

FISHY ARRANGEMENTS:

A SHORT DIGRESSION ON AESTHETICS

Michael Carter

*No world
wears as well as it should but, mortal or not, a world has still to be built
because of what we can see from our windows,
the Immortal Commonwealth
which is there regardless: it's in perfect taste
and it's never boring but
it won't quite do.
- W. H. Auden*

In his book, *Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin makes the following remark: 'Breeders habitually speak of an animal's organization as something quite plastic, which they can model almost as they please'.¹

This short paper is a meditation upon the key notions of Darwin's reasoning in that sentence namely, the materiality of the world ('the animal's organisation'), the characteristic of pliancy ('quite plastic') and the agreeable effects this induces in us humans. Although this was one of the major themes of my book *Putting a Face on Things*, both space (and time) restricted the degree to which I was able to elaborate upon it outside of the demands of each chapter. So this paper is, in many ways, a piece of unfinished business.

I grew up in a world before deep freezing was widely available. Perishable goods had to be moved fast and many ingenious methods were devised to prolong their shelf lives. One that retains a particular vividness from this time was that used by fishmongers. A common feature of their shops was to have a huge slab of marble set at an angle to the street so that passers-by and prospective customers could easily view the fish. The cooling effect of the marble was supplemented by jets of cold water placed at the head of the slab, which bathed the fish throughout the day thus keeping it fresh. By far the most striking feature of these shops was the complex patterns and designs into which the owner arranged his fish each day. Although these designs never repeated themselves – crabs might be in abundance one day and absent the next – I can recall certain regularities. The patterns were always non-figurative and whilst there was never any attempt to work the creatures into kitsch 'marine views' neither were they abstract in the modern sense. I later realised that the designs were derived from the European tradition of ornament and in particular drew upon the iconography of the cornucopia where abundance is signified, not simply by quantity but by the pleasant tumbling and spilling incorporated into the designs. If my memory serves me right, the designs moved between patterns where the level of accident was high to those of a more ordered configuration in which chevrons, homogenous blocks of colour and geometric shapes were prevalent. Certainly what was taking place on the fishmonger's slab was an aesthetic activity in that he was engaged in the manipulation, or arrangement, of physical matter into forms and shapes that were aimed at producing an attractive

appearance to his display. Might we not say, then, that at least one dimension of the realm of the aesthetic can be regarded as the organisation of appearances, an organisation whose ordering principles are non-utilitarian and whose aim is to catch the eye? But, if we can characterise this aspect of the aesthetic so, and if we also allow that it is possessed of its own ordering principles, have we exhausted the question? I think not because we are bound to enquire why this 'aesthetic re-ordering', this re-arrangement of physical matter, is taking place at all. What is buried inside of the desire to change, or improve upon the appearance of nature, and which casts it as a pliant entity capable of taking up the designs we have upon it? Is the answer the one provided by Auden at the head of the essay – it (nature) 'won't quite do' – and if so why not?

Let us return to the fishmonger's slab. At the end of the day the design was in tatters. As the fish were purchased the lines, the pattern of colours, the chance appearance of abundance began to vanish, erased by successful sales. The design and its effects were only temporary, forever moving from dazzling fullness in the morning to ruination in the evening, but always capable of being renewed the next day. Thus the pleasing arrangement was only short-lived, a matter of surfaces produced by a momentary expenditure of energy which, for a while at least, held the fish in the order required by the design. Just for that short while one could entertain a belief that a small part of the natural world seemed to be filled with human significance. At this level, then, the organisation of the world's appearance, this matter of surfaces, opened up a kind of imaginary consolation for both arranger and viewer. The stuff of the world, by entering into a condition of pliancy, appears to undergo a form of transubstantiation.

I am aware that to call this realm the aesthetic may be stretching that poor abused category beyond its legitimate boundaries, but to resort to the barbarism of the 'ur-aesthetic' is too awful to contemplate. However, given these caveats, I would like to develop this notion of the aesthetic by way of an engagement with a single text, Terry Eagleton's, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*.²

One of the themes that surfaces throughout Eagleton's thesis is the observation that aesthetics, as it has been construed within the tradition of Western philosophy, is drawn towards, and fascinated by, the ambiguity (even confusion) which surrounds human artefacts, and in particular the manner in which they complicate the line separating the animate from the inanimate. Eagleton refers to this ambiguity as 'a peculiar positionality', a positionality in which the work of art, as the paradigmatic instance of the artefact, is thought of as 'a kind of subject'. What he seems to mean by this is that the work of art (and by implication made objects in general), by nature of their 'peculiar positionality', are regarded as manifesting certain of the properties normally associated with the ethical person.

*The morally virtuous individual lives within the grace and symmetry of an artefact.*³

What is intriguing here is that he appears not to notice that, in this statement, the directionality of the metaphor is not quite as he might have intended and appears to be moving in a direction opposite to that which his argument requires. In fact, in the above quotation it is the human subject who is being figured in terms of the beautiful object and not vice versa. This meant that, for the present writer, it was possible to make an alternative reading of the phrase 'peculiar positionality'. That is, as well as imbuing, or appearing to imbue, the artefact with elements of consciousness (the subject);

consciousness may also be configured as if it were possessed of the grace, charm and order of the object. Do not those three terms, grace, charm and order apply with just as much legitimacy to the world of made objects as they do to the psychological dispositions of the subject? In the context of the present argument what is important to note is the way in which the author recognises that, within the very materiality of worked objects, it is their aspiration to a condition of an ideal that marks them off from their surrounds.

Within the dense welter of our material life ... certain objects stand out in a sort of perfection dimly akin to reason, and these are known as beautiful. A kind of ideal seems to inform their sensuous existence from within.

Again Eagleton uses a human category, that faculty of the subject called reason, to provide both a point of origin for, and standard of comparison between, the objects of our material life. The exceptional ones, the beautiful ones, are those which appear to approach our condition and which appear to manifest our characteristics. Thus it is that Eagleton's text locates the origins of the aesthetic within the sentient, perceiving corporeal subject and not as a particular way of organising the material world and its appearance. What I would like to do is not simply to invert Eagleton's equation, but keep open the ambiguous feel that this 'peculiar positionality' of the made world implies.

It is in the chapter entitled 'The Kantian Imaginary' that we find the links between the aesthetic and the imaginary most fully elaborated. At the start of the chapter, Eagleton, commenting upon the pervasiveness of the subject-object couplet in Western epistemology, remarks that the more the subject extends its hold over the world:

The more it relativises its own needs and desires dissolving the world's substance into the stuff of its own sense.⁵

He is somewhat overstating his case here, I feel, since it is only very extreme forms of sensationalism that convert the world into 'the stuff of its own sense'. Indeed, one of the recurrent themes that crops up in philosophical discussions of the imagination is that the action of the imagination upon the stuff of the world is invariably a two-fold process. The first move made by the imagination is to transform physical matter into a plastic substrate, or an ensemble of elementary particles. This condition is one where the world, or that element of it being worked upon, is rendered into a pliant state able to assume new configurations. Eagleton castigates this process as being 'Imaginary' or 'narcissistic'. But imagination never denies the materiality, or even externality, of the world; it merely alights upon and exploits that 'peculiar positionality' it occupies once it has been subjected to human labour. Thus in his discussion of Marx he remarks approvingly:

[Marx] insisted on the heterogeneity of matter to consciousness, on the material [the real] as some irreducible externality which inflicts a necessary wound on our narcissism.⁶

But is it not precisely to overcome, albeit temporarily and at the surface, this 'irreducible externality' that human beings engage in aesthetic re-arrangements of physical matter in the first place? Is not style always a double index of failure and success, a compromise between the aspiration towards an ideal and the persistent recalcitrance of the matter, which is being worked upon? One problem with Eagleton's argument, I think, lies with his rather sparse conception of the role played by both imagination and fantasy in our

dealings with the world. At this point, it is worth recalling Bachelard's insistence that the couplet made up of the imagination and the aesthetic always presents a double aspect: there is the aggressive moment of fragmentation and dissolution, but this is followed by the productive moment, the moment of re-making. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any situation in which either the individual, or the collective (which must perforce live in a material world), is capable of accommodating to the world or attempting to make the world accommodate to it, without the 'world's substance' being submitted to some sort of transubstantiation. The moment of the world's dissolving, its rendering down, is always followed by a subsequent moment in which we find artefacts and appearances being produced. The new forms and surfaces will be marked by the needs and desires of human beings, but that is hardly surprising since it was the inscription of these needs and desires which propelled the activity of labour to be initiated in the first place. But this renewal is never ended, like the slab with the fish; a new morning comes and work must begin again to repair, maintain and turn the world in our direction once more. Of course this re-constitution of a fragment of the world into an embodiment of an ideal is only temporary, but to claim that because of this it can only be concerned with the superficialities of appearances, and further that it will therefore only ever reside within the order of the imaginary could only be regarded as a shortcoming by the most committed of Romantics. In reading and re-reading Eagleton's immensely enjoyable discussion of the Imaginary, I was continually reminded of the dissembling, only superficially cynical, remark made by Oscar Wilde that 'only the shallow underestimate the importance of surfaces'. Eagleton continually contrasts the superficiality of our attempts to gild the stuff of the world with our needs and desires for the authentic, a real penetration into the forms of the world. Thus it is that we are prone to a number of mortal sins, the chief of which is to mistake the illusion for the real and so fall into a condition of hubris. If we mistake surface for depth, and if we believe that we have really 'turned' the world to face us, to smile back at us, then are we not in danger of thinking that the stony indifference of reality has finally been overcome, that matter has been permanently rendered into a benign pliancy for the mind? Perhaps it might not be too cheeky at this point to remind the reader of the affinities between Kosmos and cosmetics.

I would not want so lightly to dismiss the efforts we make to construct a place in which to live and work for what Eagleton calls the more 'authentic', more 'absolute', or more 'real'. The artefact is neither the supreme conquest of spirit over matter, nor is it a symptom of human inability to turn the universe in neither our direction, nor our constantly reiterated mistake of only recognising ourselves in alien products. The realm of made objects will always occupy an intermediate position; it will always exhibit an irreducible ambiguity as to whether it is a transformation of the inanimate into the animate, a raising up of the dead, or a descent of the animate into the inanimate. By demanding the absolute, Eagleton overlooks the seriousness of the charming, those minor, but important, pleasures conceded to us by the decorous. Whilst he allows that the appearance of artefacts may be such that they reveal an aspect which 'is delightfully pliant to the mind', it is precisely here that their illusory quality emerges since, Eagleton cautions us, 'things-in-themselves turn their back to us'. It is in this sense that Eagleton's declension of the 'aesthetic aspect' remains equivocal. It can reveal, momentarily and in a localised manner, the promise of a more generalised mode of non-alienated existence. However, the aesthetic always remains dangerously seductive because we all too often mistake the local for the general, the surface for the depths. It is as if the aesthetic

becomes the consolation prize doled out to human beings by the Gods for denying them access to the absolute. But, if we forgo the Romantic desire for transcendence, if we curb the dubious demand that art give to us that which is every- where else absent, then the aesthetic is certainly only skin deep, but just deep enough.

At the start of this aesthetic digression I posed the question of what it was that might be lodged within this desire to improve upon nature. My answer has been one that sees this not so much as an improvement of nature, but more as a transformation of it into a condition where it becomes something in which it is possible to see us; for a while the indifference (or is it an 'a-difference'?) of nature is softened. Its forms appear to offer only minimal resistance to our wishes, needs and desires. That this moment of apparent fullness and plenitude, this imaginary alignment, should largely be a superficial matter is the heart of the realistic illusion whose humility is preferable to the illusion of realism.

1. Charles Darwin, *On The Origin of the Species* (Harmondsworth: Penguin' 1985), p.90.
2. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
3. *ibid*, p. 34.
4. *ibid*, p.17.
5. *ibid*, p. 70.
6. *ibid*, p. 206.