

In Living Silver
by
Laurence Scott

When he was a little boy, Kurt Vonnegut joined in with his star-spotting cousin, who was naming all the constellations above the family's lakeside holiday cottages. 'That one is Tralfamadore!' young Kurt said. In the future, which is our past, he remembered this spontaneous joke, and named a race of aliens in his books the Tralfamadorians. These four-dimensional beings are able to see all of time all at once. As he writes in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 'It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever.' For the Tralfamadorians, past, present, and future are meaningless distinctions. They find it strange that we humans should mourn for the dead, since people's lives and deaths are overlaid in an eternal moment. The baby and the corpse co-exist.

In our networked age, with the past so easily caught on camera and hauled with us into an ever-unfolding, digital present, we increasingly perceive the world in the Tralfamadorian style. Think of how we can scroll up and down a Twitter feed, seeing the days come and go and come again, with no discernible story, simply moments of time: violent, whimsical, momentous, trivial, tumbling together in the blur of a scroll. Back in the material world, the most banal, everyday objects can trigger in us a vision of the timeline in which they sit.

The Bureau of Linguistical Reality, a public art project that catalogues the new emotions emerging in our over-heating, linked-in societies, lists 'tralfamadorification' as one of its neologisms. As defined by Jenny Odell et al.:

Those who experience tralfamadorification may walk through the world seeing a "beach towel" at one moment and then experience briefly the "beach towel" opening up into a black hole of information regarding the production line for the materials, the factory they were assembled on, the human suffering in creating these objects, the resources extracted, the shipping containers they were carried to and fro in, etcetera

Under this new kind of gaze, the commodity cracks open and its provenance comes radiating darkly out of it. And in such four-dimensional moments don't we see its future, too, our minds plunging forward into the spinning gyres of waste that haunt the Pacific? Any apocalyptic feelings, which aren't unreasonable at this particular juncture of the young century, haul the past and the future into the moment. Cause-and-effect collapse, spit-roasting the present: all the years of digging for coal and oil on one side, and on the other the world's last, ashen, underwater exhalation.

This omni-vision, which perceives objects not merely in themselves, but as a pressure-packed timeline, can be a source of malaise. We can become deluged in time. In his 1901 essay, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', Georg Simmel cites what he calls 'blasé' as a dominant attitude of his own epoch. The blasé individual is left numb by the new, dizzying, incessant stimuli of the modern city, as compared to the relatively stable rhythms of agrarian life. Simmel argues that this stimulation, the bombardments of sensory information piling up from a simple walk down a street, create a kind of experiential and moral blur. He writes that 'the essence of the blasé attitude is an indifference toward the distinctions between things'. Indeed, the stuff of the world begins to 'appear to the blasé person in a homogenous, flat and grey colour with no one of them worthy of being preferred to another.' Haven't we all felt this greyness as our emotions are lurched up and down the timeline, watching the victims of the world's horrors rub shoulders with photogenic flat whites, friends gathered in rows of gleaming teeth, dogs canoodling with cats?

The Tralfamadorians have a mantra that might sound blasé to some ears. 'And so it goes' they say, when asked to comment on a particular occurrence. For them, the act of separating one event from another is a mysterious human habit. For instance, they know that one of their race, a test pilot, accidentally destroys the universe by igniting an experimental fuel. When asked why they don't try to stop this apocalypse, they reply, 'He has always pressed it, and he always will. We always let him and we always will let him. The moment is structured that way.' And so it goes. For questing humans, who wish to be the heroic protagonists in the stories of their lives – to save the day, to buck fate – the Tralfamadorian way might sound grimly static. After all, the Tralfamadorians, shaped like plungers, have unstuck themselves from the dynamism of cause-and-effect, knocking away the hyphens that propel one event into the next in linear time.

Rather than seeing all of time simultaneously, another way of derailing cause and effect is to suspend time altogether, to live in an eternal instant, approximated in the looping GIFs of our era. To free yourself from chronology in this way is a curse as well as a liberation, as Oscar Wilde knew well. In the strangest and most boring chapter of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the beautiful man who becomes as ageless as a painting falls under the influence of a book given him by his corrupting mentor, Lord Henry. It is a 'book without a plot', and in this sense it mirrors Dorian's exile from the flow of time. After all, a plot takes time to unfold: a king and queen are told their child will grow up to kill

and marry them respectively, so they abandon him on a hillside, and then, years later he approaches a crossroads, and so on. In this weird chapter, Wilde dramatises the passing of time in the life of an eternal youth by suspending the novel's action, abandoning cause and effect to record in great detail the various hobbies that obsess this freak of time. We are told how Dorian:

would now study perfumes and the secrets of their manufacture... At another time he devoted himself entirely to music, [collecting] together from all parts of the world the strangest instruments that could be found... On one occasion he took up the study of jewels... Then he turned his attention to embroideries and to the tapestries that performed the office of frescoes in the chill rooms of the northern nations of Europe... And so, for a whole year, he sought to accumulate the most exquisite specimens that he could find of textile and embroidered work...

Wilde's sentences become lists of acquisitions; each new object that Dorian collects is like the tick of a clock. Time is measured by the space that his collections take up, an accumulation of things. Here we might be reminded of Walter Benjamin's image of the Angel of History, blown backwards on the winds of progress into the future, watching as 'the pile of debris before him grows skyward.' The plot of the world is not a story but a rubbish heap, a valley of ashes.

But there is yet another, more vivacious way to view suspended time. Perhaps the most famous temporal freeze in Western literature is Homer's description in the *Iliad* of the shield of Achilles. He has reached a pause in the epic: Achilles is mourning the death of Patroklos and has yet to return with rage to the battlefield. The story is on hold. But this pause shimmers with life, as Homer describes the concentric designs on the shield's plating, which contains a cosmos of movement. There are the heavens, where 'The Bear, revolving, points his golden eye'; there are two cities, where 'youthful dancers in a circle bound' and matrons 'Stand in their porches, and enjoy the show.' There are civic trials, and elsewhere wars, spies and squadrons, and bucolic scenes of harvests, feasts and yet more dancers tumbling in an 'undistinguish'd blend... So whirls a wheel, in giddy circle toss'd, / And, rapid as it runs, the single spokes are lost.' When the shield's forger and artist, Hephaestus, the 'father of the fires', finishes the armour, Homer tells us, 'Thus the broad shield complete the artist crown'd / With his last hand, and pour'd the ocean round: / In living silver seem'd the waves to roll, / And beat the buckler's verge, and bound the whole.' Although literally a static object, the shield pulsates with time, with plot, with causes and effects. It symbolizes the life that resides in things, the vitality and possibility of matter.

You will probably have heard, by now, of the battle for the Blackest Black and the retaliatory Pinkest Pink. But much less remarked upon is the Greyest Grey, the shade of our times. This may sound bleak, but it depends how we encounter the infinite present, as dead or alive. Viewed one way, the Greyest Grey is the colour of ashes, the dullness of blasé, the ominous sheen of charcoal on a boiling Spring day, the colour of the tabs tiled across the roof of my laptop screen, a thoughtless firmament, a misspent digital afternoon. It is the colour of unfree will: Tralfamadorian Grey. But the Greyest Grey is also the persistent colour of vanished stars, what is sometimes called ancient light. It's the pulsating colour of twilights and dusks, crepuscular, hosting more than one time at the same time. Think of the colour of a ghost's cloak as it grazes your bedroom floor. It is the colour that has been with us all along, and always will be, the eternal shimmer of things, both bound and free, in living silver.

Laurence Scott is the author of *The Four-Dimensional Human: Ways of Being in the Digital World* (W.W. Norton, 2016), which was shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Prize and won the Royal Society of Literature Jerwood Award. His writing has been published in the *New Yorker*, the *Boston Globe*, *Wired*, the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian* and the *New Statesman*, among others. He is a regular presenter and contributor on BBC Radio 3, and is Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at Arcadia University in London.