

# Letters to Ukraine

Column for *The Day Digest* [Kiev] – normally the first week (usually Thursday) of each month

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(these pieces were first published in *The Day Digest*)

*Note: these texts are my (preferred) versions, which may differ slightly in wording/ spelling from what the editor publishes.*

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*Daddy, can I have a REAL circus for Christmas?* Naturally, the child gets a toy circus, or nothing at all. That's what 'democracy' can be like. We campaign for human rights in Tibet, march against war in Iraq, or lobby MPs to save a particular rainforest, but all too often, even with massive public support, nothing real is delivered. Why? There are, of course, numerous reasons (ideology, business elites, etc.); but governments sometimes behave like unyielding parents because the electorate, as a whole, can be an unreasonable, self-contradicting child. We expect, for instance, environmental preservation or improved education, then complain bitterly if taxes are increased to achieve it. Moreover, will governments behave with integrity while we turn a blind mind to the way their shady deals are conducive to our current lifestyles? Meanwhile, few of us take genuine interest in how the democratic household of the nation is run. Some, like myself, can't muster the time or effort; others simply wish to be looked after whilst they attend to their private affairs. Many feel excluded, voiceless. But if everyone demanded greater involvement in democratic process, participation would eventually happen. Instead of accepting toy circuses, we have to join the real one and transform it.

Letters to Ukraine – 10 200 words [1 December 2011 ]

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*What use is art?* This most plural question has no singular reply. Pleasure, celebration, insight... each must answer for herself. For me, contemporary art needs some hand in bridge-building. So many of our problems (economic-ecological-social) arise from excessive specialisation. Among our narrow-sighted experts, who sees the landscape entire? Who beckons us away from the simplistic riverbank where we slumber, to the precipices where one must be receptive, awake? Radical, connective art helps society to stay alert to itself; but much modern/ postmodern art says either "Ah, let's just sleep together" or "Find my impossible treasure – but with no map from me". Of course, the greatest art needs no map, isn't bound by social utility; it has its own reasons for being; but it can prompt us to see (perhaps even to cross) certain barriers we might otherwise miss or ignore. The State may attempt to control or isolate, but bridge-makers persuade and liberate – or is all persuasion reserved for speech-writers and advertisers? Artistic bridge-making demands courage. Refusal is a kind of bridge too. The King, ordering his prospective Queen to love him, heard her reply: *Always*. Fearing for her head, she sacrificed her heart. Genuine art is the gutsy Queen who can say *No*.

Letters to Ukraine – 9 200 words [3 November 2011 ]

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*Why are we obsessed with lead singers?* In soccer, strikers capture more column inches than defenders. We heap fame upon actors and comedians whose writers receive scant recognition. We're intimate with all the brand names for our gadgets, yet have no idea which scientists made the crucial breakthroughs. There are exceptions... Einstein, Shakespeare; but, in the main, our species overvalues delivery, reserving its fullest attention for the presenters of its cultural products. "After 1980," claims Arthur Erickson, "you never heard reference to space again. Surface, the most convincing evidence of the descent into materialism, became the focus." Erickson's observation on architecture applies far more widely. Our infatuation with surface is also expressed through vacuous celebrity, in leaders who deliver magnificent speeches but run aground with legislation. We wonder why they fail, ourselves failing to appreciate the powerful systems that condition us all. Indeed, our surface obsessions divert us from the underlying forces at work: those systemised assumptions and values underpinning advertising, education and market 'laws'. That's where most of the cultural 'space' really is: beneath and behind. These spaces generate the superficial songs most politicians sing. Rather than simply clap or boo the show, we'd do well to squint into what's going on backstage.

Letters to Ukraine – 8 200 words [6 October 2011 ]

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*How might our modern relationship with ecology seem, to an advanced alien race?* Like someone selling their home for a few dollars to rent a tacky room overnight. Like a frog soon to be boiled alive in slowly-warming water, where the frog itself set up the experiment. Like a surgeon crudely opening a patient's skull, hoping that the sophisticated instruments required to complete the operation have just been invented. Like a tourist allowed to burn the Mona Lisa in his portable stove, so everyone can enjoy a few chips. Like the expanding circle of a biological culture in a Petri dish, moving towards its future by consuming it. Like a split mind that reveres great poets ("I will show you fear in a handful of dust"), playwrights ("One touch of nature makes the whole world kin") and philosophers ("If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading"), yet organises society to be incapable of responding to them. Like a creature that defends its children from terrifying predators, then relaxes by eating the grandchildren. Like the final moments on a juggernaut hurtling towards a cliff, whose occupants heatedly debate whether they are doing 95 or 105 miles per hour.

Letters to Ukraine – 7 200 words [1 September 2011]

[Quotes: TS Eliot (*The Waste Land*); William Shakespeare (*Troilus and Cressida*, III, iii); Lao Tzu.]

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*Who knows, now, the story of the painting famous for its smile?* People thronged just to glimpse it. But the nations were desperate for cash. As nobody could afford to buy it outright, the painting was micro-lasered into 1mm lots, each with a tiny identifying number scorched on the back. Buyers would want a lip or a pupil, not a nondescript speck of sky – so the numbers were randomised. Bidders wouldn't know which bit they were actually getting. And so, one Valentine's Day, half a million numbers were put on sale. Collectors clamoured. Failing businessmen emptied accounts to impress mistresses. The greatest lottery ever – over within days. Later, investors received a facsimile of the painting, a crimson 'X' marking the location of their (framed) fragment. The Vatican claimed divine intervention when all fourteen of its crosses found the face. According to rumour, the last great philanthropist of that age ruined herself attempting to reunite the motes. Mounted between plates of glass, her life's work was a see-through ghost: a gauzy mess of crags, a pale mask hung in space, forever blurred and pocked. That's the story. And that's what happens when civilisations make revenue their One God. No longer enigmatic, they lose their smile.

Letters to Ukraine – 6 200 words [4 August 2011]

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*Why must all good things come to an end?* We work for security, then watch our investments falter. We constantly reform civic society to uphold our most sovereign morals, with partial success. Each generation dreams it will take humankind to a higher level, eliminating disease and poverty, achieving global peace; each grows old witnessing age-old suffering, hoping the next generation might do better. Some give up altogether, concluding that human nature is doomed to endless repetition. But quantum physics now relates what spirituality has always known: all is connected; everything *connects*. We couldn't be irrelevant if we tried: our every action has repercussions, though we may not be able to predict or witness them. Each striving towards insight and compassion, however futile it may seem, eddies through the cosmic pool. And so, one should never become disillusioned, utterly, by impending defeat or loss, be it environmental, cultural or personal. For the good watchmaker, even failure can be useful in understanding the mechanism. Beckett wrote: "Fail again. Fail better." Meanwhile, celebrate success; but don't cling grimly to it. Goodness isn't exempt from change either. Ultimately, the reason why even the best things must come to an end, is so that the worst ones can too.

Letters to Ukraine – 5 200 words [2 June 2011]

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*Can you direct me to your Culture, please?* Imagine tourists lost in the suburbs, asking you that. Would you steer their gaze towards the brutal lines of high-rise flats? To those grimly functional, overlit boxes we call supermarkets? If the way we build reflects our collective mind, then the physical pride of our culture resides primarily in city centres, in our showpiece museums, galleries and state monuments. Most citizens, however, must endure nondescript tenements, schools and shops. Shabby streets. We can visit country cottages and lanes that delight the eye; but our cities deploy 'high culture' carefully, even cynically, to remain within eye's reach of the businessperson, banker and (crucially) tourist. Meanwhile, popular culture is collapsing away from the material, external world of buildings towards the virtual, internal universe of the internet and TV. "Whoever controls the media, the images," said poet Allen Ginsberg, "controls the culture". Is mass culture revealing itself to the eye through those particular forms distributed by advertising and business, designed to enact material and symbolic control? Increasingly, that 'culture' arrives via the same few conglomerates and their media/ advertisement think-tanks. Is that why the suburban world, everywhere, has begun to look the same? Are we all becoming lost there?

Letters to Ukraine – 4 200 words [19 May 2011]

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*“Where are our intellectuals? Writers? Philosophers? Why are they silent?”* That was the voice of Chernobyl evacuee, Ludmila Polyanskaya. Who has answered her? Overshadowed by events in Japan, Chernobyl’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary approaches. Shall we now resolve to speak: for ourselves and, where appropriate, on behalf of the silenced? But radiation from wrecked reactors is a particular expression of something much larger. ‘Chernobyl’ can take many forms. It’s that contamination between peoples and nations, expressed through power or oppression. Or an education system that creates exclusion zones in the minds of our children. It’s that endless wait for the military to decay into something less inhuman, more enlightened. ‘Chernobyl’ is a self-interested few deciding the fate of many. It’s our culture depopulating the very places our artists would have us walk. I’ve been asked: *Why don’t the poets speak up?* Sadly, to be silenced today, most poets need do nothing more than publish a book and place it in full view on the library shelves. Our artists are speaking, but either say what we already know (which is one form of silence) or what we ignore because we’d rather not hear it (which creates another kind of silence). I wonder, is Fukushima the next silence?

Letters to Ukraine – 3 200 words [7 April 2011]

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*Artist or Entertainer?* For Woody Allen, life doesn’t imitate art; it imitates bad television. Has modern art begun to imitate that medium too, emulating the accessibility and sensationalism of TV? I don’t say that art can’t, or shouldn’t, entertain; it’s just that ‘entertainment’ has become a commodity, mass-produced for mass consumption. A diluted culture neglects artists who convey complex social messages or embody hard-hitting archetypes, preferring instead the familiar, wishy-washy comforts of personality. Notice how many modern ‘actors’ simply play heightened versions of themselves on screen. The media, instead of asking philosophers or artists to discuss our condition, pursue sound bites from celebrities (yes, I myself opened with Woody). Meanwhile, novelists want best-sellers with lucrative film rights, poets try to get on the late show to feel less invisible, and dissenters must settle for aficionado audiences or grinding anonymity. True, powerful art can still have popular appeal, as sand animator Kseniya Simonova proves – though she’d need to sing pop to win anything on British TV. We’re close to becoming the generation of the entertained. One way out, if we actually want it, would be to give artists who stick thorns in our sides the same commitment we reserve for the massagers of funny bones.

Letters to Ukraine – 2 200 words [1 March 2011 (Tues)]

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*How best to measure human progress?* Via technology? Economic growth? I’ve a better gauge: manners. I don’t mean etiquette, that training of human monkeys for polite society. Manners aren’t about knowing which knife to pick up during supper, or standing when a lady enters the room; they’re a profound sensitivity to the situation and feelings of all those we encounter. If people barge past us without even a grunt of apology, it’s because we’ve become little more than an extension of the material background to their lives. Rush hour, bad weather, Christmas shopping, all seem able to sink us into a mindless collective drive. We grow horns, hooves, tails; lose all sense of the ‘other’ in others. Take that mindset to its extreme and even making love can become, essentially, a solitary act. What use is state funding for culture, then, or outreach programmes for disenchanting youth, if (as Fred Astaire put it): “The hardest job kids face... is learning good manners without seeing any”? When any one of us treats strangers on the street like animated lumps of matter, we all step closer to chaos. For Horace Mann, “Manners easily and rapidly mature into morals”. And the ripe fruit of morality is civilisation.

Letters to Ukraine – 1 200 words [3 February 2011]