

A Love Letter to Croydon

Variations on a theme by Willam Congreve

Dearest Croydon,

Please don't take this the wrong way.

I was telling someone about you the other day - your beautifully broken ring road and your string of unrealized visions; your big buildings next to small buildings and your empty car parks - and was reminded of a passage from 'The Way of the World' by William Congreve. It's a Restoration drama, first performed in 1700. I studied it for my A-Levels at one of your 156 schools. Maybe you know the play too? Anyway, when I remembered it I was inspired to speed straight home on your super-efficient Tram system and found my old copy of the play (Dover Thrift Editions) on my bookshelf, between a book on brickwork and the Story of Art by E.H. Gombrich. It didn't take me long to find the relevant passage as it is quite near the beginning, in Act I, Scene III. I re-read it and it really does remind me of you. It's quite amazing.

I felt it best that I write to you and share the passage with you. Better that than to have it all welling up inside. I also wanted to share the list that I have started to compile for you, about you. Yes, a list! But more of that later.

Again, please, please, please don't take this the wrong way.

Here is the passage from 'The Way of the World' by William Congreve. Act I Scene III. The character Fainal is quizzing Mirabell about his attitudes towards his love, Millamant:

"FAINALL For a passionate lover methinks you are a man somewhat too discerning in the failings of your mistress.

MIRABELL And for a discerning man somewhat too passionate a lover, for I like her with all her faults; nay, like her for her faults. Her follies are so natural, or so artful, that they become her, and those affectations which in another woman would be odious serve but to make her more agreeable. I'll tell thee, Fainall, she once used me with that insolence that in revenge I took her to pieces, sifted her, and separated her failings: I studied 'em and

got 'em by rote. The catalogue was so large that I was not without hopes, one day or other, to hate her heartily. To which end I so used myself to think of 'em, that at length, contrary to my design and expectation, they gave me every hour less and less disturbance, till in a few days it became habitual to me to remember 'em without being displeas'd. They are now grown as familiar to me as my own frailties, and in all probability in a little time longer I shall like 'em as well.

FAINALL Marry her, marry her; be half as well acquainted with her charms as you are with her defects, and, my life on't, you are your own man again."

Croydon. Do you see it? You are my Millamant!

Those affectations which in another town would be odious serve but to make you more agreeable.

It is so true! You are so agreeably affected. Not odious at all, as everyone seems to think. Am I mad to think so highly of you?

Anyway, (and please don't take this the wrong way) reading Congreve has inspired me to start compiling a list of your faults. Like the one that Mirabel wrote. I hope you will understand that like Mirabel's one, this is definitely a loving list. Your faults make you more agreeable. Always remember that.

Here it is:

'A Sifted and Separated List of Croydon's Affectations, Faults, Follies and Failings'

1. Your ring road is incomplete
2. You have a string of unrealized visions
3. You have issues
4. Your roads are hard to cross
5. You have too much guard rail
6. People laugh at you
7. You are a joke
8. You are 'an abyss in which values are meaningless'
9. Your town centre has seven multi-storey car parks, and they are empty
10. Crystal Palace FC are not very good and Selhurst Park is one of England's worst football grounds
11. You can't decide whether you are in London or Surrey

12. You pride yourself on being the home of Nestle UK
13. You are impossible to cycle around
14. You think you are a city
15. You don't get the message
16. Your Art School was good in the 1960s, but it's not anymore
17. The Fairfield Halls was good in the 1960s, but it's not anymore
18. You buried the River Wandle
19. David Bowie called you 'Complete Concrete Hell'
20. You hide your best qualities and flaunt your worst ones
21. Lunar House is a horrible welcome to the UK
22. People think you are ugly
23. You destroy your own history
24. You are deluded
25. You are boldly drab
26. You are constantly incomplete
27. You think you are 'different'
28. You are rude
29. You are a mess
30. You have no taste
31. You are pumped up
32. You are full of empty space
33. You are aggressive and nasty and violent on a Friday night
34. You think that you are the centre of the universe, and you are not
35. There are four McDonalds in your town centre
36. You shine garish coloured lights onto yourself at night
37. You are cold
38. You are home to some horrible people
39. Your street market is the oldest one in London, but it is dying
40. All of your pubs are closing down and being replaced with blocks of shabby flats
41. You think you are 'Mini Manhattan', but you've never even been to New York
42. You are full of back offices
43. All of your best shops seem to close down
44. You are a 'chunk of Inner Johannesburg'
45. You are a lost opportunity
46. Everyone always insists on reporting that Kate Moss grew up within your boundaries
47. You filled in your canal
48. You are crooked
49. Your towers are private and closed
50. You have the edge city blues

That's as far as I have got so far. Fifty follies, faults and failings. But I am convinced that there are more. In fact, I've just thought of your lack of decent paving slabs and your seas of blotchy tarmac. Oh, and your provincial narrow-mindedness and your forests of redundancy. You don't have a mountain. You don't have a harbour. You have a Bishop, but you don't have a Cathedral.

It's definitely going to be more than fifty-long. Sorry.

I intend to lovingly add to and edit, sift and separate this list over the coming years. I'll study it and get it by rote. Just for you.

I love you.

X

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