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**Robert Clark-Majerus**

### **Lockdown Beauty: Naturalist Meditations**

Wintrange is an ancient landscape, sheltered and long-fertile, with many tributary streams flowing towards the Moselle. Millennia before the Romans came to plant vines, it will have given nourishment to many people. Around our village, where there is level ground, medieval common pastures are now lush with deep grass and wild flowers, sheltered between beech and hazel woods. The bird song is choric, one species tuning in with another, filling the space with sound and a kind of fellowship. The cuckoos hereabouts keep cuckooing minute by minute, hour by hour, an expenditure of energy insufficiently explained by sexual or territorial impulses. One evening, on a neighbour's roof, a bird I do not recognise trills on and off for perhaps half an hour, seemingly just singing with joy.

I read recently an ethologist who maintains that each woodland has its own accents and patterns, that there is a local identity as well as a species practice. We might say that the thrushes here sing "Wintrangelly". As we walk in their company, it is easy to believe they mention our passing, and that they celebrate the unusually early warmth and seemingly unending days of sun. What else could that song thrush be doing at the end of a branch way above our heads other than celebrating the day on behalf of all those who can admire his wonderful notes.

In one meadow a few days ago, we found this Orange Tip butterfly (*Anthocaris cardamoines*) drinking nectar from a Garlic Mustard plant (*Allaria petiolata*). The underwings of the male Orange Tip are delicately patterned like leaves on a white ground, bringing to mind Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Pied Beauty":



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Glory be to God for dappled things –  
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;  
And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
Praise him.



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My second photograph is of an inch-long green caterpillar hanging at my eye-level from the branch of a tree about five metres above the ground. The thread by which it hung must have been at least a hundred times its body length, but it was valiantly struggling to climb back up to the branch. I remember from my schooldays that caterpillars abseil like this to escape a predator on the branch or to descend to the forest floor so they can pupate. This

caterpillar was trying to get back up, so it had fled a predator. I found myself wondering how such small creatures know to do this, and how the word 'bravery' does and does not attach to such situations. 'Blind instinct' is perhaps all humans can call it, but it seems much smarter than blind, more reasoned than instinct. My mind moves to our current human predicament, our struggle to survive, and our struggles with the Coronavirus: how did this thing – a complex of a few protein molecules without even cellular structures – come to be so successful at replicating itself inside animal bodies? It is only a millionth of the size of the cells it infects and turns into replicating machines. This raises a perennial question: is a virus an organism, or just a chemical accident?

Little Lamb who made thee  
 Dost thou know who made thee  
 Gave thee life & bid thee feed.  
 By the stream & o'er the mead;  
 Gave thee clothing of delight,  
 Softest clothing woolly bright;  
 Gave thee such a tender voice,  
 Making all the vales rejoice!  
 Little Lamb who made thee  
 Dost thou know who made thee

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,  
 Little Lamb I'll tell thee!  
 He is called by thy name,  
 For he calls himself a Lamb:  
 He is meek & he is mild,  
 He became a little child:  
 I a child & thou a lamb,  
 We are called by his name.  
 Little Lamb God bless thee.  
 Little Lamb God bless thee.

Please God, whilst you are thinking of lambs, spare a thought for caterpillars, and viruses. Who made them? How does it appear to us that they have so much intentionality? Are they just chemical accidents which are, again by accident, capable of cloning themselves. They certainly do not correspond to 'bravery' or the military metaphors with which our politicians ornament their speeches.

My third photograph is of a pair of tiny walnut buds. Of all the trees hereabouts the walnuts are the last to come into bloom and leaf. The catkins and flowers appear several days before the leaves open, and within two weeks the fruits are set. Every day in April we stand amazed at how fast nature is. Cherry trees are in bloom for only a few days, then the seed is set and the petals fall. Four months from now each walnut tree will rain hundreds of walnuts. Such a profligate necessity! We fear the corona virions that succeed. How many billions are wasted?



**Robert Clark** is the founder and editor-in-chief of *The Literary Encyclopedia* (<https://www.litencyc.com>). He taught at the University of East Anglia until his retirement in 2012 and has also worked as a free-lance photographer, documentary film maker, software developer, and brick layer. He has wide interests in the history of literature and ideas, especially political theory and psychoanalysis, and has published numerous essays on English and American literature since 1680. His current work is focused on Daniel Defoe, Jane Austen, British imperialism and the rise of capitalism.

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