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# CRITIC'S ESSAY

*comprised of the Author's idiosyncratic field notes listing numerous anthropological observations gathered from the Artist's drawings describing the good people of Onomatopoeia (capital of Triangland) but which, regretfully, will leave the Reader's desire to extract meaningful clues behind these pictures somewhat unfulfilled; and in which the Author admits her failure, really, to get to grips with the place.*

## INTRODUCTION OR DOGS ARE IN THE DETAILS

What seizes my attention whenever I pore over – and over, and over – Charles Avery’s sprawling vision of *The Island* is the uncanny combination of:

- A. the artist’s wildly implausible imagination; and
- B. the artist’s fanatical accuracy in observing ordinary things.

This contradiction stokes my curiosity no end. The pitch-perfect draughtsmanship and familiar details in Avery’s vision, combined with outrageous surprises and my ongoing failure to take it all in, captivate me again and again.

Innumerable drawings depicting this wondrous place – where heated philosophical dialogue reigns supreme (principally, Empiricists v. Rationalists\*); where the Hunter arrived many moons ago, seeking (like everyone else) the Noumenon but fell hopelessly in love with the unpossessable Miss Miss – provide countless ethnographic details which Avery renders at worrying levels of artistic obsessiveness. The flood of visual information never fails to stop me in my tracks, and keeps me returning for more. Sublime moments, like:

- **the exquisite engineering of a bicycle observed in perspective, laid flat on its side; the two circular wheels distorted into ellipses conjoined at their tangents; the exact twist of the handlebars; the flawless faceted bike-chain; the complicated, intersecting tracery of the spokes.**

And more irresistible details:

- **the minute distribution of multi-sized white spots sprinkled down the curving black backs of floating eels, tangled together in an aquarium;**
- **the link-by-link interlocking of a heavy metal chain, knotted round old tyres, all tumbling into the sea and fastened there to prevent a boat from breaking apart if crashing against the docks. Safety measures – against a possible boating accident in a fantasyland?**
- **the swaying thin white lines of the pinstripe pattern streaming down an older gentleman’s once-dashing two-piece – either bought second-hand, or tailor-made when he was**

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\* Empiricists v. Rationalists, i.e. those who believe that knowledge must ultimately derive from experience v. those who believe that knowledge must derive from logical deduction and self-evident truths. There is also a third group, for whom revelation is the unaccountable source of knowledge. Ask Robin.

younger (the trousers are badly short, displaying excessive ankle and sock). This is odd, because pinstripe-man – existing solely on paper – has only ever been this age. Despite his fancy suit, the man looks shabby. He mutters continually to himself – a common Onomatopoeian habit and broadly tolerated;

- **the exact curvature of a standing child's arched back**, his rounded stomach protruding in an erect, curved-spine posture recognizable for its expression of mingled curiosity and trepidation, observable in equal measure in the boy's small body;
- **the zoological care with which the many kepews are drawn** from multiple angles, as if they were living things that Avery has actually observed. (Kepews are those tufted, beaked, inexplicably proud, four-legged creatures – like anatomically precise Dr Seuss characters.) Possessed by ravenous appetites, kepews make detestable pets. They feed on discarded takeaway leftovers, scraps of sea rubbish – anything vaguely comestible, really. Living street cleaners, kepews are abandoned to breed at will – like the spray of climbing rare Pearlbobs (highly coveted and almost uncatchable) or common Silverbobs crawling over the architecture; or the skinny, stray-dogs; or the unidentifiable amphibians and miscellaneous vermin endured everywhere.

And so, compelled to pore over – and over – every inch of Avery's drawings, I am forced to pull together 1) my growing inventory of finely rendered details, and 2) my chronic inability, really, actually, to get to grips with the place – its contours, its demographics, its philosophical dialectics. The fiction concocted by Avery's tireless imagination, for me, turns puzzling because of the unmistakable recognisability and the maddening ordinariness of –

- **a plastic beach bucket**, its proportions flawless, including that all-too-familiar hard-plastic handle complete with moulded finger-grip;
- **the petrol canister**, with the usual semi-transparent vertical striations and ribbed cap;
- **the flop of an unfastened leather satchel**, its buckles undone and hanging;
- **the voluptuous curve of a ship's bow**, lovingly rendered under grey skies, anchored deep in Northern waters;
- **the tilt of Miss Miss' lovely head** as she reads, sporting grey stockings on which Avery has not failed to omit my utmost favourite Onomatopoeian sartorial detail: the pantyhose's dark, reinforced toe.

## CHAPTER 1 ATTIRE IS A BIG DEAL IN ONOMATOPOEIA

That reinforced-toe pantyhose moment – how irresistibly absurd! These tights will never run: they're *drawn on paper* – triggers the following important chapter, covering the locals' unerring sense of dress. Tourists make too much effort: they overdress, and how embarrassing is that. 'Casual', for sure, captures the dominant vibe on the Island.

- **Men go shirtless, a lot.** This makes them look as if they've just clocked out from bluecollar jobs down by the harbour; but that may be a deplorable class-based assumption. They are just as likely to be world-class philosophers, such as Tobias the seven-foot beggar. Leaping to assumptions based on appearances is a bad habit, and especially inadvisable in Onomatopoeia.
- **Adolescent girls don school uniforms basically all the time.** Off-duty, they loosen their stripey ties and encourage their standard-issue white shirts to hang out of their skirts in a deliberate display of school's-out slovenliness. This detail gives Onomatopoeia an urban, wanton, south London/Peckhamish feel.
- **Generally speaking, Onomatopoeians sport severe haircuts.** For men, an all-over number 2; women, geometric crops. Ladies who insist on keeping their hair long sweep it back in a timeless chignon-type up-do. This makes them look pretty in a tired and unfashionable way, especially when compared to the tall, stylish teenagers – all legs, novelty tops and tribal jewellery – observed walking together in conversation, or sprawled on 70s-style Missoni-esque afghan rugs and consumed in reading. No one minds the dirty feet.
- **Sportswear is popular; for some that athletic/casual look provides an everyday default wardrobe.** Think football shirts; platform trainers; loose running shorts; Converse knock-offs; hoodies. Paired racing stripes streak down shoulders and arms, reinforcing that Peckham-by-the-Sea look.
- **Few wear glasses, or suffer excess weight.** Protruding ribs hint alarmingly at unspoken malnutrition issues (see 'Diet').
- **Rarely do they smile. Eyes are cast downwards.** This gives the true islander a forlorn, inward look. I'm guessing Onomatopoeians have a sense of humour, but I would not dare test this.
- **Beads and necklaces are popular,** with an inclination towards enigmatic pendants bearing the double-snake pattern – like a witchy rune, or secret Celtic message. Ask Charles.

- **Very, very special attention is paid to footwear.** Magnificent, high-shine, vintage-leather lace-ups for the men; classic pumps for the ladies. Sturdy wellies are the sensible choice for all that seaside labour and leisure. Other options: plimssoles; cheap mid-heel sandals; running shoes; bargain-basement rubber flip-flops. Going barefoot is acceptable in all circumstances: they cycle barefooted, turn up at Uni or at work without shoes. Again, no one minds the dirty feet.
- **Eccentric dress goes unnoticed.** A grizzled thug walks the street in a fur-collared dressing gown loosely belted over pinstripe trousers. He looks like a bloated and potentially violent Samuel Beckett, and stands erect despite only having one leg. This passes for nothing special in Onomatopoeia.
- **Moustaches and beards have not caught on** – save for the discrete handle-bar above the lip of a young girl, holding hands with her 19<sup>th</sup>-century throwback of a brother, both dead-serious in their towering bulbous hats. For this gothic pair (she: Empiricist; he: Atomist) these outlandish get-ups represent ordinary daywear – not fodder from the dress-up box. (These siblings scream Pugsley and Wednesday to me, perhaps on account of the many *The Addams Family* re-runs I watched as a kid).
- **Offshore tourists – with their tacky hats and cheap suits – are uniformly vulgar.** They try to pass for Islanders and, like all tourists, get it hideously wrong. They are instantly recognizable for their very wrongness. They are as awful as the mangy kepews.

I'd resist describing anyone as classically beautiful – with Miss Miss' perfect oval face and girlish figure making a welcome exception. Some of Avery's cast-sculptures lean towards 'rather beautiful, in a classic kind of way'. These busts wear Serious Hats.

**Serious Hats:** Much of Onomatopoeia could seem just another grey day on a remote Scottish island if it weren't for the telltale flysaucer headgear and spectacular feats of millinery adorning Islanders' heads, declaring their philosophical affinities (bright pink and shaped like flower buds for the Empiricists; a gridded white model for the Rationalists). Giant rubber spheres; tessellated prismatic small-scale architectures; a four-sided box with maze motif on each side; an elongated, skyscraper-ish black thing, reminiscent of a miniature tubular city or mixed-length organ pipes. I could go on and on.

Note the tall, colourful, multi-faceted cupola of the Atomists' hat – worn by the distinguished gentlemen seen exiting the brothel, looking mighty dignified with his white button-down waist-coat, elegant walking stick and... are those two-toned shoes spats? (see above: 'Very, very special attention is paid to footwear').

The occasional cyclist dons your basic baseball cap.

## CHAPTER 2 BEHAVIOUR

- **Onomatopoeians gather in groups**; however, they interact in ways that are uncommunicative if not downright autistic. Crowds form as a multitude of loners rather than a cohesive community, the isolation only broken by the occasional romantic couple or single-parented family. Most seem absorbed in the vast cosmos of their own swirling thoughts, their eyes half-closed.
- **A number of citizens seem unduly consumed in the hunt for unseen things** – a dropped this or a lost that. These items are never found; fruitless searching may constitute something of a local hobby.
- **Onomatopoeians kiss**; hold hands; read assiduously; visit brothels. They keep busy yet seem curiously unproductive.
- **Inhabitants seem perpetually tempted to break into dance**. Onomatopoeians' pointed knees are always on the verge of falling into a two-step, following the beat of a music we can not hear. Come to think of it they all seem absorbed by a music that no one, not even the fellow members of this pencilled world, can share. A silent music serves as the Island soundtrack.
- **Conversations are tense and hushed** things between two people and no more.
- **Almost everything is done out of doors**, save for the claustrophobic debates that rage in Heidless Magregor's Bar (where you might duck in to escape the ungodly wind). The vast glassed atria of the Universal University and the museum function more as covered plazas, really, than actual rooms.
- **Smoking is permitted**: both cigars and the common fag.
- **Heads and eyes regularly hang downwards**; thus they fail to notice –
  - a naked removals man, pushing a wheelbarrow load marked 'HEAVY';
  - two unsavoury, potbellied gentlemen, one of whom brandishes in broad daylight a threatening-looking baseball-bat-cum-prehistoric-club.
- Also, in no special order, the locals –
  - shop at Bargain Village;
  - jog;

- tend somewhat distractedly to their young;
- fall in love, embrace, dance.

The more I gorge on the excess information, the more Onomatopoeia's random statistics leave me baffled, needing more.

### CHAPTER 3 COMPRISED OF FURTHER COMMENTARY THAT FITS NOWHERE ELSE

Diet: Limited, and low in vitamin C. On the menu:

- **Eels:** grimly slaughtered; sliced; hard-boiled or fried. Beware: the fat ones are tasteless; the small ones delectable but pricey.
- **Henderson's Eggs, Size Five:** Pickled, de-shelled and sold by the jar behind the bar at Magregor's. Available in fine shops (but stocked in the crummy ones too). Consumed in a single suffocating bite. Indigestible and slightly repulsive.
- **Whiskey.**

Weather: Skies, permanently overcast. Pack wellies, sportswear, novelty T's, etc., as above. Night never falls.

Space:

#### A. *Geography:*

- flatlands;
- gridded landscapes of spongy spherical growths, between which stagnant pools trap the fattest and least edible eels;
- a pyramidal mountain range called The Distant that emerges – without foothills – straight out of the barren and forbidding, flat white outskirts of the city;
- plains of perfect-circle white blossoms floating weightless over windswept grasslands, called 'Where Rocco Found a Dead Monster'.

Keeps eyes open for the magical never-seen zone, The Plane of the Gods. The search for this coveted place spelled the Hunter's doom.

B. *The Built Environment:* Onomatopoeians' architectural tastes are refined, but understated.

- They are fond of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century High Modernist architecture – all aerodynamic curves and floor-to-ceiling windows, combined with, say, onion-cupolas or multi-pyramidal follies. Onomatopoeians are anything but purists;
- They display a penchant for novelty roadside architecture, such as the pot-shaped stand selling Broodthaers-inspired mussels, complete with tilted lid – like the hotdog-shaped purveyors of American fast food that Robert Venturi waxed lyrical about in 1972. Onomatopoeia feels nothing like Las Vegas, however.
- They also favour mid-20<sup>th</sup> century decorative design, when the severity of High Modernism gave way, c. 1960, to bursts of cautious ornamentation: curved concrete; all-over prismatic patterns; snaking floor tiles; dotted rhizomatic public sculpture where Silverbobs climb and children play; slender, slanted pitchers and cups from which a mournful seated couple sip a mysterious drink.

When designing the much-frequented brothel, the local architect invented a tall, double-curved archway reminiscent of two standing figures leaning in for a kiss – but this may be a kind of Rorschach effect, and, worryingly, I'm beginning to see things that aren't, really, there.

Time: Onomatopoeians have plenty of it, and reject watches, clocks, and calendars.

Demographics: Everyone looks as if they share multiple ancestors. Emigration is low.

Flora: Trees are strange, geometric, metal assemblages with pendulous, illuminated bulbs – like a sort of tentacular streetlamp. Others have curly branches and grow normally, with roots, a trunk, bark, etc.

Fauna: Curious origami-type flying insects, Dihedra, never stray far from open prismatic cages, around which they flap their triangular paper wings in clusters. Dogs scavenge while pregnant women brace themselves against the cold.

Transport: People scoot, cycle and unicycle; push wheelbarrows; ride rowboats and rickshaws. Automobiles are *verboden*, I guess. Onomatopoeian prams are elaborate, over-engineered things which even a Victorian would judge excessive.

Property prices: Affordable. The bad news for would-be buyers: people never move; homes are never vacated; flats never come up for sale. I worry some newcomers may be sleeping rough. Appliances; household goods; soft furnishings – forget all that. Little by way of comfort and convenience in spartan Onomatopoeia.

I find myself tracking the omissions. The place is devoid of –

- furniture (exceptions: Miss Miss' lamp/table/stool concoction; the farmhouse-type wooden worktable where the sea-beasts are butchered; a sidewalk café table and chairs);
- currency;
- dishes; cutlery, in fact no kitchenware whatsoever – unless you're counting the two-storey mussel-cooker.

Digital gadgets are kept to a minimum. No mass transport. The only sign of a musical instrument is an enormous cello case, tucked away at the Mr Schism & Logik café.

Here's what turns up at their tabletop sales:

- raggedy teddy-bears;
- undersized ceramic pitchers;
- an old-time perfume bottle with retro airbag sprayer;
- cheap binoculars;
- antiquated mobile phones;
- Man Ray-ish metronomes with a tacked-on moustache, rather than that single swinging eyeball;
- miscellaneous unidentifiable stuff.

Out of this strange assembly, spread out on a cheap folding table, we half-expect to read some sort of coded message, as if deciphering a rebus. But no; it's really just random junk –if meticulously drawn, right down to Teddy's grubby, overkissed face. The whiff of desperation from this collection of cast-offs reflect the Onomatopoeians' patent disinterest in material accumulation, and their devoted preference for a life of the mind.

Despite the overload of information – Bauhaus-inspired posters for CYCLISM; adverts for the Free Church of Logical Positivism; pocket handkerchiefs; squeezey bottles of brown sauce available on the counter to season your fresh-cooked street-food; maps and guidebooks – Onomatopoeia holds too many half-opened secrets ever to disclose them all. This place should not be so impenetrable, given that so much is literally spelled out – MOTION; MASS; *DASEIN*; LABOUR. But these are cryptic, alienating messages that aggravate the frustrating mystery of the place. I have memorized the sayings on their totes and T-shirts ('IT MEANS IT MEANS'; 'EVERYTHING IS REAL') but not learned anyone's name – save for the gods (Aleph Nul, Tobias, Mr Impossible) and the philosophers, like the great elder Knot Faah. These figures, I am assured, are well worthy of reverence.

I remain captivated. I am getting closer.

## CHAPTER 4 IN WHICH IT'S ALL ABOUT THE AUTHOR, AGAIN

Actually, as an American immigrant to London, I am oddly reminded in Charles Avery's enigmatic drawings of my introduction, years ago, to this nation of similarly weird and mysterious islanders.

When I first arrived in the UK, each new day offered an overload of sensory clues; yet the resulting picture that formed remained chaotic, baffling, out of reach. I could make no sense of the ways and worries of these indecipherable Brits. I was condemned to never really belong – all because I'd squandered my childhood watching the wrong television, *I Dream of Jeannie* instead of *Dad's Army*; *Gilligan's Island* instead of *Porridge*. Despite more or less sharing a language, despite my lifelong devotion to their bands – The Stones, Led Zep, the Who (I can still recite all four sides of *Quadrophenia* back to back; doesn't that count for anything? No, sorry. And isn't that a bellboy's cap and uniform I see on a few of Avery's odder characters? An obscure Who reference, perhaps? Doubtful. None of my 'preparation' ever helped).

None of my eagerness assisted me in accessing this strange island where I'd beached, wide-eyed and keen, hoping to meet everyone, learn everything, blend in. The surfeit of details – in England, or London, or Mull, or Onomatopoeia – only makes my over-zealous attempts at assimilation more hopeless. I am reduced to dumbly taking inventory of more linguistic nuances to grasp; codes to master; and unshareable depths that I, the permanent tourist, will never penetrate.

Occasionally I think I recognize someone in Onomatopoeia. I'm tempted to wave hello. Isn't that Duchamp struggling with his windblown tie? Or Pete Townsend's impoverished twin, gutting eels? No, I'm wrong; it's not them. I know not a soul here; and Avery never appears in cameo. The giant sea creature with feathers and unicorn horns trailing down its spine, flayed and decapitated by the shore, is as unfamiliar to me as the blocky Modernist hat-racks, or the serpent-pattern metal railings. There is enough compelling detail to convince me: it is all real. Charles Avery has been there. He has seen it all, I am certain. And so I await the next spill of details added to a picture that will never finish. The drawings are left uncompleted: figures half-formed in tentative outlines, fading into nothingness. The edge of the picture blurs into the blank paper. The plaster busts reveal raggedy undersides: the cast breaks off and life abruptly stops. Photographic details of faces and water-features tempt my desire to see Avery's lifelong project finally completed – if necessary I'll finish it myself. I'll go there, damnit, and fill in the maddening blanks that torture my curiosity. I will witness this Onomatopoeia myself, in full swing.

I will board a ship crossing The Sea of Clarity and The Occluded Ocean. I will disembark, weary and excited, in faraway Triangland. I will go native; leap across fields of white dot-flowers; taste the eel. I will shuffle purposelessly through downtown Onomatopoeia; wear pencil skirts, beads. I'll carry my stuff in a satchel or a tote. I will cycle. I will go barefoot.

I will fall in love with a skinny islander, ask him hey what's up with the dual-serpent pendant necklaces. I will ignore his bad posture and bony ankles. I will act like, look at me, sitting with my own socially inept and overly pensive boyfriend at the Mr Schism & Logik café, with my own unidentifiable dark beverage in my own greasy tumbler. Look at me, feeding the eels by the prismatic urban fountain, ignoring everybody while Heideggerian paradoxes consume my every waking thought. Look at me! I belong.

I will fool no one.