
NOTES AND QUERIES ON QUOTES AND THEORIES

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“It’ll never be known how this has to be told, in the first person or in the second, using the third person plural or continually inventing modes that will serve for nothing. If one might say: I will see the moon rose, or: we hurt me at the back of the eyes, and especially: you the blond woman was the clouds that race before my your his our yours their faces. What the hell”.¹

It’s good to start these things off with a quote, don’t you think? The example above is a personal favourite of mine, from Argentine author Julio Cortázar’s wonderful short story ‘Las Babas del Diablo’,² in which the narrator gets muddled between who’s recounting the story: himself, his trusty camera or some other unseen witness. But I’ve used it in an essay before, which is the tricky thing about writing – nothing’s new under the sun, as they say. Another Argentine writer, Jorge Luis Borges, echoed something of the scribe’s quandary in an interview once (despite the obvious originality of his own prose): “A poet has maybe five or six poems to write and not more than that. He’s trying his hand at rewriting them from different angles and perhaps with different plots and in different ages and different characters, but the poems are essentially and innerly the same”.³ Again, I’ve given you a quote from one of my favourite sources, which might not be of interest to anyone save other writers, so how about some Oscar Wilde, then? Everyone likes a good quote from him: “Things are because we see them, and what we see and how we see it, depends on the arts that have influenced us”.⁴

None of these are Nick Hornby’s preferred quotations, however. His derive mainly from the great Modernist sculptors: Constantin Brancusi, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Alexander Calder and, looming above them all, Auguste Rodin. A contemporary of Wilde’s, Rodin was also part of a post-romantic intellectual and artistic reaction against the nineteenth-century’s moralising academicism, with the Frenchman preferring an uncomfortably real, objective handling of his materials, and an almost violent merging of the classical and the modern. Let’s hear from another contemporary of Rodin’s, Friedrich Nietzsche, and this time from one of Hornby’s preferred passages: “All becoming arises out of a war of opposites... Things themselves do not actually exist at all, they are the flash and spark of drawn swords, they are the glint of victory in the struggle of opposing qualities”.⁵

This is how Hornby sculpts (at least for now). Not by channelling or aping the voices of past masters, but by putting these exponents of historical sculpture into combat or conflict with one another, in an act of fusion that allows another, hopefully, harmonious entity to emerge, be it authored by his hand or some imaginary, newly crossbred superhero-amalgam of sculptors, perhaps called, ‘Rod-worth’, ‘Bran-calder’ or even ‘Moor-din-usi’.

Allow me to explain. Charged with producing an educational interpretation to the Hayward Gallery’s 2009 show of environments representing artists’ imaginations, ‘Walking in My Mind’, Hornby asked six young people from a local community group to each provide an image of their choosing for the project. These signs, glyphs and ideograms were then transposed into three dimensions as objects and incorporated into one multifaceted supra-structure or ‘Super Subject’ if you prefer, in which each design was given equal visual weight but could only be glimpsed from a certain viewpoint. The finished work morphed with every step and looped back on itself

with each circumnavigation. Time for another quote by someone Hornby likes: "It is common knowledge that the artist is both something of a scientist and of a 'bricoleur,'" noted Claude Levi-Strauss, "the scientist creating events (changing the world) by means of structures and the 'bricoleur' creating structures by means of events".⁶

This exhibition is a refinement, an atomisation even, of that first additive and conjugal process, only now Hornby's reference points are the silhouettes of famous sculptures, conjoined and rendered by computer before being machine-cut and cast in jesmonite and fibreglass. The results are more refined also, due to the limiting of each admixture to two or three constituent elements, in most cases. What exactly do you get if you cross Rodin's 'Walking Man', Brancusi's 'Bird in Space' and Hepworth's 'Single Form'? A shifting, fugitive, almost filmic sculpture, in which human and animal figuration tussle with abstraction – each recognisable profile dissolving as soon as it's made. There's a procession through time as well as space, beginning in 1877 with Rodin's striding legs spread like compass points, which are then whittled down to an essential sliver of a creature in the Romanian's bronze of 1941, finally being stretched flat into Dame Hepworth's 1961 'Single Form' and punctured by her elegant void. Each sculpture represents a progression from its forebear, as well as a negation, but Hornby's trybridisation (that's a made-up compound word – I told you writing wasn't straightforward) is not so much an improvement on ancillary ancestors or an act of one-upmanship, as it is a synthesis of iconic forms that collapses differences of style into an axiomatic way of ordering objects.

Hornby's project is born of homage and a spirit of fellowship, rather than mere appropriation or aesthetic thievery – if you must think such vulgar thoughts ("No crime is vulgar, just as all vulgarity is crime"⁷ wrote Wilde) – and besides, artists copying artists and other such chains of influence and self-referentiality precede even the nascent seeds of Modernism. To some extent, however, Hornby goes further by relinquishing control of his decisions entirely, allowing the arching shape of Calder's 'Flamingo' (1974) to dictate how Elizabeth Frink's 'Horse and Rider' (1975) will emerge on the other side. These last two examples are both public sculptures – the Calder standing in Chicago, the Frink in nearby Dover Street – which brings up the issue of whether Hornby's democratic, deauthored project is not somehow aimed at an inclusive, social vision of art, recalling Joseph Beuys's mantra of creating sculpture from thoughts: "How we moulds our thoughts, or how we shape our thoughts into words, or how we mould and shape the world in which we live. Sculpture as an evolutionary process; everyone an artist".⁸

The dangers in this idealism are clear, because a truly democratic process might lead to a dulling of the original vision, "the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people"⁹ as Wilde had it (that's enough from him) or even to "a continual extinction of personality", which T.S. Eliot saw as a positive, sacrificial aspect to artistic progression.¹⁰ Instead, I'd like to focus on how Hornby has constructed what conceptual artist Adrian Piper called a 'meta-art' in 1973, "the activity of making explicit the thought processes, procedures and presuppositions of making whatever kind of art we make." She continues, citing Kant's method of "regressive proof" from his 'Critique of Pure Reason' to provide an analysis "that would consist in beginning with the fact of the work itself, and from its properties inferring backward to the conditions necessary to bring it into existence".¹¹

But as well as looking back, these sculptures look forward too. With their ethereal white glow, these sculptures have

a whiff of science fiction about them, as though they'd been genetically modified in some futuristic laboratory, from the DNA strands of sculptural Modernism. They have a certain lightness as well, the fractured forms disencumbering each monument's aspect of what has been described as sculpture's great common denominator: gravity.¹² "All that is solid melts into air".¹³ Now where have I heard that before?

¹ Julio Cortázar, 'Blow-Up and other stories' (1959), 1985, p.114.

² Originally published in 1959 and translated into English as 'Blow-Up', on which Michelangelo Antonioni based his famous film.

³ Paris Review interview with Jorge Luis Borges (1967), 2007, p.151.

⁴ Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', (1889), 2004, p.19.

⁵ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, 'Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks' (1872-73), 1996, p.55.

⁶ Claude Lévi Strauss, 'The Savage Mind', 1962.

⁷ Oscar Wilde, 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' (1890), 1992, p.168.

⁸ Joseph Beuys, 'Untitled Statement' (1973) in 'Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art', 1996, p.633-634.

⁹ Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1891), 2004, p.10.

¹⁰ T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', 1919.

¹¹ Adrian Piper, 'In support of meta-art' (1973) in 'Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology', 1999, p.299.

¹² See William Tucker, 'The Language of Sculpture', 1974, p.145.

¹³ Karl Marx, 'Communist Manifesto', 1848.