

Metaphysical Margate

Photographs by Werner Zellien

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The Real Margate

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Metaphysical Margate: it is a strange title. There is a rather discordant note struck by the apparent loftiness of attributing a technical philosophical term to a town that has been all too obviously mired in a socio-economic crisis for at least the last 30 years. The air of purity that comes with philosophical language – a language all too often stripped of common ambiguities in the search for pristine meaning – seems to be deeply at odds with the messiness of Margate. That Margate is a messy place is apparent to even the most cursory visitor. It is often to be found literally in the form of littered streets but it is equally clear that there is a messy mix of visuals throughout the town: the brash lights of the front that stand in such contrast to the expanse of the horizon; the grey verticality of Arlington tower sitting awkwardly amidst the gentle curves of the sea-front; the high street bedecked with boarded-up premises and the old town strewn with the faded hopes of new enterprises come and gone. Hardly a place worthy of philosophical reflection; it would seem. In Zellien's photographs of Margate, however, a different Margate is reflected back to us 'us' residents, visitors, workers, migrants, survivors, lovers of Margate. It is not Margate that is the mess but our metaphysics. It is philosophy that must step up to the challenge of the metaphysical nature of this most fascinating and beautiful of places. That it takes a photographer to show us this may itself seem strange, but only if we hang on to our image of the lofty and airy realms of philosophy. Brought back down to earth, philosophy and photography find a common pursuit in the search for, and

questioning of, reality. Zelliens photographs have us stand still in the sight of a Margate we often miss; a Margate of traces, lines and echoes. These images coax us into asking: what is the real Margate?

Metaphysics is Messy

Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy concerned with the fundamental nature of reality as a whole. Perhaps the easiest way of thinking about what this means is to contrast metaphysics with its near-neighbour in disciplinary terms, physics. Physics is concerned with the study of empirical phenomena, elements of nature that we can see (or more generally, sense) in one way or another. The current search for the Higgs-Boson particle at the CERN laboratory is an example of cutting-edge physics: a group of scientists delving into the extremes of physical conditions for evidence of a particle that has been theoretically conjectured by dominant perspectives within the discipline but that has yet to be ‘observed’. If found, then this particle may prove fundamental in the way that we describe and account for the natural world, a major contribution no doubt, but not one that impacts upon the realm of metaphysics, at least not directly. Whereas physicists are looking to understand the workings of nature, metaphysicians ask a different series of questions about nature that cannot be answered within the confines of a scientific domain because, in principle, they are questions that do not ask for answers that can be proved or disproved by appeal to our senses no matter how technologically sophisticated we are when it comes to augmenting our senses with devices such as the CERN accelerator. One might say, indeed, that the questions that concern metaphysicians are those that arise when you cross the limits of physics. But this rather neat connection between the two disciplines belies both the rather messy origins of the term metaphysics and complications regarding the questions that define its core themes.

The term metaphysics was first used as a way of ordering texts. The texts in question were those of the Greek philosopher, Aristotle. Amongst many

works, Aristotle wrote a treatise on nature called the *Physics* which provided the framework for the natural sciences until Galileo and then Newton were able to rethink the mechanics of the natural world. But Aristotle also wrote a series of books, in more or less completed form, which his followers placed together as ‘the books that come after the *Physics*’ (*ta meta ta phusika*). The term ‘meta’ in Greek simply denotes this textual relationship. *Metaphysics*, therefore, for all that we think of it as the lofty discipline of fundamental philosophy, first appeared in our philosophical lexicon as a way of ordering a series of Aristotelian texts: a rather haphazard beginning for a part of philosophy so deeply concerned with the fundamentals of reality.

Nonetheless, there is a rationale for the ordering established by Aristotle’s followers. The texts that comprise the *Metaphysics* are those that address two key questions: a) ‘are there principles that govern everything that is real?’; b) ‘what are the fundamental aspects of reality?’. The first question might lead us into speculation regarding the nature of cause and effect (what causes the billiard ball to move?) whereas the second would lead us to inquire into the fundamental nature of reality (is the billiard ball real, if so then in what sense?). These questions overlap significantly but it is always worth bearing in mind that they are technically distinct and may require different kinds of reasoning and different concepts in order to address them. So, not only is the label ‘metaphysics’ one with an unusual back-story, it is also a philosophical endeavour with a particularly complicated internal division which has become exacerbated (and more complicated) as the discipline has developed.

It is no longer so obvious that metaphysics is the clean philosophical thought applied to ephemeral and untidy realities as it too has a rather contingent beginning and a rather messy internal structure that we all too easily forget as we get lost in the technical concepts and refined air of high philosophical debate. Given this, and as the lustre of metaphysics dims with this knowl-

edge, Margate can step into the light refreshed and unabashed with its less than gleaming facade.

Margate is Nothing...it can become Anything

What is the real Margate? Is it the old glories of the famous sea-side resort or is it the new dream of cultural regeneration? Or, can we find the real Margate in-between the old and the new? During the winter months of 2004/05, when Zellien took these photographs, both the era of the sea-side resort and the hope of a burgeoning cultural hub seemed very distant. Two cannons in the background, facing each other, as if caught in a quaintly archaic version of mutually assured destruction, the old and the new Margate seem pitted against each other. Does Margate have to forsake its past in order to claim its future or is the battle between the resort and the artistic haven not really a battle at all? When faced with such stark choices must we choose between them? Perhaps, in having to choose we realise that we are free to choose something else; a present and a future for Margate that is both the old and the new? This existential realisation, however, is the outcrop of a deeper metaphysical claim: that Margate is nothing. The real Margate, that is: the one found within the empty streets, the looming dark skies and the barren townscape of this exhibition, in between the reflection on the cafe window. In these photographs Margate appears in all its bleakness, stripped of people, in photos typically taken at dawn and dusk as the famous Margate light played out its dramas. Yet, at its most bleak, Zellien suggests, Margate finds itself, its real nature, as nothing.

And it is this nothingness that is its beauty. While other towns in East Kent find their beauty in tradition, the layers of past activity etched into Cathedral walls or shingle beaches, Margate's beauty has been all too often shrouded by the images people have of the town. Defined by the well-to-do Victorians as a place of healing, by the cockneys as a place of leisure, by border control authorities as a place of retention and by the New Labour elite as a place of

culture, the real Margate has been hard to find. This is no doubt because everyone of these visitors to Margate have come already expecting to find what they think they know about Margate; it is a place where the dead weight of expectation has hung heavily over the town. The signs of these repeated attempts at defining the essence of Margate are everywhere and yet so too are the demands to be allowed to simply to exist: ‘I need my own flat and money, please Gov’. Margate is nothing and it just wants to be nothing; ‘not the thing’ that others say it has to be.

The real Margate: a town on the edge of Britain always able to renew itself, where change and transformation are intrinsic to its beauty. When all that is left is the mystery of the real Margate we could do worse than turn to Kierkegaard; ‘face the facts of being what you are, for that is what changes what you are’. To know that Margate is a place of transition and change, a place where being something (in the eyes of others) is always trumped by becoming something else (for ourselves, us lovers of Margate, even despite ourselves), is to know that there is always more to a place than simply choosing between choices as others present them. The message of Eliot’s famous remark in *The Wasteland* – ‘On Margate sands/ I can connect/ Nothing with nothing’ – is not simply that Margate is nothing, but that in recognising this Eliot realised that he could, once again, begin to make connections. Once again, he could create. Out of nothing, anything is possible.

Photography and Metaphysics

How do photographic images lead us to metaphysics? It is by no means clear that they should, not least because we tend to think of most photography as a snapshot of a moment, frozen in time, a moment of stationary being cut out of the flowing world of change and becoming. And much photography has this effect. But not, I suggest, these images. Zellien has found a photographic grammar that allows the real Margate to flow before our eyes, even to talk to us as we look, and to reveal that it is always more than we think it

is, no matter how many times we look and listen. Zellien has understood that there is sadness in our attempts to confine Margate to one destiny or another. As such, the melancholy in these images is plain but also necessary. It is necessary because in keeping alive the grief of a dying town we see that there is life and possibility to be found in the grief itself. Besides, consigning our sense of loss – the lost resort, the lost opportunities of a cultural hub to come – to the safe haven of a process of mourning that must be ‘done with’ is to ask us to forget that Margate is a place that will always change. If we are to be aware of the real Margate, the Margate that changes, then we must embrace the fact that change will always bring death into life. That is why these images, so saturated with sadness, always also retain a deep sense of hope and promise. It is also why photography, seemingly snatching a moment and killing its flow, can (when realised with the precision of Zellien’s images) precisely illuminate the real flow of life that marks a place.

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