PART ONE

JOURNAL

Murmur

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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There is a picture book in the Royal Infirmary waiting room. I think it is an attempt to improve me, or to give the sickly reasons to get well (art, culture, all of it waiting to be appreciated!) should medicine struggle to oblige. It contains a reproduction of Poussin's *The Triumph of David*. I was struck by the painting, which I did not know. In particular I was struck by the fact that the young Israelite and the waxy outsized head of Goliath, the slain Philistine, wore similar expressions. They seemed sad, as if they had glimpsed, beyond the immediate joy and horror, echoes of the act in history – its wave-like propagation of revenge.

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A gardener, today, laying out the common beds for the council: 'A whole mob of crows died in the meadow a few years ago. They did autopsies, because it was such an unusual event. But they died of old age. They were about seventeen.' Christopher's age.

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That life has arisen on this planet might be regarded as a matter for amazement. That it should arise on many others would be, on the face of it, if true, even more amazing. The repeated escape from, as Schrödinger puts it, 'atomic chaos' would be not just one sense-defying statistical fluctuation but a whole series of them. It would be like throwing handfuls of sand into the wind and finding, when the grains are settled, tiny replicas of the Taj Mahal, St Paul's Cathedral and the temple complex of Angkor Wat upon the ground. It would be very lovely, but unlikely. Luckily for us, however,

the statistical system of the universe has about it a marvellous impurity, which is that it functions also as a dynamical system or mechanism for the maintenance and reproduction of order over long stretches of time. Or, to be disappointingly precise, the prolonged illusion of order, because the statistics of thermal disorder are all still there in the background and, like suspicious tax officers, they will get to us in the end. The art of living then, on this view, is simply that of defying them for as long as possible, until equilibrium, which isn't as nice as it sounds, is restored.

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The alarming truth is that you can't grasp your own condition, though you suspect that something is wrong. You see yourself on the edge of a black hole, or a bowl, or a cauldron, whereas, in reality, you have disappeared down inside it.

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You know your social life is in trouble when you spend the evening reading an article on puzzles called 'Recreational Topology'. I don't have any kind of social life. It's topologically invariant under many deformations, you might say, although probably only someone without a social life would bother to say that.

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The other part of my rehabilitation, or punishment, or both, consists of fortnightly meetings with a psychoanalyst, Dr Anthony Stallbrook. I have approached this with circumspection. I find, however, that it is not as I had been led to

expect. He is a most sympathetic, comfortably tiny person with fuzz around the ears and a pate that shines like a lamp in his study and lights the way to two armchairs. No couch. We chat. We go for walks and trips. We are not supposed to go for walks and trips, but then he does not believe in his assignment, that homosexuals require any rehabilitation, or that there is time to be lost where friendship is concerned. Neither does his wife. We are planning a trip to Brighton. Our sessions together founder somewhat on the reef of his presuppositions: I have searched my conscience for repressed feelings and find none. I loved Christopher and had fantasised about a future that involved us living and working together. He took me seriously. I am quite sure that I never fooled myself into believing that he felt intimately about me as I felt about him. His friendship would have been enough. My fantasies were outrageously Platonic, and I have never stopped loving him. At the same time, I am haunted by his presence, molecular, gaseous, call it what you will – and the nearness of his voice and person, on the lip of conscious experience, is a constant anxiety made worse by my own changes. He is as near to me as I am near to the person I used to be, and both persons are irretrievable.

Dr Stallbrook often asks me how I feel. I reply that I do not know. How *does* one feel? It is one of the imponderables. I am better equipped to say *what* it is that I feel, and that is mysterious enough. For I feel that I am a man stripped of manhood, a being but not a body. Like the Invisible Man, I put on clothes to give myself a stable form. I'm at some point of disclosure between the real and the abstract – changing and shifting, trying to stay close to the transformation, not to flee it. I have the conviction that I am now something

like x – a variable. We discuss dreams, and in the course of these discussions I have come to see dream figures as other sets of variables. How else should one account for the odd conviction we have in dreams that the strangers we encounter are 'really' people we know?

What gets us from one expression of the variable to another?

There is a leap from the inorganic to the organic. There is a leap from one valency to another, and there is a leap from one person's thought to the thought of others. The world is full of discrete motes, probabilistic states, and gaps. Only a wave can take us from one to the other; or a force or flow; or perhaps a field. When I look in the mirror, I think, thrice, 'Is it me? Is it not me? Is it not me, yet?'

Dr Stallbrook encourages me to write. It is like making a will, he says – eminently sensible. If you've signed your papers and made a will, you know there will be an end. You have already witnessed it, so to speak. And people who make this definite accommodation with their end, with the prospect of death – who get it in writing – live longer. He says this with a matter-of-factness I can't help liking.

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Julius and others belabour me with questions about thinking machines and the parallels between chains of neurons in the brain and the relationship of the controlling mechanism to output and feedback in digital computers. I want fair play for the computer, of course. I feel, as he does, that 'understanding' in a machine is a function of the relationship between its rules. Recursion may turn out to be reflection in both the optical and the philosophical senses of the word.

Who knows what machines may end up 'thinking'? But I am privately sceptical of too wide an application of the personifying tendency. One knows oneself to be aware and infers from others – from behaviour, yes, but also from the body or the instrument that produces the behaviour – that they are similarly cognisant. One can't go on from there to supposing that awareness itself is necessary, however. Hasn't it struck most of us at one time or another that much of life is a pointless algorithm, an evolutionary process without an interpreter. On a smaller scale, too, a process such as simple addition has human 'meaning' only because I am there to observe it and call it 'addition'. And yet it certainly happens. Perhaps the larger process, too, is unmeaningful. If life works, it works. The character of physical law as it extends to biological material is that it should underpin the way cells and systems operate, and that is all.

That sounds pleasingly final, but it won't do. I know that. Things don't always add up. I can tell you that it is asymmetrical motion at the molecular level that picks out an axis for patterned development in a sphere of cells – that turns a sphere into an embryo – but I cannot satisfy the person who goes on asking 'why?' That person is the halfwit in a public lecture. That person is a child. And that person is also me. The Church says: 'People come in search of meaning, and to have their fears and anxieties allayed.' But to think you can be finally satisfied on these points, or to imagine you can satisfy others, is the source of the misgiving.

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I have this strange idea. Christopher left school without saying goodbye. His parents came to pick him up and I saw

them get in the Daimler. I was in the upper gallery, working on some diagonals. I looked askance, through the window, and there they were, thanking the Headmaster, hurrying away. I heard no more from Christopher or his mother, with whom I imagined myself friendly, until the notice of his death. I had not known he was consumptive. He had cold hands.

This is the idea. We, Chris and I, were reprimanded for scrumping apples from the trees that overhung the chaplain's garden. They belonged to Fowle's fruiterers. We were punished and interviewed separately. I think he was told to avoid me. I think he was told no good could come of our friendship, because of what I am, or rather, because of what, then, it was suggested I would become. I am not effeminate, but I am mannered. I am a homosexual, and I suppose that much was clear to the masters. In particular, I think it was impressed on Chris that some polluting disaster would befall *me*, and if only he had asked 'why?', my future ghost might have told him.

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Dr Stallbrook makes many notes as we go along, talking and arguing, and it has crossed my mind that patients of different stripes must react differently to this. I confess I find it irritating. I do not like being 'marked', or having my papers tampered with editorially, or submitting to a 'clinical' opinion I am not in a position to check. (I was displeased when I found out that I had been circumcised.) And if his notes are, as he claims, 'for his eyes only', then they are unfalsifiable. They may well proceed from a psychoanalytic theory. But how is the theory being tested or controlled? How can

it be said to be scientific? He is unflappable, of course. It is not that kind of theory, he says; it is, rather, *theoria*, from the Greek, meaning 'contemplation'. The look of point-missingly clever satisfaction on his face! Anyway, he is not telling the truth. I am a criminal. He is writing reports and sending them off.

The whole premise is childish, like the schoolboy who covers his work with his elbow to prevent his neighbour cheating. I told him this.

'I'm really not trying to hide anything, Alec,' he laughed. 'I just don't think you'd benefit from reading my notes. My job is to help you *encounter yourself*.'

I replied, in a bit of a torrent: 'Balls. This is passing the buck. This is what my father saw in India all the time – Europeans waving their hands and saying, "But the unrest is *native* and has nothing to do with us." You are not an impartial observer, Dr Stallbrook. The observer is a participant, as the great revolution in quantum physics has taught us. Consider now that I am the set of notes that *you* wish to read. I might as well ask: how are you to benefit from reading me? Shall we condemn ourselves to solipsism? The two sides of an equation must meet if they are to balance. You are dodging the issue. What you want is for me not to press too deeply, not to ask for things you cannot give, not to question your authority. And that is unfair.'

'What do you mean?'

At this point, I lost my temper. 'The assumption of science is that things are discoverable. Things that belong in problems of logic that are not in principle resolvable belong in a separate category. Things that do not admit of rational argument in another – God, for instance. But things that are

just hidden, or powers that are reserved for no good reason because someone 'says so', are the work of the bloody devil! They are a cryptic burden to us all –'

I was half out of my chair, and sat back heavily, because I'd come upon one of my own restrictions and couldn't believe I'd hidden it so effectively from myself.

The Act constrains me, of course. Aspects of my working past are always to be concealed from Dr Stallbrook. With the result that I am confined to addressing my personal life – aspects of which are presumably concealed from me.

Noticing my discomfiture, Anthony asked me what I was thinking. He sounded very kind, and I wanted to equal him in cooperation. Whenever I have not been able to persuade someone, I have tried to cooperate. I take this view even in respect of my conviction. One should meet bad manners with good grace.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I respect a necessary authority. But I do not like dodges or masquerades. Puzzles, yes. Masquerades, no.'

'Is this a masquerade?'

'No.' And I was sullenly silent for a while, thinking distractedly and angrily that civilised England is a masquerade. The War Room is a masquerade when the real thing is far away. Psychoanalysts are doubtless persons of integrity, but persons of integrity may still be pawns. There is usually some rule governing our voluntary actions that we either do not know about or are unwilling to acknowledge – the motives of the companies that pay our salaries and ask us to do things, the real function of justice, and so on. 'No,' I continued, 'but this is nevertheless a *game* with prohibitions we are playing, and one in which you have the advantage.

Your opinion of me counts, whatever I say. If you were to decide that I constituted a danger to society, you could have me locked away in a mental institution. But I cannot affect what happens to you. And the further disadvantage to me is that there are things I simply cannot tell you, because I have given my word to others – others in authority – and even the confidences of our arrangement shall not tempt me, because a secret is a personal vow of custody. It cannot be handed over to someone else for safekeeping. And now you will think *I* am being unfair, and even obstructive.'

'No,' said Dr Stallbrook, carefully, 'that is not what I think.'

We brooded for a while, and the tension eased.

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Also: just because something is discoverable doesn't mean one has any idea of how the discovering is to be done. One experiments, and sometimes there is a breakthrough and sometimes one has to admit defeat. How is one consciously to encounter one's subconscious? The gap is unbridgeable, it seems to me.

Love is a gap. I used to look at Chris while we were tinkering with chemicals and I'd carry on a conversation, adjusting retorts, making notes, apologising. Thinking all the while: this must be possible; clearly it is, for others manage it. But how?

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Tolstoy's accounts of Borodino and Austerlitz show us what real war is like: no one knows what the orders are or who is winning. No one has any idea what to do. Soldiers are

permitted to kill each other and are maddened, sooner or later, by the realisation that someone else, somewhere relatively comfortable, thinks this is the right thing for them to do. And we are not so far from that kind of chaos in everyday life, really. I walk down the street towards the Infirmary, every Wednesday, and I go in and wait and sit down and everyone is quite polite, and I am played with by the law and turned into a sexless person. The most extraordinary thing is done behind a nice white screen. And the nurse who injects me does it with a good will, because she has been told that it is her job. She doubtless thinks of herself as a freely choosing agent. She likes to think she does her job well, but at the same time she is *just doing her job.* (One hears this a lot.) That means she does not take ultimate responsibility for her actions, because those kinds of decisions are taken, or absorbed, by more powerful persons, like Tolstoy's generals, who know what they are doing. She sees no contradiction between this and her own intuitive sense of agency.

She goes home to her parents' house and has her tea. They have put up some new frieze wallpaper with a ribbon of classical-looking dancing figures where a picture rail might have been. It looks pretty and I wonder how often the family has looked at the actual figures in the frieze, copied from vases in the British Museum by some impish and bored designer. The figures are a) playing music, b) killing their enemies, and c) engaged in exotic but mechanical sexual relations.

We agree not to look. It is a simple but profound contract of the collective subconscious with the truth. If you speak the truth, or do something which indicates how human beings function, regardless of the law, regardless of

moral superstition, then people will turn against you, and you must never underestimate how fearful and weak most people in a large body, like a government, or a university, or even an office, actually are. Once you have been isolated in this way, you can be dismissed.

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I wish people who believe in God could believe in him a little less fervently – could see him as a metaphor for the boundedness of our physical existences and the problem of the mental, which is physical too, but perhaps in a way we don't understand.

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'You're doing tremendously well!' or even 'You're looking well on it' means: 'Please don't tell me any more about your plight, but instead reassure me that I don't have to worry about this.' Similarly, hilariously, 'We know what it's like. We've just had the most awful trouble with . . .' means: 'We are not going to help you.'

But they are helping, my neighbours, and I am cruel. They want me to teach their son chess. He is a pleasant chap with no great aptitude (yet) for the game, or for calculation in general, and I suspect that he likes the barley water at the end of our lessons most of all. He stumbles over my name, and speaks inaudibly, which I find upsetting.

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Doctors can be terribly self-important without realising it because they get to point and diagnose, and if they're pointing at you then of course that means you're not pointing at

them. Pointers are an odd lot. They want the triumphant power of clarifying something, of accusation, but they're also jealously private. They don't want to be pointed out themselves: it's a sort of nightmare for them, which leads to them pointing at others more and more often, more and more vehemently. I tend to do it when I get cross. It's an extremely unappealing habit born of heaven knows what guilt and insecurity. But I don't do it so much now – now that I've been pointed out once and for all, as it were. Perhaps I've realised I just *don't* feel guilty of this so-called crime. The whole thing is . . . pointless. It rather frees one up.

Stallbrook is at least intelligent. The endocrinologist at the Infirmary told me, 'These are conservative measures. The hormone is effective rather than strong. There shouldn't be side effects.' It is effective, but in a way that doesn't have effects.

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I liked the Fun Fair and Festival Pleasure Gardens, but I love the old fairs more.

At the Festival there were approved attractions – the tree walk, the water chute, the grand vista, the Guinness Clock, and a marvellously eccentric children's railway, designed by the *Punch* cartoonist Mr Emett. This last innovation had a locomotive called Nellie, with an engine sandwiched between a pavilioned passenger car and, to the rear, a copper boiler surrounded by a wonky fence. Britain on the move! A weathervane sat on top of the boiler, and a whistle in the shape of a jug. Everything seemed thin and elegant, a series of wiry protrusions, like an undergraduate. The whistle itself adorned a chopped-off lamp post and a dovecote. It

presented an unconscious picture of bomb damage and higgledy-piggledy reconstruction.

Oh, but it was lifeless! In the Hall of Mirrors, for example, I noticed an absence of the laughter one encounters on the seasonal fairground or in Blackpool or Brighton, on the pier. Instead one had the sense that, in looking at themselves all bent out of shape, people were being reminded of what was not quite right about their day out as whole, which was that the jollity felt forced, and polished up, and that the element of lawlessness that is so necessary to a carnival was missing.

As it happened, just up the road, Brooker's fair had come to the common, as it does every year, and that was a proper raffish fair of the old type, with stalls and toffee apples, and fish for prizes, and overcoated old ladies in the payboxes of the dodgems (and the gallopers and the chairoplanes) keeping an eye on the hordes, and gaff lads riding the waltzers, and duckboards underfoot (the common has marshy spots), and caravans, and lights everywhere, and yes, the fighting booth, with a few rather tragical-looking curiosities no longer called freaks but 'Wonders of the World'. In fifty years' time, you will have my machine in a booth, of course; or better yet my test, and instead of the sign outside the booth saying 'Are you a Man or a Mouse?' it will say 'Are you a Man or a Machine?' (And the answer will be: both.)

It is an erotic place, the fair. Everything about it – the mushrooming appearance, the concentration of energy, the scapegrace hilarity, the ambush and occupation of common land, the figures moving in the trees after the covers go on and the lights are out – bespeaks the mortal. This is your chance, it says. Take it!

He was wearing a very threadbare black suit, with a grubby white shirt.

The girls, away from their concerned mothers, were hanging about the novelty rides with the flashier gaffers, the ones with studded belts and rings on their fingers and satin cuffs on their shirtsleeves – the ones with sideburns and cowboy swagger. They are not handsome, these lads, and they're filthy dirty from all the putting up of rides and maintenance, but their attraction – to the girls – is their daring, the way they leap about the tracks, hitching rides on cars and leaping off again, and of course the fact that they do not have to be introduced to anyone.

But I preferred Cyril, who was dressed, as I say, in a suit, who seemed shy, and said 'Thank you, sir' in a soft deep voice when I handed over my money. He didn't quite belong with the other gaffers, which meant he was a new hire and not formerly known to the Brookers. And he had a moment's uncertainty – I caught his eye – when he counted out the change and saw that I knew what he was doing.

The double spin – the spin within a spin – of the waltzers prompted me to think about the *n*-body problem and waves of chemical concentration in a ring of cells, so I was happy to pay for another ride. Well, that wasn't the only reason. This time he gave me the right change and a smile. I took a risk and said: 'I'd like to know how that is done.' 'How what is?' he replied, frowning, and moved on to the next car. But I waved when I got off and his grin was a flash of mixed emotions.

I gave him lunch, which he wolfed down, and we talked. I don't think I expected him to respond to my weekend offer. Asking for things entails a loss of esteem, but he didn't

absolutely say no and so I concluded he had been embarrassed rather than put off, and I went back a few days later and loitered.

Though these assignations do not last long, the moment invariably spreads out.

The first thing he did when we met in the trees, in a small bower of hawthorn, was to pick a spiny twig out of the way and thread it safely behind a larger branch moving in another direction. That meant he could then lay his head on my lapel and put his hands on my arms, as if he were bracing himself for something. The tender contract signed, we went about our business very efficiently – Cyril eagerly taking the woman's role, as men least willing to admit their taste mostly do – and the mood changed. The reward for competence is suspicion and, between men, a ruthless brio designed to break the bonds of troublesome affection. Luckily, I am not jealous. 'I want some more,' Cyril whispered to me. 'You can watch if you like.' So I did. He slipped from our shelter into the main clearing and soon found his way, turning jauntily as he walked – almost skipped – to another tree-fringed island where a group of men from the caravans took turns with him. One of them stuffed a handkerchief in his mouth. Cyril turned his head, all eyes, mouth filled up with dots, to look at me while this was going on, to see if I was still there, to see if I was shocked. I was fascinated, of course, and pleased he was enjoying himself, but concerned in a different way. His legs looked thin and white and unfinished with the trousers dropped about his shoes, like the bones of a more robust ancestor.

When the men were done, I went over and asked Cyril if he would like a bed for the night, and he was polite and

gentle again, and said yes, that would be lovely. We listened to the radio, as I have said. He told me several of the riding masters went with lads and that it was one of the perks of the life. He said that there is usually one who becomes the 'dolly tub', a term Cyril did not like, and that sometimes it was very good and others it was too rough and a worry. He would not admit to prostitution and so I made the mistake with the money, which is perhaps why he stole from me. I think being a gaff was a source of pride.

These are, or were, the contributing circumstances. I view them unsentimentally. It is interesting that I do not consider their rehearsal to be a serious kind of thought. Underneath them run echoes and rills of a different order, however, the inner murmur, and these I take to be true thinking, determinate but concealed.

In the middle of the night, with his back to me, and his skin warm, he explained how the short-changing or 'tapping' was, after all, supposed to be done.

'The rich flat' – flats or flatties are trade, the punters – 'the rich flat hands me the money, say a ten-bob note for a half-shilling ride, and I take it to Queenie in the paybox. There's no fooling Queenie, because she can tell who's on the ride, how many, how much should be coming in, so I can't diddle her.' He paused to cough, and I felt his ribs. 'Not so hard!' He settled his head back into the pillow. 'So I collect the change, florins, bobs and sixpences, and go back to the customer, and I count it out from my left hand to my right so he can see it's right: "Two, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, nine-and-six, and the ride makes ten." Now it's all in my right hand, in the palm, but as I tip the coins into the flat's hand, I squeeze my palm, like, to keep hold

of a few coins. The ride is running up by this point, so the customer doesn't notice what has happened.' He swallowed. 'Or he shouldn't. It takes a bit of practice. Takes a bit of nerve. I saw you and thought, this one won't shop me. Bit old for me, but not bad.' I could sense his eyes opening in the dark. 'And that's how you do it.'

'I know the weight of the alloy,' I said. 'Two florins and five shillings and sixpence should weigh approximately one and nine-tenths of an ounce.'

'You didn't have to look?'

I said that I liked to trust people, which I do. Lying there, I seemed to float outside my body and look down at us both. The objective viewpoint. I could see him laughing into the pillow, his eyes going right through the wall into the ivy and the street.