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at Midcentury

The periods which to our narrow apprehension, and compared with our ephemeral existence, appear of incalculable duration, are in all probability but trifles in the calendar of nature. It is Geology that, above all other sciences, makes us acquainted with this important, though humiliating fact. Every step we take in its pursuit forces us to make almost unlimited drafts upon antiquity. The leading idea which is present in all our researches, and which accompanies every fresh observation, the sound of which to the student of Nature seems continually echoed from every part of her works, is –Time! –Time! –Time!

George Poulett Scrope *Memoir on the Geology of Central France* (1827) ¹

In 1851, John Ruskin lamented to his friend Henry Acland: “If only the Geologists would let me alone. I could do very well, but for those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses.”² This plea, from a devoted amateur geologist, indicates the pressure exerted by the study of the earth on the veracity of the Book of Genesis. At issue was a troubling conception of time. This was deep time -- the vast chronology of earth science, against which the six days of Creation

seem quaint, and human history is reduced to a sneeze.³ In the following pages, I consider the ways in which three ardent Christians thought about time in mid-century Britain. This was on the eve of the faith-shaking publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859), which revealed an ongoing evolutionary process predicated on a vast chronology inspired by the research of the geologist Charles Lyell. Convictions about the unfolding of divine providence were in ferment. And, in this period, the notion of deep time had currency well beyond the scholars who had brought it before the public. What interests me is not the pain wrought by conflict between revealed religion and geology but the imaginative ways in which the relationship of past to present was contemplated. I do not claim that these case studies are representative of widely held convictions. On the contrary, I suspect that they are idiosyncratic -- an understatement in the case of Philip Henry Gosse. What they hold in common is a stake in fertile ground for speculation and wonder. In its engagement of nineteenth-century British science as a context for visual imagery and poetic rhetoric -- and in its range from geology to marine biology -- this study parallels recent work by historians of science Ralph O'Connor and Martin J.S. Rudwick and, in its approach from the humanities, that of Rebecca Bedell and Jonathan Smith.⁴

In 1701, 4004 B.C. was printed, as the date of Creation, in the margin of King James Bible. The fixity of this date -- established in the 1650s by Archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656) by adding the life spans of the patriarchs in the Mosaic genealogy -- had been cast into doubt long before Ruskin complained of the "dreadful hammers." By the late eighteenth century, there was a consensus among naturalists that the earth was vastly older than Archbishop Ussher had posited. And this new perspective brought urgency to the subject of time. In his study of the extinct volcanoes of France, the

geologist and Member of Parliament, George Poulett Scrope (1797-1876) professed humble amazement before the immensity of geological history. In the 1830s -- impressed by Scrope's research -- Charles Lyell (1797-1875) proposed a uniformitarian model of geological history. The earth, Lyell argued, has been shaped by slow, gradual change continuing in the present -- not created in a catastrophic moment of divine volition.⁵

While this takes us far from Archbishop Ussher, it would be mistaken, when considering the first half of the nineteenth century, to see a clear opposition between Christian faith and natural science. The two were traditionally inseparable. Since the late seventeenth-century, British science (actually, natural philosophy, as the term scientist was not used until the 1830s) had been guided by natural theology -- the notion that nature is a work of divine design and that investigation of the natural world supplements revelation as a means of worship.⁶ Embodied in Genesis, this concept assumed prominence during the scientific revolution. Bacon's conviction that science and religion offered mutual support was carried forth by the chemist and physicist Robert Boyle (1627-91), whose will of 1691 bequeathed funds for sermons in defense of Christianity. Also in 1691, John Ray (1627-1705) asserted that our very inability to determine the number of God's creations provides "us a demonstrative Proof of the unlimited Extent of the Creator's Skill, and the Foecundity (sic) of his Wisdom and Power."⁷ Ray linked wonder at the natural world to liturgical duty: "Let us give Thanks to Almighty God for the Perfection and Integrity of our Bodies. It would not be amiss to put it into the Eucharistical Part of our daily Devotions: We praise Thee, O God, for the due Number, Shape, and Use of our Limbs and Senses; and in general, of all the Parts of our Bodies; we bless thee for the sound and healthful Constitution of them...."⁸ Another early

spokesman for natural theology was Thomas Burnet, (c. 1635-1715), author of *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (first published in Latin, 1681-89). Referring to God as “the Author of Nature,” Burnet insists, “we must observe and consider, that *The Course of Nature is truly the Will* of God; and as I may so say, his first Will . . .”⁹

For nineteenth century readers, the notion that Nature’s design presupposes a praiseworthy Designer was popularized by *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802) by William Paley, the Archdeacon of Carlisle (1743-1805). The reader is exhorted to believe in the benevolent, divine authorship of natural phenomena. For one so blessed, according to Paley, “The world from thenceforth becomes a temple, and life itself one continued act of adoration.”¹⁰ Neither a man of science nor a subtle theologian, Paley offered a model of earthly contentment admired by John Constable, whose friend, Archdeacon John Fisher, found affinity between the cleric’s sermons and the painter’s sketches.¹¹ While, in the 1830s, concord between scripture and the visible evidence of divine creativity began to be challenged, natural theology remained vital in Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century. Even after Darwin’s model of heartless competition for survival delivered a critical blow to natural theology’s optimistic vision of nature shaped by benevolent providence, popular science writing remained reverent.¹²

Paley’s *Natural Theology* opens with the image of a man finding a watch -- a device whose complexity presupposes a maker. While the image squares with the mechanistic predictability of Paley’s conception of nature, the experience of time is irrelevant to the deductive argument. This is a world unchanged since creation. Neither the resemblance of Paley’s schematic model of providence to the Deist notion of God as

divine clockmaker, nor his expansion of worship into daily experience of the natural world, endeared his popular work to the theologically rigorous. Scorned by Victorian High-Church Anglicans, Paley's cheerful legacy also found resistance among those Low-Church Evangelicals drawn to the harsh insistence on the burden of sin professed, in the previous century, by Joseph Butler, bishop of Durham (1692-1752).¹³ At the same time, *Natural Theology* enjoyed academic respectability during the first half of the nineteenth century, when it was required reading for Cambridge undergraduates.¹⁴ The scholarly defense of natural theology was stimulated by £8,000 bequeathed in 1829 by the Rev. Francis Henry Egerton, 8th Earl of Bridgewater (1756-1829), for the publication of evidence of "The Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God, as manifested in the Creation." In the 1830s, this pious Georgian legacy was divided by the President of the Royal Society among eight authors, including Ruskin's mentor at Oxford, William Buckland.¹⁵

In the year that Ruskin entered university (1836), Buckland's *Geology and Mineralogy Considered with Reference to Natural Theology* was honored as a Bridgewater Treatise. Twenty years later -- despite the geologists' hammer blows -- Ruskin's faith in earthly evidence of divine volition remained as robust as his devotion to geology. This conviction informs volume IV (1856) of *Modern Painters*. Subtitled "Of Mountain Beauty," this was considered by the author to be the work's most important section. There, he conveys his particular fascination with gneiss, the rock on which he appropriately stands in the famous portrait by Millais (1853-4; Fig. 1).¹⁶ Ruskin's enthusiasm for this "slaty crystalline" is reflected in a characteristically patient rendering of an outcropping (Fig. 2).¹⁷ With a close point of view befitting a preference for surface texture over definition of volume, Ruskin is careful to maintain a sense of hardness and

undulation, a source of marvel for the writer. Evoking the impressiveness of mountains comprised of this variety of rock:

We yield ourselves to the impression of their eternal,
unconquerable stubbornness of strength; their mass seems
the least yielding ... of all earthly substance. And, behold,
... it is touched and troubled, likes waves by a summer
breeze ... They, which at first seem strengthened beyond
the dread of any violence or change, are yet also ordained
to bear upon them the symbol of a perpetual Fear: the
tremor which fades from the soft lake and gliding river is
sealed, to all eternity, upon the rock; and while things that
pass visibly from birth to death may sometimes forget their
feebleness, the mountains are made to possess a perpetual
memory of their infancy¹⁸

This hymn to the shaping hand of God is informed by an aesthetic sensibility attuned to the effects of time's passage. Thus, Ruskin is attentive to evidence of erosion, superbly manifest in the peaked shape of the Alps. "It would have been as easy for the Creator to have made mountains of steel as of granite ...", he observed. "but this was clearly no part of the Divine counsels; mountains were to be destructible and frail; to melt under the soft lambency of the streamlet; to shiver before the subtle wedge of the frost ... and yet, under all these conditions of destruction, to be maintained in magnificent eminence before the eyes of men." The divine purpose behind this geological process is, "that a subject of

perpetual interest be opened to the human mind in observing the changes of form brought about by time on these monuments of creation.”¹⁹

From Ruskin’s pen, the reference to mountains as “monuments of creation” -- a commonplace of natural theology -- assumes uncommon resonance with the paradigm informing the author’s conception of geological history: the architectural monument. Comparing the time-worn shapes of mountains to a Gothic ruin, he sets forth the deliberate purpose of geological erosion, asserting:

that in the human architecture the builder did not calculate upon ruin ... but that in the hand of the great Architect of the mountains, time and decay are as much the instruments of His purpose as the forces by which He first led forth the troops of hills in leaping flocks: --the lightning and the torrent, and the wasting and weariness of innumerable ages, all bear their part in the working out of one consistent plan; and the Builder of the temple forever stands beside His work, appointing the stone that is to fall ... and guiding all the seeming wildness of chance and change, into ordained splendours and foreseen harmonies²⁰.

Inseparable from Ruskin’s representation of God as “great Architect of the mountains” and “Builder of the temple” is an exalted conception of the human architect manifest in his uncompromising judgment of a building’s aesthetic and moral aspects. Natural theology’s veneration of the Creator’s work is thus diverted into sacred investiture of the architect and craftsman. This elevation of the architect springs from a humanistic,

historical perspective apparent in Ruskin's insistence that it is the human past that elevates landscape.

This he had already articulated in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849). Recollecting a spring sunset amid the pine above Campagnole in the Jura, Ruskin inventories the delightful prospect with a specificity analogous to that with which, in his drawings, he rendered both unhewn rock and architectural detail:

There was the wood anemone, star after star, closing every now and then into nebulae; and there was the oxalis, troop by troop, like virginal processions of the Mois de Marie, the dark vertical clefts in the limestone choked up with them as with heavy snow, and touched with ivy on the edges – ivy as light and lovely as the vine; and, ever and anon, a blue gush of violets, and cowslip bells in sunny places; and in the more open ground, the vetch and comfrey, and mezereon, and the small sapphire buds of the *Polygala Alpina*, and the wild strawberry, just a blossom or two, all showered amidst the golden softness of deep, warm, amber-coloured moss.

Such wonder before even the most modest wildflower – reminiscent of the lover's attention with which John Clare made Romantic couplets of rural buds and blossoms – flushes with life the botanical pedantry of the Victorian natural history enthusiast. Before this Edenic landscape, the restless critic began to analyze the origin of his delight:

It would be difficult to conceive a scene less dependent upon any other interest than that of its own secluded and serious beauty; but the writer well remembers the sudden blankness and chill which were cast upon it when he endeavored, in order more strictly to arrive at the sources of its impressiveness, to imagine it, for a moment, a scene in some aboriginal forest of the New Continent. The flowers in an instant lost their light, the river its music; the hills became oppressively desolate; a heaviness in the boughs of the darkened forest showed how much of their former power had been dependent upon a life which was not theirs, how much of the glory of the imperishable, or continually renewed, creation is reflected from things more precious in their memories than it, in its renewing. Those ever springing flowers, and ever flowing streams had been dyed by the deep colours of human endurance, valour, and virtue; and the crests of the sable hills that rose against the evening sky received a deeper worship, because their far shadows fell eastward over the iron wall of Joux, and the four-square keep of Granson [both medieval sites in Switzerland].²¹

This passage characteristically reflects Ruskin's dedication to *theoria* – the integration of moral urgency within aesthetic experience – about which

Peter Fuller has eloquently written.²² What makes it extraordinary is the clarity with which it conveys Ruskin's elevation of the human past as that which brings meaningful beauty to nature. This was not solely a question of nostalgia. Ruskin's aesthetic demanded visual evidence of time's passage – a lesson illuminated by “The Lamp of Memory:”

For, indeed, the greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, nor in its gold. Its glory is in its Age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity ... it is in that golden stain of time, that we are to look for the real light, and colour, and preciousness of architecture²³

This “golden stain of time” appeals, on the one hand, to the uncompromising connoisseurship of that which has mellowed with age – a taste fostered at home, I suspect, for this son of a sherry merchant whose eye could savor Turner's amber mist. On the other hand, Ruskin's empathic capacity to humanize a building -- to hear its voice or to sense it sternly watching, approving or condemning the visitor -- is of a piece with his thought experiment regarding the pines and flowers in the Jura that would become desolate if bereft of human history. Thus, until a building “has been entrusted with the fame, and hallowed by the deeds of men, till its walls have been witnesses of suffering, and its pillars rise out of the

shadows of death, that its existence, more lasting as it is than that of the natural objects of the world around it, can be gifted with even so much as these possess, of language and of life.”²⁴

Such insistence that evidence of the passage of time constitutes an indispensable attribute of beauty underlies Ruskin’s resolute stand against architectural restoration -- this, in stark contrast to Viollet-le-Duc, who unblushingly sought to improve the medieval French buildings in his care.²⁵ Ruskin carried his embrace of the time-worn into his illustrations for his architectural writing, loyally rendering the fracture as part of the excerpted stone work. And he brought this taste to his pedagogy, requiring students to copy battered coats of arms from Westminster Abbey tombs. He included, for example, this chipped escutcheon of Eleanor of Castile (1871; Fig. 3), in the corpus of study models offered to beginners in his Oxford drawing program.

For Ruskin, the “golden stain of time” sanctifies a view of the past in which human history is the focus of veneration and the source of legitimacy. This outlook aligns with a strain of conservatism in Ruskin’s thought. Notwithstanding his inspirational contribution to the Socialism of William Morris, Ruskin professed, at the opening of his autobiography: “I am, and my father was before me, a violent Tory of the old school...”²⁶ Ruskin’s violence was directed not at political innovation, but at the nineteenth century, with its railroads, its loss of morally resonant architecture, and its defilement of nature. In this regard, Ruskin’s cult of “the golden stain of time” is redolent with disdain for the present.

When, in 1858, Ruskin underwent an “unconversion” in which he lost faith in the Anglican worship in which he was raised, his belief in divine agency endured. Just as

Ruskin's language was indelibly colored by scripture, in the early 1870s he interpreted dark clouds observed above his home in the Lake District as signaling divine wrath with the century whose depravity had recently been manifest in the Franco-Prussian War. "The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century," a lecture of 1884, delivered in the twilight of Ruskin's sanity, pessimistically revises his humanistic outlook.²⁷ Ruskin's earlier, buoyant celebration of the divine craftsmanship of gneiss and his heroic invocations of human history here give way to a brooding eschatological model of time, in which human fault brings divine punishment, whether in the days of Moses or in the age of Victoria.

Ruskin's humanistic notion of the past and his respect before "the golden stain of time" contrast with the outlook of Philip Henry Gosse (1810-88), renowned Victorian authority on marine life. In his case, a radical strain of natural theology was coupled with an eccentric conception of time. Jonathan Smith distinguishes between the gentle natural theology of Paley and Gosse's harsh, evangelical version in which sin and redemption loomed large.²⁸ Gosse attributed natural phenomena to divine providence with a fanaticism also evident in his myopic renderings of minute organisms in his enormously popular seaside collecting manuals.²⁹ When not wading along the Devonshire coast, Gosse was preaching. Restless pursuit of a sufficiently fundamentalist congregation led him, in 1847, to abandon Methodism for the Brethren, who shared Gosse's faith in the absolute veracity of scripture. After becoming disillusioned with the Brethren, he served as minister to an informal group in St. Marychurch, which he called, literally, "The Church of Christ in this Parish." Gosse's fierce piety is portrayed by his son, the eminent man of letters Sir Edmund William Gosse, in *Father and Son: Biographical Recollections* (1907). Raised under the Philip's uncompromising eye, Edmund (1849-

1928) was subjected, when he went to London to work to clerk in the British Museum library, to unending paternal questioning about the state of his soul.³⁰ Notwithstanding the difficulty of this upbringing, Edmund was awed by his father's conviction. "My father preached," recalled Edmund, "standing at a desk or celebrated the communion in front of a deal table, with a white napkin spread over it. Sometimes the audience was so small ... that he was discouraged ... but he never flagged in energy and zeal." Though his fundamentalism was alien to the High-Church Anglicans, Gosse shared with them a particular devotion to the sacrament of baptism, which, according to Edmund, was performed in the early days of the congregation: "with picturesque simplicity, in the sea on the Oddicombe beach..."³¹ This seaside rite points to the bond between Philip Gosse's faith and his devotion to marine study.

Gosse's illustrations of marine life have an evenness of descriptive detail that speaks at once to their scientific function and to the artist's obsessive awe before God's handiwork. Among the plates to *The Aquarium: an Unveiling of the Wonders of the Deep Sea* (1856), is an illustration of the ancient wrasse, which serves as frontispiece (Fig. 4). Gosse praised the coloration of the species with quaint emphasis on the cheerful purposefulness of nature: "They have put on their summer attire; -- I do not know whether, like our humble country belles, they choose Whitsunday as the day of their first appearance in holiday hues, but it was just about that time that the magnificent Ancient Wrasse (*Labrus maculatus*) first fell under my notice"³² Such specimens were examined with an eye for detail also evident in the text. Here is a description of the feeding periwinkle:

When he eats, he separates two little fleshy lips, and the glistening glass-like tongue is seen, or rather the rounded extremity of a bend of it, rapidly running round like an endless band in some piece of machinery, only that the toothpoints as they run by, remind one rather of a watchwheel. For an instant this appears, then the lips close again, and presently re-open and the tongue again performs its rasping. ... [T]he action and the instrument, the perfect way in which it works, and the effectiveness with which the vegetation is cleared away before it, all strike thee mind as both wonderful and beautiful.³³

It is as if a living equivalent to Paley's watch has been observed through a jeweler's loupe.

As Alison Smith has pointed out, Gosse's illustrations share the Pre-Raphaelite conception of mimesis as the amalgamation of scrupulously rendered parts, an affinity indicated by Edmund Gosse in recounting his father's delight when viewing William Holman Hunt's painting *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple* (begun at the Dead Sea in 1854 and completed in England in 1860) when it was exhibited on tour.³⁴ Edmund's recollection that "This large, bright, comprehensive picture made a very deep impression upon me, not exactly as a work of art, but as a brilliant natural specimen," points to the identification of natural history with sacred testimony that presided over the sessions of specimen gathering, fondly recalled by Edmund as the sole times in which his father relaxed his overbearing demeanor.³⁵

Just as the underwater world offered Philip Henry Gosse respite from the fallen present, so, too, do his illustrations convey a suspension of earthly duration within the continuum of sacred time. In accord with this sense of timelessness, the illustrations to *The Aquarium: an Unveiling of the Wonders of the Deep Sea* were characterized by the polymath historian, sanitary reformer and seaside collector Rev. Charles Kingsley (1819-75) as “still as drawing-room ornaments, flower-gardens which never wither, fairy lakes of perpetual calm which no storm blackens”³⁶

Such mesmerizing stillness matched the sacred notion of time informing the illustrations. Appropriately, Edmund made an analogy to the Garden of Eden when elegizing the once abundant life that teemed along the southwest coast before it was stripped in the vogue for specimen collecting popularized by his father’s manuals:

The antiquity of these rock-pools, and the infinite
succession of the soft and radiant forms, sea-anemones,
seaweeds, shells, fishes, which had inhabited them,
undisturbed since the creation of the world, used to occupy
my Father’s fancy. We burst in, he used to say, where no
one had ever thought of intruding before; and if the Garden
of Eden had been situate in Devonshire, Adam and Eve,
steeping lightly down to bathe in the rainbow-colored
spray, would have seen the identical sights that we now
saw, -- the great prawns gliding like transparent launches,
anthea waving in the twilight its thick white waxen
tentacles, and the fronds of the dulse faintly streaming on

the water, like huge red banners in some reverted
atmosphere.³⁷

This passage from Edmund mimics his father's association of rock pools with the Garden of Eden.³⁸

In 1857 – shortly before the period of collecting fondly recalled by Edmund – his father's absorption in his work was disturbed by the death of his wife and by resolve to defend the scriptural account of Creation in the face of fossil evidence. *Omphalos: An Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot*, addressed the painful situation about which Ruskin lamented: the plight of those who, in Gosse's words "cannot shut their eyes to the startling fact, that the records which *seem* legibly written on His created works do flatly contradict the statements which *seem* to be plainly expressed in His word."³⁹ To the embarrassment of Gosse's admirer Kingsley, *Omphalos* proposed that fossils were created by God as fossils, and that to believe that these stones, or any living organism, had anterior life was as misguided as it would be to maintain that Adam's navel (i.e., his *omphalos*) presupposed that he had undergone development as an embryo. "It is certain," according to Gosse, "that, when the Omnipotent God proposed to create a given organism, the course of that organism was present to his idea, as an ever revolving circle, without beginning and without end. He created it at some point in the circle, and gave it thus an arbitrary beginning; but one which involved all previous rotations of the circle, though only as ideal, or ... prochronic."⁴⁰

The "prochronic" refers to the imagined, intangible existence of an organism prior to the moment of its creation. On the basis of this concept Gosse argued that evidence of previous existence is independent of the life cycle. That Gosse is considering zoological

data in sacred, rather than earthly, time strikes home as the author considers those features suggestive of aging in an adult crab lifted from a tide pool:

To all appearance this Crab is several years old ... When this form was first assumed, the diameter of the carapace was not more than an eighth of an inch; it is now two inches; a great many periodical sloughings of the crust must have occurred to accomplish this sixteen-fold increase All these evidences of age, clear and unanswerable as they are, are yet fallacious, because the Crab has been created but this morning.⁴¹

Thus, the *fiat lux* of Genesis is infinitely repeated within the life cycle of living organisms. CREATION,” according to Gosse “IS A VIOLENT IRRUPTION INTO THE CIRCLE OF NATURE.”⁴² Choosing the example of the cow, the author diagrams the circular configuration of the life cycle (Fig. 5). With his notion of the “prochronic” Gosse resolves, *deus ex machina*, the dilemma of which came first -- the chicken or the egg (or, in his example, the cow or the calf). It comes as no surprise that Gosse’s argument was characterized in the *Westminster Review* (January 1858) as “too monstrous for belief.”⁴³

Whereas Gosse’s concept of the prochronic defied the very concept of duration, contemplation of the immensity of time – whether geological, astronomical, or historical – shaped an enduring work of art by another pious Christian. In *Pegwell Bay, Kent: A Recollection of October 5, 1858* (1858-60) -- painted one year after the publication of *Omphalos* -- William Dyce (1806-64) represented his wife, son, and sisters-in-law

searching for fossils or shells before the chalk cliffs of Kent (Fig. 6). A distant figure at the right edge, with back to the viewer and carrying what seems to be a canvas, is traditionally identified as the Scottish painter, himself. His head is elevated toward a pale streak in the sky. On the date specified in the title, October 5, 1858, Britons were offered their most spectacular view of Donati's comet -- considered the brightest ever seen above Europe. Juxtaposed with the astronomical interval marked by the comet's passage (not to be seen again for more than two millennia) and set before the eroded chalk cliffs of Pegwell Bay -- slowly accumulated and known for rich fossil deposits -- this October visit to the shore seems all the more fleeting. No less striking is the way that, under Dyce's meticulous brush, the specifics of momentary illumination and pose are frozen, as if in a bell jar or a photograph. Like other works sold by the artist to his father-in-law, James Brand, *Pegwell Bay* features a location with tourist appeal. In this case, Brand acquired a souvenir of his daughters and grandson at a well-known, picturesque site on the best day for viewing the comet. There is a solemnity here -- unexpected in a family memento of shore leisure, and irresistible to eyes accustomed to Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Grande-Jatte, 1884*: "The landscape is bleak, the figures collect their shells with a seriousness that verges on gloom, and the mood is distinctly melancholy."⁴⁴ This dour aspect suggests a thematic scope transcending a recollected outing on the Kent coast.

Marcia Pointon argued such in the late 1970s. Drawing attention to the contrast between, on the one hand, the vast time scales represented by comet and cliffs and, on the other, the ephemeral beachcombing of the artist's family, Pointon aptly identified *Pegwell Bay* as a meditation on time.⁴⁵ Mindful that, for some Victorians, the

chronological evidence of astronomy and geology was acknowledged with awe (e.g., by the geologist Lyell) or with pain (as in Tennyson's "In Memoriam"), Pointon drew an analogy to Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (1867), with its evocation of a world of eroded faith offering "neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help from pain; / And we are here as on a darkling plain..." Characterizing the human activity along the shore as "desultory and meaningless," Pointon read *Pegwell Bay* as resonant with emptiness and loss.

Subsequent commentators have viewed the painting through a similarly dark lens. Peter Fuller interprets *Pegwell Bay* as a requiem for natural theology and views the comet as a portent of the coming shock to the union of faith and science soon to be dealt by *The Origin of Species*.⁴⁶ Roberta J.M. Olson and Jay M. Pasachoff attribute a "mood of impending doom" to the painting.⁴⁷ These pessimistic readings, and that of Pointon, run against the grain of the painter's robust faith.

This was distinctly unlike the literal-minded fundamentalism of Gosse.⁴⁸ A High-Church Anglican, the pious Scot was sympathetic to Catholicism and friends with Cardinal Wiseman and the German Nazarene Friedrich Overbeck. Dyce was a driven polymath, devoting much time to ecclesiastical pursuits, including publication of *The Order of the Daily Service* (1843). His multi-lingual library was rich in theology, the arts, and music.⁴⁹

Revitalized in the 1830s by the Oxford Movement, the High Church subordinated pulpit to altar, zealously renouncing their century's appetite for the vulgarized Word. Selfless devotion to tradition, orthodox celebration of the sacraments, and submission to ecclesiastical hierarchy were the only means by which fallen man could seek grace. Faith

was to be attained along this cloistered path – rather than in pursuit of evidences of the Creator’s handiwork in nature. Disdain for natural theology was characteristically accompanied by a dislike of science – the latter a prejudice not shared by Dyce. In 1832, he authored a prizewinning study of electromagnetism, and his correspondence indicates an informed interest in geology. Armed with a faith unbendingly focused beyond earthly time and space, Dyce was not susceptible to being spiritually shaken by geological evidence, as were Victorians steeped in natural theology, such as Gosse and Ruskin. While it is unlikely that the artist attributed Christian significance to his family’s beachcombing – given High-Church disdain for natural theology -- there is no reason to doubt that he shared the contemporary regard for amateur natural history.⁵⁰ And the dignified air of the family group is appropriate to an edifying activity that corresponds to the painting’s theme of meditation on time.

This topic was of particular moment to a revivalist painter whose refusal to slavishly imitate precedent was as strong as his veneration of the past. As Allen Staley has pointed out, meticulously naturalistic landscapes, such as *Pegwell Bay*, represented for this painter of historical and religious subjects a sideline of a career largely devoted to fresco.⁵¹ One example, *The Baptism of King Ethelbert* (1846; Fig. 7), in the Lord’s Chamber in Westminster Palace, had relevance to the site of *Pegwell Bay*.⁵² As Malcolm Warner has indicated, it was through Pegwell Bay that Christianity was brought to England by Saint Augustine of Canterbury (died A.D. 604) -- not to be confused with the earlier Saint Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 345-430), author of the *Confessions*.⁵³ In Dyce’s fresco it is Saint Augustine of Canterbury who baptizes King Ethelbert. Recounted by the Venerable Bede and, more recently, in Dean Stanley’s popular *Historical Memorials*

of Canterbury (1855), the story of the saint's landing in Richborough, Kent in A.D. 597, and the subsequent royal baptism, were common Victorian knowledge. As in a previous High-Church account, Stanley dwelt on the striking topographical change undergone by the area around Pegwell Bay since Augustine's landing.⁵⁴

In view of Pegwell Bay's significance in the history of Christian Britain -- and before the prospect of deep time represented by comet, cliffs and beach -- Dyce's posture, I propose, is one of humility. Accordingly, I identify the artist's perplexity before the immensity of deep time not with doubt, but with a venerable tradition leading back to the first Saint Augustine. In the *Confessions*, the enigmatic nature of time is contemplated with formidable insistence on human inadequacy. Augustine wonders, for example, "When time is measured, where does it come from, by what route does it pass, and where does it go?" At this juncture, he confesses:

My mind is on fire to solve this very intricate enigma. Do not shut the door, Lord my God. Good Father, through Christ I beg you, do not shut the door on my longing to understand these things which are both familiar and obscure. Do not prevent me, Lord, from penetrating them and seeing them illuminated by the light of your mercy. Whom shall I ask about them? And to whom but you shall I more profitably confess my incompetence?⁵⁵

Augustine's humility before these imponderables has an understated echo in the inconspicuous figure observing the sky at Pegwell Bay. If, indeed, this is a self-portrait, then Dyce has assumed, before these august memorials -- astronomical, geological, and

religious -- a posture of self-effacement in keeping with High-Church emphasis on humility. "Keep ever present with thee the knowledge of thine own infirmity," exhorted one of the Oxford Movement's founders, Edward Bouverie Pusey (1800-82), insisting that self-abnegation would transcend human frailty: "Seek humility, and thou wilt find it; and when thou hast found it, thou wilt love it, and by God's grace, wilt not part with it: with it, thou canst not perish."⁵⁶

There is an additional aspect of the Augustinian legacy relevant to Dyce's art. Humbled by the imponderable relationship between historical and sacred time, Augustine remained anchored to the mystery of divine omniscience: "In the sublimity of an eternity which is always in the present, you are before all things past and transcend all things future, because they are still to come, and when they have come they are past."⁵⁷ Such faith that sacred time stands outside of, yet encompasses, earthly history resonates with the British geographic specificity of Dyce's *The Man of Sorrows* (exhibited, with *Pegwell Bay*, at the Royal Academy in 1860), placed among the stones of a geologically particularized Scottish landscape (Fig. 8).⁵⁸ The incongruity of this work springs from the artist's commitment to, on the one hand, the Victorian mode of exacting, empirical description exemplified by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and, on the other, a belief in the eternity of sacred time. In this regard, Dyce shares common ground with three pious artists who, having undergone, in the Holy Land, an epiphany of the living continuity of biblical dress and ethnicity, brought uncompromising nineteenth-century standards of exactitude to their religious painting: William Holman Hunt, Horace Vernet, and James Tissot.

Dyce's juxtaposition of a fleeting family outing with the deep time of sky and earth, and with the antiquity of British Christianity, is consonant with both Augustinian pessimism regarding human capacity, and with the theme of *vanitas*. The painter's achievement was to wed these sober meditations to nostalgia for an autumn day at the shore, and to do so with economy and with an understated reportage of casual circumstance appropriate to a family keepsake. Indicating that, for a Victorian believer imbued with humility, the prospect of deep time was not necessarily in conflict with faith, *Pegwell Bay* quietly embodies a positive dimension of the meeting of science and Christianity at mid-century.⁵⁹ As Jennifer Melville has put it, for Dyce "the wonder of nature" was considered "not as a denial of religious truth but as physical proof of it."⁶⁰

In counterpoint to the earnestly humble *Pegwell Bay* is a seaside image close in date. In a watercolor of around 1858-59, Dante Gabriel Rossetti devised a flatteringly assertive and worldly role for the artist who meditates on time. In *Writing in the Sand*, a man walks with his lover along a windy beach (Fig. 9).⁶¹ With a cane, he has drawn in the sand a schematically idealized profile of his companion. The vulnerability of this image of the beloved in the face of wind and wave suggests the transience of human love and life. At the same time, the aesthetic and sentimental aspects of the image trump this weighty theme. As artist and as lover, the man is absorbed in the idealized features of his muse; and his warm devotion fleetingly contrasts with the cold shingle.

Notwithstanding the dissimilarity between the religious convictions of Ruskin, Gosse, and Dyce, each approached the topic of time with reverence. This is not to equate the contributions of the great writer, the seaside collector and the Scottish painter. Ruskin's prose

remains vital and evocative. *Omphalos*, whose “rather monstrous elegance” would attract Borges in 1941,⁶² is but a dusty relic. Dyce’s shore outing is a masterwork of Victorian art; and his humility in the face of time’s passage has endured in the work of one prominent British artist.

On Saturday, 20 March 1999, Andy Goldsworthy carved the hard, wet beach at Schoorl, Holland into a meandering channel, and waited for the tide to erase his work. Imitating, in miniature, the slowly formed contours of an oxbow river, the artist was glad to draw his knife through a glacial deposit. “That white sand has been left by the force of snow and ice pleases me enormously,” he noted; and the pleasure he takes in such work requires inventive pursuit of the experience of time. “I finished very late in the afternoon,” recalled Goldsworthy,

and the tide began to turn, eventually touching the work around 5:30pm. The piece was made on a slight rise, so when the tide reached it, water immediately flowed around and in front of it. In the end, it all happened extremely quickly. As the work was on a slope, water ran rapidly down the channel, which caved in as the water flowed through. It looked very beautiful, but I wished it had been a little slower, so that I could have enjoyed it more.⁶³

Goldsworthy searches for unexpected beauty resulting from interventions – often ephemeral – in the natural landscape. He preserves his observations through photography, not by means of painstaking rendering.

Though he works in a context of secular modernity – with venues of exhibition, publication, and patronage unknown to his Victorian forebears -- Goldsworthy, like Ruskin, Gosse, and Dyce, believes that spending time outdoors is a serious business.

¹ Quoted in Martin J.S. Rudwick, *Earth's Deep History: How It Was Discovered and Why It Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 164. I am grateful to Bernard Lightman for his thoughtful reading of a draft of this article.

² Appropriately, this quotation opens J.M.I. Klaver, *Geology and Religious Sentiment: The Effect of Geological Discoveries on English Society and Literature between 1829 and 1859* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

³ For deep time, see Rudwick, *Earth's Deep History*; idem., *Scenes from Deep Time: Early Pictorial Representations of the Prehistoric World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987). For Victorian concepts of time, see also Nancy Rose Marshall, *City of Gold and Mud: Painting Victorian London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012, 13-17; and Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Triumph of Time: A Study of the Victorian Concepts of Time, History, Progress, and Decadence* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966).

⁴ See Ralph O'Connor, *The Earth on Show: Fossils and the Poetics of Popular Science, 1802-1856* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) (Bernard Lightman brought this book to my attention); Rudwick, *Earth's Deep History*; idem., *Scenes from Deep Time*;

Rebecca Bedell, "The History of the Earth: Darwin, Geology and Landscape Art," in *Endless Forms: Charles Darwin, Natural Science and the Visual Arts*, ed. Diana Donald and Jane Munro, exh. cat. (Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009): 49-79; and Jonathan Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁵For Lyell, see O'Connor, *The Earth on Show*, chap. 4.

⁶For natural theology, see Bernard Lightman, "The Voices of Nature": Popularizing Victorian Science," in *Victorian Science in Context*, ed. Bernard Lightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 187-211; John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); David M. Knight, *The Age of Science: The Scientific World-View in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); and the introductory essay in *Science and Religion in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Tess Cosslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁷ *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation*. 7th edition, corrected. London, 1717. Reprint. New York: Arno, 1977, 18.

⁸*Ibid.*, 375-6.

⁹ *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*, int. Basil Willey (London and Fontwell: Centaur, 1965), 221.

¹⁰William Paley, *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802), reprint (Houston: St. Thomas, 1972), 395.

¹¹In a letter to the artist of January 27, 1825, Fisher mentioned some sketches that he would shortly return: "In the same box I shall enclose two volumes of Paley's

posthumous sermons, which you may read to your family of a Sunday evening. They are fit companions for your sketches; being exactly like them, full of vigour, fresh, original, warm from observation of nature, hasty, unpolished, untouched afterwards. There is prefixed to a new edition of his works, a life of Paley, by his son, in which the inner man is laid open. If you can get it there are parts that will delight you. He appears to have been a strong-minded, guileless, simple-hearted man, who told the truth, and declared his honest opinion to every man he met with, friend or foe. Hence he was sometimes in scrapes. “ C.R Leslie, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable, Composed Chiefly of his Letters*, ed. Jonathan Mayne (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 139.

¹² See Bernard Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

¹³ For Butler’s influence during the nineteenth century, see Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 170-83; and idem, *A Mad, Bad, & Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 335-6.

¹⁴ Knight, *Age of Science*, 37.

¹⁵ For Buckland, see O’Connor, *The Earth on Show*, chap. 2.

¹⁶ See *The Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. Leslie Parris exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 1984), reprint, no. 56.

¹⁷ See the catalog entry (no. 80) by Staley, in Staley et al, *Pre-Raphaelite Vision*.

¹⁸ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, IV (London: J.M. Dent & Co and New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., n.d.), 113.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

²⁰ Ibid., 135-6.

²¹ *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (Sunnyside, Orpington, Kent: Allen, 1880), reprint (New York: Dover, 1989), 177-8.

²² See Peter Fuller, *Theoria: Art, and the Absence of Grace* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988). I am grateful to Allen Staley for bringing this work to my attention.

²³ Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 186-7.

²⁴ Ibid., 187.

²⁵ See Nikolaus Pevsner, *Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc: Englishness and Frenchness in the Appreciation of Gothic Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1969).

²⁶ *Praeterita: The Autobiography of John Ruskin*, int. Kenneth Clark (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 5.

²⁷ See Fuller, *Theoria*, chapter 12.

²⁸ See *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture*, 80-4.

²⁹ For Gosse's collecting manuals, *ibid.*, 77-91. For the popularity of natural history in nineteenth-century Britain, see *Endless Forms*; Lynn L. Merrill, *The Romance of Victorian Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Lynn Barber, *The Heyday of Natural History, 1820-1870* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980).

³⁰ Gosse's biographer, Ann Thwaite, criticizes the partiality of *Father and Son* for giving insufficient attention to the loving and humorous side of the father. See *Glimpses of the Wonderful: The Life of Philip Henry Gosse, 1810-1888* (London: Faber, 2002). For Philip Henry Gosse, see also L.R. Croft, *Gosse: The Life of Philip Henry Gosse* (Walton-le-Dale, Preston: Elmwood Books, 2000); and Roger S. Wooton, *Walking with Gosse:*

Natural History, Creation and Religious Conflicts (Southampton, England: Clio Publishing, 2012).

³¹ *Father and Son: Biographical Recollections* (New York: Scribner's, 1907), 135.

³² *The Aquarium: An Unveiling of the Wonders of the Deep Sea* (London: Van Voorst, 1854), 111.

³³ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁴ For the analogy between Gosse's illustrations and Pre-Raphaelite painting, see Alison Smith, "The Enfranchised Eye," in Allen Staley et al., *Pre-Raphaelite Vision: Truth to Nature*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Britain, 2004), 16; Merrill, *The Romance of Victorian Natural History*, 85-6; Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture*, 78; and Herbert Sussman, *Fact into Figure: Typology in Carlyle, Ruskin, and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1979), 4-5.

³⁵ *Father and Son*, 256-7.

³⁶ Charles Kingsley, *Glaucus, or The Wonders of the Shore* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1855), 142.

³⁷ *Father and Son*, 148-9.

³⁸ For Philip's association of rock pools with Eden, see Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture*, 82.

³⁹ *Omphalos: An Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot* (London: Van Voorst, 1857). For *Omphalos*, see Klaver, *Geology and Religious Sentiment*, 177-87; Thwaite, *Glimpses of the Wonderful*, chap. 9; and Wotton, *Walking with Gosse*, 79-102.

⁴⁰ Gosse, *Omphalos*, 344-5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 216-17.

⁴² Ibid., 126.

⁴³ Quoted in Croft, *Gosse*, 172. For the negative response to *Omphalos*, see Thwaite, *Glimpses of the Wonderful*, 222-27.

⁴⁴ Allen Staley, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape* (1973), 2d ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 236.

⁴⁵ See Marcia Pointon, *William Dyce 1806-1864: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 170-74; idem, "The Representation of Time in Painting: A Study of William Dyce's *Pegwell Bay: A Recollection of October 5th, 1858*," *Art History* 1, no. 1 (March 1978), 99-103; and idem, "Geology and Landscape Painting in Nineteenth-Century England," in *Images of the Earth: Essays in the History of the Environmental Sciences*, ed. L.J. Jordanova and Roy S. Porter (Chalfont St. Giles: British Society for the History of Science, 1979), 84-108. For *Pegwell Bay*, see also Tim Barringer et al, *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Art and Design*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Britain, 2012), no. 82; Allen Staley et al. *Pre-Raphaelite Vision*, no. 107; Bedell, "The History of the Earth," 62-4; Marshall, *City of Gold and Mud*, 241-2; Staley, *Pre-Raphaelite Landscape*, 234-7; Malcolm Warner, *The Victorians: British Painting, 1837-1901*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1996), no. 107; and Parris, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, no. 106.

⁴⁶ Peter Fuller, *Theoria*, 95.

⁴⁷ *Fire in the Sky: Comets and Meteors, the Decisive Centuries, in British Art and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 96-97.

⁴⁸ This point is made in Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture*, 77.

⁴⁹ See *Catalogue of the Library of the Late William Dyce, Esq. R.A. ...* (London: J. Davy and Sons, 1875), comprising 1169 items.

⁵⁰ In view of the earnest respect for seaside collecting at midcentury, Smith takes issue with Pointon's view of the shell collecting as meaningless. See *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture*, 75. Rebecca Bedell argues that it is unclear, on the evidence of the painting, whether Dyce ascribed to natural theology. See "The History of the Earth," 63-4

⁵¹ Staley, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape*, 225.

⁵² For *The Baptism of King Ethelbert*, see Caroline Babington et al, *William Dyce and the Pre-Raphaelite Vision*, exh. cat. Aberdeen, Scotland: Aberdeen Art Gallery, 2006, nos. 26 -7. Pointon, *William Dyce*, 89-92.

⁵³ *The Victorians*, no. 24. See also the catalog entry by Alison Smith, in Allen Staley et al. *Pre-Raphaelite Vision*, no. 107: "Pegwell Bay was ... known as the spot where St Augustine alighted when he introduced Christianity into England, but there is no indication of this portentous event."

⁵⁴ See Arthur P. Stanley, *Historical Memorials of Canterbury* (London: Murray, 1855), 12; and *Lives of the English Saints. Saint Augustine of Canterbury, Apostle to the English* (London: Toovey, 1844), 89-109.

⁵⁵ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. and ed. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 236.

⁵⁶ Pusey, *Parochial Sermons II*, revised ed. (1878), quoted in *The Mind of the Oxford Movement*, ed. Owen Chadwick (London: Black, 1960), 210-11.

⁵⁷ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 230.

⁵⁸ For the *Man of Sorrows*, see, Emily Hope Thomson, "The Religious Landscapes of William Dyce," in *William Dyce and the Pre-Raphaelite Vision*, 50-2.

See also the catalog entry (no. 70) by Staley, in Staley et al, *Pre-Raphaelite Vision*.

⁵⁹ My argument squares with an assertion by Klaver:

“What struck the public [in nineteenth-century Britain] most was the new vista of geological time which complemented the astronomical sense of vastness in space and thus led to a further humbling of man’s importance in the plan of the creation.” *Geology and Religious Sentiment*, 158.

⁶⁰ Jennifer Melville, “Faith, Fact, Family and Friends in the Art of William Dyce,” in *William Dyce and the Pre-Raphaelite Vision*, 44.

⁶¹ *The Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. Leslie Parris, exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 1984), cat. no. 226.

⁶² See Jorge Luis Borges, “The Creation and P.H. Gosse,” in *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*, trans. Ruth L.C. Simms, int. James E. Irby (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 22-25.

⁶³ Andy Goldsworthy, *Time* (New York: Abrams, 2000), 127, 130.