

Upstate

Also by Jeremy Hooker:

Poetry

Landscape of the Daylight Moon

Soliloquies of a Chalk Giant

Solent Shore

Englishman's Road

Master of the Leaping Figures

Their Silence a Language

Our Lady of Europe

Adamah

Arnolds Wood

The Cut of the Light: Poems 1965-2005

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Welsh Journal

Criticism

Writers in a Landscape

Imagining Wales: A View of Modern Welsh Writing in English

As editor:

At Home on Earth:

A New Selection of the Later Writings of Richard Jefferies

JEREMY HOOKER

UP STATE

A North American Journal

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**Upstate:
A North American Journal**

For David Lloyd and Kim Waale

Preface

This journal is a record of a visit to North America with my wife, Mieke. During the academic year 1994-95 I was visiting professor at Le Moyne College near Syracuse in upstate New York. Our friends David Lloyd, the writer, and his wife, Kim Waale, the sculptor, were frequently our companions and guides in our explorations during the year. Through David and his family we were privileged to gain a special sense of areas settled by Welsh immigrants in upstate New York. This was our first, and so far, only, visit to America, and, for us, it was an experience of discovering places and a way of life that was new to us.

Of course, it is late in the day for anyone to imagine that they have 'discovered' America! In that sense of the word, there are few places in the world, if any, that remain undiscovered. Yet, for any mind that is alive the world is always new. However much we may gain from reading and study or benefit from other people's advice or experience, true knowledge is always first-hand.

This, no doubt, is one reason why some people keep diaries or journals. I looked recently for the first time into Julian Green's *Diary 1928-1957*, where, in the first entry, he writes: 'This diary . . . will help me, I think, to see more clearly into myself'. It would be futile to deny that keeping a journal involves a search for self-knowledge. But that was not what made me want to start a journal, when I was a student. Rather, it was a sense of wonder. I had been struck by the sight of some flowers – I think they were tulips – on a grassy bank in a street in Southampton, and I had been reading William Blake, a combined experience that impelled me to ask about the flowers' maker. Subsequent entries had more to do with self-recrimination over boozing and time wasting, and it was almost another ten years before, living in rural Wales, I began the writing that matters to me, which is essentially exploratory.

A few months later in his diary Julian Green, who has been reading Samuel Pepys, remarks that Pepys 'wrote for the pleasure of talking about himself. Now, I obey the incomprehensible desire to bring the past to a standstill that makes one keep a diary'. I can identify with this: the desire to capture the moment. This is impossible, of course, yet in the very attempt something of the life-sensation may be caught. The aim pertains also to memory, and may be valued especially by someone who

has a poor memory for details, as I have. Simply making a note may be a poetic act, a humble attempt, in the words of Patrick Kavanagh in his poem 'The Hospital', to 'Snatch out of time the passionate transitory'.

I love the literary journal as a form, and delight in published diaries and notebooks – Dorothy Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, Francis Kilvert, H. D. Thoreau, these are among writers whose personal writings deserve to be known as bright books of life. What gives me special pleasure is the art of natural observation, which I first discovered as a boy in the essays of Richard Jefferies. It is an art which, at best, is not mere note taking or even picture-making, but involves an acute sensitivity to the life in things, to the quick of sentient existence. And the observation or perception is, in the kind of writing I have in mind, the origin of thinking. Jefferies's Notebooks reveal a man who never stopped thinking for himself, even when in great pain, to the end of his life. One could call this courage. One could say also that this was the man he was; there was no other way for him. And perhaps this is the way of Negative Capability, of the person who lives with doubts and uncertainties, and for whom the living detail is always the beginning of a fresh perception, a further adventure towards – where?

Keeping a journal is a means of seeing in the dark, and the dark always advances.

I have no interest in confession, although I am aware that my very selectivity – and every journal entry is a selection from countless possible impressions – is a form of self-revelation. My hope would be to speak in a way that opens upon common human depths. Self-consciousness, as I understand it, is less the material of a journal than a problem the person keeping a journal has to deal with, the more so once a possibility or intention of publication arises. It will be less of a problem, however, if one's aim is always to keep one's mind on the matter in hand, whether noting a natural effect, or engaging in a process of thought, or thinking about oneself. The one thing a diarist must never do is perform for an audience, even if the audience is only himself or herself. At best, I have found my journal a means of escaping from self-consciousness, since it is not about the ego in isolation, but about relationships between the seer and the seen, between self and other. If it is about finding oneself, it is about finding oneself in the world, neither of which is separable from the other.

It will be evident from the foregoing that I understand keeping a journal as analogous to writing poetry. It is not the same, but there are analogies. Each is about making a shape in words – a literary journal rarely consists of raw notations; its aim is to find the right word or image, to form the corresponding ‘shape’ for an impression or thought. In my case, too, the journal has sometimes served me as a ‘quarry’ of poetic materials, as well as a way of thinking about poetry.

Immediacy is a feature of journal entries, as it may also be of the poetic image – ‘quickness’ may characterize both. But it is not only the present moment in which one lives. *Upstate* is a journal in which I record impressions and ideas inspired by the day-to-day experience of living in upstate New York. Yet I was also during that period preoccupied with thinking about and imagining Europe, and writing poems that were subsequently published in my book, *Our Lady of Europe*. What North America gave me was experience of the New World. But it provided me also with the distance from which I could see the Old World in which I had lived. The contrast between ‘new’ and ‘old’ worlds enabled me to seek the terms in which each was most vividly alive.

29 August 1994

In the air at last, cloud below us and land under cloud-shadow visible below the clouds, sunlight shining on the edge of the wing. We left Frome this morning after several days of frantic preparations. When Mieke & I visited my father in the nursing home, he said, over & over again, 'Never mind, Jeremy' & 'No one stands for me' – by which, reverting to his early days, he meant no one supports him. As I write this, I can see Portland joined to the land by a narrow strip, the long shingle beach of Chesil, far below. And now we are following the coast: small, irregular green & brown fields with cloud puffs above them, visible through a darkish gauzy light.

Turbulent now – pen shaking too much to write.

Small white clouds like gunsmoke. Land & islands like pieces of jigsaw, sea dimpled & shimmering.

At 35,000 feet with a floor of woolly cloud below us & below that the Atlantic. And here we are cramped in our seats looking at tiny screens set into the seat backs in front showing silly films, only five hundred years after the tiny boats crossed the 'green sea of darkness' & the conquest & white colonization of the New World began.

How this would have startled Brendan & the early voyagers. Would they have found the world full of miracles if they could have travelled in air-conditioned comfort above it? Even to us, who seldom travel by air, the experience is less than marvellous. Yet the achievement is amazing when one considers the beginnings of flight, let alone the time before, when for ages flight was a wonderful dream. How quickly though we have got used to our own technological new world and taken for granted what would have seemed miracles even to our Victorian ancestors.

As I look out of the window along the wing I see a kind of sublime vacancy. Above, the blue dome of the sky; below, the cloud-floor shaped like wind-moulded drifts of snow, but insubstantial, because the blue sky appears through rifts & open spaces. As it becomes more broken, the cloud might be ice floes on a sky-blue sea. It is beautiful, and vast, and in relation to the oceanic cloud we seem to be moving very slowly. For some reason, I think of the Soviet astronaut who believed he had categorically disproved the existence of God, because he found no sign of God in space. It's easy to laugh but in fact most of us are drunk on

the ideas our age lives by, its faith that there's nothing anywhere except man & his concepts & images.

For a long time we have been flying above continuous flat cloud but now, though the cloud is still continuous, it forms an extraordinary hilly landscape, all stacks & whirls & twisted upthrust formations, like the surface of a strange planet.

39,000 feet over the Gulf of St Lawrence. All blue under us, a great depth of blue.

Over the coast, a distinct orangey-red line. Fields, roads, houses, a relief map with raised patches of trees. Again the smaller clouds & cloud-shadows under them, dark shapes, like jelly fish, drawn across the surface of the land.

Coming in over the water at Boston, another jet below us, small as a toy.

Three hours later. A dark, clear night, patterns of lights on the ground & the after-sunset glow to our right. On the way to Syracuse.

2 September

We have come to an area of pinewoods & low hills – a drumlin landscape; prosperous suburban America, but spacious, with a remote feel of the early continent, a just perceptible sense of the wild land, around secluded & well-protected residences. Our landlady, Terrie Sopher, insists on calling our roomy & beautifully appointed apartment a 'suite'. It is above hers, in a wooden building she herself designed. She has it well secured with a system of locks & alarms which makes me feel jumpy, because I don't yet understand it. She too makes me feel nervous; she's intelligent & well meaning & very helpful towards us, but this is very much *her* house, and I'm afraid of doing something careless, like forgetting to lock a door or setting off an alarm. Terrie's late husband was professor of geography at Syracuse University – it was an eerie experience for me to look at the bookshelves in our suite and find books on landscape & place . . .

The people we've met have been enormously welcoming – David & Kim who met us at the airport when we arrived, and colleagues, Barron & Pat, with whom we had a meal & drank a lot of delicious South African red wine the evening after our arrival. But also many other people in the

college, which has a relaxed, friendly atmosphere.

The welcome has given us great pleasure and its immediacy is part of the *difference* of being here, but doesn't altogether account for it. There are things that seem superficially different – cars, road systems, architecture, wealth of goods in the stores. And everywhere the different peoples, almost all of them Americans, who belong here, as we do not. I don't want to start with false ideals, and I'm aware of a crassness that almost beggars belief. But I already have a sense of a much larger degree of democracy than I'm used to in England with its little dictatorships, snobberies, & resentful assumptions of inferiority.

And there's the space, as I was told there would be. Here the space immediately around us, which isn't much different from that in a well-to-do, leafy English suburb, but also, with a feeling of a remnant of original wilderness among trees & 'small lawns of home', openings towards far-off horizons – the Great Lakes, the Adirondacks, the Catskills, all the country to New York City & the coast.

There's no doubt that what we've come to – despite deer & squirrels in the pinewoods around – is a life of great luxury, the greatest, in terms of distribution, the world has ever known. And this too gives a different feel to things. Not wholly a welcome one, in the measures taken to protect it, for example, & in the obsession with bodily well being & with securing the personal – *me, my things, my place* – against intrusion, that goes with it. But it would be merely hypocritical for me to deny the benefit of conveniences & facilities, & my pleasure in the goods on display.

A call from Joe in France, where he & Maddy went with the lorry to travel and earn some money a few days before we left England. He wanted to know how M. and I would feel about being grandparents! Even seemed a little doubtful we would be pleased! And of course we're delighted to know that Maddy is two-months pregnant and they intend to have the child. Afterwards M. cried. And I could see so clearly the little boy I used to walk with in the fields round Brynbeidog, and take to and fetch from school.

A gray squirrel chak-chacked from a vertical pine branch outside the window this morning and its plume of a tail stood up waving violently.

I couldn't see what was agitating it. Later we drove downtown to the Federal Building to set in motion the process that will get me a social security number. I feel already that America will offer me, as it has countless others, an opportunity of freedom – a loosening of creative restrictions maybe – although I'm not sure what form it will take.

4 September

Sunday morning excursion, with Terrie driving, to Skaneateles (by one of the Finger Lakes) for brunch in a restaurant. Afterwards, with several wrong turnings, we drove to Beaver Lake. Woods, vibrant with cicadas, surrounding a lake of green-brown water. An area of marked & illustrated trails, like the New Forest, only more so, with a joky information board every few yards: Nature as mass entertainment. 'Swamplands are the supermarkets of the wild, producing an abundant food supply for animals and fish . . .' 'All around you a great factory is at work' (picture of the interior of a leaf as a factory), juxtaposed with 'the miracle of green and growing things'. Until 1960 the lake was called Mud Lake, which may have been a translation of the Indian name. One picture by the lakeside showed a red man looking out across the water. Returning from a day's hunting he relaxes, enjoying the scene, as we also may relax . . . I feel closer to nature watching the black-capped chickadees (as I've learnt to call them) flitting about in the hawthorn with big red berries which leans over our verandah and coming to drink at the water-bowl.

5 September

Labor Day. I spent most of the time preparing classes until the late afternoon of another warm, sunny day, when we walked along the road and into St Mary's Catholic cemetery, which occupies a large hilly area (bigger than most English city parks) between here and Le Moyne College. We saw our first raccoon by the roadside – a dead one, lying on its back – and, in the cemetery, our first groundhog, so absorbed with head down in grass beside the path that for a time it didn't see us. I was struck by the newness of the smooth gray stones, most with Irish names: none worn out or indistinct and no stone sunken or fallen apart, as in our English graveyards with their invitations to easy reverie. This is indeed a city of the dead. A few maples among the stones are beginning to flame.

6 September

At the end of my first full day's work I was exhausted. The Shakespeare class is large – 33 students – and will be hard to animate. The creative writing class has half that number, and the students are committed. The modern British novel class is a little smaller. Not much participation yet, except among the writers, so I talk too much, try too hard to make things happen. And then, when someone does speak, I often don't hear properly! At the end of the day my head was dully singing.

7 September

Tired last night, and feeling the difficulties of being here – How far will our money go? Will we be able to afford a car? To travel? Will we adapt to the constrictions of the suite? – and thinking about our home & life in England – I doubted that we had done the right thing in coming here. But this morning everyone in college was immediately so helpful, my spirits rose. I felt reassured, glad to be here.

For the time being, as far as my work goes, I have left something complete behind me. Now's the time to move on, to gain new experiences: to renew my sense of imaginative possibility. I like the expansive American gesture – it's what appeals to me in the poetry – Whitman, Charles Olson – in the spaces of the land, but also in the friendly openness of the people. Sometimes it's superficial, but not always, and I don't automatically assume it is. What I want anyway is to go beneath the surface.

Evening At Barnes and Noble listening to David reading poems by Gillian Clarke from his new book, *The Urgency of Identity: Contemporary English-Language Poetry from Wales*, to a small audience. Strange to stand in the bookstore and think of her 'small cottage near Lampeter', as David called Blaen Cwrt.

Pat Keane read an extract from his new book, *Coleridge's Submerged Politics*. Afterwards we went with him, Barron, David & Kim, & Jonathan, a philosopher who had read from his book on criminal law, to a bar and drank several jugs of beer. They are so friendly towards us, and good humoured with each other, that we at once feel included. But I feel rather shy, too, and afraid of being too ponderous, as I always do in the company of quick-witted people.

8 September

A better teaching day with a more fluent rhythm. The large Shakespeare class is going to be difficult – so little response so far that I haven't the faintest idea what they really think of the play, or make of what I'm saying, or of me! They sit quite still, looking at me, sometimes taking notes, reading parts, with little expression, when I ask them to. And I stand in front of them or walk up and down, getting excited with ideas or throwing myself into reading, with no idea of what they make of any of it.

The other classes, especially the creative writing workshop, are coming alive, which makes teaching so much easier & more enjoyable!

And occasionally I get to sit in my office, and look out of the window over college buildings and the campus onto a great plain. This looks more natural than suburban but in fact is rather the latter, with groups of houses among trees. In the near distance, airplanes periodically fly in low and disappear from sight, landing at the airport. Far off, the vague outline of a mountain range – the Adirondacks, I think.

Most of the houses we pass near the college, standing apart from each other in comfortable suburbs, are made of clapperboard.

9 September

Thunder & lightning, at times almost overhead, woke me in the night and I lay in bed reading Pat Keane's Introduction to his book. This immediately impressed me by its engagement with contemporary intellectual issues. Pat manoeuvres intelligently in a tricky & even desperate situation – in effect, a mental war fought by extremists on Left and Right – and in my view uses what is most valuable in radical historicism while retaining a firm grasp on aesthetic values. I was all too aware of academic *hatred* from my own experience, but he brings home to me the extent & ferocity of the warfare – not guns, but words & ideas, which kill the soul – between ideological positions and on grounds of ethnic, gender, and cultural differences. One of the main issues, as I was already aware, was the guilty hatred of Western civilization that has arisen in recent years among white middle-class intellectuals. There is in this a powerfully insidious mixture of justified anger – at slavery, exploitation, patriarchal attitudes, and so on – puritanical self-hatred & ideologically narrow readings of the evidence. What so few of us can

stand are mixed feelings, and a cultural heritage that produces them, and virtually *embeds* us in the ambiguities of love-and-hate, good-and-evil, right-and-wrong. It isn't that I think we should wallow in these, refuse to reason, fail to discriminate between right and wrong. What I feel rather is that with 'pure' mind we dehumanize ourselves.

We need to recognize past evils while acknowledging our links with both victims and perpetrators. (How shall I know my humanity if I can't imagine the suffering and outrage of the former, but also the capacity for inflicting injury that I share with the latter?) What's more difficult, though, is to recognize *present* evils – the forms of moral blindness, injustice, and cruelty to which we in our time are prone. In my small if vociferous world, which is mainly literary & academic, the evil I know is that of the Manichean mind, the ideologically 'pure' with its interrogation of *all* mysterious presence, whether in person or poem.

I don't want to stand for muddle or confusion; I want to see more clearly & more variously. But I want also to be able to admire, and love, and feel awe. I do in any case feel these things, and they mean admitting mixed feelings. Seeing the things of which I'm made doesn't only mean seeing *through* them.

'The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.'

Walt Whitman

Syracuse, the city close to which we will be living for nine months, is in Onondaga County. The Onondagas belonged to the Confederacy of the Five Nations, and were situated between the Mohawk Nation, 'Keeper of the Eastern Door', and the Senecas, 'Keeper of the Western Door'.

The red men were the first to slash and burn the forest to clear the fields. The women were the farmers. They planted many varieties of beans and squash between rows of corn. They called these 'our supporters' and revered the spirit-sisters that guarded them.

During the Revolution soldiers with 'a good eye for country' tramped over New York interior, destroying Indian food supplies. 'No doubt more than one soldier who set fire to a cornfield decided that he was burning a better crop than he had ever seen at home and resolved to come back after the war and claim a piece of such land for his own.'

The New Military Tract: 150,000 acres in Oneida-Onondaga districts

were designated to soldiers (600 – 6,000 acres each, depending on rank).

Most major roads follow Indian trails in New York State. Genesee Street – New York’s Route 5 – replaced an Indian trail, ‘deepened with the steady tread of moccasins’.

The Iroquois acted as middlemen in the trade between the English and Dutch on one hand, and the Indians of the interior on the other. ‘Competition between Hurons and Iroquois for the Great Lakes area customers who wanted European artifacts shaped the destiny of a continent and gave New York its outline for emergence.’

Syracuse, once South Salina: a short distance from the salt works at a point near where a north branch of the Genesee Street crossed Onondaga Creek. The salt springs along Onondaga Lake, in swampy country notorious for summer fevers, were a focus of activity from the earliest days of colonization. Lowering the level of Onondaga Lake in 1822 drained the swamp.¹

This confederacy consisted of the Senecas, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, Mohawks, and Tuskaroras; and until the innovations of white people, with their destructive engines of war – with whiskey and small-pox, they held their sway in the country, carrying victory, and consequently terror and dismay, wherever they warred. . . . Their combined strength, however, in all its might, poor fellows, was not enough to withstand the siege of their insidious foes . . .

George Catlin, *North American Indians* (1844)

13 September

My feelings towards the new are ambivalent. On one hand I enjoy its familiarities, and recognize that without them democracy – the relative freedom & livelihoods of millions of people – could not be sustained. (‘Primitivist’ thinking, to which I’m strongly attracted, caters for an intellectual minority: I’m not aware that it could do anything for the mass of Americans, except abandon them.) On the other hand I see the superficiality of our prevailing civilization, which, with the power of its

¹ Information and quotations drawn from D.W. Meinig, in John H. Thompson (ed.), *Geography of New York State*.

images, is the most insidious that ever has existed, producing a mental world that seems all encompassing, killing our sense of nature (as our poisons kill Nature herself) and seemingly making it impossible for us to see or imagine differently.

The very spirit of poetry breathes hopelessness in this air. A condition that doesn't *necessarily* produce hopeless poetry, while the characteristic freshness of American poetry relates subtly to revolutionary hope: the hope of making a new beginning, of radical change, and (in Whitman and William Carlos Williams for example) of revolutionizing poetry itself, and replacing European models with a poetry that voices *this* land and *this* people.

No wonder Ivor Gurney was attracted to Whitman, and Richard Jefferies fell under the spell of *Leaves of Grass*. I too have long felt the attraction – and while I dislike Whitman's rhetoric, turning to his poetry has always been to me like opening doors and windows when I feel suffocated by my own culture, or unable to write a line of poetry that breathes.

But I know we are far from his day, and from what felt like its renewal, in the 1960s. Not far in actual years, but in mental time, inside the suffocating sphere of our image-world. Yet I don't feel hopeless. I'm curious; I want to see and to understand. The days when it was possible to explore the continent are over, but experience is always new, and all true poetic life is exploration.

16 September

Morning. A pair of white-breasted nuthatches among the Scots pines, running up and down the trunks, and spiralling round them, pecking insects from the bark. The other bird unfamiliar to me, which haunts the garden, is the blue jay. So far I've only glimpsed it, but we often hear its harsh cry. When I was a boy, at school at Rope Hill, Mr Randall, the English teacher, who first woke my interest in *modern* poetry, showed us one of his own poems, in which he mentioned a blue jay. And I criticized the image, on the grounds that our jay wasn't the blue jay!

A history of the United States must be a history of victors; the defeated are relevant chiefly for what they tell us of their conquerors.

Hugh Brogan, *The Penguin History of the United States of America*

Why? The victors' fascination with the conquered (the redskins) tells us something about their guilty consciences (the consciences of sensitive descendants who haven't had to struggle for a place to live in), but probably even more about the loss or destruction of a sense of the sacred. For to the Native Americans this land was sacred ground. With the death of the sacred we are dying spiritually, and Nature (Mother of the Wild Things) may die indeed.

So we turn to the wisdom of the aboriginal people, as we should. But we cannot thereby *become* them without denying their identity, and betraying our own. We can become wiser by getting outside our own skins, but we can't abandon them. It isn't merely 'balance' or fair-mindedness I want. What I want is the truth that lies in meeting; but also understanding of what one is by virtue of western civilization, with its religious inheritance, and meeting with native wisdom, which our ancestors overrode.

For all its limitations born of racial prejudice, there's an honesty about the ambivalence & even the confusion of *Heart of Darkness* that is lacking in the primitivism of the colonialists' heirs, and in our politically correct retrospection. The 'message' may be profoundly pessimistic: the West is hollow at the core, resting on an idealism that is an illusion. But Joseph Conrad recognized himself as a beneficiary of the 'light' won from the 'darkness' that once enveloped the site of London, as a result of 'robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind'.

I write, not to condone crimes against humanity, but with a sense that, *now*, one of our most insidious temptations is an impossible 'purity', a righteousness of thought, which denies the mixed people most of us are. To say that without slavery there would have been no black America isn't to condone slavery; nor does it justify the conquest of the Indians to say that there would have been no white America without it. What is justice to the mind of God, or in the scale of human history? How could any mortal know? We have ourselves to seek to be just in the circumstances of our times. It's my sense of justice that, for better or worse, often makes me take up a position neither on one side or the other, but *between*. It's there, where different things come together, that I find the greatest sense of human possibility.

Evening

David drove us to Cazenovia, where we met Kim and visited the college at which she teaches. The small town – David calls it a village – is one of the oldest in the State. It was founded in the late 18th century, close to a beautiful lake, which, unlike Onondaga Lake, isn't polluted. The college, with older stone buildings and graceful buildings of red brick, stands on the site of the first Madison County Court House. A student band was playing Latin American music on a college lawn, as we walked round, and along streets shaded by tall maples. After dark, a gibbous moon, appearing & disappearing among cloud, but clear & bright later, after we had had a meal in a restaurant and walked to the lake.

The thing most to be avoided, always, is playing God: reconciling the irreconcilable in the mind.

17 September

Terrie took us to Founders' Day dinner at Syracuse University, where we mixed with alumni and students in the lobby of the Geology Building. Halfway through our meal, which we were eating at one of the round tables set out in the lobby, members of the SU football team, with mascot & female cheerleaders, came into the room, and paraded round chanting their war chant. We were among the very few who didn't go to the game afterwards, and we walked back to the car against a crowd streaming towards the Dome. The function of the students at the dinner – confident, personable young men & women – is to mix with the old people – the alumni – and talk about the university past and present. I was able to slip away for a minute and look at the fossil dinosaurs – a Pliosaurus, a Plesiosaurus, and an Ichthyosaurus – exhibited on the wall: one had been found near Dorchester, the other two at Glastonbury, in England.

18 September

A Sunday afternoon drive with Terrie to where she & her husband used to live, in a house in the hills above Oneida Lake, which we glimpsed below us, in blue light under broken masses of cloud. Afterwards we drove to Chittenango, and walked a short distance along the old Erie Canal – in its day (built 1817-1825) the great channel for trade, which ran from Lake Erie to the Hudson. Today, a few leaves were drifting on the

surface of grey-green water. From there to Chittenango Falls, where the creek drops 167 feet into a gorge cut through limestone. We stood above it, where the water flows between boulders which it has washed smooth &, literally, streamlined, before falling into the gorge. Before driving to Cazenovia, where we had tea in the gracious surroundings of an old restaurant – alone in a high-ceilinged room, we helped ourselves to tea from silver teapots set out on a table at the farther end – we visited Stone Quarry Hill, where there is an art gallery & a sculpture park. Here we walked in the beautiful garden – partly cultivated, partly left wild – in warm sunlight, and looked down at other hills. It was beautiful, and reminded me of Welsh hill country, &, perhaps for that reason, I felt a little empty, because I have no associations with this country – its ‘white’ history, which I scarcely know, is so recent, its ‘aboriginal’ history so vast. Yet I am drawn to it, too, and as we drove among the hills, occasionally glimpsing Oneida Lake below, and approaching Syracuse again, I sensed a little more of the patterns of the land.

20 September

A cloudless day. I lectured on *Twelfth Night* in the morning and on *Howards End* in the afternoon. In between, a writing workshop – the Ruskin exercise, listening to what the students had *seen*. So many things, each one different.

21 September

Another day without a cloud in the sky.

Sitting on the verandah in the shade of the Scots pine & the hawthorn, which has dropped big red berries on the planks under my feet. A light breeze stirring the leaves & occasional quick nervous movements of chickadees. With the sound of cicadas, more constant than the louder noise of construction noise nearby, & the resinous smell & beautiful flaky bark of the pines, the place reminds me of the chalet we stayed in in Spain.

In life & death we are all completely wrapped up in the unknown. Genetic inheritance can’t explain the wonder of individual consciousness, the birth of awareness we don’t question, because we know nothing else. So we appear, and the world appears with us, and eventually we disappear, and the world we know disappears from us. I

don't begin to understand what it means, however much I read about evolution & the creation of the universe. I don't say we can know nothing, only that in the matters that concern us most – consciousness and death – we are wrapped in darkness. And the only wisdom I know is to love it, all of it, including death, which we will share with those we love. I can't imagine the world *not*, I can never come close to imagining nothing. And perhaps it isn't for us to do so, because we have no business with 'it'. But say no thing, which is beyond our capacity to conceive or imagine, and may be the ground of all that is . . .

The breeze is a little stronger now; I can feel it moving my shirt against my skin. Now & then a leaf or a pine needle falls, a small bird chirps, and though the clouds I can see are small, there is a perceptible diminution of the warmth & brightness of the sun. That steady sound of the cicadas, we hear it all day and we hear it when we wake up in the night. One could imagine it the sound of the machinery of life itself. Only soon it will be still, in the long cold winter everyone tells us is to come.

'As to me I know of nothing else but miracles . . .'

Walt Whitman

25 September

A Sunday morning drive and walk round Green Lake. This is one of two glacial lakes in the park. The meromictic lakes, with surface & bottom waters that never mix, were formed in the plunge basin of a waterfall, and are very deep. The water is turquoise, and now reflects the colours of the autumnal woods that surround it, growing on hillsides rising steeply from its banks. Conifers grow on the very edge and many, stripped of bark, have fallen in, and lie like ghastly skeletons under the water, or stick out like the 'sword' of some prehistoric beast. Tangled limbs under water, knotty root systems, contorted pale torsos, and rotted trunks already half mingled with the earth. The water seemed still until we looked, and saw ripples, leaves floating on the surface, a fallen insect spinning round and round. And the woods seemed quiet until we heard the cicadas, the cry of a jay, a bird or insect making a noise like a telephone ringing in a farther room, an airplane's drone.

Other couples were walking round the lake, and parents with young children, and now and then a jogger trotted past. Most people we met said hello or hi cheerfully. Faint but warm & sweet, the woods were beginning to exude a smell of decay.

For some reason – perhaps the sense of mysterious depth – I thought of the first still water I fished in, the lake at Newlands Manor near Milford, which was to me most wonderful, a magical place. I would usually go with a friend, and we would leave our bikes in the hedge, near the road bridge, which was said to be haunted by the ghost of a poor boy who had lived close by and, together with his whole family, died of diphtheria. The bridge was known after him as Cox's Bridge.

Newlands Manor lake was full of small rudd, but while we were catching them, big golden carp would hurl themselves out of the water and fall back in with a mighty splash. I have never seen carp fling themselves into the air as often as those fish did.

The days of magic & expectation were short lived. They came to an end one day when I was wading in the lake with bare legs, struck at a bite and hooked a small rudd clean out of the water, accidentally swinging it with a smack into my friend Roger's face. We must have been making a lot of noise because when we turned to the bank three men in dark suits were standing there watching us. One of them told us off for abusing the freedom of the lake and ordered us to leave.

I found my way to other lakes and ponds afterwards, but none of them had quite the magic of Newlands Manor lake, with the abandon of big golden carp leaping out and falling back.

The water (for me, the primary source of inspiration, and very element of reminiscence), the lovely aquamarine water, with its slightly menacing look, made me think and talk about the past.

I loved the places to which I belonged as a boy, and to which, for some time afterwards, unselfconsciously, I felt I still belonged. And that original feeling has shaped all my relationships to the world. Not always wisely or for the better (I sometimes see myself as a big overfriendly dog eager to jump up and lick everyone on the face, or anxious to propitiate dogs of a different temper), but it is what I have, nevertheless, to work with.

Happiness can stupefy with self-absorption. It's also necessary to imagine differently; to see the world as it appears to others, even as ugly,

violent, dark. To the other who is other, but also to the other who is an aspect or potential of oneself. I would like to write a book that is true to my happy self. But I would like also to get out of my skin, and to extend my imaginative sympathy.