

The tyranny of time

Gillian Orchard

*The dire hand of time*¹

AS I CAME TO THE END OF MY LINDSAY DAVIS NOVEL, the train slid to an unscheduled halt somewhere outside Doncaster. In a moment I was overwhelmed by a feeling, not of mild regret, but rising panic. I had *nothing* to do for the rest of the journey to London, no crossword, no needlework, no further reading matter. I had come unprepared for the long and tedious return that catches many of us out on a Sunday evening. As we sat motionless, time seemed to disappear down a black hole. I began to search for ways of alleviating boredom. How could I make time pass less painfully? I *could* punctuate the journey by half-hourly trips to the buffet bar; there was the obvious possibility of engaging another passenger in conversation. I *might* sleep, but even as the thought passed through my mind, I rejected it on the grounds that GNER designers did not build their head-rests for people of my height, and I should emerge at Kings Cross with a crick in the neck and cramp in the arm. With the poets I began to inveigh against ‘the dark backward and abysm of Time’;² I could imagine my life foundering on ‘the shipwreck of time’;³ time indeed was well described by Richard Jago as ‘leaden-footed’ and ‘creeping’⁴ – ‘wasteful’⁵ too and, in the choice epithets of the bard, ‘sluttish’⁶ and ‘a bloody tyrant’.⁷

Meanwhile, a bothersome medley of fear, anger, impatience and gloom swilled around inside me. I leant back, sighed and mentally kicked myself for not buying the Sunday papers. They would have kept me going for at least two hours. Time was going to crawl, and I felt as helpless and frustrated as a young child waiting for the party or for a parent to return; I had made up my mind that time was going to pass in ‘leaden-stepping hours’⁸. Meanwhile I took frequent glances at my watch and felt a sharpening sympathy for the sick and lonely; I fell into neither category and resented the guilt instead. Time was exercising an extremely heavy hand and I was wilting under it – until I began to think about the fact that whereas the minutes seemed like hours to me, someone else in another situation would be cursing the speed of time and trying to find ways of saving it. In which case, it seemed that with regard to time control, we human beings have none and are at the mercy of a capricious god. Was it possible to exercise better time manage-

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ment? If so, how? Antoine de Saint-Exupéry gives us a fanciful response in his story of the little prince:⁹

The merchant sold pills that had been invented to quench thirst. You need only swallow one pill a week, and you would feel no need of anything to drink.

‘Why are you selling those?’ asked the little prince.

‘Because they save a tremendous amount of time,’ said the merchant. ‘Computations have been made by the experts. With these pills, you save fifty-three minutes in every week.’

‘And what do you do with those fifty-three minutes?’

‘Anything you like . . .’

– an imaginative answer which is, however, positively injurious to our physical well-being!

Tempus fugit

Meanwhile, on the other side of the equation, we experience the passing of time as something akin to a streak of greased lightning. The poets describe it as rapacious and greedy, ‘biting’ and ‘cormorant-devouring’. Time ‘flees’ or ‘flies’ depending on the circumstances and how one wishes to translate Virgil:

*Sed fugit interea, fugit irreparabile tempus.*¹⁰

But meanwhile time is fleeing [flying], irretrievable time escapes.

This too is an experience of time’s passing that each of us knows well. In my own memory it was associated particularly with being a teacher in a boarding school. Basically, despite the carefully marked divisions of time into nine forty-minute lessons a day, punctuated by meals of designated length, study periods, recreation, bedtime, terms and holidays, time was always at a premium, untamed and uncatchable. I lived life at a gallop and ate on the hoof, and time raced by, resisting all attempts to rein it in. There was never enough of it for constructive use, no time to enter peacefully into processes of choice, deliberation and evaluation, or to work at relationships or enjoy leisure. As a result, time hacked and scythed its way through my life, lopping off potential growth, killing initiative and cutting corners. People began to matter rather less than the system: the results were disastrous and dehumanizing. We can all identify parts of our lives where work has become god,

where time equalled money or self-importance, and where our most precious relationships have been pushed to the edges.

Time the deceiver

Everything that is not directly to do with instant and lasting achievement and success is inevitably hostile, including the passage of time, whether experienced as rapid or tardy, or as potential threat. Exploring this notion in 'Birthday poem', W.H. Auden presents an image of time that lurks with malevolence and threatening intent:

Time watches from the shadows
And coughs when you would kiss.

In headache and in worry
Vaguely life leaks away
And Time will have his fancy
Tomorrow or today.

The menace in these lines is palpable; feelings of fear and guilt abound, and liberty to act or not to act is lost. The great untruth is that time rules. And like all deception it feasts on exaggeration and duplicity. If you or I permit time (or money or work) to hold sway, and then find that we live to regret the consequences, we have only ourselves to blame. Time is a servant, a tool, an instrument in the hands of a human person, the one empowered to order, wield and call the tune – but only to some extent. For many people the experience of tragedy, bereavement, serious illness or significant loss is the turning point from which a new concept of time emerges and new attitudes are born. A long learning curve starts, a rebirth that affects many levels of being interactively, a movement through servitude, disunity and isolation towards the promise of freedom, harmony and community. It is a painful but liberating upheaval; it touches a person's depths, cleanses and clarifies, consoles and strengthens, is undeserved and unbidden. It is pure gift – and with it we begin to see life in a different perspective: life itself is a gift, time is gift, people are gifts. Every day becomes time precious because it is time given. We can still feel pressurized, but lack of time or too much of it fails to make the same negative impact.

*Time the clock-setter*¹¹

Time was on my side again – or was it? With a new objectivity I realized that notions of time are measurements of moral neutrality. Time does not choose 'sides': it can only stand by while *I* make the

choices. It is dependent on the user and the user's stance, attitude and disposition. Time neither bestows nor withholds favours: it is simply a series of names given to different divisions of measured duration and held within the concept of eternity, which is unmeasured and of unmeasurable duration. In such circumstances, human beings can begin to make sense of their lifespan, find reasons for their existence, and exercise a limited control over events in the world. We mark the passing of time with recognizable signs: we notice and name the changing seasons, we celebrate birthdays and anniversaries, we follow a liturgical calendar, we set our summer clocks according to BST and return to dark winter evenings with GMT, we move our watches back and forth as we travel across continents, we work to schedules and timetables, plans and guides, all of which are produced for our functioning, efficient working and ordering but, at the same time, are subject to disruption by uncalculated and unforeseen forces. Normal routines vanish in the face of birth or death, accident and tragedy, breakdown and cancellation, traffic-jams, the unexpected visitor, and so on.

How do I cope with sitting in a siding near Doncaster, or waiting for medical attention with a sick child in casualty, even queuing at the checkout? Do I find myself becoming irritated or frustrated? Do I start thinking of all the other useful things I could be doing? Is this particular delay a 'waste' of time? The answer hinges on whether I habitually regard time as associated with 'chance' or whether I have learnt to think in terms of 'providence'. For time, like life, is *given*, given in fact *for life*. And time is given for *love*, for the purposeful use of every human being who seeks ultimate truth and fulfilment beyond time, in the world of the spirit, which is the unseen context of our lifespan on earth, and our desire and hope hereafter when time, like faith, will be irrelevant. So time and notions of time remain mysterious, but that fact is entirely consonant with our being and life's purpose which is about growing into the depths of the mystery. Thérèse Daly in her introduction to *Deepest longings* reminds us that we are invited to walk into 'today's mysteries',

to face the reality of the present moment
 to reflect on this reality
 to become attuned to all that we experience
 the mixture of despair and hope
 bewilderment and wonder, anger and peace.¹²

And that is a *spiritual* exercise.

Love's not time's fool

So in a culture that is extremely time-conscious, and skilfully promotes beauty products that banish or at least delay the onset of ageing; when death and dying are taboo subjects, yet await every one of us; when as ordinary men and women we are caught into a time machine, how do we break through a system that seems to cramp and shrivel, deny our freedoms, and stunt growth at many levels of being? How do we take control of the time we have to do and to be, to grow and to become? It seems to me that the way forward is to enter into the process of what is measurable and mortal and human, and to see it in the context of what is unmeasurable, immortal and divine. In other words, we need to accept that our world has limitations, just as each one of us has limitations, but that the world and all that is in it is journeying in and towards the eternal reality of God in his loving concern and desire for our ultimate happiness. Time is given to help us who are creatures of time to begin a journey through mortality into immortality. A positive attitude towards the purpose and use of time means making friends with it and not allowing it to dominate our lives to a point where we feel crushed.

Making friends with time, like making friends with one's work, or serious illness, or old age, is an activity therefore that God and I can and should work at together, because it is about accepting the framework of my life as God in his infinite wisdom and kindness would have it. It is an ongoing exercise in trust, in trying to abandon my will and my passion for controlling, commanding and organizing time to suit myself and what I perceive to be good, kind and wise for me. And because our lives touch those of others, I must also be aware that their demands affect the way I manage time, be it family commitments, work, leisure activities, dependants or friends. It is a slow patient process which acknowledges God's terms of reference, and begins to see time and to respect time as a gift given by God for a good purpose. Something like the taming of the fox in *The Little Prince*:

'You must be very patient,' replied the fox. 'First you will sit down at a little distance from me – like that – in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye, and you will say nothing. Words are the source of misunderstandings. But you will sit a little closer to me every day ...'

And as the little prince and the fox took leave of each other, the fox offered a gift in return, to share his simple secret:

'It is only with the heart that one can see rightly,' said the fox. 'What is essential is invisible to the eye.'¹³

Redeeming the time

As I become more aware of the need to be unshackled from the tyranny of time, I begin to understand that to call time 'avenger',¹⁴ 'despoiler', 'devourer',¹⁵ or even 'the bald sexton',¹⁶ is to invest time with a power it does not possess. It is to exaggerate the lie, and to that extent, to abdicate the responsibility that I am given to work with the Creator who is just and free, and who loves all things that he has made. Co-operating with God means moving out of my time-ridden existence into a time-space where immediate returns matter less, 'For what is not done in one year may be done in another. We must abide Almighty God his time and leisure, for we must follow, not go before him' (Mary Ward, *Maxims*). And nothing is more true about the pace of God's working than the time it takes. It is about tuning in to the providence of God and the creativity of God, which are the steadfast flow of goodness in our direction. The third millennium is coming into sight; Jesus' resurrection is two thousand years behind us, and we cannot begin to guess how many years ahead of us; and still he labours at drawing forth from us 'a response of love and service here on earth so we may attain our goal of everlasting happiness in heaven' (D.L. Fleming, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*). Amidst the human messiness, mistakes and misuse of God's gifts, God goes on working in Christ at reconciling the world to himself and entrusting us with the same message of reconciliation (cf 2 Cor 5:18-19). So there is a time for everything under the sun:

a time to be born, a time to die;
 a time to plant, and a time to pluck;
 a time to kill, and a time to heal;
 a time to break down, and a time to build up;
 a time to weep, and a time to laugh . . .

according to the poetic litany of Ecclesiastes. But we do not need to draw the same despondent conclusions as the Old Testament writer, who infers that since God is in control, we can do nothing about it except endure. The God of the New Testament shows us another way: the way of the Son, the Incarnate Word who enters our humanity and effects radical change in our lives if we allow him to do so. And that includes the choice to permit the time factor to govern our lives for

good or for ill, and whether we co-operate with God in Christ, or fight every inch of the way with self-centred zeal, driven by the illusion that we will be in charge.

Last week I was in hospital for a day on the receiving end of a blood transfusion. It was a slow process, as I knew it would be, so I had come prepared with Jane Austen on tape, and some letters to write. And when I had completed these operations, I rested in the chair, unruffled and calm, with a sense that the time given was time to be given back. I pondered and prayed, and watched life on the day ward with interest and increasing involvement. The day seemed to unfold like a stately and dignified dance: even the unforeseen collapse of one of the nurses was handled without panic or undue flurry. Time was well managed and not permitted to stray or even take over human control. There was a certain rhythm and careful choreography about the day which, for me, was punctuated every hour by the checking of temperature and blood pressure. I was prepared for the space and time that was given me, I was not caught out by the unexpected and I was able to manage time to my satisfaction. I remembered my experience on the outskirts of Doncaster – perhaps grace aboundeth, I thought, and more conversion has been wrought in me than I know. God chuckled . . .

*Only through time, time is conquered*¹⁷

The great philosophers of the East have a more profound understanding of the place of time in the impermanent created world. They see it as *already* part of the cosmic eternal world. Dogen, a thirteenth-century Japanese thinker, produced a space/time continuum, claiming that time, just as it is, is *being* and that being is *all time*. He maintained that time did not 'happen', otherwise it could only be known by the gaps in it. Time was in fact a continuum, a single, intrinsic, 'passageless passage' or 'flowing entity', which Dogen called 'being-time'. In his recent book on eastern philosophy, Mel Thompson explains Dogen's theory thus: 'If everything in the cosmos is impermanent and changing, time is simply the name we give to that process. It is not something that flies past, there is no passage between one state and another, nothing would exist without time, therefore time is being.'¹⁸ Dogen, and his twentieth-century parallel, Teilhard de Chardin, throw more light on our understanding of the notion that the God of the cosmos is eternally present, in the *nowness* of life and love, without denying our experience of time past and of time future as integral to the continuum of being.

And, therefore, though I wrestle with the meaning of time and 'what days are for' (cf Philip Larkin), and am acutely aware of trying to find

words for the inexplicable and the unknowable, I know that time need not be the trap it often appears to be. In freedom I am graced to contemplate the God who is Yahweh – the One who is – and to meet the continual mystery of the present moment where God is, timeless but in time. A simple but helpful image presented itself to me last night at midnight. My digital clock registered 0:00. It was like a sudden electric shock and I knew the excitement of touching hands for the space of a second with the God who is forever NOW. The fact that God became flesh, dwelt and dwells among us, means that our human time-frame is both sanctified and sanctifying. No more do ‘our days pass away under God’s wrath’ or ‘our years come to an end like a sigh’ (Ps 90). Instead I wait and hope in patience ‘for with the Lord there is steadfast love/and with him is great power to redeem’ (Ps 130). God’s involvement with humanity is a long and persevering story of ‘working salvation on the earth’ (Ps 70), through the holy men and women who were faithful in the Old Testament, and especially through Jesus Christ and those who as his friends continue to love and believe and spread the good news that God, not time, nor money, nor NATO, nor governments, nor you, nor I have a workable plan of salvation and human happiness. That will be complete only at the end of time – whenever that is – and only God knows. Since the birth of Jesus, time is both a blessing, and blessed, and given for a purpose, which has significance far beyond this transient world.

Conclusion

Because time hinges on the fact that we are mortal and subject to decay and death, we shall only make complete sense of it when it is no longer useful or meaningful to us. Meanwhile in order to become more human, we are urged to learn ‘to live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28) within the mystery of time and in the time-frame of God’s choosing, where Christ comes to meet each one of us, whose work of transforming love in us takes place in time. In a recent publication celebrating the millennium, Lona Fowler wrote the following poem in which she described Jesus, the centrepiece of history, as

the Person of God’s Middle-Time
 between the exhilaration of beginning
 And the satisfaction of concluding
 Between Creation and . . . Accomplishment
 Through him God said of Creation
 ‘Without mistake,’

And of Accomplishment
 'Without doubt'.

. . . Jesus Christ is the Completer
 of unfinished people
 with unfinished work
 in unfinished times.¹⁹

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NOTES

1 The following poetic quotations on the subject of time may be found in the *Oxford dictionary of quotations* under the authors as noted.

2 William Shakespeare, *The tempest*.

3 Francis Bacon, *The advancement of learning*.

4 Richard Jago, 'Absence'.

5 William Shakespeare, Sonnet 15.

6 William Shakespeare, Sonnet 55.

7 William Shakespeare, Sonnet 16.

8 John Milton, 'On time'.

9 Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The little prince* (Mammoth, 1991), pp 71–72.

10 Virgil, *The Georgics*.

11 William Shakespeare, *King John*.

12 Thérèse Daly IBVM, *Deepest longings* (Jesuit Publications Australia, 1990).

13 Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The little prince*, pp 65ff.

14 Byron, *Child Harolde*, c.iv cxxx.

15 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*.

16 William Shakespeare, *King John*.

17 T. S. Eliot, *East Coker* from *The Four Quartets*.

18 Mel Thompson, *Eastern philosophy* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1999).

19 Lona Fowler, 'Middle-Time' from *Journey to the millennium and beyond* (McCrimmon, 1998), p 70.