

KEEP THE LINE / BLEED THIS

HIL MALATINO



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One spring morning in 1958, Michael Dillon had just entered his surgery aboard the British steam merchant *City of Bath*, where he served as the resident doctor-on-board, when a two-line cable arrived. It read: “Do you intend to claim the title since your change-over? Kindly cable *Daily Express*.” The title was a baronetcy (a hereditary knighthood); the change-over was a gender transition. While Dillon had indeed been keen to claim the title since his change-over and had even written to Debrett’s *Peerage* (the definitive genealogical guide to British aristocracy) to have his name added as a secondary male heir to the title, the sudden arrival of this wire heralded only an end to his years of stealth living. Recounting the incident in his memoir, he desponds “my secret had leaked out after fifteen years. Here was the end of my emancipation!”<sup>1</sup>

The *Bath* was docked in Baltimore; “two reporters, one armed with a camera”, boarded the ship in short order. Dillon reports that they “were not unsympathetic, but they made it clear they had a job to do and were not to be diverted from it. And they wanted a photograph. If I did not consent they would take it anyway, so they might as well be allowed to get a good one.”<sup>2</sup> The weaponization of the image, the revocation of the possibility of refusing visibility. The photographic capture, belying the conditions under which it occurred, is indeed conventionally “good”: Dillon is handsome in profile, bearded and slightly smirking, garbed in his Merchant marine uniform and white mariner’s cap. He offers little more than this pleasing surface, refusing access to his psychic interior: “after answering questions in the shortest possible way and volunteering nothing, I was allowed to leave.”<sup>3</sup>

And leave he did; for India, where he planned “to disappear...for a while, till all the fuss had died down.”<sup>4</sup> Such a trope of whiteness, this disappearance to the East; a long-standing colonial practice of falling off the supposed map of Western civ, absconding to once or presently colonized territories to forget the self, reinvent the self, evacuate the self of Self and become something otherwise. That such a journey appealed to Dillon, an erudite Oxford man

(having attended Oxford's women's college), physician and traveler of the globe aboard the ships of the merchant marine, is no surprise. He was primed for such a migration, having spent the prior few years studying the work and methods of mystic philosopher George Gurdjieff, who was himself a student and synthesizer of monastic, ascetic Eastern somatic-spiritual practices. Under the influence of Gurdjieff's work, he had penned and self-published a slim volume of poetry, *Poems of Truth*, in 1957. Once in India, he changed his name to Lobzang Jivaka.

Talking with Spence about this move to India, which presaged the flood of mostly-white beats and hippies to "the East" for the purposes of self-discovery, self-dissolution, and transformation just a few years later, he says he had talked with his friends Vinnie and Lu about this, and they postulated thus: "it's like he's always a few years ahead of the counterculture; he makes these big moves and then just finds himself on the other side of them, alone."

Eighteen years earlier, just a few years after testosterone had been synthesized, he had begun taking it. Twelve years earlier, he had had the first of thirteen operations that comprised his phalloplasty, which was overseen by Sir Harold Gillies, the British surgeon who had pioneered the procedure while working with men injured in the Second World War. Eleven years earlier, on the heels of this surgery, he had published *Self: A Study in Ethics and Endocrinology*, an examination of the complexities of endocrinology vis-à-vis questions of subjectivity, sexuality, and sexed embodiment. Though Dillon remained mum about his own biography in this text, he articulated an early ethical argument for medical transition, routed through the sexological and psychological research of his contemporaries.

Dillon's biography is one of highly selective disclosure (often only for the purposes of accessing treatment or, in the case of the title, prestige). Though attracted to women, he scrupulously avoided sex, believing that "with girls one had to be careful. No one seemed to suspect anything and I developed something of a reputation of being a woman-hater, since I made a point of treating them in a rather rough brotherly fashion, and sheered off if any showed any signs of being interested. One must not lead a girl on if one could not give her children. That was the basis of my ethics."<sup>5</sup> Michael Dillon had a great unrequited love, fighter pilot and race car driver Roberta Cowell – a woman who sought him out after reading *Self*, who he assisted in accessing

orchietomy, who (like Dillon) framed transition as a corrective to a very-likely-invented intersex condition. Cowell was not interested in settling down and becoming Dillon's wife, a life-course which Dillon, in so many ways a very traditional bourgeois man, definitively desired. Both desired, and lived, lives that weren't overcoded by the fact of being trans; indeed, neither understood or referred to themselves as such; both resisted the terms of interpellation and recognition such a term seemed predicated upon. Looking to their stories now, I feel a palpable relief: they document lives that contained a transition, not lives that *were trans*.

When Cowell later sold her life story, Dillon was nowhere present. When Dillon penned his memoir, Cowell was similarly left out. As to why, only speculation is possible: was the presence of more than one transitioning person too much for the presumed readership to handle? Would it ruin the spectacle and fascination of the anomaly? Was broaching the topic of intimacy, sex, or romance between transitioning folks too scandalous? Or was the mutual omission a grace, a justice – a means of sheltering each other from the brutal floodlight of visibility, of granting and respecting privacy in a culture so increasingly keen to rob trans people of it?

Spurned and prickly, safe-ish behind his performed misogynist scrim, he organized his intimate life around homosocial contacts – bike touring throughout Europe with his long-time friend G., long visits with a series of male mentors, idle hours with fellow seamen. Mostly, he spent long hours alone – writing, reading, exploring his oft-shifting environs via bicycle or motorbike. Estranged from the routines of conventional intimacy and domesticity, he developed what, in a rather hackneyed turn of phrase, one might call a *rich interior life*.

There are many shades of stealth, many genres of being “found out,” many ways to be seen wrongly, many strategies to wrest some control over how one is seen.

By the time he decided to become a monk, he was deeply familiar with routine renunciation and found joy in a certain ascetic rigor, often eschewing comfort for discipline and austerity. He writes of his long bicycle sojourns, of cutting a bed in a paddock of high soft grass better than any posh hotel; of the restorative peace he finds in routine labor. He was also no stranger to metaphysics, having long been preoccupied with the Meaning of Life.

As a child, he describes finding the bourgeois domestic lives of his aunts useless to the absurd, a judgement which then prompted the following series of interrogatives: “what is the purpose of life? What are we here for? And very soon it became specifically: what is the purpose of my life? And shortly afterwards I was contemplating the problem of what one had done to justify one’s existence if one was on the point of death.”<sup>6</sup>

There are many ways to disappear and many ways to get free.

Dillon’s existential itinerary was marked by a tension between a rigorous commitment to self-improvement and a fascination with esoteric strategies of self-dissolution; these obsessions enabled him to side-step the immediate problem of the transmasculine body. Whether one loses themselves in work or in the cosmos, one is still, for a time, lost. Or perhaps that’s the wrong way to consider this: maybe the body was always a tertiary consideration for Dillon, something he had to modify but not the *raison d’être*, not the explanatory principle for the rest of his life. A vessel with which he moved through the world, but one from which he wanted to pare away the signifiers that troubled those possibilities for movement.

His story is perambulatory, circuitous; he’s always transporting himself or being transported, constantly in movement. But it’s impossible to deny the fact that much of this movement is either spurred or circumscribed by the revelation of his transness (or the threat thereof). He relocates often, he is ambivalent about visiting past sites and acquaintances, and finally he “disappears” – brings the material of his body to a monastery, imagined as beyond the reach of Western news media and its invasive jockeying for sensational narrative.

One way to think of this is a retreat from the vagaries of visibility, a refusal of the idea of mere representation as a socio-political good. Dillon wants his readers to move beyond the body, beyond appearances – this, even as he has taken great pains to transform himself. There’s something here worth pressing on, dwelling with: the desire to become a body that you don’t have to constantly think about might also be a desire for a kind of psychic space foreclosed by *having* to think about the body as a *problem*. Reconfiguring and retraining one’s somatic form so that the body can more effectively be a conduit or medium (I think of how Dillon, anticipating that he would spend a lot of time cross-legged while in the monastery, began training himself to

sit that way for longer and longer periods of time so that his limbs would not protest during meditation). Training the body to enable the body to recede from the forefront of consciousness. Allowing oneself to *feel abstract*, paradoxically more present as the focus on the problem of the body dissipates.

Dillon, in some respects a metaphysical autodidact (trained in Greats at Oxford but didn't range beyond the traditional Western philosophical canon until his encounter with Gurdjieff's work), is very keen to *explicate* the import of his poems, including prefatory commentaries before nearly every work in *Poems of Truth*. It is a writerly tic I both understand and dislike, an effort to control the pedagogical function of the work, to outrun the aleatory dimensions of reception and interpretation. But there's also something that feels very trans about this tendency towards explication; a way of wresting and transforming the power dynamics that control the logic of the confessional, a way of insisting that *I am telling you the truth*. This is infinitely preferable to a subjugation that takes the form of having the truth of one's utterances laid bare by and through a privileged decoder: priest, analyst, doctor. Dillon isn't teaching Trans 101 in these poems, but he's just as keen to insist on correct interpretation, definition, and reference as someone who is. He explains Happiness ("the absence of all desire")<sup>7</sup>; Understanding ("the seeing of ourselves in other people")<sup>8</sup>; Compassion ("the feeling of ourselves in other people")<sup>9</sup>; Thought (that which "perpetuates the Universe")<sup>10</sup>; God ("time" and "timelessness" both)<sup>11</sup>; and Truth ("like a ladder that stretches from Heaven to earth. Its rungs are the rungs of Being. Its sides are the sides of Knowledge, and the act of climbing it is Understanding")<sup>12</sup>. He is keen that the reader grasps, at the close of this slim volume, the importance of moving towards universal spiritual truths, though "Materialism smothers them with her grossness".<sup>13</sup>

The insistence on the singular definition, on the capital letter concepts, on the poem as a key that unlocks Truth – all of this grates on me, schooled as I have been (though at times ambivalently) in the posts (structuralism, humanism, colonialism) and also quite committed to an insistence on the importance of the material. But I'm also reminded of another castigation of the material that comes from the past: that of Herculine Barbin, in the memoir they composed before suiciding at the close of the 19th century after having been discovered to have an intersex condition and coercively reassigned as

male. In it, they write of being surrounded by a populous “enchained here below by the thousand bonds of [their] gross material senses” while they, having lost faith in and ties to humanity, are able to “plunge into that limpid ocean of the infinite”.<sup>14</sup>

I was struck by the resonance, the way it opens onto questions of abstraction. Tarrying with the non-representational opens space for plunging into metaphysical considerations, as well as ways to re-think the purpose and function of materials worked with in the process of producing (a work, a self). Spence talks to me about these glassworks: about the colors (ambers, which preserve opaquely, maintaining and shrouding simultaneously), about the scale (much larger than is typical for kiln formed glass work), about their own amateurishness with the process (“kiln forming can be very high craft, very precise and technical...people who work with this process may think ‘oh, that’s not done yet’”), about the dialectic of technical precision and unavoidable submission to the aleatory (“so much is out of my control”, they say, from the color to the quality and consistency of the seams where parts join). They show me photos of works in progress; the photos have notes adjacent to the works where they write things like “keep the line” and “bleed this”.

Keep the line: maintain an imperfection, an element of contradiction, a seam, a visible suture, a disruption of visual expectation. Bleed this: let this part mix, excessive and promiscuous, becoming otherwise. I ask Spence what he finds interesting about Dillon; they say “his confidence” and “his relationship to mastery”. Dillon started reading Gurdjieff and in short order published a book of poems on the meaning of life; started studying Buddhism, joined a monastery and, six months later, was writing and publishing on his experiences as a novice. Spence learned the rudiments of the kiln forming process and went big, even though the form tends toward the small; they kept the line – the trace, the imperfection – and scaled up fast. Testosterone was synthesized in 1935; Dillon was injecting it by 1939. Phalloplasty had only just emerged, rather rudimentarily, when he underwent the first of thirteen procedures. He healed from top surgery in the midst of blitzkriegs during which he served as a firewatcher.

Urgency, exigency, an opening outward, no matter the context: the time for plunging into the infinite is maybe always now.



- 1 Michael Dillon/Lobzang Jivaka, *Out of the Ordinary* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), p.214.
- 2 Dillon/Jivaka, *Out of the Ordinary*, p.214.
- 3 Dillon/Jivaka, *Out of the Ordinary*, p.214.
- 4 Dillon/Jivaka, *Out of the Ordinary*, p.218.
- 5 Dillon/Jivaka, *Out of the Ordinary*, p.125.
- 6 Dillon/Jivaka, *Out of the Ordinary*, p.69.
- 7 Michael Dillon, *Poems of Truth*, (London: Linden Press, 1957), p.12.  
*Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/8g84mm48m> (accessed September 10, 2022).
- 8 Dillon, *Poems of Truth*, p.18.
- 9 Dillon, *Poems of Truth*, p.18.
- 10 Dillon, *Poems of Truth*, p.30.
- 11 Dillon, *Poems of Truth*, p.36.
- 12 Dillon, *Poems of Truth*, p.20.
- 13 Dillon, *Poems of Truth*, book jacket.
- 14 Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, (New York: Vintage, 1978), p.99.

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