

Two or Three Things

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David Trotter's writing, say what you like about it, has never set itself up in the grand narrative mode, whether literary or historical or any other kind. That's one of the many things that I really like about it. A sharp sentence from Trotter's Introduction to *The English Novel in History: 1895-1920* spears at a stroke 'the lofty notion of a world-historical march from realism to Modernism and then on into postmodernism'. Point taken. Not missing a beat, he continues: 'The more accurate a politicized or gendered understanding, the more likely it is to dissolve such world-historical schemes.'¹

No one, I think it is fair to say, does such dissolution (and such accuracy) better than David. Already in this book of the 1990s, whenever those were, there are whole chapters on subjects like disgust, or degeneration, or waiting—each in its own way pushing against or otherwise failing to fit with the marching orders of a straight historical sequence. Would it be too teleological, too much of a proto-narrative of development, to suggest that this earlier work shows unmistakable signs, already, of the messes and muddles and muck that would take on their ultimate Trotterly uniform in several subsequent books? We shall see about that. For perhaps it may be, to change the perspective, that this particular tendency was there, underlying the works all the time. It might have been temporarily papered over by the proprieties of other concerns in those late twentieth-century years, but really, like one of its own major themes, it was only awaiting the chance to emerge in all the pathological perfection of a *Paranoid Modernism* or *Cooking with Mud*. Who knows?

But here is an origin story of my own. It must have been back around 1990 when David wrote to me about a journal special issue he was editing. Would I like to contribute something, perhaps related to the chapter called 'Things' in my book on Woolf? I couldn't have been more pleased. This was long before thing theory was a thing, but here was a kindred spirit who, like me, had caught a glimpse of the exquisitely counter-narrative wonders to be found in the obscure quotation that had started off that chapter.

The quotation is from Woolf's biography of Roger Fry and the words are not Woolf's or Fry's, but his mother's. Late in her very long life—she died in 1930, at the age of ninety-seven—the gloriously named Mariabella had noted down an extraordinary list. It consisted of what she called 'Things that were not—: Things that were: when I was a little child'. Just by themselves these categories might offer the material for a whole new theory of social history. But the specific items that follow—'It is an instructive list,' says Woolf—are equally suggestive or enigmatic:

Among the thing that were not, she counted lucifer matches; hot-water bottles; night-lights; Christmas trees; hoardings with posters; Japanese anemones; spring mattresses; and gas for teeth extraction. Among the things that were, she counted flint and steel; rushlights; prunes and senna; clogs and pattens; beadles and chariots; tippetts and sleeves (in one); snuff-boxes and Chartist.

'She drew no conclusion,' Woolf goes on, 'and it is left for us to infer that there were more denials than delights, more austerities than luxuries in the life of the little Quaker girl.'² But is it really left for us to infer any such thing? Or anything? Lady Fry has said it all, said everything, although not every thing. She has laid out a set of words—of things—to which no gloss or commentary could possibly do justice—whether aesthetic or historical or philosophical. Woolf calls the list instructive; and she is not afraid to indicate a shared inference—'for us'—about a long-term change for the better: an evident as well as alliterative psychological progression from 'denials' to 'delights' which is also, implicitly, a material move forwards. There was doing without, and now there is more than enough, as the

things of then and not then are confidently classified as austerities as opposed to luxuries. I wonder!

What I propose to do now is to continue to wonder—at the marvel of Mariabella’s list, and also at what it may show us, no doubt not deliberately (but how can we ever know?), about the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of finding a frame for the description of historical change. You draw a line, make a causal story, describe an ongoing process, that takes the form of a movement from a point A to a point B, from a point of beginning to a later time: a simple story with one thing (or some things) and then another (or others). But why this particular piece of evidence, why this and not that? Other things just keep getting in the way.

One might list other ways in which Mariabella’s lists undermine every expectation of a historical narrative. She speaks of two times, and populates each one with its distinctive things; but she offers no interpretation of their differences, nor does she summarise any general difference between the two times. Are the things meant to be representative or exemplary? Or are they just randomly pulled from a post- or pre-Victorian hat? And in any case, whether they were or were not at the beginning, might not their meaning (or lack of it) have altered over the long time? The things she picks out are placed in superb isolation: they are unconnected to one another within their own times, even, as well as being given no explicit function as part a story of social change. In adding her own gloss, Woolf writes as if it is already there for the logical making (‘infer’), but in fact the lists offer no more than their own bare nouns, unconnected either by syntax or by classification. What is offered is a non-story of minimal perfection, reduced to two times not even of then and now, but of then and not then.

Or in fact, of not then and then: in the writer’s own words, of ‘were not’ and ‘were’. Part of the magic of Mariabella’s enumerations, I think, can be found in the sheer unexpectedness of the *not* coming first. Not only does this seem to go against the logic of common sense, which would posit an x or a y before a not x or not y, -x or -y. But it also, amazingly, seems to suggest that the past, a particular past, might be characterised by the things that weren’t in it: it is, or it was, what it wasn’t. This then takes us, in sense-making mode, to the place of the writer, the lady herself, whose list is made now, in this later time, with a view (or overview) not available to the witness she was as a child, in the earlier time. The comparison, the before and after, rests on the personal testimony of one who has seen it all, seen every thing, seen the difference. It appears to be a perfectly positive method, with an observer who can bear witness, across this great tract of time, to the manifold changes in the material surroundings of everyday life. But this then only goes to show the limitations of that way of representing such a process and perspective. For it is not just that the things that were not were not, but that neither the little child nor anyone else could have known of their (future) existence. If they had, then by definition they would not have been the things that they were: that is to say, the things that were not. Because the period when they were not only came to have lacked them at the subsequent time when they were.³

Moving down or along to the other list, we find that with a similar stark and counter-intuitive logic, the things that *were* acquire this positive existence only at the point when they enter the negative state of not being, of no more. Lady Fry’s non-narrative involves many kinds of specification, but always as if in reverse or against the common sense of a temporal sequence moving from a past to a present (and thence to a future). This might be Mariabella’s entirely logical come-back to the simplifications of an inexorable forward ‘march from realism to Modernism and then on into postmodernism’. But it doesn’t counter those fictional lines by offering curls and bends or other diversions, or the round and round of circulation (to recall another of Trotter’s critical explorations).⁴ It shows only a single point of subjective time, presented comparatively as a two-point perspective or retrospective.

Any one of the fabulous items on each of the lists could inspire in its own right an essay, a treatise—at the very least a nice historical footnote. (Or perhaps a post or a podcast, now that those things have ceased to be things that are not.) And any of them could be distinguished for particular attention, or made to appear representative of some more general character or flavour to be attributed to its bygone or future time. Of the things that were not, the one it's most tempting (to me) to treat in this way is the 'hoardings with posters'. Mariabella is not mistaken, either, in her dating. The OED thinks that *hoardings* (etymology uncertain), the word not the thing, had no existence before the 1830s—that is, before the young Miss Hodgkin's conscious life (she was born in 1833). But already by then the phenomenon of surfaces covered in posters had become a common sight, round every corner, in the cities and towns of the time. John Orlando Parry's painting of 1835, 'A London Street Scene', is a picture of poster upon poster, the large and the enormous, the plain and the coloured. These printed sheets all but cover a high wall against which a few destitute people huddle with their brazier—and all but cover the space that is the painting. A billposter, seen from the back, is stretching upwards, his implements high above his head, to stick on the latest addition to the display. The posters advertise shows and sales, and spectacles of all kinds: 'Woman Tames Tigers'; *Otello* [sic]; 'Two Lectures' (titles not visible); 'Adelphi Theatre, Extraordinary Hit, The Last Days of Pompeii!' To the exclusion of anything else, the posters have taken over the surface of the painting, just as in the scene represented they have taken over the street. At the same time, the painting's meticulous copying of the printed words and images draws attention to its all but anachronism in a world in which lithography can now—in its own time—produce numberless new posters like the ones in the picture, while photography—we know now—is just about to supersede the existing means of producing an image of reality. Shadowed or highlighted by technical things that both were not and newly were, by photography (not quite yet) and lithography, for the painting the posters' printed words are painstakingly copied by hand.

Photography thus hovers as if on the edge of Parry's picture, seen at any later time. In a comparable way another momentous new thing can already be glimpsed, or at least with hindsight, behind the proud presentation, on one of the posters that Parry has copied, of a 'Splendid New Coach' to Liverpool. This new 'Comet! In 24 Hours' sets off in superb obliviousness to its imminent redundancy through the construction of the railway network. The Stockton-Darlington railway had begun at the end of the 1820s, and soon the stagecoaches would be a quaint old thing of the past. Within just a few years, a headline London to Liverpool journey of 24 hours would be news of a breakdown, not a breakthrough.

For most of the rest of the nineteenth century, the permanent walls and temporary fencing of buildings and building sites would continue to be plastered with posters. Everywhere. And while it would be natural to imagine a story of steady, unhindered encroachment, with every possible surface eventually succumbing to its obliteration by pasted-on posters, in fact this was not, after all, a straightforward, one-way development. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, activists in many countries campaigned for the regulation of these unsightly ephemera said to be spoiling the streets of the cities—and even the fields of the countryside, now transformed into prime advertising locations, seen from the windows of passing trains. These environmental campaigns succeeded: legislation was passed at local and national levels and the indiscriminate sticking of advertisements onto any and every visible vertical surface was at an end. To this day, the city of Paris shows the scars of that battle, with public buildings scored with the firm instruction: *Défense d'afficher* (No Bill Posting), and even the exact date of the relevant law, July 31st 1881. Ironically, the removal of transient blemishes was sealed by the imposition of permanent disfigurement.

Lady Fry, therefore, was witness to the golden (and all-colour) age of 'posters on hoardings', before this most spectacular of media platforms had come to be curbed and

controlled: her youth was the time of posters' ubiquitous urban presence, to which Parry's painting is an all but photographic testimony. And behind or alongside those posters lies the development if not the beginning of the thing that is sometimes given the handy summary name of consumer culture. Not something you can exactly see with your own eyes, out on the street, but a way of being and living and moving through days that those posters, here today and gone next week, bring out. A poster suggests that there is always something new and now: something to see that belongs to this time and no other. It has its day, and then it is gone—covered over. In the time of the poster the present moment becomes a show of itself *as the present*, to be seen and enjoyed as such. It is colourful and sensational, and it is meant to attract attention. It is putting forward a picture of the present time as *the latest thing*, ongoing, always about to disappear. In its own medium, it is a manifestation of Darwin's paradigm of perpetual tiny changes, as opposed to lasting identities and sudden, decisive events. Change is constant; every day is almost imperceptibly different from yesterday—but different, all the same. Like the layers of fossil accumulation, the posters past—the previous days—remain beneath the posters new that have superseded them, and they will in turn be covered over, more or less, by tomorrow's new announcements. It might appear that the starkly binary clarity of were and were not, either/or, would go against this sense of minutiae, of the change that almost can't be seen as such. But in the old lady's final lists, as with the development of species, it is only in retrospect that the direction is clear, that a change can be seen to have happened.

In a consumerly context, Lady Mariabella's lucifer matches strike a parallel note to the blatant publicity of the posters. Lucifer matches were a branded product that became so much a part of everyday life in the nineteenth century that they were naturalised as a common noun: as with twentieth-century Hoovering, the lucifers of the first invention quickly became a generic term for all the other matches that were made in the same way. Thanks to his newfound position as the bringer of warmth and comfort, the devil has been domesticated—made to conform to the useful powers of his euphemism (*lucifer*: bearer of light). But though lucifer matches, like posters, share the quality of being in essence short-lived, shining a light on the present moment, they are also very different. The match is there to do a job, to light a fire. A poster may serve a useful informative function, showing what's on, what's on offer; but usefulness is not its only or even necessarily its primary role.

Similar (and more extensive) explicatory excursions could be started with any one of the listed things. But the matches, like the posters or any of the rest so easily become, what they so much are not, emblematic: telling parts that have been extracted or snapped from some would-be total picture of a coherent time when, time then. They are taken away from the jumble and individually framed. Then again, is it really a jumble, a random assortment, after all? In particular, it might be thought that the 'Chartists' stand out as the human exceptions, as if protesting a difference from the inanimate, seemingly unpolitical *res* that surround them. Or just *protesting*. What was she thinking of when she included them?

When I first came across this sublime dual list of the things that were not and that were, quite a lot of the stuff that was in it was just unknown to me even as words, let alone as the things that those words once referred to, in Roger Fry's mother's childhood or her later life. That was me then, some time in the 1980s. But now, with a click or two, a whole supplementary series of miniature histories appears before my eyes, as if to flesh out a history for all the particular things that made their impression on Mariabella as having been there or not been there, once upon that time when she was a little child.

And now it is possible to say, looking back, that one thing that was not when I first found that list, was Google. It is a different list today from what it was, back then, before the internet. Well yes. But not so fast. For just as there was no 'world-historical march' say from

flint and steel to lucifer matches, and onwards and upstairs to central heating, so there was never a time pre-Google—until now.

ABSTRACT

David Trotter's work is always focused on how to think about the relationship between literary forms and the specificities of social history. This paper explores that question by means of an old lady's wonderful comparative list of 'Things that were not—: Things that were: when I was a little child' that is quoted by Virginia Woolf in her biography of Roger Fry, son of the once little girl. Does the pinpointing of historical change depend on a clear-cut story of what the now past was not?

¹ David Trotter, *The English Novel in History: 1895-1920* (London: Routledge, 1993), 4.

² Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry : A Biography* (1940 ; New York : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 17.

³ A generation later than the moment of Lady Fry's lists, a character called Lady Fawcett in *The Candidate*, a TV play by John Bowen broadcast in 1960, comes out with a delightful one-line summary of something like the same position in relation to the absences of a remembered childhood: 'Teenagers! We didn't have teenagers when I was a girl.' The special Wildean combination of absurdity and accuracy occurs because on the one hand it is obviously daft to suggest that until recently there was no one aged between thirteen and twenty, but on the other hand 'teenagers' really are both a newly created type and a new word. See Bowen, *'The Essay Prize' with 'A Holiday Abroad' and 'The Candidate': Plays for Television* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 119.

⁴ See Trotter, *Circulation : Defoe, Dickens and the Economies of the Novel* (1988 ; rpt. Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).