Nick Berry

know fear, know courage™

Essays

Anima 1

My native tongue has been a joy all my life, encouraged by an early introduction to poetry, for which I honour the memory of my parents. As to English itself, I am aware of its riches of metaphor and simile, which I do not find as common to daily intercourse in German, the only other language of which I have anything approaching mastery, although I once spoke fluent Norwegian and am currently transferring the residue of that knowledge to Danish – a new challenge. Norwegian, although possessing a lexicon around 60% that of English, surpasses its more verbose cousin in words descriptive of nature and shades and nuances of its description. Norwegians live close to Nature.

Joseph Conrad, in choosing to write in English, was using his fourth language, after Polish, Russian and French. Asked why, he is said to have replied: 'Because English has no corners'. Perhaps that is why I made that reference to English as capable of being literal, as the exception rather than the rule. In my experience of it, the chief observable difference between English and German appears to reflect something of the respective characteristics of the two peoples. Germans write as the English speak while the English speak as the Germans write. You cannot read a German text that gets straight to the point, whether a novel, a news article or even an advert. Nothing is committed to text without some form of preamble, often extensive. If you read a piece of analysis in *Der Spiegel*, for example, you can safely start reading halfway through and not have missed anything. In contrast, no English person is capable of saying what he means without disguising any statement behind clouds of metaphor and intimation.

Added to that you have the fact that German as we know it today has only existed as a homogenised written

language for around 150 years, since the formation of the first German State, which accounts for the discrepancy between German as formally written and German as informally spoken. The latter gets by on two verb tenses (present and participle) – three (simple past) if it is feeling poetic – while English speech employs 12 major tenses and another half dozen variations on the theme, all of them carrying specific implications to the native speaker. Which may explain why Germans find English harder to learn the more fluent they become, whereas the English find German hard to begin with and then easy. The rules are clear and the shades of nuance less nebulous. Having lived in Germany for 13 years, I can confirm that I got by just fine without the need to use much metaphor, whereas English seems sometimes only to work through that rhetorical device.

To which we can add the fact non-native speakers will never master a second language's use of prepositions. I know staggeringly fluent Scandinavians who still make basic errors in English preposition use, as I do with German, and always will. Just as the verb 'to be' is irregular in every language, so preposition use seems to define what it means to be a native speaker.

I was reminded of these linguistic curiosities by reading a discussion of how to translate *psyche* from the Greek sources. While it is most often rendered in English as 'soul', to the Greek contemporaries of Socrates, it will have encompassed wider implications of meaning; pretty much everything about the person unrelated to the body and its functions. Which reflection led to my next thought.

The *Phaedo* concerns itself with the fate of the soul after it has parted company with the body. Why?

Much of the debate ranges around the fate of the soul of the philosopher versus that of the common person; how these respective souls will get on in the afterlife, who will find it easier to cope, and whether the philosopher will there reap the reward of his or her life of contemplation while the common person is tortured by his or her inability to transcend the base concerns of the body while still this side of the grave.

Why? What does it matter to the soul which of the two possibilities await it; dreamless sleep or a rendezvous with all who have gone before? It doesn't matter to the soul. The soul will be just fine, either way. It matters to the body. It matters to us.

Why do so many of us fear death and why do so many of us attempt to draw death's sting by imagining how we are going to flourish after our bodies decay? Because if there is no reward in death – if death is indeed an eternal sleep, undisturbed even by dreams (which state would be of comfort to Hamlet) – it will mean that we have ceased to matter. The fear of death is the fear of our own irrelevance. That, in turn, is a reflection of our limitless solipsism; the obsessive idea that we matter, in and of ourselves. We do not. We matter only as we work on and in others. It is our life, but it is not about us, as a wise person once observed.

Cicero is said to have written that to philosophise is to learn to die. What did he mean by that? To me, he meant that to philosophise is to understand that we as individuals do not ultimately matter to the universe. The universe has no memory, least of all memory of us; of the time we spent using the earth's resources. If we can accept that, we can die in peace, because we are no longer seeking to extend our relevance beyond the grave. We have no universal relevance; that is, no relevance to the universe. On the other hand, we have limitless relevance to those we love and whom we have allowed to love us, which is determined by our ability to overcome the primal defence mechanism of the ego. Love makes us immortal. Love is eternal life after the biological fact we call 'death'. If we have loved, we are incapable of death in the sense of ceasing to mean anything after our bodies have decayed; ceasing to be of relevance. If we have never loved, we have never lived and have been always dead, so what does it matter when we pass from breathing to not breathing?

In the same way, if we have hated and spread hate, we have lived our lives in hell and our souls will die in hell. Love spreads love, forever. Hate does not spread hate, forever. Love lives eternally. Hate dies eternally.

Since I moved to Denmark in mid-January 2022, I have missed only a handful of days swimming in the ocean. Never would I have expected to find myself a convert to winter bathing, as they call it here. The coldest water I had previously experienced was the few microseconds I spent in a Slovenian river, which flowed into the magnificent Lake Bohinj, just around the corner from you. It was August and 36 degrees, and the water of the deep river pool into which I dived to escape the heat, was 10 degrees. I had never previously known that water was capable of being that cold. The coldest the sea has been since I moved here was 2.7 degrees, and I spent five minutes in it, which may as well have been five hours and could only be endured through self-hypnosis.

One day, when the sea temperature was 9 degrees, I swam what must have been around one kilometre, which took me 40 minutes. Naked and swimming, as I was, estimated maximum survival time in water of that temperature is one hour. You can last longer if you are clothed and huddled together with others. Swimming cools the body faster, as the physical exertion pumps the blood more quickly to the extremities. The body loses heat 25 times faster in water than in air of the same temperature. I found all this out once ice swimming became a habit to me, as I needed to get a sense of where the boundaries lay. The transition to hypothermia happens quickly and you can lose your sense of judgement before you are aware that you have. Many times, I have been cold enough to know that if someone threw me a rope to pull me out of the sea, I could not close my hand with sufficient force to grasp it.

After the 40-minute swim, I returned from the sea – I think of it as the sea giving me back to the land rather than me leaving it – and stood naked on the shore, as is my custom, to allow the wind to dry me. Nakedness is not frowned upon in Denmark and there are, besides, few people on the beach at eight o'clock on a February morning to complain, even if they meant to.

Getting out of very cold water into very cold air feels warm. Under normal circumstances, I can stand naked in the

wind for as long as it takes to dry my skin, without feeling that I am freezing. On this occasion, I was fine for about five minutes, after which I began to shake, violently and uncontrollably. When I reached the door of my apartment, it took me a good 20 seconds to get the key into the lock, using both hands. When you are that cold, there is no point going under a warm shower. The skin feels the heat and the body reacts to it by trying to cool down, so you get colder – or that is how it feels. Instead, I put on two Norwegian sweaters, wrapped my lower body in a wool blanket, pulled on some ski socks and a ski hat and gloves, and huddled in an armchair to see what happened. It took me around 30 minutes to stop shaking and probably an hour or more for my body to regain normal operating temperature. It was a thrilling experience.

Recounting this story to a friend later, she told me that shaking therapy is a well-known technique for realigning soul and body, and has apparently been practiced for millennia. I did not know this. I did know that my maximum survival time was 60 minutes, or thereabouts, and wanted to see what it felt like to swim towards the shadow line, dividing breathing from not breathing. It was not the last time I did this, and each time I found myself reflecting on how little the sea would care if I got my calculations wrong. I do not matter to the universe. I matter to the people in it whom I love and allow to love me. And if I love and allow myself to be loved, in what sense can I ever be said to die? That, to me, is the irrelevance of the body and the relevance of the soul. Seen in that light, it doesn't matter where the soul goes after parting company with the body, nor does it matter what it does when it gets there. It only matters that the soul lived, because if it did live – and it lives through love – it cannot die.

Our fear of death is the fear that we have not lived – that we have not loved; because no one who has not loved can claim to have lived, and no one who has loved can claim to have died. It is not possible. The love we share is there forever because it is passed on forever. Only hatred can die, because hatred was always dead: it is the zombie form of the soul.

That is why I like Cicero's definition of the purpose of philosophy. If it means anything, it means understanding our relationship to the universe at the macro level, and to the people our lives touch at the micro level. How much more greatness in the context of the unknowable, infinite heavens can you achieve than one individual act of kindness towards one individual person, at any point in your life, which is an expression of disinterested love? That is the opposite of solipsism, which is the root of the fear of biological decay.

In answer to the *Phaedo*'s question as to the nature of the soul and the nature of its fate when we have finished breathing, I would say: It doesn't matter. If you have used any part of your time on earth to love, you are already immortal. Where your soul goes after corporeal demise, and what it does when it gets there, is detail. Like what you did on your last holiday.

God is the meaning of life and God is love; so love is the meaning of life, because love makes you immortal. Heaven is leaving life as Montaigne and Socrates intended. Hell is leaving life in hatred and fear. English loves metaphor.

[11] *When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.*
[12] *For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*
[13] *And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.*

Nick Berry

know fear, know courage™

Phone: +45 81 98 73 17

Email: words@nickberry.net