The Dances of Albion
Also by John Milbank

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The Dances of Albion
A Poetic Topography

John Milbank

Shearsman Books
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For my mother in her ninetieth year
To the West

To the West
of the not-yet dead;
lost attributes
for self-haunting.

Shrunken, unapt,
the timeless one:
the brothers’ ancient stocky root;
their Jesse-tree,
more potent than
the later may be, yet

‘the tube is hard to fit;
he was always small.’ Always?
They are puzzled,
out there in the West,
by late damp apples fall
dismayed.

Not over, not over yet.
They mourn their not now mourning.
The old king’s shadow
interferes with his own passing.

As horizontal lines divert
transcendence, for a while.
Mark how
the lark and linnet sing
not yet again,
O matchless, matchless man he
must have been:
young nightingale.

Or are they still deceived?
How are they now,
if he is less?

Orpheus, lost Avalon, the West
of the uncanny interval.
One dreamt last night remembered lands,
awake forgot.
And how can he be still
without their clasp?

It is as if they see the spirit itself quail;
whereas the body once bore
in itself a whole kingdom.

But was he always lame
while they still ran?
So may they now outrun him.

Since a new beginning
the one body is always
borne to lie for healing
suspended

in a far-off water
of mist
and orchard.
Dorset Song

Between the seen and unseen danger
twilight falls
to lull us down the cliff-tops’ milky-ways.
It makes us float.

Four elements, drifting
within the same medium:
air of the angels
all around us now
kneeling, swooping.

Far-off, to tantalise us
in the moonlight,
the old ringed
and longed-for hill.

These yearnings outlast
all understandings,

while I climbed between
the gate and the electric wire
and snapped quickly the fallen stone;
noted, running, the re-arranged sarsens,
worried at the gate, broken,
and by whose hand? Why
the twisted, knotted, newly
turned-around signposts?

To mislead walkers?
As the new
and urban signs
so will command us.
Unlike those allegories of choice:
old white and black
and sweetest pointers;
world ash’s human branches,
very paradigm
of upright three dimensions.

Whether to the longed-for,
or the headland seared by sunset to a flying island
as the car-beams laser open to but heal at once
earth’s cataracts.

Autumn, still my first love.
At your first breath
Man’s fire stirring,
and Man’s deed making
every down anew.

Our walks to be a dream
where every step
will sound a symbol
of a landscape really buildings,
over cliffs really creatures,
whose graves the sea ceaselessly
is doomed to disinter.

And our business also
to dig and merely wonder
at the limit, at the outside,
in the outlasting.

Between the lyric
and the hymnic
forever poised.
Over cliffs really creatures,
Giant molehills monuments,
every far-off dream-hill
truly once a dwelling;
rites held out of doors
and swans for farming.

Height to height
and light to light,
like butterflies and minor gods
or aerial photographers
we make this plot,
pretend to view
a former fate

where Hardy’s rustics still forgive
what seems to them but nature’s lot.
And Darwin claims to read the oldest age.
While our own human time,
time of our first desires,
beginning twilight, is declared
unknown.

Swans for farming,
rites outdoors,
the swinging sign-board:
Royal Oak.
The scrolled-out giant,
sacred well –
an antidote –
the druid-groves
where men must hide
at fall of state,
the heroes’ hour.
In carved-out *temenos*
Apollo’s light once fell.
And truth dictated deeds of kings
and dread
foreshadowings.

Since, without terror,
truth would have usurped
its own arrival.

So for then truth fell
as the knife in the back,
as the relic shafts –
as signposts of the last
quivering gestures
of human limbs.

Autumn, my first love
and the human risings.

Black-haired, red-lipped,
with the oak, beech,
ash and elder garlands.

First and opening *agon*:
 writings, writhings.

Pointings begun
only when ended
with the vanishing of their lies.
Cancelled, fulfilled
with the failure of their calculations.
Ancient speech, its run.
Poetry as memory, law that lay
between the lyric and the hymnic.
In the small churches
(there was less wealth here
than in East Anglia for example)
are still encrypted the
old roses for Lydia, chants for Apollo
newly emergent.

Light to light,
height to height
new-born to smoulder.

Shepherds, shepherds all betray.
Gabriel: half Judas, half
evangelist: St John.

Shepherd, once yourself betrayed,
still lead me as a lamb that is sheltered
from death always
by your exchange
of premature slaughter.

True shepherd, lead me.
Dance the hill-tops, our devisings.
Oldest angel, fly the cliffs that pile
the record of our sins before our time.

Lead me, from the hill-tops to the pastures.
Show me secret hidden bones
and unused openings.
Lead me, shepherd to your death again,
where you alone do not betray,
no longer indicate.

If I escape this wire and gate,
these pagan tramplings, farmers’ wiles,
I will pass through Saint Wite’s stone wounds
some ring, bangle or other token.
The Children in the Land of Summer

Treasures not always from darkness.
Treasures once sprung from the light.

To mourn a lost love:
better, longer
than love’s pretence.

As dreams
the living dead. Though old and changed
they once desired
town brides for country garlands;

girls who never could abide
were needed
from the nethermost
to be.

Resting with desires and still
not passing eastwards
to the cure of no-desiring,

while trees by shadows skirted ever seek
to touch their ghost
which then would vanish
even beyond nightfall

since, for centuries
we culled our secrets from below,
we paid their price and met the keeper
at the crossroads of the drover’s road.
By the gnarled beeches,
by the skirting branches,
at a price he yielded,
though he held the songs, the seeds.

Lessons of darkness:
there was no escape.
We needed ruses
to discover the secrets
of the ruses we would need
again to locate secrets.

In those days, for that man
whose fate was to give;
that very thing
was used against him.

In those days there was no escape
from the three curses:
Lessons of darkness.

Not from the scream heard in every hearth-place.
Not from the listener to every word in the whole island.
Not from the depletion of Hades’ cauldron.

Here, uniquely,
came the day of the death of the gods.
When they fled to the barrows,
and when one, without shelter,
captured the forever by a ruse,
naming it but one night
and a single daytime.