

## *Doctor Placebo*

**Also by Alan Wall:**

*Poetry*

Jacob

Chronicle

Lenses

Gilgamesh

Alexander Pope at Twickenham

*Fiction*

Curved Light

Bless the Thief

Silent Conversations

The Lightning Cage

The School of Night

Richard Dadd in Bedlam

China

Sylvie's Riddle

*Non-fiction*

Writing Fiction

Myth, Metaphor and Science

# Doctor Placebo

ALAN WALL

Shearsman Books  
Exeter

Published in the United Kingdom in 2010 by  
Shearsman Books Ltd  
58 Velwell Road  
Exeter EX4 4LD

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-133-7  
First Edition.

Copyright © Alan Wall, 2010.

The right of Alan Wall to be identified as the author of this work  
has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyrights,  
Designs and Patents Act of 1988.  
All rights reserved.

### **Acknowledgements**

‘Ruskin and Sesame’ was first published in *Shearsman*; ‘Trivium’,  
‘Labyrinth’ and ‘Origin of Species’ were first published in *Temporel*  
(with translations by Anne Mounic); an earlier and shorter  
version of ‘Doctor Placebo’ was first published in  
*International Literary Quarterly*.

# CONTENTS

## Part 1: Doctor Placebo

The Doctor	11
DIY	12
Placebo's Relics	13
Oculist Placebo	14
Now He Attends to the Blind	15
One of the Doctor's Favourites	16
Placebo Astray	17
Placebo Divided	18
Placebo Dreams of Rome	19
In the Library	20
Bereft in Turin with Brother Friedrich	21
Moonman Placebo	23
Placebo Elegiac	24
Snicker-Snack	25
History turns Personal	26
Religio Medici	27
Placebo's Tinnitus	28
Placebo's X-ray	29
Placebo's Winter	30
Placebo in Mufti	31
Placebo's Dreamroom	32
Mirror-Phase	33
Origin of Species	34
The Drinking Philosopher	36
Placebo's Palimpsest	38
Placebo's Music Hall	39
His Bafflement	40
Revenant	41
Prognosis	42
Hemispheric Consolations	43
The Square on the Hypotenuse	44
Doctor Placebo and Doctor Johnson	45
Religio Medici #2	46

The Ring	47
Placebo's December	51
Bibliophile Placebo	52
Fittest	55
Placebo Thinks Darkly of John Ruskin	56
20th Century Elegy	57
Placebo's Guardian Departs	58
Insomniac Placebo	59
Placebo's Lifeline	60
Imitation of Life	61
Placebo's Midrash	62
Placebo Pedagogical	63
Placebo and the Entrails	64
Placebo's Forebear	65
Bonjour Placebo	66
Placebo Under the Sign of Saturn	67
Placebo's Last Orders	68
<b>Part 2: Ruskin and Sesame</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Part 3: Labyrinth and Trivium</b>	<b>85</b>

*To*

*Ann and David Denham*





# **PART ONE**

## **DOCTOR PLACEBO**



## The Doctor

### 1

Doctor Placebo was asked  
If he could vouchsafe  
One true thing at least.

I have abandoned certainties, he said  
Or perhaps they have abandoned me.  
The speed of light remains constant  
In a vacuum, of that I am reasonably certain  
Though disproof is still possible  
At the unreached edges of the universe.

And there's mortality, of course.

Charles Péguy remarked in *Clio*  
That History constitutes dark reflections  
Upon falling things.  
Shortly afterwards History assassinated him  
For this impertinence.

## DIY

Placebo operated on himself  
Several times.

These manoeuvres at least  
Alerted him to the heart's attentiveness  
When probed.

Its red alert on encountering  
A foreign body.

He also acknowledged at last  
(As he administered rigorous post-operative care)  
The value of accurate stitching,  
An art he had once thought  
Merely womanish.

## Placebo's Relics

Medieval remnants of the true cross  
Marilyn's dress

A fragment of James Dean's last car  
Elvis's guitar

An image, however contrived, of the Cottingley Fairies  
The Hitler Diaries

A first edition of *Sigmund Freud: Collected Works*  
Pip and Joe Gargery's larks

A photograph of Eva Braun's false teeth  
Propped up by the Hippocratic Oath

## Oculist Placebo

In *La Bête Humaine* Severin says to Jean Gabin:

'Don't look as hard as that at me:

You'll wear your eyes out.'

And when Leo Stein handed his book of engravings

To the youthful Pablo Picasso, the Spaniard

Stared so fiercely at them, Leo declared

Himself surprised there was anything left on the page

Once he'd finished.

One of my patients peered at me anxiously

Awaiting my diagnosis.

'It's a pathogenic metaphor,' I announced

'Which has taken over your life.

'It's all you'll ever see now

'Even with the curtains drawn and your eyes closed.'

## Now He Attends to the Blind

Like Gloucester in *King Lear* or Milton  
My patient underwent the gnosis of a blinding.  
Eyeless then in Gaza or in Chalfont St Giles,  
On the road to Dover, up against  
The sweatstink of an evil hearth  
Or merely Placebo's book-lined surgery in Bermondsey  
The blind speak Tiresias's lingo, the sightless  
Orienteering of the seer.

Hölderlin thought Oedipus's crime  
Was to stare into the darkness of the gods,

Their *nefas*. Thus did he answer the Sphinx's riddle  
Guaranteeing his self-blinding later.

## One of the Doctor's Favourites

When Doctor Placebo considered Spinoza  
He witnessed a man grinding lenses  
In the age of lenses.

Staring into the glass he saw  
The Milky Way (unspeakably vast)  
Through another lens he saw a flea  
Its armadillo armour articulating  
Movements through a microcosmic world.

Through the last lens he ever ground  
Glass sedimenting his lungs  
He saw God, in all the glory  
Of His quantum states  
With only the mildest hint  
Of chromatic diffraction.



## **Placebo Astray**

A minute cloud in the left-hand corner of a sky  
Otherwise insultingly blue

The beach is a Möbius Strip, neverending  
As you flip the mind first this way then that

I think a shark appeared yesterday salted with composure  
While I sat dryly here

And last night I woke badly from a dream  
In which an old enemy, a successful sailor, called me Robinson

From the prow of his boat and shouted  
'Do you never open your emails any more?'