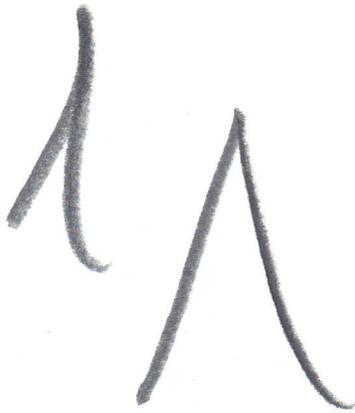
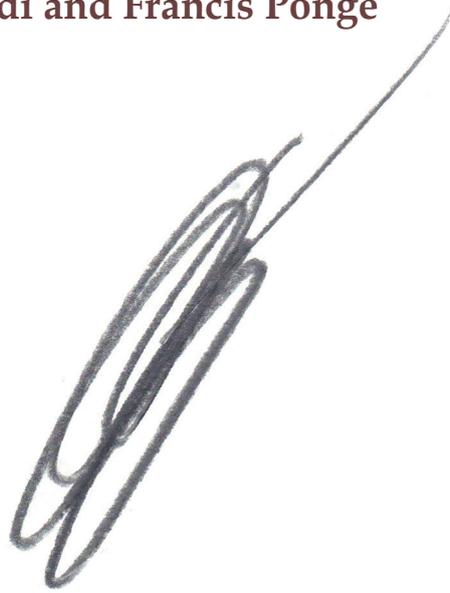


Drawing and Poetry: Giorgio Morandi and Francis Ponge



**Adventures  
*of the*  
Mundane**



**Paul Patrick Fenner**

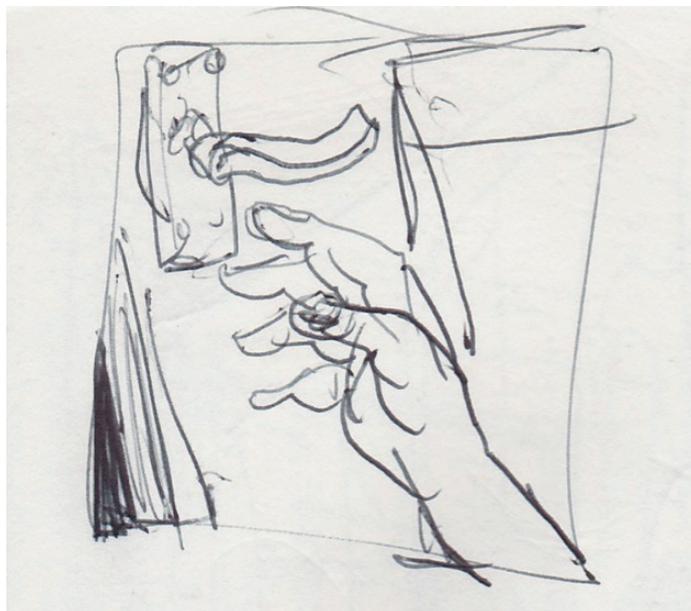
## Adventures of the Mundane

By Paul Patrick Fenner

### Drawing and Poetry: Giorgio Morandi and Francis Ponge

When compelled to spend almost all our time at home, our first impulse might well be one of escape: the internet! novels! films! But what if we turn our full attention to what is closest to us - to that self-contained universe of things that constitutes the inside of our houses or flats? What can poetry and drawing tell us about this world?

The vast majority of objects that surround you at home are human-made: they have been designed and then manufactured, probably by many people in different places. It's worth remembering that all of them, whether mass-produced or not, must have started out life as some sort of drawing, whether designed on paper or on a computer screen. Most of them are tools of one kind or another: things that we use rather than look at. We know them intimately, but more through touch than through sight. I'm thinking of things like door-handles, taps, toilet seats, drawers, light switches, biro, potato peelers. These are things that are so close to us, so attuned to our use that they are like parts of our bodies. Like our elbows or ears, we are using them all the time, but don't think about them at all (it's not necessary to examine the door-handle before we use it).



Paul Patrick Fenner drawing

This world of the everyday is all the more mysterious for being so familiar, and few people understood this more than the French poet Francis Ponge (1899–1988). Ponge devoted his entire life's work to an exploration of the most ordinary and overlooked of objects both natural and human-made. In his 1942 book *Le Partis Pris des Choses* (which roughly translates as 'on the side of things') he examines in short prose poems such things as pebbles, packing crates, and jugs.

Ponge's ethic is that of austerity, a stripping back of the fripperies of poetic language and subject matter. But it's of a paradoxical kind; one that is in the service, you might say, of a greater sensuousness. By choosing the smallest and most 'basic' of subject matter, the poet or artist can attune themselves more fully to material reality, achieving an intense apprehension of the depths of things. The less weighted with symbolic or poetic baggage, the more the object's presence can prompt the artist to get down to the fundamentals of what it means to represent, to make signs.

Ponge was close to several of the leading painters of his day, and in a moment, we are going to look at one of his poems in relation to the work of one of his artist contemporaries, the Italian Giorgio Morandi. But first I want to consider more generally how the kind of reality attained by drawing and poetry derive from their being what I want to call empathetic practices.

Rather than using words or lines to mirror or reflect the object, the artist or poet must make something with a life of its own, setting up a rhythm that can serve as the expressive analogue of its subject matter. To try and explain what I mean by this, let's take a look at this drawing by Rembrandt, made some time in the mid-1630s.



Rembrandt, Christ Carrying the Cross, Pen and wash. Mid 1630s.  
Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin.

There is a sense of being outside in strong sunlight, a feeling of the press, confusion and noise of the crowd, the strain of muscles, the exhausted body of the central figure crushed under the weight of the wooden cross, the immovable resistance of the ground. A totally convincing world is brought into being on the sheet. Yet these things are not explicitly stated; there is very little in the way of tonal description for example. Look how much work the white of the paper is doing.

Imagine the kind of drawing that would result from tracing around figures in a photograph: it would look utterly unlike this one. None of the ink lines here are simply tracing the outline of something, but are instead moments of a process, gestures that are totally bound up with the action of the figures. Each line is directly meaningful: each has a *value* in terms of bodies and spaces. This is what gives the drawing its tautness and power, as if Rembrandt is saying with his line: “this is a lunging/crouching/stumbling figure, this a grasping hand...”.

In a banal or ‘academic’ drawing, lines and tones are thought of in an essentially ‘dead’ abstract way, as subordinate means to an end: techniques systematically employed to create the ‘effect’ of volume, of light and shade etc. The lines in such images are decoupled from the things depicted. By contrast, Rembrandt seems to have started with the action in mind, the marks flowing from a sense of the whole. Everything in the drawing is at the same time radically simplified and utterly specific - nothing vague, generalised or superfluous. The position of heads in relation to torsos, the sense of the ground, the trajectories and weight of the bodies, their relative position in space: all are totally clear.

The late Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins does something in literature analogous to Rembrandt’s looping, bodies-in-space line. In Hopkins there is a proto-modernist sense of the need to twist and push language to the edges of formal sense, to find a novel way of combining words in such a way as to arrive at a vivid reality adequate to that of the subject matter. Like Rembrandt, Hopkins fuses together object and action, in his case through the distinctive use of hyphenated and compound words. In his poem Epithalamion, a “listless stranger” walking through woodland on a summer’s day comes across a group of boys bathing in a river:

He drops towards the river: unseen  
Sees the bevy of them, how the boys  
With dare and with downdolphinry and bellbright bodies  
    huddling out,  
Are earthworld, airworld, waterworld thorough hurled, all by  
    turn and turn about.

It is the rhythm set up here that conveys the totality of the scene. As in perception, the group of boys and their noisy splashing about are presented as an immediate condensed image. Hopkins gives us bodies in space, person and action as inseparable - conjuring up a whole world in an astonishing economy of means. Ordinary, everyday language freezes and fixes things, separating experience out into subjects and objects, nouns, verbs and adjectives. Hopkins wants to circumvent this, his tumbling together of words and phrases is a means of reimbuing them with their primary signifying power.

Hopkins wanted his poems to reveal what he termed - in his peculiar metaphysical parlance - 'inscape'. The inscape of something is its unifying principle of identity, its essential quiddity or 'thingness': the *treeness* of a tree, the *houseness* of a house. In seeking to break something down into its component parts, or uncovering what it is made of and how it slots into systems of categorisation, 'analysis' and scientific discourse miss what is most essential about it. Things are more than the sum of their parts.

When in daily life we see someone we know approaching from a long way off on the street, we recognise them long before we can distinguish their individual features. It's in their total comportment, their particular way of being that we perceive them. We don't 'interpret' a person's face, registering nose, eyes and mouth in turn before 'concluding' that it's that particular person: the recognition is immediate and direct. You can't understand a building by making an inventory of the materials that comprise it.

The same irreducible principle of identity goes for all objects, and this is what Hopkins is getting at. Inscape is not - as it's sometimes misunderstood to be - a question of some spiritual essence beyond or behind appearances. It's the utterly concrete reality accessible to our senses. It's what is meant by 'likeness' in drawing, and it's not something accessible to photography, or the resources of straight-forward description.

Hopkins understood that a poem adequate to the task of grasping the reality of things must have a distinctive and independent reality of its own. It must achieve its own 'inscape' - and here this leads us back to Francis Ponge, whose elliptical portraits of objects are not so much descriptions, as objects built with words. The poem must be a construction as internally consistent as the object it refers to.

For Ponge, exploring the territory of the mundane meant probing and making visible the sheer strangeness of language - sign-making - itself. Again and again he confronts us with the astonishing fact of bits of the world *meaning* other bits of the world; a mystery the same as that of our own expressive, signifying bodies. He makes us aware of the physical presence of the word on the page, playing on its aural and visual qualities. In *La Cruche* (The Jug), Ponge considers both the vessel-like 'U' in the middle of the word, and its onomatopoeic 'hollow' sound (here, dare I say it, the English translation works almost better than the original).

The sense of the reality of the jug is totally bound up with the sense of the reality of the words on the page: the object is not so much represented or illustrated as enacted, *said*. We are made aware of how the jug appears in and through the words. Like the sides of the jug itself, they enclose and activate a central void or emptiness, that of the white page.

## The Jug (La Cruche)

No other word has the ring of a jug. Thanks to the U that opens in the middle of it, jug is hollower than hollow, and in its own way. It is a hollow surrounded by fragile earth: roughcast and easy to crack.

Jug is first empty and as soon as possible empty again.

Empty jug is resonant.

Jug is first empty and filled up with song.

So shallow that water rushes into it, jug is first empty and filled up with song.

Jug is first empty and as soon as possible empty again.

It is an indifferent sort of object, a mere go between.

Among a few glasses (for example) with care share it out.

It is therefore but a go-between, which we could get along without. Hence cheap; of middling worth.

But it comes in handy and is used every day.

A workaday object, whose only reason to exist is to be used a lot.

A little rough, succinct; despicable? – Its loss would not be a disaster...

The jug is made of the commonest materials; often of pottery.

It doesn't have the bombastic form, the emphasis of amphorae.

It is a mere vase, slightly compounded by a handle; a pot belly; a wide neck – and often the bluntish beak of a duck.

A farmyard object. A domestic object.

So the particularity of the jug is to be both poor and fragile: so somehow precious. And the problem with it is that one must – for such is also its character – use it every day.

We must take hold of this poor thing (a mere go-between, worthless, cheap), place it in the light of day, handle it, make use of it; clean, fill, empty.

The jug goes so often to water that in the end it breaks. It perishes of long use. Not from wear: by accident. That is, if you like, by wearing out its chances of survival.

It is a utensil that perishes from a special kind of wear: by wearing out its chances of survival.

So the jug, which has a simple, cheerful personality, perishes of long use.

One is advised to handle it with care. Put it where it won't bang into things. Leave some space between it and the other things.

Treat it as a dancer his partner. When right up close, be prudent, Avoid hitting nearby couples.

Full, it may overflow, empty it may break.

Don't bang it down... don't give it too little room.

So this is an object that we use day in day out, but with regard to which, in spite of its cheapness, we must take care how we move about. To keep it in shape, so it doesn't break, go to pieces suddenly, devoid of interest, heartrending and derisory.

It is true some people, to console themselves, linger – and why not? – over the pot shards: noting that they are convex... crooked even... petaliform... that there is a kinship with rose petals, egg shells... who's to say?

But is this not a kind of mockery?

For everything I've just said of the jug, couldn't one say equally Well about *words*?

(translated by Beverley Bie Brahic, 2008)

Ponge's older contemporary Giorgio Morandi (1890–1964) - whose *Still Life* from 1954 can be seen in the Sainsbury Collection - built a life's work out of a collection of small medicine bottles. In canvas after canvas, Morandi shuffled round his cast of objects in different configurations. The greater the repetition, the more endless the variation: his is a virtuoso art of limited means.

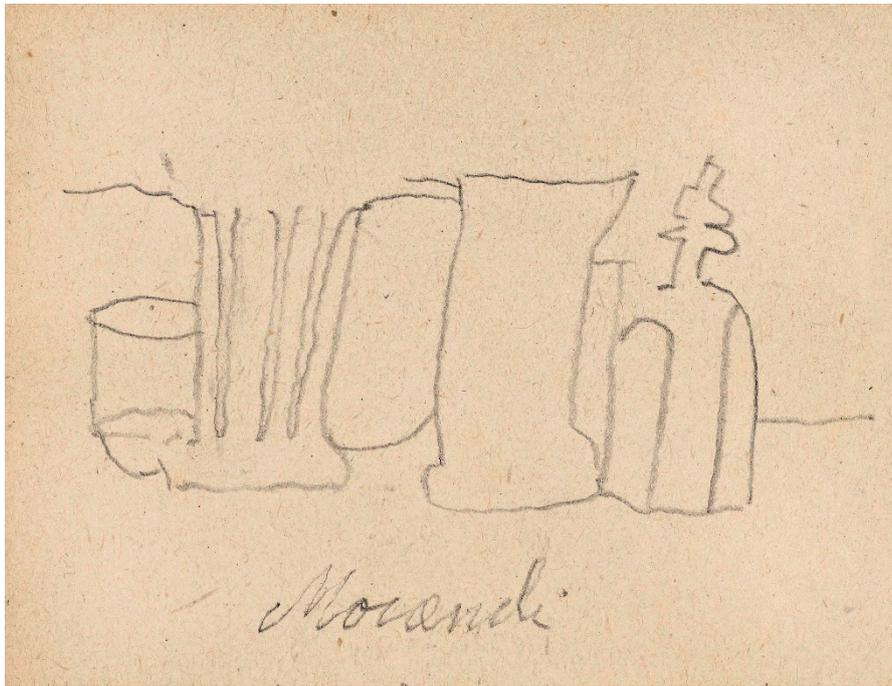


Giorgio Morandi, Still Life, Oil on Canvas, 1954. Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection.

The different elements tend to be lined up and facing us, parallel to the picture plane in austere, formalised arrangements as if posing for an old-fashioned photograph. Odd correspondences are set up: sometimes the top of a squarish object will line up with the far edge of the table, or the side of a bottle will align with the edge of another behind. You might expect all this to have an abstracting, flattening effect, but Morandi's objects are so *felt* - so convincingly held by his brushwork - that this isn't the case. In fact the spatiality of the paintings is made even more apparent, as our attention is brought to the slivers of receding planes in shadow, or the reflected light on the side of a bottle. We are made acutely aware of the edges of things: the space around presses palpably on the objects, as they seem to hover on the edge of being and non-being.

As we said earlier of Ponge, so with these paintings: austerity and restraint goes hand in hand with sensuousness. There is a strange voluptuousness to these images. Just as in Ponge's writing the signifier, the word itself, is foregrounded, so in Morandi we are aware of the brushwork gently pushing and pulling things into place. Our apprehension of the painted surface as a made-thing is what gives the paintings their intense feeling of reality. The duality of the paint and image, of paint *become* image, is made thrillingly apparent.

The same process is at work in this drawing from 1962, that seems particularly suggestive of the relationship between drawing and writing. The forms open beautifully onto the whiteness of the paper, whilst the same pencil line that describes the objects goes to make up his signature below.



Giorgio Morandi, *Natura Morta*, pencil on paper, 1962. Private Collection.

Perhaps we can think of the difference between good drawing and bad drawing as being defined by the attitude towards the white sheet. Drawing that is banal or lifeless treats the sheet of paper as the enemy: a neutral blankness to be filled. Good drawing involves activating the white sheet and making it resonate. Regardless of style, to draw well means being aware that as soon as you make a mark, the space around it is transformed.

Similarly, whilst much bad or forgettable writing manically fills the page with needless description and detail, good writing always involves an awareness of the unsaid - the presence of the word on the page and the spaces between.

Drawing and poetry have the potential to defamiliarise our taken-for-granted surroundings, revealing our common world in all its unexamined strangeness. Both Ponge and Morandi show us that thinking about the small things is perhaps the most interesting thing of all.

