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## ***GEOLOGICAL TIME AND HUMAN TRANSIENCE IN WILLIAM DYCE'S PEGWELL BAY, KENT: A RECOLLECTION OF OCTOBER 5<sup>TH</sup> 1858***

**Keywords:** *geological time; Victorian painting; Victorian science; landscape; William Dyce*

**Abstract:** *Starting from the analysis of William Dyce's painting Pegwell Bay: A Recollection of October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1858, foreground, middle ground and background, my intention is to show the mid-Victorian preoccupation with the background of geological and cosmological time against which the present limited day moved, and to relate the painting to the way in which this recurrent preoccupation appears in the essayistic debates and literature, particularly poetry, of the time.*

In Michael Ondaatje's successful novel, *The English Patient* (1992), the main character, László de Almásy, keeps his most personal, precious, tangible recollections within the pages of his favourite book, Herodotus' *Histories*. Intimate letters, notes, cards, annotated thoughts, in other words, the important history of his most intimate self, is scattered among the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Greco-Persian war descriptions and ancient Mediterranean stories. Thus, his personal life is comprised within the large sweep of human history (human history by extrapolation), and both the individual and the collective history are seen as a spiral continuum of passions, blasting errors, forgiveness, death and revival. Revival through the art of storytelling (Almásy's memories), the art of painting, through love and religious faith (Hana and Kip, the Indian Sikh).

Art, religious belief, love and, in addition to the book, eternity through the blood of one's children seem to be the few soothing remedies for one's melancholy awareness of being limited in time and space. But when the realisation comes that the private life of the self is intertwined not only with the history of other people, but with the huge pages of geological time and astronomical space in the natural history book of the universe, the comparison shatters and dwarfs the individual, making him feel isolated, vulnerable and terribly mortal. A speck of dust. The scientific truth about the limited human being and the universe at large seriously disturbs the feeble inner balance of the individual who feels hurt and unfocused in his religious creed.

The present paper focuses on such an awareness, looking into the way 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorians perceived the universe's durability of the earth and, implicitly, of the universe and the transience of the human self. The paper analyses two of William Dyce's paintings (*Pegwell Bay, Kent: A Recollection of October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1858* and *The Man of Sorrows*) and identifies and discusses the same issue in Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach* and Alfred Tennyson's *Parnassus* and *In Memoriam*. The paper will make reference to the popularised scientific ideas of the time in the field of geology, astronomy and the theory of evolution (looking at the theories of James Hutton, Sir Charles Lyell, Robert Chambers, Hugh Miller and Charles Darwin) attempting at establishing the way their ideas were transformed into visual and literary art by Dyce, Arnold and Tennyson.

The awareness of human evanescence in the vastness of the universe is probably as old as mankind, if we are to take into account the divers perceptions of the term "vast universe" (from referring to "beyond the village hill" to the far infinite space beyond the solar system), but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for the 1<sup>st</sup> time, starting with the 30's and going well into the 60's, the theories in the field of geology, evolution and astronomy seriously shattered the traditional belief regarding the age of the Earth, God's creation of the world and the human divine spark in all people through the heritage of Adam and Eve. Up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the English speaking world, it was considered to be common truth the fact that God

started the creation of the world, followed by the creation of the first man and woman on October 23<sup>rd</sup> 4004 BC. This was calculated by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Anglican Archbishop James Ussher and published in his 1650 work *The Annals of the Old Testament, Deduced from The First Origin of the World* (Cartwright 171). For Roman Catholics, “the Latin translation of the Bible known as the Vulgate... indicates that Creation took place in 5,199 B.C.”

([www.charlespetzold.com/MathematicsOfMiracles/MathematicsOfMiracles-08-03-22.doc](http://www.charlespetzold.com/MathematicsOfMiracles/MathematicsOfMiracles-08-03-22.doc))

With such powerfully well known religious calculations hitting against fossil evidence, Donati’s comet<sup>1</sup> visible in the sky in 1858, and Darwinian conclusions about the evolution of species, it was difficult indeed to cope with the acceptance of biblical time error or an Adamless inheritance which was unfortunately echoing the apes or with the terrible insignificance of the limited self. The artistically visual and literary representations of these tormenting qualms express the artists’ various attitudes. The structure of the essay will thus focus on such different attitudes that go with:

a./ The painter William Dyce, who shows the disturbing changes in the mentality of the time caused by scientific data and the theological battle of ideas in his painting *Pegwell Bay*. But, in my opinion, he seems to remain rather mysterious about his judgement on the matter. There is, I think, a turning of the tables I am going to look at closely in the paragraphs to come.

b./ I shall then refer to a slightly different view with Alfred Tennyson in *Parnassus* and *In Memoriam*, who casts doubt on the biblical truth regarding the age of the Earth and our Adamic ancestry by recording some of the scientific theories. The contemporary French novelist Jules Verne was quite enthusiastic about geological discoveries and astronomical theories; he invited the reader to embark upon a *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864) and one *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865).

c./ I shall briefly look at Matthew Arnold, who in *Dover Beach* marks the rapid loss of Christian faith.

d./ John Ruskin, in exchange, expresses his uncomfortable feeling about the advancement of geology in a letter written in 1851 to one of his friends (Henry Acland).

You speak of the Flimsiness of your own faith. Mine, which was never strong, is being beaten into mere gold leaf, and flutters in weak rags from the letter of its old forms; but the only letters it can hold by at all are the old Evangelical formulae. If only the geologists would let me alone I could do very well, but those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses... Men trying to do right and losing their very Humanity. (Ruskin 115)

He is quite stern about the noisiness of scientists, probably men like James Hutton and Charles Lyell stating that the minute study of rock layers explains natural not divine causes of land formation and that “all features of the Earth’s surface are produced by physical, chemical, and biological processes through long periods of geological time” (Encyclopaedia Britannica Online). That there is no demiurgic cosmogony or cosmology about it. Ruskin’s Evangelical background keeps him in high esteem of the Bible. In his opinion, those denying the biblical authority become inhuman.

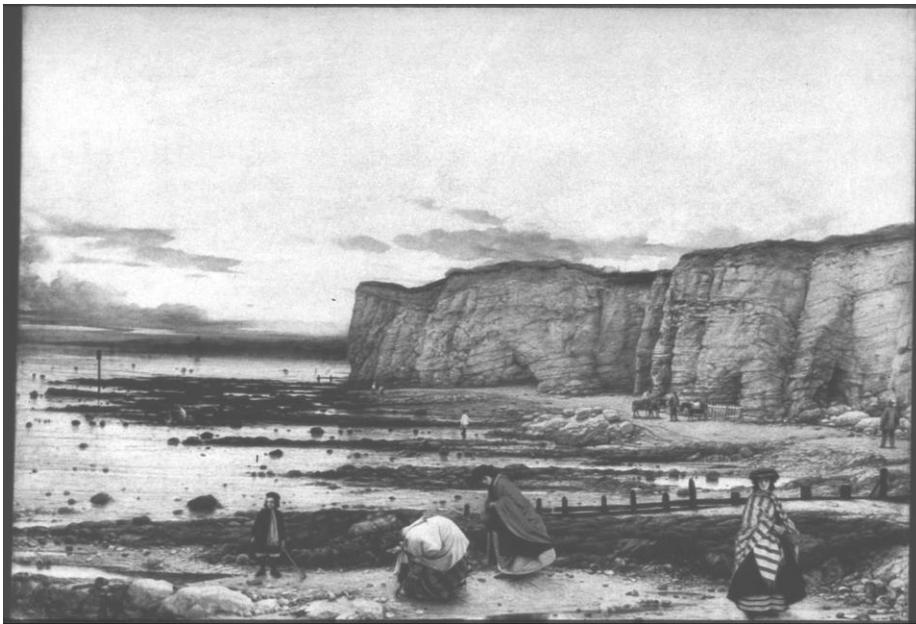
Before Ruskin, Jane Austen’s favourite poet, William Cowper (1731-1800) severely satirised science’s first enthusiasts who did not recognise nature’s Godly origins. In his poem *The Garden*, published in 1795, seven years after James Hutton’s *Theory of the Earth* came into print, Cowper is ironic about the inquisitive minds of those who try to prove God gave wrong information to Moses about his creative doings. For Cowper, to search into the nooks of what the Creator made means to doubt him, which for a mortal is quite a waste.

Some drill and bore  
The solid earth, and from the strata there

<sup>1</sup> Between 1854 and 1864 Giovanni Battista Donati discovered six comets, one of which, first seen on June 2, 1858, bears his name (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/169001/Giovanni-Battista-Donati>).

Extract a register, by which we learn  
That he who made it and reveal'd its date  
To Moses, was mistaken in its age.  
Some, more acute and more industrious still,  
Contrive creation; travel nature up  
To the sharp peak of her sublimest height,  
And tell us whence the stars; why some are fixt,  
And planetary some; what gave them first  
Rotation, from what fountain flow'd their light.  
Great contest follows, and much learned dust  
Involves the combatants, each claiming truth,  
And truth disclaiming both. And thus they spend  
The little wick of life's poor shallow lamp  
In playing tricks with nature, giving laws  
To distant worlds, and trifling in their own. (Cowper 25-26)

But no matter what scientific or religious choices they have, and how opinionated they may be, they all seem to have one aspect in common: the attempt to put to question the efficiency of some of the durable remedies which may save the individual from oblivion, insignificance and death.



William Dyce: *Pegwell Bay, Kent: A Recollection of October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1858*. Tate Gallery. Oil on canvas 635 x 889 mm

### **Art? Religious faith? Love? Descendants?**

Let us look at William Dyce's painting *Pegwell Bay, Kent: A Recollection of October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1858*. It starts in the foreground with a family scene: according to the Tate Gallery comments, several members of the painter's family are gathering shells. On a strip of sand the painter's child and wife, slightly stranded from each other, are looking towards the seashore, actually at us, beyond a sea of time. Between them, Mrs. Dyce's two sisters are picking shells and probably fossils, momentarily lost in the entertaining exploration of the small world. In the background, other small groups of people are multiplying the

ladies' gestures by gathering shells and/or seaweed and/or fossils, beachcombing. Dyce himself seems to be doubly present, outside the canvass painting it and inside it, sketching pad under his arm, walking in the middle ground, attracted by the majestic chalk cliffs. He is dwarfed by the distance, the same way as his family members are dwarfed by the immensity of the chalk rocks in the background. The cliffs dominate the whole painting towering over all individuals, all animals (by the rocks, there are three donkeys most likely carrying a small burden of fossils collected by their owners). In an immemorial past, a long time before Archbishop Ussher's biblical calculations, those rocks were a seabed made up of million bits of debris and dead sea creatures whose fossilised shapes indicate a prehistoric past. They now rise above the horizon as a stony monument of *memento mori* and they raise the question of the biblical truth on Genesis. Thus the painting echoes Darwin's *Origin of the Species* which was published in 1859, about one year before *Pegwell Bay* was exhibited at the Royal Academy. The scrupulously drawn photography-like seabed pages of the Earth's paleontological book the chalk cliffs stand for challenged "a literal understanding of the biblical account of creation, and in so doing destabilised one of the central beliefs of Western culture" (Barringer 79)

The rocks counteract the pleasant relaxing moments on the beach, at low tide, with the family enjoying the fresh air and the sunset. From this perspective, apparently, this is a painting about Dyce's awareness that his attempt to defy time through the blood of his offspring whose visual memory is arrested on the canvass or through the art of this very painting seems rather futile when facing the modern evidence of Earth's timescale (Pointon in Barringer 79).

Moreover, according to Darwin, species have evolved from common ancestors through the process of natural selection.

As many more individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive; and as, consequently, there is a frequently recurring struggle for existence, it follows that any being, if it vary however slightly in any manner profitable to itself, under the complex and sometimes varying conditions of life, will have a better chance of surviving, and thus be naturally selected. From the strong principle of inheritance, any selected variety will tend to propagate its new and modified form. (Darwin 12)

The fittest individual will survive "to propagate its new and modified form". In the light of Darwin's words, William Dyce's painting retains a feeling of melancholy about the far distant possible future when the human race may become extinct and layers upon layers of human bones will be encrusted in the future cliffs of the Earth (Hauser 39).

The reason for which the painting has such a precise and long title, *Pegwell Bay: A Recollection of October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1858*, is because it again puts into contrast the Dyces' *Recollection* of a family trip at the seaside resort near Ramsgate with the extraordinary cosmic event that the painter caught on the canvass: Donati's comet crossing the sky on October 5<sup>th</sup> 1858 when it was the most brightest and visible. Its presence in the painting seems to state the fact that astronomical phenomena were no longer considered to be influencing the lives of humans for the better or for the worse, as it was thought about comets. The family memory of the day out on the beach gets crushed by the vastness of cosmic space the comet was crossing and the awareness of astronomical time. (Barringer 81). When reading the painting as a "snapshot" for the family album, the title becomes ironic, because it also marks the private history of the cosmos in the provinces of the Solar System and the contrast between Dyce's time and deep time<sup>2</sup> is so evident (Gilmour 27).

The onlooker may say that "that is it!". William Dyce fully shares the modern scientific theories of the time and the painting is a visual representation of popularised ideas in the field of geology, evolution and astronomy. It would probably be safe to say that the painting is a marker in the changing mentality of the time: from the tradition of the Bible to science. But, there seems to be a turning of the tables: I believe Dyce's open dedication to either science or the Biblical truth remains a bit of a mystery, a

<sup>2</sup> deep time, a term developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by James Hutton and referring to geologic time [http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_)

suspended judgment. The choice of that particular beach may not have been made at random. The legend says that is the very place where, in 597 AD, St. Augustine landed. Sent from Rome by Pope Gregory the Great to convert the English king Aethelberht of Kent to Christianity, he became the 1<sup>st</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury and is looked upon as the founder of the English Church (Delaney 67-68). Given this new frame, the message of the painting becomes more complex. The religious presence is only culturally felt, not seen; it remains subdued in the background knowledge of the onlooker, in the almost ethereal colours of the sunset. Maybe the painter wished to unevenly counteract the advancement of science with the spiritual breath of the bringer of Christianity on English soil. Maybe he poetically meant to represent his family members and himself looking not necessarily for shells or fossils, but for the mysterious unseen traces of St Augustine, as if on a pilgrimage, so that they could fill themselves with biblical reassurance. Whatever the painter's very personal convictions, this Pre-Raphaelite piece of work is an outstanding statement of the period's clashes of ideas.

He was known as a High Church ritualist (Poe), a devout churchgoer with a keen interest in early church music and religious subjects for his paintings. He painted *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, *The Garden of Gethemane* and *The Man of Sorrows*, to offer just a few examples. I quote from The Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery biography of William Dyce“:

His paintings of the 1840s were influenced by the Nazarene School, a pseudo-monastic group of German artists based in Rome who attempted to capture the spirituality and seriousness of the High Renaissance. He later identified himself with the Pre-Raphaelites.  
(<http://www.bmagic.org.uk/people/William+Dyce>)

His association with Pre-Raphaelitism is characterised by his being a good friend of William Holman Hunt, by realistic detail and bright colours and by the attempt to catch the Godly mystery on the canvass the same as it is believed the fra-painters before Raphael had done.

*The Man of Sorrows* was exhibited together with *Pegwell Bay* at the Royal Society in 1860 and it seems to put in equal visual balance religious faith and geology, mystical time and historic one, biblical space and Scottish landscape. The theme is slightly different from *Pegwell Bay*. It shows Christ during his forty days of fasting. He sits in meditation in a corner of the painting, dressed in traditionally shown ancient garment which unnaturally juxtaposes the typically Scottish Highlands of granite hills covered in wild grass. His hair is auburn as Scottish people's hair quite often is. The painter, a Scotsman himself from Aberdeen, gave Christ a local colour. The photographically painted solid granite rocks show the heavy materiality of the world, almost towering over a thoughtful, passively suffering Christ. The rocks are meant to be in contrast with the deep spiritual thoughtfulness of Christ, because in the clash between matter and spirit, the latter is more important. Putting together biblical and historic times, geologically realist natural elements and Renaissance-like Italian representation of the Saviour, the painter may have intended to draw attention to the devotional perspective on the world and the realist factual perspective showing them in suspended judgement or he may very well intended to reinforce the idea there is divinity in the landscape, no matter in what corner of the globe, no matter how geological it is (Gibelhausen 187). He seems to be inviting the onlooker to make his own choice. Given the fact that this painting was exhibited at the same time with *Pegwell Bay* and most likely made about the same time with the other, I can only presume that the complex messages of the two compliment each other.



William Dyce: *The Man of Sorrows*. The National Gallery of Scotland

The above mentioned paintings advertise the beauty of nature in the English seascape and the Scottish Highlands. If we are to move in larger circles, referring to the opinions of the time Dyce had undoubtedly known, the two paintings are in the spirit of the popular guidebooks which promoted “the grandeur of nature and its geological interest” (187)<sup>3</sup>. They may also echo or come against the scriptural geology of Hugh Miller, who, in his posthumous book *Sketch-book of Popular Geology*, published in 1857, three years before *Pegwell Bay* and *The Man of Sorrows*, was trying to reconcile the modern theories in the field of geology with biblical cosmogony (187).

To the geologist every rock bears its inscription engraved in ancient hieroglyphic characters, that tell of the Creator’s journeyings of old, of the laws which he gave, the tabernacles which He reared and the marvels which He wrought (Miller 87).

Miller was not the initiator of such reconciliation, he went along French anatomist Baron Cuvier’s catastrophist theory which he had developed in his 1812 *Essay on the Theory of the Earth*, saving thus “the Mosaic account [of Creation] from the perils of literal interpretation” (Gilmour 119). Cuvier stated that Noah’s flood was the last of many previous catastrophic ones that had happened before the account of Genesis (119). Between Cuvier’s and Miller’s published opinions, John Ruskin, in 1843, in *Modern Painters* was stating the same opinion about every bit of the world being the manifestation of God’s doing: “There is not a fragment of its living rock, nor a tuft of its heathery herbage, that has not adorable manifestations of God’s working thereupon.” (Ruskin 98)

Ruskin and Miller were, in fact, fighting against a different geological theory which was advanced in the early 30s by Sir Charles Lyell in his book *Principles of Geology* (1830, volume 1), a theory called “uniformitarianism” Charles Darwin himself went along with. As a matter of curiosity, Darwin took Lyell’s book on his first voyage on *The Beagle* in 1831. Lyell continued the theory of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century geologist James Hutton, by explaining that the Earth’s seabed found on top of mountains does not have divine catastrophic interventions, but natural causes: stones, mud and dead sea creatures

<sup>3</sup> Guidebooks: *The Art of Deer-Stalking* by William Scrope or , *Leslie’s Tourist Guide to the Scottish Highlands* (Gibelhausen. 187)

build the seabed which in long spans of time are uplifted by volcanic activity forming new land which starts eroding “in an uniform operation through time” (Gilmour 120). From here, the uniformitarian theory.

Artists like William Dyce and literary figures like Ruskin, Arnold and Tennyson were caught between the biblical truth, on the one hand, catastrophism, uniformitarianism, and the theory of evolution, on the other hand. Tennyson’s poem *In Memoriam* was published in 1849, after 17 long years of writing and rewriting it. A lament for the sudden death of his best friend, Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833, the poem represents the poet’s inner tormenting journey from devastation to acceptance with Tennyson discussing some of the modern ideas and theories of the time: for instance, he puts into poetic form Lyell’s geological theory, uniformitarianism:

The moanings of the homeless sea,  
The sound of streams that swift or slow  
Draw down Aeonian hills, and sow  
The dust of continents to be...(Tennyson 82)

He plays with the contrast between the human understanding of time, which considers hills eternal (“Aeonian”) and geological time, which turns hills into sea mud and back into future continents by sedimentation. The same way as Dyce in *Pegwell Bay*, Tennyson shows the flimsiness of human life when compared to the immensity of geological time:

The sound of that forgetful shore  
Will change my sweetness more and more,  
Half-dead to know that I shall die. (82)

In lyric 54, he displays the shattering worries regarding the dwindling certainties of religious faith on the immortality of the soul in a period which was witnessing the advancement of theories on the evolution and extinction of species. The laws of nature fall implacably, with ...”Nature, red in tooth and claw” (126), with individuals fighting for survival, with nature’s laws falling on the human individual turning him into dust, making him

Be blown about the desert dust  
Or seal’d within the iron hills (126)

Tennyson must have been influenced by Robert Chambers’<sup>4</sup> book *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, published in 1844 anonymously, a controversial book at the time about biological evolution without God’s intervention. (Gilmour 124) The book paved the way to Darwin who published his much more scientific data 15 years later. In a later poem, *Parnassus* (1889), he recognises the towering influence of archaeology and geology in the mentality of the time. He calls them “terrible Muses” because, like religious faith, art cannot turn the poet immortal since he is also subject to natural decay on the big timescale of geology.

The same melancholy mood is met in Matthew Arnold’s poem *Dover Beach* (1867) at the loss of faith in God, at the rapid changes of ideas. He mentions Sophocles, the ancient playwright of tragedies who had also written about humans having defied other Gods and ending punished by them. The ebb of the tide is compared with the dwindling faith:

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full...

<sup>4</sup> 1802-1871, Scottish author, journalist editor who became interested in geology

But now I only hear  
Its melancholy long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating...(Arnold)

To show the immensity of old religious fervour, the poet associates the belief in God with the sea, mysterious in its depths, immense in its span, but also the cradle of Earth's life, the depositor of fossils, the container of future continents. We may never know whether Arnold intended to wash away geological and evolutionary echoes by associating the sea with the faith in God. What is certain is that the poet urges his beloved to trust each other, and implicitly have faith in each other in the middle of a world torn by uncertainties.

### Art? Religious faith? Love? Children?

Various remedies to sooth the individual. The solution to salvation that was most bashed in the epoch was the religious creed. The painter and the poets I have mentioned in my paper recorded the roaring clashes of ideas with the "terrible muses" of Astronomy and Geology baffling and shocking the common and uncommon Victorian who was struggling to find his bearings in a changing paradigm of time and space.

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