

GOETHE'S PANTHEON

(A Short Story for the 21st Century inspired by Darkness At Noon)

'So you get a second innings', Max said. He was sitting at the bar of what would become his new local, talking to three delightful strangers. It was a stroke of luck really, because he only went to the 'Dog and Duck' to watch the Champions League Final between Barcelona and Manchester United. He did not expect to meet any one and was reconciled to coming straight home afterwards. But here he was still sitting at the bar talking to his new friends. They insisted that all the drinks were on them, since this was Max's very first night in Newtown.

Of course, Max was unused to instant friendship. Is this what the people of Newtown are like? Max was reminded of something written by the young Marx: When communist men and women get together they have no ulterior motives. They share a few drinks and their only need is 'company, association, which in turn has society as its goal....The brotherhood of man [and woman] is not a hollow phrase, it is a reality.' Well they say Marx is making a comeback in these troubled times. All the same, Max dared not declare himself just yet, in case he alienated his new friends. He was also a little wary of spontaneous camaraderie. It is a rare thing these days, in a society which is wedded unashamedly to money, the callous cash-nexus.

What did Marx say? Money has become man's 'sole essential trait'. Even the cult of celebrity is a means to an end. At it's very worst, it allows the talentless to

massage their egos and to make money at the same time. Narcissism is substituted for ability. The bottom line is: With a bit of cosmetic surgery - maybe some work in the gym - you can be beautiful too (in the celebrity sense); if not, at the very least, get your teeth fixed and apply the whitener. But if you're mug is not on Facebook, well you're a mug! 'Christ', thought Max, 'I've only just got myself a mobile phone. Even if I wanted to, I haven't got a chance!' Technology-wise, I am still 20th century man!

Then again the big one could have been setting Max up, before mugging him on his way home. No! He was not like that at all. In fact he reminded Max of the big Lebowski in the film of the same name. This Dude also wore shades in the evening. ('The world is so bad, I have to shut most of it out', he later explained. Fair enough.) Just like the Jeff Bridges character, he was big physically and he had a personality to match. Max liked one side of the Dude straightaway: He was an ex-rugby player from Wales. (a front rower, of course.) And his love for the game was even greater than Max's. This Dude had once transported himself all the way down to New Zealand, home of the 'mighty' All Blacks, because he wanted to learn how to play the game better.

Bob was the Dude's sidekick. He was smaller and less flamboyant, but pleasant enough and certainly very intelligent. In fact he would soon prove to be a real challenge for Max. Later Bob was joined by Sue. 'What a gorgeous woman!' This was Max's first impression; friendly like the others, but she's pretty and shapely, so this gave her the edge! Max was equally transfixed by her warmth and sensuous

nature. She was curious and arty too. 'Bob is one lucky guy', he thought. 'But I also get the impression that Sue's a vulnerable type, although Bob doesn't seem to care. That makes me sad. Well I would want to fix that myself if I were you mate; if only I could.'

Bob was the first to engage with Max's proposition. It was the start of a long and complex discussion. 'Why do we need a second innings?', he inquired. The other two were prepared to sit in on the conversation, at least for the moment! Max had an unexpected audience for his philosophy of life, a rare treat indeed! But how would he handle it? 'Well, you know, mother nature is bountiful', he said, somewhat hesitantly. 'She also knows that youth is wasted on the young, especially us humans. Sorry about the old cliché!' Sue, at least, smiled approvingly. This remark had clearly struck a chord with her. She was just old enough to appreciate what the statement really means. (41 she said, but she looked younger)

'Surely that's not right!', Bob declared. 'Otherwise, we would all know about it. So we would behave badly the first time around. Then things would be worse, a lot worse, than they are now!' Max knew that he was in a real battle of wits. He had to think quickly. 'Well, we all do live twice. In fact there are no exceptions! It is one of nature's hidden laws' Max was struggling. He felt as though he was going to become unstuck, even before he had got started. Then the title of Henry Handel Richardson's first novel (which he had just finished reading), popped into his head. It seemed appropriate. 'The fact is most of us need two lives for *'The Getting of Wisdom'*. You see, even if we do manage to get it during our first life, by then we're too old. It's wasted on us.'

‘Youth is wasted on the young. Is that what you mean?’, said Bob’. Yes.’ ‘The getting of wisdom’ - what do you mean exactly’, asked the Dude. Sue joined in. ‘Is it something you can pick up, like when you want it?’ Was she being deliberately obtuse? (Max hoped so.) ‘Not at all, Sue; quite the opposite, in fact; it’s a quality that can’t be quantified, even in today’s money-obsessed world. The getting of wisdom means that we have the potential to learn something about life as we go through it. But to do that really well, we also have to be receptive to the wisdom of humanity’s finest thinkers and writers; not just people we meet.

‘But that’s unfair’, Bob shot back. ‘What about all those people who go through life and only read the News of the World (that was). At the last count there were at least 7 million of them! This scurrilous rag, of course, was not renowned as an advocate of high culture. But then again, as the saying goes, the media. only reflects what people want. That’s what they call democracy, isn’t it! On the other hand, you could say this is the price humanity pays in a society which allows itself to be driven by the free market.’

How could Max- the marxist- not be impressed by remarks such as these. By chance, it seemed he had found a kindred spirit in Bob; so far so good! But he had to press on, in the hope that he would be able to do justice to his defence of high culture. In today’s postmodern world, it takes a brave man to do that. For at least 20 years, the very idea of high culture has been subjected to a sustained attack. And it was the cultural intelligentsia who led the way, not the tabloid press. (But now the literati who write for the *Guardian Review*, are saying that the internet has

killed postmodernism; although they don't seem to know what has replaced it, if anything. Of course, they don't share Max's view: that postmodernism is the fag-end of modernism or art's decline; i.e. its submission to a totally commodified world. Once the market takes over, a work of art is valued as an asset; it is like property; you buy it as an investment; in the hopes that its value at auction will increase; not because of its intrinsic worth.

For the moment, however, all that Max could come up with was, 'If only we could be young, sexy, handsome or beautiful, as well as wise beyond our years, all at the same time! Because it's only then that we are able to enjoy life to the full without getting hurt - or hurting others; doing stupid things, making the wrong moves - so we end up being screwed up; no longer desirable to anyone - Of course, we all would like to help others to get wisdom as well'

He was suddenly aware that anyone of his listeners might say, 'Well, for something as important as that, I don't understand how I could possibly have missed it! How come YOU know this Max; whereas WE don't?' But no one did. Max had dodged the obvious flaw in his fable. Still, he had to box clever. 'You're right Bob, given the way society is organised, it is not a level playing field when it comes to the getting of wisdom.

It's bloody unfair. But the thing is, we are born again as the same soul, not as a newly incarnated one. As for the concept of the soul, I mean it's everything that makes us unique as people - There's no one else like me or you. Of course, there's

a catch, isn't there always? - We have to start with a tabula rasa. So the real challenge is: Can we get this wisdom before we get too old once again or is it always going to elude us?

'It sounds like the proverbial holy grail to me,' Bob countered. 'and you're theory is about as believable as 'Monty Python and the Holy Grail!' Max was unabashed. 'Well, actually, there is a GLIMMER of hope. In fact there are three possibilities. Firstly, we all have free will when it comes to the way we treat each other and what we want from life - Not everyone who is deprived turns out to be a criminal - It's also a question of family and self-belief, as well as class. Look at All Black legend, Jonah Lomu. He started out as a delinquent, who could have ended up in gaol. But his parents worked night and day to send him to boarding school, where he discovered the game of rugby. The rest is history. 'Oh you're right there, boyo,' the Dude said and then fell silent.

'Of course,' Max continued, 'the question of class IS a factor here. If I may be allowed to generalise, in this regard, the working class has always been worse off than the middle class; but today I think it is in an even worse position than it was before. It is not just a question of money and opportunity. It is also a question of motivation.

The middle class has always had more money and opportunity. So they tend to have more self-belief. And they never lose sight of the value of a good education for their children. This includes a willingness to learn, from our experience of life,

and from posterity too. In other words, they have the **ASPIRATION** to become more self-aware human beings. You need this just as much as aptitude.

‘On the other hand, the working class has ceased to exist as an entity.’ ‘Qua?’ ‘I mean, it’s no longer conscious of itself. Under Thatcher, the postwar consensus between state ownership, welfarism and the private sector gave way to the free market. Almost everything was privatised, including welfare and council services. New Labour carried on where Thatcher left off. It also relied on a Faustian pact with the City: An increasingly bloated financial sector provided more revenue in taxes, which helped pay for welfare and public services; the quid pro quo was the deregulation of its financial practices. Unfortunately this led to increasingly reckless speculation by investment banks, hedge funds and so on. At the same time the unions were shackled by anti-labour laws, which led to a workforce without rights. ‘Zero wages’ contracts take us back to the 19th century, don’t they! . Real Wages were depressed as a result. Social inequality increased. As for the left, it failed to step into the vacuum and create a new workers party....’ ‘My God Max, you should be a university lecturer!’

‘Only if I could be having a pint in the pub at the same time!’/‘ ‘Haha, I’ve often been pissed during a lecture.’ ‘Of course, starting with the MacMillan years in the 1950s (‘You have never had it so good’), workers saw themselves as stake-holders in a mass consumerist society. But during the Thatcher/New Labour years, most of them have forgotten about labour’s traditional respect for a good education: The fact that it offers an escape route from deprivation; not just in economic terms, but

ignorance as well. It didn't matter any more if an imperfect comprehensive system was under attack. As cheaper goods and services flooded the market, along with easy credit, the idea of educational achievement became less and less important.'

'Hmmm!'

'So the working class is not just FRAGMENTED in terms of the gap between white-collar and blue-collar workers; now it's become ATOMISED as well.'

'Atomised? That sounds like armageddon!'. 'By that I mean, it's up to each family (provided there is one) or individual to define who they are. This takes the form of ,

' I consume and therefore I am! As Adorno says, there is nothing left but 'to capitulate before the power of the advertised stuff' . 'Oh! I see: You're an Adorno fan as well, Max!' 'Well, Yeah; but I'm also quite critical of old 'Teddy' too. After all, in the late 1960s, he found himself lecturing to an empty lecture hall, because his students were out on the streets protesting about the 'Fascist' state, which they believed West Germany had become. May 1968 was just around the corner. Those were the days!....

'Anyway, I agree with Adorno when he says the masses try to gain 'spiritual peace' by making the imposed goods literally their own thing'. This is erroneously called 'individual taste'! And how does this affect the working class? Well, now the majority - parents as well as children - don't have any aspiration at all. I mean what happened to human curiosity? The pursuit of knowledge is too much like hard work. It's easier to join the rest of the pack. Become a perpetrator - or a victim - of 'brand name bullying', as the media calls it. Certainly, the recent riots revealed just

how important designer labels are to working class youth. With the odd exception, the rioters were mainly interested in looting things like blackberries and JD sports wear, weren't they? This absence of aspiration is also reflected in social networks like Face Book. The pinnacle of it all is the opportunity to become a celebrity. Hence the unbelievable popularity of TV shows like the X-Factor, and so on.

Bob nodded. 'It's a further development of Marx's point about commodity fetishism, right Max? Going back to the riots, it's true, they were more about looting, not just anything, big brand names in particular. So you could say this has taken commodity fetishism to a new level. Do you agree with that, Max? 'Hmmm, I think I understand what you mean Bob. Perhaps you're right!

Bob paused. But after a moment he said. 'I would love to talk about Adorno and his theory of the 'culture industry', which he sees as a distraction for the masses, etc. But more to the point, Max, you seem to have turned a positive into a negative. What about this glimmer of hope!'

'You're right Bob. But I didn't want to give you the impression that I'm a bourgeois sociologist! I had to introduce the tricky question of the 'interface' between mass consumerism and class. Anyway, just to counter Adorno's pessimism, let's have a bit of optimism, what I call, optimism of the last resort. Others might call it a bit of the old utopian socialism. That was what kept Benjamin kept going. I'm sure you know that he was Adorno's friend and colleague. After the defeat of 1933, What could be worse: These two guys were

leftwing intellectuals - Jewish as well - who were forced to flee the Nazis! Poor old Benjamin, he went Paris. He had no idea that France would fall so easily in 1940. There he was with the Gestapo hot on his heels!....Partly in homage to Benjamin, I would say my second glimmer of hope lies in his theory that, despite everything, man possesses a collective memory of his long hard struggle to become a 'social, human being'. It is buried in the unconscious. On this basis, he believed - or was it just hope - that the proletariat, as the bearer of this memory, would awaken from its slumber at the moment of crisis. Yesterday, it was Fascism. Today, we have late capitalism in extremis!'

'You know your critical theory, don't you Max! But what about your third glimmer of hope? 'Oh shit, Bob, I'm beginning to scrape the barrel here! Well, of course, there is luck. I mean our luck changes from one day to the next, doesn't it. Sometimes things go well for us - like our chance meeting here tonight - at others, they don't, like I could be run over by a bus tomorrow! (I very nearly was once. But that's another story!).'

'Well, Max, I think your idea that we have two lives, even if there's a catch, also this 'getting of wisdom', is a great idea!', Sue said. (So she's still listening. Great!)

'This all sounds like a science fiction story. I love interesting stories. If only I could write one myself. But I lack the confidence and I don't even have a decent dictionary; would you believe!'

Max sensed his opportunity He also wanted to see if Sue was a serious person.

‘Well, Sue! I just happen to have a spare one at home - I may be living in a empty flat at the moment with only the bare necessities. But I do have a few books, including a dictionary, which I can spare. It would be my pleasure to give it to you. It’s a good one too - a large Oxford English - Actually, I’m the one who can’t write stories. Yeah! I’ve got some interesting ideas, but I can’t write them down. I love literature, but I have no literary talent. So, why don’t you take this scenario of mine and turn it into a story. I’m sure you could do better than me?’

‘But I need to give you some more detail: One could ask, why is this getting of wisdom such a big deal any -way? I mean, why don’t we leave it to those who are bright, as well as privileged enough to have a decent education? Well I don’t believe in privilege! Why shouldn’t everyone have the same opportunity in life? Of course, individual aptitude will always be a factor - we can’t forget that - which varies from one person to the next. But my point is, we all possess the capacity to do better or ‘fail better’, if you like. That’s why everyone should be given that chance. As I said before, the sort of wisdom I am talking about goes way beyond actual life experience, although we can’t do without this either. The thing is, each of us should also have the desire to embrace the very best of human culture if we are to truly appreciate the world; not just sensuously, but also intellectually. Only in this way can we ‘acquire a musical ear, an eye for the beauty of form’, and so forth. In other words, our five senses need to be cultivated by an appreciative mind. Otherwise our senses remain ‘the prisoner of crude practical need’.

‘Take food as an example: A starving man does not appreciate food in the human sense, since his need for food is reduced to its ‘crudest form’; like that of a hungry animal. I would also argue that the word ‘food’ needs to be understood in a broader - metaphorical - sense. In a society obsessed with private property, money, consumerism and entertainment, I think it is fair to say the masses are being starved in the spiritual sense as well. The tragedy is that millions of human beings don’t know any better. So they don’t give a damn either, because they think that their present diet of ‘fast food’ is wonderful! On the other hand, a billionaire collector does not really appreciate the beauty and importance of his art collection, because he is primarily interested in its monetary value.

‘Beauty as an asset, it’s more than tainted! It’s like a beautiful woman who ends up as a prostitute!’ ‘That’s right Bob’ (Max was actually looking at Sue, the old todger began to stir; but he instantly realised how hopeless his situation was. So he pressed on, try to impress her with your mind, but this is equally hopeless!) ‘...And just to prove my argument, Sue, these are not my ideas. You can find them in Marx’s *EPM*. But on the basis of my desire for self-improvement, as well as my experience of life, especially now that I’m older, I embrace Marx’s wisdom wholeheartedly. Naturally I want to pass this on to others.’

Predictably, although he was still felt chagrin, Sue did not question anything Max said. He was hoping that, at the very least, she would ask him, ‘What is the *EPM*?’ Rather she turned back to Bob, who was deep in conversation with the Dude. He ignored her; even after Sue had begun to rub herself against his leg.

Instead Bob turned to Max, 'You have to say more about this getting of wisdom, he insisted . Max began to wonder if Bob wasn't really interested in the conversation. Perhaps he just wanted to provoke. Maybe he was also a little jealous of all the attention that Sue had been giving to Max. (But that was before he had started down this getting of wisdom road.) Despite the fact that Sue was besotted with Bob, this did not stop him humiliating her in front of the others. When she started to talk about her experience at a nudist beach, he accused her of being a fantasist. Perhaps Bob was beginning to find Sue tiresome? Yet here was Max thinking that Sue might just be the woman of his dreams. He even imagined that he might care about her a lot better than Bob. What a miss-match. Life is ironic, but cruel with it! Of course, this is only Max's personal view.

Right now, however, he desperately wanted to answer Bob's question in a way which could be both startling and convincing. He had started with a science fiction fable. So why not pursue that angle a little more? Max took another long sip from his Bombardier. 'We get this wisdom from the immortals. Of course, there's only one kind of immortality, which is strictly material; there's no need for the gods or God. Have you read Milan Kundera's novel, 'Immortality'? You'll find it in there. We can also thank the great 17th Jewish philosopher, Spinoza, for this view as well. As a young man, he was thrown out of the synagogue in Amsterdam for heresy. Politically, he was a radical, who was ostracised by his peers, because he advocated tolerance and peace. Despite the accusation of being an atheist, he remained a committed rationalist. Spinoza's most important idea was his rejection of the concept of dualism - you know - the idea that the mind and body are

separate entities. He argued the opposite. Therefore great ideas are not inspired by an external God. Rather 'all consciousness is of the body'. For Spinoza, the essence of God is reason; which opens up the possibility for self-realisation.'

Sue turned to the Dude, who had just finished his umpteenth pint of Directors. 'I don't understand this anymore; do you?', she murmured.

In a flash Max realised, ('Je regret': For Christ's sake, I could never become this delightful Sue's soul-mate, even if we were attracted to each other. Deluding yourself - again - Max, you're just a silly old bugger! Only thing to do is to acquit yourself well here in your debate with Bob. He's an intellectual.) 'We-e-e-ll, Bob (What shall I say next?) 'Umm....To get back to Kundera: In *Immortality* - his novel, remember - he argues that there are two kinds of immortality: the 'great' and the 'minor'. He gets this from Goethe. You can find it in *From My Life (Poetry and Truth)*. Once again, it has nothing to do with religion; i.e. faith in the immortal soul. Firstly, great immortality, in the words of Matthew Arnold, derives from 'the best that has ever been thought and said' - by those men and women who belong to our cultural posterity - Goethe called it the *Pantheon*. On the other hand, minor immortality is all that the rest of us (mediocre) mortals can hope for. It is the memory of a person in the minds of all those who knew us after we die, providing, of course, that we deserve to be remembered! Inevitably, of course, this sort of immortality disappears after a generation or two.'

But Bob was having none of this: 'Max, excuse me; but you're a fucking ELITIST!' He could have added that since antiquity, knowledge and culture have been the monopoly of rich, old European men; it's a gender/culture thing and ageist too. (Go on Bob, defend the postmodernists; since you're one of them, aren't you!) '...So the pantheon is merely a social construct, based on wealth, power and privilege, which is biased against the younger generation; not to mention other cultures. Apart from that, we now have the internet, which has democratised culture and art. It gives everyone the opportunity to create something which can be appreciated by thousands, even millions of people. And who's to say that what Joe Blogs puts on You Tube is any worse than Goethe's Faust, for example! Therefore any self-respecting democrat (let alone a socialist) should condemn this Pantheon nonsense outright!'

'Well, I beg to disagree Bob - and I'm a socialist, a marxist in fact. After four pints of beer, Max felt confident enough to launch into an extended pub lecture (laced with quotes from Marx). He hadn't done this for a while! Yet he was about to start one with three complete strangers. Bob, of course, was his biggest challenge. So if it all comes off, Max really has discovered three soul-mates and on his first evening in Newtown. Life might be beautiful, after all!

'Firstly, bear with me guys. Good ideas, like art, should be a struggle to understand and appreciate. Leave that which is banal to popular culture, to entertainment, of which there is already too much. In fact, we're drowning in it. Secondly, this argument about elitism is misunderstood.' 'How come?'

‘There’s no simple answer, Bob. But if I could answer in a single sentence, I would say: It is the hierarchical STRUCTURE of capitalist society itself which is inherently elitist. It doesn’t make any difference whether I’M an elitist or not. Hierarchy is a feature of all class societies; but under capitalism a qualitative change occurred. This is because a new division of labour was required, which is quite unlike anything that went before.’

‘That’s a complicated answer, Max. And you have already used more than one sentence. But I want to know more. Let’s say it is a refresher course from the stuff I learnt about Marx years ago! I think this is all old hat, so you will have to be GOOD. OK!’

‘I’ll do my best Bob. But before I do, I must deal with your point about the democratisation of art, thanks to the internet. I don’t believe this is happening at all. Let me illustrate my point by way of a recent experience which I had with You Tube:

‘The BBC have just finished airing Vasily Grossman’s novel *Life and Fate* on Radio 4.’ ‘Oh! I missed that.’ ‘What a pity, Bob, because many people would argue that this novel is the *War and Peace* of the 20th century. Certainly, it’s a great epic....It is centred around the Battle of Stalingrad in late 1942. Millions of Russian Soldiers and civilians - along with half-a-million German soldiers - died as a result. Without doubt, this was one of the most terrible battles in history. It was also the turning point in the Second World War. The Wehrmacht was bled white on

the Eastern Front. Hitler met his own Waterloo at Stalingrad, not on the beaches of Normandy! But to come to the point, I thought it was very commendable of the BBC to dramatise, *Life and Fate* for a wider audience.

‘But I also wanted to find out what sort of response there was on the internet. The first thing I looked up was a You Tube piece called, ‘Kenneth Branagh and David Tenant on *Life and Fate*’. I was appalled to discover that, not only had it attracted very few comments; the few that were there were either crass or ignorant. One person wrote, ‘My two favourite men on the planet’. Another wrote, ‘I love the way Kenneth Branagh rolls his ‘r’ on the word ‘brilliant’. The third comment said, ‘Blimey! Not more Jewish flag waving.’ I felt compelled to redress the balance and so I wrote, ‘It’s not about Jewish flag waving, but about *Red Star* war correspondent Grossman’s disillusionment with Stalinism, made worse by the fact that this brutal system - the mirror image of Fascism - claimed to be building a communist society. The enormous sacrifices that were made to prop up this monstrous lie is the greatest of tragedies. It let capitalism off the hook historically and look at us now!’ ‘Ok! Ok! Max you have a point. But why is it that the masses abuse such a wonderful technological means of communication; this is what the internet is intrinsically. Though I don’t have to tell you it is used by pedophiles, and many more, for their own debased purposes. And as for the vast majority, of course, they use the internet for practical reasons: Online-shopping has now become their method of choice. Only a minority use it in the purely intellectual sense, as you and I do.’

‘That’s another very difficult question Bob. In fact it supports my argument. But if you want me to answer this question, can you give me some more slack? ‘You really like theorising, don’t you, old fella! Well, I suppose I’ll have to indulge you.’

‘Thanks mate. You say you have studied Marx a little bit. That’s a big help. I assume you know he was a dialectician. Hegel, his teacher, was also one. But he was an idealist, whereas Marx discovered materialism. That’s why he had to stand Hegel on his head: Marx argues that ideas spring from material reality, not the other way round; albeit man needs ideas in order to change the material world, especially to reorganise society. These ideas also need an agency, that is a social class, which begins to react to the changing conditions....

‘At a fundamental level, developments within the sphere of human culture as a whole - by that I mean science, art, philosophy, law, political ideas and so on - these take place more or less independently of developments in the economic sphere, such as a change in the means of production, the form of exchange, and so on. On the other hand, the mode of production, which is the basis of these new ideological forms, has to be established, before consciousness has any possibility of revolutionising society. By so doing, Marx, revolutionised philosophy. As he also famously said, ‘Previously philosophers have interpreted the world. The point is to change it!

‘Just to give you a couple of historical examples....’ You are beginning to sound like my old history teacher - Bob cut in - ‘Given our age difference Bob, I could have been, if only; but fate chose otherwise! Anyway, the examples: Firstly, during

the eighteenth century, the European Enlightenment or 'the age of reason' reached its apogee. The notion that man is essentially a rational being, who is capable of creating a just and humane world for everyone, was first espoused by revolutionary aristocrats, e.g. Rousseau. It was he who famously said, 'Man is born free, but everywhere is in chains' ...Later the Enlightenment ideal was embraced by a new revolutionary class, the bourgeoisie. But as the profits from trade and empire accumulated, the latter began to demand economic and political freedom, which brought them into sharp conflict with the old regime, the church on the one side and the monarchy on the other. Hence the famous battle cry of the French revolution: 'liberty, equality and fraternity!' But when the bourgeoisie talked about the UNIVERSAL rights of man, they did not really mean it; because that would have meant the emancipation of the lowest artisan, women, of course, and last, but by no means least, the millions of slaves in the new world, who had created the wealth in the first place.

'Well said Max! You should come and lecture my students.' 'I'll take that as a compliment Bob! Secondly, in the nineteenth century, we had the industrial revolution, which led to the rise of another revolutionary class, the proletariat or working class. But unlike their bourgeois masters, their interests were fully compatible with the demand for liberty, etc. As Marx famously pointed out, they have 'nothing to lose but their chains'. However there was a downside to that: The industrial revolution also involved a qualitative change in the division of labour, which is 'mind-crippling in its effects', as far as the working class is concerned; that is the majority of society.'

‘A qualitative change in the division of labour. What do you mean by that?’ Bob demanded . ‘Well, the best way to explain this is to compare the present with the past, by that I mean antiquity. In ancient Athens, for example, as long as you were a free citizen, you had an all-rounded education, which gave you the opportunity to engage in intellectual labour, such as philosophy, talking about science or art and political debate, as well as practical labour, working out how to build the Parthenon, for example. Of course, they left manual labour to the slaves. But this was still very much a patriarchal society, so even highborn women were excluded from intellectual labour, since they were considered to be second-class citizens. This would remain the situation as long as the old religious and patriarchal ties remained strong.

‘But under modern capitalism, as even Hegel acknowledged, on the one side, there was a tremendous increase in mechanisation, and on the other, the ‘engulfing of quality by quantity.’ This was a consequence of the rise of commodity society. It seemed a logical step forward. Once everything can be reduced to a quantity, capital becomes far more flexible. Concretely, money (in all its forms) becomes a universal unit of measure....

‘At the same time use value, in the form of goods and services, including labour itself, are transformed into exchange value or commodities. Therefore, along with everything else, the worker becomes a commodity, which the capitalist can order or dispose of at will, in accordance with his needs. His primary aim, of course, is to increase his profit margins, regardless of the human cost. But it is the worker who

pays the price in human terms; because he is reduced to the level of a machine or a mere 'cog in the wheel'. As Marx says in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, this has the effect of 'depressing' workers 'both intellectually and physically'. Henceforth, intellectual labour, including the making and appreciation of art, is reserved to a privileged few. Whilst the capitalists may be content with their position as 'extensive sausage makers' and so on; they become increasingly dependent on an intermediary layer of experts, each with his own specialist field. Marxists define the latter as the ideologues of bourgeois society. We could also call them academics or the intelligentsia.

'Careful Max, remember I'm a university lecturer!' Bob joked. At this point, the Dude, who had been very quiet for a while, spoke up. 'Max, if you don't mind, Sue and I are just nipping out for a smoke'. It was to be the first of several such interruptions. Max was not deterred by the Dude's snub. 'That's fine by me', he said genially. After all, Bob was still very interested in his argument, if only because he was waiting for Max to slip up. Max, of course, was determined not to.

He decided that a prudent pause was in order. (Really!) It was a sign for Bob to restart the conversation. 'So we're no longer talking about that idyl of society, which Homer describes in the Iliad, wherein 'men take divers delight in divers deeds', as he so poetically puts it; are we!' 'That's exactly right Bob. More importantly, the Enlightenment ideal was also embraced by the ideologues of bourgeois society - the political economists - in particular Adam Smith and Ricardo. Smith was a moral philosopher as well as a social theorist. If you read

him when he is wearing his social theorist hat, he rationalises the bourgeois division of labour, along with commodity society, as progress in the real sense of the term, because it is a more efficient means for the accumulation of capital. This in turn - with the help of mechanisation - reduces the cost of labour and thereby increases the accumulation of capital even further....' 'Hmmm'.

Max's mind was firing on all cylinders now. He was in full flow. While Bob seemed to be on the back foot. 'So Smith justifies a process whereby most of the wealth that is created by the workers goes to the capitalist. The latter only needs to ensure that the wages he pays to his workers are sufficient to enable them to feed and clothe themselves and their families; to put a roof over their heads, etc. As for the bourgeois state and its responsibilities, by and large, it is prepared to be responsible for the welfare of all its citizens, only in so far as there are enough consumers who have the money to purchase the commodities, which they themselves have already produced, both the necessities of life, as well as 'unnecessary wants'.....'Mmmm'

'On the other hand, Smith, as a son of the Enlightenment; has to say something about the human cost. So now he puts on his moral philosopher's hat and introduces the idea of 'the man of perfect virtue', who is able to reconcile his own selfish feelings with a social conscience. This is his famous 'invisible hand'. In other words, Smith presumes that the capitalist is a moral human being as well. If only for altruistic reasons, he will ensure there is a redistribution of wealth; because it is mutually beneficial to both the capitalist and the worker. Marx, of course, dismissed this as an idealist argument.

'I'm afraid you've lost me there Max. I missed the point where you jumped from the Enlightenment to Adam Smith.' 'I'm not surprised Bob. It's a tricky juxtaposition to explain, even for Marxist scholars. Perhaps I can clarify this by giving you another of Marx's famous aphorisms: 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence; rather it is their social existence which determines their consciousness.' Once again, for the capitalist, the accumulation of capital is the most important thing, This comes way before his moral conscience. Of course, there are always exceptions. Samuel Smith, the famous brewer, was a contemporary of Smith. He supported the antislavery movement. Today, we have multi-billionaires like Warren Buffet, who are also philanthropists. But they are the exceptions that prove the rule. Today, as always, a majority of capitalists prefer to give their money to the Republican Party or the Conservative Party.

'Looking back, one could argue that commodity capitalism hijacked the Enlightenment ideal. But that does not stop today's scholars from attacking the Enlightenment as a bad idea. Maybe this is a symptom of a crisis of the intelligentsia itself.' Bob said nothing....

Periodically, of course, the capitalist system goes into crisis, as a result of its own internal contradictions; concretely, overproduction/under consumption . Then the true nature of the capitalist class is clearly demonstrated: Workers are made redundant, social welfare is cut back. They look for scapegoats like 'dole bludgers', and so on. The capitalists, along with the political class, etc. are so enmeshed with their system, they actually believe that there is no alternative. Look at what's happening now!

‘Yes,’ Bob replied, ‘Obviously this is what is happening across the developed world. It is spearheaded by the draconian ‘austerity programme’, which the European Union is trying to foist on a hapless Greek people. But all this austerity carries the risk of another ‘double-dip’ recession. It could be worse than 2007-8.’

‘But I don’t think the latest crisis is part of an endless cycle’, Max went on. ‘This is because I see capitalism as an organic process. The system has evolved over the last 300 years. But its relations of production is a contradictory one: It’s basic problem is a constant need to expand its profit margins, which it extracts from the labour of billions of human beings; but over time the rate of profit has a tendency to fall; unless a new solution can be found.

‘Previously we had industrial capitalism, which replaced mercantilism. Whilst the latter led to a tremendous growth in trade and empire, at home, the old feudal ties continued, based on large estates, including the right to use common land; Manufacturing was still dependent on the cottage industry. But the home market needed to be expanded. The problem was solved at the end of the 18th century, thanks to the profits of empire, based on a capitalist form of slavery, which was far more brutal than that anything in ancient times. It provided vast amounts of surplus capital to finance the industrial revolution....

‘This in turn created a new class of workers and a greatly expanded urban market. (The same thing is happening in China today, but at a much faster pace.) But the rise of an organised working class in the 20th century, along with rivalry for markets between Europe, America - and Japan - showed that industrial capitalism

did not have all the answers either. It led to the Great Depression and another world war. The era of the American multinational corporations has lasted say fifty years.....'

'Hang on a minute mate, I've got to have a slash. Don't worry, I'll come back. I want to hear the end of your lecture. You should be a professor of, of...' 'Political economy?' 'Yeah, political economy'. 'But there's no such thing, these days!....' 'Haha!'

'As I was saying Bob,...at the same time, finance capital 'came up on the outside' and assumed the dominant role. The great advantage of this form of capital accumulation is that it circumvents the problem of how to deal with organised wage labour, which always wants a bigger share of the capitalist pie. Therefore the real living standards and the combativeness of the workers is weakened. By the end of the 20th century, it was more profitable to invest capital in the financial sector than the real economy, with London and Wall Street competing to be its epicentre. With the arrival of the electronic media, profits from the banks and financial houses received an enormous boost. Of course, as I have mentioned, for this to happen, the banks had to have the freedom to operate with the minimum of interference. Yet look at what has happened:

'On the one hand, the financial industry has amassed enormous wealth for about 1% of the population, which has now reached obscene proportions. On the other, it led to more and more risky investments that ended up as toxic debts, which are not

only very large; they are also very complex and intertwined. (That's why the Greek bailout is such a mess. It has contaminated the banking system across the whole of Europe, if not the world.)

'Therefore the financial system itself, which is the foundation of late capitalism, is undermined. In 2007-8 the banks stopped lending to each other, for fear of mutual default. The resulting credit crunch led to the biggest financial crisis since the 1930s. Fundamentally, as the marxist theorist, Hillel Ticktin says: when a system such as capitalism is no longer able to resolve its own internal contradictions, it begins to decline.'

'Hell, I don't know Max. You've over the top. This is TOO MUCH!' 'No Bob! It's not just ME. Radio 4's 'Capitalism on Trial' ended by paying tribute to Marx. He predicted the stage when capitalism is at the mercy of fictitious capital; conscious control over the system becomes impossible. This is what's happening NOW. We seem to be on a runaway train, but there is no one ready to pull the emergency cord. THAT'S too much!' 'What about the new powerhouses of capital, especially China? They have all this surplus, whilst we are collapsing from the credit crunch.' 'I don't see a lot happening there: even if they wanted to, can they bail us out and build their own market at the same time? The Chinese communists rule over 1.3 billion people. They are already worried about their own internal revolt; since there is so much poverty in the countryside, if not in the new giant mega-cities that have sprung up like mushrooms.'

Bob wasn't listening. As a died-in-the-wool sceptic, he was thinking about playing his trump card: 'But what about the Communist Manifesto, especially the bit where Marx says, paradoxically, it's the 'nihilism' of the system itself which becomes the catalyst for revolutionary consciousness? Then he makes that famous remark, 'All that is holy is profaned and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.'

'That's a great quote Bob. Later Marx extends this idea as 'communist-mass-consciousness'. In this instance, I would say his Enlightenment faith in man as a rational being could not be more clear. He sees this as an essential part of human nature. But it's a question of: can man fulfil 'his' potential, which is not guaranteed. After all, he is on his own. So, despite his detractors, Marx is not a crude determinist. He did not say the revolution is inevitable....' 'Really, doesn't the *Manifesto* say that capitalism is its own grave-digger?'

'It does say that. But Marx said other things as a counterpoint....' 'Socialism or barbarism', for example. It was the Stalinists who seized on the idea that history was on the side of the workers. It goes with the mantra that 'the Party is always right; even if the leadership makes mistakes. Don't forget that the defeat of 1933 was a HISTORIC defeat for the revolution; but THIS was NOT inevitable - First of all, German Communists, under orders from Moscow underestimated the Nazi threat. Secondly, when they dismissed the Social Democrats as 'social fascists', which was utterly preposterous, they botched the chance of a united front from below between themselves and millions of workers who usually voted for the SDP....' 'Christ, you're an historian, as well!'

‘This left the German working class fatally divided - Be that as it may, its a tragedy that millions of communists throughout the world actually believed the Party was infallible - like the Pop - that ‘history is on our side.’ Therefore, despite the ‘setback ‘ of 1933, sooner or later the revolution will triumph! Just imagine, this was the last thought that countless loyal Bolsheviki had as they waited for the executioner’s bullet. If it wasn’t so bloody tragic, it would be funny.

It’s all there in Koestler’s *Darkness At Noon* - Have you read it? - Of course, this is catholic theology, not marxism. The REAL Marx pointed out that a distinction has to be made between ‘changes in the conditions of production’, which can be understood ‘with the precision of physical science’, and the various ‘ideological forms’ in which men become ‘conscious of the conflict and fight it out’. Consciousness is just not predictable. It has a contradictory relationship with reality...Either ‘socialism or barbarism’. Looking at the mess we’re in today, one may well ask, where is humanity going?’

Max’s last point went right over Bob’s head. He was still preoccupied with his question: ‘Why isn’t the working class fighting back now?’; he insisted. We have corporate greed, on the one side, and social inequality on the other. Jesus! Such decadence. It probably exceeds the worst excesses of the Roman Empire. Yet when a really serious crisis erupts, the response is an all-out attack on the living standards of ordinary people everywhere. But only the Greeks seem to be resisting! They’re heroes, really.’ ‘But now Greece is on the verge of a social meltdown’, Max replied. ‘This is serious. The German taxpayer doesn’t want to bail out the

‘profligate’ Greeks any more. Some experts are saying that, if this happens, the Euro zone might collapse, which could lead to the rise of nationalism in Europe all over again.’

‘Your right, Max. That Golden Dawn movement is bloody frightening! Perhaps the only thing that might stop these attacks is the danger of a double-dip recession. People are just not spending, because they are afraid of running into more debt. Of course we can’t include the recent riots. This was a revolt of the so-called socially excluded. I think Marx described them as the lumpen proletariat, which does not a revolution make. Isn’t that right Max?’ ‘Yes! This is nihilism. I mean the hoodies et al are into ‘shopping with violence’ and destroying their own communities. That hardly constitutes working class consciousness....’

Just then the Dude and Sue returned to buy another drink, ‘Now c’mon Max, why don’t you kick all this intellectual stuff into touch!’ said the Dude. I think we argue about who’s going to win the Rugby World Cup instead!’ At the same time, he lined up another round of beers for the boys, and a glass of the house white for Sue. ‘For Christ’s sake Max, is it (?) Give us a break, LIGHTEN up!’ Sue added. Clearly she was fed up with Max to the back teeth. She had never met a bloke like him before. Unfortunately for Sue - and the others (!) - her sudden outburst had the opposite effect on Max: He could be perverse at times. As soon as he realises he’s about to be spurned by a pretty woman, his response is: up the intellectual ante. It was the kiss of death!

But the Dude's intervention was a timely one for Bob. He now had the opportunity to regather his own thoughts. He decided that he had to silence the RUNAWAY Max for everybody's sake. 'Max, this is a very lopsided discussion; you're being far too theoretical!'

'Maybe', Max snapped back, 'But the fact that you oppose my theoretical approach proves my point: It demonstrates the way in which the system impoverishes the majority, especially in the intellectual sense. If what I'm saying is too much for you, despite your university education, how would a worker react? Firstly, through no fault of his own, he hasn't been taught to think theoretically. Secondly, the masses crave for some sort of relief from the drudgery of being a mere 'cog in the wheel'. (Today this includes skilled workers, even management.) All they want is to escape from reality, to be ANAESTHETISED, just like a patient who is able to avoid the pain of the surgeon's knife. So it's no wonder the masses are seduced by the distractions of consumerism; not just the allure of mass produced goods, and all the fads that go with that; I would also include the infantile attractions of the entertainment industry as well; all that gratuitous violence or celebrity trivia. At the same time they don't have to think about the world about them. As Blake says, we build 'mind-forged manacles' for ourselves.

As for the Dude and Sue, both were completely 'shell-shocked'. The only discussion they were interested in was whether to go outside again for another cigarette. Suddenly Bob began to laugh sarcastically. He decided to do a volte face. For one thing, as the younger of the two, he just wanted to cock-a-snook at Max, the pompous old fart. (Who does he think he is, Jack-the-lad as well!) 'Hey you

guys, I don't believe it. Old Max here is a walking anachronism. All this talk about capitalists and working class struggle, let alone the revolution; it's So-oh- so out of date. 'This is the 21st century Max. Get a GRIP old fella. It's time to move on. Everyone else has!.... All this talk of communism. Don't you realise Max, that Marx has been expunged from the curriculum in higher education for at least 20 years. This is too much. I need another drink!'

'Hell Bob! Don't give up on me now man', Max pleaded. 'Let's get back to Kundera then. As if things were not complicated enough, Kundera also points out that we're living in the epoch of the 'spectacle'. He means that with the rise of the modern mass media, the image has become omnipotent, because it is omnipresent. The image has even supplanted ideology. He calls this 'imagology'. (He's too much of the old postmodernist cynic for me. But still he's interesting.) Anyway, according to Kundera, 'a person is nothing but his image; the obsession with celebrity has replaced immortality.'

'Hang on a minute Max', said a reanimated Dude! 'I'm trying to get my head around all this Marxist stuff. But now you've got me completely bamboozled by this 'SPECTACLE thing! The only spectacle I know is the one I made of myself during a game of rugby: There I was with the ball tucked under my arm and an open try-line before me, and what did I do, I dropped the bloody ball!' 'Were you pissed? Reminds me of the Guinness poster', Max added. 'It shows a glass of the black nectar which has been knocked over. The caption underneath says: 'Knock on!' Not bad eh! Hey, I'm sorry guys. I'm probably overdoing it as usual. But,

as the quiz master says: 'Although the buzzer has sounded. You have started your answer, so you may finish'...The term 'spectacle' was introduced by the Situationist, Guy Debord. He defined this as 'the moment when the commodity attains the total occupation of social life'. It is the culmination of mass media society.'

Now it was Max's turn to decide whether to call it a day. Would there BE a next time with Bob, let alone The Dude and Sue. He wasn't sure. So he decided there was nothing for it, but to try and explain the ideas he said he would leave until next time. (Put it down to the booze. There is nothing like a few drinks to bring out a man's true character: Max was an incorrigible 'didactic'. He was like a dog with a bone!)

'The situation', he said. 'is not helped when the cultural intelligentsia decide that the status quo is a fait accompli. Objectively speaking, they have provided an intellectual fig-leaf for late capitalism, which is lurching from one crisis to another. Superficially we can blame this on the rise of postmodernism, which one critic has described as 'the logics of disintegration'. But as a materialist and dialectician, I am bound to say that Stalinism is the primary cause: On the one hand, it was a counter-revolutionary system, which tried to coexist with capitalism rather than overthrow it completely; hence it was brutally repressive. On the other, it allowed capitalism to get 'out of gaol' during its greatest crisis; concretely, the Great Depression of the 1930s and the rise of Fascism, The latter, of course, was an excrescence of capitalism. Not only did this lead to the showdown at Stalingrad

with countless millions of lives lost. More importantly the USA emerged from the ruins of World War Two - especially in Soviet Russia - as the world's first super power. It also presided over a post-war boom, during which the *societe de consummation* came into its own, not just in the United States; it exported the culture industry to the rest of the world.'

Max hardly dared to pause for breath. 'Think of it: Before the 1960s, we had Lenin, Trotsky, Lukacs, Benjamin, Adorno, to name but a few. All of them shared an anti-capitalist world view in one way or another. (Although some would argue that the rot began to set in with the last two, via critical theory and the Frankfurt School.) So then what did we get? We got all these French philosophers, the fathers of postmodernism, such as Lacan, Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard. This last one - an ex-Trotskyist (!) - started talking about the commodity as a 'libidinal sphere', which enables the individual consumer to achieve an 'illusionary sense of fulfilment', as if this was a good thing. See what I mean!' (Who's listening now?)

'Max, what about Kundera?' 'Okay! Okay!....When the intelligentsia becomes addicted to the spectacle along with everyone else, the danger is that Kundera's argument will become a SELF-FULFILLING prophesy!'

The Dude was no longer interested in the spectacle, whatever it is. Right now, he was lining up two more pints of Directors on the bar. 'Max, I thought you said you were an ex-rugby player? You are already two pints behind me. You should be bloody ashamed of yourself! Get that down ya, boyo. It's stronger than the Bombardier too!'

Max gratefully obliged. But at the risk of losing Bob, the intellectual, let alone Sue and the big Lebowski, he just had to carry on. After all, he was nearly at the end of his argument. Why stop now? May as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb (or is the other way round?) 'Because the worker suffers under this 'mind-crippling' division of labour, Surely, this is all the MORE reason why we must defend Goethe's pantheon; NOT mock it, as Kundera does. Intellectuals - like Kundera - should be arguing for a society in which everyone has an equal opportunity - in the REAL sense of the term - to realise their human potential. If the masses could appreciate Goethe's Faust, rather than gratuitous violence, which they can now download on their PCs, then humanity might get somewhere. 'The world would be so much richer because of it. THIS IS THE OPPOSITE TO ELITISM!

By Max had long since lost his audience. He was well over the top, had been for some time. But there's the rub!

Later when he was back home alone in his empty flat, he was prepared to concede that perhaps he might have been 'a tad over the top' (!) To mix a musical with a dancing metaphor, perhaps he indulged himself in too many intellectual riffs. But then again, it takes two to tango and Bob wanted to take him on. A sleepless Max began to think about his own fable with which he had begun the evening. Who among us four, he mused, is more likely to succeed in this 'getting of wisdom'; albeit with the help of a second innings? But, of course, there is also the small matter of mother nature's insistence: that each soul has to be reborn with a *tabula rasa*; so there is every possibility that at the end of this generous offer of a second innings, the 'getting of wisdom' is nothing more than the elusive 'holy grail'.

Max decided to start with himself: His first problem was that he is too easily distracted - not by 'the society of the spectacle' - but by what he calls 'Schubert's *Winter Reise* syndrome'. (Others might call it self-pity! But isn't this a matter of opinion? One person feels pain more intensely than another. We cannot measure such things.) Right now, Max identifies with Schubert's alter ego in his song cycle: the story of a young man, an outsider, who wanders through the snow from one village to the next. As he stumbles along, he glimpses life's warmth through the lighted windows of the village. It is a metaphor for a man - or a woman - who is feeling the pain of rejection. At times delirious with cold and close to suicide, this man cannot shake off a deep feeling of loss and longing; or *Sehensucht*, as the Germans say. Max thinks, 'Such a beautiful word, both in sound and meaning'.

Suddenly he has a vision of Sue as she tries to smooch with Bob. 'She's a victim too', he decided. 'Why can't this guy appreciate this gentle, warm-hearted and gregarious creature. No doubt they went home and fell into the sack for some drunken 'rumpty-tumpty', which they will have both forgotten about next morning. Certainly, Bob will. (It is the starving man syndrome again!) Behave yourself Max. Be generous. Think of Blake's poem, the one where he says, 'What is it men in women do require?/The lineaments of Gratified Desire./What is it women do in men require?/ The lineaments of Gratified Desire.'"

Of course, given Bob's cold indifference to Sue, Max was biased about the fellow's prospects vis-à-vis the getting of wisdom. Yet he had to acknowledge that Bob IS an intellectual, his equal, at the very least. Max was also pleased to discover that

Bob was not a died-in-the wool English chauvinist, at the level of football anyway. With the game over, he declared that Manchester United did not deserve to lift the chalice (sorry Champion's League Cup). After all, 'Barca' had made the top 'English club' look silly with their one-touch passing, which resulted in three beautiful goals to United's solitary one. If Max could be objective for a moment, perhaps Bob might be on schedule for the getting of wisdom, despite his scepticism, etc.

But what about the big Lebowski? Even after he had taken his sunglasses off, unlike Max, he seemed to be oblivious to Sue's amorous intentions. Rather he wanted to tell Max how he had built up a successful business. He was certainly generous with his money, buying rounds at an alarming pace. (Max just could not keep up with him; because the big man could knock back a pint in a couple of gulps.) The Dude also considered himself to be a bit of a thinker or so he would like Max to believe: 'I know a lot about the Middle East', he claimed. 'This is where it is all happening, isn't it'. Yet he failed to elaborate. (Did he mean that this is the place where Armageddon will start or was he referring to Israel's relentless colonisation of Palestinian land, settlement by settlement, or perhaps the 'Arab Spring'?)

No! This is not what the Dude meant at all. He went on to talk about Lawrence's 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom'. But then he was only using it as a sort of grand intro for a discussion about Saudi Arabia, which he had visited on business. (At the very least, Max would have preferred the Dude to talk about the 'Arab Spring'. He

couldn't think of anything positive about the Saudis. In fact all he could think about was an old TV drama called 'Death of a Princess'. It ended with the public beheading of two young people. Their crime? A princess and a commoner had dared to fall in love with each other! It really happened, because the whole thing was filmed by a British engineer! Today, Saudi women are still not allowed to drive a car.)

No! None of this adds up to the getting of wisdom, Max concluded. So that leaves the gorgeous Sue. 'It looks as though she is already ahead of me when I was her age, Max thought. Hopefully she hasn't messed up as badly as I did?' (By the time he was 40, Max's career as a teacher had nose-dived. At least he had taken up photography as a weekend hobby. He had to do something to alleviate the stress of trying to teach knowledge-phobic children in what had once been a fairly decent comprehensive system. They had been born into consumer culture, and so on.

Thinking back, Max glimpsed a 40 year-old bloke, who drank far too much. He was a rudderless ship adrift on the ocean with middle age fast approaching; until one day a friend asked him, 'Max, have you got a plan for the rest of your life?' This was a rude shock. It was then that Max discovered a passion for what he would later call this 'getting of wisdom'. He went back to university, part-time, where he studied the history and theory of photography up to MA standard. He tried his hand at being a freelance photographer, but he could not make a living out of it. At the same time, he dreamed of becoming a critical theorist and lecturer in cultural studies, but he couldn't cut the mustard there either.) So now Max

describes himself as 'the in-between-man', i.e. bright enough to be curious about 'the best that has been thought and said'; but not bright enough to BE an intellectual and start his own campaign against those sodding postmodernists! For years now, he has been engaged in a marathon solo effort to write a definitive account of 'The Decline of Art in the Age of Popular Culture'. But, to return to the cricketing metaphor, even Max is beginning to realise that he is on a losing wicket.

Goodness! Max was digressing again. It's SUE he should be thinking about! She doesn't look 40; she is also curious, arty and wants to write fiction. Aspiration is a rare thing these days. And she hasn't used a mobile phone all evening! Most people her age are constantly checking their messages and answering calls, even in company; such is today's social etiquette! That was when Max decided the next time he goes to the 'Dog and Duck', he will be armed with the promised dictionary. He'll be praying that Sue will be there and when he greets her, he will say: 'Please accept this dictionary as a token of my esteem. Open it and you will find these pages scribbled here!'

Now whenever Max thinks of Sue, the English 'rose', he recalls Molly Bloom's soliloquy at the end of Joyce's 'Ulysses'; especially her final utterance: 'I drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume Yes and his heart was going like mad and Yes I said Yes I will Yes!' But in his heart-of hearts, Max knows that he had lost any chance he might have had with Sue that night in the pub. It was all down to this division of labour thing! If Bob could not be won over, then his words had gone right over her beautiful head. Well that was certainly true.

At least that is how he prefers to see it; since it is hard to accept reality (even for Max): The fact is, he was just too old for her, among other things.

But as a good materialist, Max also knew that instead of immortality - be it Goethe's or the man who has plenty of mourners at his funeral - let alone a second innings, we only get one chance for the 'getting of wisdom'. And, of course, it is not a level playing field either. As the great contemporary writer, Coetzee says in 'Summertime': There is 'Just one life and then never again. Never, never, never.'

Rex Dunn

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