

Yearn After Reading: Ends, Endings and the 'Difficulty of Reality'

Can't repeat the past?... Why of course you can!

The Great Gatsby, F.Scott Fitzgerald

Michael Campbell

0. Architectonics

Adapting Parfit's taxonomy, we may distinguish three types of theory of the nature of happiness for human beings; hedonism, judgement-satisfaction and objective-list.¹ According to hedonism, a person is happy at a given time if and only if they have an experience of pleasure or absence of pain.² According to a judgement-satisfaction theory, a person is happy if and only if their situation is such that they would endorse a judgement to that effect.³ According to an objective-list theory, happiness consists in an individual's meeting some set of necessary and sufficient conditions.

The name 'objective-list theory' is something of a misnomer. All three views are objective in the sense of providing us with criteria which determine, for any individual, the conditions under which they count as happy. Thus, all three views can be put in the form of objective lists, with the difference being only that hedonists and judgement-satisfaction theorists place only one

¹ Cf. Parfit *Reasons and Persons* pp.3ff. and appendix 1. I have replaced Parfit's desire satisfaction with the broader category of judgement satisfaction. Insofar as desire satisfaction is to be understood in such a way as to be distinct from hedonism, desires must have intentional objects and can be understood as a special category of judgements. But one may judge that one's life has gone well, without taking that to involve the satisfaction of some desire or another.

² In what follows I will assume that happiness can be a property either of times in a life or of a life as a whole. I will assume no particular account of the part-whole relationship between these predications.

³ The subjunctive tense here allows for there to be a fact as to whether a (contingently) unreflective person is happy or not. The caveat 'to the effect that' allows maximal flexibility in how we are to cash out the relevant judgement to be endorsed; whether, for example, that judgement will make reference to the concept of happiness.

criterion on the list, by contrast to the possibly legion criteria on their objective-list rivals.

What's more, all three views are subjective in the sense of holding that the conditions which determine whether an individual counts as happy make reference to features of that subject's constitution. It would be coherent, but wildly implausible, to hold an objective-list theory on which a given subject counts as happy if and only if the planets are in a certain alignment. Instead, on any plausible list theory, a person's happiness will depend, at least in part, on psychologically real features of their constitution - how they feel or have felt, what they are experiencing or have experienced, and so forth.

According to judgement-satisfaction theories, a person is happy insofar as they would recognise themselves to be so. This view's principle advantage over a list-theory is that it allows us to accommodate the variation in human life in a non-moralistic way. A theory that says that (for example) having children is a necessary constituent of being happy is committed to overruling the sincere, reflective judgement of a childless but contented individual. This kind of judgement seems overly moralistic, because it refuses to grant to individuals the right to determine the conditions under which their life counts as having gone well.⁴

But judgement-satisfaction theories have a major weakness, in that it is unclear just what constitutes a judgement in the sense relevant to the assessment of a life as a whole. It is presumably not enough simply to declare that one is happy with one's condition - that would be to neglect the twin dangers of error and self-deception. But what it does involve is deeply unclear. Thus, to claim the right to set the conditions on one's happiness is to claim ownership of a problem without a solution. If anyone else claims the right to determine whether or not one is happy one baulks, but when one asks of oneself whether one is happy or not, no method for finding an answer presents itself.

⁴ That we possess this right is borne out by our ability, in principle, to disengage from any condition which can be put forward as criterial of one's happiness. Health, money, success in one's career, relationships - all of these elements of human life are both generally desired and desirable, but any or all of them can be rejected by a sufficiently strong-willed individual with an idiosyncratic conception of the conditions under which their life goes well.

Our attitude towards happiness will depend largely on the role that we suppose the concept to play. For Aristotle, at least part of its function is to allow us to explain behaviour - eudaimonia is the end for the sake of which all intentional action is undertaken.⁵ Since Aristotle takes happiness to apply to life as a whole, and to be an evaluative concept, it provides us with both an orientating goal in our lives as a whole (being the state towards which we aim) and a concept by which we can evaluate and rank the various ways in which our lives may turn out. The finest and best life is that of a *phronimos*, someone whose situation has been suitably inclement for them to have been sufficiently virtuous in their lifetime.⁶ This is the finest life available for a human being, and the kind of life to which we will (if well-brought up) aspire.

This final end provides an 'architectonic' structure which shows how our other ends fit together into a coherent whole, and which allows us to discriminate between our superficially conflicting purposes.⁷ Treating happiness as an overarching ideal structure, to which lives more or less approximate, enables us to explain why it can be rational to pursue a course which leads to short term misery but long term gain, and why it can be rational to sacrifice some interests for the sake of others.

The idea of happiness as the lynchpin for an evaluation of human life goes hand in hand with the presumption that the best human beings are those who are well-adjusted; whose responses are appropriate to the environment in which they find themselves. As Aristotle puts it, the *phronimos* is someone who has emotional responses "at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way".⁸

Given this presumption, the chief difference between the three kinds of theory broached above is that of how the standards for what constitutes an ideal equilibrium are to be set.

⁵ Nicomachean Ethics (hereafter *NE*) 1097b1-3 In this I part company with McDowell, who takes eudaimonia to be a special class of end and not a final end for all action. Cf 'The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle's Ethics' in his *Mind, Value and Reality*.

⁶ Cf. e.g. *NE* 1098b30-1

⁷ On the notion of this structure as 'architectonic', cf. Anscombe 'Practical Inference', p. 147

⁸ Cf. *NE* 1106b8-28

According to hedonic and judgement-satisfaction theories, one counts as well-adjusted (and so happy) if and only if one's situation meets standards set by elements of one's internal constitution. As a result, so long as one can reconcile oneself to the vagaries of one's circumstances, there is in principle no barrier to being happy even in the most miserable conditions. ("The mind is its own place and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."⁹) According to objective list theories, one counts as well-adjusted if and only if one's situation meets standards set by the objective determinants of happiness. As such, certain circumstances may be so inimical to human life as to make genuine adjustment to them impossible.

In what follows I am not going to try to decide between these conceptions of happiness. Instead I am going to suggest that, however happiness is understood, it is insufficient both as an explanation of human action and as a final end towards which human beings ought to aim.

In order to substantiate this I will focus on a certain class of experiences which undermine the idea of the ideal human being as someone who responds appropriately to the world's demands. I will suggest that certain aspects of reality are such as to occasion, not particular appropriate judgements or responses, but rather the failure of the faculties of judging and responding. To put it another way: there are certain experiences to which human beings are vulnerable and to which the concepts of appropriateness and proportionality are inappropriate. In that these experiences are unpleasant and unsettling, they are inimical to happiness. But they are aspects of the human condition. As such, they call into question the aspiration for a life of happiness, if that is conceived of in terms of a continuous state of harmoniousness with the world around one. And they undermine any heuristic that would seek to explain all human action in terms of its standing vis-a-vis happiness.

1. The De Re Des Res

⁹ Milton, *Paradise Lost* p.11

One example of this kind of experience is that which Diamond describes as being "shouldered out of one's instant and heat", in confrontation with an intolerable aspect of reality. She discusses, in this context, firstly Ted Hughes' poem 'Six Young Men' and secondly the breakdown suffered by JM Coetzee's character Elizabeth Costello in his eponymously titled novel. Hughes' poem describes the effect of looking at an old photograph of six men who would less than a year later all have been killed in the First World War. Coetzee's novel describes the increasingly frantic attempts of an elderly novelist to express to others her sense of the intolerability of life in a world in which animals can be butchered for meat.

Diamond discusses these phenomena under the rubric of the 'difficulty of reality' - as exemplifying ways in which the world can impress itself on one that defy explanation and understanding, and that make everyday life seem intolerable and unsustainable. As she puts it:

[T]he difficulty lies in the apparent resistance by reality to one's ordinary mode of life, including one's ordinary modes of thinking: to appreciate the difficulty is to feel oneself being shouldered out of how one thinks, how one is apparently supposed to think, or to have a sense of the inability of thought to encompass what it is attempting to reach.¹⁰

In the remainder of this section and the next I will discuss these two cases, starting with that of Elizabeth Costello.

Costello is a famous novelist who is invited to give a prestigious series of lectures at Appleton College. She chooses as the subject of her presentation 'the lives of animals'. In the course of the lectures it becomes clear that she is unable (or unwilling) to obey the conventions of academic form. The lectures are, from everyone's point of view, a disaster. Costello, rather than provide the

¹⁰ Cora Diamond 'The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy' p.58

audience with a series of reflections or arguments on the nature of animal life, presents herself, a 'wounded animal', to the audience:

I am not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every work I speak.¹¹

But her presentation is met with bafflement; although she is there to be seen, the audience fail to see her as she is, fail to appreciate the depth of her woundedness, its urgency.¹²

The source of Costello's injury is her awareness of the horror of our treatment of animals, and her sense of the intolerability, but inescapability, of that fact. Costello shows us that the act of meaning one's words – imaginatively committing oneself to living out the consequences of what we do and say – may lead one to crack up; one may find oneself, in the process of trying to entertain a thought, unable to entertain any thoughts at all. At the justly famous culmination of the novel, Elizabeth is, in the arms of her unsympathetic son John, reduced to tearful incredulity:

I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidence. [...]

Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life.

Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can't you? *Why can't you?*

She turns on him a tearful face. What does she want, he thinks? Does she want me to answer her question for her?

¹¹ Coetzee, J. M., and Amy Gutmann. *The Lives of Animals*. See also J M Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* p.26

¹² Cf. Diamond, *op.cit.*, p.47

They are not yet on the expressway. He pulls the car over, switches off the engine, takes his mother in his arms. He inhales the smell of cold cream, of old flesh. 'There, there,' he whispers in her ear. 'There, there. It will soon be over.'

2. Rending, and Rendering

How are we to understand Costello's response, and the divergence between her and her son? What follows is one answer to that question.

We can think of Elizabeth Costello's system for representing the world as akin to a pair of old-style night vision goggles. These allow an individual to see things clearly in low-light environments, by registering infra-red light (or heat) sources in the environment; brighter objects glowing brighter than darker objects. However, when an object that is too bright is seen through such goggles, they suffer from 'whiting out' – the wearer's whole field of vision becomes occluded. On this analogy, Costello is someone who stares at a light source that is too bright for her, and as a result can only register the presence of this light in her failure, under its influence, to record any facts at all.

There are, however, new-style night vision goggles that don't have this feature; when the user encounters a light source of too-great intensity the goggles top it out at a certain brightness, so that it and those surrounding it can still be seen. In Coetzee's novel, Elizabeth Costello's son John provides an example of this kind of 'new model' thinker; he accepts that eating meat may be morally wrong, but cannot see how that fact could occasion the kind of hysterical reaction that his mother displays. People like John are likely to think that their ability to remain functional in the face of such facts is a virtue of their sophistication. Granted, by limiting the brightness of very intense facts some of the degree of contrast with mundane features of experience is lost, but they will insist that this is still a more accurate depiction of the very bright (very important) facts of life than no depiction at all, which is all that Elizabeth Costello can offer. On this line of

thought, so long as we are aware that these facts are bright (important) it is better that we register this in a way that doesn't undermine our ability to do something about it.¹³

Thus, John's way of seeing the world is one that has built into it an underlying commitment to functionality. To see the world as he does is to assume that it's possible to live in a world in which morally terrible things are being done. Compromise is an inherent part of his representation of moral situations, his first question being 'That's how it is; now what am I to do about it?' On that way of conceiving of morality its demands are checked by the structures of reasonableness, and, as such, morality will never require of you that you refuse to live with your family, refuse to eat with your grandchildren, refuse to participate in the hurly-burly of social life and so forth, because to think of moral perceptions as obligating that kind of response is to conceive of morality as 'over-demanding', of requiring of us behaviour that is politely described as saintly (and, less politely, as sociopathic).

We can begin to see the distance between Elizabeth and her son when we recognise that Elizabeth does not think that she is *obliged* to refuse to compromise, she just finds herself unable to. Her thought is something like: 'can the world really be like *that*?' and, concomitantly: 'how is it possible for me (for other people) to eat, drink, laugh – in short, to live life and enjoy it – in an awareness of what goes on?' And that thought is not an expression of conviction but of incomprehension.¹⁴

If one thinks that a well-adjusted representational system always accommodates these moments with an appropriate scaling of the significance of the facts of life (facts which we are presented with from a young age) then you have to take the opinion that responses such as Costello's are just malfunctions of the faculty of judgement, and therefore that they are to be

¹³ As John might put it, were we all like Elizabeth Costello, nothing would ever get done. (Then again, no animals would ever be killed for meat either. Maybe the best thing the human race can do, morally speaking, is to become unable to do anything.)

¹⁴ Diamond op.cit. *passim*

dismissed, distrusted.¹⁵ If ethics is the study of structures of judgement and action, then the lives of people like Elizabeth Costello (who is unable either to judge or act) are beyond the reach of ethics; she is fit only for the psychiatrist's chair, or the old person's home.

On the other hand, one might think that the cornerstone of ethics is not the modulation of structures of judgement and action, but rather settling the question of what responses (if any) constitute a truthful response to the world. If one has a view of ethics on which the principle demand is *not to falsify*, then to dismiss Elizabeth Costello as a subject fit only for the psychiatrist's chair is to characterise her experiences as inauthentic.¹⁶ And with what right do we describe her in these terms?

Ted Hughes' poem 'Six Young Men' describes the 'dementing' effect of looking at a photograph of a group of young men, unaware that their fate was to be killed a mere matter of months later. Echoing her description of Costello, Diamond says that here we have:

[T]he experience of the mind's not being able to encompass something which it encounters. It is capable of making one go mad to try, to bring together in thought what cannot be thought: the impossibility of anyone's being more alive than these smiling men, nothing's being more dead. (44)

But alongside this important similarity between the cases are a number of differences. The experience described in (and evoked by) the Hughes poem is in an important respect the opposite of Costello's experience. Granted, both are instances of perceptions which are in some way intolerable, which are such as to make the speaker into "someone who can longer speak within the [language-]game" (45). But the relationship between representation and experience in

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, and cf. her 'Eating Meat and Eating People' in Diamond *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*

¹⁶ On this idea of truthfulness, cf. Holland, R.F. 'Is Goodness a Mystery' in Holland *Against Empiricism: On Education, Epistemology, and Value*

the two cases is reversed. In 'Six Young Men', the inability to function is brought about by the power of the representation (the photograph of young men, and Hughes' elaboration upon it). Being a representation, the photograph is what it is only because it points to something beyond itself. (Thus, someone who saw the image only as a series of colours and could not discern human forms in it would be immune to the effect that Hughes describes.) This representation then engenders an experience, a sense of contradiction, which can be described (as Diamond describes it) as a simultaneous awareness of both the impossibility and the reality of mortality. By contrast, Costello's inability to go on is a product of some aspect of the world itself, an aspect (the suffering of animals) which has the power that it does without pointing to some state of affairs beyond itself. Starting from this experience, Costello then gropes around for some way to represent it, to make vivid the intolerability of her perception to her audience.

This distinction ties into the differing feelings that the cases engender. A natural response to the Hughes poem is to feel a pained sense of loss, and to see the poem as an attempt (necessary, but necessarily futile) to fill, with words, the gap left by these men - to use language (or to trade it) to bring them back. On the other hand, the feeling that we share with Costello is not the painfulness of absence, but of claustrophobia; a discomfort caused by the stifling presence of an intolerable aspect of reality. Costello does not aspire to use words to restore something to wholeness. Rather, words present themselves as a barrier to (and shield from) an uninhibited contact with reality itself, contact which is finally to be achieved not through the activity of representing, but rather through the activity of *being-with-another*:

If I do not convince you, that is because my words, here, lack the power to bring home to you the wholeness, the unabstracted, unintellectual nature, of that animal being. That is why I urge you to read the poets who return the living, electric being to language; and if the poets do not move you, I urge you to walk, flank to flank, beside

the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner.¹⁷

In the culmination of Costello's experience words are left behind. By contrast, words are a necessary component of the maddening effect which we experience at the culmination of our reading of Hughes' poem.

The feeling which comes from an awareness of the absence of another is not of the same order as the feeling of (say) an absence of oxygen - nor is it the same as an awareness of the presence of another. The kind of absence that Hughes describes is only real for us insofar as it is elaborated upon in language; insofar as the contrast is brought to our attention.

3. Fled is That Music

I would like to elaborate on Diamond's thought by considering the experience of yearning. This word connotes many different feelings, unified by the fact that they all involve an intense dissatisfaction with some element of one's current state, an awareness of some absence which presents itself to consciousness as to-be-filled.¹⁸ I am particularly interested, not in cases where one yearns for something achievable (such as one might long to visit a particular place), but where that which is sought after is inchoate or incoherent. One such feeling is the desire to return to a time in the past - perhaps with the knowledge and experience that one has as a product of having lived through it. Another is the desire to 'stop time', to exist without changing in a particular state of bliss. Yet another is the desire to bring someone back from the dead. And, finally, there is the sense of yearning which finds its expression in the desire for an uninhibited contact with reality, to really understand and to be understood by another, or to become (as it is

¹⁷ Coetzee, *op. cit.*, p.65

¹⁸ Kant describes the feeling of having avoided doing evil as a kind of 'negative inner satisfaction'; Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*; 5:118. By contrast, the feeling of yearning is a positive inner dissatisfaction. It is positive in the sense that it points beyond itself, to some further state. And it is dissatisfying, in that it involves discomfort with at least some aspect of one's present condition.

said) 'one' with another or with the world as a whole.¹⁹

All of these feelings have the interesting feature of being resistant to a certain kind of reflective scrutiny. The person having this feeling knows that their desire cannot be satisfied, without their taking that knowledge to undermine either the intensity of the experience, or its legitimacy.²⁰ (By contrast, a rational person will hope that their anger towards another person would subside were they to realise that the other person was not blameworthy for the harm that they suffered.)

Different kinds of yearning have different sources. One source is the ambivalence of our desires - the fact that our ability to dissociate from our naturally given ends gives us the means simultaneously to endorse and reject a certain course of action, or to endorse two conflicting courses of action. These kinds of conflict between our drives can lead to a feeling of dissatisfaction, a desire for a state whose achievement would be both a source of satisfaction and of frustration. Another source is the inexhaustibility of our desires - the fact that there is always something more that can be wanted, that reaching a goal is unsatisfying when that goal is immediately replaced by another one.²¹ And yet another source is our finitude, the fact that we do not always get what we want.

But when the content of the experience is (as in Diamond's examples above) inchoate or incoherent, then the source of yearning is, I suggest, different. It is a product of our position vis-a-vis time (when our desire is to return to some prelapsarian state) or vis-a-vis the material world (when our desire is for a more perfect union with the world or some part of it). More precisely, it is a product of a difficulty that we feel about our relation to time or the world, as being neither fully in them (as animals are), nor fully outside of them (as God is).

¹⁹ Cf. Plato *Symposium* 189c -193e

²⁰ By the 'legitimacy' of an experience I mean the sort of contrast one draws when one speaks of the difference between genuine perception and hallucination, or between what Keats calls, in his 'Ode to a Nightingale', "a vision [and] a waking dream".

²¹ We are leaky vessels, in Plato's phrase; cf. *Gorgias* 494a

To simplify matters, in what follows I will focus on yearning as it relates to the past. That simplification may compensate somewhat for the indirection in my approach; rather than deal with the phenomenon head-on I discuss it as it occurs in a range of poetic attitudes towards the reality of the past and the passage of time. My justification for this is that in all of these attitudes the concept of yearning plays a role, even if it is relegated to the background or the chorus.

4. In the Rough

And we placed our basket of fruit and wine
By the runlet's rim, where we sat to dine;
And when we had drunk from the glass together,
Arched by the oak-copse from the weather,
I held the vessel to rinse in the fall,
Where it slipped, and sank, and was past recall,
Though we stooped and plumbed the little abyss
With long bared arms. There the glass still is.
And, as said, if I thrust my arm below
Cold water in basin or bowl, a throe
From the past awakens a sense of that time,
And the glass we used, and the cascade's rhyme.
The basin seems the pool, and its edge
The hard smooth face of the brook-side ledge,
And the leafy pattern of china-ware
The hanging plants that were bathing there.²²

²² Thomas Hardy (1914). 'Under the Waterfall'

The above lines from Thomas Hardy portray an individual who sustains a connection with their beloved by the power of a "throe from the past". This experience takes as its focal point the relatively minor mishap of losing a cup in a stream. That experience must have been felt at the time as a loss - one presumes, as an annoyance (however minor). But, Hardy suggests, this loss is compensated for by the memories which the loss of the cup can now evoke. The lost cup, in being lost, was freed from the ordinary commerce of material objects and was transformed into something more - a symbol of a time and a place. The experience of loss is, in that respect, transformed - its appearance now as past gives it a value which endures even after material losses have been adjusted for.

As well as being an argument for the power of memory to console us to loss, Hardy's poem is also implicitly a defence of the poetic endeavour itself, for the poet is someone who takes words out of their ordinary commerce and frees them to play a symbolic role. Against the claim that poetry is useless, Hardy provides a justification for it in its ability to sustain for us, against the onrushing of time, a value in experience. Here, then, we have an attitude towards the past on which the imaginative possibility of poetry is a source, not of despair, but of hope.

Hardy evokes a concept of time in which certain events stand out in sharp relief. Since our relationships are (arguably) constituted by such moments, the ability to reinhabit such moments through flashbacks guarantees that what is past is not fully lost. The fact that memory remains is a form of consolation.

This attitudes draws on a certain strand of romantic thought we can find consolation for the passage of time in the endurance of memory. This notion of consolation finds natural expression in the thought that what was valuable in a thing persists, even when its bodily form has been lost.²³ Transposed to a philosophical key, that becomes in turn the thought that there is no difference in kind between objects and our representations of them - death or destruction involve

²³ To that this mode of expression is natural is not, of course, to endorse it.

a shaving off of some aspects of an individual, but their persistence in memory shows that their essence endures, in our enduring experience of them.

The underlying logic of immaterialism is that there is no difference in kind between memories and present experience, and no difference in kind between experiences and things themselves. To be is to be perceived, and everything is perceived by God. That is consoling, in two senses: firstly, if all things are perceived by a being who stands outside of time, then the passage of time cannot affect the underlying reality of things. Within God's purview we all exist, and always will. Secondly, the act of invoking a thing in memory is an act of summoning; a thing survives insofar as it survives in memory. Nothing that can be remembered is lost forever and, if God sees and remembers all, then we need never give up hope.

In this way, Hardy shares with Hughes a sense of the poignancy of the passage of time, but draws the opposite conclusion from it, seeing it as a source of strength.

Turning to the work of Keats, we find an attitude towards the past which sits ambiguously between Hughes' 'permanent horrors' and Hardy's consolatory moments:

Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man...²⁴

These lines occur as an interruption to a poetic animation of the antique figures on a Grecian urn. Immediately prior to this interjection, Keats was imagining the figures as both alive and yet frozen in time ("little town, thy streets for evermore/Will silent be"). (Nothing is more alive;

²⁴ Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'

nothing more dead.) His poesis consists in his ability to animate what would otherwise be a merely useless piece of pottery – an urn, too old to be servicable, fit only to be discarded. The title captures this ambiguity: the theme of his Ode is (on) the Grecian urn; the upshot of the poem is to see the carvings on its side as their own Ode, as evoking in us a sense of a former time.

Keats engenders a sense of conflict by contrasting our vulnerability to the passage of time with the stillness of the figures (the foster-children of "Silence and slow Time"). The perfection and completeness of their state is contrasted favourably to our own transience and imperfection ("Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed/ Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu"), and the effect of this juxtaposition is to "tease us out of thought".

The similarities to Hughes are evident, but Keats' tone is far more pastoral. We are here drawn from thought without any of the violence and ecstasy that comes from a 'shouldering out'. And, as we see in the poem's final stanza, thought's exile is only temporary - the culmination of the poem is not the subversion of representation, but a representation of the highest order: the one insight, necessary and sufficient to human life, the Platonic equation of truth and beauty.

By contrast to this line of thought, we find in Auden the conviction that to view memory in this way is a mere indulgence. In 'As I Stepped Out One Evening' he writes:

O plunge your hands in water,
Plunge them in up to the wrist;
Stare, stare in the basin
And wonder what you've missed.²⁵

The reference to the plunging of hands marks this passage out as an echo of Hardy. But the effect

²⁵ Auden, 'As I Stepped Out One Evening'

is strikingly different. There is an intimation of suicide (Hardy's "bared arms" become the wrist, not "plumb[ing]" the water but instead cut by it), which gives Auden's rhythmical verse an air of brutality. And there is a marked absence of any imaginative elaboration on the past or the present. The narrator commands us to think on our losses - but poetry will give us no help. As such, the dramatic power of this verse is in its absences. And this absence in turn inflects the concept of wondrousness that Auden invokes. Unlike the dulcet tones of Hughes and Hardy, where to wonder is to revel in an experience which is replete with intensity and unexamined meanings, here wondering is a negative experience - it is the groping of someone who knows that they are lacking something, but knows not what. Their search cannot begin, and so they must have their ending.

Yet Auden is himself a poet, and his refusal to indulge in imaginative elaboration in this verse has the power it does only by virtue of its position within a poetical work as a whole. And the rest of the poem powerfully depicts the passage of time as maddening and intolerable; not a boon to present pleasures, but a bourn between us and them:

In the burrows of the Nightmare
Where Justice naked is,
Time watches from the shadow
And coughs when you would kiss.
In headaches and in worry
Vaguely life leaks away,
And Time will have his fancy
To-morrow or to-day.²⁶

²⁶ *ibid.*

The effectiveness of these lines is secured by the perpetual interruption of acts of kissing by the intrusive presence of Time, here personified. Kissing is an intimate act, in which one's attention is drawn to the other in a way that transforms (and may obscure entirely) one's sense of time and place.²⁷ It is thus the romantic archetype. If uninhibited, a kiss is something deeply personal and is dependent on the couple having an uninterrupted occasion to absorb themselves in one another. Time's repeated coughing is therefore a constant frustration to the sense of privacy upon which the kiss depends.²⁸

In this way, Auden suggests that a reflection on our nature as finite beings, destined to lose everything that we hold to be valuable, undermines our ability to participate in these ordinary rituals of life.²⁹

Auden is writing against that strand in romanticism which tries to find consolation in the individual's ability, through thought, to relate themselves to past. In that sense, he can be described as an anti-romantic. Here, as elsewhere, he commandeers romantic form (in particular, the use of rhymed couplets) to skewer the idyllic and idealistic vision which he finds at its heart.³⁰

These are just a few of the indefinitely many, and variously conflicting, stances towards the past which artists invite us to take. Of course, the point is not to decide (outside of any context)

²⁷ At an extreme, a kiss occludes our sense of separateness from our surroundings, the other person and ourselves; the harmony is total. The power of the ending to Ulysses trades on this; the dissolution of the structures of language perfectly echoes the dissolution of Molly Bloom's sense of the separateness of her being.

²⁸ The image of a coughing time is doubly effective. The cough is both a commonplace social move for drawing attention to one's presence, and a symbol of sickness, implying that time makes its presence felt in intimations of disease, and ergo in one's sense of the inevitability of death.

²⁹ Auden's poem has affinities to another personification of time, notably Marvell's famed evocation of it as the "wing'd chariot drawing near" in 'To His Coy Mistress'. Marvell also represents time as the enemy of a kind of pleasure. But unlike Auden his aim is rhetorical; it is to present our awareness of the onrushing of time as a problem to which an uninhibited pursuit of bodily pleasures is the solution. In that way, he does not take the inescapability of time to be a threat to the possibility of pleasure in itself - only to call for a change in our present attitudes. Marvell hopes that in the light of that perception an adherence to a virtue of chastity will appear as a pointless – indeed, perhaps even pernicious – restraint on our behaviour.

³⁰ Elsewhere, I have suggested that his 'Stop All the Clocks' be read as a *reductio* of the romantic conflation of subject and world; cf M. Campbell *Being Human: Fine Tuning Moral Naturalism* (PhD Thesis), available at <http://tinyurl.com/humanphd>, p.ii

between these attitudes. The point is, rather, that a multiplicity of positions are available to us, as we come to think about how to respond to our circumstances, to our (to *the*) human condition. Of course, we only see the need for these alternatives insofar as we have a sense of our relation to the passage of time as presenting us with a problem. Yearning is one such awareness of this problem, and the unifying strand amongst all of the poems discussed above is that they are (either implicitly or explicitly) both responding to, and engendering, that feeling.³¹

Just how important one takes such differences in imaginative outlook to be will depend on how seriously one takes poetry. In other words, it will depend on how far one is willing to let imaginative perceptions of the facts of existence affect one's behaviour. For someone like John Costello, for whom our responses must always be proportionate, the risks and rewards of poetry are always hedged. But we need not be like John Costello; we need not delimit poetry's authority to speak to us in this way. To really listen to the poets (to really see Costello's woundedness) would mean taking seriously the prospect that, in the process, we might be sent, perhaps irrevocably, off the rails.

Camus claimed that suicide is the only really serious philosophical problem.³² As he developed it, that claim may be hyperbolic. Be that as it may, his approach to ethics least takes seriously (as much philosophy does not) that there may be thoughts which open the question of suicide, or in the contemplation of which suicide (or hysteria) might be genuine risk. For both Elizabeth Costello and the narrator of 'Six Young Men', there are ways of thinking about our world which are unhingeing. These are facts which do not cause us to alter our way of life; they call into question the supposition that life *has a way*.³³

³¹ The indefiniteness of the possible attitudes here shows us that the imaginative sense of the past as problematic, engendered by poetry, is neither fully nor finally answered by it. (At least, it has not yet been answered by it. Could one hope that - by analogy with scientific problems and a completed science - in an ideal, completed poetry, poetry's problems are given unambiguous and definitive answers?)

³² Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, O'Brien (trans) in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* 1991 Vintage.

³³ Witness in this respect, Singer's discussion of Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals*, and, in general, his well-known views on global justice and vegetarianism. Singer thinks that taking moral facts seriously will mean changing our way of life; to respond to those facts with hysteria or despair could only betoken a psychological failure.

5. The Nonsense of an Ending

There are three conclusions which I would like to draw from the preceding discussion. The first is that feelings like yearning show that the claim that happiness is the final end of action, rather than expressing a conceptual truth, expresses an ethically loaded conception of what is admirable in human life. To aim to be happy is to aim to be free of the vulnerabilities that are found in the interstices of imagination and experience. Insofar as those vulnerabilities are part of the human condition, it is an aspiration to be other than human.³⁴ Such an aspiration may be intelligible - may even be admirable - but it is not inevitable.

The second conclusion is that experiences, both of the sort that invite imaginative elaboration and of the sort that defy it, are of central importance for ethical thought. Part of ethics is the search for answers to questions about the meaning of human life - what attitudes are appropriate to facts such as that we are mortal and that our desires are transient. But a yet more fundamental part of ethics is the search for outlooks from which these facts present problems to which a variety of answers might be forthcoming.³⁵

As an illustration of the importance of these differences for ethics, take the Republic's discussion of justice. The dialogue begins with a discussion of the nature of desire. Cephalus, an old man, tells us that his acquaintances frequently complain that "the pleasures of youth and love are fled away: there was a good time once, but now that is gone, and life is no longer life."³⁶ On the other hand, Cephalus has a different attitude to aging, seeing it as a liberation from the 'mad

My point here can be compared with Gaita's objection that if we were to take seriously Singer's claim that we are all murderers by virtue of our omissions, suicide would be the natural response; Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, pp.58ff..

³⁴ We could go further than this if it could be shown that we are opened up to vulnerability to yearning by the same faculties which shape the distinctive form that happiness takes for beings such as us. But I will not now try to substantiate that claim.

³⁵ As well as Diamond *op. cit.*, cf. her 'Anything But Argument?' in her (1995) for a more comprehensive exposition of this point.

³⁶ Plato, *Republic* (trans. Jowett) 329a5-6

masters' of desire. He defends his alternative conception of the relationship between aging and happiness by quoting Pindar: "Hope [...] cherishes the soul of him who lives in justice and holiness and is the nurse of his age and the companion of his journey; --hope which is mightiest to sway the restless soul of man."³⁷

Socrates' defence of justice occurs on the background of this contrast in attitudes towards the passage of time. Cephalus sees the passage of time as being a boon to human beings, freeing them from desire and allowing hope to nourish the soul. The proceeding discussion of justice is designed to justify this point of view, and to elaborate on the role of external goods (such as wealth) in enabling this state of hopeful acceptance. The impetus for the philosophical enquiry is therefore the conflict between two different perspectives which one might take on the relation between human happiness and the passage of time; perspectives which are elaborated (at least in the first instance) by reference to the poets.

The final point of this paper is methodological. Ethics involves imaginative elaborations upon, and evocations of, experience. It therefore depends on those modes of thought through which these elaborations occur. Poetry is one such mode of thought, a way of 'returning the living, electric being to language'.

In the varying conceptions of our relation to the past we have arguments over what follows from what. It is no small matter whether time is an enemy that pursues us or a help meet to old age; a bourn or a boon. In this way, as Diamond urges, poetry provides us with forms of argument. It invites us to see certain conclusions (about the possibility of happiness, or about our sense of the value of certain virtues) as following from certain considerations (e.g. from reflection about what it means to die, or to be a finite being for whom the past is inaccessible except in memory). These arguments are (as all are) contentious, and can be more or less successful.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 331a3-5

Poetic reasoning is not the kind of thing that could be written up on a blackboard and its conclusions traced out by an individual who was emotionally deadened by hardship, or who was (for whatever reason) overcome with cynicism.³⁸ There is no dispassionate assessment of the convincingness of a poem. But there is assessment, nevertheless; this is a mode of understanding, and, as such, can be assessed in terms of its ability truthfully to speak to us.³⁹

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³⁸ Gaita, *op.cit.*, pp328ff.

³⁹ On this point cf. Cavell *passim*; Diamond, 'Anything But Argument' in her (1995) and Gaita *op.cit.*, chs15-17.

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(Michael Campbell, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Japan Society for the Promotion of
Science (JSPS), Kyoto University)