John Evelyn and the Political Uses of Curiosity

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Invoked as herald of the experimentalism and attention to taxonomy that marked the emergent scientism of Restoration and later seventeenth-century England, John Evelyn has as much to tell about that cultural moment in the mid-seventeenth-century when accounts of experience bore the inflections of curiosity and wonder and wrought a “curious” alliance between the artful and natural. In Evelyn’s Diary nature is something not only to be analyzed but wondered at and transformed into objects of aesthetic pleasure. Deriving aesthetic pleasure from “things” provided armor for Evelyn’s sojourns in alien cultures both abroad and home during the upheavals of the English Civil War. Expressing wonder at the incomparable rarities of his exceptional experience, Evelyn nonetheless came to follow the marketplace in affixing monetary values to his “rarities” and comparing the “incomparable.” A prolific writer, Evelyn puts his appetites and convictions--and those of the moment he embodied--most conspicuously on display in his copious Diary, a document which, begun in middle age, was retroactively extended to his early childhood in the reign of James I and then ends but a few days short of his death at eighty-four in the reign of Anne. Given access by birth to elite circles, Evelyn remained ever the royalist and Anglican whose Diary helps us understand the ideological and political uses things and collecting came to serve in the period. Indeed, in the life and career of Evelyn, we may see all too apt an embodiment of what Pierre Bourdieu has called the aristocracy of taste.

For June 29, 1641, John Evelyn records in his Diary, that he “sate to one Vanderborcht [the Dutch painter Hendrik van der Borcht] for my Picture in Oyle,” a portrait, he simultaneously notes, which he presented to his sister Jane, “being her request upon my resolutions to absent my selfe from this ill face of things at home, which gave umbrage to wiser then my selfe, that the Medaill was turning, and our calamities but yet in their infancy” (2: 29). So it is that Evelyn records the inauguration of that period of civil-war induced “absence” in extended study and travel abroad that, off and on, lasted for more than a decade. This moment marks Evelyn’s decision to evade the “troublesome times” in England and simultaneously anticipates his self-invention on the continent as a would-be virtuoso and one preeminent in collecting “curiosities” and

EIRC 34.2 (Winter 2008): 217-228
“things”—in England in the mid- and later seventeenth century. It is with this intersection that this paper is concerned, and with the two worlds this moment—albeit recorded some years later—bridges: the politically troublesome times Evelyn was leaving—if not exactly leaving behind—and the inquisitively and acquisitively aesthetic orb he enters in absenting himself from infelicity awhile. In Evelyn’s account, where re-collection gives so much of itself over to collection, Evelyn’s emphasis upon his curious, virtuosic accomplishments might well seem an exercise in political sublimation, a reminder by omission of where Evelyn wasn’t and what he wasn’t doing during the “troublesome times.” Yet Evelyn’s account also reminds us of the ideological striping curiosity and collection had come to have, especially by the time when Evelyn puts his account together in the Restoration, and that for Evelyn being a man of curiosity was inescapably political and a means of perpetuating—in some form—a political order the troublesome times had disrupted, if not extinguished.

To be sure, as the principal mirror through which to view Evelyn’s continental travels the Diary is not unclouded. In part its opacity results from the filtration inevitable from the putative temporal distance between the events it recounts and their recounting (Welcher 123ff). Since Evelyn, as it is generally agreed, reconstructed the entries for these years when he was a middle-aged and even older man, ample room exists in his narrative for the adulterants of self-censorship, selective amnesia, and the post-venient grace of hindsight. At times the Diary humorously conveys the sense of a superego firmly—or striving to be firmly—in control, ruthlessly suppressing any hints of the libidinous or rebellious in his younger self—and perhaps rewriting his “wanderings” as “travels.” Surely, for example, one can only smile when in a confessional moment Evelyn recalls that a certain period in Paris was “the only time that in my whole life I spent most idly, tempted from my more profitable recesses” (2: 534), only to tell us nothing at all about this lone lapse, beyond noting that it was short-lived; indeed, after giving only half a sentence to it, Evelyn recalls that he “soone recovered my better resolutions, & fell to my study,” picking up some high Dutch and Spanish for good measure! That Evelyn is holding something back from his readers is, of course, among the criticisms leveled at his Diary by Virginia Woolf when she memorably complains that Evelyn “never used its pages to reveal the secrets of his heart,” even more memorably to suggest later that maybe he had and that, on the basis of what he does reveal, Evelyn was, “we cannot help suspecting, something of a bore” (80, 85).

And we feel the manipulative force of Evelyn’s intervention in the