A Piece of Work

Sad Young Man on a Train, Marcel Duchamp, 1911-12

“What a piece of work is a Man,” said Hamlet, “how noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god, the beaty of the world, the paragon of animals.”

But Hamlet was not easy to please, for he went on to add that Man pleased him not. Notwithstanding his splendid qualities, he was in fact but the quintessence of dust. All his brief period on earth, so full of passion and endeavour, of suffering and joy, is (to quote another Shakespearean character) nothing but sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Many of us, I should imagine, veer between exaltation and disgust or despair on contemplating human existence. Certainly, it must be borne in on us that Man, whatever else he may be, is a complex creature with a constant capacity to surprise or alarm. Dostoyevsky tells us that, even if, *per impossibile*, there were a government so wise good and perfect that it considered only the welfare of its subjects and resulted in the happiest of all possible arrangements, we should rebel against it just to assert our existence as beings with free-will. (Doctor Johnson hints at the same thought at the beginning of his philosophical fable, *Rassselas*.)

I have lived, on the whole, a fortunate life. I am grateful that never in the course of it have I had to commute (I wasn’t grateful at the time, it is only in retrospect that I have realised what a great and unusual blessing this has been), and also that I have been able to avoid most extraneous noise for the vast majority of my life. I am not quite as sensitive to noise, perhaps, as was Roderick Usher or Marcel Proust, but noise nevertheless seems to me to be one of the worst of all pollutions, though I know that many people seem hardly able to do without it and create as much of it as possible if it is not already present. Having worked in a prison for quite a number of years, the question of what I would find intolerable about imprisonment naturally occurred to me often. Not the

food, not the discomfort, not even the imposed discipline, would be the worst, but the inescapable *noise* would be to me a torture. Even in the prison, I could retreat into silence in my consulting room, a luxury not granted to the prisoners themselves. How much of the noise of prison life was necessary and how much was desired by the inmates I cannot say for sure; I think quite a lot was the latter. After all, Victorian prisons in the last quarter of the nineteenth century were places of imposed, almost monastic, silence, and not a few prisoners came to me requesting something to make them stop thinking, which is often a painful activity. Noise is a welcome preventive of painful thought, and for many people thought is primarily painful and therefore to be avoided if possible.

I live quietly, almost wherever I am, but that of course means than noise, being unaccustomed, is particularly disturbing to me: and there was such a noise recently as I sat in my first-floor study. It came from my neighbour across a little roadway: he was having a wall built and the contractor was sawing the bricks in two to make them the desired size.

An electric saw capable of sawing bricks is a noisy instrument, like the drill of a thousand dentists. It is as impossible to ignore its high-pitched grinding noise as that of a dentist performing excavations in one’s mouth. It is often said that one accommodates to sensory stimuli, for example those of unpleasant smells which, after a time, become indiscernible. But the sound of bricks being sawn in two is not susceptible to such sensory accommodation: it is too penetrating, and besides it is intermittent, with pauses of silence occupied by ringing in the ears. Then the horrible grinding starts up again just as the ringing subsides.

I recognised, of course, that I had no right to complain, and that in any case the brick-sawing would not continue for many days. I did wonder why they couldn’t have bought correct-sized bricks in the first place, but I am not a builder or a

bricklayer and did not know whether bricks came in the desired size. Perhaps they didn't.

I looked out of my study window and there saw a young man, in his early twenties, sawing the bricks. In addition to the noise, they gave off a cloud of fine red dust—I suppose specialists in particle science would have called it coarse red dust. At any rate, it would obviously not be good for the lungs.

The young man wore neither a mask nor any form of earmuffs to reduce the sound reaching his eardrums. Should I go out and say anything to him about this? I shall long be dead when the effects of this carelessness make themselves manifest—and cause great suffering. To be deaf and to suffer from fibrosis of the lungs would not be much fun, to say the least.

I hesitated. It was not really my business. To adapt Hamlet slightly, what was he to me, or he to me, that I should weep for him? And am I my brother's keeper?

Hamlet-like, I pondered the question. Clearly, the easiest course would have been to say nothing. He didn't look a bad young man, if I may be allowed a little amateur physiognomical judgment: but still, especially these days, one never knows. He might turn nasty, despite his peaceful appearance. I discussed the matter with my wife: in the end, we decided that I should say something.

I discovered that the young man weas working with an older man, old enough to be his father. I soon discovered that he was not only old enough to be his father, he *was* his father, they were a father and son team. The had the weather-beaten face like a professional outdoor man, and he too did not look aggressive or otherwise unpleasant.

'I hope you don't mind me interfering,' I said to him, 'but I am a doctor. I noticed that the young man was wearing neither a mask nor earmuffs. If he continues like this long or often,

he will suffer for it later in life.’

The father took it very well, indeed he thanked me for my concern.

‘Yes, I know,’ he said. ‘I’ve tried to tell him. He’s got all the protective gear in the van, but he won’t use it.’

‘All the same … ’ I said. ‘He should.’

‘I’ll go and tell him again,’ said the father, and he did.

A short time later, as I looked out of my window again, I was gratified to see that the young man had donned a mask, though not the earmuffs. My intervention was a partial success.

Why did the young man not don the earmuffs as well as the mask? I very much doubt that he disbelieved his father when he told him that the unmediated noise of the drill would damage his hearing, but at the same time acknowledged the danger to his lungs. No; what was at stake was his pride, his ego. Merely, and meekly, to follow advice that he knew to be good would be in some way a defeat for him, a derogation from his status as a being who decided things for himself. Perhaps at another time, in another location, he could use both the mask and the earmuffs, but not here, not now, in immediate response to the good advice. In a way, this bore out Dostoyevsky’s insight, that we would prefer a path in life that would bring us misery provided it was our own way, to a way that would bring us perfect happiness if it were someone else’s. There is a contradiction here, of course, for if we chafed under a regime of perfect happiness, it could not have been a regime of perfect happiness. Nevertheless, the insight is a real one: the complex perversity of Man.

Since I am, at least to some extent, an intellectual, I am also Hamlet-like. I began at once to consider the question of whether the father had been negligent or blameworthy in not imposing the protective gear on his son. Surely he, if anyone,

had the authority to do so? Yes, he was negligent.

What, however, if his son were so headstrong that any such imposition would have destroyed the evidently good relations between them? The father knew his son as I did not. He was clearly a good father, in the sense that he loved his son. Sometimes an external authority (albeit a weak one such as I) can encourage conduct that no amount of paternal or parental badgering could or would do.

Another question came to my mind. Let us suppose that the young man donned the mask only to please me, and that he thought (as young men do, and as I myself did at his age) that such as I were a fond, foolish old men, fussy, interfering and absurdly cautious. After all, God gave us dangers that we might confront them, not that we might take pettifogging precautions against them. I remembered the time I drove dangerously (thinking it amusing to drive after drinking a whole bottle of champagne) and visiting far-flung civil wars for the fun—and to some extent the enlightenment—of it. It is not that I did not appreciate the dangers: I behaved thus *because* of the dangers. I was in immortal good health, as I daresay the young man believed himself to be.

Let us suppose his devil-may-care attitude lasted long enough for the damage to become evident to him. He might then take the view that it was too late to do anything about it; many people do. The damage is done, no point in changing now. (There is one notable exception to this common attitude: after a heart attack, most sufferers give up smoking without difficulty afterwards, having for years claimed that it was far too difficult for them to do so.)

Clearly, the young man—if he followed this path of insouciance followed by fatalism—would have a much-reduced life expectancy. He would die much earlier than otherwise, perhaps by as much or ten or fifteen years. He would enter the statistics as a manual worker who died early, and the fact

that his class dies early is often taken as an injustice in society, for if there were justice, every class would die at the same age.

But has this individual suffered any injustice at the hands of his society merely because he is the member of a class that dies comparatively early? Of course, the easiest way to address the imbalance in the class differential of life-expectancy would be to ensure that the most fortunate in life died earlier than they do, since it is easier to take life than to prolong it; but no one, except revolutionaries, would propose such a thing.

Some of the difference—not all—of the differential in life expectancy is accounted for by differences in habit. Poorer people, for example, smoke more than rich, and this naturally reduces their life expectancy relative to the rich. They also eat more unhealthily, for financial but also for other reasons.

Sociologists, economists, psychologists and others will ascribe these differences in habit (not implausibly) to differences in the life experiences of the members of the classes – albeit that movements between classes is possible in both directions. Others will ascribe the differences to other factors, such as the irreducible perversity of Man and even to differences in intelligence. For the first type of person, equality is the natural state of man, and all differences the result of remediable injustice; for the second, people in the modern world get what they deserve. Probably, the truth is somewhere between the two, as a physician I once overheard said to a patient with myeloma: that he didn't have cancer, that he didn't have leukaemia, but that he had something in between the two. It wasn't much consolation, as the truth often is not.