

◀ Doctoral Thesis ▶

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Revising is something I ought to be good at. After 'O' and 'A' levels, and an almost incalculable number of mocks, I should find preparing for examinations ridiculously easy.

Yet it gets harder.

Four weeks to finals, I told myself. An hour ago, when I'd opened one of my overflowing files and tried to turn my attention to the conflicting arguments surrounding economic development in thirteenth century England, I'd thought the same thing in an attempt to concentrate. It wasn't working. My mind was still drifting, efforts to remember lines from medieval records occasionally turning up opinions from Lord Castlereagh or someone else I'd studied in the sixth form, but more often dwelling on otherwise inconsequential conversations or events.

This didn't use to happen, I recalled. Five years ago, I could spend hours in seclusion at home, absorbing facts about Shakespeare or Hitler, or the rules of German grammar, and could be certain of remembering them when the time came. Funny how complicated simple things seemed then.

"Yes, but of course, you're dealing with ideas now, not just empty facts. You're trying to meet the challenge by telling yourself the task should be easier. Won't work, you know."

My heart felt for a moment as if it had switched places for a few seconds with someone running a marathon. Part of me tried to dismiss the existence of the person who'd just come into being behind me as irrational; the other part told me irrationality was fun, so I turned round in my chair.

The fourth Doctor was sitting there among the half-forgotten papers next to my window, his eyebrows raised and his lips pursed quizzically.

"Well come on then! Aren't you going to say hello?"

"Hello," I said, conscious that I was in all probability talking to an empty space, and my neighbour would be listening through the absurdly thin walls we have in my college, deciding I was madder than he already thought I was.

"You'll be going to ask why I'm here next, or how I'm here," he speculated aloud rapidly, rising from my window seat and proceeding in three steps to stand to the

left of me, next to my door, scarf and papers trailing in his wake. He brushed the curls of his hair with his left hand, as if in irritation with some idea, and then supplied the answer to his own question, not looking at me at first but abstractly examining the edge of the ceiling as he talked.

"I was visiting a friend of mine who lives near here. That is to say - he would live near here, if..." He paused, looking at me from the corner of his eye as if considering his own fictionality, appeared to make some measure of the space between the door of my room and my desk with his hands, then continued. "He likes to think of himself as a sort of abbot, presiding over a sort of monastery, but relatively, that's only temporary. He's very into exploring Time Lord potential, physical projection, and so on." The Doctor tapped his head with one finger, and, leaning towards me, whispered conspiratorially "The power of the mind".

He leapt back and considered my window.

"I like the view" he stated airily.

"Everyone says that," I began, but the Doctor ignored me.

"Of course, that wall could be a little higher, more decorous, and one or two of those trees could be chopped down... oh, I don't know, perhaps they should be made to blossom longer, adds a bit of colour..." He grinned.

All this time I was sitting in my chair in front of my desk, craning round when necessary to follow the Doctor's movements. The thought crossed my mind to offer the Doctor tea or coffee, but somehow I felt I would be demeaning this mythic figure by doing so, so I didn't. In any case, I still didn't quite believe he was there; the pressures of academia have been known to lead to psychological disturbance.

"Are you real, or are you just a product of the conflict between my imagination and my overflowing memory?" I asked finally.

"Well - reality's such an odd thing," the Doctor answered, picking up, as I might have expected, on an entirely different part of the question to that which I had intended. "I wouldn't let it bother you too much. Take this college, for instance. It continues because everyone believes it does, even though all its members change every few years. Well, almost all. Did you know Archbishop Laud?"

I told the Doctor that, were he still alive, the Archbishop would be about four hundred years older than I was.

The Doctor gazed out of the window, away from the modern building in which I'd been living, across the college garden, towards the back of a seventeenth century quad. "Serious chap. Far too flamboyant a dresser, though. I told him so, and he wasn't happy with me. Lost his head, poor chap."

"You said that about Marie Antoinette."

My comment failed to stem the Doctor's garrulousness. "The guillotine was usually the more effective means of execution. I once met a chap who thought himself something of a connoisseur of executions. He recommended a method called the ysraanig which the Dovrians use on Portach, but I'm not the sort of person who takes a great interest in seeing people put each other to death, and I don't suppose you are either are you?"

"I can't say that I am. Not that I would have the time," I added.

"Not have the time!" he exclaimed, stalking over to me intently. He surveyed the creatively arranged contents of the varnished surface next to me. "A slave to paper!" he proclaimed as he took up a sheet of notes based on M.M.Postan's 'Essays on Medieval Agriculture and the General Problems of the Medieval Economy' (Cambridge, 1973), studied them for a second, and then proceeded to practise his skills in origami. "I never allowed examinations to assume more importance than they deserved."

I expected more originality from the Doctor than that, I thought. "What did you get from the Academy again? A double gamma?"

"Well..." He sank down on my bed. "It was a good, solid qualification. And they weren't teaching me anything I didn't already know, or particularly wished to know." He stared into space for a moment, but I couldn't make out if this signified regret or indifference.

"Perhaps I'm too bothered about doing well to do well," I mused after a while.

"Hardly an original response." Inwardly, I allowed myself a wry smile. "But you are too worried about crossing the finishing line without really thinking about the process of getting there, aren't you?"

"What does that mean?"

"Think about what you're dealing with. Don't just treat examination like information jigsaw puzzles."

I remember moaning something about floating away at a tangent.

"There's nothing wrong with floating away. My monastic friend - bit of a Buddhist at the moment, although he's been on other things, and will be, no doubt - does it frequently." He rose and crossed over behind me to stand at my right. "That's what he was trying to teach me to do, in a manner of speaking. What was it I once said?"

"A straight line may be the shortest distance between two points, but it is by no means the most interesting." Why couldn't I remember useful quotations in the way I had that? I couldn't remember anything from the work I'd done yesterday, let alone two years ago. "And I agree with you. Unfortunately, a lot of people don't, and they'll be marking the papers I'll be sitting in a few weeks."

"I'm sure they do agree with us, really." His voice was warmer and his eyes twinkled with the magic that I'd been enthralled by as a child. "They're just restrained by

convention. Have a jelly baby." A hand withdrew a sweet from an inner pocket, which I slowly devoured.

"Not all of us have TARDISEs," I countered as I chewed.

"Why should that stop anyone?"

"Because it does. You can perform great acts of universal benevolence and retreat to your TARDIS before the repercussions of your actions strike you."

The Doctor frowned. "A little anarchy never did anyone any harm." He paused. "Well, now and again, yes - but why are you lecturing me? I thought I'd found the mind of someone who needed my help, not someone who's going to start telling me what I'm doing wrong. I had enough of that on Gallifrey."

"Why bring Gallifrey up?" I questioned. "You don't need to refer back to the Time Lords. What about the people who travel with you? You rarely let them say anything meaningful to you. I remember you ignoring Sarah once when -"

I don't know if I'd touched some reservoir of guilt in him, but he seemed disconcerted by the mention of Sarah Jane Smith. "Poor Sarah. She had a lot of insight, you know, perhaps more than either of us realised at the time. I hope she's happy with that K9 I gave her. It was a sort of apology, I suppose."

I turned back to my work. "Perhaps you're right about the anarchy. I can be too straight-laced at times."

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"And I don't know how lucky I am." He looked over at me, his hands behind his back, the collar of his coat upturned, resembling vaguely a Napoleonic general. "Perhaps you should try things your way."

"I think I may just have rediscovered it."

The Doctor looked across the garden again. "Romana will be wondering where I am. She's too young to try and follow me. It could be dangerous. My old teacher had reservations about me trying this." He considered his clothing. "He suggested," raising both ends of his scarf, "that I should impose a little more order on myself first. A bit more discipline."

I considered suggesting that he avoided wearing the shirt with the question marks embroidered on the collars that he would soon discover in the TARDIS wardrobe, but, mindful of the Blinovitch Limitation Effect and all that, I didn't.

"Time I was off. Do be careful," he added as an afterthought, and disappeared.

I looked at my watch. It was nearly an hour since the Doctor had first materialised. More precious revision time gone.

I first gather my notes together, then tossed them into the air. There was a brief, and shallow, feeling of release as I watched the leaves of paper descend to the floor. To be a legendary hero may be a heavy responsibility, but it has its luxuries, I thought.

I collected up the debris, sat down again, and started writing.

Written during the author's finals revision in Trinity Term 1992, and dedicated to all those taking examinations in Trinity 1993. ●