LYRIC TIME

As with so many other aspects of the lyric, Keats's odes and Whitman's meditations provide ~~an~~ almost inexhaustible opening gambits. Time, for instance, as a measure within and without the poem: that is, the conceit of the amount of time implied or covered within the "action" of the poem; the actual time the poem takes, say sonnet-time as opposed to fifty or eighty lines or the hundred-and-thirty-two lines required to cross the East River from Manhattan to Brooklyn; or timing time, the rhythm, the cadence, the metrical time, the length-of-line time across then down the page, pacing time. Then there is the time after the poem, relative to its displacement, density, and resonance, the reading and reflective time, the breadth of time necessary to absorb the time of and with a lyric poem.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn," by nature--or should we say by art--is circular in time; the reader turns it in the mind in order to see what the speaker sees. The action of the poem is, in effect, simultaneous, at-once with the condition of the form of the urn, its "Attic shape." Though in fact a frieze, frozen, as it were, in time, static in its circularity, the imagination brings it into life, animation, movement, though that movement goes "nowhere," is eternal, "Forever warm...forever young." It is a "Cold Pastoral" because it is locked inside its own eternity, in which what is depicted, the scene inscribed, will be always in a pose of potential life, overwrought. Cold time. The calf will never quite be sacrificed, the town will never not be empty, the lovers will never quite be kissed, "Forever panting...All breathing human passion far above,/That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed."

"To Autumn" *seems* also to promote stasis, stillness, except the mind actively transform. Yet it proceeds as might a painting if it were read, say, left to right, front to back, even up and down, processes that take time, create time as well as living *in* time. "Only by the form, the pattern,/Can words or muisc reach/The stillness, as a Chinese jar still/Moves perpetually in its stillness," writes Eliot in "Burnt Norton." Same with an urn, moving perpetually in its stillness, as the mind perceives. The mortal, temporal ashes in the urn may be gone, but that fact only enhances the "eterniality" of its presence. The season autumn, as a contemplated object, has its stillness too, but within itself a whole day passes, a whole agricultural workday, moving from the harvest to the store to the "stubble-plains" of "the soft-dying day." The cornucopia of its fullness, its harvest and storage, must be, in the nature of things, emptied in the end, no less than the archaic urn. "To Autumn"'s resonance, however, unlike the "Urn" ode, is that its time is about recurrence, return, and the living, time-bound seasons. The only season for the urn is a cold pastoral sort of spring--"Where are the songs of Spring?"--that will never change. And the only return is the turning of the shape of the urn. Different kinds of time, these two odes: one completely reiterative, the other completely cyclical.

At eighty lines, "Ode to a Nightingale" presents a little different take on time. It is much more of a participatory poem, the speaker directly centered in the scene--not, as in the "Urn" and "Autumn," a "disinterested" observer. (For Keats, "disinterested" is the opposite of sentimental or didactic.) The speaker has much on his mind, though his thinking time lasts but minutes, as long as it takes for evening to turn dark, which, in the duration of the poem, it does. "Shadows numberless" become "Darkling," as in "I cznnot see what flowers are at my feet." Time of day becomes time of night, transitional, between waking and sleeping. The light itself is a late April and, perhaps, with revision, a mid-May ("mid-May's eldest child") light: which is to say, a falling light, at the edge of evening, when the spring air feels cleared of the business of the day. So the light is falling through the great trees on Hampstead Heath onto the nearby lawn of Wentworth Place, where a nightingale has nested and is now finishing its last feeding and vespers and flying back and forth, singing, between places. Keats is listening, lost in thought, then in a deeper--as he thinks about it--meditative state. The bird, singing, flying, brings up all manner of concerns, those concerns in present time amplified, compared, and analogized in past time--the moment juxtaposed with mythic memory. Of all the odes, this one plays with narrative, story time. The speaker's heart aches, but his mind too is pained, numb, "as though of hemlock I had drunk," a deadly opiate. It is almost as if the speaker were more than "half in love with easeful Death" but were in fact close to death, while the nightingale, so alive at its natural tasks--singing, flying, building--is the sound of life calling to the speaker to stay--to stay awake, to stay alive, to stay here, attentive, in the moonlight, like Endymion. The paradox seems to be that without the narcosis of the semi-sleep of the dark the rich awareness of his situation--his intense indolence--would not be available to him.

No wonder he fantasizes flying with the bird: he who identifies with the "pale...and specter-thin...and leaden-eyed." He wants to leave time, transcend it, since time is nothing but gravity and mortality, and all the pain and sorrow between the two. He has eighty lines of a carefully worked out stanzaic pattern of patience and self-reflection to come to terms, to reconcile with the reality that his "vision" of this passing night has been a waking dream, and that like all such dreaming it may be predicated on time past--the moment locked in memory--but its energy is predictive of time future. We are doomed to dream our deaths as if they were life.

One hundred-and-forty-five years later, Philip Larkin borrows Keats's few-minutes-in-eighty-lines form to take a Whitsun weekend train from his workplace Hull, on the Humber, to holiday London, on the Thames. The dreaming now becomes daydreaming. And though the poetic form is nearly identical, the pacing and movement, the timing and time, develop very differently. "The Whitsun Weddings" is Larkin's homage, with wit, to Keats's intensely immobile predicament.

Even on The Flying Scotsman, the "fast" train between London and Edinburg, the stopoff at Hull would mean up to a six-hour ride between ~~Hull and London~~ London and Hull. Perhaps even slower going south. Larkin's problem, then, as to time, is not the momentary lapse of evening into darkness or birdsong within stillness or sunset shadow to moonlight. His problem is to travel some three hundred miles in eighty formally engineered lines, most of which are necessarily linked or enjambed, including the stanzas. (We are, after all, on a track.) The smug speaker ("~~xxxxxx~~ At first I didn't notice what a noise/The weddings made...") gradually becomes aware of what is going on around him, makes fun of the events, mulls them over, then has a change of heart ("this frail/ Travelling coincidence..."). From looking out the train windows to observing the wedding parties joining the train to seeing within himself and identifying with "how their lives would all contain this hour"--from the sequence of sights and insights, miles of towns "new and nondescript," and running landscapes both pastoral and industrial--Larkin "measures out" and times his train experience, making his great poem a masterpiece of motion and balance, realization, hard truth, and reconciliation. Larkin's tone, as always, is sardonic yet forgiving, since he himself is likewise always indicted. It is timing, however, here and in the best of his poems, that marks him out. The combination of quick strike and rumination, piercing commentary and compassion, judgment and identification that hold time to a slightly different standard, suspend it then let it go.

Larkin, the gritty realist, is in truth a romantic, as Whitman, our fabulist, is in truth an all-embracing, all-forgiving realist, if by real we mean the whole of experience, not ~~the~~ its parts. Whitman's famous ferry from Manhattan back to Brooklyn must have taken about twenty minutes. At one hundred and thirty-two long lines, nine sections, that gives him a good deal of room in which to muse, repeat, speculate, commiserate, observe, record, and travel in his mind between past and future, life and afterlife, here and now and when. Enough room that he is in our faces as we read his greatest of all our meditations, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."

It may seem improbable, but this extended meditation of Whitman's ferry ride occurs in less real time than the evaporating evening moments of Keats's nightingale ode. "Crossing" lives inside a single saturated instant of perception in which Whitman's hundred eyes take in the entire visual and emotional experience at once--those seconds that the sun is exactly "half an hour high" over the Hudson River as its December light cuts across the south end of Manhattan to reach the passengers and waters on and off the East River..."the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the sunlight water." Whitman's point, of course, is that the Brooklyn Ferry is eternal--past, present, and future--and that we, its passengers are, in the best sense, interchangeable with those who have and those who will travel this well-worn water path. Whitman, too, is eternal, as the speaker and arbiter of his poem. His credential is his empathy with all he sees, all he embraces, all that matters, so long as these "parts" contribute to the whole, so long as they, "Great or small," "furnish" and fill the soul in its journey "toward eternity." But Whitman's all-encompassing vision--as it is often called--starts very specifically--here, on this ferry ride between particular, important places. It is "the float forever held in solution" that carries us between the one island and the other, just as, metaphysically, we are borne from body to meta-body. The most moving moment in the poem, for me, however, involves Whitman's sense of time. Not simply his assertion that "time and distance avail not," that the future is no less alive that the present, the present no more alive than the past: but that he, Walt Whitman, of Brooklyn's "ample hills," lived too, that he was actually, truly alive once; that it is this poem, this ferry of a poem, that has brought him and his words into right now. Yet he speaks of himself in this guise in the autobiographical past tense, past time--"I too many and many a time cross'd the river of old," the old river that is still new, the old river that within thirty years of the poem would be crossed--in the very same spot--by a wondrous bridge.

Whitman's ferry, it is worth noting, crosses against the grain of the flow of the river; it does not follow the arrow of the current, time's arrow. It crosses time, in longer and longer lines, the way great poetry is supposed to do. This horizontal/vertical tension is what ultimately holds time in the poem, and becomes both its subject and its object. "The impalpable sustenance of me from all things from all hours of the day": those palpable, external, objective forms we call buildings and boats and water and people, they are the bread of our being, the flesh of our word, which is carried forth, incarnate. Of time and against it.