JULIAN THOMAS AND THE DANGERS OF SCHOLASTICISM

Julian Thomas (Manchester University) and Mike Pearson (Wales, Aberystwyth) were the opponents in the defence of Jonna (Ulin) and Fiona's (Campbell) dissertation in Gothenburg (see my blog entry for June 11).

Something has been bugging me since then about Julian's criticisms of their work.

Jonna and Fiona make a basic proposition that archaeology is performance. Even in the notion that archaeologists simply discover the past, archaeology is a contemporary performance, for the experience of discovery is never neutral or abstract but is located (in lives, memories, cultures, dreams) and is certainly beyond simple representation in narrative and image. Finds evoke. And archaeology is so much more. As I keep reiterating – archaeologists work on what is left of the past. In this we are all archaeologists, performing our pasts.

Julian is one of archaeology's great contemporary theorists. He has been a major figure in the rethinking of European prehistory that will, when matured and assimilated, revolutionize our understanding of the broad shape of history. My latest book on the shape of history owes much to his school of thought. We had a wonderful time together as colleagues in Lampeter – true collegiality, talking about prehistoric monuments and landscapes, visiting the same in Brittany, excavating in Angelsey together on his project with Mark Edmunds. I miss his intellectual company. But I am concerned that he is slipping into a detached and scholastic world where words and ideas alone have effect. I am more and more convinced this is because he is fascinated by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.

Julian took issue with the idea that archaeology is cultural production, in the sense I have just outlined – archaeologists working on what is left of the past. He thinks this means the past becomes a passive raw material subject to the whims of the archaeologist. Work implies control over raw matter, he said, and the past is not raw matter.

He also refuses to accept the notion of fragment or remains – that the past is left to us in its ruins. For him this implies that the past has primacy over what comes after, when past and present should not be so contrasted.

For Julian, archaeology's concern should be "materiality". We are thrown into a world of materiality, of things and thoughts, and live an indeterminate temporality of relations between past, present and future. The old modern and Cartesian dualisms of mind and body, knowing subject and object of interest and manipulation should be discarded. He invokes Heidegger's intricate German compound vocabularies that are meant to help navigate these dualisms that do indeed pervade understanding.

I have spent my intellectual career similarly opposing just these splits in the way we think about ourselves. But which artist or craftsman ever thought that in their work they simply manipulated some inert raw material? None in my experience of twenty years of research into design and making. And what lies behind a denial of entropy, of the loss and ruin at the heart of history? Maybe a desire to retain the wholeness, to staunch the loss through verbal technics. But words don't fit. Julian

however wants to purify our language. Not making and remains. We must talk about materiality, zuhandenheit, sorge, vorhandenheit, the worldness of the world, ein ereignis der anwesenheit …

The radical and disabling splits between ourselves and the worlds we live will not go away through a denial and clever substitution of one discourse by another. The best form of criticism is not the beautifully worded put-down but an alternative practice. Embody criticism in your work. Don't argue too seriously about the implications of calling archaeology a mode of cultural production and the implications of such a formula – just get on with what you want the past to be to us. The past is a mess of ruin and loss – denying it leads us to a jargon that seeks to resolve the contradictions of the world we live in word play, in an empty poetics. Julian's and Heidegger's response to the aporias, the dead-ends of our modern understanding, is a jargon of authenticity, as Adorno put it. Word games. A peotics, yes, but poetics is precisely (re)making, working with the materiality that is our social, cultural and personal fabric

Julian Thomas excavating – Bryn Celli Dhu, Angelsey, 1993

Helen, my wife and ceramic artist, taught this to me – be less interested in talking about your work than getting on with it, melding talk and making. And this is the true poetics.

Dare I quote Marx? Philosphers have so far only interpreted the world; the point is to change it.

Or Milton? – I deem it to be an old errour of universities not yet well recover'd from the Scholastick grosnesse of barbarous ages, that … they present their … novices at first comming with the most intellective abstractions of Logick and metaphysicks.

I am working my way through Julian's new book on archaeology's relationship with modernity and the modern world – I will report on what I find.