

The Passing

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It is nearly a century since Freud wrote of the three wounding blows that, he said, science dealt to human's conception of themselves and their place in the universe. Copernicus made the first strike; we are no longer the privileged actors at the centre of a vast Cosm-drama arranged for our benefit. The harmony of the stars and planets and the portentous dissonance of fiery comets are not about us - we are just a newly arrived complex life-process existing on the thinnest sliver on the surface of the third planet from a sun, one of billions in our galaxy, about two-thirds from its centre, our galaxy itself one of billions. In time, our sun will end this stage in its life, expand in a last hurrah, and with it our earth and all trace of life would vanish. The universe will carry on regardless.

Darwin and the theory of evolution by natural selection wielded the second blow. We are not the distinct perfectible apex of a cosmic plan, made in god's image and given dominion over nature. We are of the earth, irreducibly dependent, contingent on its processes, close relations to chimpanzees and bonobos, more distant relations to everything else. If success is survival, our modern humans 300,000-year story is a mere blip in earth-life history, and thus far too short to judge success. Life exists because it evolves traits to persist and reproduce in the long-term struggle for survival in a myriad of changing and challenging ecological niches. What emerges needs no designer sculpting human forms, no architect regulating the unfathomable relationships through a whole eco-system.

The final blow was from the modest Freud himself. Our minds are not the home of autonomous self-knowing reasoners, we were not, in his words, even masters of our own house. Of course, the evidence for this was always there- where do thoughts come from? What is the feeling of the feelings of desire, envy, care, jealousy, anger, love-out of what do they arise, why do they exist? From where comes the stream of words becoming structured sentences to answer a question never before considered- giving the external impression of conscious reason rather than the mouth-piece of sub-cranium eruptions? For much of what we say or do there are no reasons but an inchoate mix of instinct, socially acquired habits and assumptions, and cultural mythologies that articulate us as much as we articulate them.

Eat, drink, shit, fuck and survive, are the ecological and ultimately thermodynamic foundations of our species- other things- morality, art, religion, science, politics and nations are the elaborations our social species has acquired through biological and cultural evolution that serve those foundations. They embody the behavioural strategies of many other social animals: cooperation, competition, status, short-termism, social and self-deception and group belonging. These links are not linear or deterministic processes; they are emergent and networked social forms that can show novelty and apparent contradiction. The celibate priest may not be reproducing, but he may be acquiring a place of status and prestige within a society. His church, its rituals, symbols and stories embody a type of status in part because they are defining an in-group sharing bonds of reciprocal obligations, benefits and meaning, and using to power of the group to cooperate to secure resources and influence in competition with other out-groups.

Eat, drink, shit, fuck and survive: even now I wince a little at publicly writing the words. They have often been surrounded by taboos in human culture. In the England at the time of Darwin they were becoming ever-more base, as in lowly and not fit for the polite gaze, or becoming fetishised in the elaborate anxieties and social signifiers that would emerge in our food culture of abundance. Base, as in the necessary foundations upon which all other things stand, could be distanced culturally because they were being distanced physically.

Despite the dramatic rise in population, people ate better and more securely, fed by a declining share of farmers as a percentage of population. By mid-century the cholera, typhus and influenza infested cesspit of human and animal filth that was London was been taken in hand under the name of progress by great social reformers such as Edwin Chadwick. Civic sanitation, flush toilets and clean water would have far greater social influence than the peripheral intellectualism of Freud's three wounding blows. Survival, if we interpret it as physical and social security was transformed too. Inter-personal violence declined and social and political rights and protections were expanded. None of this is to deny 'the dark satanic mills', the smog-muffled misery of the new urban poor described by Engels, or that women waited until after the First World War to get a vote. But the life of an eighteenth-century peasant, sometimes conjured in wistful nostalgia by nineteenth century romantics, could be back-breaking, food insecure and prey to vagaries and greed of an aristocratic class that could sever their connection with sustenance and cast them adrift for more profitable sheep.

There was a revolution that was called progress. A physical transformation of growing wealth, new opportunities, and an acceleration in the incremental advances in science and technology; and a moral one of the expansion of empathy, democratisation and individual rights. There was the manifest promise that, whatever the travails of today, tomorrow really could be better. Progress as a description of relatives also became progress as manifest destiny, of myth. Released from superstition, by marshalling the power of the human mind expressed in reason, science, technology, trade, commerce, democracy and moral vigour, we could unshackle ourselves from the dead hand of fate. Man could remake Mankind, we could transcend our base selves and the limitations imposed by nature and in the process make a richer, more humane and peaceful world. We are jaded and sceptical progressives now. But some of that excitement and awe before the new and the possible can be sensed in the accounts of visitors to the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851. My favourite is from a letter by Charlotte Bronte to her father, worth quoting at length for its evocative sparkle:

It's a wonderful place- vast, strange, new, and impossible to describe. Its grandeur does not consist of one thing, but in the unique assemblage of all things. Whatever human industry has created you find there, from the great compartments filled with railway engines and boilers, with mill machinery in full work, with splendid carriages of all kinds, with harnesses of every description, to the glass-covered and velvet spread stands loaded with the most gorgeous work of the goldsmith and silversmith, and the carefully guarded caskets full of real diamonds and pearls worth hundred of thousands of pounds. It may be called a bazaar or a fair, but it is such a bazaar or fair as Eastern

genii might have created. It seems as if only magic could have gathered this mass of wealth from all the ends of the earth.....The multitude filling the great aisles seems ruled and subdued by some invisible influence. Amongst the thirty thousand souls that peopled it that day there was there not one loud noise was to be heard, not one irregular movement seen; the living tide rolls on quietly, with a deep hum like the sea heard from a distance.

It's hard to imagine the general public cooing over innovations in boilers and industrial machinery now. We've habituated to change. What was once genuinely transformative; food security, sanitation, primary education for all, better housing, social protections, are now taken for granted. However, the progressivist myth took a sober battering just as Freud wrote of his wounding blows in 1917, when human ingenuity fashioned oil fuelled dreadnoughts, tanks and mustard gas to industrialise slaughter in the name of tribal conflict, while the Bolshevik's attempt to fashion a new utopia ended in terror, famine and autocratic paranoia. It seemed that we could not transcend ourselves, just as the Palaeolithic peoples with skulls showing evidence of violent spear trauma, or chimpanzee groups hunting down in savage fury a stray chimp from another group could transcend themselves.

Any yet, what we call progress, in its mundane form, is not an illusion and even its grand mythic arc has served us well in many ways- helping propel the rights revolution, for example. If food, shelter, health, security and a place in community seem to be basic requirements for human well-being, then we in our safe European home should be mindful that we are beneficiaries of what many in the world can only dream of and what our ancestors would look on in awe. If we only measure our situation, political or economic, by our disaffections or by comparison with an ideal than we take for granted what has been obtained, and risk what could so easily be lost. If what we do rather than what we say is the real measure of things, than the sorry litany of people fleeing war, insecurity and poverty while risking drowning to get to Europe and the promise of a better future is a case in point. Nobody takes such risks to go in the other direction, no matter how much they grumble.

But progress, in both its mundane and mythic forms, is on the cusp of precipitous change. Our complex and interdependent globalised economy is a living extension of human behaviour and culture, in which metabolic flows of energy, raw materials are transformed into the global flows of goods and services on which we have come to depend. The food in our supermarkets; clean water; the electric grid; communications; the value of money; our jobs, factories, research and development; political legitimacy; our world-views; habitual assumptions and expectations of the future are woven together in an interdependent human ecology, each part more or less essential to the functioning of the others. We do not, nor could we understand the myriad interconnections upon which we depend. By a process of iteration, adaptation and co-evolution people, communities, businesses, and institutions, working within their own niches, have over time constructed a progressively more complex and globally distributed ecosystem that maintains our welfare. And though humans have imagination, foresight, and the ability to plan, we (as individual, business, institution, government) do this from within our own niche, cooperating and in competition with other niches, but always constrained by the complex

interdependencies which the niche requires for its own survival. The emergent outcome of all these niches over time is our globalised economy, and indeed civilisation. It has no designer, no master controller, just like any complex ecosystem in nature.

Just like our human base processes, its food is energy and raw materials. But unlike humans whose energy and material intake stabilises when we reach maturity, our economy is locked into a cycle of growth requiring growth. And this cycle requires more energy and resources to maintain the complex civilisation what we have grown accustomed to and dependent upon, and it must continue to grow further in response to our evolving needs and desires and to deal with the ever-increasing problems arising. But the cheap energy that fuelled this growth, particularly oil, so essential for all those flows, is depleting while its substitutes such as fracked oil is more and more expensive. It is so expensive that our economies will struggle to pay the price. Technology is losing the race against depletion. Food supply and the global production ecosystem built upon and adaptive to vast energy and other inputs is fragile. The upshot is environmental constraints are starting to hamper our globalised economy's ability to grow.

Again, just like our human base processes, the by-product of growth is waste and depletion. Soils stripped of nutrients; the rolling catastrophic extinction of the plants and animals that are our relations; polluted water; plastic infested oceans; and complex forest eco-systems replaced by mono-cultures are all part of that legacy. And of course, there are the greenhouse gas emissions whose implications are already becoming apparent, and with the potential to fundamentally transform the climatic and ecological stability that allowed the first proto-civilizations to emerge ten thousand years ago. These sorry tales undoubtedly move and worry us, for we are carriers of other, older myths that tie us to our earth-home, its creatures, rivers, soils, forests and landscapes. But we go back to our computers, our beer with friends, our shopping and our workplaces, waste and depletion made manifest in the hum-drum of our lives, complicit, conflicted and human.

Thus far, in the rich world, we have avoided a face-to-face reckoning with our ecological predicament, largely for the reason that our globalised economy, its complexity and our position within it has had the adaptive capacity to surmount and displace such encounters elsewhere (mostly to poor world) and into the future. But if that economy falters and begins to shatter such reckonings could come to meet us from every direction. And the most perilous faltering will in all probability come from our financial and monetary systems. For no other critical system is so dependent upon the myth of progress and the expectation of growth. Our money is created out of promises, out of credit with its latin root, *credo*, to believe. It is the binding spell of global systems integration. It's digits on a computer terminal have value because of the faith that tomorrow they can be turned into goods and services. Our whole intertwined financial edifice is a tangle of even more promises built upon this promise. The financial crisis, was and is because we could not meet those promises, and even now its stability implies the expectation of massive future economic growth. If that growth cannot continue, if energy and food constraints cascade through fragmenting and disrupted supply-chains, making an increasingly imminent future more and more opaque, then that once-solid edifice could vanish in fear and a loss of faith, seizing up the flow of goods and services that we depend upon.

It is the progressive voice within our culture, anxious about such threats to our world and welfare, and what we hold on to and take for granted, that calls out: *let us transform our economic system, make it green and fair! Because we have built it, we can change it!* But as we've seen, we did not design it and we do not control it. We cannot pull the rug of our dependencies out from under our feet and expect to remain standing. We cannot avoid, only go through.

Wounded, desiring, lacking, the hungry ghosts of the human condition, our manifestation of nature's drive to growth and diversity, itself an expression of the universe moving towards equilibrium. There is only change and transformation, temporary islands of stability, eddies in time that have their moment before returning to the flow of things: our moments and days, our lives and deaths, the rise and fall of civilisations, the flourish and passing of planetary life, and the birth stars becoming supernova, neutron stars and black holes. As a species we are not bad or evil, we're the conditioned expression of the universe becoming.

As individuals, as people who need people, people who need nature, we face radically new choices, for soon enough change will be imposed by forces and processes beyond our control. If we are wise to ourselves, we will learn to let go of what can no longer be grasped, be it our world-views, mythologies and the material expectations that comfort and trap. If we are imaginative, we won't wallow in anger and blame, because there'll be important tasks at hand and new paths to discover. If we love, then we'll understand that our welfare is inextricably linked to the welfare of others, to the rivers and the birds and trees and the soil under foot. If we are to find joy, we'll be more attentive to what we have and what is present than what we have not. And if we are the myth-makers, we'll return to the base, to what sustains us and other living things, and discover again succour and wise counsel among those who will share the journey and in the natural world in which we're so wonderfully a part.

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