

On the Margins of Great Housing Estates

Also by Andrew Duncan

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On the Margins of Great Housing Estates

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On the margins of great housing estates

The green lights of the village gush out from the teeming mouths of wheat, sunflower, and sunn, wild apples, tender ripe onions, green belladonna, cloves, and buckwheat, cascading like cascades of water down a throat of ripe and fallacious apples.

—computer generated text (*GPT-2*)

THE HISTORY OF SHOPPING

‘Only the prisoner shall be free, only the poor shall be rich, only the weak strong, only the humble exalted, only the empty filled, only nothing shall be something’.

(a) Llyn Cerrig Bach

This is the lake where an Iron Age deposit of metal artefacts seems to result from the Celtic preoccupation with bodies of water as a site for ritual deposition – an arm of the boundless where payment could be made to the gods for the benefactions of past and future harvests, perhaps. Virtually, these are the swords from which the famous sword came, that was handed to Arthur out of a lake at Avalon.

One of the objects is a fetter – the first, we are told, ever to be found in Britain. Its conformation does not suit a cow or a dog. It is suitable only for confining a living human body. Glimpse of a social order, lapping around the class era like an ocean, where there were no slaves. Of a shining society, without differentiation, moving like the sea, sliding over itself and back. Approach of the Mediterranean. Run-up of a society with awesome powers for producing prestige goods, alluring a simpler society, with no money and few specialists, into stern measures for a counter-prestation. It must have been the nobles of the tribes who nominated the genealogically marginal as slaves. This is – we know it – a first step in the history of shopping. Britain enters the Mediterranean economy as a satellite, a blank page – exporting raw materials, war-dogs, and its own inhabitants, as slaves. The arrival of a range of goods, from overseas, with more tiers of rank, destabilises the old order. The social system convulses and turns into a form with more niches, where differentiation means that political freedom is an attainment; there are nether niches where people are simply unfree. The higher civilisations are more expert in devices of confinement, indoctrination, debt, and torture. The tribes cease to be the complete image of a cosmos, held in place by analogies, and start to be the world periphery, their lands and humans signed with a perceived inadequacy of ownership.

The vast deposits of finely wrought metal, invisible but fiercely imagined as gleaming, in the rivers, lakes, or hanging from splendid trees in the groves or *nemeta*, already represented a mighty expense and self-raising: the objects which support the words one utters to the gods. The upward

thrust of assimilation is now diverted to a new task: of shopping. Ports are built so that the ships of Continental traders can approach with their fabled and heady cargoes. So that people with no appreciation of preciousness can become a commodity.

The vote of the owned is to have a home. The home of the owned is the extent of loss. What the owned know is a deficit economy. The admiration of the commodity is the cultured lord; white markless hands; a gaze where the high falls on the low.

(b) The Goths as Inventors of Tourism

The long route of famine, breaking what they could not carry –
Just an old clatter of pots and pans. Accumulation is what you leave.
Possession straight from *session*, you sit down to enjoy it.
Blowing through thin pastures they devastate,
The long route of hunger. Of shadow series, the flocking delirium
Of what you couldn't have, dream treasures.
Herds multiply flesh wealth
And count down when the grazing cannot carry.
Eurasian fluctuation belt, this dirt is your dirt.
Bags and cans from the economy of shipwreck.

Driving through that fable
'Insatiable', lost in a cycle, at tip of a barren strip after
the herd had eaten down what could be bitten.
A wolf as guide.
Discarding what would not fit into horse-packs,
appetites intact. A market without funds.
Leaving little trace. The grasses regroup.

On the curve of the progress zone
They dig holes in the ground, empty pits
Of earth for firing, inventing the house.
Pits build up to production sheds,
Rows of warehouses and spoil heaps.
The real series of commodities, climbing vector.
The southern cities are depots for all wares.
Wealth gradient
Is no barrier ridge.
Dark periphery full of yearning.

Cycle terminator
In breach of boundaries.
A marine incursion like a shipwreck,

The shores depressing under its weight,
The poor people of Europe in flood
Surfing behind a boat. A line of shields
Dragging the moon out of place.
A northern displacement.
Guided by a flock of carrion birds, auspices,
A commodity gradient shuttles the poor
Into the shopping centres of Gaul and Italy.
The Empire drawing in new forces,
Lose your voice and face. But you love yourself.
At latest with Alaric
The invention of tourism:
Classical cities
Recontextualised by off the scale designers.
They didn't want those Baltic beaches and the strand-grass
So we had to go to them.

I was a barbarian unclear I wasn't a god,
We spotted a vacant empire with original features,
Aromatic and wine-rich. We flew there in the company
Of cranes. A fuselage of yearning.
How close can you get to blue perfection
Without it being turned on by you?

An erasure at the origin of states.
Spear rise spear fall
Sortes Gothicae, dice you throw to win
The casino, the showgirls, the police chief
And the land division.
You say trailer trash, I say Russian roulette.
Cast a thousand lots, risk and thrill.
The land registry is a sprawl of notes,
The smiles of fortune, fallen leaves of the first book:
Origo Gothica.

Honour-avid eorls turfed new earth
Dire-drenched drengs statuted serfdom.

The most booty is in temples and cities.
Turn the herds into straps and bags.
Forget about carrying the shopping home,
We buy the hotel.
A deposit of the self
That solves transport problems
And moves the problem families to a new town.

It was like that film, you know,
Parade armour for a dying gladiator. Gold crows
That treat the rich like a delicatessen. It was Sunday
And we sacrificed the losers. Thought of all the things we don't own
And took half. Weighted on a perfect point,
Acuity turning, then wipe peel off the blade. Half
Of what you ever wanted.
You offered me diamonds, fur coats, and champagne
As if sanctifying them. Can I get a witness?
Can I own a beach? Can I choke a crow?
Get this mosaic featuring me
Popping tags on an Istrian marble quarry!
Those jewellery boutiques were right where we stacked arms
And showered. That's not very *sophisticated*.

We say hi! to the world of objects,
Snare criminal dreams
And write their clauses out as a law-code.
The barbarian equity
Is that you are what you own.
The culture of the unschooled has it
That you can make names up for anything you steal.
Show me who used to own this city
And I'll show you my new poetry tutor.
Tear up my tab
I don't want the oinochoe
I want the vineyard.

(c) Equidistant

A point is dissolved out of connections and is equidistant from all other points. It vanishes in a sky full of points, where every step is as likely as every other and no cell escapes from the constant grey.

A large library offers this boundless free variation reproduced at the level of articulated and finished trains of signals. The larger and more thorough the library is, the more it corresponds to stochastic noise on a monumental scale. The freedom sharply reduces as we choose a single book, which is why this step is so hard to take. Perhaps it is an error, a kind of falling to the ground. Not a word I heard could I relate. When everything we desire is at hand, we have to decide what to desire. The sight of completeness tells us that curiosity is a form of incompleteness: by devouring partial forms, we acquire an appetite for the data which completes those forms, and which is closely specified by the parameters of the incomplete form.

Why go through these metabolic burns to achieve the goal of tranquillity? At this point hurry enters the frame. We incite this state of incompleteness, tension, partiality, fallenness, in order to regain the sense of completeness. The data remains the same, but we enter a dynamic process with respect to it; like other appetites, prone to disorder and compulsiveness. Routes of rapid decay obscure classic and static forms.

Who could lock the gates by which we enter an incomplete state? The solution of asymmetry, where we move through least-energy states, processing nothing. Like the algae on the rock in the river cellar. Who could break the lenses and make the world of signals too faint to recover? Jochmann wrote his *Retreats of Poetry*, three thousand years of falling silent like a harmonic curve realised in wood, its smooth and lawlike decline. Once we knew we were gods we ceased to be gods.

Where a lens is a flaw and a mirror is a fall. A point is perfection and is equidistant from all other points. It vanishes in a sky full of identical points, boundless. A self scattered across this sky has no features and no flaws. It has ejected its organs. It is serial like number. It responds to no signals and dissolves into itself.

[d] Shopping for Books

On the 27th of September 2003 I took the train to Cambridge to visit the university library. My list of books to borrow was: Will-Erich Peuckert, *Pansophia*. The *Straeon* of Glasynys, stories of the 1840s, described by Parry as faithful retellings of Welsh folk tales, free from the inflation of Welsh prose which took place in the Victorian era. A volume of the *Transactions* of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, the learned society dealing with the antiquities of the Highlands, to be used by me as a source of prose in Gaelic, to practice on and to extend my vocabulary. CW von Sydow's *Vor folketro*, our folk's beliefs, an account of folk religion in Sweden, part of a series called *Norden* which described the whole of Scandinavian folk culture.

As my enemies would have predicted, the library had none of these books. They have the TGSi, but you can't borrow those volumes. My whole project, so carefully planned and fantasized about in odd moments of quiet in the office, or just after waking up in the morning, had to be abandoned. I had to improvise and find interesting books by scent – the worst trail of all in a library with several million books.

Hands that scramble through a bed of mud as if counting coins, pawing and pushing away and grabbing. I catch at an unlimited display of books, as if falling past them. Each is available, each is frustrating. I imagine the result of reading each one, as a good prudent consumer: a momentary image flashes on my brain. I start to get fever, my throat is sore, perhaps a small asthma attack. The brain fever sees whatever it wants to see. The images get more and more sketchy, overheated, overpowering, evanescent. I am listening to music at 100 times the right tempo. I only want things which are irretrievable, unreported, obscure, in little-known languages, ignorant of the main lines of European culture, marginal, exotic, irrational. And that is how I wanted to be myself. I implore von Sydow to have written the book I want to read. I am wildly over-excited, tired, unable to respond, everything now is disappointing. I can almost hear wires crackle and burn out. Such is shopping.

Culture, who needs it? None of the books here is a close match to what I desire. But perhaps what I want is in the next aisle? I couldn't bear to leave it on the shelf and be excluded just because it was in a language I couldn't read. No, I couldn't even figure out the title – that's even more unfair.

The shape of what I desire is specific – it mirrors the shape of my body. Its site changes constantly – cooling and heating up all the time like the air around my body. I own the desire I built and which was not fulfilled, and I

own the frustration, a hot bag full of something unnamed. I move through the middle of an *Ich-Gestein*, an ego-geology, a landscape where all the parts run into me and I flow out into all the parts.

The fallback was to borrow five books – three in Welsh, one in Norwegian (from the Norsk Folkeminnelag), one in English about Hungarian folk customs.

The country houses of the land-owning families who formed the apex of society were full of collections of objects; and still are, with the families mostly gone or decollected. The rules of collecting allow for completeness and define future acquisitions – missing points of a series. As the middle class acquires leisure, it seeks to re-enact the successes of the gentry, and so culture becomes an act of collecting: in my case, of experiences rather than objects. The collection reflects the childhood predilections of its maker – in my case, folklore and linguistics, and being in the North. Acquiring culture in this format is a prestation, an act of conspicuous consumption which is not even visible – but virtualised, internalised. The poem is a collection of rare experiences and sets of words – a unique thing in a modest home, mimicking the fabulous treasures in the big house. The modern poem is like that other display possession of the gentry – the Folly. I write the book in order for someone to collect it.

I woke up on a boat on the Thames. It was light and no-one else was awake. Near my head was a book on Occultism and Alchemy, belonging to the owner of the boat, stuffed with hundreds of coloured illustrations of mystical events of transformation, of marriage, of the birth of worlds. It exactly matched Peuckert's book – according to a description I have, "He gives a historical sketch of the white and black magic of that time, the years of Faust and Paracelsus, of the kabbalistic movement, of the mysticism connected with the names of Ficino, Weigel, and Jakob Boehme. *Pansophie* shows us an intellectual world, which had fallen into oblivion for more than two hundred years(.)" I wanted to fall into that oblivion and become what it knew. Gazing over the deck, I could see the fabled reaches of Wandsworth.

[e] One Absolutely Perfect Cultural Object

The core is accepting strangers, and the coveted objects,
The core is repetition and fixed order.
On offer, in matching colours, a stone wrist-bracer,
Microliths, bronze mirror, peat-bog,
Collection *Critique*, animal heads, industrial skips,
Coffee sops and blood-crusts wires.

Quiver of ibex leather and hazel wands,
Bronze dagger and stone bracer on wrist
Of lord for whom the sunbeam strikes as nimbus
Tooling strap details in a splash of colours and fine fabrics.
Modularised for export to a thousand sites.
Wear the set and enter the story.

The horse is waiting for a rider, the continent
Is all recorded as tenures, on skins. You get the seat for
A romance in which high status males and females
Cycle through love and warfare without a climax,
Cells reproducing across variant geology.
Feathered hermits and arrogant enchantresses,
Marriage, religion, or death
By the Tarn Wathelyn in Inglewood Forest.

The ticket says you're Steve Bannon for a day.
It was depth. Even *smelt* like the pipe cracking heads
Outside the neighbourhood bar where the guys watch the HUAC show.
Shatter post-doctrinal half-truths, empathemes. Opencast brains
Crackling like frayed flexes of 1953. *Live* the
Blue-collar geopolitical re-enactor, his
3-word ideologemes beaming in over infected earpiece.

I was drafted for the Blair-era Grand Project
To mitigate the effect of society on social life.
Do you have faith in them? Can you read their quiet signs?
We were soaring in the service of others,

I got into the legend and out of the curve,
They used my press release to sop up coffee,
I got kicked out of the Social Exclusion Unit.

You go to a mall with many zones
To pick up the thing you have lost.
We peak in the Perfect Zone
But could not remain.
You love the thing you want
You frequent a café where you used to have it

In the *grande surface* we got the book through the till,
And in the Café Pique on the next level down
We were Connected and not touching the ground.
Editions de Minuit. Exclusivity opened up –
The core is accepting strangers,
And lit me with its nimbus. We had the refrains,
Those great lines were meant for us.
Gilles, Félix, and me. Collected the set.
One foot on the Left Bank
And one on the shore of the Trent.

In the poverty-owning cosmocracy
Every identity is temporary and replays from system start.
In the strict regime of abundance
A sense of self comes free with the purchase.
You catch the recursion and take home
One absolutely perfect cultural object.

CCTV UNDERGROUND

The house sailing on a sea of rain
Gathers soot and silt to funnel down
The pipe fixed to the wall
Into the dense root-plait choking the way

The jasmine tapped the six feet of pulsing black silt
Its roots got thirsty on the drain
A brush of roots swept water inwards.
Swelled to the bore of the clearance channel
Which backed up, in a bubbling spring.

Blue bricks of the back yard lifted and stacked
As the hidden emerges into shot
On a screen on wheels. A yellow plastic frame defends it.
A cable with camera at its tip
Is sailing bravely into the darkness of the drain
A diode light pinned to its forehead.

The jasmine, breathing
It does so catch water in a net
A hand without a palm
whose fingers drink straight through the skin
Drinking and binding in refinement of greed
It strikes the deepest roots, the narrowest and most fined down clutch,
The most competitive and penetrating, whipping its holes as fine as
[water-seeps,
drafting the subsoil into an organ of jasmine.
Tripping up houses from the toe
A message of me
Sprayed upward cascade of nutrients.

The earth arches its back;
The tip detaches and swims off, through layers of black humus
The fine world of roots, the cells of larvae,

Acid and humus and mineral seeps
The waterways sliding towards day.
Drawn down sightless channels with the run-off
Sailed through 100 lightless colours.
An eye hidden in its own horizon
Lashed by curiosity, a spasm of nerves
Glimpsing sleeping strata of broken stone.
Where the soil is milled,
Where the brooks gather, where the rain is drowned,
Dissolution is a night without dreams
Leaching by laws of the slope down from the archaic crags.
The royal barque of the pristine eye
Comes forth by day
Bearing a strip of knowledge
Traced by a star in the upper darkness
Commanded by symmetry.