

The Virtuous Pencil

Like vintage wine, high-flown sentiment should be kept for special occasions rather than brought out on every possible occasion, especially when it consists mainly of humbug, as it usually does. We are surrounded by it, in fact, mentally suffocated by it. I picked up a pencil the other day and this is what was inscribed on it:

About this pencil: Lacquer-free renewable cedar casing, recyclable aluminium ferrule, enviro-green degradable eraser and certified non-toxic imprint inks.

It was a nice pencil and the rubber at the end of it worked quite well, which is not always the case with rubbers at the end of pencils, which leave a smudge rather than an erasure. But the high-flown sentiment irritated me, for it was expressed with the kind of imprecision that made verification impossible. That things should be renewable, recyclable and degradable did not mean that they were actually renewed, recycled, or degraded (in the sense of returning to the environment in a non-polluting way): only that they could be. The world could be strewn with these pencils, buried in them, and the words on them would still be true.

Take the aluminium ferrules at the end of the pencil (that held the rubber in place): how many of them actually *were* recycled? I should be rather surprised if many people went to the trouble of disposing of those ferrules in a way that caused or enabled them to be recycled. As with presents, it is the thought that counts.

The information on the side of the pencil was designed not to inform us, or even to exhort us to do anything, but to make us feel virtuous for having bought so environment-friendly a writing implement. No more than making the correct choice of pencil was required of us: buy it and you were automatically

helping to save the planet. The Cedars of Lebanon are conjured by the words.

Actually I bought the pencil because it was comparatively pleasant to chew. Ever since childhood I have had the bad habit of chewing my pencils and I remember the days when the paint used to come off in nasty little flakes between my teeth and create an unpleasant sensation in my mouth. Sixty years ago the paint on pencils was probably rather toxic as well; I was mildly reassured that the imprint ink was certified non-toxic, though there was no indication of who had certified it as such. At least I won't suffer from pencil-poisoning.

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