

## **The Wheel**

The wheel is an old and spoked wagon wheel. Set upright, just out of the vertical, it has been wrapped in several layers of blue-tinted polythene. Within layers of the polythene parts of cut-out words are discernible, but rarely a whole word; and all of the part-words within only two of the wheel's quadrants.

These - *fa, ure, pa, car* and *inty* - are the word ends and beginnings that are decipherable in the uppermost quadrant.

In its opposite, the lowest quadrant, these word parts are visible - *ete, elves, cert, stic* and *cove*.

My own supposition, based on current sayings and preoccupations, is that the part-words put together the upper quadrant will say - *Certainty is our one faith* and *The past carries us into the future*.

I'm more confident of the lower quadrant, that put together the pieces and their obscured parts will say, *Uncertain we consider only ourselves, cover the land in concrete and the seas in plastic*.

This is an outdoors installation, the slope of the wheel being set under a truncated drainpipe. During, or for a period after rain, water dribbles down over the polythene, ripples further obscuring the words already partial. Drips from the polythene enter a cream enamel bucket, which regularly overflows. Clearly visible and printed in black on the bottom of the bucket is the one word, **LOSS**.

**The soundscape** has a by-the-yard rhythm section of snare drum, electric piano, bass and pan-pipes; with the two words *fake* and *placebo* being repeated at seeming random, sometimes one word on its own, although more often at a one breath run - *fake fake fake... placebo placebo...* Which can at times segue, the two words distorted and slurred together, into alternative pairings - *fakeplacebo, placebofake*.

And then... One's own *fake placebo* is saying something other, is where thought has gone and internally carries on growing the contradictory concept. More of one's own words get dotted and slotted between and about the snare drum, piano, bass and pan-pipes, clothing and enveloping the rough idea within spongy flesh; until all without has become background mush.

### **fake placebo**

every note  
of every  
musical  
instrument  
aspires to  
the singular  
clarity  
of a bell

## **In the Gallery Canteen**

In the gallery canteen, carrying my tray, I manoeuvre  
between chairs, seeking a table where  
I can sit with my back to the words.

Words here run in a frieze around the walls  
and have been etched into a frosted strip  
across the canteen windows. One set  
of wall words is a long quote from a Laureate,  
the other single words and part phrases  
the result of a primary school 'poetry project'.

I won't repeat any of the words on this page.  
Nouns and adjectives have been chosen because  
they supposedly describe where they are,  
those on the glass - depending on the season - what's beyond.  
Having been read so often they possess now  
only the capacity, not to inspire, but to irritate.

Whenever I enter the gallery I have to look to the right  
to avoid more 'project' words that have been carved into  
a block of stone set by the doors. But one particular word,  
unavoidable because inlaid into the floor beside the stack of trays, subconsciously read again  
and again, has come to seem  
the tritest, the most excruciating word in current usage.

## Wheels Within Wheels:

examples of juxtaposition & proximity

**Dear** There is a fashion for sampling single words **I** from various texts and redisplaying them in other **hardest** settings, either singly on otherwise blank pages **next**, or in condensed combinations taken from the **me** same text; or even - as here - placed within other **phone** and often unrelated texts. The text I have chosen to **stay** sample is a letter of abandonment, a *Dear John*. **touch** Taking the 1st word from the 1st line of the **come** letter, the 2nd word from the 2nd line, 3rd from **despite** the 3rd, *et cetera* - unless the word so alighted upon **hourly** is an article **need** or otherwise link word, in which case the next **despite** word has been chosen. When the end of a line **year** has been reached I have started again with the 1st **true** word from **faithful** the line below, continuing in more or less zig-zag **warmth** fashion down through the letter. All of those **bear** sampled words have been redisplayed here in **good** bold.

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**Dear** John,

When **I** begin by saying that, in my whole life, this has been the **hardest** letter that I've had to write, you have to know what's coming **next**. So all that remains is for me to explain my decision. Let **me** say that I've been truly grateful for all your letters, **phone** calls, emails & texts, for every effort you have made to **stay** in touch, and that includes the flowers and presents. But it is **touch** that I have **come** to realise is what I miss and need above all else. Because, **despite** the letters, despite the long phone calls, even the **hourly** texts some days, I really do need to feel some warmth. I **need** to hold and to be held. So when you chose - and **despite** the pressures you cite you did choose - to stay away another **year**, I decided - and I know that I swore to be faithful & **true** to you, but by choosing to stay away are you being **faithful** & true to me? - that I have to find some human **warmth**. I cannot **bear** even the thought of another year enclosed by emptiness. Take **good** care of yourself.

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**Oh the irony**

Pop Art's **POW!**  
**Wham!**  
**Does he love me?**

Let us pretend  
that we are coloured newsprint  
and of the common people

show us metres wide  
in hushed galleries  
and excitable auction rooms

Oh  
the irony

## **Hello Poets**

At the centre of every human being  
                                          is an absurdity.  
Some people are very obviously silly,  
wear their insides  
                                          on their outsides,  
get called fools, or fanatics.

Others we believe to be honest, to be  
self-depreciatingly realistic.  
Until we come upon that thing,  
                                          that one thing  
that they hold sacred  
the thing that is not to be questioned,  
                                          not to be mocked,  
                                          not to be derided;  
the one thing that adds them  
to the panoply of the ridiculous.  
Hello poets.

## Writer

I can see into your soul  
and down all the tunnels of your being:  
                    expect no respect from me.

Your talent? That  
which comes easy to you  
you do not trust;  
and those who praise you  
for such facile accomplishments  
you think fools, and yourself false.  
Yet, unhappy breaking new ground  
                    - possibly new ground -  
you seek always precedents  
to justify what you do, depend on  
cued responses. Yours becomes  
the false spontaneity of a performer  
                    calling out his yee-haws;  
and your self-vaunted earthiness  
is simply an old man being noisy  
and coarse at his ablutions.

                    What, defiantly,  
you call faith in yourself  
                    I label simple conceit.  
Self-flagellating (as here) you descry  
always the mote in your own eye, while,  
with a fake like-me compassion,  
you deny the beam in others.

                    Most of your latter  
creative urges you have lavished  
upon yourself instead of on  
your works of art.  
So have you become

                    The Writer.  
(On realisation of this  
all that's left is nostalgia.)

## **The half-smile that his listeners wear**

He first tells us that he is at home  
in himself  
(full of himself? empty of thought?)  
goes on to relate  
slowly  
the 'interior experiences  
of his ineffable self'

Eager for praise  
he says he wants us to eat his words  
flavoured with garlic  
scorched by lightning  
spiced with cardamon

His obvious vanity  
(hat-wearing indoors:  
romantic heroes do not lose their hair)  
is no threat to us

The danger of extinction is elsewhere  
that huge sump of the intellectually challenged  
and the spiritually corrupt  
ready always to drag us back into barbarity

## As Here

Contemptuous of all engineered excitements my life experience is no stream of consciousness, more an enclosing mist. But how to convey that state of partial awareness, voices off not quite heard? I want to keep on saying, "I don't know," than to pretend that I do. How can I know? There's too much of it. Just too much. All that I truly know is negatives. I don't feel quite like that, don't wholly agree with...

When you live among junkies and alkie and you want only to get on with your own life, while all around you are trying to get rid of theirs, each one of those chemically-controlled human forms glimpsed out the window, passed in the street, provokes a dismissive grunt...

As to beauty. Beauty? We recognise something from somewhere unremembered — a cloud shape? a sunset? — and we exclaim that it is beautiful. But in truth the sunset, the cloud, hasn't moved us, aside from to speak, it is only something we have recognised from a painting, or a photograph, which just by its having been put up on a wall, or included in a magazine, was saying that it was worth looking at...

Here then is the shallow truth of me; and shallow though it may be, no matter how often I say it, rephrase it, as soon as it is in words it too becomes false, becomes artificial. Same for all our limited capacity for absorbing experience: science and religion go seeking, in the step-by-step logic of madness, contemporary explanations for both new and ancient phenomena. While most new art now defeats its purpose in drawing attention only to itself. As here.

**Polemic** — in the shape of a poem  
because we have been conditioned by poetry  
to treasure the English countryside  
— poetry being a weapon of rebellion  
and the countryside having always  
been under threat from those  
who claim to own it.  
Been etched upon our collective psyche  
therefore  
appealing images of gnarled trees  
standing anciently alone  
in dappled pastures; and conjunctions  
of ragged hedgerows, cross-hatchings  
of fields...  
all made icons.  
But  
when you come to look at what  
you have been trained to love  
— shape of woman, lie of land  
and you know the one is  
silicon synthetic, at best cosmetic,  
and the other poison-sprayed, then  
pleasure dies in the eyes.

Beside glowing upland lakes of yellow rape  
fields of blue flax reflect squares  
of powdered sky; and cloud shadows  
go flying on over sterile oblongs  
of young corn and darken  
the black glistening field spawn of  
plastic-wrapped silage.  
Love this.

## **If Hungry for Legends, or Tourists, Invent....**

(inspired by the tale of the Black Angel, Illinois)

Role of midwives fell  
traditionally to witches,  
attracted superstitions...

Truth is (could be)  
every birth attended  
mocked her grief.  
How, though, to be bitter  
at the undeserving alive,  
at the slippery newborn,  
at the rawly unformed.

She placed her energies instead  
in the commission of statuary,  
lost herself in wrangles  
of concept versus execution.

And still her son is dead,  
still her son is dead.

This is mortality, angel.  
Study it.

## **Curtains of red stone**

hang above the steeped city.

Flat-footed swans

take their time

crossing the road.

A woman in a long black coat

walking as slowly

looks down at her feet

and into her concerns.

In the botanic gardens

palms and primordial ferns

have been wrapped around

with vertical swathes of straw

and parcelled in bin liners

becoming again winter's corner

groupings of headless torsos.

A couple in clean clothes,

slim and tanned,

swiftly carry their sneers

around the small gallery,

a piece of the city's rubbish

stuck to the man's shoe.

## **seen into**

horizons carved from sky  
bone and stone stand alone

from a closed-in and  
leaf-wet garden

inverted drops  
shine a hole

through Battersea Park  
and New York

& Barbara Hepworth  
continues to speak

in a language  
beyond words

beyond culture  
strikes some

primordial chord  
eyes well &

the throat  
constricts

with a glad recognition  
that rock will outlast us?

& finding oneself  
content that is so