

CAM BRIDGE RELITERARY VIEW.

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Charles Lambert

postfuck tristezza

lasting blueroom pleasure to meet so many
freshminds happy bodyminds

(from a letter to the author, dated 730609 and signed -s-)

AMONG THE WRITERS to read for the Blue Room during its first year was the concrete poet Dom Sylvester Houedard. I'd never heard of him before being invited by John Wilkinson and Charlie Bulbeck to help run the society and this was true for many of the writers invited there to read. Indeed, the only poets I *had* heard of before John contacted them were Jonathan Williams and Edwin Morgan, and they came during the second year. dsh, as Sylvester liked to be known, died over fifteen years ago now, and I don't know to what extent death has enhanced or damaged his reputation (I suspect the latter), but in 1973 he was one of the luminaries of the various interfaces surrounding poetry as words-on-a-page: Bob Cobbing working with sound, John Farnival with images; dsh was a bit of a gadfly, alighting on the back of the poetry world and leaving an itch quite out of proportion to the size and depth of the sting. He was known for producing what Edwin Morgan had called *typestracts*, asymmetrical geometric images made by banging the typewriter keys repetitively to form a sort of design, sometimes containing words. I'm not sure what value these works have now—they're certainly a long way from my own concerns—although I don't remember scepticism then. I think I was attracted by the glamour of a man who wasn't just certifiably avant-garde but also a Benedictine monk, the literary editor of the Jerusalem Bible, a bit of an expert on Buddhism, and, although on whose authority I have this I don't remember, the favourite interpreter of Pope Paul VI. dsh was well-connected all round.

When dsh agreed to read for us he asked if we could fix up dinner for him with Joseph Needham, the illustrious Sinologist, at that point

more or less halfway through his *Science and Civilisation in China* and a notoriously difficult figure to deal with, especially when approached by first-year students with no documented interest in China or science. I'm sure John did his best to entice Needham across town from Caius to Jesus, presumably using dsh as lure, but Needham had another engagement that evening. In a letter he wrote to Harry Matthews two days after the reading, dsh explained his absence like this:

dr needham the science and civilisation of china master
of ginville (*sic*) & caius was to have come to dinner but the
wretched queen sent for him to entertain the chinese minister
of foreign affairs at hampton court

I have no memory of this, although surely the vision of Elizabeth Windsor summoning the testy Marxist academic to her table would be hard to forget. It's a surreal scenario, more suited to Elizabeth I than to her current successor; still, I can't see any reason to doubt it. By that point we'd arranged to have dinner in John's rooms in Jesus. This was the only occasion during my three years in Cambridge in which I witnessed college servants carrying food in single file from the college kitchen to the room of an undergraduate, like a scene from *Brideshead Revisited*. They crossed the lawn diagonally, bearing their silver-domed platters in a process that managed to be both ostentatious and, when the food was revealed, dispiritingly spartan, although dsh, in a letter written shortly after to Peter Swale-Thornber, describes the dinner as "an excellent meal". John had moved his small wooden desk into the middle of the room and the three of us—John, Charlie and I—and dsh sat down to eat. This was before the reading. There was college claret and a fair amount of that was drunk as dsh told us stories. We spoke about poetry, a little. We also spoke about plans to set up a printing society, essentially to print our own work. But the most significant memory of the meal had nothing to do with what was said. I was sitting on dsh's left, with John to my left and Charlie opposite. About halfway through the meal, with dsh slumped slightly forward as though groping for an errant napkin, Charlie's expression, up to then of polite, rather glazed interest, subtly changed. Moments later, I saw a similar shift in

John's face, from attention to a curdled blend of surprise and affront. It wasn't until dsh's hand reached my leg and gave it an affectionate, gently probing stroke towards the groin that I understood why. Before any of us had time to react, dsh was smartly upright once again and the episode was over.

The reading itself was gossipy and entertaining. Work that depends for its success on its visual appeal, as dsh's does, clearly isn't designed to be read out loud, and dsh, who must have had some experience of events like this, was wise enough to opt for an anecdotal mode. I recall it as a polished performance, with substantial, teasingly indiscreet stories about Allen Ginsberg and others. The only actual poem I remember was dsh's famous translation of the even more famous haiku by Matsuo Basho: frog-pond-plop, presented in fold-out origami form, like those playground games girls use to discover which boy they're (not) in love with. He was dressed in a black suit and, I think, a black shirt, and had a rather dapper mafioso air about him, oddly enhanced by his donnish bald head and heavily-rimmed glasses.

After the reading, it was our job to take dsh to the guest room I'd booked for him at Emma, my and Charlie's college. John, by this time, had melted away and Charlie and I walked dsh from the room in which he'd done the reading down through the college gardens to the room in which he'd be sleeping. He must have been more than used to the monastic frugality college guest rooms offered in those days—I don't know if this is still the case—and barely glanced around him as we opened the door and waved him in. He dropped his bag on the bed and demanded to be shown the bathroom immediately. For a moment, I thought he was going to be sick, and rushed him two or three doors along the corridor until we'd found it. He darted in, came out seconds later, beaming. One of his areas of expertise, he told us, along with ecumenicism and Meister Eckhart, was sanitary ware; he collected the names of lavatory manufacturers, and this one, the one he had found in the Emma bathroom, was a rare and fine example. Charlie and I glanced at each other, amused, perhaps also a little disconcerted. Before we left, dsh asked us both for our room numbers. Charlie mumbled something;

I spoke more clearly. We left him in his room and, I think, went for a last drink in the Castle.

The following morning I found dsh standing beside my bed. I never locked my door when I was in, on the unstated, unexamined principle that I would always be available. In one sense, I lived to be interrupted, which played havoc with any idea of concentrated study but also meant that routine, both self-imposed and institutional, was routinely thwarted. So I'd often wake up to find people already enjoying my room, rolling a joint or taking a record from its sleeve, and wasn't initially discomfited to find a middle-aged man there, although I must have been surprised; dsh wasn't a friend and fellow student, but a famous poet, and old enough to be my father. I was nineteen, easily star-struck; six months earlier I'd never met a genuine 'published' writer or, to my certain knowledge, an adult homosexual. By the time I'd wriggled into a semi-upright position he was sitting comfortably on the bed, at the height of my knees, his legs crossed. He glanced around the room. You like David Bowie, he said, and I saw he was looking at a poster above the desk, the cover of Ziggy Stardust, which had come out the year before. Yes, I said, very much. He turned his head towards me, placed a hand on my knee. You do know what people say about David Bowie? I think I might have nodded; I'm pretty sure I didn't move my knee; it would have seemed inhospitable. That he's gay, you mean? dsh smiled. And maybe I smiled back with what looked like, or really was, encouragement. Maybe I'd unwittingly stumbled into a recognisable, albeit coded, exchange of seduction that I was born to use. I'd like to think so. Whatever, the next thing I knew dsh had swivelled round, dropped down to his knees beside my single bed, whipped back the cover and was briskly sucking me off. I lay back, startled, titillated, flattered, incredulous, not looking at him, staring at the ceiling, until I came.

What dsh did to me was illegal at that time; in 1973, I was still two years too young to consent, even if I'd wanted to. But that didn't cross my mind at the time, and I suspect it was equally far from dsh's thoughts. And it may have been that my state of semi-waking semi-awe lent itself to a reading of consent. I certainly didn't feel damaged in any way,

although I do remember him standing up, slipping his handkerchief with my spat-out sperm inside it back into his pocket, reaching into his own unzipped fly in an optimistic fashion, clearly hoping for a little reciprocity, and my shaking my head very firmly and saying no. But I didn't feel uncomfortable or have any sense of inappropriacy until it was time for me to get out of bed, naked, and dress. I suppose I'd expected him to leave the room. But dsh sat back in my small orange and bleached wood armchair and watched me as I slipped on my underpants and jeans, and hunted for a clean shirt, and didn't know what to say or do, or think, for that matter; and the lewdness of that attention exposed and even violated me in a way the sexual act hadn't.

The rest of the morning we walked around Cambridge. My strongest urge was to free myself from him, and to give myself time to consider what had happened; also, I think, to tell somebody, to give it some shape, and distance, perhaps to brag about it. dsh had replaced his horn-rimmed glasses with sunglasses, their lenses impenetrably dark. He seemed to be at a loss as well. We went to a café round behind Christ's and had tea and bacon sandwiches and what I should have done, I think now, is explain to him that I'd been, to all intents and purposes, a virgin until an hour before and that, however I'd imagined my first sexual experience with an adult man, and I'd done little *but* imagine it for the previous eight years of my dream-driven masturbatory life, the notion that I might finally be deflowered, so to speak, by a middle-aged man I barely knew, a monk and a poet, and someone for whom I felt nothing but admiration, had never crossed my mind, and that I didn't know what to do with it; it had made me feel both cheated and ashamed. I didn't do this, and, of course, it wasn't up to me that it be done. What we did was talk about the printing society, and I've no doubt dsh told me a few more stories, though I wasn't listening as I had been the evening before. But he was also distracted, oddly defenceless, as though he'd been wronged in some way and had no available source of redress. As soon as breakfast was over, and I remember that dsh had no money at all and that I had to pay, I suggested we call on John. He jumped at the idea.

John wasn't there but he'd left the door unlocked and a note that we

should wait for him. I offered to make coffee, hoping dsh would be distracted by John's impressive collection of books, and leave me alone. But he followed me into the tiny kitchen and tried to embrace me, and I pushed him away, with a violence that startled me and may have startled him; I'd given him no reason to think I might not still be compliant. When John arrived soon after, we were both, I think, relieved. We drank our instant coffee and, as far as I recall, though I can't imagine why, unless dsh had simply become mine in some mysterious way, I offered to take him to catch the coach back to Prinknash Abbey. We left John and walked to the bus station, dsh increasingly nervous, as though some bell of doom were about to toll. The weather took a turn for the worse; a fine drizzle began to fall. dsh must have had a bag, although I don't remember it—I do recollect an umbrella, which must have been his, and his pulling me, arm linked to mine, beneath it.

But the schedule he had written down was wrong. The coach for which he had a ticket had left some hours before, at the time, I calculated later, that he was in my room. The man collapsed. He may even have cried a little, his dark glasses finally removed, his bottom lip quivering. He was hopeless, stunned, then tense and fluttering with panic, glancing around himself as if waiting for the Furies to arrive. More than anything, I think, I was worried he'd make a fool of himself, and of me. I was shocked to see an adult so needy, so utterly incapable of solving the small logistic problem of changing the time on a ticket. I felt that I was dealing with a frightened child, when that was also how I saw myself. I was irritated, anxious for him, touched by his neediness, in more or less equal measure. I gave him reassurance, the way an adult might with some lost toddler. I'd have held him but for the risk he'd hold me back; even in public he felt like a wild card. He was terrified, I understood later, that his ticket might no longer be valid and that he would need to buy a new one; a new one for which he had no funds. He would have to explain to the Abbot exactly why he'd missed the coach, which would involve his lying, or his telling some kind of truth about what he'd done with me. The night before he'd told us with glee of his part in selecting the apprentice boy-potters at the Abbey. Perhaps that kind of behaviour was no longer so amusing.

Two days after I'd put him on the next coach, a letter arrived; more than a letter: a large buff envelope. He'd been very busy. He'd written to printer friends about our plans to start a printing society; he'd written to friends in France to say we might be visiting that summer. One of these friends was Harry Mathews and it's a source of regret to me that I didn't take advantage of this; others were artists, abbots, marquises. All these letters, each one carefully tailored to its recipient, he'd made a carbon copy of and sent the copies to me. I still have them, and they're testament to an extraordinary generosity, not least because he pointed out that they might have actual monetary value and even gave me the name of a dealer who might be interested. Among the letters was one addressed to me, typed using the red part of the ribbon. The body of the letter is brief and businesslike, although it does contain the epigraph to this essay. It's signed "luvlib -s-". But the ps, which is twice as long, contains a sweet and thoughtful analysis of some poems of mine I'd given him to read. Two weeks later, he wrote again. I must have let him know I'd had some poems turned down by Peter Finch at *Second Aeon* on the grounds that they were too heavily influenced by John Wilkinson's work (which was certainly the case). This is what dsh had to say:

- i cld perhaps have like warned you peterfinch is just like that -
blames on him not yr work - one proof is the way you feel from
yr letter - sort of postfuck tristezza - (if thats what italian is for
tristesse) - anything ive seen of yrs isnt wilkinsonianesque in
even the least - the words you use make the sheet theyre on a
flowerbed - & even more ah happy featherbed smiling passing
minds into it

These are the only references, albeit oblique, to what happened in my room. I never saw him again, and our correspondence soon fizzled out when it became clear that I wasn't going to visit him at Prinknash or make use of his enormous network of contacts, as much out of a sort of unacknowledged wariness as anything else, though lack of funds played its usual hand. I learnt he was still alive and active from the linguist John Sinclair in a lift high above Birmingham university campus, three years before dsh died, but wasn't tempted to get in touch. I've never

met a man who struck me as more adamantly non-spiritual, although that didn't make him the obverse of spiritual: worldly. He was perfectly equipped to do what he did, it seems to me now, skimming across a harsher world with the malice and invention and charm of a child. I thought my memories of him were entirely fond but, writing this, I find that isn't the case.

luvlib.

Author Info

Charles Lambert grew up in England. After leaving Cambridge in 1975, he moved to Italy, where he still lives. He has published *Little Monsters*, a novel, and *The Scent of Cinnamon*, a collection of short stories. His second novel, *Any Human Face*, will be published by Picador in May 2010.