

43 SLOW TIME... AND SEA-URCHINS (Jan 2022)

(für Georg und Claudia – herzliche wünsche!)

Where others may have a skull on the mantelpiece as a *memento mori*, I would rather have an echinoid (or fossilised sea-urchin - in French, the delectable ‘oursin’; in German, ‘der Seeigel’ or sea-hedgehog). You can find two kinds along the beaches here in the Pays de Caux (the land of chalk...): the classic vaulted dome versions, or the beautiful, heart-shaped sort. I’ve read that they have been found in the burial barrows of great chiefs or warriors and were thought to be eggs of the gods. More extraordinarily, according to the British Geological Survey, they have been around since the Late Ordovician, about 450 million years ago, which is about 220 million years before the first dinosaurs appeared. This is quite difficult to start thinking about!



I’ve been collecting them for years and they are not easy to find. The one in the centre is a modern-day cousin. Humans (roughly 300,000 years old) evolved from our “ancestors”, who were learning to walk upright between 5-7 million years ago. So, before we start priding ourselves on our fabulous progress and our “superiority” to all other species, we would do well to ponder whether our species

will still be around in one or two *hundred* years’ time, let alone 450 million!

We were visited in December by our German friend Georg (Claudia unfortunately couldn’t make it this time) and their very convivial stays in our Charretterie always get me thinking about time. For example, eighty years ago (1941), such visits would have been utterly inconceivable, and even in 1991, when we bought our house here from Monsieur le Comte de Montalembert, who declared himself a good friend (“*bon copain...*”) of Churchill and even knew “*votre Monsieur Lloyd George*” (just think! I’ve shaken hands with a hand that shook hands with David Lloyd George!), he actually told me, across his great mahogany desk in the *Sénat aux Jardins de Luxembourg à Paris* where I (not Vicki! a *woman!*) was summoned to meet with him, that I was extremely fortunate to be British because he would *never* have sold the house to anyone German!

Georg has an interesting story: his father was stationed here in Dieppe, not at the time of the catastrophic Dieppe Raid, or Operation Jubilee (*Jubilee??!*), by the Canadians and British in August 1942, but later. Later still, Georg’s father was taken prisoner and sent to a POW camp

in Ramsgate. There he became good friends with an Englishman, Mr Glover. After the war was over, Georg's father regularly visited Mr Glover, whose daughter, Doreen, had to be cared for in a care home. Mr Glover asked whether, in the event of his death, his German pal and bosom friend might continue to come over to Ramsgate and visit Doreen from time to time to check that everything was all right. When Mr Glover passed away, that is what Georg's father faithfully did, and he asked Georg, in turn, when he felt he was approaching the end of his life, if *he* too would continue to do this. So, Georg told us, he had taken on this responsibility of visiting Doreen from time to time in her care home in Ramsgate and seeing that all was well. It had become a family duty of friendship.

Eventually, Doreen died, some years ago, and Georg went over for the modest funeral. There were very few mourners as hardly anybody apart from the staff of the home knew her. The clergyman was interested to see Georg there, an unknown German at Doreen's funeral, and he asked him how he knew about her. Of course, the heart-warming story all came out as Georg told of his father's friendship with Doreen's father.

"This is extraordinary, you *must* come with me!" announced the vicar and he marched Georg off to the local tavern.

"Listen, everyone!" he called out to everyone in the pub. "Drinks today are on the house! It's official: the Second World War is finally *over!*" And everybody there heard the story.



worth of small creatures dying and having their bodily remains crushed into chalk or frozen in time by silt that through pressure and time became flint and allowed urchins, amongst other animals, to become fossilised.

We used to bring our children here to play tennis at the beautiful "Hôtel de la Terrasse" (they played happily while we could sip drinks on the "terrace" above, which overlooked this leafy headland and the sea... and the setting sun). We once talked to the

We went for a walk together and I took him to Vastérial, a beach that feels very remote and has enormous sandstone rocks that fall from the top of the cliffs and then are carved into fantastic shapes by the sea.

It's a good place to search for echinoids and a good place to reflect on the passing of time. These chalk cliffs once lay below the sea and are a cross-section of the passage of millions of years, eons'



Georg at Vastérial

elderly couple who ran the hotel. There had been only *one* success in the Dieppe Raid and that was the British commando team who arrived by boat the night before the attack on Dieppe, walked up from the beach at Vastérial and blew up an important German battery a little way inland. They walked back down and safely made it back to the ship that had brought them there. “Did your family know of this exploit at the time?” I asked.

The couple showed us their photo album. “Do you remember that night?” we asked. The elderly woman’s husband laughed.



“Yes! The British soldiers stopped at the hotel on their way back down to the beach. My wife’s father served them coffees in the garden; it was August. My wife was just a little girl of six then and she came out into the garden in her nightie. She saw her father surrounded by men in the darkness and came closer, asking with great curiosity, ‘*Est-ce que vous allez fusiller mon père?*’ (Are you going to shoot my father?) There was a lot of laughter when they knew what she had said.”

His wife, who I think was called Marie, laughed and shown us more photos.



I told Georg the story and he was very amused. We found no fossils that day, though I gave him an echinoid as a keepsake and we quietly mused about time in our own lives.

The beach at Varengeville,
just beyond Vastérial

My great-great grandmother had kept a journal during the Siege of Paris in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. I told Georg how surprised I had been to learn that no pupils in France ever study the Franco-Prussian War, because, after all, French enthusiasm for



mobilising against Germany in 1914 came directly as a consequence of the previous war in 1870. Was it shame at the atrocities committed by the French against their fellow citizens in the Commune afterwards? There are still silences on all sides about the ‘inconvenient’ aspects of the historical record in *all* wars. For example, in Britain pupils are taught about the ‘triumph’ of the evacuation of Dunkirk, but not about the *failed* evacuation, at almost exactly the same time, of the 15,000 allied troops at St Valéry near our home at Houdetot, where the Scottish ‘Black Watch’ put up such fierce but hopeless resistance to Rommel’s forces. This uncomfortable defeat doesn’t figure, I think, on British school syllabuses.

Bill Brandt, the photographer, made some lovely black-and-white studies at Vastérial in the 1950s of which I could only find a few on the internet with the help of our son, George.

Here are two:

“But what has all this to do with poetry?” you may well ask. Well, as it happens, the *New York Review* has just published a poem by Auden that the world has never seen before. It was put aside in 1941 and it is bang in line with my ponderings in these last few days about Time, both long, slow time as measured in echinoid terms, and more recent times of parents, grandparents and ...great or even great-great-grandparents.

And Fate.

So, I have the opportunity to be one of the first to comment on this unknown poem:



We get the Dialectic fairly well (WH Auden 1941)

We get the Dialectic fairly well,
 How streams descending turn to trees that climb,
 That what we are not we shall be in time,
 Why some unlikes attract, all likes repel.
 But is it up to creatures or their fate
 To give the signal when to change a state?

Granted that we might possibly be great
 And even be expected to get well
 How can we know it is required by fate
 As truths are forced on poets by a rhyme?
 Ought we to rush upon our lives pell-mell?
 Things have to happen at the proper time

And no two lives are keeping the same time,
 As we grow old our years accelerate,
 The pace of processes inside each cell
 Alters profoundly when we feel unwell,
 The motions of our protoplasmic slime
 Can modify our whole idea of fate.

Nothing is unconditional but fate.
 To grumble at it is a waste of time,
 To fight it, the unpardonable crime.
 Our hopes and fears must not grow out of date,
 No region can include itself as well,
 To judge our sentence is to live in hell.

Suppose it should turn out, though, that our bell
 Has been in fact already rung by fate?
 A calm demeanor is all very well
 Provided we were listening at the time.
 We have a shrewd suspicion we are late,
 Our look of rapt attention just a mime,

That we have really come to like our grime;
 And do not care, so far as we can tell,
 For whom or for how long we have to wait.
 Whatever we obey becomes our fate,
 What snares the pretty little birds is time,
 That what we are, we only are too well.

The “Dialectic”, as I understand it, is the Hegelian/Marxist idea that man is subjected to historical and social forces that create their *opposites*. Marx’s “dialectical materialism” was trying to show how external material forces actually created poverty and the ‘alienation’ of workers in the capitalist system, rather than the wealthier world that it promised. Here, then, in the first stanza, Auden introduces this idea of opposing forces at work over which we have little or no control. Leading, of course, to the Big Question that is forever posed: does man really have free will, or are our lives constantly determined (or ‘fated’) by forces (gods?) outside our control?

The poem elegantly ‘acts out’ its own thesis: its form is that of a “sestina”, a six-stanza poem of six lines, where each of the ending rhymes is repeated in every stanza – ‘determined’. YET, when we look more carefully at the poem we see that “time”, “fate” and “well” are indeed repeated, but that the poet allows himself the ‘freedom’ to rhyme these words with three other words in each stanza. Half-determined/half-freely chosen. So, the structure of the poem is already leading us to the supposition that between free will and determinism, it’s pretty evenly balanced.

Where was Auden in 1941, eighty years ago? It’s worth asking the question. In 1939, he and his best friend, Christopher Isherwood, in what many thought was a very cowardly move, had jumped ship and moved to the USA from England. Why? Auden himself, I think, in his great poem at the time, “September 1, 1939” (see **appendix** below), is ambiguous in his response. Rejecting “Imperialism’s face / And the international wrong”, (ie British imperialism and the punitive terms of the Versailles Treaty), he seems to feel that it is only by escaping from the nationalist rhetoric of his own country and moving towards the more republican virtues of the USA that he can find his true artistic voice, even though he knows also that the skyscrapers of Manhattan may well hide other sorts of greed and selfishness.

All I have is a voice
 To undo the folded lie,
 The romantic lie in the brain
 Of the sensual man-in-the-street
 And the lie of Authority
 Whose buildings grope the sky:
 There is no such thing as the State
 And no one exists alone;
 Hunger allows no choice
 To the citizen or the police;
 We must love one another or die.

Defenceless under the night
 Our world in stupor lies;
 Yet, dotted everywhere,
 Ironic points of light
 Flash out wherever the Just

Exchange their messages:
 May I, composed like them
 Of Eros and of dust,
 Beleaguered by the same
 Negation and despair,
 Show an affirming flame.

It ends ambivalently, full of “Negation and despair” but trying to show “an affirming flame”.

Back then to the “Dialectic”, because Auden two years later is still trying to sort out the question of where he *should* be making his stance, as an artist trying to become more engaged with this doom-filled world. Can he stand *freely* or is he subjected to the same forces as everyone else?

Granted that we might possibly be great
 And even be expected to get well
 How can we know it is required by fate
 As truths are forced on poets by a rhyme?

Although DNA had not yet been discovered, enough was known about our genes to know that some diseases are almost programmed into our being. The poem riffs on the idea of ‘fate’ and finishes ambiguously with,

Whatever we obey becomes our fate,
 What snares the pretty little birds is time,
 That what we are, we only are too well.

Let’s take it carefully because it is not easy to understand. Blind obedience, of the sort demanded by totalitarian régimes, becomes the “fate” of many people. We are snared also by “time”, which is fair enough as an idea – but the last line is difficult to tease out in terms of sense. First of all, the line is *not* saying “That *which* we are, we only are too well”. “That”, here, could mean “so that” or “in order that”, and the very last phrase of the poem seems to cancel itself out. “Only” is a negative sort of word (eg. I was *only* trying to help...), but here “too well” seems to contradict it with a ‘positive’. “*Too well*”... positive??

It’s as if the poet wants to show us how time forces us into a box, BUT that somehow our knowledge? our artistry? our abilities and cleverness – can deliver us from this prison of ‘fatedness’. “... too well”? Does Auden suspect that his own cleverness is yet another trap – to make us feel that we can escape our ‘fate’ through our knowledge, even though our clever knowledge or artistry has actually no *power* to free us from our ‘fate’. This would seem to be true of climate change right now!

It’s a beautifully elegant poem, but teasingly it leaves questions hanging. Perhaps that’s why he never published it.

Another poem which deals with what I'm here calling 'slow time' is "An Arundel Tomb" by Philip Larkin. I think it's one of his best, even though it, too, is highly ambiguous.

An Arundel Tomb

Side by side, their faces blurred,
The earl and countess lie in stone,
Their proper habits vaguely shown
As jointed armour, stiffened pleat,
And that faint hint of the absurd—
The little dogs under their feet.

Such plainness of the pre-baroque
Hardly involves the eye, until
It meets his left-hand gauntlet, still
Clasped empty in the other; and
One sees, with a sharp tender shock,
His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.

They would not think to lie so long.
Such faithfulness in effigy
Was just a detail friends would see:
A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace
Thrown off in helping to prolong
The Latin names around the base.

They would not guess how early in
Their supine stationary voyage
The air would change to soundless damage,
Turn the old tenantry away;
How soon succeeding eyes begin
To look, not read. Rigidly they

Persisted, linked, through lengths and breadths
Of time. Snow fell, undated. Light
Each summer thronged the glass. A bright
Litter of birdcalls strewed the same
Bone-riddled ground. And up the paths
The endless altered people came,

Washing at their identity.
Now, helpless in the hollow of
An unarmorial age, a trough
Of smoke in slow suspended skeins
Above their scrap of history,
Only an attitude remains:



Richard Fitz-Allen, 10th Earl of Arundel,
and his wife, Eleanor of Lancaster in
Chichester Cathedral (14th century)

Time has transfigured them into
 Untruth. The stone fidelity
 They hardly meant has come to be
 Their final blazon, and to prove
 Our almost-instinct almost true:
 What will survive of us is love.

Let's begin by passing over the slip Larkin made in thinking that it was the left hand of the earl rather than his right. Larkin said he had spent barely two minutes in the cathedral studying the tomb – probably a bit of an exaggeration, but it's hardly important (what bothered him more, in fact, was that the tomb had been 'restored' in the 19th century and details of the sculptures had been changed – something he was ignorant of when he wrote the poem).

Ironically, that last line is the one most remembered: "What will survive of us is love". If you read that carelessly, as I did first reading the poem, you might think, "Good old, Larkin! The old cynic about marriage and love etc. has finally realized that love IS the most important aspect of our lives – the old romantic!" Such, however, is not the case, and we need to read the poem more carefully to uncover what Larkin is really getting at.

The holding of hands, which is the detail that draws the poet to the tomb in the first place, is downgraded in importance. It was just a detail added by the sculptor as a "sweet commissioned grace" added to help keep hands out of the way of the "Latin names". In fact, the poem claims, we in our modern age cannot begin to comprehend what their relationship was really like.

What I particularly love about the poem is how Larkin summons up the passing of 'slow time' –

Rigidly they

Persisted, linked, through lengths and breadths
 Of time. Snow fell, undated. Light
 Each summer thronged the glass. A bright
 Litter of birdcalls strewed the same
 Bone-riddled ground. And up the paths
 The endless altered people came,

Washing at their identity.

In our "unarmorial age" beside "their scrap of history", we are told, "Only an attitude remains".

"Attitude" here refers to their physical disposition – the way they have been rendered in stone - but it also hints at the feelings summoned up by this depiction. It is in the final stanza that the poet tries to unpick what this "attitude" comprises. The "stone fidelity" is really hiding an "Untruth" – the couple never imagined or meant their coupling of hands (a gesture that we respond to more in our modern age where such gestures hold more significance) to signal

what WE nowadays treasure – the “almost instinct” we have that *we* may not survive but the ‘love’ we have helped to generate in our lives just might (through children perhaps, or by what we leave of our artistic ‘loves’ and responses in human terms).

Cynical old Larkin! – the couple holding hands were NOT, then, really complying with modern mores which insist, more or less, that couples be pictured as holding hands, an affirmation of love’s strength to overcome time. “Rubbish!” says the poem to that idea.

Or *does* it?

Certainly, the logic of the syntax is pointed that way. But look at the form of the poem. That last line is very affirmative *as a last line!* “What will survive of us is love”. Taken on its own, it becomes the thing it professes not to be. Our “almost instinct” *is* “almost true”. Talk about hedging one’s bets! Look also at the careful rhyme scheme, so typical of Larkin, whose poems are nearly always impeccably “sculpted”. “Love” is carefully rhymed (and linked in our minds) with “proved” – hinting, perhaps, that what the sculpted gesture ‘prove(s)’ really is that ‘love’ *can* outlast time...

??

Or so we might like to think, until we read Larkin *again*, more closely. Ambiguity rules OK! There is a freedom of expression – the running-on or *enjambement* of the lines and stanzas that offsets the tight discipline of the rhyme scheme. This balance also creates rather than dispels certainty.



Georg brought us a beautiful artwork he had created and printed in 3D from a coke tin he had found flattened in a parking lot in Germany. It’s a lovely example, I think, of “wabi sabi”, the Japanese concept of finding timelessness in very evanescent forms – designs inspired by nature, impromptu serendipities ‘found’ and traced on their pots or paintings.



He also brought us a CD of tracks that he and his rock band had put together. I include 2 of them here (and hope that your system can ‘read’ them all right): superb ‘tracks’ in the *sands of time*...



“On The Rocks” – Georg’s band - both are original songs.



Georg, the drummer, is also on vocals as well as drums in No 2.

(I’m afraid that these tracks do work in the pdf but to access them here on line you have to click on the buttons I’ve put on the web site.)

So, I’m sorry if this month’s offering is less than conclusive on the idea of fate and free will (and also how love enters the mixture!) – what we leave of ourselves is lucky to last even a few generations. What was Shakespeare’s take on slow time? “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day” has one ‘solution’ (**Sonnet 18 – see Appendix**):

Nor shall death brag thou wander’st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Art would preserve his lover... forever

And also Sonnet 60? He was arrogant enough to think his art would last! It has – so far!

Like as the waves make towards the pebb’l’d shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end;
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.
Nativity, once in the main of light,
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown’d,
Crooked eclipses ’gainst his glory fight,
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth
And delves the parallels in beauty’s brow,
Feeds on the rarities of nature’s truth,
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow:
And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.

But, I think we’ll have to leave it there for this month.

Right now we’re all taking it one day at a time.

Appendix

September 1, 193

W.H. Auden 1907-1973

I sit in one of the dives
 On Fifty-second Street
 Uncertain and afraid
 As the clever hopes expire
 Of a low dishonest decade:
 Waves of anger and fear
 Circulate over the bright
 And darkened lands of the earth,
 Obsessing our private lives;
 The unmentionable odour of death
 Offends the September night.

Accurate scholarship can
 Unearth the whole offence
 From Luther until now
 That has driven a culture mad,
 Find what occurred at Linz,
 What huge imago made
 A psychopathic god:
 I and the public know
 What all schoolchildren learn,
 Those to whom evil is done
 Do evil in return.

Exiled Thucydides knew
 All that a speech can say
 About Democracy,
 And what dictators do,
 The elderly rubbish they talk
 To an apathetic grave;
 Analysed all in his book,
 The enlightenment driven away,
 The habit-forming pain,
 Mismanagement and grief:
 We must suffer them all again.

Into this neutral air
 Where blind skyscrapers use
 Their full height to proclaim
 The strength of Collective Man,
 Each language pours its vain
 Competitive excuse:
 But who can live for long
 In an euphoric dream;
 Out of the mirror they stare,
 Imperialism's face
 And the international wrong.

Faces along the bar
 Cling to their average day:
 The lights must never go out,
 The music must always play,
 All the conventions conspire
 To make this fort assume
 The furniture of home;
 Lest we should see where we are,
 Lost in a haunted wood,
 Children afraid of the night
 Who have never been happy or good.

The windiest militant trash
 Important Persons shout
 Is not so crude as our wish:
 What mad Nijinsky wrote
 About Diaghilev
 Is true of the normal heart;
 For the error bred in the bone
 Of each woman and each man
 Craves what it cannot have,
 Not universal love
 But to be loved alone.

From the conservative dark
 Into the ethical life
 The dense commuters come,
 Repeating their morning vow;
 "I will be true to the wife,
 I'll concentrate more on my work,"
 And helpless governors wake
 To resume their compulsory game:
 Who can release them now,

Who can reach the deaf,
Who can speak for the dumb?

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.

Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

Sonnet 18

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

This *wabi sabi* picture I took of serpentine rocks at Kynance Cove on the Lizard Peninsular shows slow time in a very dramatic way. It's very rare to see serpentine



rock above the sea's surface. The reason we see this and other rare rocks on the Lizard is that, extraordinarily, over 500 million years ago, there were volcanic explosions as tectonic plates off the west coast of what is now the continent of Africa, *below* the Equator – and these same rocks at the bottom of the ocean, left by these massive occur-

rences, very, very slowly *travelled* over the course of 500 million years from below the Equator, thousands of miles, until they became stuck on to the outer edge of what was becoming the European continent. This edge happened to become the Lizard Peninsular, which is, as a result, totally unlike the rocks elsewhere on these islands of Great Britain, which was FIRMLY attached to Europe once upon a time!

Take back our borders! What a laugh!

Where will the rocks travel in the *next* 500 million years? And will we humans, or sea urchins, be there to see them reach their destination?