

Early in lockdown, a chain letter invited me to pass on some poem or meditation that I find heartening in these bewildering times. I plumped for Coleridge's poem *This Lime-tree Bower My Prison*, which you can read by clicking [here](#). The situation was that his lifelong friend Charles Lamb, as well as William Wordsworth and sister Dorothy, were staying with Coleridge and his wife Sara at their cottage in Nether Stowey, Somerset. Then, as he says in a letter, "dear Sara accidentally emptied a skillet of boiling milk on my foot." (It is nice that he says accidentally.) This prevented Coleridge from going on long walks with his friends and so one evening, when they had left him for a few hours, he "composed the following lines in the garden-bower." Written in 1797, *This Lime-tree Bower* is to this day a beautiful instance of poetry, nature and human sympathy overcoming pain and confinement.

I know very well that I'm lucky not to have anything worse to complain of at the moment; but here is my own poem about the virus lockdown preventing a customary walk with friends.

FROM A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR

Round about now, the clocks change.
Carried over in our diary from year to year,
Your note reminds me it is now
That uncontrived woods on the cliff

Over Roche Abbey in Maltby Dyke
Are sprinkled with wild daffodils
Escaping when Capability Brown
Brought to order the rest of the ruin.

They are to me as deprivation was
To Cistercian monks who sang.
We'll not be going to look for them;
We have declared it Spring and stuffed

The chimney with a bag of crumpled
News as though a time capsule
Because we'll be having no guests.
Soon enough, clocks will change back.

Provided, as I say, that one is not afflicted by the more grievous problems just now, it is interesting to see what kind of art and writing people are coming up with despite, or even because of, all the worry and constraint. Mighty precedents come to mind: Langland, Nashe, Dekker, Defoe... even [Shakespeare](#) writing in quarantine. Simon Armitage got in early with his [take](#) on our local epic of lockdown, the heroic ‘plague village’ of Eyam. Carol Ann Duffy has set up a [webpage](#) called *WRITE where we are NOW*, to “provide an opportunity for reflection and inspiration in these challenging times, as well as creating a living record of what is happening as seen through our poets’ eyes and ears, in their gardens or garrets” [reference](#). Here is one of my poems for the *WRITE where we are NOW* project:

IN TIMES OF PESTILENCE

When the Black Death came scything through Florence
Boccaccio had his ten narrators
In islands of villas whiling away
The greatest ever boxed set of stories.

When the same angel winged into Cambridge
Newton holed up in Woolsthorpe manor house
And spent the time under an apple tree
Forming his universal idea.

It is a plague year but nothing occurs
To me. The buses go lit but empty
While “cattle come home to their barns at night
without keepers, as though rational beings.”

The quotation at the end is a haunting image from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. I’m not sure I’d have invoked Newton had I known that his prescription for plague was toad’s vomit: see learned [reference](#).

Of course amongst our relative deprivations are all the Sheffield seasonal events – the snooker, the Music In The Round, the exhibitions – for which I see the tickets are still pinned up in our kitchen. In particular, I was to have read at the cancelled Broomhill Festival, and so I realise even more than usual how helpful it is to try out new work with that audience year after year. For the rest of this piece, I’d like to share three poems written under lockdown that may compensate a little for our art galleries being shut.

One of the most popular paintings in the Graves Gallery is a landscape by the nineteenth-century French painter Jules Breton, which you can see on the invaluable ArtUK [website](#).

THE PATH TO COURRIÈRES

An 1854 oil sketch by Jules Breton.

The gleaner in her shawl, the rough linen sling
at her waist, figured against the evening sky
as she returns to her village, is absent here;
it is the painter himself who trudges home
in the receiving dusk, his harvest done.

The place of the woman is held by the tallest elm,
its crown drawing a scatter of silent rooks.
The path leads the eye peacefully round
to the low houses, brick-red and white,
and to the church tower and beyond.

No hint of surveyors, trial drillings already
there at the time as exploitable veins
were opened and spoil heaps began. Not yet
the coaldust explosion, the Kameradschaft,
the burning church, the massacred hostages.

Time has scumbled all that history.
I come into the gallery out of the Sheffield rain,
put down my shopping bag next to a bucket
catching the skylight drips. There it is,
its frame a little brighter gold than the corn.

I let my eye be led again by the curve
of the path to Courrières, past the verge
of poppies, the everlasting elm, the wheat
as permanent as Ruth. The rooks, chipped
into the paint, may never settle again.

When that poem is printed, it will have a footnote explaining the historical references which I condense in the middle stanza:

The first coal shaft at Courrières was sunk in 1849; the mining concession was granted in 1852. Pabst's classic film Kameradschaft (1931) depicted German miners coming across to help in the 1906 disaster which killed 1,099 of their French comrades. (Breton himself was to die four months later.) On 28th May 1940, an invading SS division set fire to the village and shot 45 hostages.

Breton's little landscape seems to be an oil sketch towards one of his larger paintings that share a similar background; for example *The Friends* (1873) and similar works. I prefer our modest picture to these large worked-up paintings with their conventionally sentimental figures who seem to be studio models. Think of Millet's *Gleaners* (1857), painfully bent under the horizon of their labour. Even the gleaner of Millet's whose face is partly revealed is straightening up a bit only to relieve her back; the exact line of that back is physically eloquent. By contrast, Breton's delightful conversing young women in *The Friends*, although painted in just as 'realistic' a manner, are shown off in their facial and bodily postures against the sky. Their three forms are classically varied and interwoven, owing more to the academic indoor model of the Three Graces than to any labourers who might be observed in the fields. The atmosphere of *The Friends* was typical of Breton's appeal, despite the uglier conditions and changes taking place at the time. The Graves' landscape is to me the more authentic Breton, showing the way to a certain view of his village as though in implicit protest against the industrialisation which was then becoming so real.

Another impressive painting in the Graves collection is more obviously harsh in manner and content. You can see Stephen Farthing's *A Room at Saumur* (1990) [here](#).

'A ROOM IN SAUMUR'

...le théâtre de la vie familiale...
Honoré de Balzac, *Eugénie Grandet*.

Knowing as we are about 'the picture plane,'
we hang up our doubts at the door and,
given the title and signs of a room,
try to enter, seek presence or evidence
of actors to live and move in such a space.

We clamber across the fictitious wall
– though it is too literally dissolved,
leaving sightlines obstructed
by fireback and painting that might
be clarified from this illusion did it not

have deeds to conceal. Foreground clutter
prompts, like forensic tape across a scene,
mingled alarm and complicity
as we feel so bodily enclosed
by what we know delusional.

By now, the story has us by the hair.
What passion held this late household
that empathy should draw us in,
not quite living here but nonetheless
playing along with its emotional tone

which is a cruel, metallic grey?
Why be appalled at the chair punish
-ingly screwed to the floor, forced to stare
at a window form blocked with blank light,
not sky but a screen that is switched on,

or the stagey curtain shapes, all their crimson
of silk of Tours leached away only to steep
to the canvas edges of apron and arch,
into smears we could use to frame an actor,
in view on the frontispiece we tried to ignore?

Like Farthing's earlier [painting](#) *Mrs G's Chair* (1982), *A Room in Saumur* is named after the parlour in Honoré de Balzac's great novel *Eugénie Grandet* (1833) which is set in the town of Saumur on the Loire near Tours.

A Room at Saumur was commissioned by the Graves for its 1991 exhibition *The Absent Presence* which, as Anne Goodchild made clear in her catalogue, took its cue from the gallery's [painting](#) by Gwen John of an expressively empty room. (For a little more on evocative absence in Gwen John, see the notes [here](#) and [here](#).)

John's and Farthing's paintings each show a stage without actors, and the intense (though very different) emotion in each case is excited by our speculation as to whom exactly is missing. In Farthing's work, however, the clues are not as

literal as they may seem. The implied story seems to me both enigmatic and menacing, in a way that is not fully accounted for by descriptions in Balzac's novel. Some of the Grandet furniture is there, to be sure; but the cruel avarice in the book is represented only metaphorically. For instance the chair by the window, set up on its blocks so that Madame Grandet could watch passers-by, is certainly represented in the painting, but there it looks more like a dentist's apparatus, or even a torturer's. It is as though the painter of this bleak grisaille has developed a visual metaphor from one of Balzac's translators: that for Eugénie money and self-interest were destined "to take the place of all warmth and colour in her life." (Marion Ayton Crawford, 'Introduction' to the 1955 Penguin *Eugénie Grandet*, page 13.) To put it another way; Eugénie is herself destined to sit in her mother's appalling chair.

My third lockdown poem about a painting reflects upon an intellectual yet intimate [portrait](#) in our nearby Derby Art Gallery.

AN INQUIRY INTO THE PORTRAIT OF JOHN WHITEHURST
BY JOSEPH WRIGHT OF DERBY

In memory of Mark Roberts, Conservator.

He is discovered in his study at night.
His astute, unflattered profile,
the hair thinned through tracts of time,
looks up slightly, as though to weigh
an idea that's just entered his head,
two other themes being lit: his work
overflowing the writing slope and,
through the window of his Grand Tour,
a distantly smouldering Vesuvius –
one of Wright's tenebrous Italian views.
Otherwise, timeless abstract night.

The tableau was easily read
by the worthies of Derby. It displays
a finding by their ingenious friend
who by dint of diligent reason
adds to the sum of useful knowledge.
The paint renders, almost to touch,
not only his gently capable face
but his thought: the crucial diagram
of local strata known to owners of mines
which they possess in copperplate, folded
into their fifteen-shilling quartos of

AN
INQUIRY
INTO THE
ORIGINAL STATE AND FORMATION
OF THE
EARTH;
DEDUCED FROM FACTS
AND THE LAWS OF NATURE.

At last! a product from all those years
of listening to him at the table, his face
in candlelight, the clock of his own
making on the mantelpiece as he
sorted and measured his day
-by-day observations in Matlock;
Here at last every wheel is in gear
and this the great connection he drew.

He is discovered in deep shadow,
with not even a clock to suggest
the slightest sound, for this
is the primal scene, the fertile night
bringing the unforeseen into birth.
The paper, the volcano and the man
are placed as in a waking dream,
all else in suspense. And, for a study,
no book is visible to show
the natural philosopher the way,
or the world how it comes to be as it is.

But, if this is illumination,
there is no saint or poet's eye in fine
frenzy rolling to inspiring source.
He is alert but level. He looks up
slightly from his work, to consider
a thought in distance out of the frame.
Oh, I see! It's exactly the way a painter
glances up to check his subject.
Wright, in depicting his friend,
depicts him as a brother artist
as he brushes that thinning hair.

In the very instant of insight,
the painter compacts his own volcano
with his friend's precise drawing
of a section of local habitat
prepared for the engraver's burin.
It is a painting about the moment
of thought, about art, about science,
and it paints about friendship.
It is a painting about the stubborn
intensity of loving attention
that may elicit concept from dark.

He is discovered in his study like Faust
in Goethe's Rembrandt frontispiece,
riddling forbidden mines of lore,
the toadstone nodules and the rifts
loaded with ore that conjure
rules of stratigraphy, vulcanism,
the subterranean fire, the inferno
indifferent to us as the planet revolves
within its clockwork orrery.
His book will clarify creation, the point
of his pencil turned to his own breast.

I dedicate this poem to the memory of a friend who worked on the conservation of several of Wright's paintings in the Derby Gallery. The sensitive work of [conservation](#) is of special value with Wright's effects of light.

It is probable that Whitehurst was also the model for the astronomer who demonstrates an Orrery in Wright's famous [painting](#) which is also in Derby (the companion to his National Gallery [picture](#) of the Air Pump).

The muted details of the Whitehurst portrait do not reproduce very sharply, but in the original it is clear that Whitehurst is working on a diagram, a section of geological strata suggesting that what local miners knew as 'toadstone' was by origin volcanic. Though it is illegible in any reproduction I have seen, there is writing along the edge of the paper which confirms that this was the crucial diagram of Matlock Tor that was engraved for his acclaimed [book](#) on the formation of the Earth.

There is a fascinating [article](#), the art historian Andrew Graciano's "*The Book of Nature is Open to all Men*": *Geology, Mining, and History in Joseph Wright's Derbyshire Landscapes* (2005). Thanks to COVID-19, this can at the moment be accessed for free; so I'll just say that it shows how "Whitehurst's geological

investigations fundamentally shaped Wright's way of seeing the landscapes he depicted. Wright's livelihood was also rooted in the Earth on a different level, his patronage often tied... to the wealth that came from its mineral yields." (*Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol 14; 4 – 2005.)

Whitehurst's discoveries are still respected in the history of geology (Trevor D. Ford, 'The Geology of the Matlock Mines: A Review,' in *Mining History* Vol 14; 6 – 2001). At the time, in his questions and observations as to how the Earth had been formed, he was daring to trespass on scriptural knowledge; so at the end of my poem I connect the revelation in his study at night to that of Faust himself. Rembrandt's wonderful [etching](#) was copied for the [frontispiece](#) of Goethe's 1790 *Faust*.

Should we not be alarmed at this week's [survey](#) for the Office for National Statistics about issues affecting our well-being under lockdown? After very natural worry about the future (63% of us) and stress or anxiety (56%), no less than 49% say they are "feeling bored." What kind of a culture is it where people can't think of anything to interest them if they can't get to the shops or to work? It is to be hoped that much of the live-streaming, virtual tours and so forth that we are being given at the moment will still be available to us in the future; they are, amongst other things, a corrective to London-centredness. But I have two cautions. One is that although the arts can be solace, even escape, they can also help us face situations and think critically. The other is that there really can be no substitute for live performance and the painting in its oil.