

When we were two little boys

Oliver Sumner

"There were two young men with no heart and no peace
They thought to be free lying under a tree.
And so they lay there from dawn to dusk
Enjoying the air and the chickens and ducks.
They thought to be nice and wave with their hands
And so day after day they are under that tree.
Counting the leaves and waiting for tea
They are as happy as can be."

This dreadful poem, 'Normal Boredom', appeared in 1971 as one of eight signed booklets mailed out by Gilbert & George. A scratchy pen and ink drawing on the cover typically showed the two besuited gentlemen sitting on a wooden farm gate gazing across a meadow, or Gilbert stooping to examine a plant. Gilbert & George's appearance in their work as singing or dancing sculpture, in film or photographs is more significant than mere performance. Within the characters they affect, a simple ride on the London Underground becomes a sweet little work of art. It is important not only that they are two, but also that they are male and middle-class, cultivating the effect of refined outsiders.

The early Gilbert & George bring to mind Bouvard and Pécuchet, Flaubert's pair of 19th century Parisian copyclerks who yearn for a pastoral retirement. The bachelors meet sitting in a park bench one hot day. At first sight they experience an electric attraction to one another and become inseparable, held together by 'secret fibres'. They are both tired of the capital and when Bouvard inherits a small fortune they determine to realise their dreams, acquiring a farm in rural Normandy. Despite amassing a fine library on agricultural techniques, in practice the bookish fellows' attempts at farming are predictably dismal. Their ensuing failures proceed through the pastimes of garden architecture, chemistry, physiology, anatomy, geology and archaeology, all the while collecting a private museum of incongruous equipment and books pertaining to their latest whim. They end up with what amounts to a banal assortment of bric-a-brac and eventually revert to copying.

Bouvard and Pécuchet is a favourite tale for post-modern museum critiques, living as they do at the moment of classification. The enthusiastic amateurs have for instance been invoked in the discussion of Mark Dion's ecological investigations sited in natural history museums. The importance of the moral in relation to the collection since Foucault's 'The Order of Things' has been well covered, suffice to say that there is no 'natural' given in the way we classify nature or the disciplines that study it. 'Nature' is arbitrary and culturally produced.

This shocking truth makes the wilderness seem a far more scary place, and Flaubert appears to loom as a 19th century existentialist prima donna. I'm thinking of Bouvard and Pécuchet as precedents for Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon in 'Waiting for Godot'. Picture Gilbert & George in the poem gazing across the water or over a field. What are they looking for? Art? It may be more fruitful to turn to the shared identity of the figures rather than their collection. Without trying to force a direct equivalence, is it possible to use Flaubert's gents to identify a formulation for Gilbert & George in their work?

The ambiguous sexuality of Flaubert's characterisations seems intractable, whilst not quite naive they present an air of bewilderment about the whole question. The two French companions are both 60 when Pécuchet loses his virginity to their maid, contracting an embarrassing 'intimate disease'. Meanwhile Bouvard's clandestine marriage to a local wealthy widow is abruptly called off when it emerges that she was only after a part of his land. Following their bad heterosexual experiences, the gentlemen resolve to have nothing more to do with women: 'No more women, right? And they embraced each other tenderly.'

We know Bouvard and Pécuchet love to collect. From Walter Benjamin, a self-confessed collector, we get the suggestion of a relationship between collecting and libidinal desire. So it is that in his short essay,

'Unpacking my library,' Benjamin refers to children and old men as collectors, the more sexually active social groups apparently having less interest in the pleasures of collecting. *Sammeltrieb*, the primal collecting urge, attempts to reclaim the old world. The object must be released from its function, taken out of the bondage of use, reborn in the private collection. The whole business is intense and obsessive, as Benjamin recalls:

"...one of the finest memories of the collector is the moment when he rescued a book to which he might never have given a thought, much less a wishful look, because he found it lonely and abandoned on the market place and bought it to give it its freedom - the way the prince bought a beautiful slave girl in *The Arabian Nights*. To a book collector, you see, the true freedom of all books is somewhere on his shelves."

Gilbert & George, who understand the underlying melancholic existence of Bouvard and Pécuchet, have a collection of their own. In the recent 'South Bank Show' film they revealed their collection of ceramics, including 1880s Branham Ware and unremarkable Torquay Terra-cotta. For them too, the act of collecting is above 'the collection.'

"Gilbert: That's how we started to collect because once we are collecting, we are able to relax immediately. We don't even mind what we are collecting, only this movement was very cheap and very neglected so we started to collect this. We could collect anything, children's books, the magazines that George was collecting..."

George: Yes the possibilities are...

Gilbert: Endless."

Like many couples they finish each others sentences. Gilbert and George share with Bouvard and Pécuchet the curious combination of their liking for measured consistencies in life, never quite (or only just) countering a sentiment for being completely lost. Bouvard and Pécuchet, unlike Vladimir and Estragon, or Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, are equally matched, broadly concurring on all essential issues. Like Vladimir and Estragon, they could be understood as two sides of the same personality. As I mused over the question of these sensitive twosomes, I wondered if we could regard their melancholia as, in some way, a gendered space. This may seem an awkwardly framed idea. What I mean to suggest is that the wistfulness they express, and the viewer experiences, is a product of their identity. If melancholia is in part a manifestation of, for instance gender or class, it is because it is also directly figured through the desire of those identity co-ordinates. Where the word in identity politics would be 'desire', I could read 'yearning', or as I have shown, the *sammeltrieb* of the collector. So while their melancholia is of course not exclusive to the male pair, it is specific to them. Their desire can be exhibited not only in the collection but also in their alienation. In fact it is not enough to imagine the possibility of a female Bouvard and Pécuchet as mapping another specific set of desires. The point, aside from Bouvard and Pécuchet's relationship with each other, is their relationship with society. Women, particularly in the mid-nineteenth century, were not able to move freely within social structures in the same way as men. They are not accorded the right to stare at the crowd and to remain inconspicuous. Furthermore, a female counter-type of the collector is far from established.

As clerks, Bouvard and Pécuchet played a crucial stabilising role in the fabric of Parisian society. As amateur enthusiasts, their social contact with the outside world is as limited as the objects in their private collection. They are further put off by rare occasions such as the party to show off their garden which left the guests singularly unimpressed and ended in a terrible argument. As with their sexual exploits, Bouvard and Pécuchet's reserve in their relations with the small rural community is compounded by these incidents.

The small local village of the Chavignolles provides a caricature of the fabric of society; a doctor, an aristocrat,

an ex-politician, a tradesman, a lawyer, a priest and farm workers. Gilbert & George's immediate community, around Spitalfields provides the backdrop for much of their work. However it is always viewed with professional detachment. Being alone can be so much more effective if there are two of you. The more they are removed from it, the more Gilbert & George can view society in the way they compile their collection. We might fashion a kind of crude correlation between class and classification. Finally we the viewers, their public, find ourselves in their line of sight, we are implicated in the mass they survey from a lofty position. Like four observatories, their eyes zoom into the middle-distance of the crowd.

Gilbert & George have, as they say, 'held on to each other' since their early days at St. Martin's and are now approaching the Autumn of their years, an age that suits them. In some of their latest work they have begun an ongoing collection and documentation of their own bodily fluids. For 'A huge new group of pictures,' photographing samples through a microscope: shit, piss, tears, sweat and sperm. They have, George speculates, 'probably one of the biggest visual studies of shits ever made - we have thousands and thousands of different ones.' This takes collecting to new gratuitous limits.

We might refer to the unwavering recording video eye of another double act, the Swiss artists Fischli & Weiss. Accumulating video footage whilst going for a drive, sometimes to and from their studio, sometimes with no particular destination, or on a train somewhere around Zurich, Fischli & Weiss tried to present their unremarkable experiences in real time. Eighty hours of film with the uninflected quality of the ready-made: cheese making, cleaning the city sewage system, at the dentist, amount to an encyclopaedic comprehensiveness but have no explanation. Ultimately they find copying is the only answer, the conclusion of Bouvard and Pécuchet:

"They copy papers haphazardly, everything they find, tobacco pouches, old newspapers, posters, torn books etc (real items and their imitations. Typical of each category).

Then, they feel the need for a taxonomy. They make tables, antithetical oppositions such as 'crimes of the kings and crimes of the people' - blessings of religion, crimes of religion. Beauties of history, etc; sometimes, however, they have real problems putting each thing in its proper place and suffer great anxieties about it.

- Onward! Enough speculation! Keep on copying! The page must be filled. Everything is equal, the good and the evil. The farcical and the sublime - the beautiful and the ugly - the insignificant and the typical, they all become an exaltation of the statistical. There are nothing but facts - and phenomena.

Final Bliss."