

After This, Our Exile

After This, Our Exile

Dear Stranger

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Time is a funny thing. You can spend it, you can waste it, you can make it. You can take it, you can measure it, you can lose track of it.

But to talk of time travel is to talk of blasphemy.

You see, dearest reader, I've tried many a time to explain my circumstances through elaborate imaginings and over-the-top hand gestures, but to no avail. Something about waking up in a different 'here and now' every day just inspires ridicule from people. It's quite disheartening, really. But nonetheless, it's true – I've never woken up in a time where yesterday was yesterday. My yesterdays are always years in the future, or years in the past – it's like I'm always chasing tomorrow, and always missing.

Say we meet one day – at your choice of venue, it doesn't bother me – hmm? Yes, yes, a park bench is fine. Say we strike up a conversation about my choice of shoes for the day (you disapprove of my wearing such fine leather shoes to a dog park), or the way your dog is chewing on my rather nice shoes. You apologise, and offer to pay for the damage. I refuse – there's no need to put a perfectly random stranger two hundred dollars out – I won't even be needing the shoes tomorrow, or the day after that for that matter (I don't mention this, of course). We exchange pleasantries, and I ask you for the date. You say it's the sixth of November, 2014. Thirty nine years from my most recent yesterday.

Conversation flows easily between us, flitting between ideas briefly, making small talk and occasionally touching on topics of more substance – rarely though, because where and when I woke up last is hardly ever of concern to someone I've just met. I tell you a little bit about myself – how I should be twenty seven this year, how I really like dogs, how I'm floating through your time only to cease to exist tomorrow. It's not that it matters much, anyway – contrary to popular belief, one brief encounter with a seemingly mad man is hardly

enough to offer you a life changing, mind-altering experience. Now that I think of it, I don't recall ever having someone remember anything about me once I'm gone – and remember me? Out of the question! You see, I don't travel through time – I exist completely outside of it, not even making so much as a dent in each time and place. It's like no one time can bear with my cynical, self-destructive, pity-seeking existence, so they juggle me around like some hot potato, desperate not to get stuck with me at the end of all things. But I don't blame them.

You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But me? I am full to the brim with recollections to ignite your interest. You beg me to tell you more, and I honestly can't blame you. But once they know the interesting things about you, nobody asks the simple things anymore, like 'what's your favourite colour?' – it all becomes irrelevant. Whether I'm a cat or dog person, whether I prefer ketchup or catsup, whether I'm a folder or a scruncher – nobody seems to care.

I don't know how to explain my beginnings to you – or rather, my lack thereof, so I begin at the end. I start at today, and go back to yesterday, and the day before that. I explain that time is not a straight line, how it stretches infinitely backwards and forwards, how in reality there *is* no forwards or backwards motion of time.

I explain that time cannot simply be measured, as we all so casually do – '*I'll be ready in five minutes*', '*the movie lasts three hours*', '*the clock is two minutes slow*' – it's what I call 'speaking time'. You cannot just 'speak time', that's not how the world works. You cannot reduce time to such minuscule measurements, and give them meaning. Time is not a stream, nor is it an eternal return. Time is the timekeeper. What is a second but a construct? What is a minute, an hour, a year, a lifetime? Perhaps there is just no meaning, just no way of making sense of what we have and what we are.

You don't take time, time takes you.

People I encounter rarely understand this, even less so agree. No one has enough *time* to question whether what they feel is real. No one ever stops to think whether living is just

existing, whether the passing of time is just existing. It's as if there's always a deadline, an end goal, somewhere to get to, and the passing of time is just a passage through which to get there.

Why do we elude ourselves into thinking there's a higher cause?

It's because we're so full of self-importance. It's because humans are so sure that there is such a thing as purpose, as meaning, and we're adamant we're deserving of it. And it's how we find *meaning* in things, by using *meaningless* measurements in an attempt to make sense of the world. Seems counter-intuitive, but it's human nature.

Now, now! I seem to be rambling, and you're looking increasingly concerned. I can see your eyes flitting from place to place, see the little cogs whirring in your mind in an attempt to grasp what I am saying.

You've lost me. Of course I have!

I don't understand. But of course you don't!

Existing is an inerasable mark you make on time. But time does not record your follies!

Somewhere between the 'here' and 'now' of things, I ask you if you're afraid of dying – a morbid question to ask a stranger if the raise of your eyebrow is anything to go by.

"Of course," you say – they all say the same thing (the lack of diversity doesn't annoy me as much as it used to), "But then again, aren't we all?"

Ah, now there's an undeniable truth – we are all afraid of dying, of ceasing to exist, of being cast into the void of nothingness. But you see, dear reader, I die at the end of every day.

After all, isn't life measured by the memories you can recall and the people you meet? With no one to remember you, can you say you've lived at all? Where's the proof? Where is your beginning and where is your end?

"Is that what it's like? Being erased at the end of every day, I mean. Is it like dying?" – ah, now you've caught on. There's a strange kind of satisfaction you get, seeing everything click for someone, and no matter how many times I tell people the same things, no matter how many times it clicks for them, I still receive that same satisfaction.

Before I have a chance to respond, something calls your attention away – whether it be your dog's incessant whimpering, or the fact that it's started to rain, or that you've received a text from a particularly impatient person in your life who demands you drop everything to tend to them. You leave me (although it's debatable which of us is leaving the other) in some fashion or another. Just as we met, we must separate.

"That was a lovely story," you begin. Seems a little insensitive in retrospect, but you don't know any better, and I can't expect any more from you. We are, after all, strangers. Let us be thankful, you and I, that we *are* only strangers, tethered only by social obligation and polite courtesies because your worries end where I bid my final farewell.

My dearest reader, here is where I leave you. I thank you for your time, and wish you well on your way. That is the standard procedure you should undertake (or should have undertaken) when we met (if ever we did), and when we will meet (if ever we do).

I would say 'until we meet again' (although for your purposes, the use of 'again' would be irrelevant) – but you and I both know the chances of that are near impossible. It is possible, however, that I may meet you years in the future, or tomorrow, maybe – but we'd be meeting for the first time again.

You see, time is a funny thing. You can spend it, you can waste it, you can make it. You can take it, you can measure it, you can lose track of it. But we can never *travel* in time – no, no, that is utter blasphemy!

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Somewhere Between Never and Eternity

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Darkness. We can see nothing except for the small flickering blue light a few metres from where we are, and hear nothing but the small electrical whirring from some form of a motor. It is obvious that we are not participants in this time and place. We are observers for today.

Something stirs in the darkness, and we have an unsettling suspicion that the space we find ourselves in is much smaller than first anticipated. We hear a sharp intake of breath – something (or someone) is waking from a slumber. By the suddenness of the breath, we can assume this thing has been asleep for a very long time.

As our eyes dilate and adjust to the darkness, we can see more and more.

Blue lights begin to flicker, marking the shape of this space, and through the dim glow, we deduce that we are in a capsule of some sort, no bigger than what is necessary to hold the average person. The creature waking from its sleep isn't so much a *what* as a *who*. A man seemingly in his late twenties or early thirties is rousing. His actions are small at first; a minuscule twitch of the nose, a slight separation of the lips; but are becoming increasingly restless, as we all are in the moments before awakening.

His eyes open – the action neither sudden nor laboured, rather, measured. Before his pupils have a chance to adjust to the darkness, a flood of light forces the man to shield his eyes and flinch away. The capsule has been opened.

We now have a clear view of him. In the light, he looks closer to thirty than twenty if the bags under his eyes are anything to go by. He's looking the worse for wear; all flaky lips and worn skin. His wrinkles are deep, as if they have seen more years than his features indicate.

The camera slowly pans above the raised edges of the capsule. Our attention is directed above us, at the insides of a huge cylindrical structure, roofless, and a few hundred metres

in diameter. The only natural light filters in as a narrow disc in the distance. If we narrow our eyes and look closely, we can see that the structure consists of millions of capsules, all assumedly holding other people, equally as sedated as the man whose capsule in which we found ourselves. An automated parking system for people.

The camera zooms out rapidly, and we can no longer follow the path through which it passes, as if it is attempting to give us a full view of this strange setting. We close our eyes for fear of feeling queasy, and when we open them, we find ourselves overlooking the city.

A mechanical monster. Stretching hundreds of metres into the sky, and even further across the ground, it looks more like an embodiment of some frightful post-apocalyptic science-fiction than a city where people live and work. We can hear the loud congestion of what seems to be peak-hour traffic. The daybreak sun is warm in colour, but mute against the skin.

Shanghai. 3026 AD.

Indeed, it is in the distant future that we find ourselves. All technological advances and masses of metal and wiring. We are unaware as to how we arrived here, and the purpose of our time here, but are intrigued by the novelty of things. The future is what we make of it; flying cars if we wish, or even jetpack travel.

Shanghai in the science-fiction future smells of pollution and sterility, the unsavoury combination enough to make us nauseous. Before we have a chance to carefully survey our surroundings, the camera gently zooms into what seems to be the entrance of the automated parking system for people, down towards the ground. As we approach the ground, our attention is drawn to a man, the same one from inside the capsule, exiting the cylindrical structure.

There's a number stamped on his arm: 20316

We aren't aware of where he is going, but are inclined to follow the man to observe his ends. The camera follows him from a distance, past the men and women, all dressed in bleached

white jumpsuits – the absence of children is unsettling, but we assume that it must be a weekday during school hours.

He walks with purpose, but seems to have no means of achieving such a purpose.

The camera slowly pans upward, giving us a clear view of the skyscrapers from directly beneath. The colossal structures loom over the city in silence, eclipsing the sun and casting us in shadow. The shade feels no cooler against the skin than the direct sunlight.

Before we have a chance to examine these disturbing buildings, the camera returns to the man, now entering a building as grey and towering as the ones beside it. We remain outside, the camera remaining stationary as the man scans the code stamped onto his arm – as if it were a barcode. The scanning mechanism lights up green with recognition, and it is only now that we realise this time and place lacks the colour of the times we've known. Rather, it is dominated by monochromatic shades of black, white, and grey.

The camera fades to black. We are alarmed at first, but assume it to be some break in scenery, or even the end of our observation of this mysterious futuristic setting. Our time here has been brief; only a matter of ten to twenty minutes, although it's widely known that dreams especially feel much longer than they are. We cannot be sure whether we are dreaming or whether we are seeing glimpses of a far-off future – we can only hope that it's the former. The latter would be a horrible way for human society to progress, and an extremely severe system we would be developing.

The blank black canvas begins to flicker. At first, we believe it to be some trick of the light, our eyes deceiving us, but slowly and surely, an image begins to appear on the screen.

It is the same man from before. He sits before us on a desk chair, coding numbers into some sort of computational mechanism – far too advanced to identify. Beside him are rows and rows of men and women, all the same, all dressed in white jumpsuits. We immediately feel

uneasy – the sterility of the walls and ceiling makes us shiver, and the emotionless workers even more so.

We pull our attention away from the rows of men and women in white, and return to the man we have been following so intriguingly. There is no emotion on his face – no furrow of the eyebrows, no biting of the lip – no indication he's feeling or seeing or hearing anything. He's blank. Vacated.

The accountants and actuaries amongst us will see no significant issue with the image of the man coding numbers into the computer system, but as it goes, desk jobs are paradoxically not for the faint hearted. Such rigidity and solemnity are difficult to come by in our time, but experiencing this prospective future or dream-like imagining, we begin to understand why.

The light from the screen reflects in his eyes; an artificial spark of life in the eyes of a man who, if not for his furious fingers, would seem otherwise lifeless.

We pity the man, but there is nothing we can do. We are mere observers.

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Sisyphus

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To lift a weight so heavy,

Sisyphus, a man would need your courage,

Although one's heart is in the work,

Art is long, and Time fleeting.

Far from the tombs of the famous,

Towards a lonely graveyard,

My heart, like a muffled drum,

Goes beating funeral marches.¹

Today it takes him thirty-two minutes to figure out what he's supposed to do, and three hundred steps to get where he's supposed to be. It's a long shot from the seven minutes and seventy two steps of 'yesterday,' and all the more taxing.

The thing is; he's never actually aware as to where he's going. He just follows. He takes orders. He complies. *Such is life.*

It's not hard to follow a crowd. It's not hard to be faceless. Today, it's after he passes unfamiliar surroundings, and after he files solemnly into what looks to be a large, white auditorium that he realises that he's never been here before, nor has he been in the near vicinity of this time and place. He supposes it should excite him, but one can only relive

¹ Baudelaire, C 1857, *Les Fleurs du mal*, Auguste Poulet-Malassis, Paris.

something they've already experienced. Excitement wears off after so long, and he thinks it has something to do with prolonged exposure. Things are different every day – some days he has nowhere to be, and some days the place to be is apparent.

He prefers the days he has somewhere to be and something to do. It's so much easier to live in routine than have to improvise, except in his case, it's more of a rehearsed procession than an improvised performance anyway. Maybe it's the emotional toll of adding another person to his list of names he can't match up to faces. He doesn't quite feel like it today. There's too much sentiment involved. Repetition is okay to him – not desired or relished, just *okay*. Those words were far too strong to describe anything relating to him anyway.

But even through the noise and the novelty, he can recognise relics, see patterns of human activity; the same events, the same dictators, the same mistakes. He calls it 'historical reappropriation'. Today, a leader has been reappropriated, and he's somewhere between Qin Shi Huang and Adolf Hitler; somewhere between a supposedly reincarnated God and a fascist dictator.

He's come to realise that the natural instinct of humanity is to obey, as flocks of sheep do their shepherds. Although in this case, their leader is more of an all-powerful tyrant than he is a kind staff-wielding nomad.

History is about winners.

He's also come to realise that the greed of humanity for power is perpetual, but this didn't surprise him as much as the first revelation did. Something about observing constant recurrences of Caligula, and Genghis Khan, and Henry VIII, and Maximilien Robespierre, and Pol Pot taught him that.

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Many a gem sleeps buried in dark forgetfulness,

Far, far from picks and plumb-lines;

Many a flower unwillingly loses its perfume,

Sweet as a secret

In deep solitude.²

There's something about that first moment of consciousness after he wakes that inspires him to hope that he's still in his yesterday. It disappears as soon as it arrives, however, and he's thankful he's leant to accept it. Time is a no-nonsense mistress, and she will not provide for a compromise.

In this particular today, he finds himself bent in an uncomfortable position on the cold, damp cobblestones. His back creaks in protest as he tries to sit upright, but he immediately flinches upon hearing the unmistakable crack of gunfire. Just by the people running around and the barricades set up in the alleys, he can guess where he is.

Paris, some time in the 1790s.

He thinks he sees Marius Pontmercy ducking in between empty kegs, but he can't be sure. Or was he from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*? He doesn't know anymore – after so long, fiction slowly blends with fact, and he's left incapable of telling the difference between Captain Hook and Captain Morgan.

² *Ibid.*

He learns the ropes quickly today – it's not like a gunshot would kill him, but there's just something suspicious about getting up after being fatally shot, and he just doesn't want to alert his acquaintances for the day.

He's participated in an innumerable amount of conflict by now, and he can't help but think that they're all about the same thing.

Humans, he thinks, are seemingly incapable of bringing about decisive change without conflict.

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Once, he thought that maybe Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence might have had some base to it. But he knows now that it has more to do with human nature than it does with the cyclical theory of time.

Musings at Pasadena

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"So you're saying that every moment in time – past, present and future – exists simultaneously? That Hitler exists at the same time as a post-apocalyptic future? That I exist at the same time as the fall of the Roman Empire? – Pass the whiskey, will you? And some glasses too."

"Long day at work? How's Anne by the way, and the kids? No, no, no – not *at the same time*, but simultaneously with, yes. There's a difference, you see. Existing at the same time implies that time is of the upmost importance, whereas simultaneously places the stress on occurrence. It's all about occurrence, John. When you think back to a memory, you think of the *what* rather than the *when*."

"But how is that possible? We classify things into past, present, and future. The past, by definition, has already occurred, and the future, by definition, has not yet occurred. The very definition implies that both cannot exist at the same time – or as you'd have it, simultaneously. – They're good; Anne's got a new job, and Jacob's just started kindergarten. And James is still James – still giving his mom and dad hell."

"Give him a break, he's what? Two now? Kid's got growing to do. – Of course they're ordered on the timeline, and some have already occurred, and some are occurring, and some haven't yet occurred – but why should that mean they don't exist? Just because something isn't happening at this moment doesn't mean it no longer exists."

"But if we follow that logic, then the future cannot possibly exist simultaneously with the present and the past – because it hasn't occurred yet. How can anything exist if it hasn't happened yet? – By the way, have you found yourself anyone yet? Jesus Christ, Mike! You're almost forty!"

“Just because we don’t know something exists doesn’t mean it doesn’t. And for what it’s worth, John, I just turned thirty seven. Anyway, work’s keeping me.”

“Guess that new job of yours at the university hasn’t been treating you all too good, huh? Imagine that, Mr. Mike D. Paulson, Associate Professor of Time at California Institute of Technology. Do you have a gold little name plaque to go with that? – Well, an invention doesn’t exist until someone makes it. A thought doesn’t exist until it’s thought of. How can the future exist if it hasn’t occurred?”

“The future exists because we know there is a future. We know that time is infinite, that it measures the continual passage of being. After everything comes to an end, time still continues, doesn’t it? Time isn’t a variable, it’s a constant. – And for God’s sake, John, it’s Associate Professor of Applied Physics. And no, I don’t have a fancy golden name plaque, it’s silver.”

“So you’re saying that the future exists only in theory? C’mom, give me a break, Mike, I’m a bloody accountant. Dropped science as soon as I got the chance.”

“You sure did. – Well, no. There’s a certain definitive path for the future to take – we don’t know which path it will take, but we know that the future will be reached by a certain sequence of occurrences.”

“Well in that case, is there such thing as free will? If all our actions and decisions, truths and falsities have already been determined as existing, then do we have any autonomy? Or are we all just operatives of fate?”

“Of course we have free will. Just because there is a determined set of occurrences in the future doesn’t mean that we aren’t given a choice. It’s just that, all of our choices add up and become the existing future.”

“So you’re saying that there is the past, the present, and the future. The present is, of course, the smallest of the three, and god knows which of either past or future is longer. But they all

coexist at the same time? That the future doesn't dictate our actions? That the continual passage of time is just a way for us to measure our existence?"

"Yes and no. Think of time as a line stretching forwards and backwards infinitely. It has no end, it has no beginning. Think of time not as a way to measure our existence but as, well, the timekeeper. We all have a set amount of time, and time is the enforcer. Clocks measure time, calendars measure time, timelines measure time – they're all redundant, of course, because while you can try to measure time, there's no worthwhile end to it."

"Because everything is claimed by time in the end."

"Exactly, now you're catching on."

"So, can you travel through time?"

"Jesus, John, are you having a mid-life crisis? Time-travel? That's boyish stuff!"

"C'mon Mike, you know I'm no scientist."

"You're right there. But no, you can't travel through time. Exist out of time completely? Now that's something."

"How is that possible?"

"I don't know. But I met some nutter today – talked about existing outside of time, of waking up in a different time every day. The poor fellow was the most miserable bugger I've ever seen."

"You sure he didn't mean wake up *at* a different time every day? I don't know, maybe he meant he sleeps in a lot?"

"No, no – he was talking about how nobody ever remembers him, how one day isn't enough for anyone to hate him, or for anyone to love him. He kept going on and on about how he keeps getting chewed up and spat out like no one time wanted him, and how after

everything, he learnt that everyone dies a lonely and miserable death. I pity him, John, I really do.”

“You believe him?”

“Not entirely, but you should have seen him. All deep bags and gaunt faced. You can’t fake that kind of stuff. I mean, he could be insane, y’know? Messed up in the head – but he’s not making anything up, I’m sure of it.”

“God, he’s really got your feathers ruffled.”

“I don’t know – I just pity him, but not the regular here’s-a-fucking-tissue pity – the really deep pity where you feel God-awful for the bastard.”

“Well, don’t worry too much about him. If it’s like he says, then he’ll be gone by tomorrow and you won’t have to worry about him anymore. I mean, what are the chances he’ll wake up in the same frame of time, right? He’s got an infinite course of time to choose from – the 80s are pretty lacklustre anyway.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Have you got a lighter on you?”

“No, of course not – Is that... Is that a cigarette? You know you can’t smoke here during office hours, right?”

“Yep.”

“You sneaky bastard, always finding loopholes. You know, I’m convinced you’d make a better lawyer than a science professor. I’m no scientist, but that’ll kill you, y’know.”

“Something’s gotta.”

“You’re awful.”

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3 AM Monologue

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It's when he's lying awake in bed three hours past midnight that the laughter stops. He's all bark and no bite.

Because being alone is a lot harder to practise than it is to recount, and he learns that things aren't as funny when the joke's on you.

He can feel the quiet creep in as the night is etherised into a twilight somewhere between midnight and dawn. Late night Boston simmers into something involving stillness, rampant introspection, and ceilings metres too low.

I've been here before.

He lights a cigarette. The sparks are brilliant in the dark, flickering like fireflies against the inky black of night. The tip of the orange and white sliver between his teeth comes alight, the kindled flints of tobacco dying before they have a chance to combust.

After this, our exile.

Today he is particularly domestic. Weathered fingers over clean linen, unshaven cheeks scratching into downy pillows, tobacco smoke swirling in the apartment too big for one, but really, too small for two – this is him for today. It's a far cry from the him of yesterday, but all the more desperate.

It's a simple lifestyle he leads: here one day, gone the next, learning enough about each 'here and now' to survive the day. But just before he learns to *want* a tomorrow, he's whisked away like a common mayfly into another tomorrow, years away. He can't remember a time when things weren't the way they are.

He can't remember a time where he wasn't chasing a tomorrow that chronologically followed a today. It was easier at first, not having to fear fucking up every day; no one remembering

to hate him, no one remembering to love him. But the days grew shorter, and the list of one-off acquaintances grew longer, and at the end of everything, *no one remembered him.*

He's always chasing and missing.

After everything, he's learnt two things – one: you cannot cheat time; and two: time always returns to claim its winnings. All the time one wastes adds up to a hefty ransom impossible to pay. He's convinced that everyone is left dead and broken in the end, and that there's not enough glue to go around and fix everyone.

I'm awful.

It's harder learning how to cope with himself than it is to say goodbye every day. It's easy not to get attached to strangers he knows won't count in the end, but difficult beyond imaginable to survive alongside his self-destructive interior monologue. It is this pity-seeking part of him that keeps him sane – keeps him looking for more strangers to inspire misery within, keeps him aware of his every day time and place.

Somewhere between the musings of misery and comfort, he loses his train of thought. He feels tiredness tiptoe in, unwelcome, but not swept aside to the pile of abandoned thoughts – it becomes increasingly heavy to hold onto his todays, so he's learnt to allow the inevitability of it all engulf him in self-pity. He lives off the misery and pity of others.

"Off again," he laughs a little but there's more choke than chuckle, the toxic fumes puffing out in time with the ragged wheezes of his breath. Between the meaning and feeling of his words, he thinks he hears the "don't forget me", but it's lost in the sound of the seconds slipping into rhythm with the plain white wall clock above his head.

The paper this morning read 7th of November, 2014.

He's silly enough to entertain the thought of being able to live a normal life for a few moments, of being able to wake up where tomorrow was tomorrow. He grins a little, a small

sliver, before he slips from the fraying ends of his consciousness. Laying in the wake of his destruction, he falls through the cracks of time, slips between *always* and *never*, between *here* and *now*. He buries himself.

There is only time. And time, and time, and time...

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Reflection Statement

A f t e r T h i s , O u r E x i l e

Reflection Statement

"Stories last longer than men, stones than stories, stars than stones. But even our stars' nights are numbered, and with them will pass this patterned tale to a long-deceased earth."³

John Barth; Chimera

Throughout the course of human history, man has constantly been both perplexed and enamoured by the concept of time; the passing of it, and the measuring of it. In *After This, Our Exile*, a suite of short stories, I attempt to explore the complex interplay between humanity and time, most specifically the ways in which we experience the passage of time, and the reliance we have on constructs of time to assemble and affirm our understanding of people, places, and events.

My idea had its origins in my own captivation with the passing of time, and how *time and tide wait for no man*.⁴ The construction of measurements of time has long fascinated me, as has the measure of a lifetime and its insignificance in the vastness of time. T.S Eliot's Modernist poetry fundamentally contributed to my interest in and understanding of temporal consciousness, most notably his poems *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915),⁵ *Rhapsody on a Windy Night* (1920),⁶ and *Ash Wednesday* (1930).⁷

The purpose of my Major Work is to evoke temporal discourse in my audience, consisting mainly of educated individuals who maintain an interesting in understanding the world in which they live. In our fast pace and spiritually disconnected contemporary society, the

³ Barth, J 1972, *Chimera*, Random House, New York.

⁴ English Idiom

⁵ Eliot, T 1917, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, 2nd edn, The Egoist Ltd., London.

⁶ Eliot, T 1920, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, Bartleby, New York.

⁷ Eliot, T 1930, *Ash Wednesday*, Faber & Faber, London.

dominant human perception of time is as a passive flow of events in a single direction. It is my intention to instil the reader with a more intricate understanding and appreciation of time as a fluid construct whereby, in accordance to the theory of Eternalism, “*forever is composed of nows*,”⁸ and all people, places, things, and events exist simultaneously. In such a theory, where the labels of ‘past’, ‘present’ and ‘future’ are determined by the perceiver, I found inspiration for my plotline, appropriating the idea of an infinite time stream to my protagonist’s own existing outside of time completely.

In his literary treatise *Poetics*,⁹ Aristotle establishes three main unities deemed essential to a comprehensible work of fiction; the unity of time, place, and action. Regarding time, Aristotle argues that a “*concentrated effect is more pleasurable than one which is spread over a long time and so diluted.*”¹⁰ This limited perception of time in fiction contributes directly to what my protagonist calls “*speaking time*”; assigning meaningless measurements to time in order to create comprehensible constructs. My own belief is that the use of extended periods of time in fiction allows the composer the creative freedom to construct a complex and rich character, and thus, my deviance from the Classical Unities in creating an anachronistic suite of fiction further urges towards a novel and profound way of viewing time.

In order to create a sense of omnipresence in my protagonist, I drew upon my study of ‘Intertextual Connections’ in the Advanced English course, whereby I was intrigued by the potent nature of intertextuality to instil meaning in texts. Further exploration into intertextuality led me to T.S Eliot’s 1919 essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*.

Eliot writes:

⁸ Franklin, R. W., ed. “Forever – Is Composed of Nows -.” *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999

⁹ Aristotle (S.H Butcher (trans.) 2014, *Poetics*, The University of Adelaide, Adelaide.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

“No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.”¹¹

The significance of this passage is in Eliot's belief that any original text composed cannot be entirely separate from meaning it has derived from works of previous composers. This presented intertextuality to me as a vehicle of meaning through which I could make implicit connections between past works of literature and my own composition.

Each of the compositions in my suite of short stories were made to “*transform, modify, elaborate, extend on*”¹² various pieces of literature both past and present, with my first short story, *Dear Stranger*, seeing me directly reappropriating the protagonist's playful and eventually manic voice in Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Tell-Tale Heart*¹³ to my own. Furthermore, the choice of setting in this particular composition was made in an attempt to relate the occasion directly to the reader – an unremarkable setting in a park – thus sharply contrasting with the linguistics of the protagonist and creating an anachronistic contradiction of time and place.

In *Somewhere Between Never and Eternity*, I drew upon the surrealist work of Haruki Murakami, most specifically *After Dark*,¹⁴ in order to create a detached tone in a highly fictionalised version of a possible future. By reappropriating similar aspects of setting and plot from futuristic and dystopian movies such as *Blade Runner*¹⁵ and *The Matrix*,¹⁶ I was

¹¹ Eliot, T 1920, *The Sacred Wood*, Faber & Faber, London.

¹² Genette, G 1997, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. University of Nebraska Press.

¹³ Poe, E 1843, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, The Pioneer, Cambridge.

¹⁴ Murakami, H 2004, *After Dark*, 1st edn, Alfred A. Knopf, New York.

¹⁵ *Blade Runner* 1982, DVD, Warner Bros., Starring Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young, and Edward James Olmos.

¹⁶ *The Matrix* 1999, DVD, Roadshow Entertainment, Starring Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, Carrie-Anne Moss, Hugo Weaving, and Joe Pantoliano.

able to provide the reader with a somewhat familiar, yet all the same foreign and unsettling atmosphere.

Sisyphus is a composition that relies heavily upon intertextuality to shape and direct meaning, with the title of the story and struggles of my protagonist likening him to the Greek mythological figure of Sisyphus, a deceitful king punished by being forced to eternally roll an immense boulder up a steep incline only for it to roll back down at the end of each day. The story is partitioned into two sections that are headed by the four stanzas of Charles Baudelaire's poem *Les Fleurs du mal*¹⁷ (*The Flowers of Evil*). Such a poem, whilst making direct reference to Sisyphus, concerns itself with ideas of hope, failure, desire, and sin, further providing my composition with an additional facet of the human condition of existing. The reference to fictional texts such as Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*¹⁸ and J. M. Barrie's play *Peter and Wendy*¹⁹ further contributes to an eclectic sense of time.

The fourth composition in my suite of short stories, *Musings at Pasadena*, adopts the form of a conversation held in a casual setting, and was constructed out of an immense interest in the 'Life Writing' elective of the English Extension One course. The idea of recording a life, whilst serving as an initial prompt to the conceptual underpinnings of my Major Work, also provided me with the curiosity to pursue a non-conventional form in that of a conversation that still recollected the experiences and influences of my protagonist. Rather than works of fiction, *Musings at Pasadena* contains references to scientific and philosophical texts, such as J. M. E. McTaggart's *The Unreality of Time*,²⁰ thus ensuring a holistic assessment of my protagonist's situation and the theory of Eternalism.

¹⁷ Baudelaire, C 1857, *Les Fleurs du mal*, Auguste Poulet-Malassis, Paris.

¹⁸ Hugo, V 1862, *Les Misérables*, A. Lacroix, Verboeckhoven & Cie., Paris.

¹⁹ Barrie, J 1904, *Peter and Wendy*, Duke of York's Theatre, London.

²⁰ McTaggart, J 1908, *The Unreality of Time*, Mind: A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy, Oxford.

The final short story in my suite, titled *3AM Monologue* is a direct hypertext of Sylvia Plath's *Monologue at 3AM*,²¹ and contains the most poignant and personal reflections of my protagonist. In drawing similarities between the loneliness and tortured bitterness of Plath and the persona, my character was given a concluding evaluation of self and situation. T.S Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*²² is also made reference to and builds upon the Modernist sentiments established earlier on in my Major Work.

Due to the dense nature of my final product and its reliance upon intertextual connections to shape understanding, my audience is further specified to those well read in literature and possessing the ability to exact meaning from implicit connections. Such a niche of refined audience may be found through publication in online media such as *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, where they are "committed to publishing exciting fiction regardless of pedigree." The highly academic nature of this online journal further ensures that my suite of short stories can be fully appreciated by the intended audience.

I encountered many challenges whilst composing my Major Work, and the main issue I came across was deciding whether to modify my form into a single short story with sections or maintain the concept of a suite of short story. This required meticulous research into both forms, with Frank Myszor's *The Modern Short Story*²³ providing me with the theoretical underpinnings of the form of a short story. Upon reading various examples of short story anthologies, including Dave Eggers' *How We Are Hungry*,²⁴ Alice Munro's *Dear Life*,²⁵ and Raymond Carver's *Where I'm Calling From*,²⁶ with the latter confirming my resolve to create

²¹ Plath, S 2011, *Monologue at 3AM*, American Poetry, accessed 1 May 2015, <<http://www.americanpoems.com/poems/sylviaplath/6130>>.

²² Eliot, T. *op. cit.*

²³ Myszor, F 2001, *The Modern Short Story*, 1st edn, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

²⁴ Eggers, D 2004, *How We Are Hungry*, 1st edn, McSweeney's, San Francisco.

²⁵ Munro, A 2012, *Dear Life*, 1st edn, McClelland and Stewart, Toronto.

²⁶ Carver, R 1989, *Where I'm Calling From*, Vintage, New York.

a short story suite as it allowed for the greater saturation of meaning and nonconformity to Aristotle's Classical Unities.

The process of completing research on and composing five fragmented short stories, whilst retaining their textual integrity as a whole has been both a laborious and fulfilling process. I have developed new understandings of time as an ever-present culmination of all people, places, things, and events, and have also gained insight into Aristotle's Classical Unities, as well as their limitations. I have learnt much about temporal consciousness, and what it means to *be*. Overall, however, the journey of composing *After This, Our Exile* has not only influenced my understanding of time and the human condition, but also of myself, and the ways in which I define myself in the vast expanse of time.