



la Biennale di Venezia

55. Esposizione
Internazionale
d'Arte

Il Palazzo Enciclopedico

The Encyclopedic Palace

Biennale Arte 2013

Exhibition Catalog

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The Beast in the Bestiary D. Graham Burnett

Let's begin with a minor scene in a major tale. Location: the wet hemp world of the Liverpool docks. The year: 1821. The season: spring, a cold May. Several dozen packing cases, crates, and sundry tattered valises lie sequestered in the customshouse, under the watchful eye of one Mr. J. R. Lushington, His Majesty's Commissioner of Customs. Stevedores had lately liberated this exotic luggage, packed with peculiar *naturalia* (five armadillos, a caiman, a roll of curare darts, stinking bits of sloth, dank volumes of pressed vegetation, countless trays of scintillating insects, each pinned firmly to its card), from the hold of a slow boat from the tropical jungles of Amazonia. The owner of the hoard, and its collector, Charles Waterton (Jacobite, squire, explorer, gadfly), had himself just debarked from the same ship, and, now, fighting mad, mounted his carriage, two live Malay fowls in hand, to speed away from the port—back to his regal seat in the midlands. Heads would roll!

A tiff over tariffs, it would appear. And yes, it was that. But pan back for the big picture.

*

Between 1400 and 1900 the most important program of encyclopedic world-knowledge was “natural history”—the sweeping, systematic inventory of the globe; the collecting, naming, and sorting of every kind of natural thing to be found on Earth (each plant, each animal, each rock). Practically speaking, this vast project, with all its epistemological import and Adamic ambition, came down to lots of scenes like this one: some explorer, loaded up with the cullings of rough travel, meanders back to the metropolis, there to sift the haul—distributing specimens to learned societies and colleagues, botanical gardens and herbariums, zoos and museums. New species will be declared, necessitating the expansion and revision of tomes like Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae*—just the most notable of the many massive, multi-volume books of nature that kept tabs on the tabulation of all things.

Our own era of concern about global ecology and dwindling biodiversity has seen a pronounced uptick in scholarly (and artistic) interest in this massive and significant intellectual-cum-material enterprise, which not only laid the groundwork for modern evolutionary and geotectonic theories but also intersected in complicated ways with the histories of colonial expansion and Anglo-European imperialism. We now understand a good deal about the networks of exchange (and systems of knowledge-appropriation) that undergirded, enabled, monetized, and mobilized one of the great achievements of modern science: the encyclopedic collation of most of the stuff on earth. Numerous dissertations have been written about changing ideas of natural order across the centuries in question (the rise and fall of nomenclatures and taxonomies) and about the intricate expropriation of native expertise.

What was most deeply at stake in this great paragon of encyclopedic empiricism? The trembling, motile, monstrous point where the knower met the knowable—a point not easy to describe.

As Charles Waterton knew all too well.

*

So let's return to the eccentric squire, and let the strange tale of his undoing—which centers on an epochal taxonomic transgression—stand as a parable for the troubles encountered on the axis of omniscience. When we left him, his blood was boiling on account of the pettifoggery of a customs plebe. Indeed. And he wasn't just angry because his specimens were being temporarily withheld by a busybody clerk of the excise (pending the proper payment of import fees). It was more than that: one can see in the moment something of the showdown between the age of aristocratic privilege (e.g., lord to customshouse official: “I say, pass me my ocelot pelt, sirrah”) and the world of the administrative state, with its ubiquitous bureaucratic functionaries (e.g., customshouse official to lord: “That'll be three shillings and

a tuppence for the importation of a jaguar hide, exclusive of the claws, which come under the statute for horn and ivory—let me just check the rate schedule here...”). But this hardly cuts to the heart of the matter. Roiling the squire as he sped back to his castle was the whole mad business of trying to be an agent of universal knowledge in a world of mincing bean-counters—the mad business of trying to know like a god in a world of beasts.

Charles Waterton had spent years humping through the bush in some of the most remote parts of the globe, sacrificing his body to yellow fever and chigoes and the toxins of lurid vermin. And he had returned to his native England perhaps not quite in his right mind—then, to be thwarted in his cosmic aspirations by a weaselly Mr. Lushington? It was enough to drive a man of science from his senses!

Four years later, Charles Waterton would return to the shores of England from another trying expedition in the wilds of Guiana, this time with a very special specimen in hand. We must imagine the face of the customs official who opened the crate, to find himself queasily surveying the taxidermied bust of a humanoid creature (hairy, nervous-looking, rumored to look a good deal like Mr. Lushington himself). Would the squire like to explain the source of this troubling carcass? But of course: I stumbled across a family of the bloody critters upcountry—not far from Brazil. Winged one cleanly, I’m pleased to say (a fine shot!). Could hardly carry the gangly thing back to camp, though, so I dressed the head and shoulders right there. I believe it’s a new species, whatever it is. Say, do you know what the duty on it will be? I’m keen to get it through customs...

Gulp.

*

Waterton called this monster his “Nondescript” (a technical term in taxonomy at the time, meaning “a specimen heretofore unknown in the literature of natural history—hence, a taxonomic mystery”). What was it? Among other things, a virtuosic display of the squire’s powers of taxidermy: Charles Waterton, a genius of necrotic plastication, had sculpted the face of this uncanny figure from the hindquarters of a howler monkey; the animal’s anus was the mouth of the man-beast. That may say it all.

Actually, let’s say one more thing: when Waterton published the narrative of his travels a little later that year, he placed an engraving of the Nondescript opposite the title page—where one would usually find a portrait of the author. He seems to have been trying to tell us something about the real costs of universal knowledge. At that fragile, unstable, comical, hideous, inverted/inverting point where the knower meets the known, we are not quite *ourselves*. Or so we have long feared.

Not wrongly. After all, where natural history is concerned, Waterton’s nightmare could be said to come to life in a strangely literal way: a few years later, one of his readers, the young Charles Darwin, also headed out to South America in pursuit of encyclopedic knowledge of the natural world. When he came back, he carried a distressing discovery in his notebooks—every human being was made of monkey.

We were each newly *nondescript*.

D. Graham Burnett is an editor of *Cabinet* magazine and teaches in the history department at Princeton University. His most recent book is *The Sounding of the Whale* (The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

