

## So Even the Tree has its Yolk

*James Wilkes*

**Abstract** This creative-critical work draws on the archives of the Pioneer Health Centre, also known as the Peckham Experiment, held at the Wellcome Library. The Centre was established between the wars both to provide the conditions for, and to investigate, health rather than illness. The ways in which personal and group forms of vitality were conceptualized, valorized and put to work allowed poet and writer James Wilkes to think through the link between individual and societal relationships to leisure, work and health. However, the archive also holds many other strands of thinking – esoteric, biological, quasi-anarchist – and the choice of fiction as a form of writing provides a way of holding these dispersive, messy ingredients together – a way of working restlessly with restless materials.

**Keywords** Archival writing · Literary fiction · Peckham Experiment · Pioneer Health Centre · Wellcome Library

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**Fig. 10.1** ‘Mother watches while she and her daughter have their tea’. (Source: Wellcome Library Archive, SA/PHC/H.1/6/8. Reproduced by permission of the Pioneer Health Foundation. © Pioneer Health Foundation, released under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0))

First visit to mother’s studio in three months. She showed me the axolotls. The tank is huge, far too big for the space really, set on a trestle in the middle of the workshop. She pulled an old bed sheet off it and lit up a neon tube behind it. The light flickering through the soft grey water: like summer in Whitby. Mother has always had a theatrical streak, mostly inappropriate. I asked if the creatures wouldn’t be happier in the dark but she pretended not to hear me. Three outsize newts hanging motionless a few inches above the gravel before slowly backing into the pearlescent soup. When she dropped in morsels of meat they snapped at them with sudden

twists of their necks. It's ox thyroid. I'd like to see Maggie get that from *her* butcher. I pretended not to hear her. We watched the thin streamers of blood slowly twist and disperse. You must come back in two weeks' time.

Three weeks later: mother has taken delivery of a vast quantity of builder's sand. Bags of it are blocking the corridor and spilling over the floor. Crunching between leather soles and plywood. I find her on a step-ladder with a bag on her shoulder, enthusiastically tipping it into the tank. She beckons me forward. There on a promontory of sand, clear of the grey waters, sits a lizard. Its skin glistens darkly, and it blinks.

Eyelids! She was excited. And legs, proper weight-bearing legs. And caudal wasting. It means the tail's become thinner. And it's not a lizard, it's a salamander. We must be accurate.

I have a very clear image of her going for the overhaul. Rubber tubing, and the cuff round her arm. On the workbench is the circular metal box. I want to call it a binnacle. The Bio-Chemist looks into it. She looks across at it and he looks down into it, directly, placidly. She has tucked her bottom lip under her teeth, to bite and to concentrate. Brows pulled down slightly. Showing worry or focus. And who's the girl? Leaning against mother like she belongs here, also looking at the binnacle, wondering what's inside. The girl smiles a little. Upturn and downturn. In the rack, five clear glass test-tubes with five clear measures of liquid, and five dark glass bottles, unstoppered behind them. The Bio-Chemist placid in a white coat, a pencil behind his ear. The mother lip-biting, brows slightly drawn, a hairclip behind her ear. The girl (but where did she come from?) interested, curious, lips curled slightly into a smile. The binnacle we can't see into, but he can see into. He touches it lightly with three fingers. The workbench is plain, is what she would have called deal.

I was fine until I walked into the studio. It was not knowing where to start. The sheer quantity of stuff to be cleared and sorted. None of it inheritance material. My sister walked in with a box of crockery. I hope you see that Cups and Saucers can wreck an expedition if Leaders look at cups and saucers, I said to her. Or, and this is the new fact, engage Authoritarians to authoritate Cups and Saucers – for sooner or later the expedition would halt to do the Cups, and Drinking water would be used in the Desert to wash cups! And we have several deserts to cross and few and far are the oases to nourish us. She looked at me, her brows pulled down. We both looked side-long at the tank under its dust sheet, relegated to the corner. I pulled the old covering off it. Inside nothing but sand dunes stretching for miles.

The shoebox is filled with papers. One is a typescript lecture. The bottom half of the page is composed from three separate slips, two longer and one

shorter, economically pinned together with round-headed brass pins that splay behind, the top carefully cut so it starts halfway through a line – recent developments of Medical Science – the composite whole carefully attached to its parent with one deeply rusted dressmaker’s pin and one splayed brass pin. An orphan half-sentence – that divine gift, the child, is today – struck out with one line of ink. Halfway down: On the rubbish-heap of Freudianism there has fallen a seed out of which has blossomed a new valve for parenthood. On closer inspection, a single vertical line has been crossed through the second ‘v’ and a ‘u’ written in the margin. A new value. A new valve. Mother’s parental instincts spurted through a hose over which she kept a firm thumb. We walked our childhoods misted in it.

Julian Huxley wrote a letter to *Nature*, January 1920: The thyroid diet began on November 30th last. On December 17th the stage which is critical in metamorphosis induced by air breathing had been passed. On December 19th the next or penultimate stage, with scarcely a trace of larval characters, was reached. The larger specimen had climbed out of the water up a platform provided for the purpose, and its skin was as dry as an ordinary salamander’s.

Julian Huxley wrote a letter to the shoebox, July 1950: As regards evolution, this is only a technical term for the process of the development and transformation of life during geological time, just as ontogeny is the technical term for the development of the individual in time. Both are descriptive terms, describing processes. To say that either of them is a ‘force’ seems to me a most dangerous and misleading kind of vitalistic mysticism, which at all costs is to be avoided in biology.

Another sheet comes out so damp it’s almost disintegrating. The fibres come away on your fingertips. Handwritten on it in a dark graphite pencil, lists of names and attributes. Jimmy Fuller: lack of muscular coordination; Harry Thomas: a certain awkwardness of gait; Herbert Fairfax: skills at woodwork; Harry Johnson: reasonably competent hairdresser; Jim Thomas: wizard with a saxophone; Herbert Winterbottom: pocket Napoleon. I see her glancing into the luminous grey waters of the tank, making notes.

We’re not sure what to do about the installation of petrol cans. They make a moraine scree slope backed against one wall of the old canteen. Did she put them there or just never bother to get rid of them? When you open the door the smell: the rich turpentine that’s left when volatile elements evaporate, creeping into the nostrils. She never showed us this. Maggie picked one out and looked into it. She held it up and I saw her eyes circled in red. Rusted through the base. We should throw a match into this lot. I couldn’t tell if she was joking.

Seven days later: petrol cans again. In crate number four – several sheets of dry soft notepaper, covered by someone at speed, marked with paperclip rust. Because grandmother never wrote, she was the hand of choice for letters from fairies, elves, spirits. But this isn't her. Home equals something something sociological carriage of parenthood. Illegible lines. Whereas the female power, the petrol, has to be collected. Skip a bit. It has its Geometric, Earth zone, and its Dynamic or Sol zone, its Solmetricity. Parenthood the only autonomic source of geometric or dynometric something or other. Unless sustained, the battery deteriorates and the petrol-can rusts and perforates. What has happened to Society? Skip a bit. Individuals run down, their batteries are something their potential and their Petrol-cans are leaking. Why? Skip a bit. The charging station is a-virile and infertile. Illegible bit. Legible bit: We appeal not to Femininity and to Females, but to breasted women who have or feel the urge to suckle humanity, nor from the bottle, but from the breast.

In the car park we threw a lit match into one. It didn't go up like we were thinking. It seemed to go out. But then, invisible at first, a pale flame started to flicker through the holes, growing in intensity until the dented metal pinged and the valves hissed.

Two days later: the tank has been dragged into the middle of the studio and Maggie is adjusting the big halogen right over it. She's lowered the rig so the lamp is dipping into the tank. She plugs it in and a fierce glare illuminates the sand. I ask her what she's doing and she shrugs. The lamp stays on as we eat the takeaway I've brought, until the glass walls are warm to the touch. Late in the night, as we're sitting against it, warming our backs and holding up one of the photos from the shoebox, the filament goes. A loud pop and darkness and the quiet tick of cooling metal.

From up in the rafters you look down into a gymnasium-like space. Half of the back wall and all of the right is of translucent grey glass. Four – no, five – rope ladders are in motion, each with a child as a pendulum. One leans back through the ladder, toes stretched to the ground, about to kick off. One is on the bottom rung, legs tucked up, moving low and circular. One sits on the second bar, at the height of her parabola. One has his arms and shoulders through the sixth bar, toes gripping the third, the rest of the ladder flicking out beneath. One stands on the floor and holds the ladder to attention. A note on the back: Swinging not to avoid, but swinging into space.

Out of the darkness she says: salamanders communicate by opening and closing their nasal valves. She says something else about their skin that

I immediately forget. Then: this is a zone of exchange. It was in one of her letters. A place where materials are digested and exchanged. Placental. We built the workbench together. First me and her, then you and her. A workbench inside her. I can hear her uncrumpling a dry ball of paper in the night.

## AFTERWORD

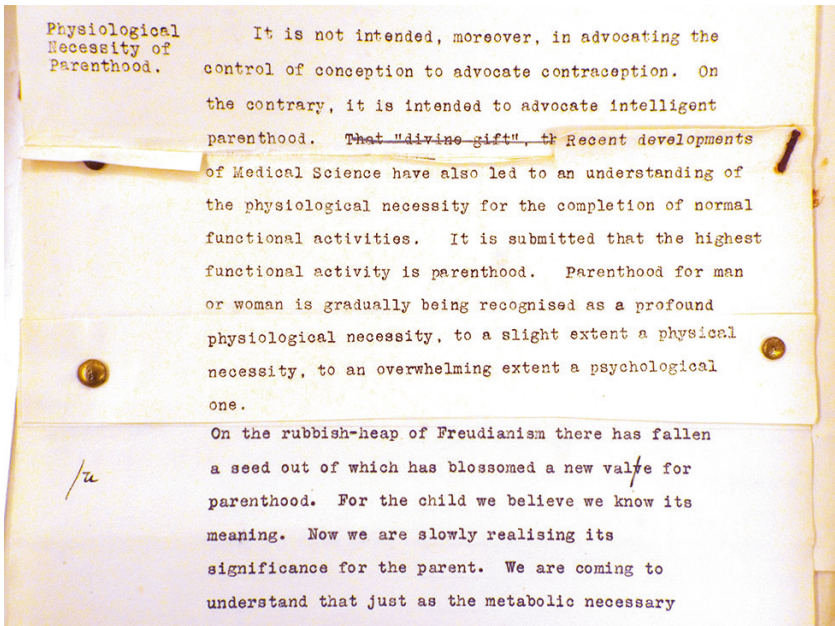
The Peckham Experiment, more formally known as the Pioneer Health Centre, was a social experiment into community health, and into what health and the study of health might actually mean. It was the brainchild of two doctors, Innes Hope Pearse and George Scott Williamson, and was based in Peckham, South London, between the wars, reopening in 1946 only to close for good in 1950. In its later stages, from the mid-1930s, it used a purpose-built building on St. Mary's Road, a few minutes' walk from Queens Road station, which functioned both as a community centre with a swimming pool and café, and a location for family health checks – a space in which people could use their leisure time to exercise their potential to live healthy lives.

The centre's archives are now kept at the Wellcome Library, and some very unlikely conjunctions are held together in this mass of typescript lectures, handwritten notes, early drafts of books, letters and photos. An overt commitment on the part of the founders to the 'biological' and to the study of organisms in their unconstrained environment sits alongside a covert theosophist belief in cosmic harmony; a genuine commitment to ideals of self-organization and anti-authoritarianism is paired with more discomfiting elements, such as an investment in 'maternal vitality' that sometimes shades explicitly into the language of eugenics, or in esoteric images through which essential natures for men and women are imagined and brought into being through lectures, books and medical consultations.<sup>i</sup>

This complex, multi-faceted content demands a form of response in which diverse materials can speak to each other in multiple ways, and in which patterns, relations and contradictions can emerge.<sup>ii</sup> Moreover, the material qualities of the archive push certain forms of making to the fore. Most obviously collage, a process of writing that works with found material and puts its creative energies into the selection, the cut and the suture, into marking, or indeed sometimes erasing, the boundaries between registers, voices and discourses. A way of making that materially marks the

<sup>i</sup> See Chap. 9.

<sup>ii</sup> See Chap. 5.



**Fig. 10.2** Extract from 'Medical Considerations for the Control of Contraception', p. 4. Innes Hope Pearse. (Source: Wellcome Library Archive, SA/PHC/E.16/1. Reproduced by permission of the Pioneer Health Foundation. Wellcome Library Archive, SA/PHC/E.16/1. Reproduced by permission of the Pioneer Health Foundation. © Pioneer Health Foundation, released under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0))

points of indecision, change and editorial intervention, and even in some cases leaves the old versions buried under the paper, and rust spreading from the join towards the finished text.

George Scott Williamson wrote, in an incomplete letter to the General Secretary of the Family Welfare Association, that:

[T]he ethnologist or cultivator does not practice – if he exists – he is like the worms in the garden, only seen at the earliest dawn – all his work is subterranean – even his 'Casts' are anonymously swept from the 'Well Kept Lawn'. So any study of 'What's Right' is done in the dark and surreptitiously.<sup>1</sup>

Literary fiction, of whatever genre, but perhaps especially the short story or prose poem which is less hostage to the expectations of plot, seems to



me to be a particularly adept machine for keeping meaning turbulent, for allowing connections and narratives to perpetually reconstellate, for working in the dark and surreptitiously. I like to think that Williamson's image could be applied to writers (of any gender) as well as to his ethologists: writers as cultivators of excessive meaning, worming their way through the subsoil and ruining well-kept lawns.

But narrative is not the preserve of one discipline, and there are many stories within this archive that surface and disappear in fragmentary, unresolved ways. One such story concerns 'Little Maggie', an infant who is pinned proleptically by the title of the document in which she appears as 'The Biter'.<sup>2</sup> The cause for her biting is eventually located in a family psychodrama, but we never discover why she was picked out as an example, exactly what her exemplary role was, or the longer story of what happened to Maggie. We don't know what Maggie's opinions of her family's diagnosis are. This elusiveness, as well as the obvious asymmetries of power that these narratives produce, make them uncomfortable reading, and this discomfort is something else that fiction needs to work with. Beyond a self-righteous dismissal or denouncement of the way narrative is assimilated to the silencing of others, uncomfortable writing can be, in the words of the collective Antena, a way to 'make us strangers in a place we thought was home', and a necessity if 'we are to imagine and begin to build a new world'.<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

1. 'Dear Ben', Ben Astbury, General Secretary of the Family Welfare Association (?c.1950). Wellcome Library Archive, SA/PHC/D.1/7/25.
2. Papers on family as focus of treatment. Wellcome Library Archive, SA/PHC/B.3/11.
3. Antena, *A Manifesto for Discomfortable Writing/Un Manifiesto Para La Escritura Discómoda* (Libros Antena/Antena Books, 2014), 3, 6, <http://antenaantena.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/discomfortable.pdf>.

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