

No Foreign Matter Unconsumed

Eccentric Work in the Time of Kate Atkin

*It was when the tress were leafless first in November
And their blackness became apparent, that one first
Knew the eccentric to be the base of design*

Wallace Stevens, *Like Decorations in A Nigger Cemetery*¹

In Georges Perec's novel, *W or The Memory of Childhood*, two stories are played out in alternating chapters. The story which begins at Chapter Two is, as the title declares, an autobiographical account of memory of childhood. It begins with the unforgettable line, '*I have no memory of childhood*'. The other story, which begins at Chapter 1, is a fantastic adventure story. The narrator states that he wrote this story at the age of thirteen. He remembered only the title, *W*. Of the rest, he *had practically no memory* apart from a couple of lines '*about the life of a community concerned exclusively with sport, on a tiny island off Tierra del Fuego.*' He adds that later, *I came across some of the drawings I had done around the age of thirteen. With their help I reinvented W and wrote it, publishing it as I wrote, in serial form.*²

To begin the autobiographical element by renouncing everything is to abandon the rules of the game of autobiography. It is a wonderful opening gambit. In his valiant efforts to remember, Perec writes, 'Like everyone else, or almost everyone, I had a father and a mother, a potty, a cot, a rattle and, later on, a bicycle'. (p12) These things are fairly incontestable, granted. Little, concrete, lumpen, everyday facts, but of great import in their normality. The rest can only be asserted negatively: 'My childhood belongs to those things which I know I don't know much about.'³

He has a photograph of his mother to which he can apply no memory, and memories for which there is no validating photographic evidence. The photographs are not reproduced in the book. This would not necessarily be unusual in a novel, whereby there is no real claim to indexical truth - as Perec goes to great pains to show.

¹ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, 2006, p128

² Georges Perec, *W or The Memory of Childhood*, Trans. David Bellos, The Harvill Press, London, 1996, p6-7

³ *ibid* p12

However, Perec was well aware of the literary and intellectual milieu of the time, France in the 1960's and 70's – *W* was first published in French in 1975. In a lecture Perec said that his earlier novel, *Things; A Story of the Sixties* (1965), was written, “to fill the blank created, so to speak, by the juxtaposition of four works of importance to him”, one of which was Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*, which contains many reproductions from mass culture. Let us say, then, that Perec omitted the inclusion of the photographs within the text on purpose. This absence of the photograph as a precursor for Barthes’ own famously absent photograph of his mother in his late work, *Camera Lucida* (1980).⁴

Chapter 1

Imagine an object, seen from the far side of a room and recognized instantly as being a family *Photograph Album*, only to discover on approaching it that it is in fact over two meters long. On bending over the tome one reads, embossed into the cover, the word, *Drawings*. On opening the vast cover one discovers each page is covered entirely, right to the edge, with tiny handwriting, a story meticulously copied from an ancient, untranslatable text. To read it in its entirety would take a one hundred years. It would become a life’s work through which one would learn nothing of the text, but only of time.

These leaps of appearance and media, although perhaps at first surprising, are soon easily understood. They occur all the time, not only in stories such as this, but also in science and everyday trivia. They occur all the time in art. It is literally and metaphorically about how *the eccentric (comes) to be the base of design*. Here are a couple of examples. The first comes from the one of the histories of photography, the second from the East End of London in the present.

1.

Nicéphore Niépce’s, *View from the Window at Le Gras* (1827), made using a pewter plate coated with a solution of bitumen of Judea and exposed for over eight hours is often claimed to be the first photograph. The plate was lost for over a hundred years. This is photo-historian Geoffrey Batchen’s story, so here, in its entirety, while I pause for a tea break, so to speak, is his telling of it:

In an article published in 1977 Gernsheim tells how he and his wife Alison rediscovered this sacred object in 1952. It had been lying in a trunk in England, forgotten until their inquiries had drawn attention to its existence. On February 15th, 1952, Helmut held the long-missing heliograph for the first time...The only problem was that this ‘foundation stone’ proved almost impossible to reproduce photographically.

⁴ An example of someone who included rather than excluded photographs could be W. G. Sebald.

The photograph that he took of it turned out to be no more than a reflection of the front of his own camera...After the Times and the National Gallery in London had also tried and failed to get a satisfactory reproduction, Gernsheim enlisted the help of the Kodak Research Laboratory. After three weeks of trials, the laboratory produced what Gernsheim describes as a “greatly distorted image...(which) in no way corresponded with the original...a travesty of the truth.” Accordingly, Gernsheim then spent two days touching up this copy print with watercolour, eliminating “hundreds of light spots and blotches” and giving the image a “pointillistic effect” that he admits is “completely alien to the medium.” Although he confesses that his painted reproduction “was only an approximation of the original”, he reassures readers that it “comes rather close to the drawing I had made a month before any reproduction existed.”...Here we have another of those peculiar twists of photographic history. The image that is everywhere propagated as the first photograph, as the foundation stone of photography’s history, as the origin of the medium, is in fact a painting after a drawing!⁵

2.

Another initially eccentric specimen would be the presence of the *Black Locust* on Old Ford Road in the East End of London. It is a strange sight, this weirdly exotic tree amidst the familiar flora of the oak and chestnut. Like a foreign island, it is somewhat defensive and resilient to attack. A short introduction to the specimen’s history and tendencies soon permits this strange appearance to take its rightful place in the canons of modern British urban vegetation, albeit not without a final warning note:

Black locust (Robinia pseudoacacia) is a legume with root nodes that, along with bacteria, “fixes” atmospheric nitrogen into the soil. These soil nitrates are unusable by other plants...It does not compete well with other trees and does not tolerate shade, so it often gets crowded out. It grows very fast, but does not live long compared to most trees. It rarely lives to be 100 years old. Black Locust can survive drought and harsh winters. This tree can send up new sprouts from roots and stumps, which may eventually turn into new trees. Black locust is native to the Ozarks and the southern Appalachians but has been transplanted in many northeastern states and Europe. The tree has become a pest in areas outside its natural range. You are encouraged to plant the tree with caution.⁶

⁵ Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA., 1997, p125-7

⁶ <http://forestry.about.com/library/tree/blloc.htm>

Chapter 3

Of Other Islands

Another opportunity to reveal how Perec's eccentric movement from the tropics to printed matter is not so far or far fetched, may be found across the works of Herman Melville. The move, for example, from *Typee* or, let's mention something more famous, *Moby Dick*, to *Bartleby the Scrivener*. The same forces are at play in many ways, the central motif being the creation of islands through mental (in)certitudes. There is the ship, the obsessed Captain, the whale itself, islands circling around and chasing after each other. Then there is Bartleby, marooned in his preference not to undertake menial tasks, in his increasing muteness, in his screened off corner of the room, in his death curled up on the floor in the corner of a prison courtyard. At extreme ends of the spectrum of intensity and resistance to the codes of the sea and of the office, both resist and each opens himself to potentialities, to vast open space and precarious movement therein.

Like a book of photographs without any photographs, or an autobiography written with no memories, to approach a medium without constraint or compliance to its codes it to permit oneself a great freedom. The possibilities are so great that most buckle before the first hurdle, and such is the fate of many who first begin to compete in the Olympics at *W*. The rewards are great and the rewards are also unknown as there are no rules. Sometimes the rewards for winning are terrible. What begins as an eccentric strategy, the saddest story of childhood imaginable alternated with a Boy's Own fantasy story of athletics and tropical far-flung islands, quickly transforms before one's very eyes into something utterly sensible, as the most appropriate way of speaking of the unspeakable. Each story says the things other cannot say about itself⁷. It speaks to the reader of one's need for a rootedness in the world by revealing the failings of attempts to *copy* truthfully from memory or to remember through photography's form of *copy*.

Atkins' early attempts to photograph aspects of the urban were hampered by what photo-historian Ian Jeffrey has called photography's *promiscuity*. Whatever your subject, the camera will register everything else within the frame, independent of the photographer's interest in it. The subject was not really isolated at all, but one element within a field of vision, often in her case an inner city field or park. Another problem with photography as a medium is that, contrary to general opinion, it is not concerned with looking, quite the opposite in fact. The third problem is that it is an inherently distancing medium. It is however in its intersection with the question of time that it at last begins to become interesting.

⁷ Perec is of course writing about the Holocaust and the loss of his parents to it at the ages of four and six years old.

The drawings, which begin with a form of scrivener-like copying from a snapshot, are arduous tasks. They take intensive days, weeks sometimes, to complete. They must become, in many ways, a daily routine. Of course, any photographer will tell you that photography is not done in a fraction of a second, but the potentially time-consuming shooting and printing process, is neither a pleasurable nor meditative activity. Photography is riddled with anxieties. Drawing however has a very different relationship to time, and also, as a medium, to historical time. One of photography's great anxieties is its status as a medium in its own right. It is very young. Drawing, although at times marginalized to a preparatory medium, is also the oldest. To be drawing now is not only to be engaging with the recent rediscovery of its centrality to all practices, but to it as a re-centered medium. It is also to rediscover time. In Atkins' case, a potentially vast form of time which is built into each work.

In his seminal essay, *Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias*, Foucault, discusses the recent invention of the Polynesian vacation village; a form of holiday resort. He writes that the huts of *Djerba* are in a sense relatives of libraries and museums, for the rediscovery of Polynesian life abolishes time; yet the experience is just as much the, rediscovery of time, it is as if the entire history of humanity is reaching back to its origin. Atkin is building a version of this relation to time into her drawings. Time is also drawn across her oeuvre as it itself develops and grows. The subject matter is urban, trees and landscaping being the principle objects. The scale and intensity of marks across the paper are all made at very close range. The field of the paper is lost to vision outside of the area upon which she is working. This loss of an edge is manifested in this new work where we see her zoom in, literally to details, bark and trunks. Where the tree and islands float in space, the surface drawings fill the frame. Formally this closing in on the surface, combined with the experiences of making these works, seems to have led her, through the surface, to intimate interior skins. The fantasy of going inside the tree's bodily trunk, through a knot, and finding lungs, orifices, stomachs.

In the relief works, we see her leaving photography behind. It is dead, an obsolete medium. The reliefs are not made by working from photographs at all. She says they come after the experience of making the drawings from photographs. They are imaginary, but weighted by what she has learned from the drawings. Photography may be said to be implicated, but by greater degrees. It is barely legible. The reliefs are new. They are experienced as a kind of prototype for something, which will inevitably quickly move into its mature form. In their prototypic state, they are newborn and what they may lack in maturity (in the context of the drawings) they make up for in their urgency to find a form for themselves. They are, little potentialities, adrift in their own black sea.

*In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.*⁸

Atkin is not dealing with heterotopias in the usual way. What she is taking from the heterotopic is its relation to time. She moves freely between the ancient (drawing, nature, the art of copying as a way of becoming closer to God), the modern (definitions, fragments) and the contemporary (urban landscaping, the act of drawing now, working against speed, the digital, Zapping). Unlike certain drawing practices wherein a form of mapping is the aim, her drawings are not stillborn, a means to an end; the process of making is the labor in which experiments take place across the surface of the paper through which she moves more and less freely from the copying mode, in and out of fantasy. What the drawings propose is not something available to knowledge, but to a deeper, incommunicable time wrested out in the present. It is across this speechless web that a communion takes place somewhere in the Holocene. It is the slowest time, our antidote to the now in the present. The act of drawing replaces photography and art is returned to its sacred origins. Drawing becomes the newest technology and the oldest.

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⁸ Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, in *Architecture Culture 1943-1968: A Documentary Anthology*, Ed. Joan Oakman, Rizzoli International Publications, 1993, p428