

Foreword

As I write there's an exhibition of the art of Daumier at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, and anyone going along might be struck by the interdisciplinary nature of the man. A nineteenth-century French cartoonist, Daumier seems to anticipate Otto Dix and his art of the grotesque, which was a response to the rapaciousness and resentment of the Weimar Republic after the First World War. And Daumier pulls no punches in his account of the privilege dressed up as fraternity that overwhelmed him about the July monarchy in France in the 1830s. One of his best known cartoons shows Charles 10th sitting on an enormous throne with his tongue stretched to the ground, workers labour up it with sacks of gold on their backs which the constitutional monarch then consumes, and defecates honours for the burghers to argue over in a scramble way below. But as well as cartoons there are paintings of all sorts of lived scenes, including knowing ones and loving ones responding to Don Quixote which show the Renaissance Don battling fantastic invasions on the open plain, or resolving imaginary theorems in his library. Polemics and high art: polemics about utopian delusions, and an art of the wonders of the mind. They aren't the same and at this moment they can't be divorced either. The power of art and the power of argument depend on each other and each is dissolved in the other. But are they even compatible? That is for Daumier's viewers to say, in their own time and also in mine. Crossing borders, as localised as the ones of genre or as blue sky as the ones of art and politics, architecture and social relations, the ability of memory to account for the past, the relation of cultural dialogue and personal unity – addressing any question of the kind is not matter of corporate identity, or even ordinary team work necessarily. It is a matter of freedom. We will step outside the frames of vision handed down not because we must but because we can; and make our own ways of relating too. But working in the arts has allowed me learn something of the dangers of that 'we', too - the tyrannies of the point of view that shape us and are so hard for any of us to distinguish. Freedom of thought and the freedom to relate are embodied for me in Daumier's trapeze artist painted in colours and textures that allow him to disappear as much as take shape, suspended in a dimension of his own making but his to lose as well. Interdisciplinary practice is a step on the way to loosening attachments and learning to give them new form.

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