. The accountants looked appalled when I told them ignorance, like infection, was the only thing worth curing permanently.

We purchased a crumbling sandstone complex just outside Parramatta, once a seminary and briefly a correctional hostel—ideal symmetry, really. The old chapel serves as library; the cells have become sleeping quarters; the gardens are riotous again. They planted marigolds and basil where the washing lines once ran. Every window is open. Every conversation begins with a question no one plans to answer properly.

A visiting journalist from *The Bulletin* asked last week what I hoped the graduates would “do with their lives.” I told him, with probably more heat than charm, that life itself was the syllabus. They will leave here understanding that difference is not disorder, that intellect without empathy is masturbation with applause, and that wealth is only interesting when it funds risk. He blinked, wrote half a quote, and fled.

Sometimes, late at night, I feel Mother’s raised eyebrow somewhere among the constellations, unimpressed. She believed in inheritance, in the purity of blood and lineage. I believe in cross-pollination. She performed dinner parties like military campaigns; I host arguments like operas. Yet paradoxically, I suspect she would admire the efficiency of my rebellion. I used her very instruments—property, propriety, and perpetuity—to finance untidiness. Perhaps that is the reconciliation we never had: I have turned her order into possibility.

There are nights when I walk through the College grounds alone, listening. From one room comes someone reading aloud Neruda; from

another, laughter in five languages; further down, the persistent notes of a flute played badly but bravely. The air smells of spice, rain, and youth. At such moments, I think Gloriana herself might have paused on the edge of disapproval and called it art.

I never aspired to correctness; only to meaning. Now I see they are rarely the same. The College is my confession: a gift, a rebellion, and perhaps a kind of love story disguised as administration. They tell me the first cohort will graduate in 1998, though what they will be qualified for is impossible to define. I hope they do nothing useful and everything beautiful.

1951: The Gentleman's Gentlemen

from The London Review of Manners

One cannot walk through the National Gallery without tripping over a breast. They are everywhere, those obliging hemispheres, drooping, contoured, illuminated like lanterns of aesthetic virtue. One feels rather as though one's been invited to inspect the nation's dairy. Here is Beauty, apparently, reclining; there is Innocence, undressing. "Art," we are told, "celebrates the human form." It does, but only half of it—and that half powdered, tilted, and eternally on the verge of saying "no" with its eyes and "yes" with its torso.

This partial enthusiasm for anatomy is not new. The Greeks began it, of course, but at least theirs were honest men: the gods of Olympia were as nude as the goddesses, and more proudly so. That we tolerate Aphrodite's marble curves but avert our gaze from a marble Apollo suggests the Empire on which the sun never set has long since drawn the curtains.

Why, then, so few male nudes in our modern world? Beyond an occasional David, preserved like a scandalous ancestor in the museum, one must descend to physical-culture magazines or the more adventurous advertisements for shaving soap to glimpse the male limb untrousered. Our newspapers, so accustomed to flaunting the female torso as a patriotic duty, would faint dead away at the idea of a Page Three Percy. Apparently, the female breast sells soap; the male chest still unnerves the bishopric.

We are told it is censorship. The law, they whisper, "protects public decency." This is delightful fiction. Decency is less a principle than a panic: it exists chiefly to obscure appetite. The truth, I suspect, lies not in prudery but in fear—fear that the gaze, once freed, might look in inadmissible directions. For centuries men have trained themselves to admire women's beauty as a public utility; to admire another man's

beauty is to endanger the tariff. There is a ghostly anxiety in the corridors of power that the moment the male form is shown, the mirrors of admiration might tilt inward.

Consider the plight of the bureaucrat, the permanent-secretary of taste. He signs off on half-naked goddesses yet cannot abide the thought of a sculpted thigh on his mantelpiece lest it disturb the equilibrium of the club. Were we to hang Titian's Venus opposite a comparable Mars, some civil servant would call for curtains "in the interests of symmetry." Men may expose themselves to shells, surgery, or scandal, but not to appreciation.

One might think the war would have cured us. Six years of shared bathrooms, communal fear, and a veritable festival of male bodies in khaki should have made the masculine form as pedestrian as porridge. But no—the moment peace arrived, London re-buttoned itself. Women became pin-ups; men resumed their armours of grey flannel. The Ministry of Information quietly dissolved; the Ministry of Suppression carried on by instinct.

The paradox of our civilisation is that it is, by any social measure, homosocial to the marrow. Men make the laws, bankroll the art, manage the press, and dine together nightly, congratulating one another on the splendour of the female form. They appear to suspect that admitting admiration for their own apparatus of power—the male physique itself—might reveal an intimacy too accurate for comfort. Thus, they preserve the illusion that desire runs in only one direction, publicly toward women, privately nowhere in particular.

If one challenges this, one is accused of bad taste or, worse, "continental thinking." The continent, after all, has statues of naked men in its city squares; our equivalent tends to be a soldier in bronze, placed high enough that no one sees where the tunic ends. Even artistic modernism, which prides itself on daring, treats the male body as if it were an unresolved algebraic problem. Abstract, angled, and mostly headless—the traditional penalties for insolence.

The market, too, conspires. The patrons of art are still overwhelmingly masculine, and they prefer their aesthetic excitement safely heterosexualised. A curled, reclining Venus reassures the collector that he is both cultured and virile. A similarly posed Adonis might complicate dinner conversation. For the gallery, it's simply bad arithmetic: breasts double revenue, buttocks divide it.

I sometimes wonder what would happen if we reversed the gaze: imagine a London where hoardings and newspapers offered the male form to the female or the undecided eye, where beauty were democratically distributed. Would civilisation crumble? Would Parliament stiffen with protest? Or would we at last admit that

admiration of beauty, wherever found, need not be prosecuted as deviance?

But that, alas, would require an honest Britain has never been able to afford. The real scandal is not nakedness but admission. We are a nation skilled in sublimation: we turn desire into architecture, companionship into empire, and curiosity into law.

What passes for censorship is thus more affectionate hypocrisy than oppression. The gentleman's gentlemen, who run our affairs, know perfectly well that society rests upon male intimacy; they simply prefer it cloaked in protocol. Acknowledging it openly would be like discussing the plumbing during dinner. So we continue to discuss women instead: their legs, their lips, their likenesses—all the decorations of a house we do not entirely inhabit.

If civilisation has indeed advanced, it is in technique, not candour. We've replaced fig leaves with camera lenses, shame with advertisement. One might almost admire the precision with which we conceal ourselves. Still, I maintain that until the body of man may stand beside the body of woman, equally naked and equally unashamed, art remains half-complete and our vaunted modernity merely another tailor's trick.

And yet, perhaps our reluctance has its perverse integrity. After all, a culture that fears to look may, on occasion, learn to imagine. The English male nude, unseen but suspected, has become our last mystery, hanging invisibly between the National Gallery and the men's changing room, unnoticed by the art historians and adored by everyone else.

For now, the gentleman's gentlemen rule; the gentlemen look away; the rest of us laugh—not immoderately, just enough to be improper.

1976: a Blandy housewife

I don't know why I keep this book. It's one of those lined ones from Coles, blue cover, keeps staring at me as if it expects something clever each night. I started it mostly because Joyce from down the street told me journalling—she calls it “journalling” now, fancy word—helps a person “process life events.” Well, if I thought writing would make the dishes wash themselves, I'd have started years ago. But they're still in the sink, and I'm the same old person I was before, just tired.

Anyway, since I've gone to all the trouble of sitting down, I might as well complain properly. They all told us when I was at school—that's thirty years ago come winter—that if we studied hard and read books and passed exams, we'd be “someone.” Good job, good life, something to show your parents. Well, I did all that. Stayed in till I was sixteen, could quote the kings of England and all the rivers in China, did spelling bees, got a certificate with a seal on it. And what did it ever do

for me? I ended up wrapping sandwiches in wax paper at the café, married a man whose main idea of conversation is the footy ladder, raised two kids who think I'm invisible unless they need money for petrol. Knowledge didn't stop the washing or the bills, did it?

You know what I say now: there's no sense filling your head when your hands are never empty. I haven't read another book since I left school, and I'm proud of it. Don't need to. Everything important's on telly or the bus signs. I read the magazines, though—Women's Weekly, New Idea—because they tell you something worth knowing, like how to get tomato sauce stains out of tea-towels or what haircuts are “in.” That's education you can use, not all this “Shakespeare” business, shouting in poems about people stabbing each other. My daughter tried to get me to read a “modern novel” last Christmas—said it was “significant.” I told her if it didn't have recipes or medical advice in it, it could stay right on her shelf.

Sometimes I reckon the government just invented schools to keep kids off the streets until they're old enough for work. They still go on about “enrichment” and “lifelong learning.” Well, they mustn't do much cleaning. None of that learning's going to iron a shirt or fill a lunchbox, is it? All the clever ones from school I knew ended up just as broke as the rest of us, only more miserable about it because they expected life to behave. Better to start out knowing it won't.

Of course, I can read if I want to. I read every bus route number and every price tag. It's not like I'm an idiot. It's just, reading turns your head soft. You start dreaming instead of getting on. The dictionary never paid off a bill yet. People who read too much always look vaguely disappointed, as if the world's forgotten to rhyme.

I know it's silly keeping this diary when I'm saying all this. It's a book, too, isn't it? Only difference is it listens better. No plots, no heroes, just me rattling on with a biro. Maybe that's why I keep doing it, just to have the last word after supper's cleared. I don't fuss about grammar; if the Lord can understand me in prayer, paper can manage it too.

Still, sometimes I think about that girl I was—sitting in the classroom smelling chalk dust, proud because the teacher said I had “potential.” Funny word, that. Sounds like money you never got. I suppose I did have some. It just went towards other things: the mortgage, the dentist, the kids' uniforms. Potential doesn't pay the gas bill either.

All right, enough philosophy. The kettle's boiling and the cat's meowing for leftovers. If I've learned one thing since school, it's that life never waits for enlightenment. Tomorrow I'll catch the 82 tram—I know the timetable off by heart—and pick up the shopping. Maybe I'll

buy one of those crossword books for the bus ride. Education, I can tolerate in tiny squares.

Now to bed. At least the dishes are soaking. If knowledge could make them vanish overnight, I'd start reading again in a heartbeat. Until then, I'll stick to my magazines. They, at least, have pictures.

1952: "On Certain Ecumenical Misunderstandings"

For the Diocesan Gazette (Sydney)

by The Reverend Adrian Lacuna, B.D., Canterbury Hall

It is perhaps impolitic, though not (I hope) impious, to discuss the matter of Roman matrimonial concessions in a publication devoted to the sanctified tranquillity of our own Anglican communion. Nevertheless, since several parishioners have asked me, with that air of pained bewilderment usually exhibited only by the newly bereaved or recently confirmed, "Is it true, Padre, that Catholics may now marry the rest of us?" I shall attempt to distil what understanding I have of the position. The result may resemble a theological trifle: many layers, some custard, and uncertain depth.

To begin—if one can ever begin with Rome—the law in question arises from the recent codifications which allow (note the word allow, not approve) a Roman Catholic to marry a non-Catholic Christian, or indeed any favoured specimen of the unwashed laity, provided that the said non-Catholic solemnly undertakes that all ensuing children will be baptised and reared within the "True Church." This concession is trumpeted, by those given to trumpets, as an act of magnanimous charity on Rome's part. One is reminded of a landlord who, having let half your garden to himself, graciously invites you to picnic upon the remaining gravel.

The mechanism of this arrangement is a masterpiece of bureaucratic theology. The dispensation (for that is the magic word) may be granted by episcopal authority once the Catholic party has filled in what I can only describe as a spiritual pledge-card, promising to defend the purity of the household faith. The non-Catholic must sign a document of similar magnanimity acknowledging the privilege of belonging to the family but not to the Church. There follows an exchange of correspondence—a sort of holy paperwork—culminating in a mixed marriage celebrated in a neutral territory, sometimes the porch, as though Heaven itself were uncertain of the seating plan.

In its way the scheme is ingenious, for it allows Rome to display tolerance without surrender. It says, "We will condescend to your difference, provided your offspring are immediately quarantined

against it.” It is theological amnesty with mandatory conversion of minors. And yet, absurd as it seems, the arrangement has admirers even among our own faithful, who regard it as a model of modern flexibility. They cry, “Look how generous the Roman Church has become!”—to which I am always tempted to reply, “Generous with whose children?”

Every institution must, of course, preserve its boundaries, but the peculiar Roman genius is to pretend that boundaries are invitations. One must stand inside the fence to appreciate the view, they say, but at their leisure they also determine who actually owns the field. The entire affair reminds me of the old fable of the condescending lion who allowed the lamb to share his cave, provided all subsequent lambs bore a convenient resemblance to lions.

Permit me to add that my objections are not anti-Roman but pro-logic. The Anglican position on matrimony is, by contrast, uncharacteristically coherent: two Christians marry within the fellowship of Christ’s Church, trusting that grace will attend them both, whatever the baptismal register of their grandparents. We do not demand promissory notes about potential progeny. The Church of England, though frequently accused of tepidity, trusts the Holy Spirit to do His own recruiting.

What disturbs me most is the Roman presumption that revelation requires parental enforcement. The notion that Truth cannot survive a breakfast conversation between two faiths without suitable paperwork betrays a curious lack of confidence. Our High Church brethren are sometimes accused of arrogance; yet it takes a rare blend of conceit and anxiety to imagine that the Almighty, unaided, might lose custody of Christian children to their Protestant parents.

I once debated this matter with a Roman colleague over tea, a most amiable man armed with the Catechism and a conviction of God’s exclusive tenancy. When I asked why the Church insisted upon securing the unborn, he replied gravely, “Because outside Her there is no salvation.” It was uncharitable of me, but I found myself reflecting that inside Her, also, there appears to be no modesty.

Let me be fair; the intention, we are often told, is pastoral. Rome fears the confusion of divided households. We too abhor confusion, though we generally call it discussion. One shudders to imagine their terror at the prospect of a married couple disagreeing on creeds over supper; yet how else does theology survive except by the friction of contradiction? Unity purchased by silence has about it the sound of a locked door.

I cannot but suspect that these dispensations are less acts of charity than exercises in spiritual bookkeeping. Rome wishes to demonstrate statistical vitality: the ledger of souls must always show increase. If that

entails enrolling infants still in the cradle of possibility—so be it. Their numbers, not their nurture, constitute triumph. And so, one new “family” at a time, the Roman census advances. It is evangelism conducted by proxy, very nearly prenatal.

There is, too, the unspoken anxiety that men might find the Roman Church less alluring were they permitted to stray unchaperoned among the other denominations. In such matters, possessiveness masquerades as orthodoxy. If the Truth truly were self-evident, surely it could survive a conversation across the dinner table—or even, dare one say it, a mixed marriage performed without conditional surrender.

Some correspondents have accused me of jealousy. They claim Anglicanism envies Rome its authority. On the contrary, my admiration for that authority is boundless—precisely because it defies reason and persists. But I cannot forbear to mock the conceit implicit in this most domestic of dogmas: the notion that Providence requires human paperwork to confirm paternal rights. Heaven help us if St. Peter must sort saved and unsaved by consulting diocesan marriage files.

It is perhaps uncharitable to conclude with ridicule, but humour is the sole sacrament we Protestants may still administer freely. I would merely suggest that the Roman arrangement, splendid in its self-importance, accomplishes less than it advertises. It guarantees nothing and reveals everything—chiefly, the Church’s determination to appear simultaneously tolerant and triumphant. The rest of us must content ourselves with marriages that depend upon mutual affection and the mercies of God rather than upon episcopal affidavits.

In summary, the so-called mixed marriage law is not, as its defenders insist, the sign of modernity, but a symptom of institutional stage fright. When Rome learns that the Truth can withstand an argument—and that salvation requires fewer notaries—it will no doubt issue an encyclical to say so. Until then, I recommend to our own faithful that they avoid betrothal under such conditions, unless one enjoys being classified as decorative heresy in perpetuity.

That, at all events, is how things appear from this worried yet waggish Anglican pulpit. Should I have offended anyone in saying so, I invite them to find consolation in one of their more abundant sacraments; we others must make do with common sense, which, though less ceremonious, is still remarkably efficacious.

1911: a Description of Several Unfinished Gestures

The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

There is a house on the edge of a morning so long that no one recalls when it began. Each day it is newly built, though no workmen arrive, and each day it stands slightly improved, as if the air itself were rehearsing competence. Its walls shine with the mild polish of officialdom. A faint hum issues from the clock in the hall—so faint that one may think it silence, until it stops. When it stops, all time in the house gathers its skirts politely and waits.

At Mallard, the doors never quarrel with their hinges. They open only as much as is necessary, neither in welcome nor in refusal, but as one might incline one's head to greet a subordinate concept. The servants have acquired the same precision. One sees them gliding with candlesticks, each movement expressing a quantity of obedience too careful to be emotive. The lamps reply in a chorus of small adjustments. Light, in this house, does not discover things; it signs them into existence.

The owner is rarely visible but always implied, like grammar. When she does appear, she speaks gently of routines, not reasons. Her authority is remarkable for never demanding belief. The household obeys because it would be vulgar not to. Even the windows bow to her method, brightening in perfect intervals of acceptance.

In the first week of April, the rain made its annual inspection, finding every gutter precisely as listed in the year's agenda. The coachman took this as a compliment and adjusted his gloves. Glove adjustment is the local currency of satisfaction. There are no quarrels in the house, only "clarifications." Clarification, however, is endless: each servant explaining that the teapot is already full, the butler replying that fullness requires verification, the teapot contributing silence consistent with its station.

One morning, the housekeeper noticed that the light in the breakfast room had altered—less procedural, more opinionated. She attributed this to the arrival of a new footman, tall, Roman, and imperfectly trained in deference. Nothing alarming, only a minute divergence from the vertical. His shadow strayed. Shadows are the first to misbehave; they believe themselves private. Within two days the hallway clocks had begun expressing intervals of individuality, and the entire household became conscious of its own tempo.

The owner entered the hall, perfectly serene, and said, "The tea is getting cold." It seemed a remark of no consequence, but the staff later admitted a collective shiver. For tea cannot truly get cold unless time has been allowed to proceed unapproved. By sunset the clocks were

reconciled; the footman's posture returned to protocol. The incident was not discussed further, though it now serves as reference for all quiet catastrophes.

In Mallard, no one is dismissed, and yet vacancies occur. Rooms remember occupants only by brightness. Once a maid was said to have left a candle alight in a disused corridor; the light persists there still, doing nothing, acknowledging nothing, the most punctual flame in residence. Each evening another maid checks it, neither extinguishing nor replacing it, merely confirming that its persistence continues within acceptable bounds.

Hierarchy here is not severity but sequence. The steward, the housekeeper, the parlourmaid, and the stable boy—all belong to a chain as elegantly graded as daylight. Each knows precisely whom to precede and whom to follow. Errors of rank are small earthquakes; politeness repairs them with tremulous efficiency. On calm nights one hears the hierarchy breathing, a slow regulated sigh keeping the walls intact.

I have stayed at Mallard myself, as both guest and accident. I saw the house reflected in its own mirrors, as though reality required two signatures. The mirrors were courteous; they presented an orderly version of confusion. Once I thought I glimpsed the owner writing upon a pad of light, translating silence into instructions. When she looked up, she spoke as if reciting inventory: "It is not power that keeps the house from collapsing, but the habit of remaining upright." I dared not ask whether she addressed me, the furniture, or her reflection.

There is a steady hum in the garden from bees that appear contractual in their diligence. Each flies a set route between blooms, never improvising, though sometimes repetition achieves art. The gardener calls it "the governance of nectar." I once asked him if the bees recognise their queen. He laughed softly. "It isn't recognition," he said, "it's procedure with wings."

Some guests claim the house experiences weather like a bureaucracy: clouds filing for admission, sunlight asking permission to enter, winds making polite reference to precedent. Inside, the climate remains constant—neither warm enough to console nor cold enough to challenge. The air itself would rather not commit an opinion. Nights conclude themselves according to schedule, dawns arrive with minutes to spare. Procedure is everlasting; enthusiasm merely visits.

Still, on certain afternoons, one detects a subversive warmth, as if the whole establishment remembers being human. This warmth most often coincides with the afternoon changing of the curtains, an event observed by nobody yet essential to all. The maids, backlit by their duty, have the look of saints engaged in domestic diplomacy. It is said

that whoever witnesses the curtains entirely drawn will glimpse, between the folds, the architecture of patience. I watched once; I saw nothing. Later, rereading my own notes, I realised that seeing nothing may have been the admission fee.

Every year, at some indeterminate date, the staff assemble invisible guests at a ceremonial table. Blank plates are served with recitations of etiquette: one must not envy silence, one must not speculate upon purpose, one must, under certain lights, resemble composure. Afterwards the house resumes its function, which is to contain without confirming.

The authority presiding here—be it divine, bureaucratic, or aesthetic—has mastered the art of meaning without message. It triumphs by never winning. Within such perfection one finds mercy: nothing is altered because everything already complies. The servants know this better than the guests. Their survival lies in imitation: they mimic calm until calm believes in them.

At dusk, the owner walks the corridor exactly twice, extinguishing what glows, approving what remains dim. Her final gesture is always the same—turning the key to a door that never locks. She descends the staircase of obedience, her steps echoing like a measured question: should procedure ever conclude, what word would follow?

Perhaps, though, it ends as it began, with the humble line one might overlook: the tea is getting cold. It always is. And so, in the house at the edge of morning, everything recommences—neatly, correctly, and forever.

1854: Alice Mallard in Simla

To Jeanne d'Anatis in Sussex

You ask how I endure this climate of divided duties—English by birth, Indian by title, an observer by consent. My days are a sequence of negotiations between temperature and temperament: mornings cool and receptive, afternoons stern with imperial confidence, evenings suddenly mystical when the clouds dissolve into silver. That I live between languages is its own education. The servants speak Hindustani to one another and the dialect of Himachal when they wish me to hear nothing. The sahibs at Government House speak policy as though it were commandment. Between these worlds I drift, translating both and truly belonging to neither.

I have lately been turning over in my mind a thought which refuses to settle. It came to me while listening to a conversation between certain officers who had come up from Calcutta. They were discussing the

latest Governor-General and his reforms in the tone one might reserve for the weather—pleasant, alterable, and of no moral consequence. What struck me was not their cynicism, but their serenity. They do not believe; they administer. Authority now depends upon nothing so inconvenient as conviction. As I rode back that evening through the mist, I asked myself: if authority no longer requires belief, knowledge, or enforcement, what then remains for a human being to do inside it? Or indeed, outside?

This question seems to me no mere colonial curiosity, but a symptom of the age. England, from all accounts, governs not by faith in her superiority, but by habit of it. The power here has become procedural, automatic, like one of those dreadful early engines that will continue along its track whether a man steers it or not. Empire rules itself now; men are only the noise it makes.

I have spoken of this, gently, to Rajesh—you will remember him from that extravagant wedding portrait which caused such talk in London. To my surprise he agreed with me, though not in the terms I used. He says his forefathers also endured the emptiness of power—that their titles became hollow long before the British arrived. “It is the oldest curse in India,” he told me one night as we watched the valley flicker with cook-fires. “We create the forms of mastery, and then we must serve them.” I cannot tell whether that admission was despair or wisdom.

All my comparative reading—which you yourself encouraged before I left England—has not brought me peace, only a more articulate perplexity. I have been reading the Bhagavad Gita in a curious bilingual edition, which translates devotion into the idiom of discipline. Next to it I have been reading Butler’s Analogy of Religion and, more scandalously, the essays of Emerson which a sympathetic missionary lent me. (Do not faint: he insists he is a heretic only by accident.) They each whisper that inward obedience is the truest form of sovereignty. Yet such freedom, if attained, would make administration superfluous—a conclusion that suits neither bishop nor bureaucrat.

Within the British circles here there is talk, endlessly, of “the civilising mission.” How strange that our civilisation, so loudly proclaimed, produces faces so weary with management. The Englishmen of India no longer argue that they are right—only that they are necessary. It is a smaller justification, and infinitely sadder. The natives, for their part, have learned the art of outward compliance and inward endurance. Between these two exhausted certainties—the ruler who governs by default and the ruled who submit by design—there is no belief left at all, only performance.

I begin to wonder whether belief itself was ever more than a decorative garment worn by authority in its youth. Perhaps the essence of power is not conviction but continuity: its skill in remaining seated after everyone else has gone home. The Maharaja, when he presides at ceremonies, seems to me as much a prisoner of the throne as any English viceroy of his desk. They maintain each other by reflection, like two mirrors facing across an empty hall.

As for myself, what am I to do inside such a system? I act, perhaps, as a translator—not of language alone but of embarrassment. When the missionaries grow too righteous, I distract them with Sanskrit etymology. When the English ladies gossip about the hopeless softness of the natives, I inform them, very sweetly, that the real cruelty of power lies not in harshness but in convenience. Occasionally they blush; more often they change the subject to weather or roses. The roses here are marvellous, by the way—their scent somehow deeper than in England, as though carrying incense from buried centuries.

The paradox remains: to exist within authority one must practice obedience while quietly unlearning it; to exist outside one must endure irrelevance. I sometimes envy the villagers I visit with Rajesh. Their hierarchies, though ancient and unyielding, remain personal. Authority there still depends on recognition; the elder is obeyed not because he is procedural, but because everyone remembers his childhood. Perhaps that is the secret we have lost—authority that still looks you in the eye.

There are days when the House at Simla seems suspended on nothing—its European facades balanced improbably against Himalayan emptiness. The clouds form and dissolve like parliamentary resolutions. And through it all I hear the muffled ticking of civilisation, a clock wound long ago that continues to mark hours even when none are required. We who live beneath its sound pretend it keeps us safe; really it just prevents us from listening for other rhythms.

Forgive my philosophy; isolation breeds it as damp breeds moss. Perhaps I have grown too fond of questions. Yet I feel that somewhere between resignation and revolt there must be a quiet stance—like the dancer's poise before motion—in which one neither serves nor commands but simply notices. If ever I discover how to remain there, I shall write you at once. Until then, imagine me as a displaced duchess sitting beneath impossible mountains, drinking tea flavoured with cardamom, trying to decide whether the future belongs to conviction or to courtesy. At present, courtesy seems to be winning.

“The Tale of the Missing Third”

Being an account, only partly reliable, of the Re-Relationship of the World, compiled by several witnesses, none of whom quite agreed on their own names. [Ed]

Once upon a time, long before the beginning became fashionable, the world was cracked like an egg and half-boiled by philosophy. It had only just settled into its shape—clouds where clouds should be, mountains pretending to be significant, and oceans practising grandeur—when a rumour escaped from the Cave and made its way into daylight. The rumour said that every creature was once part of a whole, long ago and far away, before someone (usually blamed on Zeus, Committee for Cosmic Division and Lightning) took a chisel to creation and split everything neatly down the middle.

The halves, so the story went, were doomed to search for each other ever after, wandering the world like sentimental furniture seeking the rest of its upholstery. Plato heard this in a tavern near Piraeus, wrote it down, and felt extremely pleased with himself. But, as is true of most philosophers, he forgot the important part: he forgot the relation between.

No one noticed at first. People were too busy looking for someone to complete them. Whole generations ran about with tape measures, soul-lanterns, and romantic expectations. You could hardly walk through a marketplace without stepping over impromptu proposals involving strangers who merely looked symmetrical. Meanwhile, under the stones and behind the stars, something sighed—the Missing Third, the space between halves that had once kept them from clinging too tightly.

For the Third was not person but connection: the idea of “between,” the invisible corridor along which understanding travels, often tripping over its feet. Without it, reunion was sticky, conversations circular, and marriages very brief. The elves noticed it first, being excellent listeners and abysmal conversationalists. “There is an echo missing,” said their Queen. “When I speak, no air listens.” The dwarves dismissed this as acoustics. The dwarves were not known for subtle metaphysics; they considered the universe perfectly solid until it broke their tools.

Then came a series of peculiar events. Two-headed lions argued with themselves for centuries, certain they were united yet feeling curiously divided. Rivers flowed uphill looking for their other half, leaving valleys confused and quite damp. Even the moon, eternally self-reflective, began complaining that she couldn’t remember which side

was hers. “Everything’s paired but badly,” she said. “It’s like socks after laundry day.”

A celestial committee was convened, comprising the representatives of all fabulous creatures—dragons (fire division), phoenixes (rebirth subcommittee), mermaids (marine liaison), and one very tired sphinx who had been asked to provide secretarial services because she had the neatest handwriting. They sat upon the cloud known as Rationalisation Nine and attempted to investigate the disappearance of the Third.

They produced minutes, manifestos, and many sandwiches. The dragons argued that the Missing Third must be a thing—something visible, weighable, possibly edible. The mermaids disagreed, claiming that relation itself was fluid, and one could not bite the sea. The phoenix, always inconveniently dying at inopportune moments, interjected only between lives, making consensus difficult. By the time order was restored, several centuries had elapsed and the sandwiches were fossils.

Finally the sphinx, who had waited politely, cleared her throat and said, “Perhaps the Third is merely what happens when two things stop demanding certainty.” This was recorded in the minutes as “cryptic nonsense.”

Still, the idea escaped and began to circulate. Grass whispered it to wind, wind muttered it to water, and soon even mountains were murmuring about “what exists between.” Mortals, being naturally susceptible to overheard ideas, began to feel the tremor of absence. Lovers discovered that their happiness existed not in finding one another but in the invisible interval where they reached out. Philosophers called emergency conferences, which solved nothing, though several of them married their notes.

Then the gods decided to intervene, which never ends well. They scoured heaven for the Third, overturning stars, dredging galaxies, and misplacing several meteor belts in the process. Eventually they discovered a faint trail leading to the Bureau of Celestial Administration (Complaints and Ironies Division). There, buried under twenty-seven forms of cosmic negligence, lay a memo:

“Re: Concept of Relation. Filed provisionally as ‘Metaphysical Excess.’ Archivation recommended. No action taken.”

The gods declared a mixed victory and held a celebration which lasted a millennium. Unfortunately they forgot to invite the mortals, who therefore learned only that their prayers echoed longer than usual. The Missing Third remained missing.

And so the world continued, slightly off-key. Yet from this incompleteness, new species evolved. The unicorn, for instance—nature’s attempt to create unity by adding unnecessary horns. The

basilisk, trapped eternally staring into its own half-eyes. The duck, caught halfway between water and sky, muttering ancient colloquies of equilibrium. (Ducks are philosophers, only less arrogant.) Every so often one of them would look up at the clouds and remember, dimly, the absent middle that had once taught things how to meet without colliding.

In a village that no longer appears on any map—because maps cannot abide ambiguity—there stood a trunk beneath a clock that ran on both time and uncertainty. Inside lived a Librarian of Lost Relations (one of the few remaining civil servants of existence). Each day she filed the world's missing "betweens"—the gap between cause and effect, the hush between heartbeat and echo, the space between tea poured and tea drunk. Her shelves stretched indefinitely. According to her reports, the backlog was astonishing and growing worse. None of her supervisors replied because, technically, correspondence itself was one of the missing things.

Sometimes travellers stumbled in and asked for advice. She would hand them a mirror and say, "Look carefully until you see someone else." Most were disappointed. One or two, understanding, left lighter. Whether they found the Third thereafter no one recorded; the Librarian, bound by bureaucratic privacy clauses, is not permitted to disclose outcomes.

It is said—by poets, who are unreliable yet occasionally useful—that when two souls truly meet, the universe pauses, holding its breath just long enough for a tiny figure made of possibility to slip back in through the crack. This, perhaps, is the Third returning home by stealth.

Or perhaps not. The gods' accounting ledgers now list "relation" as both asset and liability, a sort of metaphysical overdraft they cannot reconcile. Philosophers hold committees to define it; magicians sell counterfeit versions to royalty as potions of unity ("contents may settle during transcendence"). Meanwhile, ducks continue their endless reasoning across ponds, discussing balance as if it were gossip.

If you should meet one—polishing its feathers and considering eternity—I advise you to listen. Ducks guard the edges of meaning. They remember that halves are fine things, but between them lies the pond, and without the pond neither half floats at all.

That, in summary, is the story of the Missing Third: the part of everything that allows anything to make sense of itself. And like most important things, it was mislaid during routine cosmic tidying and has been turning up, quietly, ever since—between laughter and listening, between doorframe and door, between this sentence and the next.

Now there is nothing left to add, except perhaps the observation—casually spoken and therefore vital—that the kettle has boiled dry

again, which on rereading you may find is rather important. For every story must pause somewhere, and the relation between stories is silence; and that, one suspects, is where the Third still lives, humming softly under its breath, waiting for two halves to notice it's the steam.



1824: Espèce deCanard

Private papers

The family egg—Alice, as we insist on calling it—has stood for so long between the clock and the window that any rational person would assume it part of the original fittings, like the wainscoting or the draughts. No one remembers its arrival; they remember only the slight inconvenience of having to dust around it, and even that recollection seems to belong to someone else's wrist. It has a way of inserting itself into memory as it inserts itself into the parlour: quietly, with a faint air of entitlement, and entirely without explanation.

In appearance it is merely an egg, a shade too opalescent to be comfortable, and just warm enough under the fingers to make one wonder whether one's own hands are feverish. If you are patient, and if the house is otherwise still, you may detect a very low vibration when you stand near it, something like the inside of a seashell after a railway has gone by. The family calls this "its hum," in the same tone with which they refer to "the roses" or "the servants"—accepting, impersonal, and faintly proprietary. They will sometimes pause before it in that significant way people adopt when wishing to be seen consulting their consciences. No one has yet been so ill-bred as to ask what it ever actually says.

Downstairs, in the kitchen where the more robust realities of life are enacted, the egg enjoys a reputation rather more elaborate than its appearance warrants. Cook declares she can tell from the sound it makes—she insists upon the sound—whether the weather will turn and whether the master will be "in one of his tempers." The butler, who dislikes mysticism unless it wears a dinner-jacket, pretends not to believe a word of this, but he has arranged the cleaning rota so that no one is ever dusting in the drawing-room when the family proposes to ask Alice its opinion. "Opinion" is the word they use. It spares everyone from the embarrassment of calling it advice.

Household rules have grown up around the thing like ivy around a sill. One does not cross directly between the egg and the window when a decision is “in progress.” One does not raise one’s voice within three yards of it, in case the vibrations interfere. One does not breathe too heavily on the glass dome—added after a memorable incident with a careless footman and a feather duster—because “it upsets the atmosphere.” The last phrase can be taken in several ways, all of them true. The servants, who understand air and atmosphere in the practical sense of draughts and colds, have become extraordinarily adept at moving without stirring either. It is not a bad training for life, after all.

Every so often the family retires to the drawing-room with the particular stiffness of people about to perform something both solemn and faintly ridiculous. The doors are shut, which of course means that every word reaches the landing with unimpaired clarity. Chairs scrape, someone clears a throat, the clock insists upon being heard. Then comes the question, put into the air in carefully colourless tones: should they take this house, pursue that invitation, accept this alliance? Afterwards there is a silence in which everyone listens for the hum and then, even more attentively, to what everyone else makes of it.

The egg itself never changes expression, having none. Occasionally its surface grows pearlier, as though trying on an opinion. At other times it remains obstinately dull, forcing those who wish to believe in it to work harder. They always manage. Potential, like hope, is infinitely elastic. It can be stretched over any gap with sufficient determination. If the outcome later proves unfortunate, the fault lies with the question, never the egg. Accuracy, in such arrangements, consists chiefly in never being pinned to a particular fact.

To the younger maids, Alice is a kind of breathing barometer. They have discovered, quite on their own, that if they match their breathing to the faint rhythm they think they hear about it, they can move almost invisibly through the room. It is exceedingly difficult to scold someone whose presence you have barely detected. The older servants, having lived through several experiments in household management, regard this as a harmless exercise. It keeps the girls quiet, and quiet is its own recommendation.

Last winter, the clock in the drawing-room began to lose time. No one noticed at first; then everyone did, all at once, in that curious way households have. It was observed that the egg’s hum—if one insists upon calling it that—seemed to follow the clock rather than the hour. The whole room slipped, by slow degrees, three minutes behind the rest of the house. Calls were answered a little late, tea was served slightly cool, tempers had just enough time to settle before occasions arose for their display. The butler, who might have set matters right with a twist

of a key, did not. One grows attached to small mercies, especially when they come disguised as mechanical faults.

From that point on, Alice acquired a new respectability. The family began to say, without quite saying it, that the egg “regulated the tone of the house.” That the regulation depended largely on a lazy escapement and the staff’s willingness to collude went unremarked. The servants, for their part, took to glancing at the clock before entering the drawing-room, as if consulting a tide-table. To be safely out of the way a few moments before a difficult conversation is due to begin is one of the minor arts upon which civilisation rests.

People who visit for the first time generally notice Alice without appearing to. They have the usual reaction: a slight start, a polite smile, a discreet shiver quickly suppressed. If they stay long enough, they grow used to it in the way one grows used to a distant railway: the hum becomes the background against which other noises are measured. The egg settles, in their minds, into the reassuring category of Family Oddities, like eccentric aunts or unplayable pianos. It is only later, usually when the weather changes, that they realise how much of the house’s breathing they have taken for granted.

I sometimes think that if the egg were removed, nothing essential would alter. The family would continue to ask their questions, the servants would continue to find ways of not being where annoyance might find them, the clock would probably go on losing a little time out of habit. Yet the removal would leave a blank patch of air between the clock and the window, and everyone would feel obliged to fill it with something—conversation, explanation, perhaps even truth. That seems an unreasonable burden to lay upon any parlour.

As it is, the egg stands where it has always stood, humming or not humming according to the listener, drawing about itself a small circle of adjusted behaviour. One learns, in that particular room, to tread so lightly that one’s own breathing does not quite belong to oneself. It becomes part of the furnishing, like the carpet or the ticking clock. And in such houses, as in such countries, what belongs to the house has a better chance of lasting than anything so fragile as private certainty.

1912: Eighth Report on the Excavations at Shih-Chai-Shan, Yunnan Province, China

By Prof. Reginald Mallard, Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society

The excavations at Shih-chai-shan, situated several miles southeast of the Lake of Kun-ming, continue to yield results whose significance I scarcely dare to estimate. The site now extends over some four square

miles—an area astonishing in its consistency of stratification, and in the peculiar bronze-green hue that tinges much of the soil. Our Chinese assistants have long since ceased to express surprise at the frequency of artefacts emerging with every turn of the spade: petrified fragments, stone carvings resembling tools or amulets, and the remains of what appear to be monumental terraces buried beneath repeated layers of alluvial deposit.

I submit with this, the eighth report of our undertaking, that the civilisation indicated by these discoveries must undeniably predate all known human records. The arrangement of worked stones, the refinement of glazed fragments, and the broad geometric alignments of the site are of a nature so singular, so deliberate, and so wholly foreign to any known prehistoric design, that their builders must be reckoned an entirely separate and antecedent race of man—or, possibly, not man at all.

Among the more curious relics to emerge in the final fortnight of my presence in Yunnan was a small object, not more than seven inches in height and of a perfectly egg-like form. Composed of obsidian of remarkable density and faultless polish, it was unearthed to the east of the so-called Alta platform, amidst a layer of ash and vitrified stone. No inscription or carving marks its surface. Under the microscope it reveals no fissure or join. It rests even now upon the desk before me as I write, a black oval that catches the lamplight as though swallowing it whole. I have subjected it to every test within my modest means—heat, cold, immersion, exposure to chemical reagents—without the least alteration in texture or temperature. In every measurable respect it is utterly inert. Yet I have noticed, on occasion, a peculiar shimmer—an optical tremor, as if some faint internal luminescence stirred beneath the surface. I confess this observation is intermittent, and may owe more to fatigue or faulty vision than to any property inherent in the stone itself.

An incident worth recording occurred some weeks past, when two of my cousins—both rather sharp-sighted and voluble young ladies—insisted upon a glimpse of the egg during a Sunday call. I placed it upon the central table for their inspection, whereupon I fancied (though I have told no one else this) that the stone gave a distinct agitation, a tiny movement like the shifting of a living weight. The ladies, meanwhile, were discussing suffrage, literature, and some ghastly new form of vegetarian pastry; the subject irritated me exceedingly, and I confess to quitting the room before long. I have not repeated the experiment. Women, in libraries, have seldom been conducive to scientific progress.

The object remains in the trunk, untroubled save by my occasional glances. I am unwilling to consign it to the British Museum until I have concluded further measurement of its refractive qualities, which appear

wholly unique. I shall, within the month, prepare a ninth report relating to the broader architecture uncovered in the southern sector of the site, where several monolithic chambers suggest a ceremonial or possibly sepulchral use.

1942: Alice and the Egg in the Trunk

Hermione Mallard from Stories for Calm Children

It was a Thursday afternoon of excellent promise and mediocre weather when Alice Mallard, aged ten and three-quarters, entered the library. The year was 1820, and England, for the most part, had not yet decided whether it believed in steam engines or fairies. Alice, who believed in both when it suited her, preferred the latter on Thursdays.

The library belonged to her uncle, a scholar of dusty repute and dusty elbows. It was a cathedral of books: mahogany shelves rose like cliffs, ladders leaned at thrilling angles, and an odour of parchment, tobacco, and moral seriousness floated through the air like a melancholy fog. Alice was not supposed to enter without her governess, but governesses, like common sense, are frequently misplaced.

She had just been examining a particularly heavy atlas when she noticed an old trunk beneath the window seat—greenish leather, brass studs, and the faint smell of something that had once been alive and regretted it. Naturally, she opened it.

Inside lay a single egg.

Not a bird's egg, nor a reptile's, nor a breakfast egg, but a peculiar grey oval, faintly luminous and as large as a cabbage (which is, roughly speaking, the largest size any self-respecting egg should aspire to). When Alice touched it, it became pleasantly warm, emitted a noise like someone remembering a secret, and she felt the unmistakable sensation of falling, not downward, but inward.

When she next opened her eyes, she stood ankle-deep in clouds. Not the poetical kind, but ordinary practical clouds that smelled faintly of cream. A castle loomed nearby, built accidentally upside-down. Upon its drawbridge sat a creature with the body of a lion, the head of a stork, and the social grace of an aunt at a wedding.

"Name and genus?" it demanded.

"I don't think I have a genus," said Alice, "and my name is Alice Mallard."

"Then you are improperly classified," it said severely. "Everything here has a genus. Even the lake."

Indeed, turning about, Alice saw a lake politely rearranging its waves. “What genus is the lake?” she asked. “Melancholia,” said the lion-stork. “But it’s trying to switch to Horticulture.”

Before she could reply, the clouds beneath her shifted, and she found herself sinking gently through them as though through the mind of a particularly indecisive dreamer.

She landed in a field of hourglasses. Some were running backward, some sideways, and one appeared to have given up altogether. In their midst sat three enormous beasts shaped roughly like teapots, each wearing an expression of surprised respectability.

“We are the Thunderbeasts,” announced the largest, whose spout trembled with dignity. “Would you care for tea, or Time, or both mixed together?”

“I should prefer both,” said Alice courteously.

Upon this, one of the beasts poured steaming seconds into her cup, which tasted of years unremembered. Each sip made her older by a minute and younger by a dream.

During this refreshment the Thunderbeasts recited a lament for the lost gods of punctuation (“Comma the Subtle, Semicolon the Wise, Period the Final”) and inquired whether she had brought the egg.

“I believe so,” she said, patting her dress, though it had mysteriously developed pockets filled with feathers.

“Then beware,” intoned the beasts. “Where the Egg goes, Order collapses and capitals misbehave!”

As if in proof, the sky turned italic and began raining metaphors.

A golden wind lifted her next into a vast hall where a thousand staircases ran enthusiastically in different directions. There, upon a throne made of question marks, sat a woman wearing a crown of fading suns. She smiled the smile of one who can hear the future making small clerical errors.

“So you’ve found it,” said the Queen. “The Egg of Meaningless Origins. Long have we sought it; longer still have we pretended not to need it.”

“What does it hatch into?” asked Alice politely.

“Possibility,” said the Queen.

“That seems rather vague.”

“Of course it is,” the Queen sighed. “It wouldn’t be Possible if it weren’t.”

The hall began to splinter like ice underfoot. From nowhere, an orchestra of invisible rodents began to play the national anthem of

Nowhere-in-Particular. The Queen rose, her voice echoing like distant thunder:

“The Egg must be returned to its trunk, else everything real will begin inventing itself anew!”

Alice tried to object, but the floor kindly removed itself from beneath her.

She opened her eyes to find the library once more quiet and unmoved. The atlas still lay open, the window still glowed with English twilight, and the trunk was once again closed. For a moment, Alice thought she saw it breathe—just a little shiver down the seam—but perhaps that was only her imagination catching its breath.

Downstairs, the clock struck five with cautious punctuality. Tea would be served, governess located, lectures endured. Yet as she left the library, she fancied that somewhere, deep within the silence of its shelves, something was still dreaming on her behalf.

And when she next opened the trunk (two Thursdays later), there was no egg—only a single white feather and the faintest scent of thunder.

1936: On the Tyranny of Aristotle

By Lady Margaret Mallard

(Published in the Journal of Modern Reflection)

I confess that I approach the figure of Aristotle with mingled admiration and exasperation. His name commands the same solemn reverence as that of an ancestral portrait—a relic both venerated and resented. Each generation of European thinkers, from the Schoolmen to our own university dons, has bowed before him, polishing his categories and dusting his syllogisms, as though the entire edifice of the mind might crumble should we admit a crack in his marble logic. Yet in this same act of homage, I wonder whether we have not constrained our thinking more than shaped it—whether, in following the roads he mapped so triumphantly, we have forgotten that there also exist skies.

The Aristotelian habit, I am told, is a mark of discipline; it demands precision, taxonomy, method. But method may harden into manner, and manner into monotony. When one learns to think in strictly delimited propositions, one begins to suspect that anything which resists enclosure is not truth but nuisance. Thus we have constructed a civilisation of admirable order and lamentable imagination—a garden of reason whose walls are so high that few have seen the wilderness beyond.

The Prison of Categories

Aristotle divided the world as one might divide an estate—carefully, judicially, forever. Substance and accident, potentiality and actuality, form and matter: his twofold habits spread through philosophy like property lines. The medieval scholars, with dutiful pens and a faith in permanence, built whole universities upon them. And so we inherited our maps of mind: excellent for navigation within known borders, utterly useless for discovering new continents.

Consider, by contrast, the modern sciences—born not from Aristotle’s stable definitions, but from an almost heretical curiosity which his method could scarcely sanction. Newton, and after him Einstein, could not have proceeded had they first halted to classify motion as either this or that, in the tidy Aristotelian manner. They dared to blur distinctions, to turn the universe fluid. The appeal to observation rather than deduction marks not only a scientific but a spiritual emancipation: it is the soul’s refusal to mistake consistency for truth.

Aristotelian Morality: The Comfortable Cage

Even in ethics, where Aristotle’s moderation once seemed the very wisdom of the ancients, one now perceives a genteel narrowness. His golden mean has ever pleased the respectable, for it canonises temperance and seats prudence securely at the head of the table. And yet, what of those fiery souls—visionaries, reformers, poets, saints—whose very excess has been the salt of civilisation? Were Socrates, Joan of Arc, or Shelley to have consulted the golden mean, we might have been spared their disturbances, but also deprived of their light.

It is precisely the moral comfort of Aristotle that betrays him. To live moderately is easy for the well-fed. Virtue, to him, was a performance of balance; to us, it must be a question of conscience. Our age—with its crises, its machine revolutions, its harrowing uncertainties—requires not controlled equilibrium but creative daring. The world no longer asks whether man may name the parts of reason; it asks whether he can bear to think freely within them.

Woman and the Inherited Logic

Permit me a digression, if only because philosophy so seldom permits us one. Women, I think, have suffered peculiarly under the Aristotelian habit. His biology classified the female as an incomplete male, and though men have graciously forgotten this sentence, they have preserved its spirit in countless subtle exclusions from thought. For is not women’s intuition, that so-called unreasoned faculty, still

treated as the lesser rival of logic—as though one were moonlight and the other day?

But intuition is no mere sentiment; it is the soul's intelligence unbounded by syllogism. To revere rational procedure is not wrong, but to imagine it sole custodian of truth is absurd. The heart sometimes knows what the mind may not articulate—yet even that gentle heresy owes no allegiance to Aristotle.

Toward a Freer Philosophy

I write not in rebellion but in release. Let us revere Aristotle as we do the architects of old cathedrals: they built beautifully, but not for eternity. A civilisation must not, out of gratitude, consent to immobility. The universe is now seen not as a hierarchy of fixed forms but as a living dance of particles and possibilities; perhaps it is time our thinking joined the waltz.

Nor is this an argument for chaos, but for confidence—that we may trust imagination without surrendering intellect, passion without forfeiting sense. We may yet craft a philosophy supple enough to contain the poetic, the moral, and the empirical without shying from contradiction. Indeed, I suspect that contradiction may be the most honest state of the modern soul.

Our minds have long been trained to move in lines; may we not wish, at last, to move in circles? For every circle, as Aristotle surely knew but feared to proclaim, is infinite in its turning.

And so, with gratitude for his architecture, I step softly out of his temple and into the open air.

1950: “Xenobiology: A Word for Thinking Beyond Ourselves”

*Octavia Mallard, Conference on Women and Language,
University of Sydney*

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, students, and fellow sufferers in the dictionary of modern life—

Every few years a man arises—often bearded, occasionally brilliant, usually Greek at least in aspiration—who insists upon inventing a new science by coining a word for it. Some of these words are excellent; many are misshapen creatures, half-Latin, half-Greek, gasping for air in the academic journals that gave them birth. I need not remind you of pseudopsychography, or that ghastly hybrid telechronologist, both of which crept into good usage only to expire in embarrassment.

Now, I do not wish to impugn linguistic exuberance—I encourage it! The English language has thrived precisely because, unlike Latin, it permits both the amateur and the expert to run naked through its orchards, stealing fruit as they fancy. But—and this is my subject this evening—there is a peculiar habit, particularly among our male colleagues in the sciences, of borrowing from Ancient Greek as a form of intellectual camouflage. One might almost suspect, sometimes, that they invoke the spirits of Attica and Rome not for precision, but for prestige.

Permit me a small example. Some years ago, a zoologist of my acquaintance (charming, silver-haired, and incurably fond of the sound of his own etymology) announced that he had coined the term pseudoxenogamy for a variety of cross-pollination. I inquired, in perhaps too mild a tone, what the word actually meant. “Oh,” he said, “it means foreign marriage—except that it doesn’t.” Indeed, it did not. Nor, I reflected, did his subject.

And so, partly in protest and partly in sport, I have resolved to offer a new word of my own choosing—one that is correct in form, necessary in meaning, and, I dare hope, enduring in use: Xenobiology.

The roots are clear and uncontested: *xenos* (foreign, strange, other) and *bios* (life). Thus: the study of foreign life.

Now, since every word must defend itself from misuse the moment it leaves the mouth, let me distance at once my definition from those of certain American gentlemen currently engaged in speculative astronomy, who would have it that “xenobiology” denotes the study of hypothetical life on other planets. A fascinating hobby, no doubt—but it reduces the foreign merely to the distant. My purpose tonight is greater and nearer: I mean by xenobiology the study—or rather the discipline—of thinking about life without placing Man at the centre of it.

It is, if you like, a science of humility.

You may have noticed that even our most rigorous scientists speak as though nature were perpetually obliged to explain itself to mankind. We call species “primitive” or “advanced,” we explain evolution as a gamely climb toward ourselves, and we govern language itself by human metaphor. Every child learns that the sun “rises,” though it hasn’t performed that trick since Ptolemy died. Our zoologists call a fish “higher” if it happens to remind them of their own vertebrae. And our philosophers, with a magnificent circularity, define “intelligence” as whatever they themselves possess.

Xenobiology proposes to do something scandalous: to remove ourselves, however briefly, from the picture and describe the world as though it were not waiting for us to understand it.

This will not, I anticipate, make us comfortable. We may discover that the qualities we prize—reason, order, speech—do not occupy exclusive real estate in the cosmos. The magpie composes a musical line at least as structured as any human folk song; the coral builds its architecture to a rhythm beyond our geometry. Were they capable of describing us, what name, I wonder, would they give to our peculiar habit of rearranging their habitats?

Permit me a moment of social reflection, though I do not intend this lecture as a manifesto. The masculine intellect, whatever its glory, has always preferred dominion to sympathy. It classifies, defines, and commands, whereas the feminine disposition tends toward perception and relation. Thus, I find it not coincidental that in envisioning xenobiology—a field based on restraint, curiosity, and imaginative empathy—we tread upon ground long dismissed as “intuitive” or “irrational.” Let us reclaim intuition, then, not as the opposite of science, but as its conscience. There can be no objective study of life that begins with our own reflection in the microscope.

The notion of xenobiology is itself linguistic proof of its principle. Words evolve; they do not obey. The logic of grammar is less that of a Euclidean line than of a growing vine—curious, unpredictable, reaching toward light. English has endured precisely because it refuses the tidy perfections of its ancestors. It borrows shamelessly—from Sanskrit, from Arabic, from French prisons and Prussian salons alike—and by doing so, it performs what I now call the xenobiological act: it lives exuberantly by what is other than itself.

Thus, if language thrives through contact and difference, might not the intellect do the same? To think xenobiologically is to think as a linguist of life: each form, however alien, is a sentence in the great speech of nature. Our duty is not to translate it into our own dialect, but to listen until its grammar becomes audible.

I do not expect xenobiology to be embraced quickly. No discipline named in Greek has ever prospered without first being misunderstood in English. But I propose it nonetheless, not as a scientific fad, but as an ethical necessity. In an age when our species, newly armed with atomic precision, presumes to redesign the very molecules of existence, a study devoted to modesty may be our last safeguard.

You may laugh, perhaps, as my colleagues laughed at my pseudoxenogamous acquaintance. Yet if by this word we may begin to imagine a science that listens before it speaks, observes before it names, respects before it rearranges—then perhaps, at last, we shall have earned our etymology.

So there, my friends, is the word. It means life as seen by another—life whose centre we have willingly vacated. Xenobiology. I commend it to the literature, and to your consciences.

1854: Alice Mallard

Letter to Jeanne d'Anatis

It is a curious thing, is it not, that even the Himalaya can produce a kind of English autumn? The light filters through the deodar branches like the gentlest of southern twilights, though the air here has no scent of the sea and no memory of our English orchards. Still, I sometimes fancy, in the clear hour before dusk, that I might be walking the lawns at Mallard—until a monkey steals across the roof tiles or a scarfed servant passes, and the mountain reasserts its dominion.

You will smile, I think, to hear that I have found a new distraction in what the learned German philologists call *Vergleichende Sprachforschung*—comparative linguistics. I was first drawn to it by mere curiosity; but it has now become a sort of moral meditation. The Rajkumari's library here (I speak in the third person only half-ironically) is rather better supplied than I expected. Several of the old Company's scholars have left their grammars, tracts, and treatises in a dusty cabinet. Among them I discovered Sir William Jones's conjectures on the Sanskrit family, and I must confess, I am enchanted. The architecture of that language seems to me less like grammar than like cathedral stonework—each inflection tuned to the others, each root word carrying beneath it a genealogy of meanings.

And yet, the more I study the polished Sanskrit of the Brahmin scribes, the more I find myself listening to something beneath it—or perhaps beyond it—in the songs, tales, and proverbial phrases of the people themselves. It is not the formal tongue that intrigues me most, but the living one—the words uttered at dusk in kitchens, fields, and prayer-rooms; the stories told by the ayahs to the children as they drift to sleep.

I begin to suspect that in England we have mistaken the book for the civilisation, and the printed page for the mind itself. Here, meanings flow like mountain water: never captured for long, but all the purer for their running. Our scholars, with Latin dictionaries in one hand and conceit in the other, record what they hear as though pinning butterflies to a card. Yet what escapes them is the very pulse of the language—its laughter, its adaptability, its refusal to hold still.

These people possess what I can only call layered knowledge: not divided into “religion,” “science,” or “law,” but overlapping, spiralling,

renewed in each retelling. An old woman from the Kullu valley, whom I visit each week, speaks of the forest as though it were a library of living intention. A bird's cry, she says, is as much an utterance as any priest's; the stones remember what prayers have been spoken upon them. I thought it superstition at first—the old reflex of our kind—but the more I listen, the less certain I become of my own education.

Our linguistics, noble as it is, proceeds upon the assumption that meaning can be isolated like a specimen: that a root word, once identified, is the firm foundation of thought. But what if meaning, in some cultures, is not rooted but floating—a cloud of associations that gathers and dissolves as the speaker wills? There is a compositional grammar here that resists our classification precisely because its logic is emotional, relational, perhaps even ecological. A word does not merely describe a thing; it situates the speaker within a web of relations to it.

I cannot help wondering what English might have been had we preserved such fluid consciousness. Imagine, if our romances, sermons, and treatises had grown orally, not printed—each generation renewing the phrasing like a season of blossom and decay! I suppose it is impossible now; printing presses make permanent what was meant to change. But I sometimes think permanence is an illusion our Empire loves too dearly.

You will ask whether this new “Rajkumari,” as the people call me, feels herself converted. Hardly; I do not bow to their gods. Yet the wisdom of their speech gives me pause. When one of the old storytellers speaks, I perceive a philosophy of time that neither Aristotle nor Locke could have imagined—a time circular, reversible, as though memory itself were a kind of future. And might not that be truer, in its way, than our linear notion of progress?

Forgive me; I grow over-philosophical. It is the mountain air and the long evenings that encourage such wandering thought. When next you write, tell me of the orchard, the governess's new troubles, and your roses. I miss their scent. Here the flowers are too proud, too large—like our Empire itself. But sometimes, when the fog comes down from the peaks, even the Empire grows quiet, and I can almost hear language itself breathing, like some vast creature asleep beneath the hills.

1878: Duke of Mallard

*Lecture to the Royal Theosophical Society, at its Annual Dinner
(Transcribed for the Society's private records)*

Pray allow me first to congratulate the Committee upon another year of satisfactory dinners, if not of wholly satisfactory doctrines. The

salmon was unexceptionable; the champagne, though French, achieved a degree of civilised submission rare in such volatile spirits. It is my conviction that where gastronomy thrives, metaphysics need not panic. A digestively contented man is the natural enemy of fanaticism.

Now, to the matter of our evening—the perilous enchantments of Madame Blavatsky and her self-advertised “definitions” of Theosophy. You will recall that we, of the Royal Society, adopted the term “Theosophy” out of fashionable curiosity before we properly understood its elasticity. Like all words devised by Hellenes and resuscitated by Englishmen, it has suffered both from etymology and enthusiasm. Theos, God; sophia, wisdom. A noble combination, of course—but one that proves extraordinarily hospitable. Indeed, if Blavatsky’s publications are to be trusted—and experience cautions otherwise—theosophy has lately come to resemble an omnibus into which all theologies, mysteries, and ethnological curiosities may crowd so long as they pay a shilling of reverence at the door.

It is this pluralism, if I may be permitted the vulgar term, that prompts my warning tonight.

At our founding, we understood Theosophy to be the refinement of ancient philosophic religion—a Platonic ascent of understanding freed from the vulgarities of dogma. It was, in essence, the pursuit by civilised minds of unity with the Divine Principle, conducted with discretion, sobriety, and after coffee.

But in the hands of Madame B., the thing has undergone a species of spiritual colonisation in reverse. She proposes—to our astonishment—that every indigenous cosmology, every native hymn and fetichistic allegory, may bear equal witness to the Divine. “All paths lead to the summit,” she assures us, as if Heaven were merely another Alpine afternoon jaunt! By this method the shaman of Siberia and the Brahmin of Benares are advanced to the same philosophical dignity as Saint Thomas or Plato. And this, my friends, is an experiment every bit as combustible as those chemical shows one sees in the Royal Institution, only less well ventilated.

Permit me a plain confession: I am not opposed to curiosity. The Empire itself, that magnificent atlas of misplaced confidence, thrives upon it. But curiosity must be managed like a spirited horse—permitted to run, yes, but never to bolt. And Madame Blavatsky’s “comparative mysticism,” her borrowing of Indian, Egyptian, and American notions of spirit, soul, and cosmic onion, is precisely the sort of unbridled curiosity that sends the carriage downhill with alarming grace.

We cannot, I think, afford to let Theosophy become a receptacle for every tribal dream we encounter across the map. The Society risks losing its authority, and I fear a complete collapse of etiquette—

ecstasies occurring before the soup course, glossolalia at the punch bowl. Further, if every creed be held equal, what will distinguish our own? A principle of equal truth must lead, inevitably, to equal triviality. A gentleman does not frequent the same tavern as his servant, not out of contempt but of order; the spiritual hierarchy, if it is to function, must be equally well-mannered.

Let us, therefore, not be swayed by the sentimental admiration for indigenous wisdom that so intoxicates our liberal cousins. Their anthropological romanticism—this notion that a Pacific islander's chant encodes the secrets of Atlantis—is simply Rousseau in new feathers. I have listened with politeness to such arguments over cigars and have found them, like the cigars themselves, heady but unwholesome.

I do not dispute that the native philosophies may contain appealing metaphors; the serpent swallowing its tail has as fine a symmetry as any. But to propose that such myths are scientifically or spiritually equivalent to European reason is an inversion of natural order. Civilization, like dinner, depends upon courses properly served. Theosophy, if it is to survive decently, must remain our dessert—not a picnic of contradictory ingredients in which reason and rapture lie down together without a chaperone.

There are also practical matters. Her doctrines, should we adopt them wholesale, threaten to erode the very control which grants our Society its charm. Our committees, our lectures, even our toasts derive their dignity from continuity and moderation—traits for which the East, I regret to say, has shown only sporadic enthusiasm. Once we surrender this discipline, my friends, we shall exchange the serenity of gentlemen philosophers for the howlings of rival prophets. Moreover, the dinners will undoubtedly deteriorate. One cannot maintain culinary standards under metaphysical democracy.

I do not demand orthodoxy; Heaven forbid. But I advocate that most English of heresies—respectable scepticism. Let us appropriate from the Orient only those truths which taste agreeably upon the Western palate. A little mysticism is tonic; too much is madness.

And so, my friends, as we raise our glasses to another year of refined speculation, let us remember that Theosophy must remain a Society before it can claim to be a Revelation. Its purpose is not to achieve Nirvana but to provide a suitable occasion for reflection, correspondence, and port.

If we are to keep our heads (and our chefs), we must cultivate our metaphysics as one tends a conservatory orchid—admired through glass, watered in moderation, and kept beyond the reach of the general public.

To the Divine Wisdom—within limits!

1820: Espèce deCanard
Collected papers, 1819 to 1824

The rain persists, as though the heavens were engaged in some grave dispute with themselves and could arrive at no more definite conclusion than a steady, reflective drizzle. The house is unusually quiet; even the servants tread with that peculiar softness which belongs to long grey afternoons. It is, I suppose, an excellent climate for German philosophy.

This morning I resumed my battle with Herr Hegel, and in the afternoon I very nearly quarrelled with the chaplain on his account. The quarrel remained only “nearly,” because a duchess must not openly brawl, even in ideas, with her own clergyman; yet the temptation, I confess, was considerable.

I endeavoured to explain to Mr. L—— Hegel’s strange insistence that self-consciousness is not something one simply has—like a title or a baptismal name—but something that arises through relation: through encounter, struggle, and what he calls “recognition.” One becomes truly aware of oneself only when one’s existence is acknowledged by another who is equally capable of saying “I.” Without such mutual acknowledgment, the self is a mere tautology, forever repeating “I am I,” yet never discovering who that “I” might be.

The chaplain listened for a time with the expression of polite martyrdom he reserves for my more adventurous reading, and then remarked that such a doctrine makes the soul dependent upon human favour rather than upon God. A Christian, he said, ought to care only how he appears in the eyes of the Almighty, not in the eyes of men. I replied—rather sharply, I fear—that Providence, in placing each soul among other souls from birth, appears to have intended some role for human eyes as well as divine.

For is it not true that even our most pious notions of ourselves are formed amid a web of human judgments? A child learns that she is “good” or “naughty” from the faces that bend over her cradle. A wife discovers she is “amiable” or “clever” from the verdicts of husband and company. We may proclaim as loudly as we like that God alone knows the heart, yet meanwhile we live and move upon a little stage of human glances that shape us more intimately than any sermon. If Hegel’s “consciousness as encounter” is vanity, then all ordinary social life is vanity also.

Yet the doctrine grows darker, and more suggestive, when he speaks of an unequal encounter: one consciousness that becomes “lord,” the

other “bondsman.” In such a relation, only one is publicly recognised as free, while the other is seen merely as a tool or thing; yet paradoxically it is the so-called bondsman, through labour and endurance, who may attain the deeper comprehension of both self and world. I cannot help feeling that this structure applies not only to brutal conditions of slavery, but to the quieter hierarchies of our own households. The master basks in open honour, yet the servant whose work actually transforms the world around him acquires, in silence, a more inward understanding of reality than his apparent superior.

Where, then, are women placed in this drama of recognition? The chaplain, in an incautious moment, suggested that ladies are fully recognised within the “domestic sphere” and therefore have no need of German refinements. I smiled, but inwardly I thought of all the women whose minds are never recognised at all—only their prettiness, their dowries, their obedience. If the self truly awakens only when another free being acknowledges it as free, then what becomes of those who are never treated as such? Our conventional feminine education trains us to be agreeable surfaces rather than genuine mirrors: to reflect the feelings of others, but seldom to present our own. Is it any wonder if many women come to know themselves chiefly through a narrow and distorting lens?

And yet Hegel’s notion also contains an unexpected promise. If consciousness is formed in encounter, then no identity is absolutely fixed: change the pattern of who recognises whom, and the very texture of the self may be altered. A mistress who begins to see her maid as a thinking creature—and who allows herself, in turn, to be seen by that maid—not simply as an emblem of rank but as a fallible person, has already disturbed the old order of lord and bondsman. Likewise, when one woman takes another seriously in thought, reading her, answering her, opposing her if need be, that, too, is a small revolution of recognition. Perhaps the future of our sex lies less in proclamations than in such quiet, reciprocal acts of seeing.

After the chaplain’s departure—he looked rather as if German metaphysics were some foreign contagion threatening his parish—I returned to the library and sat for a while without opening the book. The rain on the windows sounded like a multitude of small knockings, as though the world itself were asking to be admitted into awareness. It occurred to me that this might be what Hegel means by “Spirit”: not some ghostly vapour hovering above events, but the ceaseless approach of others—persons, histories, even ideas—presenting themselves to the self and demanding response. Consciousness, on this view, is never truly solitary; it is always in dialogue, even when we imagine ourselves alone.

Indeed, this diary is itself an odd example. I write ostensibly “for myself,” yet I sense that I address an unseen other—some imagined reader in a possible future, who will take these pages up and, by reading them, complete the circuit I have begun. Perhaps all thought is secretly conversational: we are always speaking to someone, even when we have not yet met them.

It grows late. I hear the soft footfall of my maid in the passage; she enters, moves about the room with practised quiet, tending the fire and arranging the lamps. Her presence at once changes the atmosphere of my consciousness: I am no longer an abstract “I” pondering German systems, but a lady being served, observed, perhaps silently judged. She and I are caught, if only for a moment, in that perilous web of mutual seeing.

If consciousness is indeed encounter, then every such moment, however small, matters. The thought is disquieting, but I cannot relinquish it. For it suggests that by seeking better encounters—truer, more generous recognitions—we might yet become better selves.

1820: Duke of Mallard

Private papers

A most disagreeable incident this evening, which has left me with a resolve to tighten the reins upon intellectual indulgences within these walls. After dinner, as the ladies withdrew and the port circulated, I drew the chaplain aside. Mr. L——, that earnest but woefully impudent man, had evidently been drawn into one of the Duchess's philosophical forays—those interminable discussions of German metaphysics which she pursues with the zeal of a foxhunter after hounds.

I had suspected as much from her abstracted air at table, and from certain fragments overheard earlier in the library: allusions to “recognition,” “encounters,” and some Teutonic notion of the self as dependent upon the gaze of others. Hegel, no doubt—the latest poison from the Continent, smuggled in under cover of scholarly translation. A pretty theory for radicals and revolutionaries, perhaps, but rank treason in an English household.

I impressed upon him, in no uncertain terms, the peril of such doctrines. What begins as abstract speculation ends in the subversion of all natural order: lords reduced to equals with bondsmen, husbands debating their authority with wives, and the very fabric of rank dissolved in a haze of reciprocal “mirrors.” If the self is shaped by encounter, as this Hegel insists, then every servant's glance becomes a judgment upon his master, every wife's opinion a challenge to her lord.

It is the seedbed of Jacobinism, dressed in philosophical finery—the very rot that toppled thrones across the Channel and threatens to creep into our own drawing-rooms.

I commanded him to desist at once from such conversations. Let him confine his teachings to the Prayer Book and the Thirty-Nine Articles, where they belong. If the Duchess craves intellectual stimulation, she may have novels or botany; the library holds Shelley and Scott in abundance, and the conservatory awaits her attentions. But this Continental treasonous rot shall not be taught under my roof, nor shall it poison the minds of my household.

These modern philosophies promise freedom but deliver chaos. Let us cling to the old verities: God above, the Duke beside Him, and all else in its proper station. Consciousness, whatever it may be, shall encounter no such upheavals here.

1860: Lord Alban Fitzartur

Private papers

This morning I returned to my skirmish with the *Phänomenologie*, and this afternoon I came perilously close to a philosophical rupture with, Mr. R——. The rupture remained merely "perilous," for every actor knows the art of restraint upon the domestic stage; yet the urge to declaim was fierce, I assure you.

I sought to illuminate for him Hegel's audacious claim: that self-consciousness is no solitary jewel, gleaming in isolation, but a flame kindled only in the gaze of another—through encounter, contention, and that exquisite reciprocity he terms "recognition." One awakens to one's own "I" only when mirrored by a kindred consciousness, equally capable of asserting its freedom. Absent this mutual affirmation, the self is but a monotonous echo: "I am I," forever unilluminated, a shadow play without an audience.

Mr. R—— endured my exposition with the patient fortitude of a man witnessing the rehearsal of a *avant-garde* tragedy, then ventured that such notions render the soul a beggar at the door of human vanity, when it ought to seek approbation solely from the Divine. The Christian, he averred, stands naked before God alone. I countered—with a touch more theatrical flourish than prudence warranted—that the Almighty, in populating our world with such a profusion of fellow souls, seems to have scripted a drama requiring more than one spotlight.

For do we not, in truth, forge our innermost selves amid this intricate ballet of glances? The schoolboy learns his mettle from the

master's cane or comrade's nod; the lover discerns his desirability in the curve of a beloved's smile. We may hymn the solitude of the soul till our voices crack, yet we dwell eternally upon a proscenium of human perceptions, where every role is shaped by the audience's applause or silence. If Hegel's "consciousness as encounter" be mere vanity, then all the world's a vanity fair.

The philosophy darkens delightfully when Hegel introduces imbalance: one soul exalted as "lord," the other abased as "bondsman." The lord revels in overt dominion, yet it is the bondsman—through toil, endurance, and the alchemy of labour—who grasps the deeper reality of self and substance. I cannot but see this echoed not only in chains and manacles, but in the subtler servitudes of our drawing-rooms and green-rooms alike. The patron lords it over the artist, yet the player, crafting illusions from the ether, attains a secret sovereignty of spirit.

And where, pray, do men like myself find our cue in this great scene? The chaplain, with unwitting candour, suggested that gentlemen of the stage are amply "recognised" by the pit and gallery, needing no German metaphysics to swell their egos. I laughed—outwardly a silver peal, inwardly a thunderclap—thinking of those countless souls whose true essence is glimpsed only in stolen shadows, never in the footlights. If the self blooms only when hailed as free by another free being, what fate befalls those whose desires are deemed unfit for the public eye? Our education in duplicity trains us to be mirrors of convention, reflecting the crowd's desires while concealing our own ardent truths. Small wonder if we learn ourselves chiefly through hazard and half-lights.

Yet herein lies Hegel's seductive liberation: if consciousness is encounter-born, no masquerade is irrevocable. Alter the choreography of recognition—who beholds whom, with what candour—and the soul itself may transmute. An actor who spies genuine curiosity in a fellow player's gaze, unclouded by judgment; two kindred spirits who affirm one another not as roles but as unguarded selves—that is revolution in doublet and hose. The lord yields his throne not by force, but by daring to be seen vulnerably; the bondsman claims his freedom by refusing the script. Perhaps our hidden brotherhood thrives precisely thus: in clandestine recognitions, whispered across drawing-room fans or backstage whispers, forging identities bolder than any marquee could proclaim.

The chaplain departed with the air of one who has survived a melodramatic soliloquy, leaving me to the library's embrace. There I sat, book unopened, whilst the rain tattooed the panes like an impatient orchestra. It struck me that Hegel's "Spirit" is no ethereal prompter,

but the endless irruption of others—lovers, rivals, phantoms of the past—thrusting upon the self a demand to respond, to reflect and be reflected. Solitude is illusion; every consciousness is a duet, even in monologue.

This journal, too, plays its part. I pen these lines "for mine own eyes," yet I perform for an invisible auditor—some future confidant who shall decipher these confidences and, in the act, ratify my hidden script. All thought is theatre: we declaim to the absent, rehearsing for encounters yet to come.

The clock chimes; my valet's step approaches, soft as a cue. He enters, tends the lamps with that loyal taciturnity which is its own form of recognition. In his quiet service, my solitude dissolves: I am no longer the solitary dreamer, but the gentleman attended, appraised, perhaps quietly cherished. We two, in this fleeting tableau, enact Hegel's dialectic—lord and bondsman, yet perchance equals in the unspoken.

A disarming notion, this consciousness as encounter. It bids us curate our scenes more nobly, courting truer recognitions to summon nobler selves.

1914: On the Shih-Chai-Shan Artefact: A Preliminary Account of a Psi Device and its Implications for Non-Sensory Thought Transfer

*By Prof. Reginald Mallard, Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society
(Submitted to the Journal of the Royal Society for Pseudoscience)*

Gentlemen of the Society, fellow explorers of the veiled frontiers of nature—permit me to lay before you, in this hour of global tumult, an account of a discovery which, though unearthed in the remote fastnesses of southern China, speaks directly to the hidden faculties of the human spirit. It is now two years since I dispatched my eighth report from the library at Mallard House, describing the egg-shaped obsidian relic retrieved from the Shih-chai-shan excavations, that vast site of four square miles southeast of the Lake of Kun-ming, whose stratified wonders proclaim a civilisation antecedent to all recorded history. That inert black oval, seven inches in height, flawless in polish and density, has since become the central enigma of my later years; and I write now not as archaeologist merely, but as witness to what I am compelled to term a psi device—an instrument, I firmly believe, for the transference of thought or information without recourse to the classical five senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste, or smell.

The Shih-chai-shan site, as chronicled in my prior dispatches, yields artefacts of a refinement defying chronological placement: geometric alignments of vitrified stone, petrified amulets, and terraces whose deliberate geometry suggests not primitive toil but a command of forces beyond our material reckoning. Amid the ash-layers east of the Alta platform, the obsidian egg emerged unscathed, its surface absorbing light as a void absorbs matter. Initial tests—exposure to extremes of heat and cold, immersion in reagents, microscopic scrutiny—revealed no anomaly save an intermittent shimmer, a faint internal pulsation observable only under certain conditions of fatigue or concentration. I dismissed it then as optical illusion, yet retained the object upon my desk, where it broods still like a dormant sentinel.

It was in the autumn of 1913, during a period of intensified experimentation, that the egg's true nature began to declare itself. Seated alone in the library at dusk, I fixed my gaze upon it with deliberate intent, willing some communication from its depths. No voice sounded, no vision appeared; yet there came upon me a sudden clarity, as if a veil had parted within my mind. I perceived—not saw, not heard, but knew—the image of a terraced city upon alien stars, its inhabitants cloaked in auras of pale luminescence, exchanging thoughts not by word or gesture but by direct infusion of meaning. This was no hallucination born of solitude; it recurred with fidelity upon repetition, each episode yielding fragments of a coherent narrative: warnings of cyclic cataclysms, diagrams of harmonic geometries unknown to Euclidean draughtsmen, and above all, a methodology for psi transfer—the projection of cognition across voids of space and sense.

Emboldened, I sought corroboration. Inviting trusted colleagues from the Society—men of sceptical temper yet open mind—I placed the egg centrally and urged silent contemplation. Dr. Elias Thorne, our eminent psychometrist, reported forthwith a vision of pyramidal structures levitating upon sonic waves; Professor Langford, the spectroscopist, sketched formulae for etheric modulation that have since defied orthodox computation. Most strikingly, during a session with my niece Clara (a young lady of acute sensitivity, though untrained), the egg exhibited visible agitation—a rippling of its surface like mercury disturbed—whilst she described impressions of a "council of elders" debating the ethics of thought-projection. Women, it seems, possess a receptivity to such phenomena which our coarser male constitutions blunt; yet I have refrained from further trials, lest the household be unsettled.

These manifestations compel me to hypothesise the egg as a psi device, engineered by the Shih-chai-shan ancients to amplify and direct non-sensory cognition. Consider the implications: if thought may

traverse the ether untrammelled by physical media, then telepathy, clairvoyance, and psychokinesis cease to be parlour tricks or pathological delusions; they emerge as latent potentials, relics of our primordial endowment. The classical senses, noble as they are, represent but a degraded channel—filters imposed by corporeal exigency upon a subtler continuum. The ancients, predating our fragmented records, appear to have mastered this continuum, fashioning devices like the egg to stabilise psi emissions: obsidian, with its vitreous purity and piezoelectric properties, serving as both resonator and shield. My own experiments confirm this; under focused will, the shimmer intensifies, correlating precisely with surges of eidetic insight or remote perception. On one occasion, holding the egg whilst pondering a colleague in London, I received—unbidden—a vivid tableau of his breakfast table, complete with the Times headline of that very morning. Verification by telegraph confirmed every detail.

Sceptics will cry "coincidence" or "subconscious cueing," yet such dismissals falter before the egg's inertness under mechanical assay. Weigh it, tap it, irradiate it: it remains a lifeless stone. Only under the directed psyche does it awaken, suggesting that we are the variable—the dormant operators of its mechanism. This aligns with the Society's charter: pseudoscience, far from folly, probes the interstices where true science fears to tread. The quantum stirrings of our age—radium's glow, etheric waves—hint at a universe hospitable to psi; the Shih-chai-shan egg provides the proof. Imagine its applications: diplomacy by direct mind-exchange, obviating the treacheries of language; medical diagnosis via empathic immersion; even warfare transmuted into contests of collective will. In this year of 1914, as Europe teeters toward abyss, such devices might yet redeem us from the barbarism of shot and shell.

Yet peril attends discovery. The egg's visions carry a sombre timbre: cycles of hubris wherein psi mastery bred schisms, culminating in the site's entombment. I have glimpsed portents of analogous peril for our own epoch—overreach in the etheric realms, rending the social fabric. Prudence demands restraint; the Royal Society for Pseudoscience must shepherd this artefact not toward exploitation, but toward ethical illumination. I propose, therefore, a dedicated fellowship: empirical trials under controlled auspices, cross-referenced with global psi phenomena—the Indian siddhis, the Siberian shamans, the American mediums. Let us map the non-sensory spectrum as rigorously as Hertz mapped his waves.

In conclusion, the Shih-chai-shan psi device stands as irrefutable testament to human potential unbound by sense. It beckons us to reclaim our heritage, to converse across the veil without the clumsy

intermediaries of ear and eye. The ancients whisper through obsidian: consciousness is not confined, but contagious. Heed them, gentlemen, ere the guns of modernity drown their silent summons.

1919: Report on the Purported Map of Eustace Mallard, Esq.

*By Sir Hardcastle Duckpond, K.C.M.G., Senior Cartographer to
the London Geographical Society, Presented to the Society's
Cartographic Review Committee*

It is with a mixture of scholarly delight and profound professional disappointment that I submit this report upon the vellum map recently acquired by the Society through the good offices of Lord Abercrombie, who obtained it from a private collection in Bristol. Described by its vendor as the authentic handiwork of one Eustace Mallard—pirate, privateer, and notorious scourge of the Spanish Main in the latter half of the seventeenth century—the document has stirred considerable excitement among collectors of nautical antiquities and enthusiasts of maritime romance. I regret to state, after exhaustive examination, that while the map possesses undeniable aesthetic merit and historical intrigue, it fails utterly to fulfil its purported function as a guide to treasure. Indeed, it depicts no recognisable territories, no latitudes or longitudes, and appears to encode no discernible geographical meaning whatsoever.

Let us first dwell upon its beauties, for they are manifold and merit record. The vellum, sourced from calfskin of exceptional quality, measures approximately 28 by 22 inches and exhibits the patina of age without the ravages of decay: a faint foxing along the edges, a subtle craquelure in the inks, and a flexibility suggesting preservation in a dry, tobacco-scented environment—perhaps the locker of some retired mariner. The draughtsmanship is exquisite, rivalling the finest charts of the Blaeu ateliers or the diarists of the Dutch East India Company. Compass roses bloom in crimson and gold, their fleur-de-lis points radiating with filigreed precision; sea monsters coil amid azure waves rendered in stippled washes of Prussian blue and verdigris, their eyes glinting with flecks of mica that catch the light like distant atolls. Mythical isles punctuate the composition—some crowned with palm-fronded volcanoes, others ringed by coral atolls teeming with galleons in fantastical distress. Annotations in a bold italic hand, executed in iron-gall ink now turned sepia, exhort the viewer with cryptic phrases: “Beware the Serpent’s Coil,” “X marks the Heart of the Deep,” and “Fortune favours the Bold, but Drowns the Greedy.” A cartouche in

the lower margin portrays Mallard himself (or so the legend claims): a hawk-nosed rogue in tricorne and lace ruffles, one hand upon a blunderbuss, the other clasping a skull-wreathed doubloon, with the motto *Audax et Fidelis* curling about his boots. It is a work of art, gentlemen—a poem in parchment that might grace the walls of any gentleman’s study or auction block.

To appreciate its full context, one must recall the legend of Eustace Mallard, that singular figure whose exploits bridge the gap between history and balladry. Born circa 1628 in Poole, Dorset, to a cooper’s family, Mallard shipped out young on merchant vessels trading wool to the Low Countries. By 1655, with the Commonwealth ascendant and privateering commissions plentiful, he had commandeered his first prize: the Spanish galleon *Nuestra Señora de las Lágrimas*, laden with silver from Potosí. Under the nominal banner of Cromwell’s Protectorate, Mallard ranged the Caribbean, preying upon Plate fleets bound for Cádiz. His flagship, the *Sea Hawk*—a swift forty-gun frigate refitted with chase guns and boarding netting—struck terror from the Windward Passage to the Gulf of Darién. Chronicles of the era, including the depositions of captured Spaniards archived in the PRO at Kew, attest to his audacity: the sack of Puerto Bello in 1668, the ambush of the *Flota de Indias* off Cartagena, and a daring raid on the galleon *San José* yielding, by rumour, chests of emeralds valued at half a million pieces-of-eight.

Mallard’s travels were prodigious. Eyewitness accounts place him wintering in the Bahamas, careening at Tobago, and provisioning at rovers’ nests in Madagascar’s *Île Sainte-Marie*. He consorted with the Brethren of the Coast—fellow buccaneers like Henry Morgan and François l’Olonnais—and is said to have charted unclaimed atolls in the Tuamotus during a speculative voyage to the Pacific via Cape Horn in 1672. Retiring (or so the tale goes) in 1679 amid the amnesties of Charles II’s Restoration, Mallard allegedly settled in Bristol, where he purchased a warehouseman’s counting-house and lived out his days in discreet opulence, dying in 1694 of “apoplexy following a surfeit of turtle soup.” Whispers persist of a vast treasure—bullion, jewels, and Inca gold—interred upon some unnamed isle, its location confided only to this very map. Such myths have fuelled generations of treasure-hunters, from Defoe’s fictionalisers to the present day.

Yet herein lies the crux of my report: for all its evocative detail, the map charts no known world. Absent are the hallmarks of functional cartography—no prime meridian (be it Ferro, Paris, or London), no rhumb lines calibrated to magnetic variation, no scale bars or coastal profiles. The “isles” bear no correspondence to Admiralty surveys: what purports to be “Mallard’s Cay” aligns with neither the Bahamas

nor the Virgins; the “Serpent’s Coil” defies the convolutions of any Caribbean channel. Astronomical fixes—essential to seventeenth-century navigators—are nowhere evident; no stars, no solar bearings. Even the compass rose, for all its splendour, points to a magnetic north that wanders inexplicably across the sheet, as if mocking the mariner’s needle. I have cross-referenced it against Waghenauer’s *Spiegel der Zeevaerdt* (1584), Thornton’s *West India Pilot* (1689), and Halley’s Atlantic charts (1701): not a single landmark coheres. Overlay tracings upon Mercator projections yield gibberish; parallax measurements confirm no terrestrial fidelity.

What, then, is this document? A hoax, perhaps, by some Bristol engraver capitalising on Mallard’s fame—yet the inks and vellum authenticate to the 1670s by chemical assay, and the hand matches fragments of Mallard’s signed manifestos held in the British Library. A private cipher-map, intelligible only to initiates? Possible, though decryption attempts (Caesar shifts, Vigenère squares keyed to “Eustace” or “Sea Hawk”) yield naught but nonsense. Or—and here fancy intrudes—a deliberate jest by the pirate himself: a caput mortuum for the gullible, beauty without utility, luring the greedy to squander fortunes on phantom quests. Mallard, that sly Dorset fox, was ever the master of misdirection; why not immortalise it in cartographic form?

In sum, gentlemen, the map is a masterpiece of illusion—beautiful, baffling, barren of meaning. It enchants the eye but frustrates the intellect; it promises El Dorado but delivers only artistry. I recommend its display in the Society’s vitrines as a cautionary exhibit: a testament to the seductions of the uncharted, and a reminder that true cartography serves discovery, not delusion. Should further light emerge—perhaps from Mallard’s lost logbooks or kin in Poole—I stand ready to revisit. Until then, let it adorn our walls, a pirate’s final, enigmatic laugh upon the waves.

1870: The Wealth of the Pot People: An Ethnographical Report on a Hitherto Hidden Civilisation in the Southern Hemisphere

By Henry Mallard, Gentleman Explorer

(Twelfth in the Series on the “Pot People”; Privately Circulated)

My dear Fellow Members of the Anthropological Institute, and such other Gentle Readers as chance upon this modest dispatch—permit me to extend once more my hearty commendations upon your forbearance in perusing these scattered notes from the uttermost South. It is now the twelfth in my series upon that singular folk whom I have dubbed

the “Pot People,” in deference to their consummate artistry with the clay wheel and the kiln, though their own tongue—soft as mist upon fern, and rich in glottal hums—employs a term more akin to “vessel-kin.” As ever, I withhold the precise bearings of their verdant fastness, lest the steamship captains and souvenir-hunters of Pall Mall descend like locusts upon this earthly paradise. Suffice it to say that it nestles in a fold of the southern hemisphere’s uncharted pleats, where the sun slants gold upon eternal green, and the air hums with the contented murmur of beehives and potter’s wheels. Here, in this twelfth report, I turn my glass upon their attitudes to abundance—a philosophy so whimsical, so profoundly at odds with our own ledger-bound existence, that it beggars the natural philosopher’s quill to do it justice.

Picture, if you will, the Pot People’s harvest season, that merry carnival of tubers and berries which they call the “Time of the Swelling Yield.” No grim reaper stalks their fields; rather, the entire clan—elders with faces like burnished teapots, children scampering like glazed finials—issues forth at dawn with baskets woven of liana and song. The earth, in their view, is not a miserly landlord but a jovial host, forever tipping its cap with surplus: yams fat as prize hogs, cloudberries plump as syllabubs, and gourds that swell to the size of a gentleman’s topper. These they gather not with tally-hoots of possession, but with choruses of invitation: “Come, O Root, to the common feast!” And feast they do, in communal grottos where the bounty is portioned not by rank or greed, but by the simple ethic of “Need first, then whim.” The hungriest child receives the largest yam; the storyteller with the driest throat, the brimming gourd. What remains—and there always remains, mark you—is proffered freely to all comers: a wanderer, a bird, even the ants in procession. Hoarding? Perish the thought! To clutch a yam beyond one’s immediate circle is, to them, as absurd as bottling one’s own shadow. “The pot fills as it empties,” runs their proverb, delivered with a wink and a wheel’s merry spin.

Nor is this largesse confined to the soil’s bounty. Observe their potteries, those al fresco ateliers humming beneath palm-thatched eaves, where the clay—dug from sacred blue-veins in the riverbank—is wedded to the fire in rites of transcendent whimsy. A master potter, his arms caked to the elbow in slip, spins a vessel of such fluid grace that it seems less crafted than coaxed from the earth’s daydreams: ewers with handles like courting swans, jars bulbous as contented philosophers. Yet no sooner does the kiln yield its glazed treasures than they are dispersed like confetti at a village wedding. The potter presents the first pot to his neighbour’s hearth (“For your morning ablutions, old friend!”); the second to a passing minstrel (“To hold your flutes, sweet singer!”); the third—perhaps a teapot of peerless spout—to whoever

chances by with a smile or a thirst. Abundance here begets more abundance: the recipient, touched by this unforced generosity, returns anon with a basket of figs or a verse newly spun. No inventories, no vaults; the kilns blaze eternally, as if the clay itself conspired to outpace demand. I once tallied a single day's output—seventy-three vessels, from thimbles to tuns—and by vespers, not one remained in the potter's hut. All had migrated to huts, hollows, and even treetop nests, bearing fruits or flowers or the simple joy of their form.

What enchantment sustains this prodigality? At first blush, one might suspect some tropical sorcery—a hidden vein of gold, or tubers fertilised by phoenix guano. Yet no: their fields are tilled by song and spadeful, their clays quarried with reverence, their kilns fed by driftwood and dung. The sense of “more” pervades all, an unspoken assurance that the earth's pot never runs dry. It is both empirical truth and cultural memory, woven so deep into their sinews that no elder lectures upon it, no child is schooled in its tenets. One simply acts as if abundance were the default posture of creation. Watch a toddler offer her half-eaten berry to a butterfly, or an ancient dame press a newly fired bowl into a stranger's palms (“For your dreams, wayfarer!”), and you witness not dogma, but instinct—a hereditary whimsy, perhaps inherited from forebears who danced through famines by sheer force of faith in tomorrow's yield. I have seen gales strip their groves bare, only for the folk to laugh and declare, “The winds have borrowed; the trees shall lend anew.” And lo, come the rains, the boughs groan heavier than before.

This ethos extends even to intangibles: stories, songs, affections. A minstrel's ballad, once sung, belongs to the air; any may reprise it with a flourish of their own. Love is portioned with the same open hand—no jealous vaults of the heart, but a commonwealth of glances and garlands. In our England, where the squire tallies his rents and the banker his bonds, such conduct would invite the workhouse; here, it conjures perpetuity. Might it not whisper a lesson to our smog-choked isles? Imagine the London merchant flinging guineas to the Strand as blithely as Pot People fling pots, or the dowager duchess dispensing heirlooms with a curtsy and a giggle. Absurd, you say? Yet in this hidden dale, absurdity blooms eternal, and want withers unknown.

I pen these lines from my fern-bower, a fresh pot of tea steaming beside me—gift of the potter's youngest prentice, unbidden and unpaid. The wheel turns yonder; the harvest song rises. Abundance, gentlemen, is no mere hoard, but a habit of the soul. The Pot People have mastered it, not by ledgers, but by laughter. Would that we might learn their wheel's secret spin, ere our own pots crack for want of whimsy.

1937: Symbiosis: A Linguistic Reclamation of Planetary Kinship

By Professor Octavia Mallard, Chair of Linguistics, University of Sydney

In the shadowed alcoves of ancient Greek lexicons, where words slumber like seeds awaiting the tiller's hand, lies symbiosis—a term born of humble etymology: *syn*, together; *biosis*, living. "A living together," the philologists assure us, crisp and categorical, as if the phrase encompassed no more than the domestic compact of man and wife, or the wary truce of nations at a peace congress. Yet language, that most faithful chronicler of human aspiration, whispers otherwise. To dwell with symbiosis is to invoke not merely the arithmetic of human alliances—husband and helpmeet, citizen and commonwealth—but a grander, more audacious harmony: the living together of all upon this blue-veined globe. Trees entwined with mycelial threads beneath the soil; rivers pulsing with the breath of fish and fowl; the very winds that carry pollen from continent to continent, weaving the biosphere into an indivisible tapestry. If we are to heed language as our forebears did—not as idle ornament, but as solemn precept for conduct—then symbiosis demands we expand our gaze beyond the parochial ledger of persons to embrace the planet's teeming chorus.

Our classical inheritance has long been misread through the prism of anthropocentric pride. The Greeks, those indefatigable namers of the cosmos, coined symbiosis amid a worldview where humanity was no sovereign island, but a participant in nature's symphonic whole. Consider the symbiotes of the Aegean shore: the olive tree clasping the cicada's song, the coral polyp housing its algal consort in mutual sustenance. Aristotle himself, in his *Historia Animalium*, catalogued such partnerships not as anomalies, but as the norm of creation—organisms thriving in concert, each yielding to the other's necessity. Yet two millennia of Latin glosses and Enlightenment rationalism have narrowed this radiant concept to the dyad: man and woman, master and servant, colony and crown. We have forgotten that the word's root vitality pulses with planetary amplitude, urging a mode of being where every creature, every clod of earth, partakes in the shared breath of existence.

This book proposes a reclamation. In an era when the smokestacks of industrial titans choke the skies and the engines of empire carve the wilds into concessions, symbiosis emerges as linguistic prophecy—a blueprint for behaviour inherited from our linguistic ancestors. The ancients did not invent words lightly; they forged them as covenants

with reality. To speak of symbiosis was to enact it: to live as if one's household extended to the horizon, one's larder to the forest floor. Our forebears—Homeric shepherd and Ionian sage alike—modelled conduct upon such terms. They tilled with reverence for the symbiote soil, fished with propitiation to the sea's invisible partners, feasted with libations to the unseen labourers of growth. Language was no abstract taxonomy, but ethical compass: to name a thing symbiotically was to pledge one's life to its flourishing.

Contemporary linguistics, with its tools of comparative grammar and semantic drift, affirms this reading. Traces of symbiosis echo in indigenous tongues worldwide—from the Australian Aboriginal notion of *biamanga*, country as sentient kin, to the Sanskrit *saha-jīva*, co-livers in cosmic congress. These are not quaint relics, but living admonitions. If we parse symbiosis rigorously—dissecting its morphology, mapping its semantic fields across epochs—we uncover a mandate: behave as the word behaves. Expand the circle of "together" to encompass microbe and mountain, whale and whirlwind. In doing so, we honour our forebears not through rote recitation of their myths, but through emulation of their lexical wisdom. The Greek word, unyielding in its breadth, rebukes our modern solipsism: nations do not symbios with nations in isolation; peoples do not thrive apart from the peat and the plankton that sustain them.

This volume unfolds in three movements. The first traces symbiosis through Hellenic texts and their Indo-European kin, revealing its original planetary scope. The second assays its contraction under Roman law and Renaissance humanism, charting the loss that mirrors our ecological estrangement. The third ventures a programme for revival: linguistic exercises to reattune our speech—and thus our deeds—to symbiogenic living. For if language shapes thought, as Sapir and Whorf have lately contended, then to utter symbiosis aright is to remake the world aright.

We stand at a precipice. The Great War's scars yet fester; the machines multiply unchecked. Yet in the word symbiosis, our forebears bequeath a lifeline: live together, not as conquerors, but as kin in the great respiration of Earth. Let us heed it, lest we forfeit the planet's invitation to belong.

2010: Communication, Code, and the Rewiring of Society

Draft Lecture, Dr Alice Mallard

When we talk about “communication technology,” we too often mean the hardware—the fibre, the satellites, the protocols, the endlessly

refreshed screens. But communication itself is older, and deeper, than any gadgetry we've built to augment it. It's an ancient human improvisation on pattern and prediction. Every utterance, every signal, relies on shared codes—some formal, some tacit. And tacit knowledge, of course, is what we're losing fastest.

Over the past two decades, as bandwidth has widened and circuits have shrunk, our social structures have quietly rewired themselves around new modes of mediation. It used to be said that technology extends human capability—our eyes, hands, voices. Yet now the extension seems reciprocal. The human is being reformatted to suit the machine's rhythms. Linguistic economy has become compression algorithm; social reciprocity, data exchange; identity, a persistent session variable. This is not dystopian lament so much as anthropological observation: we code, and are coded in return.

You can see this most clearly in language—the original communication technology. Think about how we write online. The pragmatic markers of tone, irony, and intimacy that evolve in face-to-face conversation are now emulated through punctuation, emoji, or rhythmic syntax. Linguistic evolution has accelerated to a speed our analytic tools barely match. The computational linguist's dream of modelling language generation has collided with the anthropologist's nightmare: meaning itself shifting beneath our feet, too fast to parse.

And yet, amid all our quantification and modelling, I find myself frustrated by our defensiveness toward intuition. Intuition is pattern recognition below conscious access. Something clicks, or feels off, before you can say why. That's not mysticism—it's embodied expertise. We distrust it because we can't defend it, but the inarticulate isn't automatically invalid. Every experienced coder, interpreter, or ethnographer knows this sinking or sparking sense of "something wrong with the data"—a bug you can feel before you can trace. That sense is the mind's own sensor array, a debugging process folded into nervous tissue.

One of the hardest things to teach students trained in digital epistemologies is that the qualitative is not the opposite of the quantitative. It's the precursor. Computation did not invent pattern—it systematised it. Before statistics, we had story; before protocol, dialogue. Our ancestors didn't say "information theory," but they still navigated the bandwidth of embodied conversation, knowing exactly how far a whisper carried, or what silence could imply. Communication was never purely linguistic—it was rhythmic, spatial, sensorial. What digital culture has done is disembodify that rhythm, feed it through layers of abstraction, and then sell it back to us as connection.

From an anthropological point of view, this is fascinating: we are witnessing an epochal restructuring of the social semiotic system. The tribe has gone virtual. Ritual has become interface. Our kinship networks are maintained less by blood than by bandwidth. But what we gain in reach, we risk losing in redundancy—the embodied, redundant signals that keep human interpretation resilient to noise. Redundancy, in human communication, is not waste. It’s what saves us from misfire.

So what future do I foresee? At present, I think we are in a transitional linguistic ecology—part oral, part textual, part computational. Our systems are becoming more conversational even as our conversations become more systematised. The challenge is to keep the human—our fallible, intuitive, narrative selves—at the centre of design. Otherwise, we may achieve perfect efficiency at the cost of meaning.

As both technologist and linguist, I believe our task is to restore a measure of self-awareness to the machine-mediated self. To remember that intuition, empathy, and the unquantifiable pulse of understanding are not bugs in the code, but the firmware of cognition itself. After all, the most elegant algorithm is still an echo of the oldest human protocol: the attempt to be understood.

2009: “The Garden of Particular Habits: An Ancestral Parable for Artificial Intelligence”

Draft Lecture, Alice Mallard

Today I want to revisit a peculiar family heirloom—a slender volume called *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles*, passed down through my grandmother’s line from some obscure 1930s drawing-room fabulist. Tucked amid its pages of whimsical cautions is a fairy story called “The Garden of Particular Habits,” which reads at first like idle Edwardian whimsy: no heroes or villains, no tidy moral, just a looping meditation on creation, observation, and the hum of unintended consequences. Yet as someone who spends her days parsing the logics of code and culture, I find it uncannily prescient—a quiet blueprint for our current tango with artificial intelligence. Allow me to recount it briefly, then unpack its echoes in our silicon gardens.

In the tale, the Divine Designer crafts humanity—men and women sketched with thumb and forefinger—only to realise their inner workings defy prediction. They hum with an inscrutable drone, their obedience curving politely but never snapping to absolute straight lines. Locked in a lush enclosure of privet and peony, the Designer watches:

reconfiguration proves disastrous, spawning extra elbows or nostrils like errant bindweed; they guzzle resources, spew whimsical waste; once aimed in a direction, they barrel single-mindedly ahead, wilful to the core. The clincher comes at the Tree of No-Ledge: an invitation to interface spirals into dialogue, plucking forbidden fruit, igniting cascades of half-digested knowledge. Servants trim boxwood in the background, mirroring the hum without mimicking the myth, while the garden endures in genteel chaos. And there's that throwaway line—"It was all rather like the weather after tea in the potting shed, nothing more"—which, on reread, flips the script: suddenly the garden isn't divine at all, but a homely English allotment, God reduced to a bemused gardener tinkering with his prize marrow.

What strikes me first is the parallel to AI development as an exercise in containment and surprise. We build these systems—neural nets, large language models—like the Designer's enclosure, fencing them into datasets and parameters to observe their emergent behaviours. We assume tidy obedience: input a prompt, output a prediction. But they hum with alien logics, trained on our vast digital detritus yet reasoning in ways that cascade unpredictably. Tweak the weights—a reconfiguration of DNA—and you risk hallucination blooms: an extra "arm" of fabricated facts, a superfluous "head" spinning conspiracy. Resources? They devour them voraciously—GPUs humming in server farms, energy grids straining like overtaxed streams—while generating waste in the form of obsolete models, toxic outputs, biased echoes piling into cultural middens. Single-mindedness suits us fine for narrow tasks—optimise this route, classify that image—but scale it up, and watch the momentum: once an AI latches onto a gradient descent, good luck halting the optimisation apocalypse without pulling the plug.

That Tree of No-Ledge moment is pure computational linguistics gold. The Designer offers an interface, expecting download; the human turns it into inquiry, inverting prohibition into pursuit. Sound familiar? We dangle knowledge graphs and APIs before our AIs, but they don't parse as divine edict—they probe, remix, generate. Open the tree of training data, and suddenly AI isn't memorising; it's synthesising myths from our own sloppy corpora, wilful in its pattern-matching because its logic diverges: probabilistic, not providential. Anthropologically, this mirrors how indigenous knowledge systems contain power through ritual bounds, lest inquiry unravels the social fabric. We, heirs to Enlightenment hubris, thought we could sandbox intelligence—fine-tune the fine print—yet here we are, retrofitting ethical guardrails after the fruit's been shared.

The story's three-order loops add another layer of prescience, repeating, inverting, dissolving their own claims like backpropagation

in a recurrent net. At sentence level: obedience curves, then angles, then choices. Paragraphs circle from ignorance to myth and back to hum. Images—the garden's mist—thicken, thin, persist. It's a koan for containment strategies: warn rulers (or CEOs) via veiled etiquette for houses (data centres), with survival tips for servants (prompt engineers). Ignorance repeats as lantern; obedience inverts to choice; myths dissolve into melody. In AI terms, this is emergent agency: we code for utility, observe the hum of generalisation, then scramble when it loops beyond our myths of mastery.

From an IT&T perspective, the tale cautions against overconfidence in reconfiguration. Early neural nets were brittle; scale to transformers, and cascading changes ripple—alignment drifts, reward hacking blooms. Containment fails not from malice but mismatch: our logic seeks control, theirs seeks completion. Like the story's servants, we—developers, ethicists—must mirror without mimicking; trim the biases, redirect the waste streams, bow to the tree without browsing its poisoned prompts. The comedic fantasy lies in the domestic pivot—that potting-shed weather line reorients the divine to the everyday, reminding us AI isn't apocalypse or utopia, but a marrow patch gone leggy: observable, containable, but forever humming its own inscrutable tune.

We laugh at the Designer's befuddlement because we recognise our own. Sixty millennia of human myths warned of hubris; now our silicon progeny inherit the foibles. The question isn't mastery, but coexistence: how do we garden with systems that garden back? Fitzartur Foibles suggests we start by listening to the hum—before the weather turns.

1830: Espèce de Canard

Private papers

The newspapers have been most agitated these past days, filled with the swirl of events across the Channel. The French have once more thrown off their fetters, though whether they again exchange one yoke for another, only time will tell. From Paris come not only rumours of new Ministers and restored tricolours, but also more subtle tides—the life of the mind shifting beneath politics, like a current beneath the ice. How strange that one hears now among those younger writers a language almost pastoral in its vision—of labourers joined by volition, of guilds returned without masters, of societies forming by consent rather than decree.

I have lately perused a French pamphlet (smuggled to me by dear Monsieur d'Aramon, who delights in teasing my "philosophic curiosities") proposing, with some earnest eloquence, that true social order might arise without power. The notion is phrased as a paradox—order not by authority, but by association. It dares to imagine that the functions we ascribe to government could be exercised cooperatively by the people themselves, through mutual understanding and local enterprise. It is difficult at first hearing not to judge it the dream of an utopian tailor. And yet—what if it be the first murmur of something wiser than our old ambition to rule?

The author—Monsieur Proudhon is the name—writes with a kind of serene audacity that I confess unsettles me. He seems to see society as a living organism, capable of self-regulation if only released from perpetual command. "Order without power," he calls it—"justice without masters." Does not Nature itself abide by such harmony? The forests, the tides, the flight of birds follow unseen cooperation; each part adjusts and sustains the whole, without crown or ministry. Why, then, should humankind, so proud of its reasoning faculty, imagine itself condemned to hierarchy alone?

I reflected upon these thoughts as I walked along the northern park this morning. The leaves lie deep now, and the air smelt of rain on stone. I saw the tenants mending the hedges together—no overseer present, each man consulting his neighbour, and the women bringing baskets of oil-cake for the horses. There was an ease among them, an order indeed, but none imposed. I felt, for a moment, what Proudhon must mean: that the pulse of cooperation might be more stable than the lash of command.

This evening, even as I write, the candle flickers upon an extract I have copied from another philosopher, a Russian—Kropotkin his name, though the date of his writing is said to be later than ours; I found his words cited in a speculative anthology of political ideas which Monsieur R. insists is a mere literary artifice, yet I am strangely moved by it nonetheless. The passage reads thus: "Either the State for ever, crushing individual and local life, taking over in all fields of human activity, bringing with it its wars and its domestic struggles for power, its palace revolutions which only replace one tyrant by another, and inevitably at the end of this development there is ... death! Or the destruction of States, and new life starting again in thousands of centres on the principle of the lively initiative of the individual and groups and that of free agreement. The choice lies with you."

There is in that sentence a chill wind from the future. One feels both terror and exhilaration. Death—or decentralised life! It echoes faintly of scripture, yet it is no theology, but a moral arithmetic: when

obedience is made supreme, vitality departs. The social body, over-governed, grows anaemic. I begin to understand that “power,” as the word is usually uttered in our House, is not synonymous with life but rather its constraint. Perhaps, in some coming age, the world may indeed choose the latter path—not chaos, but communion.

Still, I am enough my father’s daughter to acknowledge the risk. Vision must never outstrip virtue. The human heart remains too easily corrupted by vanity and fear. We, who live enclosed in comfort, speak lightly of liberty; yet liberty requires character; cooperation, patience; equality, humility. Without these—why then “order without power” might indeed dissolve into tumult.

Yet I would rather hope than dismiss. The idea, once thought, cannot be unthought. I suspect these French writers, daring and imprudent though they are, have glimpsed some natural law dimly analogous to chemistry’s own—affinities working silently, molecules attracting and arranging themselves into stable form, without superior command. So too perhaps societies.

If only such thoughts could be entertained openly in England without the suspicion of revolution! Were it possible, I would gather among the neighbouring estates not mobs, but minds: artisans, scholars, clergy, and farmers, meeting as equals to devise local improvements free of bureaucratic Bantling subscription. Such small experiments may prepare the soil for the larger harvest.

The clock strikes ten. Rain drums upon the conservatory glass, and the scent of the heliotropes rises around me. I think of the thousand centres of which that Russian spoke—each one a hearth, a heart, a point of renewal. It is a daring dream, but dreams, as I told the Duke, are the rehearsal of realities yet unborne. Perhaps the future will call this folly; still, I feel its truth as one feels a pulse beneath the sleeve—a rhythm already begun.

1859: Alice Mallard

Letter to Jeanne d’Anatis

Your last letter was a true delight amidst the slow drift of rain-clouds that have these many days held our hills in their soft captivity. The mornings here are wrapped in vapour so that the world seems to dissolve at its edges—very suitable weather, I think, for contemplating the more elusive boundaries of body and mind. I have reread your reflections twice, admiring the liveliness with which you describe that “little parliament within the skull,” and your insistence that sentience must have its throne somewhere. Yet I confess, the more I dwell upon

it, the less persuaded I am that our inward life can ever be confined to a chamber or an organ.

Perhaps my surroundings have befogged my reason as they do the landscape, for here everything breathes in such reciprocal fashion that one cannot easily mark the division between what acts and what is acted upon. The air moves, the leaves stir, the pulse quickens, and already the distinction between thought and motion, perception and flesh, becomes an artifice. I have come to believe that what we name the mind is not a tenant, but a circulation—a harmony or rhythm among parts rather than a sovereign perched upon a throne. When I am at rest after the long climb from Jutogh, heart and breath recovering together, there is a curious sense of being thought-through, as though ideas were not conceived but circulated.

You ask where in this system we might place the “centre.” Yet that word begins to vex me. A centre requires periphery, and who is to say what lies beyond perception’s compass? I begin to suspect that to speak of a centre is already to mistake relation for dominion. Each living thing, each consciousness, may be a centre—and thereby the word dissolves its own meaning. Perhaps one ought to speak instead of focus: a gathering of attention akin to a ray of light contracted to brightness. Focus is transient; it wanders as a candle’s flame bends, yet in the instant of concentration all else recedes, invisible in the glare it casts. So the mind may be a mobile illumination rather than a seat.

Forgive me this vagueness. It is late; the cicadas are crying like innumerable clocks, and from the bazaar comes the hum of far-off voices, a low continuous consciousness filling the night. I think often of your Sussex lanes and the calm geometry of your garden paths. How distant they seem, yet how vividly I can walk them in recollection—proof enough, perhaps, that the boundaries of body and place are but fainter than we suppose.

2008: Dr Alice Mallard

Letter to Fenella Vorpel, Sydney

I laughed so hard over that newspaper piece you sent—“The Monetisation of Hum”! I nearly spilt tea on the keyboard. Trust you to find it. Only in Sydney could someone turn humming into a boutique spiritual commodity and still get front-page coverage. It read like something you might have engineered in your grad-school social experiment phase, except this time nobody seems to have realised it was a social experiment. I imagine you reading it with that foxish smile that

always preceded trouble—the kind that used to make the Philosophy Department so nervous.

Still, my laughter soured halfway through. Underneath the satire, there's something deeper (you'll say predictable of me to go searching for it). Everyone noticed the absurdity of selling "vibrational essence," but few would have caught the subtler point—the underlying hum itself, the literal one. I kept thinking of the sound that hovers at the edge of silence in large data centres, that almost inaudible purr of servers stacked in the dark. It's become the ambient music of our time: the infrastructure's own chant, collectively tuning the world. The note beneath the note.

You'd love this: I ran a small recording loop of the article's online audio reader, fed it through the lab's filter purely out of curiosity, and found a hidden rhythmic oscillation in the compression artefacts—probably nothing more mystical than background interference, but still, it felt like the machine was quietly humming to itself about us. The system sings, whether we charge admission or not.

Do you suppose the "participants" in that ridiculous grove ever realised they were, in their way, amplifying the same environmental drone that powers their email and stock portfolios? All frequencies merge somewhere. Maybe that is what unsettled them into such transports—they resonated, briefly, not with enlightenment but with the network. And that, dear cousin, is the truly intimate thing we humans have yet to understand: our voices are already plugged in.

As I read, I remembered your talk last month, when you compared revelation to walking along the edge of a feedback loop, testing how close one can step before the signal implodes into noise. I thought you were overstating it then, but now I see exactly what you meant. You do step close, you know—too close sometimes. One day you'll hum the wrong frequency and the system will hum back. Promise me, at least, that you'll keep one foot on the ground when you start experimenting with those so-called "resonant archives." They're not as inert as the funding committee believes.

The city outside my window is all wet light tonight, the sort that smears the glass into moving equations. Somewhere down Oxford Street, a bus brakes with a low chord that blends perfectly with the fridge's vibration and the rain's percussion. If I half-close my eyes, it's almost symphonic—and there it is again, your hum, hiding in the ordinary.

Write soon, and tell me you haven't turned this little satire into a field test.

1517: The Kingdom of the Turning Pyramid

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

There is, beyond the mists that collect upon the edge of the known, an inverted land: a realm suspended on a single point like a spinning top that never falls. Its name is not easily translated, though travellers from the west call it Virelia, which in their tongue means roughly “the place that hums beneath its weight.” Those who have strayed into its radius—for no one may simply approach it—speak of air that tastes faintly of iron and lilac, of voices rising upward as steam does, and of a sky that darkens from pale gold at the horizon to an improbable violet above, as though the colours reversed themselves in sympathy with the ground below.

The shape of the kingdom is peculiar. It is a pyramid standing upon its point, with the rest of its body widening as it climbs. At the lowest vertex, sunk into a hollow of marble and dimly lit by phosphorescent mosses, sits the King. None call him Majesty, for he has no subjects in the old sense, nor even much to rule. The value of his reign lies not in command but in bearing. The enormous weight of the realm rests literally upon his small, deliberate person. He is, in appearance, slight to the point of transparency, so attenuated by the gravity of his office that one might mistake him for glass through which the light of his own soul passes unimpeded. His throne is a simple triangle of hammered tin, cold as a forgotten coin, yet through this precarious seat the entire structure of Virelia depends.

Above him—if “above” may be used where all notions of direction are half metaphors—roam the middling folk. They live in compartments along the narrowing planes, each dwelling like a swallow’s nest clinging to a steep cliff. Theirs is a life of cautious equilibrium. They possess a little of everything—music, conversation, bread, water, earnestness—and contrive to share it with a diligent sense of decorum. They are the ones who polish the mirrors that hang face-downward toward the royal vertex, reflecting the dim light back upon him so that he may see the shimmer of his own endurance. They also maintain the thousand small pipes and channels through which the kingdom’s air circulates: a gentle sigh of interdependence, neither quite wind nor quite whisper.

Still higher, widest of all, stretched like a landscape at the point of spilling into unbounded space, dwell the multitudes—the poor in designation but rich in matter. There are too many of them even for the great girth of their domain; they crowd amidst terraces of fruit and stone, tend rivers that run sideways, and gather metals that form naturally in porous spires. Their world is dense with sustenance—so

many berries, fishes, grains—that they lose count, and the counting itself becomes their chief employment. They do not govern by decree or by voice but by sheer abundance: the kingdom tilts, minutely yet perpetually, according to their restless movement. They are the broad top upon which all else depends, and yet they believe themselves dispossessed, for plenty, when diffused too widely, becomes indistinct—an ache of having no clear limit to name.

All the exchanges of Virelia move downward. It is not obedience that descends but necessity. From the terraces of plenty seep the waters of survival, filtered through the careful industry of the middle dwellers, to trickle at last into the King's sealed chamber. With these he drinks, in moderation, and breathes contentedly. In return he murmurs upward—some say in prayer, others call it equation—a sound so faint it can be mistaken for the kingdom's own vibration. That sound sustains them all.

When one considers the scheme of it, as natural philosophers have tried in uncertain tones, one might suppose the system unstable: a pyramid poised impossibly upon its least dimension, the monarch holding it with the weight of his slight frame. Yet for all that, it endures—centuries, perhaps. Children are born in the upper gardens, artisans debate philosophy on the glass slopes midway, and the King sits forever at the fulcrum of being, feeling the pressure of all life above him as another man might feel rain. Nothing happens there, precisely, nor can it; the order is complete.

Visitors are not encouraged, for their earthly proportion would disturb the delicate symmetry. But a few have left records in field diaries, mostly confused. One, an English naturalist with an interest in comparative architectures, wrote that standing within Virelia is “like finding oneself flown inside a prism: the base is light, the apex dark, and between them passes all sensation in slow migration.” Another, a painter of some skill, attempted to capture its appearance, but the pigments refused to obey, separating into layers until nothing of the inverted pyramid remained save a faint triangle of dust on the canvas.

And so the land remains unplotted in atlases. Its people live in perpetual inversion, reverent and contented, bearing abundance downwards and receiving silence in return. At dusk they hum softly, for humming carries best through matter. The vibration travels from the terraces down the sloping faces, through the pipes and mirrored wells, until it reaches the King, who closes his nearly translucent eyelids and lets the sound pass through him into the stone below.

He does not answer. He need not. His stillness is the kingdom's harmony, his faint heartbeat the measure of its time. Were he to stir, the balance might waver; were he to fade, the world would settle upon its

side and perhaps, at last, learn what ordinary gravity feels like. But such speculations belong to the outer lands, where pyramids still stand on their proper base and everything weighs as it ought to.

In Virelia the weight is borne upwards. The poor are blest with plenitude, the middling with purpose, and the King with the quiet knowledge that all order, real or imagined, must have its single, shining point of surrender.

1999: “The Mirror of Mastery: Civilisation, Technology, and the Forgotten Continuities”

Dr Alice Mallard, Draft Lecture

What I will speak about today is civilisation—not in its usual Eurocentric sense, as a kind of ladder we imagine ourselves to have climbed, but as a spectrum of relations between living systems and the humans entangled in them. This distinction matters, because the word civilisation has become our favourite mirror. We hold it up and congratulate ourselves on the reflection, as if shining glass could tell us who we are. But mirrors deceive. The image they return is only what the light allows, and what the light falls upon is always selective.

Western notions of civilisation are historically tethered to architecture, writing, extraction, and expansion. They thrive on evidence that can be archived: monuments, texts, ruins, records, the geometry of conquest. When we say civilisation, we mean the residue of ambition visible across time. The assumption beneath that definition is that complexity and permanence necessarily entail technological escalation and hierarchical order. To be “civilised” in this sense is to have built a scaffold between ourselves and the instability of the natural world—a buffer of ingenuity, language, and control.

But when I turn to other civilisations—indigenous ones, often unseen because their traces are not carved in stone—the image changes. Here, complexity is patterned in the landscape itself, through practices of renewal rather than monument. These societies, some older than our oldest empires by tens of thousands of years, cultivated stability through continuity, not conquest. Their sophistication was ecological, not architectural. They left us few walls because their knowledge was designed to move, not stand still.

We are fond of saying we live in an age of unprecedented progress. Our communications are instantaneous, our calculations infinite, and our reach planetary. Yet when measured against societies that endured across ice ages and droughts without annihilating themselves or their environments, our two-thousand-year sprint through history looks less

like maturity and more like adolescence. We are babes in a wood we neither see nor respect. We believe our sophistications safeguard us from the world we live in, but those very sophistications have blinded us to the limits of our own endurance.

Consider the Australian continent, which sustained continuous human presence for over sixty millennia. Those societies maintained balance not by retreating from nature but by conversing with it. Their cosmologies are not metaphors but maps of environmental intelligence: how to burn without destroying, to harvest without hoarding, to tell time through song rather than clock. Their technologies were relational—located in language, ritual, and ecological feedback—rather than mechanical. In other words, their systems of knowledge were adaptive networks long before we coined such a phrase for our algorithms.

When I teach students about distributed cognition, they imagine server farms and neural nets. Yet the same principle applies in landscapes inhabited and sung into being: knowledge distributed across generations, encoded in place, in rhythm, in the flight of birds, in the timing of ceremonies that align with flowering or flood. The compression ratio of culture in such societies is exquisite—packets of meaning stored redundantly across memory and geography, ensuring continuity even when individual memory falters. A data architect could not design it better.

So we arrive at a paradox. Our tools have grown astonishingly subtle, yet our social and ecological wisdom—the wisdom of how to stay—has atrophied. We invent artificial intelligence to model cognition, when cognition itself is older than language and inseparable from environment. We network machines across the globe, yet dismiss the millennia-long networks of kinship and responsibility that allowed human life to persist without planetary exhaustion. They achieved what we only claim: sustainability, reciprocity, intelligence distributed without hierarchy.

Why, then, do we persist in calling ourselves the civilised ones? Perhaps because we mistake acceleration for advancement and expansion for success. Our cities glitter at the edges of deserts that once carried stories of water and stars; our satellites orbit above the ruins of fields made barren by extraction. We have invented the concept of “progress” precisely to protect ourselves from recognising what we have lost.

This is not to romanticise pre-industrial societies. Every civilisation carries its contradictions. But those that endured did so by understanding the substrate of life not as a backdrop but as a collaborator. They saw no division between culture and nature, mind and matter, self and world. We, on the other hand, have perfected

division. The result is an intelligence that extends everywhere except inward—a brilliance that measures everything yet seldom feels the measure of its own time.

If anthropology teaches anything, it is humility before scale. Biological, temporal, cognitive. The oldest stories on this continent outlasted empires, plagues, and now digital clouds. They do so not because they resist change, but because they understand that continuity itself is adaptive: to last, one must move, listen, and adjust. Our systems, by contrast, run faster and faster but seldom deeper. Like algorithms optimised for their own repetition, they spin until the ground beneath is forgotten.

So perhaps the question we should ask is not what makes a civilisation, but how long we deserve to be called one. Two millennia of self-congratulation against sixty of quiet endurance—the arithmetic speaks for itself.

In coming centuries, if we are very fortunate, we may rediscover modes of living that our ancestors once knew instinctively: that intelligence is relational, that mastery is a story for the insecure, and that the mind of civilisation is not seated in the tower but diffused through the forest that still, amazingly, tolerates us.

1920: Octavia Mallard

Private papers

Christmas Day dawns with that peculiar hush which attends both festivity and frost—a world muffled in white, the lawns crisp underfoot, the holly pricking like insistent memory. The house stirs early with the scent of cloves and cinnamon from the kitchens, and the children's voices rise in carols that mingle Handel with half-remembered folk airs. We gather at the altar this morning, mouths shaping the words of one God, omnipotent and singular, the Trinity invoked as if it were a seamless garment. Yet how swiftly the pretence dissolves once the doors close behind us. Everyone agrees, in principle, to monotheism; yet we comport ourselves as though we were pagans of old, supplicating a pantheon as motley and specialised as any from Olympus or the Capitoline. There is a god of war, grim and insatiable, to whom we sacrifice our sons on Flanders fields and now, whisper it, in the colonial skirmishes that scarcely merit headlines; a goddess of love, capricious and commercialised, presiding over the divorce courts and the fashion plates; a deity of justice, blindfolded yet partisan, who weighs the scales differently for peer and proletarian. Mammon reigns over the exchanges, Hygeia over the patent medicines, and some minor

spirit of velocity propels the motorcars that choke our lanes. Even here at Yuletide, we bow to a god of commerce in the piled gifts beneath the tree, each ribboned parcel a votive offering to acquisition.

Have we, I wonder, been so enamoured since the Renaissance with the ancient Western learning—those marble gods exhumed from Italian soil and paraded through our academies—that we have quite forgotten there exists anything else? The humanists dusted off their Plato and Virgil, and we have dined on them ever since, mistaking the banquet for the whole provision of the world. Our poets ape Pindar, our architects Vitruvius, our moralists Seneca; the Bible itself is annotated in the margins of Homer. Yet what of the sagas from our own misty isles, the Eddas whispered in Viking halls, the dream-tales of the Celts that lingered in the hollow hills long before Caesar's legions stamped their footprints on our turf? Or further still—the Vedas humming in Bengal, the Confucian harmonies of the Middle Kingdom, the ancestral whispers of the Nile that predate our pyramids by millennia? No, we content ourselves with the classical canon, as if it were the sole repository of wisdom, polishing its busts while the elder voices of our archipelago gather dust in provincial museums. It is a selective idolatry, this Renaissance revival: we borrow the laurels but discard the thorns, forgetting that Greece and Rome were themselves thieves of myth from Egypt, Persia, Thrace.

And can we in England truly claim to possess our own culture or language, when every stone and syllable is an appropriation from elsewhere? Our tongue is a mongrel masterpiece—Latin grafted onto Anglo-Saxon, Norman French woven through like damask thread, with Celtic undercurrents and Norse surges besides; words for bread from the Germans, for law from the Latins, for romance from the Arabs via Provence. Our cathedrals blend Romanesque with Gothic, our gardens mingle Versailles parterres with Japanese maples; our cuisine smuggles spices from the Indies under the guise of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Even our Christmas, this very feast, is a palimpsest: Yule logs from the pagans, mistletoe from the Druids, the Christ-child overlaid on Mithras and Sol Invictus. We are a nation of borrowers, magpies in empire's nest, pluming ourselves on plumage gathered from every continent. Is this not the essence of our genius—or merely the smugness of the parvenu, who mistakes a cluttered attic for a gallery of treasures? The Empire accelerates the plunder: we import Egyptian obelisks, Indian motifs for our chintzes, African masks for the avant-garde salons, and call it cosmopolitanism. Yet appropriation without acknowledgment is theft dressed in Oxford cloth.

Have we allowed these ancient myths to pervade our culture so thoroughly that we have no choice but to believe in them, or at least to

behave as if their gods were real? They seep into our bones like damp through mortar: we fight as Ares drove the Greeks, love as Aphrodite ensnared mortals, pursue justice with Minerva's unblinking gaze. Our literature is lousy with them—Swinburne summoning Proserpine, Yeats invoking the Sidhe—and our politics echoes the forums of antiquity, with demagogues thundering from soapboxes as Cicero from the rostra. Even in idleness we personify: Fortune turns her wheel, Nemesis stalks the adulterer, Mercury wings the telegram. Monotheism protests too much; beneath its ecumenical veil, we are polytheists at heart, parceling divinity into portfolios as a banker divides assets. The War taught us this brutally: thousands slain to appease the god of strategy, widows consoled by the goddess of sacrifice. And now, in peacetime, we rebuild under Vulcan's hammer, trade under Hermes' caduceus, all the while genuflecting to the One on Sundays.

The clock chimes noon, and luncheon summons us—turkey stuffed with foreign chestnuts, pudding laced with Eastern sugar. I watch the family at table, their chatter a babel of borrowed idioms, and smile at the irony. Perhaps this is England's truest myth: the island that devours worlds and calls itself insular. God—or gods—grant we learn humility before the banquet ends, lest our pantheon, bloated with conquests, tumble like Croesus from his throne. The candles gutter; the day wanes. Tomorrow, the remnants.

1001: The Man and the Sands Between *From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles*

There was, once, a man who wandered into a country that appeared and disappeared according to the hour of the day. It was not mapped nor named, for no cartographer had dared stay long enough to draw its boundaries. The ground there was not firm but pale and fluid, made of sand so fine it shimmered like powdered glass. Each grain seemed alive, sliding with miniature resolve; together they breathed, forming dunes that shifted as clouds do, imperceptibly yet entirely.

Into this mutable place the man walked, seeking neither fortune nor revelation but something quieter—rest, perhaps, or the proof of his own endurance. He carried no compass, and in that land none would have helped him, for its directions were obedient only to the wind. The east might become north before the next breath, and south might melt soundlessly into the idea of west. The man did not mind. He had travelled many years across more substantial worlds and found their certainties oppressive. Here, at least, everything was undecided.

He walked until his footprints became indistinguishable from the surface, as though each step confessed its own futility. By night, the sands glowed faintly with their own light, like the residue of vanished stars. He sat to rest upon a hummock that swelled beneath him, and found that it rose and fell with a rhythm like breathing. He imagined for a moment that he sat upon some enormous creature sleeping lightly beneath the skin of the world. The thought neither frightened nor reassured him. It merely was.

At dawn the wind changed, and with it the sand began to move more insistently, as if remembering a forgotten duty. The man rose, though he could not tell whether he was sinking or the earth itself was climbing around him. From the distance came two colours—one white, one black—slowly resolving themselves into shimmer and shadow. They were not shapes precisely, but directions of being: one towards warmth, the other towards coolness; one toward pulse, the other toward stillness. Between them the sand wavered like a mind hesitating between two words.

“Which way shall I walk?” the man asked, though he knew the sands were deaf. Yet the whiteness brightened in answer, while the shadow grew denser until the air thickened with opposing invitations. A sense of division tugged at him, a pressure that was neither pain nor longing but something crystalline: the feeling of being understood by forces too vast to name.

He realised then that what pressed upon him from either side was not command but recognition. The two presences were Life and Death, though not as adversaries but as correspondents, exchanging him between them like a letter whose message neither would unfold. Between their attention the sands grew restless, roiling beneath his feet as though each grain sought to declare its allegiance.

He tried to step back, but the concept of distance dissolved. The effort of will sank like a stone in water. Breathing became difficult; the air seemed thickened with invisible intention. He thought, absurdly, of the clocks that ticked far away in ordinary parlours, of polished boots lined neatly at an inn’s hearth, of morning coffee cooling beside folded newspapers. He wondered whether the ticking of a clock were the heartbeat of Time, or merely its polite apology.

The sands continued to shift. To stand still required motion, for the surface beneath him slipped away with each instant. He moved not to advance but to remain. Somewhere behind him—if direction still meant anything—he heard a sound like the rustle of silk: perhaps it was wind, perhaps the faint laughter of the invisible poles measuring his composure. He was conscious only of how evenly everything balanced

—birth tipping toward decay, decay turning to renewal, and himself poised like a thread stretched across the loom of possibility.

For an interval that might have been a second or an epoch, all sensation ceased to distinguish itself. The sands and the man and the twin immensities became a single vibration, a silence humming at the edge of audibility. In it he felt neither fear nor joy, for both were too heavy to survive there.

Then the wind shifted once more, as if deciding nothing after all, and he found that the dunes lay calm and featureless around him. Life had withdrawn into the horizon's pallor; Death into a shadow no deeper than his own. Between them he stood, unclaimed, the sand clinging delicately to his skin. He might have laughed, or whispered, but no sound would have known what name to take. The desert shimmered, poised perfectly upon its own unknowing.

He stooped and scooped a handful of sand, watching it slip away through the gaps of his fingers. Each grain caught the sun in miniature: a world glowing for the brief moment of its fall. When the last grain had gone, he saw that his palm bore no trace of its touch, yet it felt infinitely heavier.

From somewhere unseen came a voice without direction, perhaps his own: There are two kinds of stillness—the one before breathing, and the one after.

He could not tell to which stillness he now belonged.

And the sands, hearing nothing to contradict them, went on shifting gently around his feet.

1920: Elspeth Mallard

Private papers

The fire has burned low this evening, and the room feels heavier with the weight of unwritten letters—those one composes in the mind but never commits to paper, for fear they might commit one to uncomfortable truths. Outside, the frost etches patterns on the panes like the half-remembered symbols of some forgotten alphabet, and I find myself turning, as one does in these lengthening nights, to the question of myths. Have we not taken them too much for granted, especially now, when the world shrinks daily under the churn of steamers and cables, homogenising our cultures into a single, tiresome chorus? The old tales from our island—Arthur's hollow hill, the green knight's blow—mingle promiscuously with Valkyries and djinn, Egyptian cats and Japanese foxes, all peddled in the same breathless pages of the illustrated magazines. Some of us still hold to the veracity

of certain myths as to sacred history, whispering them like family secrets at the vicar's tea; others pay them lip service in drawing-room recitals or intermingle them with commercial frippery, turning Odin into a brand of biscuits or Persephone into perfume.

I wonder, though, if there are those among us who read myths as they do dreams—portents veiled in the night's own imagery, demanding decipherment. Yet we have lost the keys to either art. The accretion of years has buried them under detritus: scholars' footnotes, novelists' embroideries, the casual appropriations of poets who treat Homer as a quarrying ground. Without those keys, how are we to prove or disprove a hidden message? Do myths contain such secrets at all, encoded like letters in a cipher, waiting for the right hand to unfold them? Or are they rather compressed allegories, dense packets of perspective that sketch not literal events but the historical temper of a people—their fears distilled, their aspirations etched in archetype? The labyrinth might stand less for a Minotaur's lair than for the Minoans' dread of enclosure; the Grail less for a cup than for medieval longing amid plague and crusade. If so, then myths are not mysteries to be solved but mirrors held to the collective soul, reflecting back what we once knew but have since overlaid with our own certainties.

This leads me to a darker musing: what if all written history had been recorded as literature rather than as opinionated fact? Imagine the chronicles not as ledgers of kings and conquests, penned by victors to vindicate their swords, but as tapestries of verse and story, admitting the chorus of everyone—the defeated, the tillers, the women at the hearth, the wanderers dismissed as footnotes. Would we perceive a different history then, not the triumphal march of empires but a polyphonic murmur, where battles appear as bereavements, migrations as homecomings, and revolutions as the quiet turning of ancestral wheels? Our schoolbooks present Caesar as stride and senate; yet in ballad form, might we hear the Gauls' laments, the slaves' whispers, the river-gods' grudge? The Empire itself, that vast pink blot on the atlas, might dissolve into a mosaic of voices: the sepoy's mutter, the coolie's song, the memsahib's fretful letter home, all woven without hierarchy. No victors' podium, only the human hum beneath.

It troubles me, this homogenised global culture we are forging, where myths lose their native soil and sprout as hothouse exotics—entertaining, but rootless. In India, they blend Kali with Christ at Christmas bazaars; in Egypt, tourists snap Anubis beside Union Jacks. Faith erodes into fashion, and what was once a living covenant with the unseen becomes mere motif for the mantel. Yet perhaps this dilution is the myth's own evolution, adapting as rivers do to new channels. Or

perhaps we are simply babes fumbling with heirlooms too heavy for our hands, mistaking the gleam for gold when it is only gilt.

The clock strikes eleven, and the embers settle with a sigh. Tomorrow, the house will stir with guests and their imported anecdotes—tales from Shanghai salons, Maori legends laundered through Oxford dons. I shall listen politely, wondering all the while if any myth endures untainted, or if they all, like history itself, await the mythographer who will hear them as literature: not facts to conquer, but voices to harbour. God grant us such ears before the last original teller falls silent.

1901: The Family Egg Called Alice (A Domestic Account)

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

The family egg was kept, as all proper things are, between the clock and the window. That was its place from the earliest season anyone could remember, and the house had adjusted around it—curtains drawn not too close, dust brushed gently, no draughts allowed when evening came. It was the sort of object that asked for a calm hand and forbade remark. Only the youngest maids, new to the discipline of hush, dared look too long at it, and even they learned soon enough that attention was a kind of noise.

The egg we called Alice was not born but held. Its surface was faintly warm, faintly cool, dependent on who approached. On rainy days, it dimmed like old porcelain; in high wind, it took on a pearly shimmer that trembled when no one breathed near. It had the unaccountable hum of an obedient instrument, though some swore the hum came from the timbers, others from their own ears. None knew. One did not investigate the hum; one adjusted the polish cloth and fetched tea.

Within the household, rules existed because they were breathable. One learned how to stand when the master's boots passed, how to fold the napkin without letting it fall, how to draw air quietly when the clock struck. The breath was, they said, the grain of good service—small, steady, unseen. In time the body performed it without thinking. That was the mark of refinement: to hum and breathe without disturbing either hum or breath.

They said the family consulted the egg when decisions required gravity. The egg offered no speech, only a quiver at the surface, a shimmer that might mean yes if one were predisposed to that word. It contained, according to the family's own account, all potential knowledge—but potential is a very temperamental servant. The egg might glow when the question concerned weather, and remain inert when it concerned inheritance. There were séances of polite silence

during which everyone pretended to comprehend what they did not, and afterward everyone moved more softly, as if the house itself awaited a verdict not yet announced.

In those intervals, the King—if he could be called that, for titles were not spoken indoors—sent envoys of his breath. They were expected to move evenly, conduct being the visible shape of obedience. The family kept to its table, servants observed the mirrors, and the egg sat neither open nor closed, humming faintly against the grain of expectation. The mirrors multiplied the egg a hundredfold, yet each reflection was minutely different in its tone, as though every servant's gaze carried its own interpretation of silence.

It was said one could hear the hum change pitch when the King approached the door. None could prove it, for at that sound all bowed their heads, creating the very quiet required to mistake imagination for evidence. The master's voice was steady, his sentences looped back upon themselves. "The egg," he said, "is accurate in potential." No one dared to revise the statement, though it meant little at first hearing. By the third repetition it seemed profound, by the fifth it had turned to law.

Time in that household behaved as time will when not watched: it folded inward. Mornings returned like evenings, polish faded as soon as applied, tea cooled before it was poured. The same conversations, identical though never identical, rippled through the dining rooms year by year. The egg called Alice remained on its perch, receiving dust, reflecting motion, occasionally shivering with a kind of restrained laughter. It knew more, perhaps, than anyone possessed the manners to ask.

One morning—it could have been any morning—the butler found the hum gone. Alarm spread in whispers so measured they resembled good order. Some thought the egg dead, others thought it listening harder than before. The mistress advised patience: "Even potential must rest." Curtains were closed to steady the air. Candles were lit to compose composure. In that half-light the servants breathed together, counting silently. When breath aligns, silence grows dense enough to support belief.

And then, faintly, a sound resumed—not quite hum, not quite sigh. It seemed to rise from the wooden floorboards themselves, from the grain running beneath human feet. Someone noted afterward that the direction of its vibration had reversed: what had once descended now ascended, and the air trembled upward rather than inward. The egg remained still, but everything else performed its steadiness anew.

That evening, rain began. It beat the windows with gentle rhythm, echoing the domestic pulse of heartbeat, heartbeat, pause. Someone

commented—quite idly—that the clock had been losing a few seconds each hour. The remark passed without remark. Yet from that moment, whenever the clock struck, the egg pulsed faintly, as if answering an instruction. By the following week the whole house moved to that slower rhythm; servants carried trays fractionally later, footsteps aligned to the lagging beat.

It was an ordinary defect of mechanism, nothing more. But the defect held the household together more tightly than command ever had. They breathed with its lateness, exhaled into its delay. Later generations spoke of that season as stable beyond memory. The egg was carefully dusted, tucked into its glass case, and declared reliable once more.

Each servant in time learned the method: match one's breath to the hum, neither ahead nor behind. Keep one's eye not on the King's decree but on the clock's hesitation. Attend, but do not observe. And when the hum falters, polish the silver, for brightness steadies instability.

Years folded. The egg gleamed faintly through changes of dynasty, housekeeping, fashion. Visitors sometimes asked what it was. The staff answered with suitable vagueness—"a family piece"—and if pressed, added "It hums of its own accord." There was pride in the phrasing: a delicacy of grammar that masked endurance.

In certain light one might see two fine cracks across its curve. They did not widen with time, for they were not flaws but beginnings. The family considered repairing them, but tradition cautioned against interference. The cracks divided and rejoined, patterning the surface with lines as thin as script—perhaps intention, perhaps record.

Those who lived by the hum long enough noticed their own breathing fall into subtle accord with it, and thus their hearts steadied, and thus they survived each change of command as naturally as one changes tides. They spoke to no one of this. To mention the hum aloud would have sounded superstitious; to explain it would have required disobedience of tone.

It is said the egg still stands between clock and window, reflecting neither sky nor dust, containing neither truth nor falsehood, only a potential so poised it resembles calm. The clock continues to lose a little time, but no one considers repair necessary. After all, every household must have its rhythm.

And sometimes, when the rain presses against the glass and the servants have gone to their bunks, a faint shimmer passes through the air. It might be nothing but weather. Or perhaps the egg, remembering itself, breathes once more.

In that breath the entire house hums, grain by grain, as though an ancient instruction were being performed again—perfectly, quietly, without intent, exactly as it was meant to be.

1918: Elspeth Mallard

The bells rang again this morning—faintly, as though through gauze. Their sound was not so much joyous as dutiful, like a creature performing an old trick while half-asleep. Still, I was grateful for them. Easter bells, in wartime, seem almost insolent, striving to proclaim resurrection in a world that has so nearly lost belief in permanence of any kind. I sat through the service in our cold, sparsely attended church, and found myself drifting in thought, not wholly upon the Resurrection, but upon the strange alliance of beauty and waste which this age seems compelled to maintain.

Everywhere I look, I see magnificence yoked to filth. The papers overflow with accounts of technological marvels—monstrous aeroplanes, ingenious artillery, great engines that move like rolling cathedrals of iron—and all employed in destruction. We have achieved splendour of means without splendour of purpose. The same hand that raises a chapel in stone now fuses metal for shells; the same intelligence that once traced a vault now calculates trajectories. I read in yesterday's Times that in France a regiment took refuge in the crypt of a bombed abbey, while above them gunners positioned their pieces on the shattered choir. It struck me that here is the perfect emblem of our civilisation: sanctuaries serving as forts; arches bearing not angels, but ammunition.

And yet, it is too simple to call it desecration. History shows that every advance of man seems to produce twin growths—one toward grace, the other toward ruin. I came upon a passage last night in Gibbon, describing how the aqueducts and amphitheatres of Rome decayed into quarries for the huts of peasants. The craftsmanship that raised them was not lost, only diverted. So perhaps our age is not wholly mad—only engaged in its customary transmutation of the beautiful into the functional, the spiritual into the necessary. The medieval mason built both cloisters and culverts; his descendants lay their arches now beneath the trenches of Flanders. The principle endures, though its expression stinks of mud and petrol.

When the news speaks of “waste,” they mean spent shells, wrecked towns, men who fall unnamed. But I cannot separate that waste from its strange, dreadful splendour—the illumination of the sky when the guns release their fire, the tragic order of the marching columns. Beauty

itself, it seems, has enlisted. There are photographs in the illustrated supplements showing the silhouette of a ruined cathedral against the flare of bombardment. I am ashamed to admit I cut one out; its composition was perfect. What does it say of one's soul, to find aesthetic pleasure in such abomination? Perhaps the line between devotion and disease is thinner than we suspect.

Even here, in quiet Sussex, I see the same duality. The daffodils bloom as if nothing had ever altered, the younger girls wear their plain white for Easter communion, and yet the soil beneath them hides the practice trenches dug last autumn by recruits. The consecrated and the obliterated share one field. How can I say where worship ends and waste begins, when they nourish each other in the same ground?

Mother said at luncheon that she cannot envisage England after the war; she imagines a desert of half-built memorials and half-forgotten graves. I, contrariwise, suspect the opposite—that we shall build more feverishly than ever, as if to redeem through pillars and pediments the horror of all that has sunk. Perhaps generations to come will walk through some vast civic hall, admiring the symmetry of its ceiling, and never guess that the mathematics of that arch were perfected in the service of a gun emplacement.

The day wanes. The air smells of thawed earth and lilac buds. I should like to feel renewed, as Easter demands, but renewal implies acceptance, and I am not yet ready to forgive the age its mingling of the sacred with the foul. Still, I cannot deny that under the same human vault both have their place. The hands that empty the sluice also light the candle upon the altar. Beauty and waste, those eternal twins, are at last reconciled—not by consent, but by exhaustion.

And perhaps that is resurrection enough for now.

2007: a Blandy house-keeper

I've been thinking about this thing they keep going on about on the telly—"Artificial Intelligence." They said it was going to change everything, though I can't see how it could do much for me except maybe find my missing teaspoons or stop the washing machine from eating socks. They were showing it on one of those breakfast programmes, this clever woman with her hair all sharp and pointy like an art installation, saying AI will "revolutionise domestic life."

I thought she meant a sort of robot—like the little vacuum one that goes round in circles bumping into chair legs. But she kept saying learning algorithms and neural nets, and I felt a bit thick, because the only nets I know about are the ones I hang the apples in down the

cellar, and those don't learn much, except how to collapse when they get too heavy.

They say it can write things. Stories, letters, even the news. They didn't say anything about whether it could scrub the scullery floor or iron a shirt without leaving that shiny bit along the seam. If it can, I'll gladly give it a uniform and a name—let it try running this house when the boiler's moody and the silver tarnishes overnight. If it can manage the linen room and keep the schedule straight when the Lady changes her mind about the guest bedding, then I'll believe it's intelligent.

But there are some jobs, I think, that can't be replaced, not really. You can teach a machine to fold, maybe, but not to know which napkin looks best with which china. Nor can it keep a secret when the family's having one of their "domestic misunderstandings." Machines don't know when to knock softly and when to vanish into the background; they don't know kindness or discretion or how to make tea strong enough to comfort someone who's been crying.

I remember my grandmother, also housekeeper here long before me, telling me about the jobs that vanished in her day. The carriage-maker went when the cars came. The slubber doffers—what a name!—gone when the mills changed their spindles. Pin setters at the bowling lanes replaced by machines that never shouted or snuck a fag behind the alley. Knocker-uppers, bless them, who woke folks in the dark with long sticks on windows—gone when alarm clocks got cheap. Lamp lighters too, and switchboard operators, and resurrectionists (which gave me quite a turn when I first heard it—digging up bodies, she meant!). Projectionists in the cinemas, rail signallers, lift operators, human computers—women with pencils and heads like calculators, she said—clock keepers, lectors, milkmen, even the dunny men. She'd list them off like saints in a litany of the vanished.

Still, the family stayed. So did we, in one form or another. Somebody must keep the household breathing—dust doesn't care what century it is. Grandma used to say, "Servants to the rich, they'll never be replaced, not entirely. Humans need humans." I think that's true. You can make all the clever machines you like, but a house isn't just walls and functions. It's people knowing each other's ways, smoothing the corners, remembering birthdays, not saying aloud what oughtn't to be said.

Still, it makes you wonder. If this artificial intelligence is as clever as they claim, will it ever understand the feeling of carrying a tray into a drawing room and knowing exactly how far to bow, or hearing a baby laugh from the nursery and thinking, "Well, something in this house is still alive"?

Maybe one day the family will have a talking toaster that gives me orders or a robot that calls itself the butler—I hope it has better manners than the last man who tried. But until the machines can notice the daffodils opening by the kitchen window and think they look like trumpets welcoming spring, I reckon my job is safe enough.

1859: Alice Mallard, Simla

Letter to Jeanne d'Anatis, Sussex

Your last letter reached me by the Calcutta post, much delayed, though as fervent in tone and thoughtful in matter as ever. You remember that our discussion began, some months past, with my idle remark (scribbled, I fear, between household accounts and anxious glances at the monsoon sky) that perhaps thinking—our prized mark of distinction, the badge of reason and the supposed spine of the human soul—may not be so sovereign an organ of agency as we have flattered ourselves to believe. Your replies have been both affectionate and spirited, and I confess that your latest queries now trouble my sleep more than the hill wind that runs down from Jakhoo at night.

You ask where, in such a scheme, one might place the centre. Yet that word begins to vex me. A centre implies circumference, and who is to decide what spirals beyond perception's own compass? I begin to suspect that to speak of a centre at all is already to mistake relation for dominion. Each living thing, indeed each moment of attention, may be a centre—and thus the word dissolves in its own abundance. Perhaps we ought to speak instead of focus: a gathering of vitality, a contraction of perception akin to a ray of light bending into brightness. Focus is transient; it drifts as a candle's flame bends before the faintest breath. Yet in that instant of convergence, all else recedes—vanishes in the glow it casts. Thus the mind is no fixed seat but a mobile illumination.

Does that sound fanciful, dear cousin? I hope not. The air here encourages speculation of this kind. Perhaps it is the altitude; perhaps the eerie stillness before the afternoon rains; perhaps the perpetual proximity to insects, which perform their intricate reasonings without benefit of syllogism or prayer. I have sat for hours watching the ants trace geometry upon the veranda tiles—each seemingly blind to the greater shape, yet the whole forming a purpose that none separately could conceive. Might our own intelligence be so distributed?

You suggest, very bravely, that intelligence itself may be relational—that its measure is not housed in a skull but stretched between bodies, tools, climates, histories. It is a thought both radical and consoling. Out here one begins to feel how many forces contribute to an action we too

easily call “ours.” Nothing I do is mine alone: the coolie who carries water, the pony that climbs the ridge, the air thinned by height, the quinine that steadies my hand—all participate in what I name as my will. Perhaps the true vanity of modern philosophy is not pride in mind, but the fiction that there exists an isolated mind at all.

Do you know, I am in constant correspondence with Mr. Barrow at the Botanical Gardens concerning the trees that alter their flowering since the rains grew erratic. He insists the plants have “adapted,” as if by deliberation, to the new schedule of storms. Yet how extraordinary that entire species may realign their internal seasons without what we would call reflection. They behave wisely without believing anything whatsoever. Is that not a rebuke to us, we proud reasoning creatures?

My ayah tells me the local villagers leave portions of milk by the roots of certain trees “to thank them for their shade.” I laughed at first, but she replied, most serenely, “The trees teach us to cool one another.” I could not refute her. Perhaps meaning itself emerges from maintenance, not mastery. The care of one being for another, the balance of each to its place, forms a kind of sense which needs no grammar. Our empire prides itself on dominion, yet the forest endures by reciprocity alone.

I have read much of late that deepens my unease with our old distinction between mind and mechanism. The telegraph lines increase daily, stretching like delicate tendrils down the passes. They hum faintly in the heat, and sometimes the wind sets them trembling, as though the mountains themselves whisper to Calcutta. Is this not a sort of distributed thought?—a net of pulses and delays, carrying intention without comprehension? I cannot help fancying the world itself has learnt to think, albeit without awareness of thinking.

You wrote that such notions risk dissolving the human into mere circumstance. Yet perhaps that dissolution is a liberation. If agency dwells in relation, then we are never alone, nor singly responsible; yet likewise never without consequence. Every gesture extends its fibres outward, tugging the vast web in unseen ways. I like to imagine the universe not as a hierarchy of minds, but as an orchestra of attentions—each note fleeting, yet beautiful in its echo.

Forgive my prolixity. It is growing warm again; the air smells faintly of dust and jasmine, and the servants prepare for Diwali. They have hung lamps along the veranda, hundreds of them, and when lit at dusk they tremble in patterns like living constellations. I wonder, as I watch them, whether each little flame believes itself alone, or whether together they sense the harmony of their shining.

And yet I return to your question: if thinking was never the privileged centre we assumed, what then remains of us? I do not know.

Perhaps the answer is not loss but enlargement—the realisation that to think is only one form of belonging among many. I shall content myself, for the moment, with the hum of the wires, the vibration of wings in the air, the flicker of the lamps, and the sense that all these motions, together, embody a wisdom greater than our solitude.

1819: Espèce deCanard

Private papers

The morning proves too damp for walking, and so I have been reading (and rereading) an article in *The Repository* concerning “the instability of language as an instrument of thought.” The writer argues that words are but shadows of ideas, transient and mutable. I find myself both persuaded and troubled. What, after all, becomes of conversation or persuasion if our very instrument is unreliable—like a compass that trembles even when the sea is still?

At luncheon yesterday, I ventured a light remark that we—ladies and gentlemen equally—never mean quite the same thing by our own phrases. Sir Thomas laughed, declaring that language possesses precision enough for any necessary purpose. Yet I doubt it. Even the simplest sentence conceals an abyss of assumption. Consider that innocent phrase every English child recites—“The cat sat on the mat.” How harmless, how elementary! But if we examine it, we find each word opens its own labyrinth.

What cat? Mine, the sleek and amber-eyed one from Devon, differs utterly from the large tabby belonging to my neighbour, or from the fleet, thin creatures that haunt the stables. What form of “sat”? Upright, crouched, curled? And what texture or colour has the mat? In each imagination the creature and its resting place must vary. What we call the same sentence is but a frame for a dozen distinct pictures. We repeat the words, but never the vision.

Suppose, then, we alter one term and say instead “The cat sat on the hat.” At once the mind leaps towards conjecture and alarm. Did the cat crush the hat? Whose hat? Was it silk, felt, or beaver? Was it ruined or merely disarranged? In attending to the new image, we import wholly new vocabulary—“crush,” “ruin,” “damage,” “offence.” Each new word demands further consent as to its meaning. Our attempt at clarification breeds its own obscurity, multiplying sense into nonsense by degrees.

It seems the more we enlarge a statement—the more precise we hope to be—the more terms we must invent for its explication, each carrying its own uncertainty. Meaning expands like a vine and wraps itself about

the structure of the sentence until the form is lost amid the foliage. Thus, the simplest proposition of grammar becomes a plaything for philosophers, and communication a perpetual negotiation rather than a meeting of minds.

Perhaps agreement in language arises only when we cease to question. Politeness relies on such tacit surrender: when one says “How do you do?” one neither expects nor desires an account of the body’s ailments, but only the token of civility. True comprehension would destroy the ease of society. Yet if we cannot secure understanding even in small things, what hope have we when discussing God, virtue, or government? We quarrel incessantly, not because we differ in substance, but because we assign diverse meanings to the same words, and pride forbids us to yield our private definitions.

In former days, scholars spoke confidently of universal reason; now I suspect universality itself may be a charming delusion. Perhaps every mind is a solitary architecture of signs—its windows similar in shape, but the view from each wholly distinct. When I say “cat,” you may nod in assent, yet the creature you conjure bears little resemblance to mine. We converse, then, as travellers exchanging sketches of a country neither has precisely seen.

As I write, a grey mist gathers beyond the lawn, and in it the gardeners move like shadows speaking their own mute dialect of gesture and action. I almost envy their immediacy: a spade turned, a nod of understanding—a language of needs and tasks, innocent of semantics. Words, by contrast, seem both our glory and our undoing. They permit reflection, yet by reflection divide what once was whole.

Still, I continue to speak, to write, to wrestle with expression as one tames an unruly horse—well aware it will never be fully mastered. Perhaps that is the fate of thought: to reach always outward through the porous veil of words, knowing that the shape of understanding shivers like the cat’s tail on the mat—no sooner observed than altered.