

Four Marginal Glosses

1. Directives from the Colleges of Unreason

There exists an innate copyist in most human beings. On the train a sweating man gets a call on his mobile phone. Nobody really wants to be like him but everyone who has one of these instruments about their person will instinctively reach for it. They will then enact a most serious checking of non-existent messages. It is an unconscious emulation of their perspiring counterpart (I presume if a phone rings in a zoo, most monkeys reach for a banana as if lifting an old-fashioned receiver). This legion of non-ringing telephones is all being symbolically fiddled with, their owners stupidly willing the silent objects to give them some moral support. Everyone is choreographed in an embarrassing piece of physical theatre where the distinction between the act and the acted vanishes.

2. The first thing to do is get yourself born. You're entitled to that.

The anxious process of making art when there are two fabricators serves to generate similarly astonishing operations. What is their quasi-renaissance workshop all about and why can its products be described first this way and then that? Why is it so tempting to wonder at the personalities of these two brothers of the tool shed? If we endeavour to place them in history for the sake of distance their relics might be described a bit like this:

Peasant Fetishists: The Workshop of Dewar and Gicquel 1800–81

Through objects of the decorative and applied arts, this catalogue charts the expansion of international trade, the growth of modern cities and the major developments in the arts and sciences that established the broad outline of modern European civilisation. The direct influence of the Welsh Renaissance on the material culture of the time can also be seen in objects on display. In Europe these techniques had originated in Islamic Dorset; it had spread to the Forest of Dean in the UK by the early eighteenth century and throughout the northern and western France by the late nineteenth century.

It is known variously as Nikewood, Duffs or Hippoware according to the country of origin. These objects were made in the workshop of the Dewar & Gicquel families in the town of Romsey. The workshop was among the most important in Europe. Daniel IV (died 1887) and his son Grégory (died 1881) were especially noted for the production of sculptures with wide flat rims, decorated with freely painted subjects. The initials 'D' and 'G' and outlandish coats of arms record a fishing accident in 1860. Dewar was one of the leading humanist scholars of his day. He earned his living serving various masters as a theoretician of painting, sculpture and architecture, codifying art practice and ideas in a series of treatises. Assisting him on this project was the miniaturist and medallist Gicquel.

Dewar and Gicquel claimed that objects have the capability of making absent animals present and it was perhaps in this context that they made their first soft work. They may have been provided with a self-portrait drawing by the animal in question for the front. It certainly provided the design for the reverse, which shows their sign, the winking eye. This, they explained, represented art production, 'seeing all things and distinguishing each separate one', this is the inspiration of the scholar and artist to aim for excellence, to be all embracing in the pursuit of knowledge.

And yet doesn't that method tell us plenty of comical half-truths? They do indeed use emblems or logos, they must have to have a place to carry out their making and likewise they must be striving to make distinctions in their own way. Like this imagined history we know the psychological silhouette of some of the things that they make. Elsewhere the 'freely decorated subjects' serve to make us feel meanings are pouring out all over the place instead of being refined and honed down to some arbitrary point. This spraying about of ideas describes the centrifugal action of some head machine where the secrets of the work remain in the centre and the mutated productions travel out seeking viewers to splatter with their concepts. To keep their workshop at the forefront of object making of the startling didactic, the artists also need to travel ever outward.

3. People are murderous ants

The imagined collision between pseudo 'ethnic' curiosities and industrially produced tools is where these sculptures transport us to an unfamiliar place. It recalls the voyage into the threatening, throbbing jungle in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. As the steamer brings us closer to the fictive hunt's quarry (the terrifyingly debased Mr. Kurtz), we are forewarned of encounters with habitation. Structures and signs become crude approximations of their first world counterparts,

'Some fifty miles below the Inner Station we came upon a hut of reeds, an inclined and melancholy pole, with the sort of unrecognisable tatters of what had been a flag of some sort flying from it'.

It goes on to describe the first communication,

'We came to the bank, and on the stack of firewood found a flat piece of board with some faded pencil-writing on it. When deciphered it said: "Wood for you. Hurry up. Approach cautiously"' (Conrad, 1889 p. 53).

This creepy serenity before engagement and ambiguous resolution is akin to the sensation of looking at works involving fishing reels, an otter and trout locked in mortal combat or a curious fish/truck fossil. In all these works we should approach with caution. The 'finds', or the material that seems to indicate being brought back from somewhere far away, is entangled and enfolded into the urbane and familiar. The workshop seems to use this collection to inform its fabrications. The gentleness and attention to detail is at odds with the sweaty digging of stone or the epic battle with a fish (like that great macho literary fisherman, Hemingway). If we attempt to travel into the eye of this storm we meet craft, a term that seems to obstruct us, make us describe their production in circles again. But looking closer we can see, like a gaudy painted mask, that it resolutely obscures what it duplicates.

4. The earth is a miserable plaque of mud

The work has a quirk that we get in the language and literature it draws from; it fulfils a need to be self-fulfilling. It has to be apparently solvable, but at the same time not reveal too much of its purpose or origins. The objects melt together various recognisable elements in a tangled knot of animal and mineral straight from the tar pit. It's an assemblage that goes against the clamouring voice of reason that booms in the head of many a gallery-goer. The past seems to be snapping at our heels, as Samuel Butler would have it,

'They say that the future and the past are a panorama on two rollers; that which is on the roller of the future unwraps itself on to the roller of the past' (Butler, 1872 p.167).

The surest way of getting from one point to another is not necessarily the most interesting. Making these things with an almost fanatical attention to detail is something that tempts an analogy with the master craftsman but it is useless without a good level of primordial perversion. Like their beloved des Essientes or Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Axel*, their work is predicated on a fundamental antithesis between imagination and reality. That Dewar and Gicquel want to tune us or customise us for temporal travel is self-evident. All the way from the sickly old aesthete to the AirMax fetishising waif of the moment, we are left on a runaway gym treadmill without the means or the inclination to reach the 'off' switch.

Texts/Textes

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