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Edward Thomas: The Ship of Swallows
Foreword

Within quite recent years, I was surprised to find some diaries that I’d kept when a boy. There was little that was surprising about the contents, with their references to school and fishing and playing with friends. What surprised me was the recognition of continuity – how much of my life has been spent recording it. As a student, inspired one day by a sense of wonder, I took up writing a diary again. The impulse soon failed among self-recriminations for boozing and wasting time. What I more grandly called a journal began seriously in the autumn of 1969, when I moved with my then wife into a small cottage in the hill country some miles outside Aberystwyth, where I was teaching at the university. Since then, with the exception of one period of a few months, I have kept a diary regularly, sometimes every day, and seldom less often than two or three times a week.

Since keeping a diary has become second nature to me, I’ve seldom asked myself why I do it. In 1969 the choice to start again was quite conscious. I wanted to observe closely the life of the new place in which I had come to live – the life of the natural world, and the culture of my mainly Welsh-speaking neighbours. I recall seeing an unfamiliar moth on the cottage wall, identifying and recording it. I borrowed a scythe from a neighbour and learnt to use it on the long grasses over-running the garden. It seemed important to record these things. I had been ill, and was now being restored to life.

Finding something to observe most days, I also found observation giving rise to reflection. This took my mind back to the earliest influence upon both my seeing and my writing: the essays of the Victorian poet-naturalist Richard Jefferies. I realized how for him perception of nature in all its living particulars had produced ideas; how in the relationship between the emotional, the seeing and feeling man, and the world around him, notation of the living moment had been the spark of thought. I never consciously read other writers’ journals in order to open myself to their influence. I did however come to love the literary journal as a form practised by writers such as Dorothy Wordsworth and Coleridge, and Thoreau and Emerson. Moreover, I saw the close relationship between journal entries and certain kinds of poetry – different kinds, but with affinities based upon perception of the particular moment, as in Thomas Hardy and William Carlos Williams. In my own writing, a close relationship evolved between poem and diary, a relationship I would come to think of as an art of seeing.
When my stroke occurred without warning in July 1999 I was in the midst of a busy working life. I was teaching literature and creative writing full-time at Bath Spa University College. I was at work on a collection of poems and a critical book concerned with modern Welsh writers in English, such as Emyr Humphreys, Alun Lewis, John Cowper Powys and David Jones. Immediately before the stroke, I was preparing a lecture for a conference in London, and thinking about the speech I would make when we presented Fay Weldon for an honour at the university. I was aware of certain stresses in my personal life, but nothing prepared me for the experience that one morning I would wake up, walk with difficulty to the bathroom, fall over and just manage to crawl back to bed. Some hours later, in hospital, shocked but conscious, I asked a nurse if she would kindly bring me some writing materials. She brought me a sheet of paper and a pencil. For me, looking around as much as my weakness would allow me, and recording what I saw and heard and thought, was the natural thing to do.

The writing that resulted was ultimately a diary with a difference. As time passed and I became stronger, initially in hospital and then at home, I found that moments from the past were coming back to me; at first unexpectedly, they would rise in my mind: ‘scenes’, but quick with sense and laden with meaning. The moments belonged mostly to my early years, and involved people closest to me, my parents and grandparents, my brothers, my first friends. As they came back to me, so I wrote about them, and found myself composing a memoir, a fragment of childhood autobiography. The remarkable thing about this was that the focus of attention arising out of the diary form enabled me, at first unconsciously, to evade the self-censor.

I had never expected to be able to write about people close to me with any freedom. I have an aversion to confessionalism since it seems to me to slip easily into a form of betrayal, describing the other person – perhaps a parent or lover – from a single point of view, charged with personal emotion, and necessarily external. I have to say more than this. From the beginning, my instinct as a writer has been that of respect for the mystery of being in the unique person or thing. It is a disposition towards both world and words: a recognition of the reality words may point to, but cannot capture. As a poet I love language and value poetry highly as an exploratory art. At the same time I have an acute sense of the partiality of all forms of knowing.

In a poem of the Welsh hill country, I wrote once of a buzzard’s cry ‘confirming silence under all’. This describes my sense of the elusive nature
of reality, of depths we may be aware of but cannot know. At a crucial time in my life, when suffering the consequences of introversion, I discovered the I and Thou thinking of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, with its emphasis upon relationship, and the importance of the ‘between’, where meaning is to be found. Buber is quintessentially a thinker who values community: the world we share, as distinct from the world disembodied in any one mind. Later, I felt a close affinity with George Oppen’s emphasis upon the value of the substantive, and his poetry of essential respect for that which is. The other great influence upon my later thinking does not contradict this sense of the real. David Jones, in his Preface to The Anathemata, speaks of attempting ‘to make a shape out of the very things of which one is oneself made’. This points to an essentially exploratory art, in which the maker is part of a much larger subject, which he or she seeks to know, as distinct from imposing the self upon the world.

All this may perhaps be put more simply. I couldn’t imagine writing about people I love, as if they could be captured in a portrait, let alone subjected to the moral judgement that writing necessarily entails. I couldn’t do it until I found myself doing it, as the past pressed for expression. The diary form with its everyday particular urgency disposed of my fear of betrayal. This fear had nothing to do with anxiety about revealing secrets. It had everything to do with avoiding the risk of partial vision, which diminishes lived experience, and replaces the whole person with a verbal portrait. As I say late in the diary, my parents were great powers in my life. It is the integral power of the unique being that I seek to recognise in my writing. Following my stroke, the act of recognition was made more urgent by my circumstances. As daybook notes and reflections became memoir, so I was revisiting what mattered most to me in the light of an encounter with death. From this I learnt a greater freedom, so that later, in poems about my family, especially in Ancestral Lines, I could show more of their lives and of the life that had made me.

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SAMPLER
16 July 1999

Royal United Hospital Bath
I felt physically weak when I woke up yesterday. This morning, I should have gone to London to give a paper on R.S. Thomas & Alun Lewis at a conference. But I felt weaker, and fell over in the bathroom. Unable to get up, I crawled back to bed.

Mieke called Dr Ellis who arranged for an ambulance to bring me here. (Lying in the ambulance, I found I could see out through the rear window, and looked, at an unfamiliar angle, at the road I usually take to work.) Here, I have had numerous tests including an ECG & a brain scan; and the doctors think I have had ‘a minor stroke’. I am too weak to stand and my left side, hand & foot are weaker than my right. They are also paying a lot of attention to my diabetes, with frequent blood sugar level tests. M. has been wonderful, staying with me most of the time.

I know I have brought this on myself with bouts of intensive work, far too little exercise, and relative neglect of my diabetes.

Hospital time. There are several other mainly older men in the ward, but I feel too tired to talk now. Mortal men, mortal men. We are hearts brains kidneys lungs. I have never felt so helpless, but I know this is real, part of life, though here we think of dying, hoping to get better. And perhaps others too think: I will regulate my life differently if/when I go home.

Our Lady of Bodily Functions, pray for us.

17 July


Alun Lewis’s ‘patience’ – which ran out on him? There are times when one should just endure. Why should he take upon himself the burden of failure of Western civilization? He couldn’t be animal.
One thing after another in past months. Anxious over presentation of Fay Weldon at Graduation. Now someone else’s responsibility. At times in the night I couldn’t believe this has happened to me.

12.30 Ate a good meal.

Is the person who has difficulties with the self most thoroughly a self? Because of that concern? Keats & Lewis in their letters are utterly distinctive experiencing persons. Both claim to have no identity – Lewis’s ‘some animation the world has set flowing’. Lewis is more self-conscious, Keats has a stronger sense of the other? Is it all a self-drama with AL, even India? I have never thought myself No one.

Nurses firm with man with headache. Clearly they think he complains too much.

Lovely visits from M. & Colin Edwards, with a bunch of flowers from his garden at Freshford.

18 July

Morning. Was got up into chair but felt faint & weak and asked to be put back to bed. The nurse who had got me up obviously felt alarmed, and guilty. She put an oxygen mask on me and I lay on the bed.

Cloudless blue sky, light breeze. Older men on opposite side of the ward lying sleeping, mouths open, like effigies. Do I look like that?

None of us will live for ever. In extreme weakness I was afraid. The other thing that bothers me is lack of bowel movement, & embarrassment at the means. But the nurses are reassuringly matter of fact.

Reading In the Place of Fallen Leaves I realise how critical I am: its charm fails to charm me. I want something with more life in it, less fine & clever writing.

Afternoon, after visits from Emily & Jason, & M.: the disturbing experience of lying in a warm ward, half awake, with three or four conversations going on around, waking to a fragment here, a fragment there, the mind making some strange different sense of them.

Once I woke up in the night and for a while had no idea where I was.

19 July

Monday – sat up in chair from 7 to 10.

Anxiety over lack of bowel movements, or sudden eruption. Misplaced shame.

Lovely flowers from David Annwn & Lesley.

Sandy Arnold & John Burke to visit.

Message from M. in morning but no visit; hope all is well.

‘He’ll never be the same man again.’ (Mother, after Dad’s mild stroke.)

Third night beginning. Young man whimpering and crying out.

What a difference it makes: as a patronising nurse, who complains wearily of night shift work, goes off duty, and another, who brightly calls me ‘sweetheart’, comes on. The young man in pain, loudly abuses a nurse: ‘Get away from me, woman’. I ring for a nurse to pull up my blankets which I can’t reach.

I may be able to feel a little more power in my left foot & left hand.

20 July

Morning. Sitting on bed. Outside; tough-looking prickly yellow cow thistle alongside grey chippings on parking area. By ragwort. Wayside survivors in waste places.

M. to visit in morning. Philip twice, once when I was asleep. Left a note but I didn’t see him.

Evening: moved to Albert Ward. Visits from Jane Garbutt, Richard, Philip.

21 July

New window view. Convolvulus in hedge, orange & green flag over construction site of hospital development, hills above Bath. M. a.m. Joe & Emily p.m. Lovely visit. Reading Le Grand Meaulnes.

22 July

Nightmare complete scan in the morning. Lying inside the scanner being
bombarded by noises like road drills, I told myself nothing could be as bad once I was out of it.

23 July

Sometimes with a start of surprise: I have had a stroke!
   Yes, from neglecting diabetes.

The hills are shadows, and they flow
   From form to form, and nothing stands;
They melt like mist, the solid lands,
   Like clouds they shape themselves and go.

24 July

When I lie within my bed,
Sick in heart and sick in head,
And with doubts discomforted,
Sweet Spirit comfort me!
   (Robert Herrick, ‘His Litany to the Holy Spirit’)

Disappearance or dissolution of person (?) in the creative act (Nielsen).

Visits from Lee over the weekend, coinciding with a visit from Norman Schwenk on Saturday. Blessings of friendship.
   Lee brought photos of his new work – the next step. How often we say the same things in different words, or not quite the same language.

26 July

A run (pushed in a wheelchair) to the Vascular Unit for a scan. Glimpses of the outside, different views, refreshing air.
27 July

Old man, blindly stubborn, out of bed, moaning, hitting nurse, poking oxygen mask of neighbouring patient, confused, impossible. ‘Where do you want to go?’

Leaves shining in morning light.
Dressed myself in pyjamas.
To Sandy: ‘I don’t even know what diabetes is. Or insulin’.
Jim Insole in his wheelchair. Joe. Maddy. My granddaughter, bright Chlöe. All arrived in Maddy’s van.
Tension in bed at night.

In extreme weakness one feels at the edge – facing into the dark. All metaphors for loss of consciousness. All words in life for something that is wordless – the feared nothing. Afraid, you know you are alive.
Written 28 July with a steadier hand.

Lying here I have received so much love.

Today is my 13th day in hospital.

It was 4.10 by the ward clock when M. first left me in bed – the blackest hour.


Late afternoon visit to Frome Hospital. The young ambulance man with whom I travelled knew Mieke, who started treating his daughter today.

Evening light through the ward window, at the angle at which I see it from home. I feel I could almost crawl there; but no I can’t. My mind moves along the pavement.
From window at night, a bright planet.

Wheeled into washroom to wash myself. First time I have seen my face in two weeks – heavily bearded, familiar, quite healthy looking!
Visit from Lindsay Clarke who kissed me in greeting. He is working vigorously on his new novel and sounds fully involved in it.

Lindsay shared my dislike of Amy Michaels’ much-praised *Fugitive Pieces*. His view seems to be that it is made of words, without felt life. I see it as a very clever literary concoction based upon research into several subjects which Michaels brings together and melds with reading Holocaust literature. How could so many critics be so impressed? Haven’t they read the real thing, e.g. Primo Levi, which leaves no scope for aestheticizing the experience? To my mind Michaels’ poetic style is self-cancelling: if every sentence is significant, none is. It is a novel full of human wisdom, often epigrammatically expressed, which, to me, doesn’t ring true.

At the same time as I write I have been worrying that I am too critical. But there is a difference between having a bullshit detector as a reader and having a critical eye for human behaviour – in being deficient in charity & compassion.

Colin came in late bringing me a book of Cartier-Bresson photographs to look at.

Here, in a long ward of the Victoria Hospital, among old men, there are views of roofs of Frome, and, to the side, a shady walk under pine trees in the park.

30 July

Physiotherapy in the morning. Exercising leg muscles. Standing holding bars against the wall. This is what I need. Sue used to say I should be interested in her profession. One ignores or neglects so much until one has need of it.

Card & touching message from Al-Anon group. Would have cried if I could have done so without it hurting – as often in these days when I am shown so much caring.

Visit from Philip & Zélie who brought me a beautiful piece of granite from Dartmoor – reds greeny grey sparkles of mica. Fits my palm.

31 July

Primo Levi’s ‘The Canto of Ulysses’ (*If This Is a Man*). Levi remembering fragments of Dante, in Auschwitz: a measure of human worth & dignity,
together with memories of his native mountains. Great poetry not only survives; it is the survival of values.

With the attendance of nurses & regular mealtimes & other rituals hospital is like a long flight on an aeroplane, though not all of us are going to arrive anywhere.

Saturday morning visit from Emily & Jason.


2 August

Long hot night. Loud voices of youths in the park until late. I could stand this morning with aid of bars in the toilet.

Reading a life of Richard Feynman: I simply don’t understand why discoveries about the nature & behaviour of particles should, in the words of a scientist on the radio last night, ‘kill deity’. It is the whole man, the whole human being that is involved in seeking a relationship with God. The excitement of scientific discovery may become a form of ‘spirituality’, but is inevitably a very partial one.

Partially sighted is what we all are. Scientific discoveries about the nature of matter explain nothing about ultimate meanings, and may only impress us by our own cleverness. To Blake, nature holds no secrets, only the Imagination perceives – creates? – spiritual truths.

A nurse tells me my left ankle is swollen, which sets me worrying. M. brings a bunch of feathery goldenrod & rich brown & gold sunflowers. Start Holmes’s *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* & sympathise with STC’s bowel pains on the voyage to Malta.

Quiet afternoon. Sky veiled, a little breeze stirring the sunshade on the walled seating area outside. Murmur of voices from a few visitors. Across the ward an old man lies with his mouth open, face sharpened, probably near death. Is it true that we imagine an afterlife mainly when we are in health, full of life, when it is hard to imagine anything else? How different, though, in extreme weakness, when that weakness, pulling one further down, is the only power we can feel!
I have enough strength now to know how weak I have been – the more strength to feel it, and to begin to feel more frustrated.

Late afternoon: physiotherapy – standing with hands on bed.

3 August

A cooler night. First rain for weeks. Vivid barely memorable sex dreams.

Physiotherapy with Ros Edwards. With Ros & Jane to help, walked with a frame to the end of the ward and back again!

Visit from Frank Kibblewhite in the morning. The last time he saw me I was full of vigour – talk & ideas anyway. Now, like Gerard, I am walking with a frame but, as Frank pointed out, Gerard won’t be getting better. Frank is an exceptionally sensitive man, very sympathetic & intelligent.

‘What no-one with us shares, scarce seems our own.’

STC

Towering clouds. August cloud castles, moving slowly across the sky visible from the window, in the west.

Conversation with Jack, the old man in the bed beside me. Cancer. From Lock’s Hill; he remembers Sundyside and fields where council houses were built, on the Mount, from boyhood. Used to hear the clock of the old Asylum (across the road from where we live) at home in bed; delivered milk to Old Schoolhouse when he was a boy. A brave, down-to-earth man.

Afternoon: second walk of the day. Evening visits from my neighbours, Jenny & Paddy, and from Pip O’Callaghan, whose MA Project I was tutoring.

4 August

Fat pigeon cleaning itself with its beak, lighter grey plumage against grey pine bough stained with green lichen.

My earliest poetry was, very consciously, a form that excluded aspects of the modern world. In using the Chalk Giant & the shingle shore I aimed at a kind of integral language – not ‘pure’ in a puritan sense – which excluded the language & thought-world of advertising & popular culture, and enabled me to explore fundamentals uncontaminated. I didn't think
exactly in these intellectual terms – it was more an instinct for a kind of unity – ‘language’ of materials & place – in effect also language of a loved ‘world’. During that period I felt highly antagonistic to what I would now call (after Hegel) our age of prose, especially in respect of its buying & selling of human life & nature. I was influenced also by the models of Lawrence & Hardy & their organic languages. Hence in part my attraction to the elemental as cosmic energies & grounded materiality. At times I have feared this has made me unhuman – the Robinson Jeffers view isn’t mine – and retrospective; more in love with stones than people, and more concerned with a pre-industrial England than the present. I am not a snob but I have a horror of street-wise language & the argot of televisual culture. My view is that popular culture in all its forms betrays human beings and cheapens life.

Given this bias it was inevitable that I should think increasingly in Wordsworthian (Lyrical Ballads) terms. And at the same time become aware of self-imposed limitations – the limitations of the language I can actually use. Whatever the answer, becoming a ‘new poet’ making free with contemporary slang isn’t it.

In part I found what I wanted in George Oppen, with the difference that he was American. On reflection, though, I can see that he though urban is elemental – perhaps all Americans are, because aware of American ground – soil, rock, sea – the great body of the continent itself, present everywhere, under the skyscrapers as in the country. What prevents English poets from feeling this in England is a state of consciousness, a habitual blindness. They are more social, but in a way that cheapens the social by dematerialising it – and despiritualising it – by abstracting it from the ground. This cheapening betrays democracy, in the Keatsian sense of a conversation of individual thinking & feeling beings.

More physiotherapy: walking with Ros. I feel my weakness, but am stronger. Even at the best of times I walk peculiarly, as Les used to like pointing out. Now my legs are being re-educated. Weak, a man can feel like a tree, heavy & in danger of falling under its own weight. John Barleycorn cut off at knee.

So far I can’t share the biographer’s tremendous enthusiasm for Richard Feynman. An attractive man, but why should a genius for physics be other than an extreme specialism which limits insight in other directions? Having fun as a relief from the Manhattan Project doesn’t impress – but what would?
Opinion in the ward was divided over the Queen Mother’s 99th birthday. Early in the morning a big bolshie nurse says indignantly that she too would be ‘wonderful’ if everything had always been done for herself. Later an older nurse remarks cheerfully to me on the event, as if I should find something to rejoice in it.

Visit from Kim Taplin in the afternoon. She looks very well – always a good walker, but Jeremy is fanatical. She says she feels she hasn’t woken up yet. How does one? I thought about my writing, always aiming to see more. But Al-Anon, and the last 3 weeks, have made me feel awake as a human being sharing life with others.

Therapists questioning an old lady with thin, badly ulcerated legs who has been brought into the ward:

‘Are you worried about anything?’
‘The state of the world.’

5 August

Heavy rain overnight breaking the drought. Mother’s birthday: 5 August 1906, the weak baby they thought wouldn’t live, and christened Ivy because (she said) it didn’t seem worth giving her a more substantial name.

‘Have mercy on me, O something out of me! For there is no power (and if that can be, less strength) in aught within me!’

‘man’s dependence on something out of him.’
Coleridge

In contrast, Blake’s feeling (for it is first feeling) seems to be of self-sufficiency, the idea of gods being products of the human breast perhaps relating to the artist’s constant self-reliance & productivity. It may be that the opposed views of Nature also derive from this difference – Coleridge (and Wordsworth) responding to ‘something’ in Nature, while to Blake Nature without the human imagination is nothing. My feeling is, and always has been, much closer to Coleridge’s.
Richard Holmes connects Coleridge’s belief in ‘the one Life’ with the idea that ‘the earth [Gaia] might in certain ways be alive – not as the ancients saw her, a sentient goddess with purpose and foresight – more like a tree. A tree that exists, never moving except to sway in the wind, yet endlessly conversing with the sunlight and the soil’.

Another hospital day. Toilet, wash & dress myself. Visit from M. & Bethan & Ard in the morning. Reading. Listening to the rain – interrupted Test Match on the radio or watching it on TV. Regular meals. Monitoring my blood glucose. Sleep after mid-day meal. Two walks with frame. Visit from Sandy in the afternoon. She complimented me on my patience. But what alternative is there? (In any case, I would probably be reading if I were at home.) M. comes again in the evening. A fresher, cooler day.

At least I’m not here worrying that none of my poems is in any of the end-of-century anthologies.

6 August

An old woman was brought into the ward late at night. She soon began to cry out: ‘Help me, please help me’, then ‘Please kill me off’, ‘Let me die’ and called on her sons, daughter, her husband, her mother & father (who must be dead). All night, with intervals when she was probably asleep, she begged for help or to die. Nothing to do but listen.

Walk with frame to toilet & washroom in the morning – another first.

During the day the old woman lies, her face badly bruised, wearing an oxygen mask, across the ward. She is visited by three big sons & her daughter, whose names I heard her call over & over.

Morning visit from Elin, who arrived at Bristol Airport from Amsterdam at 9, with M. & Bethan & Ard, who return to the Netherlands today. I feel how lucky I am.

‘Not justice nor enduring correctness endears to us the criticism of Eliot, Matthew Arnold, or Dr Johnson, but precisely the sense that, for them, criticism was being used in the service of a tremendous will to power, one desirous of rewriting literary history in order to leave a blank that the poet can fill.’

Adam Kirsch, reviewing Randall Jarrell, TLS
Is this true? Can’t a critic be passionately dispassionate?

Physiotherapy downstairs in the exercise room. After walking sideways supported by a kind of bed, a few unaided steps – Ros ready to catch me if I stumble – across a small space of tiled floor that looks like an expanse of desert. I am still often surprised, and sometimes, for an instant, think I could jump up and walk.

7 August

Heavy rain. Dawn with an old moon.

The old woman whined & moaned & talked all night. Impossible to shut out, but now, like the nurses, I felt exasperation not sympathy. There seemed something wilful about it, while my sick neighbours suffered in silence.

Holmes speculates that Coleridge’s ‘concept of the poetic imagination which acted as a single unifying force within all creative acts’ owed a significant debt to Humphry Davy’s ‘scientific theories about the nature of energy and matter’. ‘Davy supposes that there is only one power in the world of the senses; which in particles acts as chemical attractions, in specific masses as electricity, & on matter in general, as planetary Gravitation … When this has been proved, it will then only remain to resolve this into some Law of vital Intellect – and all human knowledge will be Science and Metaphysics the only Science.’ (Coleridge)

Measure the distance between this and present-day theoretical physics with its passion for the invisible constituents of matter and contempt for mysticism. Coleridge, by contrast, hated ‘the needlepoint pinshead System of the Atomists’.

From the window beside my bed – from which at dawn I saw the old moon – I can see, over part of a red-tiled roof & over tree-tops – fragments of the downs beyond Westbury, &e, over them, slow-moving stacks of August cloud. This morning I made some kind of start – a few scratchy prosaic lines – on the poem for my father; but it’s unlikely that I shall be able to write in these conditions. How lucky, though, that my mind has been unaffected – even when I could scarcely move a pencil or pen, I could still think, and speak.
Summer clouds in chalk country – for as long as I have loved these things, it has never occurred to me that, one day, I would be looking at them out of a hospital window, unable, if I wished, to walk over the hills.

8 August

Jack died yesterday evening. I felt he was a kind, strong man. The nurse who told me, after I had asked about him, said he had had a very full life, and knew that he was dying. (I had heard him ask: ‘Am I dying?’)

Opposite to me now is a young woman in her forties. I thought her younger – she has almost a girl’s face. She told me she is a ‘recovering alcoholic’, and, six months ago, weighed 19 stone. She fell in the bathroom this morning and bruised her face badly. She means to live until the Millennium, she told me, and celebrate with a tiny amount of champagne in the bottom of a glass of orange juice.

The old woman died this morning. While Elin was with me, all the curtains round the beds were drawn, and her body was removed.

Before Elin came in, I was able to read the proofs of my essay on Geoffrey Grigson. What I can’t do unaided yet is walk.

Afternoon visit from Anthony Nanson, a young novelist on the MA in Creative Writing. After I had given him an account of my progress we talked books & writing for an hour or so. Later, when Mieke came, rain was pelting down outside. I repeated to her what I had found myself saying to Anthony, that in some ways the last three weeks have been the best in my life: because I am so happy about Joe (and Mieke) and the effort to overcome addiction, and deeply touched by all the care I have received. Also, in a curious way, the time has been restful, with no pressure on me, and plenty of time to read, and talk to friends.

‘To care about words, to have a stake in what is written, to believe in the power of books – this overwhelms the rest, and beside it one’s life becomes very small.’

Paul Auster, The New York Trilogy