

### *In Praise of Miscellaneity*

I WRITE in praise of *miscellaneity*, and in particular of *assortment* and *variousness* in books; of *motley* volumes; of mixed-up, impure works which nevertheless accord with the mess & disorder of nature, of life. We have come to expect most books to have a single subject; a clarity of purpose; and a purposeful organisation: in short, a sharp focus. Yet what often delights us most are digressions away from the point; self-contradictions; and those gradual blurs of meaning and intent that cast softer-edged shadows in our minds. Those of us who enjoy losing ourselves in the streets of unfamiliar cities will find an analogous pleasure in perusing haphazardly-anthologised compilations.

In Jorge Luis Borges's essay *John Wilkins's Analytical Language*, he acquaints us with 'a certain Chinese Encyclopædia' (the *Heavenly Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*) in which the animals are classified according to an eccentric and apparently whimsical taxonomy: '(a) those that belong to the emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids... (h) those that are included in this classification... (l) *etcetera*. The most interesting and troublesome category here is *etcetera*, which serves as an escape clause, a category for things not in any of

the other categories, a catch-all intended for anything, which, to the taxonomist's despair, is never quite fully 'included in the present classification.' To consider *miscellaneity* as a neat category like any other, then, is to impose a palpably false order on what we instinctively recognise as its opposite.

Wilkins, the subject of Borges's essay, was responsible for one of the most thorough and methodical classification schemas ever published. A large part of his 1668 *Essay Towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language*, is devoted to an attempt to classify everything imaginable into a universally comprehensible tabulation. Its impressive scale and ambition notwithstanding, Wilkins' classification has always been problematic. Borges mentions the Chinese encyclopædia while illustrating the 'ambiguities, redundancies and deficiencies' of Wilkins's project. In fairness to Wilkins, his classification of the animals, for example, strikes us as much *less* arbitrary than the one quoted by Borges, while nevertheless remaining squarely pre-modern: he categorises them as either *imperfect*, or *perfect*, where the former heading roughly corresponds to our present notion of *invertebrates*, and the latter is further subdivided into the *fishes*, the *birds*, and the *beasts*. At the end of his

taxonomy, however, even Wilkins concedes that ‘there are some kinds of things that are not capable of being provided for in a Character and Language proposed for Universal use...’ by which he means proper names, and local or particular terms. Ever-diligent, Wilkins sketches a quick and colourful miscellany of such things, a list that includes titles of honour and terms of office, rank, or qualification; (such as *Duke, Mayor* or *Doctor*); legal terms (*Freehold*, for example, and *Subpœna*); words for items of clothing or types of cloth (*Flannel, Velvet, Damask*); words for games, for foodstuffs, for drinks (*Muskadell, Coffi, Syllabub*); words for music & dances (*Saraband, Jig*) and for musical instruments.

In those parts of the world once collectively termed *Christendom*, one miscellaneous work of literature in particular still stands as a massive cultural foundation-stone. ‘The Hebrew bible,’ as Alasdair Gray puts it (in the Preface to his splendidly heterogeneous *Book of Prefaces*), ‘is a collection of legends, law-codes, histories, hymns, novellas, political diatribes, prophecies and proverbs.’ The authors of the Christian Testament only multiplied the miscellaneity of the book with their gospels, acts, epistles and mad revelations. While the diverse nature of Judæo-Christian scripture is seen as an accidental rather than a deliberate formative charac-

teristic, it is interesting to speculate what part its internal discontinuities and variegation may have played in Christendom’s later intellectual development.

We are told that the ancient Greeks and Romans admired miscellanies. Aulus Gellius, a Roman grammarian and lawyer writing in the 2nd century compiled a book known as the *Noctes Atticæ* (the Attic Nights), so called because he had begun it during the long winter nights of a sojourn in Attica. This comprised a jumble of notes on grammar, geometry, philosophy, history and much else besides. In this work, apparently ‘utterly devoid of sequence or arrangement,’ Aulus Gellius preserved a list of the picturesque titles of some of the literary miscellanies he himself had read and enjoyed; such as *a Basket of Flowers*, and *a Variegated Meadow*. Those classical authors whose works survived in a more-or-less miscellaneous form garnered the admiration of Montaigne (whose *Essays*, of course, are notably digressive and diverse themselves): of the *Moral Works* of Plutarch and Seneca’s *Epistles*, the essayist wrote that ‘It is no great matter to draw me unto them, and I leave them when I please, for they have no sequel or connexion.’

Before the craft of printing regimented books into uniform editions, every volume was a manuscript, and

every manuscript was unique: often a codex might combine disparate tracts only united by some momentary expedient, or some quirk of its owner's, its transcriber's, or its reader's taste. It is worth noting that one particular type of manuscript miscellany survived the advent of the age of print, and even thrived because of it: the *commonplace book*. Readers transcribed passages into these literary scrapbooks that had importance or significance for them, that brought them a moment of insight or consolation, or which they thought they might be able to re-use in future conversations, orations, or compositions of their own. Some commonplace-books by famous hands, from Ben Jonson to Robert Burns, from Robert Southey to E.M. Forster, have eventually made the transition back into print.

Isaac D'Israeli (father of the British Prime minister Benjamin) was the author of one of the nineteenth century's most popular miscellanies, the *Curiosities of Literature*, a wealth of book-lore presented in six volumes of short articles written over a period of more than thirty years. D'Israeli wrote an article on *Miscellanists* which serves as both eulogy and apology for the art in which he excelled. For him, the charm of a miscellany came from its likeness to private conversation, rather than public lecture. He considered that

a miscellany should be both *multifarious* and *concise*, and, indeed, the latter quality is essential: any work with indigestibly long chapters, articles or subsections cannot truly partake of *miscellaneity*. These are books for idle moments, D'Israeli wrote; they are 'interstitial pleasures'.

That the appeal of the various has survived into the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, is hardly surprising, given the atrophied attention-spans of these latter days. It has often been claimed that, after the Bible, the best-selling book in the western world is another motley compilation: *The Guinness Book of Records*. While perhaps somewhat tainted by its necessarily consistent preoccupation with the superlative, this remains a genuinely miscellaneous work. More recently, *Schott's Original Miscellany* proved to be a surprisingly, but charmingly successful work of disorderly assortment, although its literary merits are few, given that it is for the most part a bare collection of lists. Even so, we perhaps may detect an agreeable authorial presence when, within the space of a few pages, we are presented with *Some Notable Belgians*, *Contradictory Proverbs*, *a table of Bra Sizes*, and a *Schematic of Dante's Inferno*... Schott was quoted in an interview as having said 'I wrote it at random and that's the way it should be read.'

The internet, and our experiences of it, fully partake of *miscellaneity*. Many of us will choose to inhabit sites which exemplify both multifariousness and concision, or which resemble volatile commonplace-books: and many of us, invoking the spirit of Montaigne, actively prize the lack of 'sequel or connexion' therein. As we swing from link to link, are we not accumulating evanescent anthologies as we go?