



from Cornelius Cardew, *Treatise* (1967)

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Stretto

For Alec Finlay

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§ 1

The more difficult it becomes to deny the failure of my years abroad, the more my thoughts return to the memory of a mountain village on a reservoir in the region of my youth. I say ‘my long years abroad’, though I write from there now and hardly think of it as abroad anymore; it is simply where I happen to be. But this too is a part of my failure, for reasons that will become apparent. A phrase such as ‘the failure of my years abroad’ sounds melodramatic, and in returning to my childhood I may give the sense that it holds the key to that failure. Not so. But their connection is nevertheless real, unlikely though this may appear. The village lies in the western portion of the mountain range that defined my early years, on an artificially created reservoir. The village is approached on more than one side by a causeway, and lies on a strip of land that, it too, is narrow and elongated, lending itself to the spread-out pattern of roadside dwellings common in that part of the world. Arriving early by bicycle one morning, I notice a parish church built in a style I recognise as deriving from the southern United States. Later I would learn that local stonemasons had travelled to New Mexico, where their skills were much in demand, and on their return home had brought that state’s distinctive church architecture with them. Though not religious, I rarely passed a church in those days without looking inside, make of this what you will. Imagine my surprise then to find a series of stained-glass windows therein by a well-known early twentieth-century artist. Of the two panels, perhaps the more striking is the one depicting the Virgin Mary. The upper half of her body gives way to a series of jewels in a manner I associate with the cover

of a medieval psaltery, though all the more brilliant in this case for their frame of black. I sit for a time in contemplation, noting the lack of similarity between this Virgin Mary and her more formulaic representations. I have stated that I am not religious, but find my response to the window crystallising into a stand-off between light and dark. It is a dull autumn day, and amid so much encircling gloom I have discovered a window of light. It seems crucially important, therefore, and for this moment at least possible, that I pass through the window to whatever lies beyond. And so I do, imaginatively at least. The effects of this resolution have continued to unfold down well beyond that moment, while also leading me to the failure recorded in my opening sentence. How this came about will form the burden of the notes that follow.

§ 2

As I write these words, I turn my left hand over and study the lines of scar tissue on the edge of my palm where I put my hand through a window as a boy. We had returned home from an outing, and I bounded up the path before slamming into the window. The glass was frosted, but behind it I remember a light that must have been left on in our absence. I do not recall the aftermath of my accident, painful though it must have been. Ever since then I have thought of windows as sites of opportunity but danger too. Years later, I am reading a volume on rhetorical tropes and encounter one called, I believe, *metalepsis*. It involves the passage from one narrative frame to another, as when a film begins with a page from a book, showing the words spoken by the narrator, with an illustration of for instance a house or some skaters on a lake, before the illustration comes to life and we enter into its world. This convention is normally used sparingly, but I have found myself drawn to works of art where this becomes the norm. We become habituated to one narrative world only for it to be yanked away, as we pass through the window, and then the whole process repeats itself, and we realise that the book is transition and only transition, not the merely standing still, the merely being there. But I am getting ahead of myself. Around the time I was studying these rhetorical tropes, I had become aware of another installation by the stained-glass artist, in a museum in the city where I was a student. It is a series of windows responding to the work of a famous Romantic poet who had died young. The setting is desolate and wintry. A young man has come to a castle on a surreptitious visit to his lover, with

whom he will elope. It is the eve of St Agnes, and the woman believes she will receive a dream vision of her future husband. The fantastical atmosphere makes dream and reality hard to tell apart, and the stained-glass installation reaches its apogee of narcotising intrigue when it shows the young woman lying beautifully asleep under a stained-glass window, which is to say a window within a window. The artwork has a room to itself in the gallery, and the feeling (by now familiar to me, indeed a sensation constantly on my mind) of passing into an imaginative dreamworld never fails to work its gaudy magic. With the window within the window, however, this effect is doubled to a state of exquisite intensity. The lovers are united and ride away together unnoticed. At the death, the poem jolts us back to workaday reality with an image of its ancient beadsman who ‘after thousand aves told / For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold’, words I carry with me back onto the brisk streets of the capital outside. Here is a peculiar conflict. Does the window within the window add an extra layer of protection, sheltering us further and deeper inside its vision? Or did it make the return to the reality outside the artwork all the more painful when it comes, as it inevitably must? ‘For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold’: I speak the line again, and am again that young man wavering undecided on that brink.

§ 3

All over the city where I study, the populace finds its own portals into concealed realities, every few yards or so, or so it seems, in the form of pub doors. Though not much of a drinker at this time, I am familiar with a poster to be seen in city pubs of the famous writers of my homeland, all men, and many with reputations as legendary drinkers at this or that local establishment. Yet my own fancy, I find, is taken by a writer not on this poster – another nineteenth-century poet, who lived and died in the city without ever (hardly) leaving it, but succeeded in leaving almost no physical trace of his existence. Making a pilgrimage to his birthplace, I find it bisected by a busy modern road, while on a later visit I find the plaque on the wall marking his birth has vanished. His enormous output is almost entirely lacking in anything resembling topographical descriptions of the city. This seems strangely at odds – for an alcoholic poet, as he was – with the male-bonding and love of the local that defines the culture of drinking. He did compose an essay, in 1832, describing a trip to a pub called *The Shades*, which no longer exists, in which any prospect of bibulous camaraderie misfires. Observing a fellow drinker from a distance, he begins to speculate feverishly as to his identity, believing him to be a necromancer. He fantasises that the drinker’s nose is growing, threatening to cover ‘every square of vacant space in the vacant metropolis.’ He then passes out and awakens at home in bed with a doctor in attendance. The essay describes an anti-portal, or inside-out portal, throwing the poet back on himself in a world where even a banal drinking session with a crony defies all realist representation. In subsequent years I would come to spend more

time in pubs, but not (or not only) on account of any increased taste for alcoholic revelry. Rather, I desired to clear the hurdle that so defeated my nineteenth-century poet, which is to say everyday life at ease on arse and elbow on a barstool of the kind I too, as a young man, found so difficult to experience and represent. The transformative powers of the pub are less about drinking than access to a new physical realm, a space of light and dark, as when a glass of beer is raised to a gas-lamp in a windowless back room, and held aloft momentarily before consumption. Quaint image. But I am getting ahead of myself again. My nineteenth-century poet was also an opium addict and died at the tail-end of the Irish famine. An idealised bust of him stands in a city-centre park, with an inset of 'Dark Rosaleen', an idealised female embodiment of my homeland. The poet's nationalist admirers saw this image as a solution to the social dissonance and maladjustment I have described. Accepting this solution comes at the cost of a certain sublimation of the real problem, particularly where actual women are concerned, who after all are human too, whatever my homeland might have thought at the time. Nation as all-healing mother substitute. No. Fail. I linger briefly with my poet in *The Shades* but suggest we move on elsewhere for our next drink, through the portal again. But is this real, we ask each other simultaneously. Is this happening.

§ 4

The pauses at the stations remind me of the silences between tracks on my favourite albums. The pause of recent departure, the pause amidst resolute progress, the pause of last-minute hesitation before arrival. Were I to close my eyes and lose all sense of time, I would feel a pause and know it meant this or that station. I sit in the corner of the carriage, the right-hand side for preference, where I will have a view of the bay. The seat is not my seat, though I think of it as mine. People fill up the carriage under the unspoken rules of first one person per two facing seats; then two, once all facing seats have at least one occupant; then three, and so on to completion. Travellers entering at one end of the carriage will walk long distances to uphold these rules, sometimes even passing from carriage to carriage to do so. On the return trip later I will board the train from a different station from the one where I alight in the morning, for a higher chance of being reunited with my seat, since mine is the journey taken by the man in the corner of the carriage; otherwise it is no longer 'my' journey. Later the layout of the carriages changes, and my connection with the journey alters. This coincides with my moving away, which helps to formalise the disconnection. As we approach the city, to return to my morning journey, I look to the left and see as I do every day a white oval mirror in an upstairs window. It is inclined at an angle of maybe twenty degrees. In all my years of observing it I never succeed in spotting anyone looking into it, checking their hair or make-up before slipping out to work. The house is off down one of the narrow, cobbled streets near the canal. I cannot imagine the occupant walking a few hundred yards