

Paranoid Aphorisms

(Foreword to *Street Life in London Redeemed*, by Andrew Atkinson.)

Redemption is an act of exchange. We exchange goods for services, time for payment, favours for favours. Some of these are reversible exchanges, some are not. What happens to meaning when we exchange an action for a sign? Do we get back what we gave? When, in the case of an artwork, for example, we cash in the signifier against what it purported to signify, what do we redeem of the event, what do we redeem of the sign-maker?

Some materials might seem easier to redeem than others. To state a "difficult" material, the complex baggage attaching to the integumental layering of a painting exemplifies the difficulty of tracing intentions and full meanings back to the act of observation and the finite, but nonetheless inaccessible workings of the artist's mind. When we listen to Bach or look at Bronzino, we respond as best we can to the challenge of being a celebrant of their creations. At their best, they provoke wide ranging responses in us that affect us emotionally as well as intellectually. In fact, it's profoundly moving to reflect on how closely we can share one another's responses to works of art. Even in these "best moments", though, we are aware of the historical and cultural difference between ourselves and the artist, and indeed of the differences between ourselves and the other members of the audience. It's this awareness itself that makes the connection we nonetheless feel so affecting. But observe the exchange: we redeem these artworks for the purpose of constructing emotional and mental responses around them. It's the profession of the historian to make more informed and specialised attempts at redeeming their source materials, but a historian, more than anyone, is aware of the limitations of source materials and the fragility of the relationship between themselves and the

object of their study. What excites us, what excites the historian, is the feeling of having made a connection, having shared knowledge of a reality with its creator, having redeemed the circumstances of a situation to our knowledge.

But we cannot reconstruct past reality from our impressions of it, any more than we can imagine the whole of reality at once. (Whether or not we can reconstruct present reality from our impressions of it is a matter for doubt in certain quarters too.) What the historian knows professionally is that the tensions between subject and object are always dynamically in play. We, as the consumers of cultural artifacts, are often duly cognizant of such interplays. Indeed we often enjoy them as part of what makes a cultural production a rich experience for us. Unlike the historian, though, we are allowed the indulgence of slipping beneath the waves sometimes, and immersing ourselves in the self-sufficient contents of, say, a movie or a symphony, without regard to its limits in terms of what it can say about the truth of its construction and intent.

Sometimes it might seem that we can make a perfect recording. It might seem that we can make a perfect sign for an occurrence; something that records in perfect clarity all the detail and distinction of its subject, so that someone looking at it could tell at once what it was. "That's a recording of Bach's Mass in B Minor, "we say to ourselves, "And that is a photograph of an old man wearing a sandwich board, unless my ears/eyes deceive me." It seems, in fact, that we are encountering materials that stand-in perfectly for the reality they purport to represent. But though we can exult in the wonderful sound and identify with the fate of the old man, there are always imponderables, no less so with the photograph than with the Bach. A musician knows that, regardless of the depth of detail and the depth of musical notation's history of convention, (so much richer than that of an alphabet)

they will be called upon, at last, at the moment of performance, to recreate the artwork entirely from what they, the performer, contain within themselves. Attempts to recreate the original circumstances of the composer's intention by using original instruments and locations only defer the moment of recreation and deepen the historical understanding of the work. They do not eliminate the problematic of having to recreate, through prior internalised knowledge and empathy, the work I, the performer, have concluded the notation to indicate. Photography has, with reason, further to go in establishing the same degree of effective "self-reflexivity." Photography has a history of proponents invoking its' allegedly greater efficacy as a communicator of knowledge. (Actually, it's a good communicator of information, which isn't the same thing.) Music, though overlaid with the efforts of musicologists to interpret and critically mantle the core of the artwork, doesn't make claims to knowledge, perhaps because the absurdity of the notion is so much more apparent. It does make claims as to effect, however, but that is a different critical issue. Photography makes the claim that it makes statements about real things. To be sure, real things are pictured, but the indexical moment of the light's recording is only one dimension amongst many that constitute the meaning of an artwork, which is always a dialogue rather than a one-way pipeline of objective fact. The act of redemption is a dialogue between the redeemer and the redeemed, much as the act of reading is a dialogue between the reader and the text. Photography is as subject to the difficulties of meaning in this world as anything else mediated by our senses and the fact that they exist in time. Knowledge itself, though seeking to remove itself from time, hasn't found in humanity a species able to formulate absolute knowledge about the world that can resist changes in the way the knowledge is formed and the way it turns upon other knowledge in an unending volute of meaningfulness. Though science makes lightbulbs work, it never precludes a new explanation of why they work a century

from now.

Andrew Atkinson's *Street Life in London Redeemed* revisits the photography of John Thomson, a pioneering Victorian photographer whose *Street Life in London Observed* was published to critical acclaim and popular success. Thomson's high-quality prints record his observations of the various sights and social types on the streets of London at the time, and are overlaid with moral sensibility and anecdotal history. Thomson was also successful in bringing back home to Britain quantities of detailed photographs of far flung scenes from the mysterious orient to a delighted audience who found in these still-superb photographs a wealth of new material to fuel the multifaceted fascination of the empire's home audience. Atkinson's revision of Thomson's images is the latest in a continuing process of historical signification to which Thomson's artwork, no less than any other artwork, is endlessly open. Rather than trace Thomson's intentions and the detailed cultural mythology of the photographs, Atkinson has radically conflated the material with powerful narrative tropes. Atkinson has taken cues from a range of skills and forms of practice: Drawing on his background in researching and materially recreating a lost technique of photographic reproduction he has gained insight into the techniques and physical labour of early photography. As an artist employing a range of digital imaging methods, the imagery has been opened up to digital leverage; it becomes possible to look in ways never possible before, to change and reproduce imagery as never before. Atkinson's interest in Gnostic texts parallels the problematics introduced by his running-together of his different practices, and is present in *Street Life in London Redeemed* to an unprecedented extent. How his interests in the abstruse, though commonly available writings of the Gnostics really works as part of his practice is ultimately a matter we as his critics and audience can only guess at, and it is questionable how well able he is able to communicate

the important machinery of his thoughts on these matters. But it is equally possible, indeed plausible, that the uncertainty permeating the Gnostic view of reality and humanity's ultimate fate chimes with our uncertainty as interpreters and that the images of redemption, of communication and the common human valencies of image and language, are harboured as uncertainly in Atkinson's mind as they are in the minds of others. Atkinson uses characters drawn from the Gnostic cosmology to perambulate the harrowing byways of these doubts; there is a paranoid tension between subject and object as he skirts the limits of identity and meaning. To be sure, there are powerful stories backgrounding the work: a whole involved cosmology, the vexatious possibilities of reconditioning the imperial history of one's native society, and not least, the near-ephemeral traces of the photographs' human subjects and that of the near-run-thing of the Nag Hamaddi's invisibility.

Stories light bonfires in our minds to gather round. They're where we meet as humans. Atkinson's work exists somewhere on the boundary between darkness and light: his characters are figures perpetually held in the opening between one space and another, hanging around in the shadows and of uncertain identity. Atkinson figures the prospect of redemption as something that could as easily annihilate as transfigure. His figures do not know whether they ought to exist in a redeemed reality. The artwork itself hovers in a tension between outright historical representation and a concatenation of metaphysical doubts that is so poised as to connect not at all with our shared imaginings. This poise is less one of coolness than of paranoia and invites criticism of its aloof and private subjectivity. Much of this criticism is to be upheld, inasmuch as Atkinson is trying to tell a story and failing to do so. But it's my belief that it is more important to Atkinson to depict the doubt and circumvention his critical awareness forces him to bracket his every statement with. *Street Life in London Redeemed* does not carry out the

promise/threat the title carries. The act of redemption could consign the whole meditation to annihilation: the delicate act of looking, not so delicate, ravages the surface for meaning, and having taken what it needs, the gaze moves on.

Atkinson uses redemption in a double sense: he abandons the project of redemption-to-knowledge as too risky and offers instead a series of paranoid aphorisms. The distinction of subject and object is meant to be suspended: the meaning of the artwork is "redeemed" by being placed beyond our reach. It is a door we can never walk through.