

READING: A PROPOS DE TONI GRAND.

“In Mircea Eliade’s book *Myth and Reality* one chapter is titled, ‘Time Can Be Overcome.’ It is a basic purpose of mythic ritual and sacrament to overcome time. Horselover Fat found himself thinking in a language used two thousand years ago, the language in which St Paul wrote. ‘*Here time turns into space*’ [(Wagner, *Parsifal*)]. Fat told me another feature of his encounter with God: all of a sudden the landscape of California, USA, 1974 ebbed out and the landscape of Rome of the first century CE ebbed in. He experienced a superimposition of the two for a while, like techniques familiar in movies. In photography. Why? How? God explained many things to Fat but he never explained that, except for this cryptic statement: it is journal listing #3. *He causes things to look different so it would appear time has passed*. Who is ‘he’? Are we to infer that time has *not* in fact passed? And did it ever pass? Was there once a real time, and for that matter a real world, and now there is counterfeit time and a counterfeit world, like a sort of bubble growing and looking different but actually static? Horselover Fat saw fit to list this statement early in his journal or exegesis or whatever he calls it. Journal listing #4, the next entry, goes: *Matter is plastic in the face of Mind*.”

(Philip K. Dick, *Valis*, London 1981, pp. 45–46)

Fish is different from meat. Except for tuna. I’ve seen Japanese fishmongers, working in the big market in Tokyo, changing the frozen carcasses of tuna into meat. The conversion is done by progressively slicing into smaller pieces. The frozen bodies are difficult to handle, heavy and awkwardly shaped, slipping a bit on the bandsaw bench. The first cut is longwise, into halves, with the saw blade passing to one side of the backbone. After this it’s easier, there’s a flat surface to run on the saw table. The next cut is also longwise, quartering the body. Thereafter the cuts go across, producing blocks about as long as they are deep or a bit longer. These go into the

fridges of other dealers and are sliced smaller and smaller as they thaw and as the fish is sold, red chunks, blocks and cubes; splinters of the whole body.

“The second time I saw tunny, many years later, was in Spain on the Basque coast. This time it was a smaller species, *Thunnus alalunga*, which the French call *germon* and the Americans albacore, the prized white tunny, the only one allowed to be sold as white meat tunny in the USA. Fat fisherwomen were pulling these tight skinned shapes over the quays of the small port of Llanes. Natural slime and blood greased the way so that they survived the brutal handling unblemished. We did not eat tunny for dinner that night. Next day we were glad to blot out that over-truthful image with a visit to the cave of Pindal where a palaeolithic tunny swims gracefully on the wall. One has to step up on to a stone to make out the engraved lines. And all the time the smell of sea and wild flowers hangs about the cave. I suppose that women have been lugging these meaty, full skinned fish over the ground hereabouts for 25,000 years and longer.”

(Jane Grigson, *Fish Cookery*, London 1973, pp. 201–02)

At dusk in the autumn months starlings congregate in large numbers, chattering loudly and chaotically from their roost. All at once the whole flock will erupt skywards, joining other flocks forming a vast congregation swirling around the sky. The organisation of these enormous numbers seems inexplicable. What keeps the flock together? Why don't they crash into one another? What is the significance of the elaborately changing patterns in the vibrant mass? As the light fades, the display stops as suddenly as it has begun and the birds return chirping and muttering to their perches for the night. Watching, there is a sense that these patterns can be read: as a sign of tomorrow's weather perhaps or as a portent. They can be scanned, as we scan the clouds, for images – or read, as are tea leaves in a cup, for clues to the future. The great silver shoals of herring that once occurred in the North Sea must have inspired similar musings. Where have they come from? Where are they going?

What can they tell us? On land, the wildebeest wandering across the Serengeti plain form the last awesome herd that ebbs and flows with this same mysterious organisation, the individual by virtue of number reduced to a particle in a fluctuating pattern.

Pattern is evidence of structure – at all levels, from the twist of DNA to spiralling galaxies, we read pattern as the evidence or consequence of structure, of forces, laws or interactions. Thus we infer that pattern in the flock, shoal or herd must in some way be consequent. This habit is very hard to break. A part of the difficulty is the specifics of the particles. Animals, fish or birds are volitional in ways that we don't believe stars or genetic material to be, so that in seeing pattern (and this is particularly so in collections of vast numbers) it is that much harder not to treat it as evidence of 'grand design'. Or as a sort of communication. The intensity of this difficulty, of the relationship between the part and the whole, is provocative in the work of Toni Grand, a provocation that is intensified by the absolute precision of titling adopted in the works of 1988–92: *Sans titre* followed by a date (day, month, year). The relatively simple structures of these works are formed from units of great particularity – individual fish-units whose identity is almost erased by the encrusting resin. At Knaresborough, near Harrogate in West Yorkshire, is the cave of Mother Shipton, a local hermit and prophet of some (eighteenth-century) reputation. In the cave various objects have been (and still are) put under the drips of water continually seeping through cracks in the limestone pavement above. The leached calcium comes out of solution and gradually encrusts the objects. The process is continuous, so that the oldest of them are by now little more than peculiarly shaped lumps, their identity effaced. In the more recent both the lump and its underlying object are visible, a kind of double, one becoming the other. The activity of the prophet pushes forward in time, reading into the future. The steady drip of the calcifying water marks the passage of that future into the past "Here time turns into space" (or matter). Such doubles seem to be an essential component in the sculpture of Toni

Grand, whether in the individual components or in the relation of part to whole – of structure to design, of object to matter, or of time to space.

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