

The Authentic Edward Harcourt

I chose 'the authentic' as my title, but I'm aware that there's a lot of competition for that phrase and I might just as well have said 'the unmediated' or – more philosophically, perhaps – 'must we turn everything into a commodity?'

Consider the *Madonna del Parto*, Piero della Francesca's pregnant virgin Mary which is allegedly also a portrait of his mother. It continued its charmed life until recently in the village church at Monterchi, Piero's birthplace, after the church it was originally painted for fell down in an earthquake. Monterchi is an otherwise nondescript village a long way from anywhere – or so it seemed when I first went there in 1979. Tourists were obviously not expected and the church was shut. But a silent drunk in the local bar who turned out to have the keys disappeared and reappeared, reinvigorated, at the top of the church steps. *Io sono San Pietro*, he bellowed, waving the keys in the air (the keys were theatrically large). So he let me in, and there she was – that gorgeous round-faced young woman fingering the buttons on her cornflower dress stretched across her belly swollen all at once with – the confusion is intoxicating – a baby, the artist, God.

Nobody can see her like that any more. The bar probably still has its drunk, but poor Signora della Francesca's painting is no longer in the nondescript chapel but in a purpose-built visitor centre, behind glass. Of course that all makes sense – the visitor centre has predictable opening hours, and now that so many more people come the glass ensures the thing won't be stolen, or damaged by condensation.

What's gone missing? Of course something *has* gone missing, and if it were simply the magic of being alone, we could quite easily live with it. There are no great issues of principle raised by sharing a taxi. But it doesn't seem to be only that, for what has gone missing it is tempting to call the opportunity to approach a work of art without the mediation of the heritage industry. No entrance fee, no opening hours, no interpretation board – one could simply happen upon the painting sitting where it once happened to have been placed, the rest of the world having long since moved on.

Now I read at least some of Stuart's work as an expression of rage, and an extended protest against, the prepackaging of human experience, and not only by people at the sharp end of trying to make money out of it (and not only the experience of art).

But I think to see what's gone missing in these terms is to be the victim of an illusion – perhaps more than one.

In 1979, the Piero was carefully but invisibly protected by the reservation of specialized knowledge to a few, and by the social and financial structures that sustain that; today's glass is only a more democratic barrier. Unless one is prepared to say that knowledge – here I mean knowledge of art, but the point could be generalized – ought not to pass out of the hands of an elite, and I am not prepared to say that, then if one didn't complain about the invisible barrier, one can hardly complain about the glass. It's just not true that the difference between 1979 and now is the difference between the unmediated and the mediated, for all that the experience now comes in an unseemlier package and carries a visible price tag. For simply happening

upon a painting still happening to sit where it had once been placed for a purpose, the rest of the world having long since moved on – that too is a cultural commodity, albeit a rare and precious one that can be sold only to a few people at a time. The worry is that to prize what we might fondly call the unmediated encounter with the artwork – an aspect of what I am calling the pursuit of the authentic – is simply to say ‘they can’t have what we have’.

Indeed it gets worse. It’s not just that the mass tourist is after the same things I am after, and there seem to be no grounds for denying them beyond the desire to have all the goodies for myself. It is the mouthwatering photograph of the empty beach that wrecks the beach – because everyone wants to go there. If I and others had never been to that little church and loved it so much, it would no doubt still be there. So it is this very sensibility - the disdain for the commodity, the hunger for what we call experience without a wrapper, whether of art or anything else – that – ‘nestling everywhere, settling everywhere, establishing connexions everywhere’¹ - creates a market for experiences that satisfy it, and so renders those experiences progressively unavailable. We seem to be cursed in a way even King Midas wasn’t, in that we can turn things into gold simply by looking at them.

There’s an analogy here also with another aspect of Stuart’s work. In *Beyond Reason: Ordure* (2003) he says, or his alter ego says, that ‘the greatest success of my work would be for it to be denied the status of art’. But to set alongside the orderly free expression of the graffiti which one is invited to contribute to *State of Denmark*, I didn’t (for example) notice a comparably tolerant attitude to visitors sticking discarded chewing gum – one of society’s least digested waste products - to the bottom of *Chair*, the peculiarly alive but still church chair (I am pretty sure it is a church chair) upstairs. I don’t know enough about contemporary art to know whether this kind of thing ever happens, but I bet it doesn’t in a nice place like this. Art galleries are powerful institutions whose unnoticed formalities – tickets, opening hours, alarms and so on – can dominate the things displayed in them. Like cunning bacteria that grow strong on waste – a comparison I choose advisedly in the presence of the curator of the Museum of Ordure – the system can’t be so easily outwitted, and non-art - now a *topos* of the art show – is, accordingly, readily assimilated to art. Talk about the ‘the contradictions of the civilising processes’ – but Stuart knows all this already.

‘Critique’ is a tricky business. Surely the professional sceptic and puncturer of ideals should be a despairing figure, but too often he seems suspiciously self-confident. (This was the case with a lot of ‘analytic’ philosophy of the mid-20th century.) How is it that telling others there’s nothing to believe in can be something to believe in? In being other-focused, this style of critique leaves its own sources of strength unexplored, and the same risks being true of my own attempt to unravel the pitfalls of protest. When the French novelist Barbey d’Aurevilly finished reading *A Rebours* – Huysmans’ crazy novel, translated ‘Against Nature’ – his comment was ‘c’est le bout du fusil ou les pieds de la croix’, ‘the end of a gun barrel or the feet of the cross’. But rather than recommend either of these alternatives, let me hesitantly suggest a third way.

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

As far as I know the late Bernard Williams never wrote about authenticity except, sceptically, in connection with musical performance. But some remarks he made on a different subject, responsibility and desert, seem to fit the case at hand. With the Kantian tradition in moral philosophy in mind, he remarked on

[the] powerful strain of thought that centres on a feeling of ultimate and outrageous absurdity in the idea that the achievement of the highest kind of moral worth should depend on natural capacities, unequally and fortuitously distributed as they are.²

That is, we give a prize to the person who runs the fastest and make much of the question whether the prize was deserved – praising the athlete for training hard, blaming them for taking steroids and so on. And yet no athlete did anything to get their long legs, their capacious lungs, or any other aspect of their inherited physical endowment that enables them to absorb oxygen in to their bloodstream faster than the next person (and the same goes for many of the other things necessary for winning races). That's the 'outrageous absurdity': surely if something is *really* deserved, the thought goes, it must be independent of those natural capacities, because they're themselves undeserved. Let's call the concept of desert, or responsibility, that sets its face against the outrageous absurdity the *ultimately refined* conception.

Simon Schama's case of the 'drowning cell', a punishment reserved for debtors, shows the 17th c Netherlands were well attuned to this concern.³ The debtor is placed in a windowless cell equipped with a pump, and which gradually fills up with water; the debtor is told that he needs to pump for dear life. Debtors are also led to believe that it's the action of the pump that regulates the outflow of water from the cell. But it doesn't. For two debtors who – in one sense of the word - pump equally hard may be differently equipped with muscle-power, and to ensure that punishment does *not* follow this contingency, the debtors are observed from a concealed spy-hole by warders who control outflow of water from the cell depending on the prisoner's degree of apparent effort in pumping.

The problem is that there really seems to be no doing of ours that is entirely independent of fortuitously distributed natural endowments – we are natural embodied creatures and if we try to design our concept of desert, or of responsibility, so it *only* applies to what's so independent – to what's deserved from the ground up – we have a concept that applies to nothing at all. As Williams says, we can't do without a concept of responsibility. So the concept must be one that we can apply to natural embodied creatures – ourselves – and that in different degrees. If it's to satisfy those conditions, the concept of responsibility can't be the ultimately refined concept.

² 'The Idea of Equality', in Williams, *Problems of the Self* p. 234.

³ *An Embarrassment of Riches*, p. 17.

I suggest that we need to think in something like this way about the concept of authenticity. An ultimately refined concept of authenticity would be one which responded to a parallel sense of outrageous absurdity, insisting that nothing can count as authentic if it so much as has a place in a network of social – and commercial, and cultural etc etc – relations. That would be the concept invoked when one says that even the happening upon a painting happening to sit where it had once been placed for a purpose is thoroughly prepackaged, or (analogously) that even the most determined piece of non-art is inexorably assimilated to art. But we are no less inevitably social beings than we are embodied beings, and such a concept is, in Williams's terms, an empirically inapplicable concept – a concept so pure that it can't be applied to anything and, in particular, can't be applied to draw the distinctions necessary for a protest in defence, fundamentally, of the human.