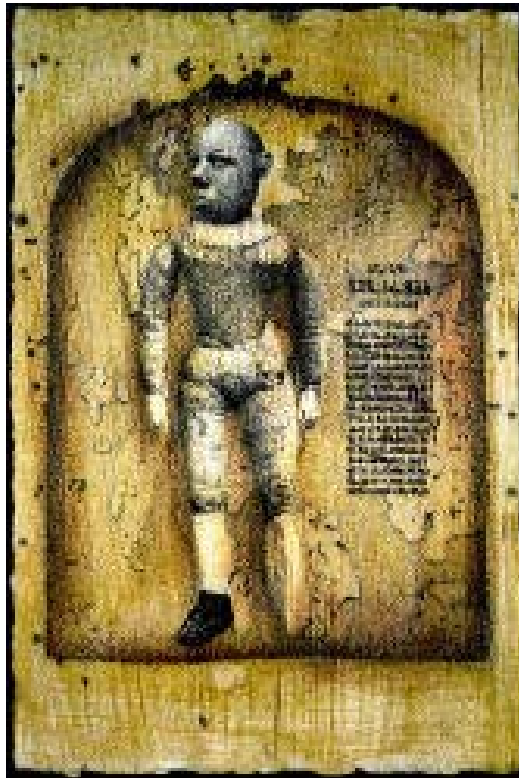


Thief of Time



Charles Benefie

A man unhappy with his life, full of bile and bitter about the hand dealt him wanders through an olive grove on the edge of a kibbutz and encounters there an aged woman standing in the shadows. Is this perhaps an auspicious encounter, or is she a personification of his fate, dark with dreams ignored? The man is a sightseer while the woman belongs to the place. His instant impression is that she has been robbed. What it is about her convinces him, he can't say, something in her very nature with which he identifies and which for him is grounds for retribution, and he is a man with a cause – to find those responsible for the robbery – everywhere. There the matter rests if this can be called rest.

A second man is anxious he will not get up on time and as a result does not sleep well. Perhaps there is a dull awareness in him that to be awake is synonymous with duty for which he must unquestioningly forsake his interest and desire even though he might be hard put to name that desire; whereas for the other man desire is eclipsed by resentment.

The first is a fragment from a long but unsuccessful analytical treatment where the patient was seen twice a week. The second man was in the first months of his therapy also coming twice a week, not yet time enough to have gathered significant transference, but for that reason a juncture serving as a good basis for conjecture to aid my hypothesis.

What seems evident about both these stories is that something repetitive and circular is happening. In the former a punishing conviction of life as a futile

charade while the latter, less toxic, registers disinclination and tends to let life slip by. Whilst the one man is vituperative and abhors surprises, there is a tendency in each to look back and apportion blame, to cling to an explanation of cause and effect for the unchanging way things are.

In Vittorio De Sica's outstanding 1948 film *Bicycle Thieves*, a poor man's bicycle upon which he is dependent in order to keep his job is stolen and pawned. He can't afford to retrieve it, nor can he make charges stick against the person he suspects took it. He is driven to steal someone else's bicycle and is found out. He faces a bleak future while realising he is no better than the person who robbed him.

The moral observation with which the film ends prompts the idea of a parallel with a psychic state, independent of morality, linked to determinism, simply stated, the robbed becomes the robber, where 'becomes' implies a causal relationship and where the connection may be closer still – not one without the other (both-and). More particularly, to have been 'robbed' (somehow) of an inherent timing (of taking one's time), then, in the condition of being unaware of the nature of the loss, since that is part of what is *taken*, the option to exercise inherent timing is not taken (advantage of), and minute by minute it passes unnoticed. It is this idea I think that Wilfred Bion envisaged in 1962 as a kind of reversal and fragmentation of a nascent emotion and thought which thereafter litters the psyche with a kind of confusion and can neither be used or stored as memory, but remains as 'an accretion of stimuli'. As stimuli these fragmented impulses, to my mind, may serve to prompt the determinism, which I have called 'robbed-robber'. As a stranger to the (pillaged) patiently attended moment a person is not so far from a state about which a notion of the perpetuation of a wilful act of robbery is constellated, a gesture perhaps of self-preservation in the face of calamity.

It is something of a coincidence that both men should have their bicycles stolen. 'The sightseer who has seen it all' – for him his cycle remained one of the very few symbols of his desire, perhaps the only one, judging that every other move of his seemed to land him in an 'abusive' situation. Robbed of this treasured possession it simply confirmed for him his default of control, his determinism. It was a form of Calvinism he espoused. The other man, who used his bicycle everyday to commute with simply shrugged, almost as if he hadn't noticed what had been done to him. Musing over his sleeplessness it came to me the 'rude awakening' was equivalent to being robbed – of time – and that he had somehow forgotten to ask, as the Welsh poet W.H.Davies (1972) has: 'What is this life if, full of care, We have no time to stand and stare... ?' It is this inner sense of timing or taking one's time I wish to say more about and first by considering the word 'temporise'.

To hesitate or play for time is usually the meaning of that word. It can also mean to give oneself time to think so as not to be rushed into a rash decision. Time is the fourth dimension. It does not exist in a narcissistic state where everything has to be at once and 'waiting time is dying time' as an acquaintance of mine once remarked. Here time is equated with distance or even absence. It has to be nullified. That is time imagined in one dimension.

To speak of two-dimensional time is an attempt to describe a kind of vague reality, on analogy with the wavy glutinous progress of a slug, with a form of continuity from A to B devoid of meaning, what could be thought of a circular, going nowhere. Dwelling in time, however, comes with the need to move from inside (desire) to outside (achievement, or modification of desire). In three-dimensional awareness time takes on an oscillating character, (a transitional position between inside and outside) one step forward and two back, according to the extent of the rigours surrounding the giving up prophecy and risking the unexpected. Here temporising comes into play. It is likely that if this stage is not reached or, as we may imagine, is retreated from, desire itself fails to be noticed, decisions are dutifully made, structures experienced as grinding and surprise replaced by a cynical knowing, the loss of expectancy, a *belle indifférence*.

In addition to the coincidence of stolen bicycles, these two had several other things in common, home country far from the UK, sexual orientation, and age. These, however, are beside the point as far as this essay is concerned. Worth remarking though is the fact that one set of parents was presented as immature and unable to think outside the box while the other mother and father were boxed in by fundamentalism. In each case the child was expected to march in time to a different tune from that of their inherent patterns.

Turning to their respective dreams, one other similarity can be drawn. Both men dreamed of flying. The 'sightseer's' dreams flagged up the fact that he wasn't going anywhere. He dreamed repeatedly of being on his way to the airport, but never took off. He had a fear of flying. In one dream he and his whole family, parents, siblings, were in a plane crash. They all survived and emerged from the wreckage only to ignore one another and go their separate ways, no relief, no sign of affection. The dreams seemed to say that he could not enter time for fear of catastrophe, but the catastrophe had already happened and so that was that. The fate of the family relationships in the dream he took as justification of his bitterness. It became painfully clear to me both from what he told me and from my experience of being with him that he lived by a perverse strategy whereby he gave others to think he was doing exactly what they wanted him to do while having vowed that while performing this ostensible duty he would derive not an ounce of pleasure or satisfaction from it. It was a device that had the effect of rendering his experience interminable and which tied others to that experience with him, the precise opposite of a coming to terms with the relentless passage of time.

The man whose sleep was broken by waking anxiety slept enough to dream. He had a recurring dream that he was flying his own light aircraft and how wonderful he felt away above the *rude* world, only that, when he pulled back on the stick, the plane did not gain height. The fact that there is no thought in the dream of increasing power with engine revs is perhaps relevant. However, the defence, of rising above things, adopting a sense of superiority did not give him a sense of having come into his own. In another dream again he was at the controls of his own private aeroplane when he suddenly noticed he was heading straight for some buildings that towered above him. Again he could not make height nor on this occasion change direction. He knew he would

crash and sensed this was the end. Instead of being smashed to smithereens, however, the plane seemed to pass through the building. The catastrophe of being robbed of his own tempo in coming to himself was experienced as an after-life without much feeling, a retreating life, represented in the dream as a living death.

What this all adds up to is fate, something written in stone, as if it had been determined how things would turn out ever after and this attended by a loss of awe, joie de vivre and the expectation of being surprised.

Time *is* willy-nilly the fourth dimension, affording the opportunity whether to enter it or not. To do so is a catastrophe since, for one thing endings are symbolised and 'time like an ever-rolling stream bears all its sons away'. Religion tempers, may even obfuscate, a reckoning with the fourth dimension with its myth of eternal life. There is the comparative longevity of the species, and there is the interminable personal option. The transition from timelessness into the fourth dimension is crucial. A rude awakening intensifies the sense of catastrophe because reality from the position of timeless narcissism cuts down to size too drastically if not done at one's own pace. A man robbed of his own time within time endures an unlived-out illusion of superiority. This is the domain of *fate*.

With *destiny* a myth¹ of individual truth unfolds with urgency as the quality of the move from inside to outside, time seized by the forelock. 'Had we but world enough, and time,' Andrew Marvell (1972) pleaded in *To His Coy Mistress*, 'This coyness, lady, were no crime... But at my back I always hear Time's winged chariot hurrying near'. The poet urged, 'Let us... tear our pleasures with rough strife Thorough the iron gates of life. Thus, though we cannot make our sun Stand still, yet we will make him run.' And in that last couplet lies the seeming paradox – time now accelerates and is seen to move towards death, but we no longer 'wait without hope' for life to begin, while my use of this phrase in itself raises another apparent paradox. Eliot's justification for his injunction – 'For hope would be hope for the wrong thing' – is uttered from a place of time inhabited, where waiting contains a faith in the dawning of desire, whereas I have hijacked his words to apply them to a state where that expectancy is not envisaged and wherein is the robbery.

Entry, in the sense of knocking at the door of time is catastrophic also since the reckoning with passage and reversals, contains a full realisation of the loss of time heretofore and contemporaneously, and thus the entrant pays his way by sustaining the sense of what has been pillaged and cannot be retrieved because in the fourth dimension time is not reversible. But now the individual is attentive to the minutiae that before passed by unmarked. In *Surprised by Joy*, Wordsworth (1909,) is awe-struck: 'By what power, Even for the least division of an hour, Have I been so beguiled as to be blind To my most grievous loss' This from the author of the great *Intimations of Immortality* ('Shades of the prison-house begin to close Upon the growing Boy, But He beholds the light, and whence it flows' p.318, ll.67-9).

For one man the light was being systematically extinguished; its glimmer persisted in the symbol of a bicycle. As a boy, his father tried to get him to ride and ran up and down holding the saddle while he said to himself I will not learn and it wasn't until his father gave up defeated by his 'effete' son, that he achieved his balance, but this determination of his also had a perverse motive to give his father no satisfaction – 'shades of the prison house'. In the individual myth, the bicycle symbolised setting out into *terra incognita* without a map. But for him this was to give too much of a gift as it meant satisfaction, letting go of grievance and leaving himself open to something else he hated, the element of surprise.

The fair to middling sleeper, in his youth, was laughed to scorn by a father for his 'outlandish' discovery of Bartok's music. Apprenticed to the local slaughterhouse and against a background of ridicule, sanctimony, disapproval and ungodly hours, he tended a reflection of his own myth, just as did Van Gogh did as an employee of a fine art company in his twenties, long before his eight great years. But unlike the brutalised Chen Jiangshui in Li Ang's *The Butcher's Wife* who lived to cut the throats of pigs and listen with pleasure to the squeals of their swift dispatch met his fate by the edge of his own butcher's knife, the 'sleeper', while diffident of his appreciation, teeters on the knife edge between fate and destiny, still harbouring his love of the great late Romantics Bartok and Schoenberg, an interest he could scarcely believe was other than a pose. So in such ways for both men the door stands ajar, the attendant hangs in the shadows and an impartial light is shed in the graphics of their dreams.

A field theory may be germane to the mythical content of taking one's own time. Donald Meltzer proposes such a theory as an alternative to the notion of being merely a product of upbringing and of strict phased development. 'The first advantage is this,' he writes in his book on *Metapsychology*, 'that unlike the phase viewpoint a field theory has no inbuilt theory of causality to beg the question of choice based on judgement... we may still construct a model of mental development free of determinism. This liberates our own imagination from severe strictures and limiting preconceptions... Psycho-analytic work is in many ways devoted to helping the individual to free himself from the story-of-his-life that has been generated, and believed from the earliest days.' Free, in other words from the imposition of someone else's myth that includes the robbery of his own.

The 'sightseer' stands arrogant on the periphery, still committed to an interminable never-to-be-satisfied dark vengeance, while the other may yet sleep soundly, depart the prison of an old dream to dream expansively and awake, not in a rude world, but expectantly, and live minute by minute, grave or gay, his myth in the time allotted him.

NOTES

¹ The word *myth* is used by Meltzer in his paper 'Facts and Fictions' in the sense of an autobiography, to mean the 'story told of one's life... events assimilated unconsciously' that have not 'contributed to his development' and

closer to what I have proposed as *fated*. 'They constitute what could be called the "personal myth" of his life, more or less correct factually but empty of what might be called "autogenous meaning"' (Meltzer 1986, p.92), the latter phrase equivalent to the way I have used *myth* as an expression of one's destiny.

REFERENCES

Ang, L. (1989) *The Butcher's Wife*. London: Peter Owen, reprinted (2002).

Davies, W.H. (1972)) in (ed. Helen Gardner) *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, 337. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972, reprinted (1992).

Marvell, A. (1972) in (ed. Helen Gardner) *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, 337. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972, reprinted (1992).

Meltzer D. *et al*, (1986) *Studies in Extended Metapsychology: Clinical Applications of Bion's Ideas*. Strathtay, Clunie Press.

Wordsworth W. (1909) in (ed. W. Macneile Dixon and H.J.C. Grierson) *The English Parnassus*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, reprinted (1952)