

I. P. Taylor

When Beasts Most Graze

1

“left their houses weeping and became unemployed and finally . . .
died in poverty and so ended their days”

Extract from the Commission of Inquiry Returns, 1517

TENANT AT WILL, WHARRAM PERCY (*circa* 1500):

They found me at Milndam, at the fishpond,
the landmaster’s men. They said:
Leave your nets, William. We’re fishers of men.
Come with us to the Lord’s house. Come—
and receive the Word.

I followed,
sharp as a fox out of cover. Squire Hilton
hung like a cloud on his front step.
His smile axed at my heart.
He gave me till Michaelmas—
“Tell the whole village the same.”

I looked up to the furlongs, the skyline of corn.
I heard children laugh at the stream.
I turned from his gate. For Hilton
a sheep-run. For the cottar
death with the plough.

Our young men wanted to fight, but
I counselled acceptance: To sever one stoat
will summon the pack. We have no rights here—
leave behind little. Our tears
like our toil will fade into the land.

We gathered below Town Field.
Swallows twitched from the church-tower,
belled the shallows. Next year
they’ll nest in the houses. . . .
Silence will gulp their cries dumb.

2

“for where there have been a great many householders and inhabitants
there is now but a shepherd and his dog”

Bishop Latimer, 1549

SHEPHERD OF WHARRAM PERCY (*circa* 1501):

Wharram, Octon, Bartindale, Argam
gone—choked under wool. What weighs more
than a sack of wheat?
Why man—a bleat!

I'm lucky, I know. I've moved
to this fine stone house that was William's.
The others are down. The best timber's gone
for the Hall—the rest for the sheep-fence.

Last September groped by like a blind hag.
Most cursed the shepherd—
many the priest. Hilton had need of us both.
Like rabbits we kept to our doors.

I watched them, threading away
down the valley. Bent like a windwhipped thorn,
the priest wept alone in the church.
I crept the Manor lawns, waiting Hilton's command.

3

“whither shall they go?—forth from shire to shire and to be
scattered thus abroad . . . by compulsion driven some of them
to beg and some to steal”

Extract from the Sheep Pamphlets

FORMER COTTAR OF WHARRAM PERCY:*

On the wolds slopes distrust.
In the towns rejection. At Grimston
the cottagers stoned us. In Malton
they barred the doors. To York,
William said: There'll be work.
Shelter. A larger place will seclude us.

But in York there were many like us,
and a threatening fear among townsmen.
Some of us left for the coast. In our camp
by the Derwent old William failed.
On a stretcher of reeds, Thomas and I
bore him back to the village.

In William's cottage the shepherd slept—
thick as a mole in a clod. We hunched
in a doorway. Cold chiselled our bones.
As first-light frosted the hills the slight breathing stopped.
We laid tumbled turves on the body—
our words too stubborn for prayer.

**skeleton discovered 1951.*

4

“But I fancy that the town has been eaten up with time, poverty, and pasturage.”
Abraham de la Pryme, 1697

WHARRAM PERCY, 1975:

If you ask in the parish they'll tell you the way—
unless they're farmers. Press them,
and they'll say it was taken by plague.
Come in July, to the dig. Learn of the finds
that jog a response to the pulse of the place:
the pair of dice, the bone needle, a thimble,
a coin. . . . Or come in spring,
when the form of the land is most easily seen:

fasten your boots. For the last half-mile
follow the tractor-ruts. Descend between swallows
cresting the folds of young corn.

The roofless church is alone in the valley—
like an old jaw loose with decay.
To the west, on the scarp-edge,
are the humps of the houses—
shallow graves in the grass.

The wind flows above them—
preserving a sadness restrained over time.

Laurence Lerner

To Sarah Burge

*photographed at Dr Barnardo's Home
in 1883, aged about 8 years.*

You are wondering why
The man has disappeared under a black hood.
What will he do to my face, you are asking,
Will he tear out my eyes,
Will he lock up my lips,
Will he tangle my hair?
What will he squirt at me,
Why was I chosen?
You were asking it then, you look out at us
Asking it now.

Well, I will tell you.
When your lips tighten with growing
He will plump them out.
When your eyes go hard and adult
He will keep them dewy.
When your hair turns grey
He will paint it black.
He will wipe off rouge and years,
Push your teeth back in,
Erase your wrinkles.

Sixty years from now you will bless him,
He dead and you dying.
He gave you the kiss of life.