

Afterthoughts

Reflections on the texture of life after 60

Clem Henricson

'Afterthoughts' - what in god's name are they? What do these thoughts come after? Where do they come on the continuum? We who could be snuffed out at any stage - no 'afterthought' for those who exit stage left a decade or so premature. None whatsoever. There are of course shouts, trills, runs of thinking and insights en route, but they are different in kind. 'Afterthought' is then the preserve of those allotted to live something in the region of sixty to eighty years. A juncture. More a seismic shift of the lay of the land, the movement of a seesaw, the mass of a lifetime slipping from one side to the other. Disproportionate weights mount and mount until the slip and you are deposited in another country of sorts. A new, chilling place to be where the signs say 'gloom prohibited' in the interests of the social. And I am a social being with all the props, and circumscribe my writing accordingly – to a degree. Despond capped with appreciation rather than appreciation dogged by despond.

These thoughts are from the scatological diaried reflections in the gut unsettling period of the seesaw slide. A settlement is already emerging post as it closes – and the best is to relax and peer back through the settling.

Death then, physical change, layered, subtle and seismic dissolution and a bugged image. The package, lets face it with its grey wash, vies towards the negative. But offsetting the gloom are poetic and exploratory textures – a kind of paced, moderate perspective – vistas, understandings that are – god spare us – not affirmations of life, but of interest.

Death

Reconciling with how long and how deep an impossible mission?

I read from de Beauvoir's closing autobiography about her abhorrence of death – that it wipes out consciousness with all the experience, thought, storage of the aesthetic in its archive stifled. The waste – aggressive, nihilistic. We spend so much time and inner resources trying to accommodate to death that we lie about it, soften it, soft soap it with notions of celebration. A 'good death'.... what a ludicrous description of this gross intrusion. The obscenity reaches its zenith with the snuffing out of genius.

A change in perspective between a tumorous death scare mid 50s and, what in mid 60s, is a diffused steady contemplation of the encroaching reality of dying – no specifics latterly, just the erosion of time. My recollection from episode *one* was of fear – fear even with reprieve at the prospect, as a 50plus human being, of facing recurrent scares until one of these morphs from scare to the real thing. But this side of the seesaw there is a contradictory process of marking time while thrashing about

for resolution before time runs out; it is one of re-pondering life, the scroll unravelling to a sheer end.

Unravelling and questions

- It seems a long music build up of inching one's way to coffin. Should I hide in the froth of living with hope and a frame of mind that perpetuates youth and middle aged zest and the future as unendable?
- The illusory froth of the wave or contemplation of the still black deep? But after all, what is the point of an incessant rehearsal? Can one start too young? – No one cares and what is it worth to have been there a million times before it happens?
- Avoiding the rehearsal, will I miss something profound? Or is it a wilful, pointless, unedifying rubbing of a sore, irresistible itch?
- How much time, thought, preoccupation should one spend in trying to get into a position of being able to face a desultory end with some sort of equanimity?
- Would it have been better to die in the thrust of middle years with a future – in those years when one had a nineteenth century identity and individual ego of worth with possibilities, image of self within a mission of self realisation. Instead of at the tail end of life with a sense of insignificance, the diminished stuff of relationships, sensibilities for naught, dust – withering flesh and concept of humanity?
- Can I cure myself of morbid introspection for these remaining years; it is a spoiler?
- Well the argument goes that you get immortality through passing on your genes. The presumption is that you would want to do that. Yes for consciousness to go on, but not particularly my or my forbear's genes. What of the notion that you spend a life time honing, taming, suppressing those genes only to see them biologically resuscitated?
- I have changed my view that death is more important than success or failure of whatever sort. I no longer at people's deaths say... "that puts a perspective on things"because death is commonplace and will happen. It is proximate.

Physical change

The physiognomy of appearance – obvious and pervasive. Suffice this:

Last night I saw a woman of the theatre of our youth. How that beauty had crumbled with age - in this particular case the face that we knew from her middle years had diminished to become part of the old face. The fat had layered behind and under so that the face, what was left of it, of yore appeared stuck on the upper front like a mask.

The emergence of genes at different ages and stages. An odd assortment of cards in a hand held close to one's chest, delivered only at each one's allotted time. The shock in older age has been to see shades of genes visited on my face and physique of the least appealing kind from both sides of the family. The nose combines the horrors of my father's Swedish bulb and my mother's Anglo Saxon strain – her large miller father of the soil and features chiselled to a coarse shape. Shades of anxious grimace eyes from my half sister. I'll say no more, but point taken. Astounding that the sum of these defects is somehow not as atrocious as their individual parts. Held together they offer a presentation that is not monstrous, even occasionally halfway handsome.

The damnation of human discourse – chatter, chatter – encroachment on the ear even engagement that I can't bear and can't live without. What a curse. The irritability of old age.

Paris November 2016. Exhausted from illness. The physical toll is huge. My body has changed – mostly in the past year – crepe like flesh as if overnight – the physical ache of lifting, just simply so much relentless movement that I cannot limit. But mental resilience too seems to have dissolved, disappearing rivulets as I contemplate continual musts and doings. A timidity that one despised. A long, tortuous preparation for return to womb – this time earth rather than flesh. I have this anxiety too that it has all started too early – the long inexorable slide.

In terms of the sudden change over the last year, it strikes me that a major change is that I can now conceive a bit of me going at anytime – collapse, a falling off, a fatal blow seems on the cards at anytime. Certainly not an improbability - a shift to the expected, simply a message from the condition of my body. I imagine this process leads to an acceptance. Expectation and acceptance have a synergy.

The changes in connections in the brain apropos words. What I have noticed:

- When I write I automatically repeat the use of words in proximity within sentences. Unconsciously embedded in the mind they spew out mindlessly and shock me that they have willy nilly taken hold, ushered forth on the page.

- Conjoining with the automaton's irresistible repetition of words, has been the inability to register the odd word or two – Crouch End, Vigaland, Eleanor. Compulsive automaton at the beck and call of the changing wires, currents, connections of the brain – or at least that is the assumption. The sensation is one of not being in charge.
- Back from Lisbon – strange little episode in Belem. The St Jerome monastery architecture was utterly different, lush and lacy – apparently a complete novelty to me. I had never set foot in the cavernous arches before I could swear – and with a sensation of relief; there was an urgency not to relive, which is increasingly the lot of those lucky enough to live long. But to my astonishment in a post visit chat I was jogged towards a superlative, renowned custard tart shop in the environs of said monastery – and that, that alone I had remembered from a past visit. The aesthetic gem and masterpiece evaporated with nothing left but the strong memory of a pastry.
- It is a shock as the capital cities that I have visited on the conference gravy train have started to merge into a higgledy piggledy medley of recollection – snippet glimpses sans narrative or perception of the concept of each individual distinctive hub with a rightful claim to acknowledgement.
- Fading out, fading memory. I thought it was supposed to be the short term memory that goes into decline – but no, something insidious has started happening. Memories from childhood and middle years – the former having been so vivid most of my life – are now a tide going out, draining, leaving the sand denuded.
- I must just log the shock I feel at having so little memory of the boys' childhood – beautiful, treasured, loved as they were. Time to sit and reflect and retrieve if I possibly can.

The possible reasons for all this other than brain contraction – as that has not yet got into gear or full swing?

The array of pills, particularly the second lot of blood pressure pills, that on first sampling I reflected diminished my joy.

The second diagnosis is longevity and a shift in living perspective – that these things matter less – the passions, the images pictorial and verbal, the business and drama of living – just matter a whole lot less than when I was between forty and fifty. Fifties was the tipping point.

Or is it the sheer scale of so many images over a lifetime that is making me shut them down, contract to manage the burden of sensation?

Dissolution

The Veneer – the front is what we engage with more and more as time goes by.

Substance dissipates - puddled with the drip of acid age.

Diminished sensation of gut aesthetic pleasure, of sex, of the physical joy of lying out and soaking up well being. The veneer hollowed – left precarious almost bottomless. The veneer of words as the worth of relationships, of experiencing a landscape or a flower. Verbal fabrication is all.

So in sum, one has occasional access to floppy contentment, but there is no ecstasy.

It has become increasingly a god send when an intense experience that one has to a diminished degree is interrupted by some extraneous event that superimposes itself; obligation a saviour!

The importance of self and social rub is played out:

- Witness the telling of personal history that is of precious little interest to anyone, even increasingly oneself, and the consequent desperation.
- Witness the discarded friendships, memories of lovers rendered miniscule - far from the fictional expectations that you might want to meet a past friend or lover for sign off.

A feature of all this was my mother's technique in her later years of recounting at the day's end the good/pleasurable things that had happened. When you have to have recourse to this, veneer has taken over.

I went through for clearance sake my mother's collections from holidays. Collected for what, for whom? Self as a reminder in old age as memory cells dwindle. Her photos of people are of interest to me – but subsequently? And a flagging interest for me too as distance from the world creeps in. Those past lives in quaint attires – my interest is dwindling, shrinking as it is in human relations. The life conceptual - stage set and actors shrinks as though there was no essence of a person or life – but just simply an illusion of perspective.

The ego no longer takes risks

Must record today's weird event on the risk avoidance register. Dejected, crumpled and diminished by the domestic scene and the hospitalisation, gall infection, I slowly sick stepped into the RSA down to the library. Fully expecting my book to have been taken down from the glass bookcase pedestal, found instead that it had been elevated to the accessible 'new and popular' stand. Sat buoyed – went to the lecture for which had come and then back to the library to find to my further surprise that an empty space replaced my book – demoted or extraordinarily had some one taken it down to read? Cautiously glanced at the readers in all their eminence until I saw it in the hands of a 30/40 year – old, well dressed, a la mode intellectual - I surmise

cerebral servant of the state - reading it assiduously and taking notes on his lap top. I sat incognito at a computer nearby, fiddled with emails, but was too distracted by him and myself as spy. Had to leave lest he ever put the book down. I never introduced myself, leaving him with a rather better disembodied illusion.

Well that is a wry, modestly amusing anecdote descriptive of a reduction phenomenon that has taken hold of life by the throat and stifled the air of ambition. Diminishing risk to an ego that I have always relied on as being continually buoyant – a wound up clockwork set in motion in perpetuity, I thought, by parental support and genetic self-adulation. Wrong. Finally, the slings and arrows take their toll; though they have not been many – accumulated over a lifetime they tot up. But it is not just this – there is the fear at a stage in life teetering towards exit, that one does not want the exit to be to jeers rather than cheers – to go out on a low. It seems that I would rather settle for the pot of gold that I have, than risk ego assault for a larger hoard.

Sometimes think I should get counselling on the above – but think not. Rather better to hobble along as best one can. And the strange thing is that books have a life of their own where my alter ego without the encumbrances of face to face, interactive limitation – being less than my readers imagine – can bloom of itself.

“Some men are better than their books, but my books are better than their man.”

A.E. Houseman, 13 September

1933

Image

Acid end and futile solutions

Why assume there is a solution – there is no solution - endgames are in the shadow and image of death. Game, set, match ...its over.

One is no longer creating a personality, but scrubbing in the embers to hold onto one.

No wonder people shun the old. They have a handle on futility that carries a deadly weight.

Whatever the old do is contemptible, commanding of indulgence, compassion. Acceptance of decline through to clinging onto being relevant. At root there is a lust to shovel them into grave.

The yawn of patronage by the young.

What sympathy or interest does one have in the acting out of the old, however glorious. The disposition is to humour – and rightly so – it is not the cut and thrust of living.

Last night old friends – we talked round tail ends – a purpose for the declining years. Marching to the end – a compliant end. Earnest all in the endeavour to be whatever one should be in the twilight years twixt 60 and 80 – a quarter of life without a role – in search thereof without the compulsion and importance of flurry in the middle of the swim – creeping up the shore to dehydrate – a scattering on the fringe. Trying to do it right without a clue as to what is right and what could be right. The precariousness, tightrope of staying upright in the face of futility. The whole business of managing not to fall off into the abyss of despond.

Is it better to throw oneself with unremitting passion clutching to the last at a sense of purpose a la under death sentence the final sculpture of Elizabeth Frink, Potters play – or to dabble – back to the delights of primary school, life once more a process of tasters? Perhaps a case to be made for play as a means of whiling away the time of living – you may as well use the faculties and savour, play pretend games – religious or humanistic.

Is there a story in acceptance of old age, that death is round the corner and winding down, animal preparations, the calm? Or is the only story the fight, the denial? The discard of possessions and worldly achievements of course feature in one's thoughts – but is 'doing' the preferred drama? Does there have to be the project to legitimise declining years? Does the statement have to be made one way or the other – is there no other post 60?

Demand for continued zest for living as one gets old is as absurd an obligation as the lie of religion. Any deception in the name of promoting happiness, fending off fear, gloom, boredom seems to be the requirement of acceptable living, a duty to fellow sufferers at the brink, and collective deceiving is the stuff of the progressive lie, the conviction of worthwhile without future – the pretence that from the top of the tree of life that all below is not dust.

It is strange hearing of the boys high flying celebrity eminent liaisons to reflect that once I had similar – sharing platforms with ministers, lead thinker on family policy in my day, creating government in waiting and government in power strategy. Ephemeral and vanished – the past, the memory and non memory a diminished currency. I reflect on a negligent dismissive response to my father's attempt to sum up his life and worth. I was in my late 20s and he in his late 60s. As it happened unknown to me he was terminally ill which adds to the guilt – but the irreverent view of an old person's tale pertains near to death or not. An old soldier's stories so much more the stuff of extremes and excitement than the life of a newer at peace person, but the present prevails, the former diminished into an old man's record stuck in groove. Occasionally I have tried to reassert through reminiscence to be met by a glazed look of boredom – even from my peers. The consolation is that relegation is pretty widespread – up to the highest echelons – grandees brought to their knees. No wonder hanging on in there in the House of Lords is the preferred route to dissolution rather than a pre-death neutering.

Redemption

To set against the shrivel of dissolution, there are shifts and points of expansion for all that they sit as a detached overlay. The core of emotion is disengaged, but these novelties are intriguing for all that. There is an intellectual detached witnessing of self and setting at this stage of the living game that has a curiosity value.

Craving the expansion of perspectives

Is the foreshortened vision from the top of the tree – far beneath my feet looking down – rather than above my head looking up – that makes for this desperation for visual length?

One can intellectualise and that is real, but this magnetic draw towards vistas – shying away from, shunning close up vision – is quite magnetic, quite animal. The nearest analogy is the drive to clear out the lair in old age ready for departure.

But there is other stuff about looking that is less easily catalogued and explained away. Overshadowing the grope for vista, is a tilt from the verbal to the visual – the difference as big as the change on the body between the rise and dip of the sea's swell – a startling break in the monotony of water. Hard to locate the why and wherefore. Still, must reflect whether this is a backward move of the mind – is there some closure of neuro circuits, a diversion of cognitive flow? That is the fear amidst this surprising and not unwelcome flip. I have even started viewing experiences as paintings on the backdrop of the mind. Verbal feats replaced with a general hazy aesthetic visual.

When I cite neural circuits I am flashing up something that happened to my brother following a horrendous car crash – brain pulled from the wreckage with IQ intact, but with the tilt of his mind changed for the year or so duration of his mend. A change that inclined him more towards the arts – and saw the emergence of a more relaxed, empathetic soul. Curiously it reprogrammed later to his former self.

Should the visual be cultivated in my later years – is it a diversion from the tight logical screwing of the mind, the discipline of effortful words? Reversion to primary, nursery unstructured thought and playing. Should one say a lifetimes written endeavour done, and play with shapes, colours, manipulations and daubes? Gawping at the backdrop of one's visual horizon, unspeaking – isn't that what they despise the elderly for doing? Is it lapse into vacancy or a lucky turn to have been donated an alternative perspective? (Not to gloss over - I am a better writer than artist.)

Timelines versus test

Have just been around 'Conceptual Art 1968-84' and am interested in how accepting I have become. The negative repudiation of the aesthetic tradition, the symbolic debunking, the linguistic challenge obsessing with the role of the signifier, the political stance, the absence of a feast for the eyes: all these in the past would have

prompted my vocal derision. But now I see it as a phase and stance that was needed – it had to be gone through – or rather our insight has benefitted from having gone through it. It is a question of now seeing things over time – changing. Not a static, universal, once and for all statement of my expectations of art. The perception of a timeline has increased. Indeed, fluid time and an historical perspective have mushroomed to something much bigger – a stamp on my latter day consciousness.

I no longer have a stipulation of continued relevance as a marker of good art. That it did something of import once with its knock on influence suffices.

Human operations

Portentous as it sounds, there is some growth in grasp of the working of human operations. Not comprehensively or conclusively, but tunnelling with a dim torchlight into odd recesses. An altered lens or unearthing of nuggets? Either or both notwithstanding, the whole business is somewhat interesting, and ‘interesting’ is enough - no longer a derogatory term in my altered vocabulary.

Shards of glass poking up out of a sea of relative amnesia

I am shocked by the impact of harshness/negatives that I hardly registered at the time, took in my stride, handled with equanimity, moved on or dismissed - their significance forcing a recognition now simply because in the multitude of experiences, daily rubs, emotional wear and tear – they have been selected by god knows what process or criteria to be remembered.

What were they? By and large put me down – from close to sources – sneers at ideas endeavours, capacity. Oddly impinging, disrupting a personal tale of high approval rating, conviction of inner worth. Threads of poignant feelings too pinpoint to episodes and momentary pinpricks. Incidents of loneliness of mother and father in their separated isolation – supper alone - silences – echoing solitude.

Caustic parental swipes at others and the world – disconcerting, untoward, sufficient to turn my head. Why did these small indictments take hold so sharply? Not obviously at the time, but rattled around for a lifetime for latter day obsessive exposure.

So should one unearth each of these niggles and ponder them, the ramifications or ripples out into life? Dig around the root canal of disease, festering? Perhaps to reflect if there are equivalent positives – I suspect not, but somehow one always feels obliged; balance and optimism de rigueur. Partly it is wanting to push at something that is newish and only pertinent in these latter stages of life. Novelty and introspective nosiness off the worn tracks of well trammelled, traversed thought.

Dream last night that was a replay of some 30 years ago – a bit after my father’s death – that he had not died but had been living in seclusion with care or in a home in the North of Sweden and I had not had contact – just dwindled link – haunted not cared for – deserted – thought he had dementia – no point. In the previous dream I went to visit, excruciating in the wake of not having seen him in years. The relief on

waking, forced waking, and that none of it had happened. His was an early death in our near presence. How has that strange seed/thread of thought lodged itself in some nook of the cranium – a surviving, mummified crust uncovered in some dusty corner?

On a flight. Reading about the Workers Educational Association and unfathomably tears started to trickle down – the struggles, the grievances, the feeling sorry, the hurts to others and indubitably self – the stuff and sensibility of a left wing disposition. And the dream of the great educational escape in the collective consciousness since '45. Recollection of the red left wing educational books in the bedroom of my working class friend's house; welsh valleys, mining. But why had this left its mark? What was the genetic strain? Why so great a hold and why did it ignite so young? What embedded sense of grievance?

And how many of the apparently slightest of impingements on my consciousness at the time have taken hold of their own volition – a taking hold that apparently vastly outstrips the initial feeling. An arbitrariness. This egocentric reflection alone tells me how much ideas are governed by emotions.

Emotions

Emotions have cognition by the throat. Is that what is being conjectured? Well then, one must consider that even this reflection is likely to be bound up with the emotion of being at the top – with vertigo looking down and nowhere to go looking up. As with any other phase there is external context and internal psychology - bound components of living and thinking. Reflections from a life perspective have as much as any idea an emotional tangle, plus some of experience added to the mix.

So the contention is that the degree to which intellectual thought is at the beck and call of emotions is understated, and there may be benefits for adjudication if greater canniness came into play. A host of intellectual houses have their foundations in emotional dispositions - witness tendencies toward belief versus scepticism, the embrace of authority versus a rebellious streak, the left right divide. Indeed, the question should be asked whether any do not. There is an intellectual and emotional mesh in philosophy. But the emotional component does not wipe out the validity of the intellectual exercise. Rather the labyrinth of philosophical disputation is worthwhile at the very least because it takes emotion to its farthest reaches.

The emotional programmed psyche plus cognition demand recognition in cross-examination of self, other individuals and collective attitudes and behaviours. When structures of thought/ programmes of life and emotions are grossly out of kilter – guaranteed trouble ahead. Ditto where structures that are the product of a particular emotional persuasion are imposed on a contrasting emotional seam, a war of emotional by-products ensues.

Attachment

A current prime example of 'out of kilter' has been the failure to accommodate 'attachment' across structures of state and social relations – rather less of a shortcoming in our one to one relations at the family hearth. We have come to acknowledge via psychology and the insights of Bowlby et al. the importance of the bonding attachment of infant to an individual adult as a point of security – effective for life.

Attachment is about exclusivity, a one to one relationship with emotional open access to all others a sign of failure, the emotional umbilical cord broke. But there is a pathway as time goes by – the siren-call of horizons, away from home, across sea and beyond – the difference adventure and wing spread of growth. The two, the former exclusive, the latter inclusive, are contradictory impulses axiomatic to survival.

It takes but a small feat of imagination to transpose attachment claims and the counter-claims of the other beyond – from one on one individual operations to group dynamics.

I recently went to a lecture by an academic on 'connectivity' versus 'tribalism'. On the side of virtue, it may come as no surprise, was 'connectivity'. But no psychology was on offer – the geography of mobile labour, city connections across coastlines, transport, infrastructure, you name it - but no mention of psychology. No allowance was made for the human condition, no understanding of the conflictual nature of our cerebral modus operandi. As virtuous surely as 'connectivity' is 'attachment' primarily one to one – child attachment to parent, family, community by extension. Indiscriminate, broad affections are signs of faulty attachment, not healthy adherence. Reconciling this with an urge for breaking boundaries, getting out and expansion is the conundrum. It isn't a question of good or bad, it is simply the way it is and the best endeavour must be to go with and accommodate the flow – the mechanics of siphoning off rupture, offering safety valves of some sort. A glimpse of recognition and reconciliation if at all feasible, rather than a blinkered triumphalism of one over t'other. Knowing that however great the triumph, the failed worm will turn.

The psychology of the individual dogs or rewards us to our grave – but how little we work with it. And as to why I simply don't know except to think that perhaps it is a question of which psychological pull is in the ascendancy across groups, which collection of individual dispositions has the reins of power. A ding dong of contradictions as it is in the muddle of the human psyche. Ditto why world intercourse is and will remain one of politics.

Living with risk and the cycle of decay

Having wondered how everyday drives, modes of living continue pretty much as per normal during war, the reason dawned on me that it is a similar predicament to habitual life in peacetime – non-stop risk, any time, any place, illness, pain, death; –

the latter everyone's destiny, as to a greater or lesser degree the first two. Risk is the condition that extraordinarily we sustain whatever.

We hide away behind inflated horror of human engendered suffering to diminish the perception of the constant, unremitting terror. The atrocities of nature far outweigh those of man – so what is the beef? Multitudes anticipate, experience god awful exits au naturel. Surely this diminishes the necessity to wail for the few who meet their their end through human inflicted killing.

Whatever route or cause, risk is the inherent condition of end sequential on being.
Howl for 'Mummy'
- *the bugger of 'attachment' betrayed.*

The rounds of communities dissolving. Clearances, repeat disappearance of cohorts to dying; their enterprises, convictions snuffed. The balloon of drama peters out with the relentless expurgation of air
- *the bugger of 'attachment' betrayed.*

Contingency

Sartre's original name for his book Nausea was melancholia. And the cause of this melancholia was the contingent nature of life – the impact of chance – the butterfly effect. Versus necessity which implies some sense of purpose.

Progress

So in the game or toil of living beset with risk and decay coped with by hook or crook - dope and stories - in the twists of culture, – what can be said of the tug of 'progress'? What of this seam of consciousness that keeps head above water in many ways?

I have written extensively of the fallacy of progress – not of material gain or scientific understanding, but of what may vaguely be construed as progress in sympathetic social values. Instead an interpretation is proffered of morality as the management of the interplay of multiple drives across acquisitiveness, status, self-preservation, fear, aggression, the urge to power, sexuality, the search for self-fulfillment – as well as empathy – without a biologically pre-determined prioritisation of one impulse over the rest.

With the location of these drives within human biology, neurological systems, what place is there for progress? There is the perceptual lie of 'never again'. 'Never again' we say in the full knowledge that, from negligence to sadism, it will be done ad infinitum across institutions - finance, caring, criminal justice, relationships.

Rejecting as a fallacious coping mechanism delusional notions of 'progress' - the call I made was to face the cold bath of reality; to brace for truth and thereby better manage the human condition.

But a while later with a lesson from the top of the tree I have a little more appreciation that such a call echoes hollow, because the prop of progress may be needed as much as oral comfort and attachment from dummies to booze.

Even material progress, shifts and movements, labour under a black prognosis of ultimate dissolution in holes and vortexes. But without the illusion of movement what would make half the world get up in the morning? Without the spring thrust and drive of Dylan Thomas's 'green fuse' – the extraordinary growth spurt with decay and slash back in store a few months down the line – and, in terms of perpetuity, with a lined up destiny of in built world obsolescence.

And so

..... to death – born to it, capable of managing it, but declining so to do. I have often pondered agog at the habitual throwing up of hands with shock – almost an inbuilt trigger of surprise, not unlike the received response to routine anti- social acts.

Why do we not manage dying? It could be done. Why cherish the trauma, the drama – why preserve the pain and random exits, contingent visitation - why the preservation of a sense of arbitrary fate at considerable sensory cost?

Dying is not easy for many. At what cost we keep the lottery option afloat – indeed keep a lid on those who wish to extricate themselves. Is it a lack of trust in the human psyche fearing that unleashed the inclination to trammel others would run amok? How far has this thesis been analysed in dispassionate mode? Scantily and laced with taboo. Rather we are programmed lemming like to hold to a particular crazy course.

Stories

Reflections on change has its compensations – sniffing, even liking an altered texture of living and, however sharp the wind, the perspective and enhanced smattering of understanding from the top of the tree has something that pricks to life the intellectual – and even has something to echo beyond in the shell of the odd receptive ear.

But what is left enduring beyond a sensory physical and mental metamorphosis? It seems to be that essence of humanity – fabulation. Pre-eminent stories from the past, fitting in the missing links, bits and pieces. Memoirs in all their various guises.

Constructions for the future? Fantasies of the mind as the unwritten scroll are a consolation prize worth taking to the end of life. Many chose closure with filling in their past, but few with speculation – yet a repeat refrain is that the pity of death is not to know the end of the story. You can't, but you can make believe as we all did to extract enjoyment from childhood. A second infancy plotting with all the options at its fingertips.

Scanning and plotting, envisioning the future, several scenarios in a second guess chaos theory. All is contingency on an act, a whiff; unpredictable, balls in the air. Arts, social relations, personal relations, planet – many hours of speculative, scheming pleasure instead of endless retrospective drag on the emotions. A counter to tossing empty on an acre of time.

Is this an end note sans melancholia? Or might it even be a partner thereto – in the easing towards demise?

Cultivating the analgesic of melancholy.

Being in dominance, winning is so precarious as one faces the fall. Contrast the gentle pleasure of being on the outside, the warmth of self consolation, the secret half lit precious world curled up in oneself on the outside – huddled round the fire of pity, the balm of tears.

Consoling glimpses of people and possibilities from which nothing but the might have been.

Greying, the soft forgiveness of rain. An animal that relishes in a mild way licking its wounds. Shuffle off – turn over and sleep.

Slices of melancholy

Sitting for breakfast in the crypt of St Martin in the Fields absorbing the visual – domed multiple bricks, muted and complicated in their anarchic shades slapped in service, propping the symmetrical arches forming the underbelly of church and the aspiration of my eyes. Human shapes watched, slumped, engaged, taut in a roll of slack, surface, delineation – sometimes a hypothetical black line around the silhouette gives a cut out for sticking on the curvature that formulates the back screen of my internal skull – the play of light filtered through a brain to some encapsulation for a time more than the present.

Sitting at the back of the car – on the fringes of family chatter, disengaged but touching the edge of vibration, – touching for safety the worn stone, finger touching spot of belief, a skin smear of defence against the cut dry and cold of utter solitude; - babble of jaws, a gentle buzz. Is this for the cultivation as one slips from mainstream per force? A habitual proclivity that in former life might have been construed an introvert malfunction, frigidity in the face of life and throng, - now might be part of an elderly persona, a shuffling off eccentricity, a muted stance cultivating a peculiar sweet.

Melancholy sits ill with a painter's palette of strident colour – eyes shaded from an oppressive sun, the impressionists have diminished appeal. Muted hues to be sought instead applied to thoughtful faces and still lives.

The exaltation of white and its shadows - grey, black if not too slab like – linear, mottled by preference. The tender perspective and intrigue of old photos that remove the stuff and blood and sauce red rich of living flesh. It is in the event the dowdy and tremulous demarcation with which one engages in a melancholy vein. Even blue will do; blood returning de-oxygenated to the heart. Hiding away in a colour that threads its way through retrospection – globules in poems, pictorial – twists of the mind's lining. The elaboration of

multifaceted guises - mining nuggets – the value of a stone shivering white, grey, black through water. Thoughts, links, obscure objects down which to drill are endless. Deliverance in a set of mumbling beads. Though no doubt a wall of tedium may rear in times down the line – for now this will do – the melancholy of the mind ennobled.

Melancholy and infinity. In landscape, art - craving for the vastly outward, the shrinking inward – that which takes the eye through forever and beyond. Perspective, colour, shape, sequence. The aesthetic.

Why do sculptural shapes grow on you as you stare?

Hastings shore - hugely wonderful early morning – almost nothing of fellowman – a welcome return to the elements, immersion in sky, water and sod.

'Tragedy' befitting at closure – the pleasure of tears jerked by the sheer sadness of living, nostalgia, elegy, emigration in all its guises – lost places, peoples, times, smells, sights. Should one probe the neurology of this phenomena or let it lie?

Melancholia, the half light institutionalised in cathedrals, the smallest church in the wilderness. The modern has not managed to capture the ephemeral whiff, unable to because melancholy runs counter to forensics.

Shades of religiosity in the melancholic streak – an overlap of sensibility – the shades of contemplation versus doing – against the back-drop of the grey and stone of places of worship. The saddest reaching for the sky, the shortness of the highest reach – and below earth glued minutiae of figurines.

In praise of a similar skyward stretch and shriek of trees.

How much of melancholia is the stuff of houses of cards the building of which renders life more interesting at home here with the titillation of a minor key?