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Steven Connor's Theatre of the Naïve

One is tempted by a Rancièrian formulation in describing what is a uniquely British mien. And no one pulls it off with more non-committal commitment than Steven Connor. Let's call it the 'Theatre of the Naïve'. Connor's commitment is tripartite: He is committed to the theatre – to the *dramatis personae* of the naïf; a kind of Robert Walser-esque babe, eminently practical in the theoretical wood. Equally and simultaneously, he is committed to the naïveté, as if he is, as a paradigmatic Britishism would have it, 'not bothered'. But just as importantly, nay, *more* importantly, he is committed to the camouflage of the *machina* in (and on) his theatrical *deus* (dais). The motor that drives the complex machinations of metaphoric gears and marionetting disingenuity is, of course – we must have guessed it, for the whole apparatus is so *animate*! – is, of course (I repeat), 'enthusiasm'! And not the enthusiasm one professes professionally, as in 'I am enthusiastic about the prospects of this or that, etcetera'. Such enthusiasm is enthusiasm's null. Connor's enthusiasm is *enthusiastic*; identical with the pressure that builds in a plaque-enameled artery, that strains against plumbing as the temperature descends below freezing, that distends architectures until they tilt past their designers' imaginations. His enthusiasm is the only kind of enthusiasm that matters: the kind that threatens to dissolve its object in the wash of its devotion. Such dissolution, of course, is actually an absorption, a melding. It is the consuming (and the consummation) of the noun by its verb; the transubstantiation of subject into object, of vice into versa, but also – poof! – the eradication of both. What were we talking about?

Exactly.

As he sits or stands at the head of the seminar, he presents a fun-house mirror whose odd talent is to reflect only what the students think they know but don't. That is to say: nearly everything. Yet Connor's mirror is curiously empty, as if all that everything was little more than nothing. And then what do we see, those of us who have been his students? We see our shadows cast into the future, where they take on shapes we cannot yet recognise. To seal the deal, Connor cowers as if we've uncorked a potion only rumoured for millennia. As if we possessed the secret: like magi, like djinns, like Houdinis. And he sells this theatre too, even in the cheap seats.

I occupied one of those seats (not so cheap, to be honest) a little more than a decade ago, fielding facts and fancies deflecting off Connor's skin like flies. He asserted nothing. In a sense, he had nothing to say. He merely wondered and wandered out loud and let us do what the prefrontal cortex does. Quoth Wikipedia: 'orchestration of thoughts and actions in accordance with internal goals'. Every new idea seemed to him a revelation, or so it seemed to us. We believed that we were teaching him; that he, poor ingénue, was sorely in need of our tutelage. And so, as we bore witness to the clamour of his enthusiasms, we came to realise the satisfaction of swinging hammers and occasionally hitting nails. We imagined our own musculature to be both the driver and the navigator of the hammer's force. Hell, we nearly believed we'd forged the hammer. We didn't need to experience our own enthusiasm. Nor did he, the actual hammerer, need to manufacture it. He merely played his role in this naïve theatre, making us his audience. And subject to the transformations to which audiences are susceptible – transformations older than anything Nietzsche imagined – we arrived at truths. Which is to say, we came to *realise*. We made things real. We animated them. And the motoric enthusiasm that was Connor's method came back full circle: animated and animating. We, dummies on his knee, were alive.

It makes sense that he started with Beckett. Who else has so deftly managed the theatre of the naïve? Nothing to be done, etcetera. It makes just as much sense that Connor has since meandered so haphazardly (or so it seems to us) into the realm of the naïvest of phenomena: air and skin and paraphernalia. Like Beckett, like Beckett's unwitting brothers, Walser and Keaton, Connor's enthusiasm is directed at the least enthusiastic stuff. He is testing their arteries, their plumbing, their architecture against their own disavowals: of permanence, of resistance, of ipseity. This has led him – episodically, but obsessively – to the subject of sound. Like air, sound surrounds, and is surrounded by, us. It is both (or neither) the inside of the outside and the outside of the inside, like skin. Sound is *para-*, always accompanying the betrothal of two things in the world. Sound is always beside or adjacent to the collision: of stick and drum, of air and reed, of fist and face. Connor's engagement with sound has given rise to a kind of moonlighting métier as mentor to a sub-generation of sonicians.

I count myself among these, proudly for having been infected with Connor's enthusiasm, if not for having wandered so naïvely into a field so naïve about its own naïveté. And since emerging from his tutelage, I have worked to pull the theory and practice of sound back into the orbit of the naïve and the enthusiastic; of things unforgiving in their capacity to forgive and be forgiven. I don't know that I've always known that this is what I am doing, but in some vaguely intuited way, I am trying to position sound under the sign of Connor, which is to say, under the sign of Beckett, of Walser, of Keaton.

Here's a bit of slapstick. In 2004 I hosted a radio programme on ResonanceFM in London. The show, 'One Reason to Live', featured one guest per week whose task it was to choose a single piece of music for us to listen to and discuss for the remainder of the hour. My guests included musicians, composers, philosophers, artists, and academics. The range of music was wide, but decidedly extracted from the left of the dial; that is, from the avantest tendencies of the avant-garde. When Connor informed me of his musical choice, I was triply vexed. First, I would need to spend a week in close communion with Tori Amos and her song 'Blood Roses'. Second, I would need to invent or discover things to say about this song, things to say on the *radio*. Thirdly, I worried for the security of my programme. Resonance broadcasts but twenty-four hours a day. There's formidable competition for each of those hours. Devoting my hour – even if only once – to a close reading of a single Tori Amos song might not only fail to meet the standards of the Resonance poobahs, it might force the inaudible hand of the radio marketplace to flick me clear of those sanctified airwaves.

Nevertheless, I prepped. My first question would follow form: I would ask the guest – Connor – to justify the week's selection. This time around, however, the question chimed a defensive tone. I was determined to leave no doubt as to who must take responsibility for the content of the hour. Yet, once he started talking, careening through his experience of the song, his ambivalence for it, for its harpsichord, for Amos herself, he transformed himself. Rather than the estimable University of London professor who'd been introduced at the top of the hour, he was now Buster Keaton in his 1920 film *One Week*. Connor sat in the Resonance Denmark Street studio, the song before him analogous to the build-it-yourself kit – home delivered to Keaton. Both the song and the house appear as the epitome of the obvious, simply assembled or disassembled, easily understood and used. I listened on as Connor haltingly – yet stonefacedly – affixed the porch to the clapboard, as he set the windows into the façade at angles both obtuse and obscene. Before long, a new passage emerged, connecting the song's front door to its chimney. A second floor window inexplicably opened onto the base of the stairs on the first floor. Simple geometry, torqued by attention and scepticism, revealed itself to be a complicated collision (and elision) of history and form and psychology: each of these a devious masking of the others. The song, it turns out, was a *problem* – a fly in the ointment of our comfortable readings of the phenomena perennially in our path. As Connor put it, thinking of the palliative power that so many of Tori Amos's fans find in her music:

I want to be healed by doctors, when I can, when they can, I don't want to be healed by songs. I want the opposite from songs – malady.

And it occurred to me, sitting there on the radio, that for Steven Connor, this is precisely the service art provides: to trouble us, and, in troubling us, not to set our ameliorating mechanisms in motion, but to accustom us to the trouble that life always is. For Steven Connor, art doesn't mean acquiescence to this trouble. It means putting this trouble to use, to let it occupy us for a while, and we it. Knowing trouble's usefulness is one of life's great, necessary sleights.

That's why Keaton must always bear the brunt of his own unforgiving world. And why, in Beckett, it isn't readily apparent that there is 'nothing to be done', but that one is forever only beginning to come around to that opinion. When Connor treads the boards of his Theatre of the Naïve, when he threads the boredom that is the necessary condition of education, he is coaxing from his students the very thing he most fervently knows. When he performs his dissemblance, he is positioning himself in the space of the falling window as the whole façade crashes down and we, his audience, are dissuaded from what we believe the house to be. He is equanimous as ruin pays a visit. The structure collapses, yes, and all might very well be lost. Meanwhile – forced by circumstance, by physics, by desire – we, his students, must reconstruct, from the scrap of our own devastated ideality something we will for evermore hesitate to call reality. But as Connor passes, imperturbable, through the window, he doesn't so much as flinch.