

A Fantasy of Dr Ox

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Jules Verne

Translated by Andrew Brown



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Introduction

The great conductor Otto Klemperer is famous, or infamous, for the increasingly slow tempo of his performances of the classics of Western music. Peter Heyworth once asked him, when he was a Grand Old Man of conducting, how he could tell what the right speed for a piece of music was. “One feels it,” replied Klemperer. “I mean, it was characteristic of Mahler’s conducting that one felt that the tempo could not be otherwise.” When Heyworth went on to ask whether he thought his own tempos had become slower, Klemperer demurred, and became a little defensive when Heyworth started quoting particular examples from his recordings that did indeed suggest that he had slowed down over the years. Accounts of these recordings frequently contrast their slowness with the quicker versions of other conductors – Toscanini, for instance, whom Klemperer on occasion found “much too fast”, and who often seemed the opposite of Klemperer – speeding up to a mad dash as he got older. And there are even more notorious cases of slow conductors, such as Reginald Goodall, whose Wagner performances are distinguished by, to put it politely, an extreme broadness of tempo. In some of the repertoire conducted by Klemperer, the question of “historically

informed performance” (agreeably abbreviated to HIP) has come to the fore in the last twenty years: the listener can now contrast the version of Bach’s *Mass in B Minor* conducted by the hare-like Franz Brueggen with that of the tortoise-like old man Klemperer, though the question as to whose speeds are more “authentic” (i.e. closer to those imagined by Bach) still provokes lively scholarly debate.

What is the right speed for a piece of music? Perhaps there is no “right” speed – perhaps no one speed is right all the time. And the different participants (performers and listeners) in music may experience the same piece at different tempos. (Sir Thomas Beecham famously asked the dancers at the beginning of a ballet rehearsal: “What shall it be today? Too fast or too slow?”)

What is the right speed at which to live one’s life? Should you be a tortoise or a hare? (It’s true that, in the fable, the tortoise wins the race – but is it worth it?) Verne’s *A Fantasy of Dr Ox* is a short, slight piece, economical in style, light-hearted in manner, told with brio and at a brisk *allegro vivace*, yet, as so often with Verne, the apparent superficiality of manner touches on themes whose slow echoes continue to resonate in the mind long after one has read the story. The inhabitants of the Flemish city of Quiquendone lead lives of extraordinary slowness and tranquillity. Their heartbeats rarely rise above fifty to the minute. Their taste in music runs to performances of lavish leisureliness. Klemperer at his

most tortoise-like would have struck them as dashing through the music in indecent haste, as if anxious that he might miss closing time at the musicians' bar. And they would have run Toscanini out of town (or presumably accompanied him gravely to the Oudenaarde Gate and put him on a slow train to Brussels).

All this changes with the arrival of the scientist Dr Ox and his assistant Ygène. Despite the reference to bovine disease at one moment in the text, the reader soon realizes that the story is not about the hygiene of oxen, of course – but Verne teases the reader: has he or she been quicker on the uptake than the initially stolid Quiquendonians? Understanding the story too quickly might spoil the rhythm of suspense and disclosure that is part of the charm of the narrative – its comic timing. One of the effects of Ox's experiment is to speed up the tempo of the locals to the point where they can shake off their sluggishness (Flemings are phlegmatic) and become more choleric (Flanders is a place of flame – or at least this is what the increasingly heated Niklausse claims in Chapter 5, though etymologically the name "Flanders" appears to come from a Germanic word meaning a "flooded place"). One of the first indices of this change is indeed in the pace at which they like their music – and, here, the comic-opera potentials of the story immediately become apparent. There was a musical adaptation by Offenbach, but Verne supposedly didn't much care for this; perhaps he would have

preferred the second, more recent version by Gavin Bryars, *Dr Ox's Experiment*, with its libretto by Blake Morrison, first produced by Atom Egoyan.

Ox is to some extent one of Verne's mad scientists: an outsider figure who comes to town, uses its inhabitants as his guinea pigs, creates havoc and then vanishes with a bang that is more Mephistophelean than Faustian. His assistant Ygène is a little hesitant about the experiment (closer in temperament to the Quiquendonians, whose whole life is one long hesitation): he registers a doubt about the hasty amorality of his scientific and modernizing master. And yet it is not certain that the story is so very "scientific", despite having at times been acclaimed as an early (and still rare) example of comic science fiction (which tends, especially from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* onwards, to be doom-laden and apocalyptic). It is true that, as Blake Morrison has pointed out, Verne might have been interested in the experiments of Paul Bert, a French physiologist who exposed animals to a treatment similar to that inflicted on the Quiquendonians by Dr Ox. It is also true that Verne's story was written in 1871, at a time when naturalism was increasingly setting the agenda for French fiction. Zola's preface to the second edition of his *Thérèse Raquin* (1868) disavows any moral intent and, at the same time, any emotional empathy with (or disgust at) his sexually enthralled protagonists Thérèse and her lover Laurent. They are simply the products of the "inexorable laws"

of their physical natures, and any remorse they feel for killing off Thérèse's husband Camille is itself a mere "organic disorder". Circumstance and environment ("atmosphere", one might say, to bring out the parallel with Quiquendone) determine the characters without their being able to do anything about it. Hippolyte Taine stated that "vice and virtue are products like vitriol and sugar" – a view that strongly influenced Zola. But Zola was not a scientist, or at least his work is not exhausted by the truth content or otherwise of the scientific themes it touches on. Verne, too, may or may not believe that behaviour we normally consider to be "good" or "bad" is explicable by purely material and physiological causes. But that is not the point. He is not out to prove anything: the Hetzel version of his story included a few words distancing himself from his eponymous hero's theory: "we have every right not to accept it, *and for our part we reject it from every point of view*, despite his whimsical experiment [etc.]". Whereas the British musical adaptation bears the title *Dr Ox's Experiment*, the story's original title places the emphasis on the "fantasy" (or whim, or act of imagination): it is not a real experiment, but a thought experiment, and perhaps not even that – a fable, or, quite simply, a short story, to be enjoyed for the many trains of thought it starts without letting any of them reach a destination. Before we realize what is really causing the speed-ups and slow-downs of the Quiquendonians, it is entertaining

to think of them as merely suffering from an acute form of bipolar affective disorder, swinging from mania to depression within minutes, like a man who leaves his girlfriend full of intense and starry-eyed love, only to decide by the time he reaches home that he never wants to see her again, and phoning her up to tell her so. Dr Ox's experiment makes the Quiquendonians live more intensely – a blessing or a curse? They will die younger, but live “more”; instead of vegetating, they will “burn”; instead of living in peace and brotherly love, like the Swiss, according to Harry Lime in *The Third Man*, they will have internecine wars and manic productivity like Renaissance Italians. (One of the blessings or, if you prefer, curses of Dr Ox's experiment is that the Quiquendonians start to get passionate about politics.) The idea of a small town in Flanders suddenly deciding to go to war with an equally small town over a trivial centuries-old trespass by a cow is partly Swiftian (Lilliput versus Brobdingnag: not “go to work on an egg”, but “go to war over an egg”) and partly reminiscent of an Ealing Comedy (*Passport to Pimlico*, perhaps, in which an intensely local patriotism is likewise inflamed by a long-forgotten deed), or of Chesterton's *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*. But skirmishes over a tiny patch of land can lead to long and bitter wars, and Flanders, home of the still life, the late-medieval form of the *vita contemplativa* known as the *devotio moderna*, and clearly characterized by Verne as a place of bovine contentment,

was also always the cockpit of Europe. Look on any map and you will see how close Quiquendone is to Ypres and Mons: forty years after Verne's story was written, the fields of Flanders were inflamed by a conflict that combined, with unprecedented savagery, the speed and violence of modern technology and the passion of territorial disputes on the one hand, and the monumental slowness of trench warfare on the other, with the gentle landscapes of Memling being torn apart by rampaging hordes from Bosch or the "Dulle Griet" of Brueghel. One particular form of new technology might have attracted the interest of Verne's protagonist: the use of chemical weapons. *Oh What a Lovely War* – or, as Dr Ox might have put it, *What a Gas*.

– Andrew Brown

A Fantasy of Dr Ox

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*Why it is pointless looking for the small town
of Quiquendone, even on the best maps*

IF YOU TAKE A MAP of Flanders, old or new, and start looking for the small town of Quiquendone, it is quite probable you won't find it. So is Quiquendone a vanished town? No. A town of the future? Again, no. It exists in spite of the geographers, and has done so for between eight and nine hundred years. Indeed, it has a population of 2,393 souls, if you reckon one soul for each inhabitant. It is situated thirteen and a half kilometres north-west of Oudenaarde and fifteen and a quarter kilometres south-east of Bruges, in the middle of Flanders. The Vaar, a small tributary of the Scheldt, flows beneath its three bridges that are still covered by an old medieval roof, as at Tournai. One of the sights is an old castle, the first stone of which was laid in 1197 by Count Baldwin, the future Emperor of Constantinople, and a town hall with Gothic half-windows, crowned by a row of battlements and dominated by a turreted belfry, rising 357 feet above the ground. Every hour you can hear the peal of five octaves, a veritable aerial piano, whose renown surpasses that of the famous peal at Bruges. Strangers

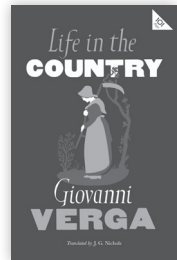
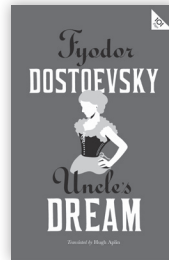
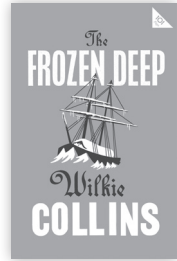
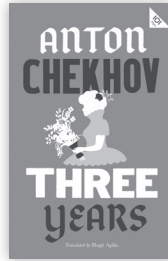
– if any have ever come to Quiquendone – never leave this curious town without having visited its hall of stadtholders, decorated with the full-length portrait of William of Nassau by Brandon, and the rood screen of the church of Saint-Magloire – that masterpiece of sixteenth-century architecture – or the forged-iron well dug into the middle of the great Place Saint-Ernuph – the admirable ornamentation on which is the work of the painter and ironsmith Quentin Metsys – or the tomb provisionally erected for Mary of Burgundy, daughter of Charles the Bold, who now rests in the church of Notre-Dame in Bruges, etc. Quiquendone’s main industry is the large-scale manufacture of whipped cream and barley sugar. It has been administered for several centuries by the van Tricasse family, passing down from father to son. And yet Quiquendone doesn’t appear on the map of Flanders! Have the geographers forgotten it? Is it a deliberate omission? That’s what I can’t tell you: but Quiquendone really *does* exist, with its narrow streets, its fortified enclosure, its Spanish houses, its covered market and its burgomaster – the proof being that it was recently the scene of phenomena as surprising, extraordinary and improbable as they are true, as will be faithfully related in this story.

Of course, there’s nothing to be said or thought against the Flemish inhabitants of western Flanders. They’re decent people – sensible, a bit tight-fisted, sociable, even-tempered, hospitable, perhaps a bit slow in speech and

not very quick on the uptake – but that doesn't explain why one of the most interesting towns on their territory still has to make it into modern cartography.

This omission is certainly regrettable. If only history, or, if not history, then the chronicles, or, if not the chronicles, at least local tradition made some mention of Quiquendone! But they don't; neither atlases nor guides nor tourist routes refer to it. Even M. Joanne, always conscientious at ferreting out little towns, doesn't have a word to say about it.* It's easy to imagine how much harm this silence does to the town's commerce and industry. But let us hasten to add that Quiquendone has neither industry nor commerce, and that it manages perfectly well without them. Its barley sugar and its whipped cream are consumed by the inhabitants and not exported. In short, the Quiquendonians don't need anyone. Their desires are limited, their way of life modest; they are calm, moderate, cold, phlegmatic – in a word, “Flemish”, of the kind you still encounter sometimes between the River Scheldt and the North Sea.

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