



## Il trionfo del disinganno \*

At the bus bay on the jam factory and Dosa Park side, a young woman, or elderly, hard to make out in the twilight, wryly hunched up on one of those black marble blocks now “landscaping” the square. One of the forlorn who hang about stations. Pitiful how her hair is cut and brushed, like an inmate’s. Seems to be hearing voices, too, and mumbling something in response. But might as well be plugged in, making a therapist’s or hair stylist’s appointment on her smartphone while waiting for the suburban bus.

The 4B approaching, Abingdon-bound, double-decker because it’s the evening rush hour. Can’t believe it’s on time. Is DUE on Oxontime displays, the established euphemism in public transport for sometime or never, re-acquiring its literal meaning, sowing confusion? The busdriver’s fingernails glowing pink as I’m returned my change and handed my ticket. But the voice that of a middle-aged man. No sissyish effort is made with a firm manicured paw to steer around the craters of potholes as we are jolting down the Botley Road.

Another night, *Neun Deutsche Arien*, baroque recital by Emma Kirkby, the famous soprano and college alumna. Unusually, no messing about here with a soprano castrato (or countertenor, if the latter was unavailable) giving his all to warble a fair maiden’s part, a contralto or mezzo-soprano lending her stately voice to the laments of a king or knight, or a doubly devious alto going out of her way to sing like a man singing like a woman. Handel, as he set to song the innocent verse of his old compatriot, Barthold Hinrich Brockes, radiating an earthly delight in God mitigated by no hint of a doubt, must have grown weary that nothing was what it was, that fair was foul and foul was fair on this sceptred isle, full of noises, that had become his home.

No. 6      **Meine Seele hört im Sehen,  
Wie, den Schöpfer zu erhöhen,  
Alles jauchzet, alles lacht.  
Höret nur,  
des vergoldnden Herbstes Pracht  
Ist die Sprache der Natur,  
Die uns deutlich durchs Gesicht,  
Allenthalben mit uns spricht.**

\* It's puzzling how *disinganno* and especially its German counterpart *Enttäuschung* could acquire this negative connotation of not meeting expectations, given that the basic words themselves, *inganno* and *Täuschung*, were already negative and the reversative prefixes *dis-* and *ent-* should have turned the valuations around, yielding the positive meaning 'release from deception' – as depicted in Francesco Queirolo's sculpture in the Cappella Sansevero in Naples. (The origin of German *täuschen* itself is a mystery; it must somehow be related to *tauschen* 'exchange'.) Perhaps there is wisdom in only expecting worse when you see through an illusion. Handel's preferred English rendering of his oratorio's title part of which I borrowed was *The Triumph of Time and Truth*, avoiding the ambivalence of *Disenchantment*, an option he sadly discarded. English *disappoint* tells a different story: borrowed from French *desappointer* 'undo an appointment', its meaning didn't undergo a positive-to-negative revaluation, but simply remained negative when it changed to 'frustrate expectations'.