

# Treatise on Living by the Younger Generations

(extract)

Alistair Robinson

*But here's life's most limiting truth – it's always now, always here, never then and there ... It's already clear to me how much of life is forgotten even as it happens. Most of it. The unregarded present spooling away from us, the soft tumble of unremarkable thoughts, the long-neglected miracle of existence... she won't remember the way she set down the spoon and the sound it made on slate, the frock she wore today, the touch of her sandal's thong between her toes, the summer's warmth, the white noise of the city beyond the house walls, a short burst of birdsong by a closed window. All gone, already.*

(McEwan 2016: 163)

*What shall I say concerning its mastery of and its waste of mechanical power, its commonwealth so poor, its enemies of the commonwealth so rich, its stupendous organization — for the misery of life! Its contempt of simple pleasures which everyone could enjoy but for its folly? (Morris 1896:9)*

## **Radical empiricism**

*It could be argued that European radicalism has its two grand traditions: the revolutionary and the romantic. The former is rhetorical in its declamations, beloved of binaries, and turns on its oppositionality. Its most celebrated present-day exponents include figures like Alain Badiou, whose declamations are unconditional, unqualified. 'Poetics' is still dominated by 'politics', to use the Aristotelian distinction that runs through Western art: in the last instance, political rather than artistic and ethical claims win out in art, at least usually. The other tradition, that of romantic radicalism, is more hostile to sweeping sociological categorisations, and is perhaps*

*more complex. It is also associated with the claim that poetics are politics; or that within every true poetics lie an ethics, and this ethics must be bigger than any orthodox political commitment. That is to say, this belief rests on the idea that forms of life are in themselves political. This tradition might be thought to run from Rousseau to Ruskin and William Morris in the nineteenth-century, through to Jacques Rancière in the twenty-first. Those invested in this latter tradition invest in what Rancière calls the “sensible” world rather more than the abstract categories of sociological investigation (Rancière 2004).*

*The tradition of describing the social world through broad-brush categories has attracted criticism from figures on the left rather than the right in the twenty-first century, from amongst others Rancière and Manuel deLanda (and earlier, Gilles Deleuze). John Peter Askew’s work echoes their renewal of a radical empiricism: the demand to pay special attention to the concrete and the particular, and avoid mere abstractions. Askew’s photographs demand that we see the elements of the world as singularities: as special phenomenon worthy of our undivided attention, rather than as mere exemplars of prior categories. This idea also requires attention paid to the sheer complexity and diversity of relations that exist between individuals, and to their historical character. In this philosophy, people are not reducible to the aggregates they have been bundled into by language. They are not merely or only the members of an ethnicity, a gender, a class, even though these characteristics are indeed fundamental to understanding who they are. This is to say, in Askew’s work as in Rancière’s, ‘politics’ is precisely a matter of understanding relations and the way the world is structured and organised. But this can only be undertaken through a close, patient investigation of the world-as-it-is, rather than relying on abstract categories that reduce people to symptoms of social forces, or ideas they can never inhabit. Askew, just like novelist Ian McEwan, knows that only art is able to capture the fleeting, variegated texture of lived experience and of historical time by itself capturing our imagination. Theoretical coinages can never capture McEwan’s “unregarded present”: that which either escapes the focus of our attention entirely, or which is never committed to memory, having never been dignified by becoming the subject of art.*

*We might say the only means for any artist to use photography today is to engage thoroughly with a world in all its particularities, as well as the peculiarities of its dynamics, as if at a granular level. The more localised that world is, and the closer-grained, the deeper and more intensive the artist's engagement with it is, the stronger likelihood of their work being able to inscribe new truths about the world. Historical experience can only be 'caught unawares', as it were, and only by those who have the greatest regard for the details that reveal how we live now. Askew has a respect for the poetry of everyday life, and a respect for both the world of material objects as well as the most subtle nuances of our behaviour. As Rancière puts it, those who aspire to reorder our perceptual-political regime must first be attentive to the world as it stands.*

#### ***'Realpoetik': towards a revolution of everyday life***

*We might say the more reflective tradition of radicalism like Rancière demand what might be called a slow revolution: a revolution in our forms of consciousness, and not just in the realms of economics or party politics. The ultimate origin of this tradition might, as above, be thought to be Jean-Jacques Rousseau rather than Marx. Rousseau's identification of virtue with nature, his celebration of youth, and of camaraderie and friendship, and his aspiration towards a cultivated simplicity of living all echo themes that run right through Askew's work. These themes, it might be said, constituted some of the mainstays of what became known as Romanticism and early modernism. In England these traditions are perhaps most famously associated with William Morris's alignment of politics and poetics, and indeed combination of political activism with the production of poetry. For such figures, the reform of the world is undertaken by attending to it one object at a time, to allow the expansion of our consciousness. 'Art' is, in Askew's view as in Morris's, the means we have to become full imaginative beings in a world where the quality of our attention – that is, all of the resources of mind and imagination we possess – is so often determined by Gradgrindian calculation.*

*For Askew, it is, as it was for the Romantic literary critic William Hazlitt, the means we have to expand our circle of sympathy past those of our immediate acquaintance. As academic Paul Hamilton has argued “For William Hazlitt paintings become politically charged when their self-contained worlds make us aware of our creative potential for renewing our own” (Hamilton 2015 n.p.). This is true of Askew’s work: his images are best seen as gifts for the imagination by which we might renew our own world. Hamilton has also coined the term “realpoetik” to describe how “revolution [was pursued] by other means in European romantic ... thought” (Hamilton 2012: 370). This ingenious coinage is exceptionally apt to describe Askew’s project. The terms in which European Romanticism has been described in recent research help us to clarify his commitments and ideas. As Hamilton has argued,*

*In what is here dubbed Realpoetik the battle for what is to be political reality is fought on a rhetorical field whose free speech is exemplary of what politics should be... a pattern of pursuing revolution by other means is visible in the political revisionism and literary experimentation of ... Romantic radicals (ibid).*

*In the Romantic tradition which Askew draws upon, the liberation of viewers and readers through art is equated with political liberation. Moreover, Hamilton observes that central to this project was “a counter-image of Europe imagined by Romantic period writers... as the experience of political opportunity” (ibid). The most fundamental facts about We might be thought that it is a ‘counter-image of Europe’; that it offers a space of ‘political opportunity’, realised through ‘realpoetik’; and that it pursues a kind of ‘revolution by other means’ whose form embodies the political reality aspired towards. Askew presents us with ‘another continent’: this too is Europe, but not as we know it.*

*(....)*

**Alistair Robinson** is Director of Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland, having worked in the national collection of photography at the Victoria & Albert

Museum, and the National Museum of Photography. He has authored and edited monographs about artists from Dan Holdsworth to David Harrison, and is co-author of the Routledge guide to Museum and Gallery Studies (2018).

This is an extract from the essay that is the introduction to the book WE published by Kerber Verlag in 2019 to accompany John Peter Askew's exhibition at the Northern Gallery of Contemporary Art, Sunderland, UK.