Charles Foster

On The Edges

Workpoints

1. We are Copernican creatures, sitting on the far edge of a fast-expanding universe, hurtling into the dark and cold.
2. We are mortal creatures who refuse to acknowledge our mortality: accelerating (for that is the strange way time works), towards the earth or the municipal crematorium beyond the ring road.
3. We are creatures of habit, easily bored, and amused only by unhabitual things. A great artist is one who – though he might be standing on the shoulders of others – reaches to places previously unvisited. Leonardo da Vinci wrote that he had invented or discovered another kind of perspective, 'which I call "aerial". It gave depth to the air itself. He was great. Michelangelo, it is said, invented a new type of art every time he picked up his brush or his chisel. He was great.
4. The allure of the non-habitual is shown not only by Renaissance Florence and its literary analogues, but also by filth. We can't pretend that we're excited only by *The Virgin of the Rocks*. Perverts and pornographers beckon from the shadowlands, and we creep out to them.
5. A great scholar is one who knows that paradigms exist to be smashed, not revered. This is not how most scholarship is perceived. A good scholar, these days, is one who adds footnotes to footnotes, and a great scholar one who adds footnotes to footnotes to footnotes.
6. We are comfort-loving animals for whom comfort is deadly. Sofas, TV dinners, central heating and air-con kill. We need to sweat, shiver and pant. Cold and hot water immersion will save you: wallowing in lukewarm water won't.
7. Altruism and courage flower most exuberantly at the margins of life and viability: in the hospice and the ghetto. So do cruelty and barbarism. Kurtz lived in the margins.

A chronology and a thesis

At first, everything was one: consolidated in an infinitely small point in the moment before the Big Bang. Then came creation. It was a process of variegation: of the

multiplication of individuals, *and therefore of edges* -for the more individuals there are, the more edges there are, and the more edginess there is. This sounds like a recipe for increasing the net amount of loneliness in the universe. It might be. But it is also a recipe for increasing the net amount of relationality, for unless one is the Holy Trinity, one cannot have a relationship with anything or anyone other than oneself.

Edginess was therefore, from the very beginning, a defining characteristic of the universe: a precondition of relationality, altruism and most conceivable virtues; both the cause of and the antidote to selfishness.

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, creation happens in this way: by division and distinction. Form arises from formlessness; light is separated from darkness, sky from under-sky, land from sea. As the story goes on, the variegation crescendos. Individuation multiplies geometrically. The waters, the air and the land teem.

Yet right at the start of the tale there is rebellion afoot. At first it is so subtle that it is visible only in tiny Hebrew nuances. Only light is fully obedient: 'Let light be,' decrees God. 'Light be,' says the text. The insubordination mounts. God wants there to be night and day. Yet there is twilight, when one bleeds into the other. The disobedience is at first slight. 'Grass grass,' God tells the earth. But that's not *exactly* what happens: the earth, instead, 'puts forth' grass. Emboldened, like a child who has got away with being rude to the teacher, the earth gets cockier. By the time God asks the waters to 'bring forth' the water animals, the earth just refuses. This time there is no 'And it was so.' For the first time God has to create directly: 'So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm.' Whatever the source of this ancient insurgency, it wanted to confound edges: wanted to homogenize. It was the first globalization project. The Tower of Babel was another of its ventures. Homogenized humanity, speaking one language, sought to raise a tower to the heavens in a brazen challenge to God. It tumbled, for the time being, but there have been many attempts to rebuild it.

And so we cut from *mythos* to history; to the time, around 45,000 years ago, at the start of the Upper Palaeolithic, when behaviourally modern humans – us - first erupt into the archaeological record.

The difference between us and the hominins that had gone before was profound – like a new act of creation. And like the first act, the creation of us involved the multiplication of edges, and may well have been ignited by the crossing of edges.

It's easy enough to see what happened. Go to any good archaeological museum and walk along the cases from Australopithecus onwards. You'll be underwhelmed until you meet us. That is not just because we truly like and are interested only in ourselves. We are far more complex animals than our forbears. What you'll see behind the glass (and in the glass, if you look carefully at yourself) is an explosion of symbolism. Things are made to stand for other things, while still remaining themselves. If a piece of bone can be carved into a wolf, is anything impossible? Nothing is just what it seems. The world is flooded with valency. Another way of putting that is that the number of edges or potential edges in the world is increased infinitely. We became quintessentially metaphorical creatures. The ability to wield metaphor no doubt conferred a great selective advantage. It allowed us to test out scenarios and strategies in the safety of our own heads rather than in the big, fierce, hungry, hairy workaday world which might very well give only one chance to succeed. But the ability gave other gifts too. It made the world coruscate. It turned us into philosophers and storytellers, for the infinite depth of the cosmos cried out to be explicated and celebrated.

Also on display in that suddenly fascinating museum case is the Self. It is unmistakable. It is visible in the representations of human faces – representations that shout out 'I', and hence 'You' and hence, necessarily, 'I-Thou' relationships and hence, too, stories. It is visible in the grave goods that say not only that there is an 'I' and a 'You' but that they are both so robust that

they will not be decomposed by the decomposition of a body with which for a while they had a mysterious relationship. The passage of a human over the vertiginous edge of death made humans – in the metaphysics of the Upper Palaeolithic – stronger and heavier. It conferred agency, not diminished it. We show vestiges of this belief now when we pray to saints or ask our own beloved dead for help.

This awareness of the Self; this ignition of pronouns: where did it come from? Darwin cannot help. There is no selective advantage in subjectivity. There is of course a selective advantage in Theory of Mind. It is useful to know what someone or something else is thinking. But there is no need to be conscious of oneself for that. No one has the first idea what consciousness is *for*. It just *is*.

It is plausibly suggested (by the South African anthropologist David Lewis-Williams and others) that the type of consciousness that we call our own was a gift from over another edge: that it was one of the benefits of travel. The idea is that by inducing altered states of consciousness (by dancing, extreme physical exertion, or ingesting hallucinogenic substances) we went on journeys far from the quotidian, into other

realms, perhaps represented by the place beyond the wall in the matchless cave paintings of Upper Palaeolithic Europe. There the shamans crossed the very edge of their species, becoming a stag a bear or a wolf. We can see the process of transformation bear-headed or antlered humans of the cave paintings. From the perspective of the other world and the other body the travellers looked back at the Ice Age camp they had left, saw their own human bodies lying in the tent, and suddenly saw, too, that they were distinct from everything else: that they were *them*! That they had an internal life. It was a tectonic discovery. That is the sort of thing that happens when you go over edges.

Edge-crossing had long been the way of hominin life. That's what hunter-gatherer life is about. It involves wandering: leaving behind one place and claiming another: entering a new world with each step. Edge-crossers is what we are. Between 85 and 95 per cent of our life as behaviourally modern humans has been spent as hunter-gatherers. Edge-crossing is constitutional. We can't change that constitution (though we've become dangerously good at ignoring it). And human thriving involves living in accordance with our constitution. It involves acknowledging that we are edge-crossers in a universe woven of edges.

We were formed by edges. Not only by shamanic voyages across edges, or the mind and body-stretching challenges of living on the edge of an ice sheet, and of hunger, and of the temper of capricious gods, and of life itself, but also by living at the edge of light and warmth. After the experiences of otherworld travel, and of laying out our dead with beads, flowers and weapons, the most formative experience was the campfire. For millennia we had cold backs and hot faces. That's as much part of our constitution as wandering. We looked into the flames and learned from them that life and light came from destruction. The flames themselves were stories. Behind us, in the steppe and the forest, where snow lay thick and ice hung on the trees, hungry eyes burned into us. The winters were long - thousands of years long - and we were fashioned in the winter. (The winter was the only time, in some early Celtic cultures, when stories could lawfully be told). Clustered around the fire we refined the language of community. Good storytellers became the elite. We carved bone and myth. This was our place: at the seam of the wild and the hearth; the dark and the light. Being human meant being able to navigate that space without losing our nerve. It still does. 'The whole world is nothing but a very narrow bridge', declared Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, 'and the great thing is not to be afraid'. Those Upper Palaeolithic bison-hunters knew what he was talking about.

So we, at the meeting of edges, innovated. We made new tools, both material and cognitive. This was an example of a general and ubiquitous principle. Evolutionary innovation can only occur at the edge of genetic orthodoxy – which generally means at the edge of a population, and often means at or over the edge of a landmass. Only at the edge of a population, where the environment throws down the gauntlet of new challenges, will individuals pick up the gauntlet and be required to change. At the centre of a petri dish bacteria are stable, smug, conservative, and can afford to be genetically complacent. They are surrounded by reassuring fellows. At the fringe, though, it is rather different. There they will find fewer conspecifics and more threats. Adventure, whether it is genetic adventure, cognitive adventure, or the sort that involves riding out from court looking for trouble, involves edges.

Think of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The poem starts at Camelot – a classic centre. The poet (here translated by Tolkien) is at pains to emphasise how soft it is all is. Arthur sits 'amid merriment unmatched and mirth without care … din of voices by day, and dancing by night.' At New Year '… double dainties on the dais were served … ' You can hear the poet's disgust and Arthur's self-loathing. Arthur wants adventure, but has to have it vicariously through Gawain who, after accepting the Green Knight's challenge, and cutting off the Green Knight's head (which of course doesn't finish off the Green Knight), goes out, out, always out, away from the centre, into the Wilderness of Wirral, beyond the sound of the courtly music and the scent of the dainties, to a place where even names cease to relate predictably to the things they used to represent: where there are, perhaps, human-animal hybrids (Woodwos) that irresistibly recall the therianthropes of the Ice Age caves. And it is here, in the Green Chapel – a place of peerless obscurity and non-centredness, a place that is 'nobbut a cave', that the real business of the story happens. There would be no story for Gawain without edge-crossing, just as there is no story for any of us.

All stories worth telling are edge stories by edge people. The *Iliad* is the tale of a clash between Greeks (the first emergence of an entity called 'Greeks') and non-Greeks. The Old Testament, from Exodus onwards, is the story of a nation that is supposed to be unlike other nations, which thrives when it is, and flounders when it is not; which abstained from pork precisely because the Philistines loved to eat pig, and whose males hacked off their foreskins precisely because the Philistines did not hack off theirs.

The great storytellers – in words, music, mythos, paint and stone - may have come *geographically* from centres, for centres allure edge people, and get them talking to

one another. But the edge people remain edgy in the geographical centre, and indeed their edges are sharpened there by grinding against other edges.

Who are the great London writers? Chaucer? His fame rests on *The Canterbury Tales* (which is about mostly provincial people *leaving* London for a pilgrimage site in a Kentish marsh) and *Troilus and Cressida*, which doesn't mention fish and chips once. His language, though represented as canonically English, is far more French. Samuel Johnson? He sat hunched in a Fleet Street garret, fussing about definitions and turning epigrams. He could have done so as well or better in a Dordogne tower, like Montaigne. Blake? He wandered through an entirely ethereal London, seeing angels at every street corner and on every shoulder. 'The fields from Islington to Marylebone to Primrose Hill and St John's Wood were builded over with pillars of gold,' he wrote, 'and there Jerusalem's pillars stood.' Chesterton? Likewise: his London was the Platonic form of the metropolis. Dickens? He is the great chronicler of the margins: of destitution, prostitution and the sweat shop; of the corruption of the centre and the cruelty of the metropolitan elite. For me, the most memorable and characteristic passage in all Dickens is the opening of *Bleak House*, where the Lord Chancellor, the cornerstone of the British establishment, sits at the centre of the centre – where all is impenetrable fog.

Who are the great Parisian artists? The Impressionists? They sought to make universal statements, untethered to Montmartre, let alone the Champs-Élysées, about the behaviour of light, and in any event were more likely to be found in Tahiti or a provincial madhouse than in Paris itself. The Surrealists? They too sought universal – not local truths: truths about the nature of reality itself.

But does the Italian Renaissance not confound my thesis? For there, concentrated in the unquestionable metropolis of Florence, bankrolled by the Medici, we have the greatest efflorescence of art since those Ice Age caves. But no, it does not confound it, as the art historian Andrew Graham-Dixon has compellingly shown. The art of the high Renaissance began as an edge movement, engineered by those radical edge-occupiers, the Franciscans.

Tuscany had an industrial revolution. Thousands of textile workers and their families moved to the edges of the cities – and notably to Florence. Franciscan missionaries sought to reach them, and built many churches where the people lived. But how to evangelise and catechise unlettered

workers? By preaching, yes, but also by way of images of the drama of redemption. The previous artistic tradition had been Byzantine mosaic. But that was costly and

took a long time. Hence fresco was born. The manner of the images had to be different too. The images of Byzantium were impassive. Jesus barely bled. He had a half smile even on the cross. His body did not look like the bodies of Tuscan labourers. Show the labourers that Jesus had a body like theirs, thought the Franciscans, and they will feel a solidarity with him that will translate to piety. There was a problem, though. Not since the Romans had there been a tradition of depicting human bodies realistically. Artists had to learn again how to paint us as we are and where we are - made not of shimmering and immutable gold in an ethereal space, but of fading flesh in a grubby world, poised on the margin of life and death. So it was that, impelled by the evangelistic zeal of the Franciscans rather than an intrinsic love of antiquity, the artists of the early Renaissance disinterred (sometimes literally) the realistic images of Rome and Greece, using them as the models for the images on the walls of the edge-churches of Tuscany.

Though the bankers came to be the big patrons, the artists of the Renaissance were never sucked into the centre. Art is itself a marginal enterprise, however sumptuous the palace in which the masterpiece appears. Often – and often subtly – the Renaissance artists cocked a snook at their patrons in the works themselves. Sometimes (think of Leonardo and Michelangelo), the artists themselves came from marginalised places (whether from economic obscurity or homosexuality). And the Medicis themselves, despite their vaunting self-confidence, were obsessed with their own eternal futures. They knew that being a banker was eternally dangerous, that Jesus himself had been the ultimate edge-man, and so saw artistic patronage of edginess as a shrewd eternal investment.

The bankers were right to see Christianity as from the margins, for the margins. Jesus himself, no doubt presumed by many to be illegitimate, was a refugee in Egypt from shortly after his birth. His earthly origins were in the dowdy province of Galilee, a long way from Jerusalem. ‘Can anything good come from Nazareth?’, asked Nathanael, expressing the centre’s scepticism about the ability of the edgelands to contribute anything worthwhile. It’s a very modern scepticism, embodied in much modern policy. Jesus kept the company of outcasts and died the most shameful of deaths at the hands of the centrists of the day, nailed to a piece of wood outside the capital. His early followers, notes David Bentley-Hart, were a ‘company of radicals’ whose values were ‘… almost absolutely inverse to the recognised social, political, economic, and religious truths not only of their own age, but of almost every age of human culture.’ Most of us, he declares, ‘would find Christians truly cast in the New Testament mold fairly obnoxious: civilly reprobate, ideologically unsound, economically destructive, politically irresponsible, socially discreditable, and really

just a bit indecent'. In the first few centuries of Christianity the central figures were radically eccentric figures – the ascetics who turned their backs on the bright lights of the metropolis and went into the desert to wrestle with demons. It's telling that the demons told St. Anthony to go back to Alexandria – the centre from which he had come. Only with the catastrophe of Constantine did Christianity become tainted with the centre, and begin to haemorrhage its authentic edginess.

It was similar for the other great religions. The Prophet Mohammed fled Mecca and the orthodoxy of the day; the Buddha left the lap of luxury and achieved enlightenment sitting under a tree in the sticks. Akhenaten, the heretic pharaoh, turned his back on the old cult centre of Amun in Thebes, took a boat down the Nile, and founded a wholly new city and civilization beyond the edge of nowhere to articulate his new monotheism.

Getting out of a cult centre: escaping an established pattern: escaping an establishment: standing outside the centre which is yourself - the process that translates, resonantly, as ec-stasy. All this seems to be necessary for progress; for movement, and hence for survival and thriving for creatures whose nature is movement. Staying anywhere is deadly, as our hunter-gatherer forbears knew. Staying in our accustomed mental places is creatively deadly. Everyday cognitive states are unlikely to produce real innovation.

And so innovators flock to the margins of their own consciousness. Take hypnagogia, for instance – the space between sleep and wakefulness. It is a fecund zone. We can learn to plunder it for inspiration, and many have. Salvador Dali fell asleep holding a key over a metal bowl, so that when he dropped off, the clang of the falling key jolted him for a moment into the hypnagogic no man's land, where he found many of his images. Edison did a similar thing with a bucket and a coin, and many of the iconoclastic greats had their own doors to the territory, where they could confer with archetypes. The Eroica, the Ring Cycle, the Waverley novels and even Oliver Twist may have come from there. Leonardo da Vinci is said to have slept for only two hours a day, but to have napped a lot. That meant a lot of in-between times, in which to snatch the designs of flying machines, understand the action of heart valves, and see the smile of the Mona Lisa.

The centre, which sees itself as, well, the centre, and so the source of everything worthwhile, is affronted and threatened by all this. It stops at nothing to perpetuate the illusion of its omnipotence and omniscience. It bribes, cajoles and flatters. 'Come and be one of us, ' it says to the edge people. 'We are where it is all at. Don't miss out. We'll look after you.' And if that doesn't work, it cuts up rough. It denies legal

existence to all but its own. Think of the difficulty you'd have without a registered address, a bank account, or a phone. Think of the war on the wanderers, whether the wanderers are nomads or gypsies. Think of the pressures to toe the party line (and the party, of course, is in the centre). It is hard to be non-neurotypical. It is career-endangering for an academic to produce anything that is not merely a timorous iteration of what has gone before. It is hard to sell books that do not fit neatly into an established category. The centre hates anything it cannot control, and since it cannot control the humanities (which, when they are pursued properly, relate to the entirely unpredictable, unclassifiable, contrary, uncontrollable lives of edge people), it decimates humanities departments, replacing them with disciplines whose outputs are easily measurable.

Centres have great centripetal power. There are two classic examples of centres. One is the Self. We all know what happens if we live entirely in ourselves, attracted by ourselves, sucking everything outside into ourselves. The other is the Black hole. It crushes and annihilates everything it allures.

For the metaphysics of the Self and the physics of the Black Hole, so for everything.

Charles Foster is a Fellow of Exeter College, University of Oxford. His latest book is *The Edges of the World: Travels in the margins of life, lands and ideas* (Transworld, 2026).