

Letters to Ukraine

Column for *The Day Digest* [Kiev] – normally the first week (usually Thursday) of each month

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Note: these texts are my (preferred) versions, which may differ slightly in wording/ spelling from what the editor publishes.

What is the best way to say goodbye? Often, goodbyes bring a sudden flash of all the things one might have said. I wish I'd spoken, for instance, on how far contemporary art should be 'contemporary': do modern artists strike a good balance between incorporating present circumstances and revealing the past? Are curators, generally, overly concerned with generating and cataloguing 'aesthetic history'? I'd hoped, too, to discuss Ernst Fischer: "Art is necessary... to recognise and change the world. But art is also necessary by virtue of the magic inherent in it." Let me add something to that: life lived without love and compassion, without that magic, is only a form of survival, a civilisation without these qualities merely animal. Another question: why do we prefer human pets to visionaries? Everywhere, people adore cutesy stand-up comedians who titillate the very world they wryly or (sometimes) insightfully mock; but, by allowing us to laugh at our predicaments, at our contradictions, does the hard-hitting comedian stimulate self-awareness or consolidate the idea of society as something we spectate upon rather than change? Alas, time! For the poet Frank O'Hara, "the only way not to leave is to go". Therefore, without leaving, I take my leave, I go. Shanti.

Letters to Ukraine – 30 200 words [5 September 2013]

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How can we gauge the true value of our actions? Life is one vast, interconnected equation: we cannot predict how our choices will ramify through humanity. For instance, an elderly man leaves everything to a local home for dogs. *How silly*, the relatives cry. *Thoughtless old fool!* Many years on, however, a Labrador adopted from that very home gives a lonely young woman a reason to live. But for her warm-hearted pet, she would have committed suicide. Decades later, that woman founds a great institution for world peace. How well that inheritance was spent! Hmm... not quite. Unfortunately, the institution grows corrupt, undoing all its previous good work and causing endless misery. Here's another example. A politician campaigns tirelessly to change international law to help developing nations. But the new laws are flawed; things actually get worse. A mistake? Well, no – because the situation becomes so appalling that the world finally comes together to implement genuine justice. So, we can never know, fully, the greater purposes through which we live and function. What, then, to do? Simply this: act always from the Heart (not sentimentally, but *truthfully*). Do that and one way or another – and eventually – all the equations of Life will be solved.

Letters to Ukraine – 29 200 words [1 August 2013]

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What does popular culture encourage in children? A profound development of the whole person? Hardly. Our media are besotted with [*reader: enter a celebrity of your choice here*] over any latter-day Mother Teresa or Luther King, whilst commerce exploits children to access parental income. Free-market capitalism, we're told, possesses an 'invisible hand' that benefits all: unfortunately, unencumbered self-interest begets more losers than winners, those losers rarely becoming the TV celebs youngsters emulate. If ostentatious wealth 'liberates' a few, it's mostly gained at the cost of those who mostly create it, for whom the invisible hand can become an iron fist (Third World debt and Climate Change provide further slaps in the face). Many children desire riches and fame; but getting rich doesn't require talent or sustained effort, nor even that you generate wealth. Capitalism is no meritocracy. It may reward hard-nosed entrepreneurialism but is indifferent to hard-working service. The young sense this: with the very concept of poverty conditioned by affluence, having no car or flat screen TV can make them feel 'poor' relative to an imagined norm. Don't we all become impoverished whenever that flat screen or car radio highlights to the young not the dedicated nurse or cleaner but a highly-paid mediocrity?

Letters to Ukraine – 28 200 words [6 June 2013]

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What gives, with that American bum and his trumpet? I seem to remember a certain storyline from my childhood, almost a cliché of early American TV and film. Put simply, a jazz musician must learn a lesson. He's incredibly talented, but success inflates his ego. He squanders his gift on excess, abuses

colleagues, neglects his adorable, adoring girl. The lesson? Talent comes to nothing without humanity and humility. Wasn't America glimpsing, through that horn-blower, its fundamental flaw – that being a soulless winner makes you a loser? The US possesses a strange directness in revealing its weaknesses, and an uncanny flair for predicting its downfalls, via TV and movies. Some claim this was so for 9/11. What if America unconsciously utilises elements of its entertainment media for collective self-analysis, or even to predict its future, the same way some people dream? “Humbug!” you reply; “anyway, the future’s unknowable”. But wasn't it Albert Einstein who said that Time (our separation of past, present, future) is merely a “stubbornly persistent illusion”? Meanwhile, America goes on blowing its trumpet assuming the world will follow. As more of the planet joins in, who has really understood the tune? Moreover, with so many apocalyptic American films around, shouldn't we worry?

Letters to Ukraine – 27 200 words [16 May 2013]

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What is 'Unaccounted Positive Feedback' (UPF)? A classic illustration of UPF can be found in e-mail and the paperless society. It's self-evident that e-mail reduces resource use, yes? But is that so, when the total picture is taken into consideration? E-mail has led to widespread shifts in user expectations and a vast increase in traffic – some of it useful, much of it pointless. E-mail needs computer systems, maintenance, electricity. Moreover, the printing out of e-mails isn't uncommon, and the e-mail ethos may actually help to entrench and expand a high-turnover, 'quick-click' mentality (thus supporting, indirectly, other forms of consumption and waste). So, it isn't at all clear whether e-mail will eventually effect an overall brake on resource use (negative feedback) or an acceleration (positive feedback). E-mail seemed like a good Green idea (on paper at least); but if, against expectations, it actually augments ecological impact, that would be a case of UPF. Some businesses and consumers may claim greater sustainability in what they do, when in fact UPF may be at work. In such cases, insisting that the eco-accounts be done thoroughly and accurately is an essential way of seeing more clearly. Indeed, it may be one form of learning *how* to see.

Letters to Ukraine – 26 200 words [4 April 2013]

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Is humanity a lost cause? Our addiction to energy, to consumption, must eventually burn itself out; but whether or not humans will disappear with it... who knows? Perhaps humanity evolves naturally towards insight and richness, despite temporary setbacks. True, Peak Oil (the maximum possible global extraction of oil, probably already passed) hasn't coincided with Peak Consciousness (which is yet to come); but the snort of industrial-strength energy-cocaine collectively indulged in since the Industrial Revolution is only a blip in evolutionary time. The 'Information Revolution' is a blip upon that blip. However, whilst we're caught within this micro-blip, we'll need wisdom and steely resolve to kick the energy habit already so deeply institutionalised (rich nations) or, elsewhere, ardently desired (developing nations). Bad habits thrive when we choose the lesser of the two incarnations of knowledge. Inorganic knowledge is mere data: lifeless, insensate, irresponsive. Hooked on last night's 'in thing', it doesn't recall (or question) anything the next morning. Organic knowledge is profound awareness: it watches, listens, remembers. It's alert even when it seems most dormant. While anyone, anywhere, breathes organic knowledge – and is breathed *by* it – there will be a life-giving cause and its vital effects. In that breath, humanity can never entirely be lost.

Letters to Ukraine – 25 200 words [7 March 2013]

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What's the biggest elephant in the room? I mean, the one thing looming over humanity that we barely discuss? Is it war? Poverty? The prevalence of cancer? Think again. Think computers, nappies, paint, plastics, motor cars, toothbrushes... What's the common base here? Answer: crude oil. Oil is the chameleon resource pervading all the hues and forms that uphold and drive modern consumer society. Almost everything we make and run depends on it, in some way, as raw material or energy source. Even agrarian cultures need oil for fertiliser and pesticide, to fuel large-scale production. And the disregarded 'elephant' is that the age of easy oil has already gone. “Oh,” we say, if pushed, “we'll switch to gas or develop sustainable energy. They'll invent fusion reactors...” Really? Or will we cling to old habits, in apathy or smouldering panic? Will we mishandle increasingly difficult oil fields sited in ecologically vulnerable areas? Will we rage oil wars? Or turn instead to coal and uranium, embracing massive pollution and radiation risks? When Ezra Pound said literature is 'news that stays news', poets still had media power. But oil – not poetry – will soon dominate headlines. Perhaps then, in a way, oil will be the poetry of the future?

Letters to Ukraine – 24 200 words [7 Feb. 2013]

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Who are the Invisibles? I've heard, from people practising various spiritual traditions, that every age generates anonymous women and men who profoundly, or subtly, change the world. I don't mean billionaire recluses, or Freemasons, or some private cartel of mighty businesspeople. These 'Invisibles' (as I call them) aren't fashionable or famous, or even well-known gurus living on the mountain; they could just as well be packing shelves in a supermarket. By humble devotion to understanding themselves and the cosmos as transcendent rather than merely material, these extraordinary ordinary people somehow fertilise the whole of human consciousness. Quietly, they become yeast for the human dough. In modern society, we tend to think of ourselves as irretrievably separate beings; but what if consciousness is more like a hologram, whereby all are connected? The '100th Monkey' hypothesis claims that when a critical number of creatures acquire a certain awareness, that state of awareness can be communicated instantaneously into the collective consciousness. Far-fetched? Well, it might actually be consistent with quantum physics. So, you needn't become influential and powerful to shift consciousness; just become that 100th monkey. Anyone can become an Invisible. Which leads us to another insight of spirituality: to change the world, first change yourself.

Letters to Ukraine – 23 200 words [17 January 2013]

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Is there any alternative to Apocalypse? Beyond a certain point, if we push too far, *must* Apocalypse happen? Not as the Evil that overcomes Good, but because Apocalypse is Good's last resort? When billions fail to listen to nature, to their truest selves, does Apocalypse clear a way for the hundreds of billions yet to come? This is like 'hard love' on a cosmic scale, allowing pain in a single generation so there will be less pain across later generations. Is Apocalypse, then, the stern (but fair) guardian who cares, dispassionately, for all his wards – not just for the one child who stands before him? When reason is perverse, when vision and altruism evaporate and compassion becomes utterly subservient to economic growth, then... Apocalypse? Whether They arrive with an obvious *Bang!* or an insidious whimper, please don't believe I'm keen to welcome those Horsemen in! Human consciousness evolves towards the Light, even in its greyest times, and we can still choose to ensure the Riders do not come. But if They do, and I am here to see Them, I'll try to understand that it may be a larger kindness, a firmer justice, not narrow vengefulness, that diverts Them to cut across our path.

Letters to Ukraine – 22 200 words [6 December 2012]

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Can discrimination be desirable? Discrimination as prejudice: no. Discrimination in that other sense, meaning that we possess excellent judgement and good taste: yes. I wonder, has the word 'discrimination' become so conditioned by its political meaning that the alternative concept is itself discriminated against? Must we abandon bad discrimination's good cousin? Pouring a great wine down the sink because it doesn't taste familiar; dismissing powerful literature as rubbish because it leaves you unsettled instead of entertained; ignoring inventive music when it refuses to follow the latest pop formula... these are the kinds of ways in which someone perceives a difference, but (in my view) fails to discriminate. Through habit and conditioning, the difference here is automatically 'coded' as aberrant when, in fact, the perceiver might do better in rising to meet it. Is this why great art is so often misunderstood in its own time? Of course, good and bad will always be fuzzy notions; and we needn't agree on 'good taste' anyway. In our fast-food age, however, is popular taste narrowing into certain acceptable 'bands' where the same few qualities are branded 'good' or 'cool'? "Taste the Difference" is a popular advertising slogan in the UK; but is that difference necessarily welcome?

Letters to Ukraine – 21 200 words [1 November 2012]

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What words best describe us? It's certainly tempting to define ourselves through a handful of common adjectives and nouns. We hope to be *happy, successful, famous, popular*; we want to have *cars, money, security, fun*. Some of our more worthy instincts tend to be captured by the abstract noun: *dignity, friendship, justice, faith*. Meanwhile, in day-to-day life and business, the verb dominates: from moment to moment, we usually think of ourselves as *doing* something. *We eat, sit, work, sleep*. How often have you described yourself to a boss or interviewer, to an adversary or prospective lover, in terms of strong nouns, colourful adjectives, stimulating verbs? Recently, though, I've begun to wonder about that quiet category of words: prepositions. *With, at, on, for*. So frequently ignored or taken for granted, we get the humble preposition wrong at our peril: for a problem to be *before* you, is hardly the same thing as it being *beyond* you. So, we may aspire to love someone; but how about being fully *with* them? We may yearn for world peace; but can we be *at* peace ourselves? When listening to ourselves concerning how we might best be in the world, the unassuming, often tiny, preposition has much to say.

Letters to Ukraine – 20 200 words [4 October 2012]

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What's the story? Answer: Everything. From fable to corporate strategy, we're immersed in stories. A skyscraper tells how we learned to mould matter to particular purposes. Our economic systems are stories too, told repeatedly until they seem as inevitable as the sinking of *Titanic*. Some stories encumber us, perpetuated via systems or ideas that previous generations invested in heavily. Advertisers, politicians and the media understand the value of writing (or rewriting) the story, which often becomes little more than an adult fairy tale. We hear of perpetual economic growth, for example, when we know nothing can expand forever on limited resources. Even facts become stories when selectively quoted or taken out of context. Perhaps, then, our percentage of 'reality' is actually quite small? Meanwhile, in this writhing, interconnected ecology of stories, which tales are endangered? In our cities, for instance, who continues the story of a positive relationship with the soil? Just as certain stories have been silenced because of their gender or race, so the radical and alternative stories of today can struggle to be heard. We listen instead to blockbuster films, celebrity gossip... but favouring these same, few fragile storytellers increasingly crams us – materially, psychologically, politically – onto their confidently accelerating, 'unsinkable' ship.

Letters to Ukraine – 19 200 words [6 September 2012]

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How do these people arrive at what they are? That man idly kicking a dog in the street. The woman you bump into, who scowls at your genuine apology. The teenager slumped in an alleyway clutching a near-empty bottle. At such times, I contemplate history. Not History with a capital H, but the lower-case history of the individual. What formed these histories? Lax parenting, bad education? Nature, or nurture? Herd behaviour, conformity, peer pressure, TV lifestyles? Was it free will: a wilful rejection of wisdom? Or is our current social trajectory simply something in the air – *Zeitgeist* – a modern, technological, urban, celebrity-obsessed drive towards an antisocial rootlessness that's hard to resist, an individual decay pressed upon us by collective norms? The poet Rilke said: "What is your most pressing injunction, if not for transformation?" Perhaps, if we all could ask such questions, something might shift – or is *Zeitgeist* unstoppable? It may even be that 'society' cannot help us towards what is right, for what begins as good philanthropy can quickly tip into poor ideology. But I can be sure of this: no one except myself can ever stop me asking the most fruitful question of all: *How do I arrive at what I am?*

Letters to Ukraine – 18 200 words [7 August 2012 (Tues)]

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What plagues human advance? First, there's 'Radical Inertia'. This is a deep resistance to change, encountered whenever a way of doing or seeing things is deeply ingrained in us or our systems. Radical Inertia fuels our continuing dependence on limited oil reserves, and you'd soon feel it if you tried to abolish tax or televisions. Next is the 'meme' (coined by Richard Dawkins): a splinter of culture that replicates itself, often across generations. Examples of memes include a famous folk melody, a TV catchphrase, or a neat and memorable political idea. Memes oversimplify how cultures really work, and aren't necessarily bad; but destructive memes are too prominent to avoid as my second plague. Finally, there's the 'Framed Question': a question posed so that only preconceived answers are possible, where the questioner's assumptions or agenda become invisible to us. A politician asking what level of economic growth is desirable is assuming (as most of us do) that ever-increasing economic growth *must be* a good thing. These three plagues, among various others, are implicated in old plagues such as poverty and war. They might seem ineradicable, but we can try at least to see them clearly, to name them. That's the first step towards a vaccine.

Letters to Ukraine – 17 200 words [7 June 2012]

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What's the point of poetry? Society is an attempt to strike a balance between the individual and the herd. Economics and advertisements want herds; good parents (and astute lovers) want individuals. Poetry asserts the individual. It has a plural spine. For Les Murray, "Only poetry recognises and maintains the centrality of absolutely everywhere". But globalization is busily homogenising and standardising everything, from agriculture to language. Popular culture buzzes around the same few forms. Economic theory calls items irreducible to a cash equivalent 'intangibles', as if lacking a verifiable price makes them somehow unreal. If poetry can be so much more than its words, can't economics and business rise above money? So, poetry might save us...? Yes? No. Infamously, poetry brought neither Mao nor the young Stalin to tolerance. But those who challenge themselves through art might emerge more alert, more able to face complex realities such as Climate Change. Poetry – at its best – confirms that value isn't just a price, that response can be more complex and subtle than a policy. Any culture that abandons its muses loses an entire language of perception, possibility and epiphany. Indeed, neglecting poetry dissolves a major means by which we recognise the herd and stay awake to ourselves.

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What is the purpose of civilisation? Viewing the track record of our species, it's tempting to see the ultimate fate of any culture as decay and demise. Is the future of all (temporary, organised) life simply to dissolve into (permanent, chaotic) death? Given its social, economic and ecological problems, its interminable conflicts, our civilisation might seem a sour old man awaiting the grave; but if our truest purpose is to learn, to find and be ourselves, for individuals to become enlightened, then I'd argue that we increasingly display, collectively and throughout our systems, the indiscipline and self-absorption of poorly-parented children. Indeed, if maturing children are the essential means to regenerate adult society, why is it that popular culture becomes progressively more juvenile and delinquent? Yes, for all its long history, with all its technological gadgetry, humanity remains terribly young. Thankfully, there are signs of spiritual burgeoning everywhere: those who are child-like without being childish. In fact, this childhood of civilisation could be a wondrous time. As the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi tells us: "Children find everything in nothing; men find nothing in everything". Perhaps, then, the balanced purpose of a civilisation is to grow up without forgetting, in gentleness and humility, how to play?

Letters to Ukraine – 15 200 words [5 April 2012]

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What is love? Is it a desire, something gut-based that wrenches us into action? Is it cerebral, a cool certitude that guides us towards selflessness? What it isn't, certainly, is something contained in a box of chocolates or a long-stemmed rose, however strongly imbued with feeling those objects are; it really has nothing to do, in my view, with the glut of material expectations around birthdays and anniversaries, or the annual orchestration of gifts symbolised by St. Valentine's Day. Perhaps love is an ongoing question life asks of us, especially when our decisions run against the grain of expectations those closest to us reasonably hold. Love is, after all, unreasonable. It has no logic, no profit-loss sheet; it holds no grudges, has no designs on anyone. It survives when wounded or apparently defeated. Clearly, it doesn't run our governments or businesses; but it's an inextinguishable ember even there, where it seems to have died down or gone cold. There it is, unbreakable beneath our most ardent follies, the deepest betrayal. It is that fabric of life itself, rich with productive flaw and difficulty. Through challenge, futility, hopelessness, it arises, fresh, as our calmest, surest truth. It is always Itself. It is always You.

Letters to Ukraine – 14 200 words [1 March 2012]

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What is your most terrifying debt? "The mortgage on my house", says one. "My overdraft", answers another. "It's our nation's massive economic deficit", intones the politician. But there's a debt worse than any of these. The liability we should be most worried about is our 'Reality Debt'. This form of shortfall concerns our remarkable ability, throughout the majority of our systems and in our daily activities, to deny or ignore the unsustainability behind so much of what we do. This must surely be the worst of bad debts because it involves us in a trajectory that will almost certainly terminate our civilisation as we currently understand it. We now have a sense of the gravity and urgency of our ecological and resource problems, and yet (as with debt generally) we still tend to push those concerns into the background. Who, or what, will bail us all out with the massive Reality Cheque we need (those trillions of realities we must now collectively reinvest in our individual minds and hearts, in our economics, industries and politics) in order to stabilise and harmonise our ecologies, psychologies, societies? And when, eventually, nature sends her bailiffs in, what on earth will our grown-up children say to them?

Letters to Ukraine – 13 200 words [2 February 2012]

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What do our commercials say about us? Imagine yourself an explorer from another galaxy, stumbling across Earth. For technical reasons, you can stay for several minutes only. You're beamed down, by freak coincidence, in front of a TV during a commercial break, with no one about. Naturally, you assume this prominently located box must be an important information dispenser. You watch, assessing humankind's primary concerns. [Do that, today, with the first commercial break you're exposed to. Here are my own results: hairspray, computer equipment, cars, car sales, insurance, sweetly fizzy caffeinated drinks, comparative insurance, financial services, broadband, rail travel (first class).] Decades later, you return across space on a full-scale diplomatic mission. Earth is now practically dry of petroleum and drinkable water; nations are riddled with conflict, famine, disease. Many of its inhabitants are hairless from pollution and radiation exposure. But you've brought an offering, based on the research of your previous visit. No cancer cure, high-tech water purifier, or strain of wheat resistant to drought and toxins; no irresistibly peaceful, egalitarian philosophy. Instead, you insist on meeting the first-class

humans, to whom you present a package of interplanetary insurance, intergalactic shares in electronics, and a cornucopia of petrol-driven cars, fizzy drinks and hairspray.

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Who am I? Why am I here? These are questions so old, so rehearsed by individuals, by entire cultures, that they've drifted off into the foggy realms of cliché and comedy. But they've lost none of their sharp seriousness for anyone asking them, in earnest, today. In some form or other, they bubble up to us when we're in crisis. We may hear them in quieter moments, when we forget ourselves and our material pursuits just long enough to listen. They're asking us, in fact, about love, about compassion. How so? Because our most profound and genuine feelings for those closest to us are, for all their value to us, only one form of love. Another form of love is to see clearly who we are and 'where' we might be (in a spiritual as well as psychological sense); and then to choose, freely, to place ourselves there.

When we are most ourselves – our truest selves – then we can be of greatest service to others. The alternative is a kind of slavery and, as Virginia Woolf reminds us, "Hitlers are bred by slaves". Many of those who seem inherently selfish have, at some level, been complicit in a process towards selfishness. We all make choices in that respect, however unhelpful our upbringing or social environment. But we tend not to view those choices through the lens of 'love' because our culture is so busy confusing love with desire, with tribalism. Partly because of that, we learn to assess our most important acts of love, often mistakenly, in terms of the most intense emotions we ourselves feel.

It might help to see this through the analogy of a jigsaw? We each of us have our single piece of the pattern to contribute. The ills of a person – indeed, of a society – usually arise when those pieces aspire to the 'norms' of success, following the lead of advertisers and popular role models, rather than their deepest instincts for rightness. Too many of us want to be the same (famous or rich) piece of jigsaw (a piece that, perhaps, shouldn't even be in the box), while many of the humbler (possibly crucial) sections are ignored, exploited or undervalued.

So, there's no sky because no one wants to be a plain piece of blue; there's no backdrop, because everyone's clamouring to be the central figure in the design. What might have been gorgeous cloud is vaguely uncomfortable down among the leaves; what could have been a juicy leaf mulched in the ground feels thinly dry and abandoned in the wind. Instead of being an accomplished article of beauty, the picture becomes warped and confused. Those who went before us haven't always helped. They too often chose, as we so often choose now, political and business systems whose primary purpose is the maintenance of economic over human progress. Today, it's pandemic for society to clip the corners off young individuals in order to fit them into desired/ desirable roles; and we mostly go along with it. Meanwhile, our political and business structures make it all but impossible for people of profound compassion and humility to occupy, unsacked or unassassinated, any conventional position of power.

Of course, my jigsaw analogy has its limitations and problems; but my main point stands. Few people uncover in themselves that form of love that drives them to explore who they really are, or the compassion to put themselves where that leads them. Please don't mistake my jigsaw for fatalism, destiny, conformity, self-sacrifice, patriotism, Big Brother. This jigsaw isn't a mechanism. Those pieces of sky aren't identical – not at all. Indeed, this jigsaw is, more accurately, a view through a window frame onto a living, shifting landscape. 'Finding your place' in that landscape isn't about self-obsession, neither does it mean dissolving the self. It takes courage and sensitivity – as well as time – to seek out your nature and to work with it to achieve the truth of what you may be. It's much easier, so much less loving, to simply fall in with the herd. I suppose, in the end, one must decide to believe that there is a glow at our centre, however clouded it may have become. I've yet to meet a newborn child who lacks it. We can try our best to open ourselves to an experience of that glow, in ourselves and in others.

In a globalised world much bewitched by advertiser and financier, it's understandable to sometimes feel that our private choices are irrelevant or, at best, of merely personal significance. It's a short walk from that feeling to arrive at resignation, apathy. And so, we focus our attention on those we love, on some small, tangible outcome. All well and good. But there are purposes beyond that, not anything that can be scientifically verified or demonstrated on profit-loss sheets. These are the purposes we feel in our bones, however briefly, in moments of insight and self-candour; purposes that implicate us profoundly and completely. Not the manifestos of any government, or the plans of any business; nor the demands of the selfish gene. Our governments, as they stand, are unable to serve these greater purposes. I doubt if they really register them in any meaningful way. Nikita Khrushchev once said (I quote loosely): "Politicians are the same everywhere. They promise to build a bridge even where there is no river."

But we are not impotent. We needn't become accidents of society, or robots of biology, or victims of our times. We gain irresistible power, and also serve the whole, when we discover our own deepest purpose

and are true to it. Nothing prevents any of us from being a nucleus for resistance, possibility, hope. Any culture, any form of politics, as much as any person, is dead not only when its heart or its reason ceases to function, but when it considers those most ancient of questions – *Who am I? Why am I here?* – to be obsolete nonsense or, worst of all, naïve.

Letters to Ukraine – 11 [Special edition] 1000 words [29 December 2011]

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Daddy, can I have a REAL circus for Christmas? Naturally, the child gets a toy circus, or nothing at all. That's what 'democracy' can be like. We campaign for human rights in Tibet, march against war in Iraq, or lobby MPs to save a particular rainforest, but all too often, even with massive public support, nothing real is delivered. Why? There are, of course, numerous reasons (ideology, business elites, etc.); but governments sometimes behave like unyielding parents because the electorate, as a whole, can be an unreasonable, self-contradicting child. We expect, for instance, environmental preservation or improved education, then complain bitterly if taxes are increased to achieve it. Moreover, will governments behave with integrity while we turn a blind mind to the way their shady deals are conducive to our current lifestyles? Meanwhile, few of us take genuine interest in how the democratic household of the nation is run. Some, like myself, can't muster the time or effort; others simply wish to be looked after whilst they attend to their private affairs. Many feel excluded, voiceless. But if everyone demanded greater involvement in democratic process, participation would eventually happen. Instead of accepting toy circuses, we have to join the real one and transform it.

Letters to Ukraine – 10 200 words [1 December 2011]

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What use is art? This most plural question has no singular reply. Pleasure, celebration, insight... each must answer for herself. For me, contemporary art needs some hand in bridge-building. So many of our problems (economic-ecological-social) arise from excessive specialisation. Among our narrow-sighted experts, who sees the landscape entire? Who beckons us away from the simplistic riverbank where we slumber, to the precipices where one must be receptive, awake? Radical, connective art helps society to stay alert to itself; but much modern/ postmodern art says either "Ah, let's just sleep together" or "Find my impossible treasure – but with no map from me". Of course, the greatest art needs no map, isn't bound by social utility; it has its own reasons for being; but it can prompt us to see (perhaps even to cross) certain barriers we might otherwise miss or ignore. The State may attempt to control or isolate, but bridge-makers persuade and liberate – or is all persuasion reserved for speech-writers and advertisers? Artistic bridge-making demands courage. Refusal is a kind of bridge too. The King, ordering his prospective Queen to love him, heard her reply: *Always*. Fearing for her head, she sacrificed her heart. Genuine art is the gutsy Queen who can say *No*.

Letters to Ukraine – 9 200 words [3 November 2011]

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Why are we obsessed with lead singers? In soccer, strikers capture more column inches than defenders. We heap fame upon actors and comedians whose writers receive scant recognition. We're intimate with all the brand names for our gadgets, yet have no idea which scientists made the crucial breakthroughs. There are exceptions... Einstein, Shakespeare; but, in the main, our species overvalues delivery, reserving its fullest attention for the presenters of its cultural products. "After 1980," claims Arthur Erickson, "you never heard reference to space again. Surface, the most convincing evidence of the descent into materialism, became the focus." Erickson's observation on architecture applies far more widely. Our infatuation with surface is also expressed through vacuous celebrity, in leaders who deliver magnificent speeches but run aground with legislation. We wonder why they fail, ourselves failing to appreciate the powerful systems that condition us all. Indeed, our surface obsessions divert us from the underlying forces at work: those systemised assumptions and values underpinning advertising, education and market 'laws'. That's where most of the cultural 'space' really is: beneath and behind. These spaces generate the superficial songs most politicians sing. Rather than simply clap or boo the show, we'd do well to squint into what's going on backstage.

Letters to Ukraine – 8 200 words [6 October 2011]

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How might our modern relationship with ecology seem, to an advanced alien race? Like someone selling their home for a few dollars to rent a tacky room overnight. Like a frog soon to be boiled alive in slowly-warming water, where the frog itself set up the experiment. Like a surgeon crudely opening a patient's skull, hoping that the sophisticated instruments required to complete the operation have just been invented. Like a tourist allowed to burn the Mona Lisa in his portable stove, so everyone can enjoy a few chips. Like the expanding circle of a biological culture in a Petri dish, moving towards its future

by consuming it. Like a split mind that reveres great poets (“I will show you fear in a handful of dust”), playwrights (“One touch of nature makes the whole world kin”) and philosophers (“If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading”), yet organises society to be incapable of responding to them. Like a creature that defends its children from terrifying predators, then relaxes by eating the grandchildren. Like the final moments on a juggernaut hurtling towards a cliff, whose occupants heatedly debate whether they are doing 95 or 105 miles per hour.

Letters to Ukraine – 7 200 words [1 September 2011]

[Quotes: TS Eliot (*The Waste Land*); William Shakespeare (*Troilus and Cressida*, III, iii); Lao Tzu.]

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Who knows, now, the story of the painting famous for its smile? People thronged just to glimpse it. But the nations were desperate for cash. As nobody could afford to buy it outright, the painting was micro-lasered into 1mm lots, each with a tiny identifying number scorched on the back. Buyers would want a lip or a pupil, not a nondescript speck of sky – so the numbers were randomised. Bidders wouldn’t know which bit they were actually getting. And so, one Valentine’s Day, half a million numbers were put on sale. Collectors clamoured. Failing businessmen emptied accounts to impress mistresses. The greatest lottery ever – over within days. Later, investors received a facsimile of the painting, a crimson ‘X’ marking the location of their (framed) fragment. The Vatican claimed divine intervention when all fourteen of its crosses found the face. According to rumour, the last great philanthropist of that age ruined herself attempting to reunite the notes. Mounted between plates of glass, her life’s work was a see-through ghost: a gauzy mess of crags, a pale mask hung in space, forever blurred and pocked. That’s the story. And that’s what happens when civilisations make revenue their One God. No longer enigmatic, they lose their smile.

Letters to Ukraine – 6 200 words [4 August 2011]

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Why must all good things come to an end? We work for security, then watch our investments falter. We constantly reform civic society to uphold our most sovereign morals, with partial success. Each generation dreams it will take humankind to a higher level, eliminating disease and poverty, achieving global peace; each grows old witnessing age-old suffering, hoping the next generation might do better. Some give up altogether, concluding that human nature is doomed to endless repetition. But quantum physics now relates what spirituality has always known: all is connected; everything *connects*. We couldn’t be irrelevant if we tried: our every action has repercussions, though we may not be able to predict or witness them. Each striving towards insight and compassion, however futile it may seem, eddies through the cosmic pool. And so, one should never become disillusioned, utterly, by impending defeat or loss, be it environmental, cultural or personal. For the good watchmaker, even failure can be useful in understanding the mechanism. Beckett wrote: “Fail again. Fail better.” Meanwhile, celebrate success; but don’t cling grimly to it. Goodness isn’t exempt from change either. Ultimately, the reason why even the best things must come to an end, is so that the worst ones can too.

Letters to Ukraine – 5 200 words [2 June 2011]

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Can you direct me to your Culture, please? Imagine tourists lost in the suburbs, asking you that. Would you steer their gaze towards the brutal lines of high-rise flats? To those grimly functional, overlit boxes we call supermarkets? If the way we build reflects our collective mind, then the physical pride of our culture resides primarily in city centres, in our showpiece museums, galleries and state monuments. Most citizens, however, must endure nondescript tenements, schools and shops. Shabby streets. We can visit country cottages and lanes that delight the eye; but our cities deploy ‘high culture’ carefully, even cynically, to remain within eye’s reach of the businessperson, banker and (crucially) tourist. Meanwhile, popular culture is collapsing away from the material, external world of buildings towards the virtual, internal universe of the internet and TV. “Whoever controls the media, the images,” said poet Allen Ginsberg, “controls the culture”. Is mass culture revealing itself to the eye through those particular forms distributed by advertising and business, designed to enact material and symbolic control? Increasingly, that ‘culture’ arrives via the same few conglomerates and their media/ advertisement think-tanks. Is that why the suburban world, everywhere, has begun to look the same? Are we all becoming lost there?

Letters to Ukraine – 4 200 words [19 May 2011]

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“Where are our intellectuals? Writers? Philosophers? Why are they silent?” That was the voice of Chernobyl evacuee, Ludmila Polyanskaya. Who has answered her? Overshadowed by events in Japan, Chernobyl’s 25th anniversary approaches. Shall we now resolve to speak: for ourselves and, where appropriate, on behalf of the silenced? But radiation from wrecked reactors is a particular expression of

something much larger. ‘Chornobyl’ can take many forms. It’s that contamination between peoples and nations, expressed through power or oppression. Or an education system that creates exclusion zones in the minds of our children. It’s that endless wait for the military to decay into something less inhuman, more enlightened. ‘Chornobyl’ is a self-interested few deciding the fate of many. It’s our culture depopulating the very places our artists would have us walk. I’ve been asked: *Why don’t the poets speak up?* Sadly, to be silenced today, most poets need do nothing more than publish a book and place it in full view on the library shelves. Our artists are speaking, but either say what we already know (which is one form of silence) or what we ignore because we’d rather not hear it (which creates another kind of silence). I wonder, is Fukushima the next silence?

Letters to Ukraine – 3 200 words [7 April 2011]

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Artist or Entertainer? For Woody Allen, life doesn’t imitate art; it imitates bad television. Has modern art begun to imitate that medium too, emulating the accessibility and sensationalism of TV? I don’t say that art can’t, or shouldn’t, entertain; it’s just that ‘entertainment’ has become a commodity, mass-produced for mass consumption. A diluted culture neglects artists who convey complex social messages or embody hard-hitting archetypes, preferring instead the familiar, wishy-washy comforts of personality. Notice how many modern ‘actors’ simply play heightened versions of themselves on screen. The media, instead of asking philosophers or artists to discuss our condition, pursue sound bites from celebrities (yes, I myself opened with Woody). Meanwhile, novelists want best-sellers with lucrative film rights, poets try to get on the late show to feel less invisible, and dissenters must settle for aficionado audiences or grinding anonymity. True, powerful art can still have popular appeal, as sand animator Kseniya Simonova proves – though she’d need to sing pop to win anything on British TV. We’re close to becoming the generation of the entertained. One way out, if we actually want it, would be to give artists who stick thorns in our sides the same commitment we reserve for the massagers of funny bones.

Letters to Ukraine – 2 200 words [1 March 2011 (Tues)]

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How best to measure human progress? Via technology? Economic growth? I’ve a better gauge: manners. I don’t mean etiquette, that training of human monkeys for polite society. Manners aren’t about knowing which knife to pick up during supper, or standing when a lady enters the room; they’re a profound sensitivity to the situation and feelings of all those we encounter. If people barge past us without even a grunt of apology, it’s because we’ve become little more than an extension of the material background to their lives. Rush hour, bad weather, Christmas shopping, all seem able to sink us into a mindless collective drive. We grow horns, hooves, tails; lose all sense of the ‘other’ in others. Take that mindset to its extreme and even making love can become, essentially, a solitary act. What use is state funding for culture, then, or outreach programmes for disenchanting youth, if (as Fred Astaire put it): “The hardest job kids face... is learning good manners without seeing any”? When any one of us treats strangers on the street like animated lumps of matter, we all step closer to chaos. For Horace Mann, “Manners easily and rapidly mature into morals”. And the ripe fruit of morality is civilisation.

Letters to Ukraine – 1 200 words [3 February 2011]