

Our Appetite for Psychological Banality

The Reverend Thomas Malthus was an English clergyman at the end of the 18th Century and the beginning of the 19th Century who put forward an idea that was to have a profound influence on Charles Darwin in developing his theory of evolution. Malthus claimed that the human population has a tendency to expand at a much faster rate than is sustainable, so that there must be periodic 'corrections,' as stock market analysts would no doubt call them, by such charming means as famine, epidemic or war.

Malthus has never been proved wrong because what he wrote was prophecy rather than prediction, and prophecies, which fix no date for their catastrophes, can only be proved right, never wrong. The biologist Paul Ehrlich forgot this principle when he wrote that it was inevitable that hundreds of millions of people would starve to death in the 1970s. Instead (for the moment) obesity is a greater threat to Mankind than starvation but, as the Nigerians put it, no condition is permanent. Besides, there is always a market for apocalyptic visions, Man being the only species (as far as we know) that takes pleasure in contemplating its own annihilation.

Whether or not Malthus's principle is true of population, it is certainly true of my notebooks. I accumulate them much faster than I fill them, for I like them as mere objects; and though I write quite a lot in notebooks, I think by now I must have many hundreds of them that are not only unfilled but that will never be filled.

My wife, who knows how much I like them, recently bought me a couple in the market as a small present. They were unique in my collection, in as much as they not only gave me space in which to write but, in the first couple of pages, suggested

what I should write about in case I had no ideas of my own.

The advice was 'How journaling can help you.' This use of the noun journal as a verb would no doubt have offended Polonius who, when Hamlet addressed his letter to 'the beautified Ophelia' exclaimed (rightly, I think) 'That's an ill phrase, a vile phrase.' 'To journal' is an ill phrase, a vile phrase, but let it pass.

'There are many ways to journal,' continues the advice, which is impersonal in the sense that no one has affixed his or her name to it. 'One way is to write down your thoughts and feelings about what's happening in your life.' One wonders whether this is a thought that will illuminate any potential keepers of a diary: apparently the world's appetite for soothing banality is as great, and perhaps dialectically related to, its appetite for apocalyptic visions.

'You might also use it to: set goals; explore ideas; remember or analyse your dreams; reflect on books or films you find interesting; clarify an unresolved situation; work out emotionally challenging experiences; write about your travels; keep track of your diet and exercise.' Here are a few additional suggestions of my own. You might use it to dwell on your resentments; calumniate your parents; insult your boss; record your infidelities; plan your revenge; indulge in malicious gossip; maintain your self-importance; rationalise your bad behaviour; and so on and so forth. In fact, the number of rewarding uses of diaries is almost infinite.

The writer of the advice, who actually sounds like a committee which has consulted a focus group, tells the potential diarist that 'journaling shouldn't be seen as a chore, but rather a quiet time to focus on you.'

Ah yes, focusing on oneself! Is there a finer object of contemplation in the world than oneself? How inexhaustible, how infinitely interesting, compared with, say, such dull

matters as history, Nature, politics, literature, art, etc. Abolish boredom! Focus on yourself! It is a subject that will accompany you undiminished to the grave.

I used to tell (some of) my patients that they needed to lose themselves rather than find themselves.

There is no need to despair if you have nothing to say. 'Try stream of consciousness writing, and just write down any words or images that come to mind.' Who knows, something interesting might turn up. You might even be able to 'remember' the abuse you suffered as a child, or some other cause of your present discontents.

At any rate, it is best to 'journal' by hand. 'Word processors make it all too easy to constantly edit as you type. Writing without that critic can be quite liberating!' No need to think, then, select or judge: diarists of the world, drive on!

There is another advantage to written diaries, not mentioned in the advice. They're easier to destroy than hard disks.

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