WATER FOR FISH?
SOME THOUGHTS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TIME AND LITERATURE

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Introductory remarks

> 'Our relationship to time is founded on desire… We desire to measure and possess time, to know it and to shape it, to save it and to spend it. In all these ways, we imagine time as an externality that bounds our lives and defines our experiences within those bounds, a view captured by a quip made by James Baldwin's character Giovanni in the novel *Giovanni's Room*: 'Time is common, it's like water for fish.' (Thomas M Allen, *Time and Literature*, 2018)

Yet, as Allen continues, Baldwin's characters, through their suffering and interaction, learn that:

> '… on some deep level, time is not external but resides within us… We are the shadowy waters with mysterious depths – not the swimmers, but the medium.'

This passage encapsulates well the intention of this talk. It is not to discuss the nature or reality of time itself (although there will be some references to this.) Rather, it is to explore through literature some ways in which, within the objective framework of public clock time, we have our own *personal experiences* of time. The central proposition is that literary imagination and insight contain degrees of physical and psychological realism that offer an interpretative vision of human character and experience, of which time is a part. The experience of time will be illustrated under four headings: how we perceive time passing; how, without temporal frameworks, we become disoriented; how a sense of an ending, particularly our mortality, informs our choices; and how we may view eternity and immortality.

But let us begin with two preliminary points. First, literature of any sort is unimaginable without temporal dimensions: time to write it; time to read it or see it performed; the narrator's point in time; and plot time, which varies greatly. Homer's *Iliad* covers some 50 days and *The Odyssey* 10 years, whereas Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* span just one day.

Second, while literature may yield insights into personally experienced time, it is reflexively influenced by the prevailing cultural perceptions of time, which have

varied greatly through history. For long periods our ancestors, including the Greeks, through the rhythms of the seasons, the daily access to heat and light and the phases of the moon, believed that time is cyclical; what goes round, comes round, as it were, in a directionless recurrence. Judaeo-Christian thought is usually credited with evolving a linear concept of time, which stretches from the creation in Genesis to the apocalypse described by Revelation; time became an arrow, albeit heading towards catastrophe. During the Enlightenment the mood lightened and linear time was linked to rational and scientific progress, human betterment and an 'open future'.

But then came three earthquakes in our perceptions of time. The first was the discovery of geological 'deep time' by James Hutton in the eighteenth century, which vastly expanded the timeline of the earth and at the same time diminished the footprint of *homo sapiens*; this was compounded by Darwin's insights into evolution of life in the following century. The second was the Industrial Revolution, which upended traditional ways of life and gave rise to irrevocably altered economic and social conditions. Railway timetables and household clocks came to scaffold the awareness of time, coupled paradoxically, with a growing sense of transience. The pace of change seemed ever quickening and this is something that has continued into the modern digital age of 24/7, where the speed of communication has almost annihilated waiting times. The third was scientific revolution through Einstein's theories of relativity and the emergence of quantum physics. Almost simultaneously time became both relative and subjective, and uncertain and possibly – though not for the first occasion – non-existent.

It is hardly surprising that literature took radical new turnings. Nineteenth century novels, from Jane Austen to Thomas Hardy, typically proceed chronologically, all sub-plots advancing more or less simultaneously, albeit with a little historical backfill here and there. Some novelists took account of technological change, for example Dickens in *Dombey &Son*, where he observes the massive urban upheaval to accommodate railways and reflects on the high speed of a train taking Dombey back to London at 25mph! A hundred years after Austen profound changes occurred in literary form. For instance, as part of a widespread revolution in the arts, the early Modernist writers explored the changes in time perception, drawing on such techniques as flashbacks and, influenced by Freud's ideas on the subconscious, the stream of consciousness. Neat plot resolutions became harder to find, as novelistic time fractured and uncertainties prevailed, reflecting the state of an altered world. Many of these early Modernists, such as Yeats, Pound, Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis and T S Eliot, were at heart traditionalist and élitist and mourned what was passing and feared a future dominated by the 'hooded hordes'. They were apocalyptic in their mindset, sensing decadence in a new materialism and hoping for renovation and renewal; they craved order in a time that was out of joint, favoured

authoritarianism over democracy and were at times openly fascistic; Yeats even talked up war as a cathartic process for spiritual renewal.

Time as an arrow that brings 'progress' was criticised by these early Modernists on the grounds that 'more means worse'. It has also become problematic in our post-imperial environment in that the idea of progress appears to privilege technologically advanced societies as more 'civilised'. This view was endemic in nineteenth century literature and often explicit, for example Kipling's poem *The White Man's Burden* urges young white men to serve the needs of the 'new caught sullen peoples/Half-devil and half-child.' The racism is obvious and there has been a strong reaction to such insulting paternalism in post-colonial writing by former colonised peoples. This elides with what is called 'Queer Studies', which critiques time's progressive arrow for ignoring communities that have non-mainstream experiences of time. For example, among gay communities the spread of AIDS has led to a sense of compressed futures.

Time passing

> '… one day in winter, as I came home, my mother, seeing that I was cold… sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called *'petites madeleines*'… I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate… an exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses…'
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> '… when from a long distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after things are broken and scattered, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.' (Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, 1913)

Henri Bergson knew Proust, as he married one of his cousins, and thus his theories of time and memory were unsurprisingly a major influence on the author. Bergson rejected the Jamesian view of experienced time as an accumulation of moments of 'specious present' and saw time instead as a continuous flow of consciousness, where present perceptions enfold the immediate past and an anticipated future through a 'real duration' (*durée réelle*). Proust embraced this view. This, together with his belief that past feelings and experiences, far from being lost, remain eternally present in the unconscious and can be recalled, often by involuntary memory excited by magic moments from the past, such as the 'madeleine moment', meant for him that the past can be revisited. In his masterpiece, *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust sets out on a kind of internal time travel, journeying backwards and

forwards in his memory over 50 years, disjointing time as his memories come and go. His overriding themes throughout are the transience of time and time's corroding effects upon the self and others, as values change, loved ones die and time exhausts the ecstasy of love. An air of melancholy prevails as happy, hopeful times are recalled but are forever out of reach.

A common feature of literature that deals with time passing is exactly this melancholic sense of loss, as in Chekhov's sold-off cherry orchard and the 'irrecoverable Lyonesse' of prewar Oxford in *Brideshead Revisited*. Lawrence Durrell's *Monsieur*, the first novel (1974) of *The Avignon Quintet*, begins with these lines:

> 'The southbound train from Paris was the one we had always taken from time immemorial – the same long slowcoach of a train, stringing out its bluish lights across the twilight landscapes like some super-glow-worm…
> How well I remembered…'

The mood of older and happier times is immediately captured, as a man retraces his steps to attend the funeral of a lost friend and sometime lover. This sense of time flowing and time passing through us and by us is undoubtedly a felt experience of many people, who resonate with the sentiments of such works. Indeed, time is awash with the luxury of loose metaphors that confirm this, such as: 'time flies'; 'time and tide wait for no-one'; 'where did the time go?'; 'time is the enemy'; and, reflecting Bergson, the 'flow of time'.

But does time really 'flow' or 'pass'? Surely not. Time does not flow like a river: it is *we* who are the fish in the water and who flow through time until we sink out of sight. Time merely accumulates, layer by layer, like sedimentary rock. Or to use another analogy, time is similar to the grid of an Ordnance Survey map, with which we can measure our distance travelled in kilometres. We have just such a *temporal* framework that we pass through, hour by hour, day by day, year by year. We remember from our schooldays, as students and perhaps teachers, the great grid of the school timetable that measured out our time in bells.

There is clearly a paradox between fixed, objective clock time and our felt sense of time passing through our ephemeral lives. But there is, perhaps, a resolution. Our nostalgic sense of the past as a happier time, though now a foreign country that can never be re-experienced, is fundamentally not about time passing us by but about the loss of our vitality as we age, something well captured in these selected lines from a poem (1886) by Henry Austin Dobson called *The Paradox of Time*:

‘Time goes, you say? Ah no!
Alas, Time stays, we go;
Or else, were this not so,
What need to chain the hours,
For Youth were always ours?
Time goes, you say?-ah no!

Where are our old desires?-
Ah, where those vanished fires?
Time goes, you say?-ah no!

Alas, Time stays,-we go!’

The ‘arrow of time’ (a term first coined by Arthur Eddington in 1927) is not so much a metaphor suggesting that time itself ‘flies’ forward but a scientific hypothesis that time is unidirectional. It may be the case that the equations of Newton, Einstein and quantum physics are consistent with time being symmetrical, that is, Janus–like, capable of moving in either direction but, as Einstein observed, causation is surely unidirectional and forward moving. Otherwise, it would be like a bull walking backwards out of a china shop and the china flying up from the floor and piecing itself back together again.

The overwhelming sense of chronology in narrative fiction is unidirectional, according with our common sense that the past accumulates; novelists tend towards, as it were, McTaggart’s A-series. It may be that authors move away from strict chronology, using flashbacks (a technique employed as long ago as Homer in *The Odyssey*), and fractured time and streams of temporally disconnected consciousness – but the overall direction of travel is clear. Detective stories, for example, usually start with a crime and the clues, motives and culprits emerge from investigations into the past towards a solution explained in the present. However, a few novels deliberately use a reverse-time plot, as in *Time’s Arrow* by Martin Amis. This is a harrowing story that traces backwards the death and life of a Nazi doctor from his time in New York to his time at Auschwitz. In an abortion clinic, a foetus is inserted into a woman’s womb, who then leaves in tears. In Auschwitz, incisions into inmates’ bodies are healed and they depart. Such a novel demonstrates the absurdity of backward causation, seeming to confirm Einstein’s view on the ‘arrow of time’.

Literature explores the passing of clock time compared to ‘psychological time’, in which the latter is experienced to be either faster or slower than the former. Who can forget Hancock’s protracted ennui during a Sunday afternoon in the 1950s? Henry Van Dyke Jr captured such psychological states in his poem (1904) *Time Is*:

‘Time is
Too slow for those who Wait,
Too swift for those who Fear,
Too long for those who Grieve,
Too short for those who Rejoice,
But for those who Love,
Time is not.’

Those who go through certain near death experiences, as in a car crash, often claim that the moment of crisis occurs in slow motion. This subjective experience has often been emulated in films, for example in the final slow-motion shoot-out scene in Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch*. Yet neuroscientist David Eagleman claims this is not so. Using experimental evidence, he argues that the amygdala creates intense ‘flashbulb memories… that make them “stick better”. Upon replay, the higher density of data would make the event appear to last longer.’ Similarly, we feel that time passes more quickly when we are older than when we were younger. A mathematician may say this is because every passing year is a smaller percentage of the total. Eagleman suggests it is because the experiences of childhood are more vivid and so have greater staying power, just as Proust suggested in his ‘madeleine moment’!

Time orienting

‘Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit the other hit. Then they went on, and I went along the fence. Luster came away from the flower tree and we went along the fence and they stopped and we stopped and I looked through the fence while Luster was hunting in the grass.’
(William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 1929)

These words are spoken by Benjy, the mentally impaired child of the Compson family, a once prosperous and respected Southern family but one fallen on hard times. Benjy has no concept of time and lives in a continuous present in which memories have the same resonance as present experience. Faulkner himself comments: ‘The past is never dead. It is not even past.’ Benjy is sensitive to events in an instinctive way but cannot organise and communicate his thoughts. His stream of consciousness narrative occurs through the first 70 pages of the novel. To the reader

it is bewildering, as one is never clear what is past or present, or how the characters mentioned relate to one another. Through Faulkner's brilliant writing we gain an insight into what it might be like to be disoriented when life lacks a temporal mooring.

In similar vein, Florian Zeller's play *The Father* is about the decline of an old man with progressive dementia. The action takes place in a Parisian flat – but is it his flat, or his daughter's? Is his daughter moving to London or does she actually live with her partner in this flat? What does his daughter look like, as the actress changes? Pieces of furniture disappear from scene to scene. The audience wonders what on earth is going on – until we realise that Zeller is putting us into same mental state as the old man who is losing his grip on reality as his memory, and his sense of time, location, and identity disintegrate. We, the audience, become disoriented just like him.

The setting for Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *La Jalousie* is a banana plantation and has three characters, a husband and wife and another man from a neighbouring plantation. The central question is whether the wife and the neighbour are having an affair. The novel abandons almost any sense of linear time as past events are replayed. A particular scene, in which a tropical centipede (clearly a phallic symbol) clings to the wall, is played over and over, presumably in the husband's mind, a mind that is steadily losing its bearings, even its sanity, in his confused consciousness. Robbe-Grillet also wrote the screenplay for *Last Year in Marienbad*, in which two characters share a surreal consciousness in which neither is able to remember if they met this year or last year or even at all, and was it here or somewhere else? Robbe-Grillet's characters are disoriented and temporal uncertainty is a major cause of this. No wonder that Robbe-Grillet was a favourite author of Roland Barthes who, in his celebrated tract, *The Death of the Author*, argued that readers must make their own sense of the text, which puts them into the same state of mental flux as the characters.

Much of Samuel Beckett's work seeks to destroy the sense of time passing altogether. It seems that Valdimir and Estragon, in *Waiting for Godot*, will undergo much the same experience *ad infinitum*. *Endgame* has an end that is in the beginning. *Play* is a play that literally repeats itself. For Beckett, time, if it is manifest at all, 'is an endless transition from one condition of misery to another'. In this 'theatre of the absurd' the absurdity exists in part because our normal sense of linear time has broken down.

In short, may we conclude from the above examples that our common sense of time, as a line passing like a thread through our successive experiences, is an essential condition for our sanity and wellbeing? The above works certainly suggest this and,

through writings of genius in fiction and drama, create this disorientation in the observer and show how disoriented we would be without such a temporal framework.

Time ending

> 'Never in my life had I felt so fat with time, so free of the need to be moving or doing.'
> (Laurie Lee, *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning*, 1969)

Laurie Lee was 19 when he left England and travelled through France and into Spain in the early 1930s. Somewhere in the middle of Spain he lay upon his stomach under the shade of wayside poplars; for hours he simply watched ants pass by, utterly unconstrained by any sense of an ending and the need to hurry up. Compare this with the words of Zorba the Greek, a man in his sixties talking to his young, intellectual master.

> 'I had gone to a little village. An old grandfather of 90 was planting an almond tree. "What granddad!" I exclaimed. "Planting an almond tree?" And he, bent as he was, turned round and said: "My son, I carry on as if I should never die." I replied: "And I carry on as if I was going to die any minute." Which of us was right, boss?'
> (Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek*, 1946)

Zorba is raising a profound question. One interpretation is that he is asking whether he should live every day on a *carpe diem* basis, doing as much as he can. Or should he relax more and develop a calmer way of life? There is, as it were, a choice between a life of 'doing, doing, doing' or simply 'being'. The temporal context is that Zorba is getting quite old and certainly does *not* feel 'fat with time' like the young Laurie Lee. He feels instead that the sands are running out. In other words he feels the imminence of mortality.

We may regard time as a resource, freely given at birth. We do not know exactly how much time we have, since we do not know how long we will live. But we can be sure that each day that passes reduces the stock. During much of our adult lives we typically sell over a third of our waking hours in order to have the income to live. If we survive, we stop working and contemplate the final years. By this time, our stock of time is very run down. And like any resource that becomes scarce, its price rises. To use a term from economics, the opportunity cost of our choices becomes higher: what is not done now may never be done.

This is Zorba's dilemma. It is nothing less than an existential dilemma about how to live our lives as mortality, always immanent, becomes imminent. Zorba casts the question in an egocentric manner. But we may push his question further and suggest that time, like any other resource we spend, has moral consequence. Should the final years or, indeed, any part of our lifespan, be lived in an entirely self-indulgent manner? Or should we use some of our time on kindnesses to others and ensuring that we do not let others down? Time is not like money: we cannot replenish the pot. Once gone, always gone. Should one really have missed that important family Christmas in pursuit of a passing passion? Such simple questions, and many others, spring from Zorba's hard question.

Mortality is a theme that is almost as prevalent in literature as time itself. The nineteenth century novel is saturated with references to mortality, often linked to inheritance, in an age when wealth inherited was nearly always greater than wealth accumulated. Frank Kermode published a book of lectures in 1967 entitled *The Sense of an Ending*, arguing that a sense of an end can be essential to our lives, as it provides us with a framework for finding meaning and psychological survival. He quotes from a book by Christopher Burney called *Solitary Confinement* (1952) that relates Burney's experience of long captivity in France having been arrested as an enemy agent by the Gestapo; he was continuously aware that he might be executed at any time. Burney wrote:

> 'One does not suffer the passing of empty time but rather the slowness of the expected event which is to end it.'

So he invents an end convenient to himself:

> 'One thing is out of the question. I cannot still be here at Christmas… This was an axiom…'

But after Christmas came and went, he invents another end.

> 'I had made it necessary to be wrong by setting the limit in the first place. The essential… was to have a boundary which would make time finite and comprehensible.'

Kermode is suggesting that this sense of an ending, which revolves around our mortality, is necessary to establish realisable goals and even to maintain our sanity, especially when confronted with crisis. In contrast, Kermode discusses Sartre's *La Nausée*, a philosophical novel exploring the plight of an individual, Roquentin, living in perpetual crisis, in a world with no God, no beginning and no end, in a 'chaos

without potentiality'. To Roquentin, life appears to be absurd and arbitrary. He is rootless in the present and not even defined by his past, which might be illusory. He cannot commit suicide to free himself from the 'sin of existence' as this is an arbitrary act without meaning. Roquentin, unlike Burley, is unable to formulate a temporal end and is driven nearly mad as a consequence.

Time everlasting

> 'Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future
> And time future contained in time past.
> If all time is eternally present
> All time is unredeemable.'
> (T S Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, the first of the *Four Quartets*, 1935)

These are the first lines in Eliot's *Four Quartets*, reckoned by many to be the greatest philosophical poem of the 20th century. This is no longer an Eliot from the psychological and spiritual desolation of *The Wasteland*. He has regained his faith and joined the Church of England, describing himself as an Anglo-Catholic. The poems have a 'philosophic calm' and are an examination of time, eternity and immortality. Eliot's views, insofar as we can interpret them, were strongly influenced by the Bhagavad-Gita, Heraclitus and his theory of flux, the idealism of Neoplatonism, the arguments of Boethius for eternity and St Augustine, who stated:

> 'It is not in time that you precede times. Otherwise you would not precede all times. In the sublimity of an eternity which is always in the present, you are before all things past and transcend all things future, because they are still to come.'
> (St Augustine, *Confessions* Book XI, 397-400)

Eliot's views present, to say the least, intractable metaphysical problems. He appears to subscribe to the Augustinian, Christian doctrine that God is eternal (a word mentioned 47 times in the King James version of the Bible) and He is outside time, for God created time when He created the universe, as the Unmoved Mover. Time is the ticking clock within the universe that has no parallel in the eternity of God. The problem that this presents to a Christian is that God is also said to be in the world, and even sent a Saviour to redeem us. But if God is in the world, He sees the changes within it and, observing change, becomes time-bound also, for change is incomprehensible without a temporal dimension.

Philosophers have attempted to resolve this paradox in a variety of ways. One solution is to suggest that God enters time at the moment of creation and will return

to eternity when the universe ends. Another solution is to suggest that God is not just eternal but also omniscient, so knows all things at once and thus does not experience temporal-dependent change, as He needs no waiting time to learn what happens next. A more recent argument posits the notion of Eternal-Temporal Simultaneity: God inhabits a timeless present in eternity and, in the temporal world, as the present moves forward from the past to the future, there is perpetual simultaneity between eternity and time. Though as Eliot wrote (1941):

> 'But to apprehend
> The point of intersection of the timeless
> With time, is an occupation for the saint'

We rather need immortality to figure these things out - and immortality is our next and last topic. Eliot, a convinced Christian, would have believed in a life after death and presumably an immortal one. But what does immortality mean: subsisting with God in the 'still point' of eternity, or in the temporal universe where the Second Law of Thermodynamics predicts the Heat Death of the universe leading to formless and timeless entropy?

Immortality has been a common theme in literature dating as far back as the 18th century BCE in the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which is largely the story of a long and perilous journey to discover the secret of eternal life. But is immortality one of those things about which we have to be careful what we wish for? Swift lampooned immortality during Gulliver's third voyage, when he encounters a society where some people, the Struldbruggs, are born with the curse of immortality, a curse because they continue to age although they cannot die; they are shunned by the lucky mortals and denied all rights 'as avarice is the necessary consequence of old age.' Douglas Adams' novel *Life, the Universe and Everything* presents immortality as an endless Sunday afternoon. His character Wowbagger, who became immortal after an accident with a particle accelerator, finds immortality so boring that he develops a scheme of personally insulting every living being in the universe in alphabetical order in order to pass the time.

The nature of life after death divides the Christian community and the history of heaven reveals extraordinary contrasts in beliefs. Some, for example Tom Wright, a former Bishop of Durham, interpret scripture as saying that immortality will be in the form of everlasting life in a material body upon the earth after the Second Coming. Others believe that it will consist of an immortal soul in the presence of God, in the serenity of eternity away from the flux of time. This conjures images from Dante's *Paradiso*, where shades exist in spiritual ecstasy in the glorious light of God's

presence. Surely we can only conjecture, for whatever is beyond death is ‘the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns.’ (1600/01)

In conclusion

Perhaps the above questions are for theology rather than philosophy. Philosophy, after all, is not bound by faith doctrines to specific beliefs. It is famously a subject where big questions receive no definitive answers - and it has certainly not been the purpose of this paper to try to provide any. But perhaps we may conclude that the more modest proposition, that literature deepens our understanding of how we personally experience time, has been reasonably substantiated in terms of: how we feel time passes; the necessity of temporal frameworks to our wellbeing; the impact of approaching mortality on our life choices; and how we conceive of a life after death. Thus we may say, through the specific examples that literature provides, such as those above, we learn more about our own experience of being a ‘fish in water’.

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