

Letter from my uncle

Graeme Maxton

Enough, Fragment from the notebook of a relinquished global citizen



This essay is inspired by, and partly borrowed from, ‘*Enough, Fragment from the notebook of a dead artist*’, by Ivan Turgenev, written in 1864.

Enough.

‘Enough’, I said to myself as I moved with lagging steps towards the gate, down the steep walkway towards the quiet little corner of the terminal I knew so well. ‘Enough’, I said again, as I drank in the yeasty fragrance of beer and stale wash-cloths from the bar, strong and pungent in the decay of another falling evening. ‘Enough’, I said once more, as I sat on the stained bench above the loading bay, gazing at the clouds darkening over the taxiing aircraft, as they reflected the final rays of daylight.

No more struggle, no more strain. Time to draw back, time to keep a firm hold of the head and ask the heart to be silent. No more to brood over the sourness of vague, seductive hope, no more to sigh quietly at each laughably superficial easy-fix solution, no more to hang onto such half-way thinking, no more to silently witness those smug advocates, those self-proclaimed protectors of the planet, deluding themselves that the way ahead is simple, self-evident and profitable.

All has been felt, by some, all has been gone through, by all.

I am weary. What to me, amid the soft peace of this distant corner and the glow of the evening, that three metres below, hidden by the bags waiting to be loaded, a diesel generator suddenly thrusts vast grey plumes upwards, groaning in unearthly shouts, as though no such engine had been on Earth before, and were the first to sing its foul tune of accumulating despair. All this has been, and continues to be, endlessly repeated, with the hope that it will last forever, as though decreed and ordained, to lead humanity forward.

But into what?

Such thoughts would never have come to me once, in that time when I too was aflame like the sunset and my heart sang an entirely different tune, like a songbird. There is no doubt now, all can see that everything has faded, all life has paled. The light that gives life colour, depth and meaning, the light that comes from all our hearts, is dying within me and many others. Not dead yet, it feebly smoulders on, giving no light, no warmth.

The falling darkness is hungry to crush under its dead weight the last feeble rays of this impotent light. It is the way of darkness.

For the last time I drag myself from the cacophony around the boarding area, down the narrow steel chute towards the plane, desperately seeking a silence to lie within. I turn a brief gaze again to the past, without any hope or prospect of its return, but also without any sense of bitterness or regret. What is now was always to be. This future is clearer than the intense blue heaven of a summer morning, purer than the first snows on the mountain tops. Spirited memories fade in slow procession, from gleaming marble to ruinous-dust.

I recall walking near a Scottish loch in winter, and the earth and sky are one unvarying milky hue, yet there is no haer. Not even the great hills that surround me stand out in the general whiteness. Distance is impossible to judge, everything looks both close and indistinct.

I walk swiftly over the ice covered mosses and, except for my own heavy breathing, cannot hear a sound. I think about the thrill of early spring, when the rain comes softly, and the hard ground begins to ease. I remember the glad tremor of my heart, that feeling which unexpectedly springs up, uncomprehended, but vividly remembered now. It drew me forwards then, like a strong flood of gladness within me, without explaining the reason it brought me such pleasure, for why should it? It was like a swiftly opening flower, a sweetly bubbling burn, a pleasant shock, like the love of some natural wonder sparkling unexpectedly in the spirit, bewilderingly radiant.

Then I think of you, and many images float before me. They are of us, everywhere, in cities, in restaurants, on aircraft, curled up in bed. At every turn of my life, I knew you.

I stumble across the remaining foundations of an ancient kirk, long given to neglectful mouldering. It is without any roof, just collapsed columns, a place worn nearly flat from the decay built on centuries of hopeful, unrewarded prayers. Where rows of packed people once knelt, only thistles remain faithful to this grave and melancholy remnant of belief.

We are alone here, alone in the whole world. Other than us, nothing is living. Outside, where these friendly dark walls of promise once stood, looming emptiness reigns. Chaos wails and moans, sightless eyes are weeping.

Within, beside you, there is still that peace and light.

We nestle closer and lean our heads together. I feel the pulse of your blood. Your thoughts are my thoughts. Your smile is on my face before it's on yours, just as you say the answer before I offer a question. We are like two wings of the same bird, essential for flight, and freedom. Our hopes might have evaporated without ceremony, but they deepened our love. We have no need for words or looks to pass between us. Breath is all we need, for now, and to be together, barely conscious we are one.

The voluptuous melancholy, the tender thoughts, the smiles and looks that pierce our souls are above words. We sit in silence, heads bowed against the weight of feeling. I cannot forget it.

I am not able to give myself up from those memories, to bid them farewell, like the wick of a candle flickering before it dies. Most remain unaware of the harsh hand humanity has dealt itself, and yet you and I are still foolish enough to imagine faintly that the deception has been lifted, that the shame and lies have been revealed in all their gallus deceit. The truth that permeates everything is not a valid truth, not the full truth. But whenever we try to reveal it we are not allowed to speak. They lock our lips and tie our hands. Nothing diverts them from their net-zero.

The only way for someone to avoid the mire of the rapacious stupidity that characterises this Age of Endarkenment is to calmly turn away from it all, to say 'enough'. Then, we can fold our impotent arms on our impotent breasts. It is the last honour we can attain, a sorry consolation.

“Our yesterdays have lighted fools, the way to dusty death, this walking shadow of life, that signifies nothing.”

Still, eternity beacons.

I have become too soaked in knowledge, have feasted too freely from the tree of the knowledge of life, and have digested it all too poorly. I have tasted so much bitterness that honey is no longer sweet, and yet the bliss of love, of perfect nearness, of devotion, still gives solace. The passion that glows, that murmurs eternal bliss, may yet devour the worm that consumes the last relic of each withered tongue. Love still blossoms gratefully, if against the odds.

On that day when the grass is parched, when the dust and sunlight are endless, when summer is the only season, when all is bleached and grey, and the forests have gone, perhaps our love will remain. We all know, do we not, somewhere deep inside, that there will be no great words of consolation from any intelligence that was artificial, or otherwise, when freedom and progress are proven to be the apparitions they always were.

If Shakespeare could be born again, he would have no need to retract his Hamlet, his Lear, today. His searching glance would discover nothing new. Still the same motley crew, rolled out with the same terrifying sameness. The same certainty, the same cruelty, the same lust for blood, for gold, the same vulgar pleasures, the same senseless suffering, the same coarse snares in which the multitude are trapped so easily, the same workings of power – the same little mouse turning in the same wire wheel. The tyrants of today, sitting smugly in their island lairs, so keen to broadcast their virtues, who sleep well at nights while their half-crushed victims seek some comfort, will enjoy the same destiny as those they exploited, everyone haunted by thoughts of beauty ruined.

What of art? Will that not remain? A clever Banksy sprayed overnight on a Park n' Shop in Wanchai is more real, and more powerful, than the Napoleonic Code or the symphonies of Beethoven, and yet each is the art of their era.

But art offers no eulogy. It is not the relativity of art that matters in the end, but its transitoriness, its brevity. Its transition to dust and ashes is what counts.

In their moment, and with their audience, art and beauty can seem to have more power than nature, and appear more eternal. Yet only dull-witted pedants can claim art is the imitation of nature. In the

end, nature is inexorable. She has no need to hurry. Unconsciously and inflexibly obedient to her own laws, she knows no art, she knows no freedom, and she knows not good. From all ages, she suffers nothing that considers itself immortal, nothing that is unchanging. Humanity is her child, but she is the universal mother, and she has no preferences. All that sits in her lap today, all that pollution, those evaporating ice-caps, that cough-inducing air, will have arisen at the cost of something else, something humanity can already imagine but appears unable to understand. Its civilised creation must yield its place to something else.

Humanity was perhaps too jealous of nature's works of slaughter. It appears that way. But, as humanity will learn, it cannot summon anything approaching the same elemental forces by triumphing its empty conquests. She has the capacity to devour everything. How can humanity resist the unceasingly rising tides, the withering heat and the endless rain? It can't park hope in the value and dignity of those fleeting images sprayed on walls, in those sonnets. Humanity sits on the edge of the abyss and has shaped barely nothing from dust.

Yet these vanishing forms will not be averse to beauty. Beauty still exists where humanity is not, where human freedom is not. Nature spoiled will come again. But humanity will not be repeated, and the work of our hands, our proud art and proud technology, once destroyed, will be lost. We were creators for just one hour.

What is left to say to the ordinary people, the second-rate and third-rate toilers, whoever they may be, the politicians, scientists, and artists? How can they be made to shake off their indolence, their weary stupor?

How to draw them back from the edge, when an idea has been stolen into their minds that denies the nullity of human existence? What would make them consider ideals higher than short-term gain, to want more than the destructive Mammon they have built for themselves? By what Bitcoins can they be lured when their medals and wars are so valueless? What can entice them to stop kneeling at the feet and grovelling before their new and lately discovered idols? Do they not prefer to live in that marketplace where buyers and sellers cheat themselves, where there is noise and clamour, and all is paltry and worthless? Do they not prefer to tussle in the mire for handfuls of empty shells, or gape in open-mouthed adoration before sorry tinsel-decked images of progress? Why should they not be permitted to create a world where each egoistic self, alive with its own shouting, hurries feverishly to a plainly visible end?

Why should they be denied?

Enough.