

PREFACE

So, here they are: the first 100 blog posts. I thought it might be useful to gather them here in one place. Some work better than others: some are inspired gems, some are about as inspiring as slime mould. Well, that just about sums us up, doesn't it: we are each of us something between a beautifully cut, multi-faceted diamond, and a blob of slime mould (no offence intended towards the intelligent slime mould community out there).

But why publish them in book form, when you can go and wade through my blog site and read them for free? Well, this brings them together into a nice, neat, easily handled package for you. Furthermore, if you are a relative newcomer to my blog, you may have overlooked some of the earlier posts. It's also possible, though difficult to credit, that you may not have come across my blog at all! If that is the case, then fear not: here is what you have always been looking for, without realising it. And, finally, think how useful a paperback copy would be for propping up that uneven table leg!

These blogs are unchanged from the originals, as they have appeared on my blog site during the past year, except for the correction of a few typographical errors. I think this is as it should be. They are not intended to present any unified theme, or any integrated whole. These are brief reflections, spontaneous expressions of what was on my mind at the time. The opinions of the author (then) do not necessarily represent the opinions of the author (now). The dates represent the day on which I posted these comments. The fact that this does not always reflect the date on my blog site has something to do with the fact that the earth is not (apparently) flat, but is an approximate sphere spinning at some nightmarish speed about its axis.

Enjoy! (The book, that is, not the spinning.)

So why blog anyway?

05/11/2012

For quite a while I resisted the idea of blogging. I would rarely read anyone else's blog. There are so many bloggers out there these days: whose blogs do you choose to follow? Friends, family? People with a common interest? So I would occasionally stumble upon a blog, by someone, somewhere, in the course of searching for other things. And occasionally it might be somewhat interesting, but rarely memorable. So why would anyone be interested in anything I have to say... about anything? In fact, no one may be interested. And I wonder if most bloggers are not just largely talking to themselves (with perhaps a handful of friends occasionally looking on). Still, perhaps it is a useful thinking/writing exercise.

Of course, the second problem when deciding to blog is: What to talk about? People around me think that I am reasonably knowledgeable about a variety of things. I don't particularly feel it myself. I am rarely *au fait* with the latest news, music, movies or trends. And although I love reading, I am also rarely up to date with the latest sensation. There are so many great books from the past to catch up with, that I scarcely have time to read whatever happens to be the "next big thing".

Ok, then. Perhaps I could give my opinions on issues (however, this does require me to be somewhat current). But I am fairly slow to form decisive opinions. And the older I become, the more I see grey, rather than black and white. I am suspicious of anyone who comes down too decisively on one side or the other. This does not necessarily

inhibit decisive action. It just means that, the more grey there is, the more my decision to act is fraught with risk. The risk of making the wrong decision, of taking the wrong side. No outcome will be fully satisfactory; so I must learn to live with dissatisfaction, with the knowledge that every victory is also shadowed by defeat, that any good I accomplish in this world is shadowed by a modicum of evil (pain, suffering, loss).

If you choose to visit this site, what you are most likely to see are thoughts in process rather than definitive conclusions. What I say in one blog may be completely contradicted by what I say in the next. And perhaps, in the third, some kind of synthesis might appear. (Anyone out there familiar with the Hegelian dialectic?) No guarantees, though. You may find rambling philosophical discourses... Or a single thought. You may find angry rantings if something has pissed me off. You may see flashes of poetry; and even, occasionally, something that looks like an insight.

Then again, in all probability, no one will read my blogs anyway.

Are you afraid to be Virginia Woolf?

05/11/2012

I have been slowly working my way through the corpus of Virginia Woolf, in between other ventures. At the moment I am reading *The Waves*, one of her more experimental novels. I may not understand or like everything that she does in her books, but I am so very grateful that she took the time to do it.

I have no idea how well her books sold during her lifetime, but I don't imagine that she depended on them for an income. She did not write for money. She wrote, I suspect, because she simply had no choice. The same is true for many of us, I think, though without necessarily sharing her talent.

We live at the dawn of an age in which almost any of us can write and publish our own work. No doubt this will result in a great deal of

substandard writing. But, and it is a very important but, many of the independent writers who are working today do not necessarily need to earn a living from it. Many, like Virginia, can write simply and solely because they love to write, or because they are compelled to write. This shatters the constraints on creativity! Out there at this very moment are Virginia Woolfs and James Joyces, agonising at the keyboard. They have the freedom to break all the rules, tear down all the barriers. Let's hear from you. Shatter *us* with your words, make us weep, make us laugh, make us angry, make us soar. Delight us, disturb us, upset us, challenge us.

A word of caution though. Learn first the trade of writing, the nuts and bolts, the dos and don'ts. Don't rush headlong into creative chaos. Virginia's early novels (like Picasso's early paintings) are quite conventional. Only when you know and understand the rules can you bend and break them creatively. Then, by all means do the don'ts and do not the dos.

Relish this freedom; and who knows, perhaps, in seventy years' time, someone will be working their way through your body of work.

Contemplating Contemporaneity

06/11/2012

I am struggling today with the word "contemporary". This question has arisen for me most recently in the context of considering "contemporary" literature. That sublime deposit of all human knowledge, *Wikipedia*, defines contemporary literature as follows: "Contemporary literature is literature with its setting generally after World War II." Note that this speaks of literature that has its *setting* after World War II. So presumably, by this definition, an historical novel published today is not contemporary literature. This seems a little odd, and probably conflates two ideas. The first idea is that contemporary literature must deal with contemporary events. The second is that it must have been written within a certain time frame. I vote that we ignore the first

idea and focus on the second. According to the first definition, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, written in 1932 but set in 2540, is contemporary literature, while Peter Carey's *The True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) is not.

So, adopting the second criterion, namely that contemporary literature is literature written after World War II, this provides us with about a 70 year window, within which a literary work can be considered contemporary. Oddly enough, if we look up "Contemporary French Literature", we find that this is defined as "French literature from the year 2000 to the present day." The French, it seems, have much smaller windows.

The word contemporary contains within it implicitly (indeed, explicitly) a certain "withness". An event or person is contemporary "with" another event or person. It does not, primarily, mean modern, or during the present era, although it appears to have this as a derived meaning. But Shakespeare was contemporary with Marlowe, although neither of them is "contemporary". Neither of them is contemporary, in this derived sense, meaning that neither of them is contemporary with *me*. They do not overlap my time, although they overlap each other's times.

I think we can see, therefore, that contemporary is a relative term. Any writer whose timeline overlaps mine, is *my* contemporary. If we assume that the average lifespan today is around 80 years (at least in our affluent western societies) then it seems reasonable to argue that anything written during the last 80 years or so is contemporary: a reasonable number of us were alive at the time. So the 67 years since the end of the Second World War may be too small a window. And we can only assume that the French live very brief lives.

I hope, at the very least, that we can extend the concept of contemporary literature a little further back than the year 2000. Or is a book that was published last Monday just "so last week"?

Maybe I am just getting old.

“I love you all”

07/11/2012

Oh my God! A follower on Twitter stopped following me! What have I done? Why don't they like me any longer! How did I offend them? Or did I simply bore them? I wouldn't be so devastated if I had thousands of followers – I doubt that I would notice. But when one of my tiny handful suddenly disappears, when fourteen followers suddenly becomes only thirteen... I am not loved!

Then I realise I have no idea who it even was. I look down the list. Who is not there now that was there yesterday? I have no idea. See! So there! I didn't even notice you! Take that!

That's all a little silly, I know. Yet there is a more serious side to it. One's worth today seems to be measured in terms how many followers one has on Twitter, how many friends one has on Facebook. People talk about this as if it actually means something. I'm sure there are people out there who are devastated to realise that their best friend has ten more followers than they do. Businesses think it means something too. And who am I to question the profound insights of the marketing community?

But I wonder. If I have 5,000 friends on Facebook, isn't that pretty much the same as having none? Yet another word shifting its meaning in our culture: Friend.

Of course, when a celebrity stands there in front of the camera, waving and blowing kisses, saying “I love you all”; or, these days, when they Tweet it to all their followers – I know they mean me. Don't they?

Fa Fa Fa Fa – Fashion

08/11/2012

I am not a very fashionable person. Does that mean that I am old-fashioned? Not exactly. Non-fashionable might be closer to the reality. I

just don't *get* the concept of fashion. Why should *anything* be the right thing to wear, the right thing to say or the right thing to believe at any given time or place? Who or what determines this? The market or marketeers? The trendsetters?

The whole concept of fashion arises out of the need to fit in, to belong to a group. So it is not precisely about the external item *per se*, but about the set of beliefs and values that it incorporates. The need to belong is deeply rooted in our evolutionary history. Survival depends on being part of a strong group: without the group we are nothing; weak groups are quickly eliminated. Once upon a time, we did belong to a particular group: our tribe, our village. With the rise of industrial society, these naturally occurring social groups began to break down. People began to move into the larger cities to find work, resulting in the mixing of people from all kinds of groups and communities. Larger groups and communities began to arise, such as the "working class": people sought unity, community and identity based on social class or job description. More recently, in urban environments, new tribes, "gangs", have emerged. Neighbourhoods have sought to take the place of tribes. But many of these new tribes and groups lack the natural, geographic and organic link that bound together the tribes and villages of our past.

As a vestige of our tribal past, we try to define our identity within a group that dresses, talks and thinks in the same way that we do; although, more often, we change the way we dress, talk and think to fit the group. The problem today – or one of the problems – is that fashion is such an ephemeral phenomenon. It is difficult, if not impossible, to keep up with the trends. We are always in danger of falling out of favour with the group. This introduces an underlying anxiety into our lives, that is probably new to our times. We cannot depend on our membership in the group for the belonging and stability which we desire, because the requirements of the group shift and change all the time. This is made worse by the fact that these group norms are not even determined by the group, but by external forces: celebrities, designers, corporations, which have their own agenda.

I began by saying that I did not get fashion. But perhaps I do. I share the need to belong. Perhaps I am not willing to change what I do, think, wear, or enjoy in order to achieve that belonging. I would rather find a group with which I share many of those things already. So, group, if you are out there, let me know.

A Must Re-read

09/11/2012

Some novels I can read twice, or even several times, others only once (and I may even regret that!). So why do I return to a novel to read it again (and perhaps again and again)? I can think of at least four reasons why I might do so.

First, I might do this if a novel has moved me in a particular way. I return to it to repeat the experience. It's rather like listening to a favourite piece of music over and over. You know how it will make you feel, whether it be joyous, or deeply sad. Of course, overexposure will deaden any response eventually, as with any sensory experience. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker is one such novel. Another is *The Book of Lights* by Chaim Potok. On the other hand, there would be no point in re-reading some novels, particularly mysteries or thrillers: once you know the outcome, you can never repeat the initial experience. You can never again savour the suspense, the sitting-on-the-edge-of-your-seat-ness.

The second reason I might revisit a novel is because it is such a rich and complex piece that I am certain to have missed something during the first reading. In contrast to the previous case, I do not necessarily expect to repeat the initial experience. In fact, I expect the book to offer up a new experience each time I read it. I will understand something that eluded me on the first reading. I respond to James Joyce's *Ulysses* and some of Virginia Woolf's novels in this way.

The third reason involves the changes I have passed through, the living I have accomplished, and the growing older I have achieved,

since first reading the book. So I return to it to see how it appears now, in a different light, to this new me. This has been my experience with some of the novels I was required to read during the latter years of high school. *Riders in the Chariot* by Patrick White is a novel I have re-read several times, at key moments in my life. I recently re-read Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, another book that was required reading. Some of the Russian classics have also resurfaced during these later years. I was a huge fan of science fiction in my teenage years and early twenties; but I have to say that most of these books have not fared well with age (with my age, at least).

The fourth reason is somewhat less satisfying. I have long been a fan of fantasy, and have often found it necessary, before reading the 800 page, tenth volume of a seemingly endless series, to go back and re-read the 800 page, ninth volume, in order to refresh my memory. (Don't these writers have editors? Has no one ever explained to them that bigger is not always better? But therein lies another tale.) This can sometimes be an irritating, rather than fulfilling, experience.

I imagine there are many other reasons why people choose to re-visit a book. I would love you to share your own experiences in the comments below.

Genesis of a Novel

09/11/2012

People have been asking about the genesis of *Maybe they'll remember me*, so I will say a few words here, without giving too much away.

I have been trying to write since at least my mid teens, when I used to compose dramatic poetry, oozing with existential teenage angst. A little later, perhaps in my late teens or early twenties, I tried my hand at fiction. These were usually clumsy attempts at science fiction, although there were a few more general pieces. I was never able to finish any of them. I continued to make attempts at various times

throughout the years, but with much the same outcome. There were some recurring themes, and even some particular plot points, that resurfaced time and time again.

However, it was not until the beginning of this year that I finally made the breakthrough, and actually completed a novel. And what an experience it was! At first I had the same difficulties as always. I would write at a furious pace for a while, the words streaming from my fingers onto the screen, via the keyboard. But, as always, the well of ideas and words would run dry. This time, however, I did not give up. Strange things began to happen. Characters that I had considered to be marginal to the story began to assert themselves, and this took me, much to my own surprise, into the years preceding the story I had intended to write. By the time I had finished, there was practically nothing left of the original chapters in the story I now had before me. It was entirely new, with fresh and unexpected stars. (Those original chapters do remain, though, and I may yet return to them to continue that other story.)

Two of the main characters of *Maybe*, Harold and Maggie are loosely, very loosely, based on my parents. That is to say, my father did serve on the Queen Mary during the Second World War, and my mother did work in a buttons factory in Birmingham. The family did migrate to Australia during the 1960s. But that is where the facts end and the fiction begins. Maggie and Harold took on lives of their own, and while, inevitably, they retain traces of their origins, they became completely different people. Indeed, there is as much of me in Harold as there is of my father – and many others too. People are very crowded on the inside. Kate, as far as I am aware, has no historical counterpart. (Although, Kate, if you are out there somewhere, give me a call.)

One of the great joys I had in writing this novel was immersing myself in the period. I listened to the music of the era, watched clips from movies, scoured the internet for pictures and stories from those times, devoured images of the fashions of the day. I tried to make the story as historically realistic as I could, within the context of fiction. I made sure, as far as possible, that the Queen Mary was where I said

she was at a given time and place – to such an extent that I let this shape the story to some degree. If the characters saw a movie, listened to a song or entered a building, I made sure these things were possible at the time. The plays in which Kate appears were all on at the times and places in which I set them although, to the best of my knowledge, Kate did not appear in any of them. The explosion of the V2 is based on eye-witness accounts – it happened precisely when and where I said it did. Digging up these fragments of information was a great delight to me.

Since writing *Maybe*, I haven't really looked back. There will, I promise, be more to come.

So there we are. A little background. I hope you have as much pleasure getting to know Harold, Maggie and Kate as I did.

Great Big Computer Thingies

10/11/2012

Way back when, during one of my other lifetimes... Incidentally, I am not sure that I believe in previous lifetimes, except those that I have lived over the past 55 years or so. Anyway, way back when – it was the mid-seventies – I actually studied computing at the University of Adelaide. Yes, kiddies, they did have computers back in 1975. Ok,



Rechenzentrum der Bundespost in Hamburg, 1974. © ullstein bild. Used with permission.

the computer with which I had to work seemed to fill the entire ground floor of the building. Yes it's true that, in order to run a very basic program, it was necessary to use a special typing machine thingy, to type holes in special card thingies. And so what if we did have to wait three days for the results of our program, printed out on what could usefully serve as toilet paper for giants. Did it

bother us that it was only then that we could see where our inevitable

error occurred, and that we would have to correct our cards, run the whole thing again, and wait another three days? All this in order to calculate the square root of some number or other. Well, yes, it did bother us actually; but we had no choice.

When you complain, as some people do, that your Samsung or Nokia smart thingummy is just too big and bulky, bear in mind that it probably has 10,000 times (that's a nice biggish number that I just plucked out of the air, where it hovered enticingly before me) the processing power of that basement-sized behemoth at the University of Adelaide in 1975. Try carrying THAT around in you handbag (or manbag, if you prefer).

And don't get me started on.....

“Life is like...”

11/11/2012

We have been informed, since some years now, that life is rather like a box of chocolates. And indeed it is! But not because “ya never know whatyer gunna git”. You do know what you are going to get, Forrest – from a box of chocolates that is. (*“Fawrst, read the inside lid of the box, you...”*). No. Life is like a box of chocolates because you can be damn sure that the best ones have all gone before you get your hands on the box! (And who wants those with an orange centre, anyway, right?)

For me, though, life is more like this: Life is like wanting to go up to the next floor, in a world with no stairs, no elevators, and only down escalators. You have to work damn hard just to stay in the same place, let alone reach the top.

I also like this one, which I have stolen from someone, but I can't for the life of me remember from whom (drop me a line if you know): Life is a terminal disease that is sexually transmitted.

But back to the escalators. Much of my life has been spent standing at the bottom of escalators, looking up. Several times I have started

new jobs, in quite different fields, and each time I have been down there at the bottom, trying to figure out how to get up there to the top. Not easy when, as I think I might have mentioned, all of those escalators are going down. As if gravity isn't enough of a force to contend with!

Oh well. Here I am again, at the bottom of an escalator. Up there somewhere are those mythical beings who somehow (so I am told, by those who claim to have seen them) make a living writing books. Oh well (he says again, with a resigned shrug), it's warmer down here anyway. And I never did much like heights.

Before my time...

12/11/2012

It's time for a rant, but not before I admit to a guilty pleasure... I like to watch TV quiz shows. Not *game* shows – good, heavens, I am not that uncouth. But shows where people have to answer questions, to demonstrate that they know *stuff*. I probably get this from my parents who always record one show while watching another. And my father collects trivia the way a bowerbird collects brightly coloured objects.

Now for the rant. There are two particular things that get up my nose when I am watching these shows. One is the oft-repeated remark, “That was before my time.” There is an invisible barrier, apparently, that prevents knowledge from seeping through from the past into the present. If something happened before I was born, or before I became aware of the world around me (these people seem to imply) how can I possibly be expected to know it? Well, I have news for you: almost everything is before all of our times. How very sad if we are unable to accommodate into our sphere of knowledge anything that occurred before our own fleeting existence upon this planet. Dinosaurs were (just) before my time, but that doesn't prevent me from having a smattering of knowledge about them. I think this may be a symptom of the pressure to be “up-to-date”. It is as though everything at the present

time somehow replaces and forces into irrelevance the things of the past. Believing this will be to our detriment.

The second thing to insinuate its way into my nasal cavity is a certain attitude towards literature. More than once I have heard people remark that they have never read a book in their life. This is likely to be an exaggeration, I suspect (I suppose these people did go to school – although I have heard many stories about how students these days, if they have a novel as assigned reading, will borrow the movie on DVD rather than read the book). They state this with no sense of shame or embarrassment; they wear it as a badge of honour. They might just as well be saying, “I don’t breathe. Oxygen is so highly overrated!”

These people can die of anoxia, if they choose. They can die of bibliophobia, if they like. They can kill themselves by tearing out their roots from the soil of the past. They’ll probably even think they are doing something really cool and clever.

Re-imagining the Future

13/11/2012

I have sometimes thought that it would be interesting to write a history of the future. I hear you asking: What on earth would that be? Well, the future has long been a favourite topic of fiction and non-fiction, of television and cinema. We love to speculate about what the future will bring. So, I am wondering: How has our concept of the future changed over the years? How accurate have the various previsions of the future turned out to be? To what extent have these previsions actually shaped the present in which we live?

This last question is particularly interesting because our present is not independent of these earlier visions. These visions have, to some extent, shaped our expectations, generated ideas. And some of these have subsequently become our reality today. So Star Trek (for example) did not simply predict the existence of notebook computers and

eBook readers. Someone watching those shows probably thought to themselves, “Hey, what a great idea!”

It is certainly also true that the way a society at a particular time and place envisions the future says a great deal about that society. It tells us something about that society’s hopes, dreams and fears. Orwell’s *1984*, to take an obvious example, surely tells us as much, if not more, about the psychology of 1947/48, as it does about the future (as envisaged at the time). Studying the past’s visions of the future, knowing what we now do about that past, can tell us something about our own greatest hopes and fears. What do our visions of the future say about us, here and now?

While this would be a very interesting exercise at the level of society, perhaps it can also tell us something about our own individual hopes and fears. What is your vision of the future? Has your vision of the future changed over the years? Which of the multitude of visions offered today by the media of books, cinema, television and video games, resonate most with you? Which do you find most attractive, which the most terrifying?

The future, remember, is just over the page. See you tomorrow.

Polly Ticking

14/11/2012

This is not a piece about exploding parrots, but I thought if I called it “politicking”, you might not read it. And who could blame you? But don’t be alarmed, I do not intend to push any particular political barrow. Rather, I am concerned with the general notion of being political. In one sense, it is impossible not to be political: everything we say, everything we do, everything we don’t do, has political implications. We are all part of the body politic, “no man [or woman] is an island”, etc. However, the notion of being political also has a slightly stronger meaning: to become actively and deliberately involved in a

particular political cause, aimed at changing, in some way, the political landscape.

In this latter sense, I used to be much more political than I am today. This issue comes up at the present time because I have friends, both on and off line, who are much more politically active than I am. At times this makes me feel a little guilty: Have I become too complacent? Too self-involved? The answer to both questions may be “yes”. But that is not the whole story.

There is a constant interaction between the individual and society. Each can and does influence the other. It is probably fair to say that the interaction is not balanced. The individual is affected much more by changes in society, than society is affected by changes in the individual. That depends, of course, on the position of the individual within that society. In social networking theory, some people serve as important nodes, with more connections to more people than others. When they change in some way, the ripples may be much greater than when someone less well-connected changes. This is something we should all think about very carefully in this age of online social networking: we are all, to some extent, seeking to extend our sphere of influence.

Because of this interaction between the individual and society, it is possible to approach political action from one of two directions. We can try the top down approach. This is concerned with attempting to directly alter the structures, institutions and framework of society, perhaps by starting or joining mass political movements, by lobbying political parties, or by entering directly into the machinery by becoming politicians ourselves. The other is the bottom up approach. In this approach we seek to influence the individuals around us, by modelling behaviour, by education, by sharing our ideas and values. The ripples are small, but perhaps with enough of them, changes can occur in the political structures themselves. Over the years I have lost faith somewhat in the first approach, because social institutions and structures have a tremendous inertia. Social movements have a way of themselves becoming institutionalised and soon fall victim to the same iner-

tia as the things they oppose. Those who try to enter the structures are more often shaped by them, rather than being able to mould them into a new shape. For that reason I favour the bottom up, slow ripple approach. It may take much longer, and I may never live to witness the changes, if they occur. But at least there is the satisfaction of knowing that I have been able to touch someone else's life, as they have been able to touch mine. My hat is off, though, to those who really do succeed in bringing about change from the top. I envy their courage and stamina.

It is a very small thing, but I hope that by touching other people with my writing, I may be able to cause a few ripples. All I seek is to have people look a little deeper into themselves, to understand the forces at work in and around them. If I achieve that, even a little, then my work here is done.

The book burners are correct: writing can be a subversive activity.

What Lies Beneath

15/11/2012

In another of my many former lives I used to be a preacher man (not the son of one, though). I want to make it clear from the start that I no longer have any religious affiliation of any kind. I say this in order to avoid frightening away those who find all things religious anathema. Of course, in the process I may alienate those who do consider themselves to be religious. I am not interested in a debate on the issue here. I raise the point only because what does remain of my previous life is a desire to look *into* things, or *beneath* things, to vary the spatial metaphor. I have always found that what is beneath the surface is much more interesting than the surface that conceals/contains/protects it. The surface is not a bad thing. It is necessary to do all these things from time to time: conceal, contain and protect what is within.

It is also very important, at other times, to expose this hidden substance of the world, of people, of *me*. Above all, I need to be aware of

the hidden substance of me. Hidden it may be, but it is not inactive. It is this substance that ultimately gives shape to the exterior of my life, though I do not always recognise how, when or where. “Know thyself” – these are still wise words. As always, there is a warning that goes with this: It can be very dangerous to bring some of the hidden stuff out into the open, particularly too much, too quickly. Nevertheless, I believe that the dangers of not doing so are greater. I think that the source of much of the unexplained, explosive violence in many of our modern societies is due to the denial and suppression of this hidden substance. We make the dangerous assumption that the surface is the truth and nothing but the truth; and that nothing but the surface is the truth. Has there ever been a less tolerant society than our “tolerant society”? Probably many; but not one that denied its own intolerance, lying just below the surface, so vehemently. There are many other creatures swimming around down there, some of them malicious, some of them harmless, some even benevolent. We ignore them at our cost.

What my life as a writer has in common with my earlier life as a preacher is the desire to raise awareness of this underneath. It was never my desire to tell people what to think, only to encourage them to do so. Whether I am successful at this, either as a preacher or as a writer, is for others to say.

Nothing **16/11/2012**

Kate Bush, in 2011, released an album entitled *50 Words for Snow*. The title track features the voice of Stephen Fry contributing 50 increasingly absurd and Fry-ed words for that crystalline variety of H₂O. I have nothing more to say about snow in this post. But as I feel that I have nothing in particular to say today at all, I was wondering if I could find 10 (an aim a little more modest than that of Bush and Fry) ways to say it – nothing, that is.

So here we go:

1. Vacuum – and no, not the hoovering variety.
2. Zero – being somewhat mathematically inclined during a previous life.
3. Zip – not the code (or the fastening device).
4. Void – bodily functions come to mind, but let's not go there.
5. Love – tennis and all that.
6. Bigger all – Aussies and Brits will get this (not sure about the North American audience – ok, so sometimes it means *almost* nothing, or next to nothing – cut me a little slack here!).
7. Sweet FA – choose your own version of the “FA”.
8. Nada – alright, so I had to borrow that from Spanish.
9. Nihilism – for the philosophically inclined (more like “nothingness” than “nothing”, but let's not be picky).
10. Nout – another one for the Brits – any Geordies listening in?

Actually, nothing is very important. You may recall that line from *Bohemian Rhapsody* by Queen: “Nothing really matters.” We can change the emphasis a little: Nothing *really* matters. It really does. There is, after all, much more nothing in the universe than something. There is much more nothing *in us* than something. Someone once said that if you compressed the entire human population, removing all space, the end product would be about the size of a sugar cube. Like all these claims, this is a very rough approximation (as far as I am aware, no one has yet tried this experiment – perhaps someone should write a funding proposal); but it makes the point. Take away all the nothing from inside me and I will amount to, well, practically nothing.

Music, Music, Music

17/11/2012

Music is a strange phenomenon. Western music, at least, is all about mathematical ratios. From these arise our perceptions of harmony and discord. But it is a mystery to me why such things should affect us in any way. Why does it sound unpleasant or unsatisfying when there is disharmony? And why does it sound pleasant, even beautiful, when there is harmony? Why does a particular sequence of notes please us, while others can leave us feeling dissatisfied? Why is the resolution of a chord at the end of a symphony so satisfying? Why does a minor chord evoke sadness? Having spent some time as an evolutionary biologist, I confess to being mystified by the evolution of this musical capacity. Charles Darwin was similarly stumped. He once wrote, “As neither the enjoyment nor the capacity of producing musical notes are faculties of the least use to man ... they must be ranked amongst the most mysterious with which he is endowed” (*The Descent of Man*).

There is almost certainly something in our neural structure that makes us respond to music. I’m sure we have all experienced the inability to get a particular tune (even a very annoying one!) out of our head. It seems to resonate in some way within our neurons, running round and round in an endless loop. Arthur C. Clarke once wrote a story entitled “The Ultimate Melody” (published in *Tales from the White Hart*, 1957). In this story, a scientist has a similar theory. He undertakes to create the perfect melody, the perfect “hook” if you like. He apparently succeeds, resulting in a catatonic state. So beware of those song writers and music producers out there. We now understand their ultimate goal!

It may be that the evolution of this musical capacity is just a side effect of other things which have more immediate implications for human survival, such as speech recognition, or the differentiation between various animal calls. If so, it is a very happy accident indeed.

For those interested in this question, the following not-too-scientific paper in *Nature* contains an interesting discussion.

<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v453/n7193/full/453287a.html>

Time... and Time Again

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We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time

T. S. Eliot wrote these words towards the end of *Little Gidding*, the fourth of the *Four Quartets*, a series of poems that are largely a reflection on time. These poems were among the last written by Eliot, composed during the Second World War, when he was around my age (mid fifties). They are words that have always stayed with me over the years, circling around and around inside my head, encircling me. There are hints here of many things: the circle of life, the eternal return. There is the suggestion that the end is in the beginning and the beginning in the end. You can only know the beginning when you reach the end, just as you can only finally know the meaning of a sentence when you reach... the full stop. (It's rather like waiting for the verb to arrive at the end of a German sentence.)

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from. And every phrase
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others...)

There is an inner tension between the image of the eternal return and that of the sentence. The circle suggests unendingness (and with it, to my mind, a certain tedium – the circle of life is something to *escape* from in Indian thinking). The sentence, on the other hand, is a linear construct, with a beginning and an end. It is these that give it meaning. In fact, I am inclined to offer another image for consideration, that of the arch. In this improbable structure, every block supports every other

block: the end and beginning support each other equally. Thus it is with the sentence, and thus it is, perhaps, with our lives. This arch that we construct above the flatness of reality requires both a beginning and an end.

Thus, despite the attraction of the circle, with its apparent perfection, I opt for a more linear interpretation of life and time. Circles, in the end, are boring. Beginnings and endings are much more interesting.

Finally, in this ode to geometry, I am tempted to give the last word to the spiral, that ever-changing, ever growing (almost) circle. Perhaps it was the Celts who had the best idea, after all.



Newgrange, Ireland. Courtesy of *Wikimedia Commons*