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### Poems: 'Variations on a Theme' and 'Whether the Lost Thing Found'

Valentine Ackland\*

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'Variations on a Theme' is a reprint originally published in *The Nature of the Moment* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), pp. 59-62. 'Whether the Lost Thing Found' is a reprint originally published in *Journey from Winter: Selected Poems*, ed. Frances Bingham (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2008), p. 155.

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# Poems: ‘Variations on a Theme’ and ‘Whether the Lost Thing Found’

*Valentine Ackland*

## Abstract

An article reporting on the writer’s attendance at the Second Congress of the International Association of Writers in Defence of Culture in Madrid, 1937, and on conditions in Spain more generally. It was published in the *Daily Worker* on 7 July 1937.

**Keywords** Valentine Ackland; Spanish Civil War; Writers’ Congress.

## VARIATIONS ON A THEME

*‘Forgive the Sleeping Man’*

I

1934

Fallen on grass, the drought grass pale and brittle,  
With such wide stretch of arid meadow  
Beyond his round head, slack feet and around him;  
Sleeping here he seems strayed, uncared-for, little—  
Mean in his mean clothes, and I in my mean clothes watching,  
And in the sun. Forgive the sleeping man:  
Not careless, not at ease, not free in air,  
Not living. Mortally sick instead, and the sickness catching.

Kill him we must. Not rouse. Already dead and swaddled  
In cerements that already stink to heaven

He is dead, is dead.  
By falling to sleep there unwarily he saddled  
Himself with the weight of death and the weight is pressing—  
Forgive the sleeping man, the dead man!  
Ask grace for deed done. More easily than the murdered  
Murderers find it—But from whence comes blessing?

II  
1936

God, awake always,  
Forgive the sleeping man.  
Man has not many days, and here in sunlight  
Lies he sleeping, low down on the earth lying;  
Lips set and solemn, head laid down as though the dying  
Had been quite easy, and his gentle hair  
Compassionately spread in wing-shape over brow.

Those who have not known sleep  
Might well think waking fine.  
This man lay down to weep and fell instead  
Into the quietness of Man's deep despair;  
Lies now in the silence of the last word said.  
Nothing is strange, or sorrowful, or new—  
Quietly he sleeps, and does not even dream.

III  
1943

Oh the man that sleeps yet  
Holds under his closed eyelids  
The darkening, the fading ashes  
Of that fire we remember;  
Still we discern the fire,  
The sharp tongues of a summer  
Whose brief, immediate radiance  
Sleeps beneath his eyelids.

IV  
1948

The man who sleeps, whose soul has fled,  
Is man-alone, whether he sleeps in bed  
Or in the grave; let spirit but begone  
And back comes innocence. With all his sinning done,  
Man lies here tranquil now the God has fled.

V  
1950

The man who drowns, see how he rests his head!  
I saw him once, saw him laid on the water dead;  
And in the flowing stems of his meek hair,  
In the arched throat, the swaying of his lightly pillowed head,  
I saw all loveliness of sleep, and all care banished.

Trouble of thought, fevers, the spinning words,  
Torment of right and wrong, of lost and found,  
Loud daylight cries, the muffled night-winged birds,  
Splinters of sky, masterful earth: when he forsook the ground  
All these were conquered, and he so could lie  
Gently upon the rocking water and untroubled die.

VI  
1957

*(Rousseau's picture: 'The Sleeping Gypsy')*

Who cried, long years ago, 'Forgive the sleeping man'?  
And now, who here sleeps, closed within the span  
Of emptiness and light? Here lies the born,  
And nothing in the landscape or the morning  
Predicates death. Here woman newly made  
Sleeps safely still, in opened light;  
And here the lion Sun can stand beside her  
Unthwarted yet by body's cry for shade.  
Here, tidy, side by side, her feet  
Which never yet trod earth; her hands are still,

And she alone in all the empty land.  
Forgive the sleepers, Lord! Thou didst so make them.  
Receive them when they wake and Oh! indulgently awake them.

## WHETHER THE LOST THING FOUND

Whether the lost thing found, the exile reaching coast  
Late and at last, a wide ocean crossed  
And foothold on soil once more:  
Which, soul does not know for sure, but feels  
Sometimes this, and sometimes as if she were still  
Alien, a stateless creature, one without knowledge of home:  
Until, on an evening perhaps, when the west wind steals  
Like the ghost of summers past over the greying hill,  
Suddenly soul awakes, and knows she has come  
To the place that's her own.

And now in welcome the sky  
Lights star after star on high; and the world sails on,  
Stately, a ship into darkness going, tall on the seas  
Of calm and eternal night;  
And all on board her are safe, and bound for home.<sup>1</sup>

## Note

- 1 'Variations on a Theme', from Valentine Ackland, *The Nature of the Moment* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), pp. 59–62; 'Whether the Lost Thing Found', from Valentine Ackland, *Journey from Winter: Selected Poems*, ed. Frances Bingham (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2008), p. 155.