

Hills Snyder: *Misery Repair Shoppe*

Utopia, like Cordelia, the favored daughter of Lear, needs no land, and has been defined as a place of nowhere converted into a concrete elaboration. Within the magnified elaboration of *The Misery Repair Shoppe*, The Repairman works toward transformation: his own and that of others --- any who know the particular act of will that is surrender.

“Sentenced here am I for my writing crime” says his verse, yet he sits at his table willingly grinding the instruments of his error to dust, perhaps to obscure the very evidence of his conviction.

And there, leaning like an assumption against a concrete wall, a winnowing shovel, blade deep in chaff.

Behold, the circular tower of his activity is no panopticon --- any unseen overseer would be hard put to observe The Repairman through the suggestively rosy aperture, though a partial view might be had from the knees. Even then, that perspective will reveal only an anonymous, floor- bound figure entrapped in Vetruvian geometry, his ideal proportions reduced to those of just another unaccountable overman.

Audio loop:

Texts by Peter Juke and Sir Walter Scott read by Matthew Rose. Synthesizer, glockenspiel, ukulele, and recording by Joe Reyes. Samples: 1963 *The Kingsmen*; 1968, John Lennon. Arranged by Hills Snyder.

Misery Repair Shoppe, Audio text:

Until a few years ago, you could be climbing any chalk down in Southern England. Trails lead up from a council estate, past a recreation ground. On the slopes above, young men with tattooed arms walk their dogs. The grass is like an old rug, woven with wild flowers, cabbage whites and meadow browns. Then the next step you take is empty air.

Few cliff tops drop away so dramatically as this corner of coast where the North Downs are truncated by the Channel. Wave erosion caught the escarpment on an upswing: the sudden panorama is enough to make the heart miss a beat. Sea-level is only some 350 feet below but you can't test the overhang. Clouds could be a few feet distant, or a few miles. Even the chalk underfoot seems to shift.

On Shakespeare Cliff, just west of Dover, vertigo has a good precedent. In October 1604, at the time Shakespeare was probably writing *King Lear*, his company, *The King's Men*, visited Dover. In the tragedy, the Earl of Gloucester, blinded for his loyalty to Lear, meets an itinerant beggar, Poor Tom, and asks him, 'Know'st the way to Dover?'

There is a cliff, whose high and bending head
Looks fearfully on the confined deep;
Bring me but to the very brim of it,
And I'll repair the misery thou dost bear.

What follows is one of the most resonant scenes in English Literature. Poor Tom (who is really Gloucester's estranged son Edgar in disguise) leads his father part way up the 'horrible steep,' and convinces him that he stands on the brink. Renouncing the world, begging forgiveness from his son, the blind man hurls himself forward to a certain death. But Gloucester is deceived. He falls forward on the grass. Returning in the guise of a local peasant, Edgar persuades Gloucester he has fallen the height of ten masts. The old man's life is a miracle. He is purged of his despair. In a single scene the cathartic power of tragedy is expressed: an imaginary fall that restores us to solid ground.

Some fine, Fearless phrases, recently said by a person of immeasurable importance:

I knew the artist. He was shrewd and prudent, Wisdom and Cunning had their shares of him. But he was shrewish as a wayward child, and pleased again by toys which childhood please — as a book of fables, graced with print of wood, Or else the jingling of a rusty medal, Or the rare melody of some old ditty, that first was sung to please his cradle.