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Two Aspects of Paternity

John Drew

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The Idea fixed in the mind but actually not realized
Reduces life to a chaos, Cambridge to a kaleidoscope,
The Cavendish to atoms. Autumn's fruits are scattered;
Chapel or not, each college is a lunatic asylum.

The Image has no option; either it shifts or shatters
Or ends in dissolution with Oxford, Kashmir, Canada,
Names which cozen the ear or enter the eye as forms.
The Mind is a flat landscape, full of ditches to fall in.

This is but a beginning; no cause to grieve a world
We cease to be immersed in; reality is relative;
Our children are not relations, our roots not in the soil.
Come. See. Heaven lowers its branches for us to climb.

Poem for Chandravadan Mehta / John Drew

Old man, scholar and endearing rogue, what strange star led you to London
Where I met you, face eclipsed, diminutive in a suit from Savile Row
As grey and full of propriety as was the city itself on that bright August
day.

A couple of months later, half the globe and a whole world away, I watched
you grow
The cotton falling off you in folds, white and finely-spun as the chameli
flowers past which we walked,
Petals of which you took, crushed and the essence showered
Upon my intellect, then made for me a garland I cannot now discard
Although I am back in London. My mind has been deflowered.

Two Aspects of Paternity / John Drew

1
You will not remember how we used to walk
Down to the lakeshore, singing in the snow,
Stick in your one hand, other hand in mine,
Your whole being so utterly giving as flesh
Can be when it is not intransigent.
This harking on the past measures a distance
Between us in the present. As you grow
Your prettiest dress becomes a suit of armour.

I cannot approach you—and expect to be dead
Before I loom in your memory so tangible
You will be shocked to detect in it the distance.
—Many tears make up the smile of a Buddha.

2

That is twice recently something like this has happened,
The child sobbing hard as if for the death of a husband
She could not possibly have. Because I raised my voice.

Her black hair loose on the pillow and like her mother, too,
The way she bewilders me. The other day she missed me
In the house and ran to tell her mother, who assumed

I was gone—like a stray dog, a madman or a unicorn.
I am amazed. I matter to them, not as a child would,
But in a way whereby I am responsible for it—and them.

Jeffrey Wainwright on John Drew

John Drew's poems are predominantly actions within the mind, contemplations, musings, arguments. They take incidents—the meeting with an Indian friend in “Poem for Chandravadan Mehta,” occasions with a daughter in “Two Aspects of Paternity”—or the conjunction of a place and abstract ideas in “Poem for a Cambridge Platonist”—and develop ideas around the experiences. The manner is highly conscious, often fully using the resources of syntax in order to articulate the thought. This degree of articulated argument strikes me as one of the most unusual and interesting things about these three poems.

Further than this the poems are self-consciously aware of the workings of the mind, and at a second level they have this as their central subject. Both “Two Aspects of Paternity” and “Chandravadan Mehta” it seems to me are concerned with the complexities of differing subjective views of the same situation, and of how disparate various “realities” can be. In “Chandravadan Mehta” this has a wide cultural, and eventually I suspect, political aspect, for the difference in the man between his London appearance, “as grey and full of propriety as the city itself,” and his presence in India undermines notions of common assured reality and in particular definitions of reality which we make from our own standpoints and so make imperial. Drew handles a similar theme in a poem not included here, “In the City” (*Stand*, 15/4), where in twelve easily moving lines he travels by associations of the mind from “a picture postcard morning” by the Thames to another unspecified country of colourless brown scrub