Eternal Youth, Eternal Kitsch

by Theodore Dalrymple (November 2014)

A kind friend of mine, knowing my interest in such matters, recently sent me a little book containing a collection of inscriptions found in second-hand books collected by a diligent anthologist, a man called H. B. Gooderham. The books were not, on the whole, precious old volumes but rather cheap and relatively recent paperback editions, many of them in rather scruffy condition. Nor were the inscribers famous persons, nor even identifiable. They were, rather, Everyman.

In his brief introduction to the book, the anthologist says that:

> … the overriding emotion evoked by these inscriptions is one of pathos. At their most basic level all are records of human connections – or at least attempts at human connections – given added poignancy by the fact that all have been discovered among the shelves of second-hand book shops and, for whatever reason, are no longer in the hands of the original dedicatees.

I am wholly in agreement with this: there is nothing quite like an inscription in a book no longer owned by the dedicatee to capture the melancholy, the bittersweetness, of the passage of time, to recall us to our own mortality and to remind us of the vanity of so much of what preoccupies us.

I love looking at the inscriptions in my books, for they are also a powerful stimulant of my imagination. Of course they raise questions that now cannot be answered, but it would be a dull world in which every question *could* be answered. For example, I have an edition of *Julius Caesar* which was published after the MGM film version of 1953, in which Marlon Brando played Mark Antony, James Mason Brutus, John Gielgud Cassius, Deborah Kerr Portia and Greer Garson Calpurnia. It was published with schoolchildren in mind, and the preface says something that I doubt would be permissible in a schoolbook nowadays:

> On the stage and screen Shakespeare's influence is as profound today as when he lived: profound because in this world of joy and sorrow man disobeys Divine Law. Shakespeare the teacher shows us in his 14 tragedies how, when the PRIDE of Coriolanus, the Jealousy of Othello, the REVENGE of Hamlet, the GREED and WEAKNESS of Macbeth, the LUST of Antony, the short-sighted IDEALISM of Brutus, etc., are allowed to dominate man, unhappiness, unrest, and often war result.

Sir John Gielgud, the great actor, provided an introduction to the play, though I am not sure how keen personally he was on the Divine Law, in which he describes actors' difficulty with the play, especially when performed in Roman dress:

> The classical costumes, though becoming and graceful to players of fine physique, can be ridiculous and hampering to men who are too short, too tall, too thin or too fat. There is always the danger of the effect of a lot of gentlemen sitting on marble benches in a Turkish bath.

That is an image that I shall treasure for ever.

The inscription in the front of the book was in a cultivated hand of the kind that I wish I had, but that it is too late in life for me now to learn (I other words, I don't want it enough). The inscription was dated 21 February, 1957 was signed *John.* I entertained a brief hope that the John in question might be Gielgud himself, but after a brief search on the internet I found a specimen of Gielgud's handwriting, and it bore no resemblance to that in this book. I will never know who John is – or was, most likely he is no longer with us.

The inscription was as follows:

> To Ted – wishing you great success and realisation of your ambition.

I know who Ted most likely was, or is, for the page is embossed by a stamp: Library of Edward C. Raeburn. Nothing came up on an internet search for that name, and it seems to me likely that it must be at the least 70 years since his birth, probably more, for no one would have given the book to a boy less than 13 years old. John's hand is that of an adult, and in the England of 1957 (and John was English, since he spelled realisation with an s rather than a z), mature men did not address themselves to young people by their first names. I suspect, then, that Edward C Raeburn was born considerably more than 70 years ago.

What was his ambition, and did he realise it? Was it connected to the theatre or films? Did he want to be an actor or director? Surely no one would give the script of the film version of *Julius Caesar* to someone who wanted to be an electrician or an airline pilot? If Edward C Raeburn wanted to be something in the theatre it is most likely that he failed, except possibly at the lowest level, or else he would be findable on the internet; and most people, after all, do fail in their ambition if they have one at all.

Is failure in ambition failure in life? Is success in ambition success in life? I love failures: and to me a failed actor, one who spends much of his career out of work and is

impoverished, is a much more attractive figure, and possibly a more interesting one, than an actor who achieves stardom. Success by his own lights is apt to make a person pleased with himself and therefore not an interesting interlocutor. The man who knows he has not achieved as much as he ought is a better companion.

But to return to my little book sent me by my kind friend: one of the lessons it teaches is that one should never inscribe a book intended as a gift with a poem of one's own, for it is sure to be bad and probably pretentious, ridiculous in the eyes of anyone other than the person one wishes to impress with it. Bad poetry fulfils a social function, of course, for reading bad poetry is an easy way to learn to appreciate good poetry; but still the rule holds that if you feel a compulsion to inscribe a gift with poetry, it is best to quote someone else's.

Declarations of love found in books are particularly poignant, especially when they were written comparatively recently. Here is one written less than five years before the book was published:

> To my darling Husband – We have now been married for 6 very special months. Enjoy memories of our wonderful honeymoon as you read this.

The book in which this was inscribed was *Death on the Nile*, by Agatha Christie, not perhaps the most auspicious of choices of book for such an inscription, since the story is of murder on honeymoon.

Why did this book appear for sale only a few years after the inscription was written? I hardly dare think that life had imitated art. Perhaps the wife of the darling husband had died tragically of natural causes, and he had found this reminder of her too painful to bear: but I doubt it. He surely would have kept the book in those circumstances. Perhaps he rather than she had died and the wife found memories of him too much to bear, but again I rather doubt it. Much more likely, because more commonplace, is that the marriage failed and the couple separated in acrimony, the darling husband being only too eager to dispose of reminders of his mistake (his new girlfriend wouldn't have liked reminders of his previous liaison).

Actually, there was a graphological clue to the instability of the marriage. Graphology is not, any more than is physiognomy, an exact science, but one feature of female handwriting that I have found a useful if not invariable sign of emotional instability is an *i* dotted with a circle. The hand of people who do this is generally rounded and childish. I have a clear picture of young women who dot their *i*'s with little circles. They are pretty in a rather common way, their hair tends to be blonde, naturally or not, and they wear a lot of mascara

and other cosmetics round their eyes, and in general they do not have a light hand with their makeup. They are friendly and jolly, inclined to exhibitionism, but their emotions are shallow if intense. I imagined Anita, the signatory of the inscription, who signed her name with a little circle above its *i*, as such a one.

The saddest of the inscriptions was written in a more cultivated hand, 'To my dearest Sonia,' on the flyleaf of an edition of *The Arabian Nights* that dated from 1997.

> We've had our own 1000 and 1 nights of marriage – more or less. Three years already! I still discover things about you I love each day or rediscover: your constancy, your generosity, your sense of justice. I count myself a happy man to have found you, and I hope it lasts as many years as we can count. I love you. Tom

Who, reading this, can remain unmoved by the sadness its discarding suggests? A human tragedy is implied in a few words, even if we can never know what exactly it was.

One inscription was of sociological moment. It was in a book with the ominously slushy title of *Forever*:

> Dear Claire,
>
> This has got to be a teenage classic! So to a 40 year old from another heres [sic] to forever being a teen.
>
> much love
>
> Nat
> Xxx

Ominously again, the signature was decorated with a little heart, pathognomonic (as we doctors say of a sign that invariably points to a particular illness) of emotional kitsch.

What was most interesting in this, I thought, was the idea that being forever a teenager is something that would be desirable. We all regret our youth as we grow older, and increasingly live in the past, but that is not quite the same as actually wanting to return to adolescence. When I think of my past, it is more with regret than with longing, that I did not use my opportunities better, that I made choices that even at the time I knew to be wrong. If youth knew, if age could, is the old French expression, and it is right.

The Peter-Pan-ism expressed in this inscription is something new. I would have said that

somebody might make a fortune if he could produce the elixir of eternal adolescence, except that it is not necessary, for our culture does it for us. It keeps us immature. First comes precocity, then arrested development.

The figure of the ageing rock star is interesting though not inspiring. When one sees pictures of these seventy year-old adolescents one is torn between repulsion and pity. Their faces are canyoned by age and, but with their uncompromisingly youthful hairstyles, dress and comportment, they look like revenants in a budget horror film, as if they have just brushed the clay of the churchyard in which they were buried from their face and body. There are more and more people in our streets who look like this but who have never been rock stars; we grow older as a population, but not with acceptance, let alone grace.

Adolescence, it need hardly be said, is an age of bad taste, when all that is garish and meretricious attracts, and all that is subtle and meritorious repels. To make of adolescence the state in which one wishes to remain is to wish upon the world the permanent triumph of the kitsch, the shallow and the gimcrack. And accordingly, the adolescent sensibility is one that prevails in much of the art world, where the most adolescent of goals, transgression, is still aimed at. Shock the parents, *épater le bourgeois*, such is the golden rule.

The problem is that the parents have long since refused to grow up and the bourgeoisie has long since decamped to Bohemia. It is hardly surprising that so much artistic production now has all the freshness of last week’s bread, for few are so conformist as rebellious youth.

Theodore Dalrymple’s latest book is