

‘The House Overlooks You’: Tradition and Genre in Two Poems By Peter Didsbury

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1

Critics have generally agreed in describing Peter Didsbury as a postmodernist poet, while also noting how his interest in history and his professional work as an archaeologist inform the poems (Osborne 7–41; Kennedy 79–109; Gregson 222–225; Barry 107–117; O’Brien 142; Jenkins 128). I don’t intend to reopen here the question of Didsbury’s postmodernity, which, notwithstanding his own dislike of being so called (Didsbury *Don’t Ask Me* 51; also qtd. in *Wheatley* 50–51), seems to me fairly settled. But although Didsbury’s antiquarian bent in both language and subject matter might plausibly be theorised as postmodernist, such a categorisation does not quite account for the poetry’s ambiguous relationship with tradition and history. In this essay I offer detailed readings of two poems whose shared central theme—the house as historical item and metaphor for cultural tradition—and whose similar approach to metre and other technical devices, demonstrate some of the complexities of that relationship. The later of the poems, ‘Glimpsed Among Trees’ (Didsbury 134–6; first published in collected form 1987), is more complicated both technically and conceptually than the earlier, ‘Back of the House’ (Didsbury 175; first published in collected form 1982). But rather than suggesting that Didsbury developed into a more complicated writer over time, I would argue that this difference is due to the poems’ participation in different genres. Although both poems are postmodernist in their continual shifting of perception and disruption of narrative, ‘Back of the House’ plays with the relatively static artifice of pastoral, whereas ‘Glimpsed Among Trees’ indulges a much more fluid and unsettling reinterpretation of the Gothic. Yet both show a poet with productively ambivalent relationships to genre, form and cultural tradition.

2

'Back of the House' approaches its pastoral materials quite openly, not only by its garden imagery and by allusion but also by direct references to pastoral writers. It starts with the premise, 'Sick of England, but happy in your garden', before going on to demonstrate the ways in which 'England' and 'your garden' are implicated in each other, qualifying the claims not only of being happy in the garden but also of being sick of England. At first sight the poem seems to lack conventional formal features, other than lineation. There are no stanza breaks; the lines differ in length; there is no strict metre; and rhyme, if present, is neither full nor regular. Yet to call the poem free verse or, worse, prosaic, would be misleading. It does not lack formal features, but uses them intermittently and irregularly throughout the poem to create a style which wavers continually between prose and poetry, deadpan and musical. Repetition (England/English, garden, grins), half-rhyme (green/vines/grins/swing, dispenses/licences, afternoon/prone) and alliteration (looks/like/Language, boulevards/bombs) and the poem's use of metre make it more than merely prosaic. John Osborne describes Didsbury poems which are 'written in prose [or] in free verse (often with a perfect quatrain or pentameter tucked snugly amidst the irregularities); and others again in alloys of the two' (7). Here, at least, the result of the formal play is a free verse which veers between the prosaic and the strictly metrical, as well as generating in isolation the kind of downbeat phonological effect typically associated with free verse.

Didsbury's allusive approach to metre leads to the sort of effect that Douglas Houston notes in 'A Winter's Fancy', 'the musical fourfold repetition of anapest/iamb... a burst of bright rhythm as if soul clapped its hands and sung against the advice of circumstances' (45). When sustained throughout a poem the effect can vary considerably. The most striking example is the recent poem 'Braxy-Hams' (Didsbury Metre 40), a rhymeless ballad in which the metre continually invokes a poetic tradition which the lack of rhyme refuses; the effect is strangely powerful, as if the speaking voice were being liberated both from and by the formal constraints of tradition. In 'Back of the House' the use of metre is quieter. The lines have an underlying iambic rhythm, but the number of stressed and unstressed syllables, and their patterning within the line, all vary. Around half the lines contain five stresses; the rest contain four

or six; and the lines differ in length from eight to fourteen syllables. There is one line of strict iambic tetrameter and three of iambic pentameter. The metre becomes stricter and looser from line to line:

A FAN /of GREEN /depENDS /from TWIGS /like VINES
but the PUNK/ah WALLah /has GONE /to STAND
in the SHADE, /where you CAN/not PICK /him OUT,
and GRINS /at the PRINT /he LEFT/ beHIND,
which MOVES /its ARM /in AIR, /and GRINS /at HIM.

The effect is to accentuate the conversational tone of the metre, reducing its conspicuousness as poetry while retaining some measure of its music and elegance. Significantly, the last line of the poem is one of the three lines of strict iambic pentameter, and follows a relatively stable set of three lines of five stresses and ten syllables, helping to bring the poem to a measured and lyrical conclusion:

I watch us still examining
the blasted elm, that rocks to your fingers
and threatens to fall. It would lie across
half the garden. I estimate its height
and step that far away, before I go.

The joke is that this ‘estimating’ takes place in a scene whose scale and contents are constantly changing. The notion of fragile perception is central to the poem’s interrogation of its subject, the garden, on the one hand, and its genre, a highly artificial pastoral, on the other. The mood is ushered in by the opening in which the addressee may or may not be dropping off to sleep, so that the whole pastoral meditation takes on a dreamlike quality:

Sick of England, but happy in your garden
this hot afternoon, your English garden,
where everything looks like something else
and Language, fat and prone beneath her fountain,
idly dispenses curling parchment notes,
her coveted, worthless, licences to imitate.

The nod here to Andrew Marvell's 'The Garden', 'annihilating all that's made/to a green thought in a green shade', is followed up some lines later by the punkah wallah's 'fan of green' and eventually by 'A pile of brushwood mak[ing] fragrant promises/to Andrew Marvell'. Note how Didsbury's poem, like Marvell's country house poems, takes the real house of a friend as its subject (Wheatley 46); and that Didsbury has said that 'I share [with Marvell] the belief that "the garden" is a very proper place for the human being to inhabit, a boundary location between culture and nature, the wild and the sown' (quod. in Wheatley 46). But this is 'a darker place than Marvell's garden' (ibid.)—indeed, Didsbury notes that the naming of Marvell takes place 'in relation to public burning, an attendant possibility in his day' (ibid.), and that '[i]n this poem, [the garden is] an enclosed place where I can safely indulge in some indolent imaginative speculations about Englishness and then step away from them' (ibid.).

The generic allusions to Marvell and others ('That large bird was running away/from a poem by Keats'), pushed so far to the forefront that they become absurd, deliberately point out the poem's artificiality and immersion in pastoral convention. The imperial subtext of 'punkah wallah' who 'has gone to stand/in the shade, where you cannot pick him out' (by implication because of the colour of his skin), bolstered by the reference to 'Siam' (not Thailand) and the vague 'or somewhere they posture with sticks and bits of string', is one of the things that makes Didsbury's garden 'darker', aware of pastoral's political implications and the less than idyllic history that lies behind the English garden. Another, not easily discernible in the text itself, is the 'awareness of the relatively recent massive violence of the 1943 blitz' (Didsbury quod. in Wheatley Interview 46).

The dream-like mutations begin with the punkah wallah, who, like the Cheshire Cat, 'grins at the print he left behind,/which moves its arm in air, and grins at him'. ('Print' continues the photography theme—another form of mimesis—established in lines 7 and 8.) They continue with the injunction to 'Impersonate a dancer' in line 15, where the poem's self-conscious artifice undermines its own claim to depict a reality (how can the addressee be asked to collaborate in counterfeiting their own garden?). This claim is strained further by the appearances of Keats and Marvell, and then the claim that 'Light, and shade, are the lustrations of trompe l'oeil';

by which point a nice deliberation between possible meanings in the manner of Empson's analysis of Marvell—'light and shade, and hence reality generally, are really illusory'; or 'the light and shade which the poem artificially depicts appear real for characters in the poem'; or 'our perception of reality, e.g. of an English garden, is artificially mediated'—seems both desirable and superfluous.

The poem escalates its discussion of artifice in this way not merely in order to debunk pastoral conventions. On the contrary, Didsbury's destabilisation of the genre paradoxically serves to militate against a charge of artificiality. By insisting on the confused relationships between reality, artifice and representation, the poem is able to generate a sense of something approximating those relationships, allowing us a glimpse of reality as it does so. (The title of 'Glimpsed Through Trees', whose procedure is as we shall see broadly similar, is suggestive.) In the case of 'Back of the House', following the 'trompe l'oeil' line the poem steps back from the brink. The dreamlike changes of perception continue, but are applied now in a quite intelligible way to describe the difference between adult and childhood consciousness:

and the three bleached poles that limit the brassica
make a hitching rail for goblin cavalry
in the childhood garden that continued to grow
commensurate with our stature. 'How far we used
to travel in only three paces,' you say
as we take an unhurried dozen to the gate.

In this dreamlike state, all perceptions are levelled to the same provisional and subjective status; and this allows the speaker both to observe his own commitments to the 'English garden' dispassionately and to accept them as part of his identity:

When I walk off down the hot brick lane
I know I leave myself behind
in the coloured window, in the Byzantine
back of the house.

The speaker's attitude to the garden qua English idyll is similarly ambivalent: he 'walks off', but 'leave[s] [him]self behind'. There is a sense of lyrical conclusion but no neat resolution of tensions. The

menace of the dead or dying elm ‘that rocks to your fingers/and threatens to fall’ and the speaker’s caution in ‘step[ping] away’ from where it will fall might serve partly as a repudiation of the garden, England, and tradition—but, like everything else in the poem, an untrustworthy, oblique and artificial one. The play on the word ‘house’ to mean, among other things, ‘dynasty’, suggests a historical ending (‘back of the house’); and the reference to Byzantium is also fortuitous. The ‘Byzantine/back of the house’ evokes the jutting outhouses and chimney-breasts, the elaborate and asymmetrical brickwork at the back of a grand, Victorian Hull terrace; and it also historicises the building as belonging to a remote period of high empire. An equivalence between the British and Roman Empires and the periods of their decline is also suggested elsewhere in Didsbury’s work (66, 72, 212).

3

‘Glimpsed Among Trees’ deals with its materials through the lens of a different genre from ‘Back of the House’, not pastoral but Gothic. As a result, both the central conceit of the physical house used to stand for tradition, and the teasing approximation of metre, are made more complex by the distorting prism of the Gothic; both are shifting and unstable.

The poem’s ninety-six lines vary in length from five syllables to a monstrous nineteen. The shortest is the first, beginning the poem with a metrically irregular cluster of stressed syllables which is like a clearing of the throat before the rhythmical fireworks to come: ‘The house comes on line’. The longest marries form to content in a way typically postmodernist if not necessarily typical of Didsbury: the line’s ten stresses mirror its catalogue of tens, the Old Man’s ‘occurrences which I call my Decades’:

ten sweet farts, ten persons of Belgian nationality, ten
fascicles of tens.

The humour here is typical of Didsbury, from the scatology of farts and the reference to Belgium as a self-evidently ludicrous place—cf. Didsbury’s own ‘In Belgium’ (203) and his friend Sean O’Brien’s ‘But look, you bastards, the Belgians are laughing at us’ (O’Brien ‘Palmersville’ 240)—to the deliberate overuse of a repetend; cf. ‘A Daft Place’ (199) and O’Brien’s discussion of Didsbury’s use of this

device, which he suggests may originate with Kennech Koch's 'Sleeping with Women' (O'Brien Deregulated Muse 139). The humour is in fact more typical of Didsbury than the marriage of form to content, whose wit may seem merely cerebral by comparison.

Within these extremes, the short line of indeterminate metre and the long line flamboyantly attempting a decameter, the poem builds a loose pattern of five- and six-stress lines, rising to six, seven and eight stresses in the second half, particularly in the Old Man's monologue. Lines 2–7 create a loose impression of alternating pentameter and hexameter (loose because the distribution of stresses and the number of syllables are both irregular):

Information that streams from its eyes like dots
seeks out a person who kneels on a brown allotment,
the month being March and the time of day noon,
the long spongy root of a plantain grasped in one hand
and the sudden wide notice of the house's attention
conveyed in open assiduous envelope, down to this plot.

Note how the line breaks coincide with syntactical breaks, a feature which works with the metrical allusions and the suggestions of rhyme (see below) to make this poetry rather than prose. Four lines of alternating pentameter and tetrameter follow:

There is no moisture anywhere. Friable skin,
untouched since Autumn last, denies it.
A dry sheet covers the lumpy mattress
that aches in the scarcely visited bedroom,

before a sudden irruption of three lines of tight iambic pentameter, concentrating the rhythm:

the outside tap has stained its rags with rust.
A cold as square as furniture, but white,
not I, not thou, despite the urgency,

before relaxing it again with an irregular line of only three main stresses, the arch

is emptying the old tradition,

then a line of five stresses not remotely iambic:

of the high gabled forehead lost among trees,

and finally a line of strict iambic pentameter to end this island of metrical play:

and leaving a continuum behind.

The pattern of rhyme and half-rhyme in these opening 17 lines is similarly complex. In what follows I use ‘rhyme’ to refer to both full and half-rhyme, and to more remote resemblances such as that between trees and mattress. Didsbury’s use of quieter and more oblique sound-patterns is analogous to his use of metre: it demonstrates a creative engagement with tradition. Lines 1, 4, 6 and 8 end with line, noon, attention and skin, lines 2, 7 and 9 with dots, plot and it, and lines 3 and 5 with allotment and hand. The effect of this already muted patterning is mitigated by the irregular line length and lack of strict metre. Internal rhyme (information, person, brown, plantain, sudden, open and down all occur in the seven lines between line and skin) serve not only to bolster the rhyme but also, paradoxically, to confuse the reader’s sense of where it might occur. The result is a poetic style which may seem prosaic on first sight or taking a few lines in isolation, but which generates a modest yet insistent music—rhyme which an auditor senses is happening without being able to identify easily. Meanwhile the variable distance between rhyme-words allows sounds to recur over large distances and tie the poem together while not appearing to the ear or eye as rhyme—trees at the end of line 16 echoes mattress at the end of line 10, as well as, nearer in proximity but further away in sound, rust at the end of line 12. In turn, line 21 ends with toys, line 24 with snows, line 25 with hours and line 29 with house. By the time we arrive, via choice (line 35), at line 42’s fallacies, no reader still consciously remembers mattress, but the phonological theme has nevertheless been preserved. While this example shows nothing more than that Didsbury is writing poetry with close attention to sound, the irregularity of the sound-repetitions mirrors the irregular approach to rhythm.

Such technical approaches allude to traditional forms without merely replicating them. The long, urbane sentences, and the coincidence of line-breaks with syntactical breaks, work with Didsbury's use of archaic and antiquarian language and historical materials to create a slight classical flavour. This effect is bolstered by overt rhetorical devices such as the classical elision of a verb in 'the month being March and the time of day noon' and the Biblical repetitions 'which the kneeling man has knelt to cultivate' and 'is only waiting for the dancer to come, whose coming was delayed'. But one of the most noticeable factors in generating an erudite and classical atmosphere is the poem's use of binary and ternary rhythms. The two sorts are intermixed throughout, and one of the reasons the poem's use of metre is so conspicuous is that the juxtapositions create obtrusive metrical contrasts from line to line. But, as it proceeds, the poem turns from a predominantly iambic pulse towards a predominantly dactylic one. The tone correspondingly turns from the relatively conversational towards the elegantly and expansively rhetorical. This effect really starts to become manifest after line 52, a line of perfect iambic pentameter followed by a loose fourteen, and then by an extraordinary line in perfect dactylic hexameter except that it ends in a single stressed syllable (i.e. a tailless trochee):

NOTing the /MOON and the /CHAINS we are /GOing
to /MAKE our at/TEMPT.

A number of the lines which follow respond well to scansion, either in following a metre exactly or in inviting analysis into a mixture of feet:

- 58 a DRUN/ken CRY[] too CLOSE /for the CREW
/at the RAIL
- 59 and the OLD MAN[] BITing his /PIPE and
dis/CERNing
- 64 i SAY /my PRAYERS[] and DO /my CER/tain
SUMS.[] i LIKE /the NUM/ber TEN
- 65 I am /ALlways /COUNTng /ON my /FINGers,[] or
FLEXing /my HID/den TOES
- 72 THERE are /TEMples /EVery/WHERE.' He
/ENDed,

- 75 could NOT /its SUIT /of AIR be TAK/en DOWN
 /and WORN?
- 76 It is STITCHED /with LIGHTS for the DANCE
 /with the SWART EARTH
- 78 EIGHT/y YEARS /aGO a GIRL /out WALK/ing
 LOST /a BUT/ton HERE

Such metrical crystallisations occur intermittently throughout the poem, but they are more noticeable in its second half, possibly because the move from 5–6 stresses per line in the first half to 6–7 or even 8 stresses per line in the second encourages the reader to read each line with a distinct caesura (and sometimes two), confirming the impression that classical metres, and therefore a classical sensibility, are lurking somewhere underneath the surface. The mixture of binary and ternary stresses allows great flexibility even in the lines which can be scanned unproblematically (lots of lines can't). It would be nonsense to suggest that lines can be scanned outside their metrical context; but here some rudimentary analysis shows us that there is a metrical context to be considered, albeit an irregular and shifting one. Towards the end of the poem a series of interspersed, metrically elegant six-stress lines (marked in italics) build towards a lyrical conclusion whose mood is some distance from the poem's muted, iambic early sections:

The button goes under the tap like a drunk, and its pitted
face
is pinched between finger and thumb, and then pocketed.
Quartz from the lips of the tide shines like diamonds,
then dies,
but this has been up and down in the earth, and has
learned a thing.
Its stored reflections will always include the poles of the
ferry at Hell,
its vibrations always be unwinding the band of the voice
of the goose
as it beats from the drain to the dyke. I absolve you, oh
my heart,
for you inhabit your vocative well, you have slept on old
farms

and are watching the face in the glass, as Mr Lockwood
did,
whose 'yell was not ideal'. Your only reader must
absolve you,
for there is blood in your hand.
You have waked in the oaken closet of the day and
found yourself kneeling,
the house overlooks you, and its phantoms regard you as
real.

Note how the short line 94 is not only appropriately abrupt in view of its content but also generates a pause to introduce and counterpoint the magnificent rhythm of the last two lines, a pause echoed in the marked caesura after 'overlooks you' in the last line.

The poem's argument has similarly come a long way. In the simplest terms the subject has shifted from the house to the addressee of the last sentence: from the house in the background, via details of the scene, including the trees of the title, to the 'person who kneels on a brown allotment', whom 'the house overlooks' and who only at the end of the poem 'wake[s]... and [finds him]self kneeling' (the poem is in a sense the process of waking, the coming to consciousness of its subject).

Such a sketch gives us a visual or, in its transition between visual elements, viewpoints and scales, filmic idea of what is going on in the poem. The visual sketch could be filled out with large amounts of detail, and part of the poem's charm is the understated ingenuity it brings to its description. But this ingenuity is not merely decorative: it destabilises the picture it creates, creating confusion and tension which paradoxically underwrite the poem's claim to depict or evoke reality rather than merely displaying imagery. For instance there is the 'broken bowl of an eighteenth century clay/inverted as helm upon, and making to seem Mongolian,/the head of one of [the boy's] metallic infantry', in which the hanging syntax of 'inverted as helm upon, and making to seem Mongolian' draws attention to itself as language. There is the casual way in lines 30–45 that items from the landscape ('trees... cottages... hedges... the fog... that gull... sheds') are dropped into a complex discussion of the poem's mimetic process, so that the discussion and the process fuse as one. And there is the sudden zooming out over 'the

entire eroded coast' which provides not only descriptive detail but also a segue into the Old Man's monologue.

In any case enumerating visual details is only half of the reader's task here. Part of the poem's subject is the way it makes its transition from house to figure. For instance, the addressee of the last sentence is still grammatically the speaker's heart, named in line 90; reading the poem properly will mean taking account of what could be meant by the relations and equivalences suggested between house, person, and heart, to name but three. I don't mean here just that this postmodern poem is interested in its own mimetic practices, but that the subject of the poem, which is however nebulously something other than the poem's own rhetoric, is partly conjured by the way that the poem's ostensible subject continually slips, suggesting a subject which sits between, or is a complex of, various ideas of place, text, personhood, tradition and so on.

Thus the 'broad prospect, and old "intelligence", which the kneeling man has knelt to cultivate' are connected by the metaphorical sense of 'broad prospect' meaning 'way of looking at things', suggesting that the poem's (visual) representation of a house in a physical location and its examination of a 'house' of cultural tradition are not distinct activities but identical. Similarly the kneeling man is a character variously working on his allotment and/or praying (cf. 'minutes spent replying to the sky'), but also the speaker/poet himself, 'cultivating' the 'broad prospect', or landscape, which the poem constitutes. The prayers are depicted as 'binary ons and offs'—data—'sent back/up a still intact funicular to the roof, the line of the eye/engraved as in a diagram, Plate XXVIII for choice'. This metaphor moves the poem into discursive territory while renewing, rather than abandoning, the visual element in a diagrammatic form, as if a poem which deliberates about its own processes ought to provide images of itself doing so. The description of the eye in the diagram—'with barlets that pulse from a ball'—is faintly architectural and reminds us that it is still unsettled whether the kneeling man looks up at the house or the house looks down on him. This ambiguity is central to the poem's dynamic between person (individual) and house (group or tradition). It is established in lines 2–3 and then insisted on in the strange 'the sudden wide notice of the house's attention/conveyed in open assiduous envelope, down to this plot', which might be read to refer to the house actually looking intently, or to a visual impression of it doing so. The

attribution of subjectivity to the old house continues with its peeling walls depicted as ‘friable skin’, the ‘lumpy mattress/that aches in the scarcely visited bedroom’, and the ‘high gabled forehead lost among trees’ which feels the emptying of its occupants as the ‘emptying [of] old tradition.’ The fate of a large house after economic decline is analogous—or even identical—to the psychology of an individual faced with the equivalent cultural decline; and the condition which results is a ‘continuum’, not so much ‘only physics’ (the poem’s religious preoccupation is never clearly stated, which saves it from any such religion-versus-science simplifications) as a liberation which ‘is not didactic, it makes the mind go blink/with novel gravities’. But the poem’s elegiac tone and antiquarian bent make this claim of epiphany seem slightly tenuous—which only increases its lyrical effect. Both the concrete house and the cultural tradition are specified historically by the poem’s store of Victoriana as existing in a contemporary present which is therefore defined by its relation to its past. The house’s dilapidation and the ‘cooking marsala’ suggest decline. The ‘still intact funicular’ and the boy’s ‘metallic soldiers’ specify a present as a historical afterwards. The diagram, designated by the old-fashioned ‘Plate XXVIII’ rather than ‘Figure 28’, and the ‘eighteenth century clay’ also demonstrate the present’s interest in the past, as does the mention of ‘empire’ and the imagining of the Humber’s industrial history in ‘Small flotillas hoot, the incoming geese give voice,/the larger cargoes stand in line off Spurn’. The Old Man’s mixed archaic–contemporary diction (‘It is egregious, oftentimes. I lie in my bed/and wish I were mental, like Rawlings’) makes him the mouthpiece of an ahistorical, or trans-historical, consciousness which belongs in (or even gives voice to) the landscape. Similarly the lost button ‘took down into the trench with it, sealed inside its glass,/the whole of the dusk which descended on the farm’ (Didsbury comments: ‘I suppose it was just fantasising about the idea that the glass button unlocks the whole Edwardian past’ (2007, pers. comm., 29 March)). So the house’s appearance of consciousness, of containing the cultural tradition to which it belongs, is the most obvious example of several cases where an object focuses and evokes its historical and cultural contexts in a magical or ghostly way. The focus of cultural and religious material in objects is a recurrent device in Didsbury’s work, as is the use of landscape, historical and cultural materials to approach religious concerns.

The poem's religious interest comes out after about line 40 in the oblique celebration of 'volumes of lunchtime air' for 'bring[ing] carelessness to empire'—the everyday reality whose epiphanies Didsbury's poems have consistently been fascinated by, as opposed to the theologies they mock (see, for example, 'Upstairs' (178), 'The Autumn' (184), 'A Natural History' (18), 'Cemetery Clearance' (32), 'Chai' (38), 'Passing the Park' (54), 'Part of the Bridge' (57), 'An Expedition' (95), and 'Vesperal' (154) on the one hand, and 'That Old-Time Religion' (64–5) and 'The Devil on Holiday' (74–8) on the other; and 'Jotting from Northern Minsters' (94–5) for a poem which mediates the two concerns). The concern for a religious experience which can be had anywhere and through anything explains why Didsbury might be interested in a levelling which 'dispose[s]/of sheds and cybernetic pastimes equally' and might not be interested in adhering to political and religious orthodoxies. The cold air 'turns the whole invective'—again a catch-all figure for scene, tradition, text—'into neighbourly Walden Pond [...and] sinks the Marist Church'

in a soup of such communion that its dedicated bell
can honour with one mouth the entire eroded coast.

But the determination to 'take this festering street and sail it home at last' is frustrated by the patrician Old Man, whose monologue mysteriously takes us back by both its language and its content into cultural and religious traditions. Although he is presented comically, the Old Man's concerns are quite serious: 'I lie in my bed/and wish I were mental, like Rawlings'; 'I find that I am singing./I say my prayers'. The end of the monologue might be a cartoon of the persona Didsbury has built up throughout his work:

I remember, once, I brushed against my sea-boots in the dark
and after I'd frightened myself incurred with growing joy
the thought of their emptiness as a witness to my work.
There are temples everywhere.

One such temple is the 'coat hanger, hooked to the rusty guttering on the shed' of which the poem asks: 'could not its suit of air be taken down and worn?'; but the effect of the Old Man's speech has been to redress the balance between a purely experienced present and a past

which colours present experience. Moreover the poem's, and speaker's, means of approaching religious experience has been the specific landscape of objects and the history and cultural traditions they represent, so while this is an extreme Catholicism which finds epiphany 'everywhere', it is nevertheless tied inextricably to the speaker's home landscape and cultural background. The lost button buried in the earth contains the past it has witnessed, and 'Its stored reflections will always include the poles of the ferry at Hell'. The poem ends not by resolving but demonstrating the tension between past and present, the indebtedness to the past which is the ground of the present as we know it — demonstrated not only dramatically but through the poem's mixture of free and metrical verse, and classical and postmodern rhetoric. The speaker 'absolves' his heart from the guilt of its tendency to let the past impinge on the present,

for you inhabit your vocative well, you have slept in old
farms
and are watching the face in the glass, as Mr Lockwood
did,
whose 'yell was not ideal'.

Here the poem's underlying conceit, the unclear subjectivity of house and man, alludes pointedly to the genre it originates in, the Gothic. The house's uncanny consciousness is a variant on the haunted house, represented here by the reference to Mr Lockwood's encounter with Cathy's ghost in *Wuthering Heights*. Note Didsbury's mischievous quotation from Brontë's novel, in which 'ideal' is used in an archaic sense to mean 'imaginary, merely an idea': it shows a delighted fascination in tradition which complicates and makes more interesting his urge to transcend it. The poem's nightmarish vacillations between house, man, speaker, reader, imagination and poem are provisionally resolved but remain unsettlingly open:

You have waked in the oaken closet of the day and
found yourself kneeling,
the house overlooks you, and its phantoms regard you as
real.

Back of the House

Sick of England, but happy in your garden
this hot afternoon, your English garden,
where everything looks like something else
and Language, fat and prone beneath her fountain,
idly dispenses curling parchment notes,
her coveted, worthless, licenses to imitate.
There is too much to photograph here,
so put your camera down. Relax.
A fan of green depends from twigs like vines
but the punkah wallah has gone to stand
in the shade, where you cannot pick him out,
and grins at the print he left behind,
which moves its arm in air, and grins at him.
So pull the rope on the broken swing, to make us cool.
Impersonate a dancer from Bali or Siam,
or somewhere they posture with sticks and bits of string.
Look around you. That large bird was running away
from a poem by Keats, and it failed.
A pile of brushwood makes flagrant promises
to Andrew marvell, and the boulevards are ringed by bombs.
Light, and shade, are the lustrations of trompe l'oeil,
itself the name of a garden in France,
and the three bleached poles that limit the brassica
make a hitching rail for goblin cavalry
in the childhood garden that continues to grow,
commensurate with our stature. 'How far we used
to travel in only three paces,' you say
as we take an unhurried dozen to the gate.
When I walk off down the hot brick lane
I know I leave myself behind
in the coloured window, in the Byzantine
back of the house. I watch us still examining
the blasted elm, that rocks to your fingers
and threatens to fall. It would lie across
half the garden. I estimate its height
and step that far away, before I go.

Glimpsed Among Trees

The house comes on line.

Information that streams from its eyes like dots
seeks out a person who kneels on a brown allotment,
the month being March and the time of day noon,
the long spongy root of a plantain grasped in one hand
and the sudden wide notice of the house's attention
conveyed in open assiduous envelope, down to this plot.
There is no moisture anywhere. Friable skin,
untouched since Autumn last, denies it.

A dry sheet covers the lumpy mattress
that aches in the scarcely visited bedroom,
the outside tap has stained its rags with rust.
A cold as square as furniture, but white,
not I, not thou, despite the urgency,
is emptying the old tradition
of the high gabled forehead lost among trees
and leaving a continuum behind.

Nothing whatever to do with the 'arid soul',
for it is not didactic, it makes the mind go blink
with novel gravities. The boy's room, revealed
as if in his absence, to the cleaner, by his toys,
shows the broken bowl of an eighteenth century clay
inverted as helm upon, and making to seem Mongolian,
the head of one of his metallic infantry. It snows.
His father the Doctor, demented by early hours,
leaves lemonade and cooking marsala
to go sticky in a glass, a tipple which
the blue-painted god of the morning absently retrieves
and carries with him to the topmost view in the house.
It is this broad prospect, and old 'intelligence',
which the kneeling man has knelt to cultivate,
and minutes spent replying to the sky
denote it well, the binary ons and offs sent back
up a still intact funicular to the roof, the line of the eye
engraved as in a diagram, Plate XXVIII for choice,
with barlets that pulse from a ball whose tender lids,
peeled back and gorgeous with lashes, will never blink

at that which is only physics, its trees relentlessly inverted
in air as thin as this and its cottages always held
behind hedges of optical glass, – it takes the petulant
volumes of lunchtime air to be libertine enough
to bring carelessness to empire, to bend that gull with fallacies,
or to plot the fog which take the next day out,
a strike with a flannelled hammer to dispose
of sheds and cybernetic pastimes equally, which is what it does.
It turns the whole invective into neighbourly Walden Pond
with old and chimneyed Thoreaus standing round and hearkening
to the anserine cries in its reeds. It sinks the Marist Church
in a soup of such communion that its dedicated bell
can honour with one mouth the entire eroded coast.
Small flotillas hoot, the incoming geese give voice,
the larger cargoes stand in line off Spurn,
a white embankment indulges the Sabbath shore... It is the hour.
Noting the moon and the chains we are going to make our attempt.
We shall take this festering street and sail it home at last,
provisioned and coaled and silently observing
the estuarial forts as they slip by on the beam,
a drunken cry too close for the crew at the rail
and the Old Man biting his pipe and discerning,
'It is egregious, oftentimes. I lie in my bed
and wish I were mental, like Rawlings. I watch
the great timber of the plough, to which all the other
parts of the plough-tail are fixed, and I find that I am singing.
I say my prayers and do my certain sums. I like the number ten.
I am always counting on my fingers, or flexing my hidden toes
and I log those occurrences which I call my Decades daily.
Ten ivory beads in the form of geese breasting the air this morning,
ten sweet farts, ten persons of Belgian nationality, ten fascicles of
tens.

I remember, once, I brushed against my sea-boots in the dark
and after I'd frightened myself incurred with growing joy
the thought of their emptiness as a witness to my work.
There are temples everywhere.' He ended,
and the problems of narration started up all over again.
That coat hanger, hooked to the rusty guttering on the shed,
could not its suit of air be taken down and worn?
It is stitched with lights for the dance with the swart earth

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and is only waiting for the dancer to come, whose coming was delayed.

Eighty years ago a girl out walking lost a button here
and it took down into the trench with it, sealed inside its glass,
the whole of the dusk which descended on the farm,
its fluting impermanent sounds, the language of the wildfowl on the
drain,

the green and oily bulk of the engine, as it chained the evening
on its last and most festive traverse of the field. All this is known.

The button goes under the tap like a drunk, and its pitted face
is pinched between finger and thumb, and then pocketed.

Quartz from the lips of the tide shines like diamonds, then dies,
but this has been up and down in the earth, and has learned a thing.
Its stored reflections will always include the poles of the ferry at
Hell,

its vibrations always be unwinding the band of the voice of the
goose

as it beats from the drain to the dyke. I absolve you, oh my heart,
for you inhabit your vocative well, you have slept in old farms
and are watching the face in the glass, as Mr Lockwood did,
whose 'yell was not ideal'. Your only reader must absolve you,
for there is blood in your hand.

You have waked in the oaken closet of the day and found yourself
kneeling,

the house overlooks you, and its phantoms regard you as real.

Peter Didsbury

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