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“Aspects of Time in Poetry”
Approx. 3,450 Words

Aspects Of Time In Poetry

The catalyst for this speculation was a short essay by W. S. Merwin in Berg and Mezey’s anthology *Naked Poetry*. [1] In That piece, Merwin relates the form a poem takes to the poet’s sense of time. It’s a seminal idea, but one which needs elaboration — more than I’ll be able to give it here. My intention is to explore the kinds of time in lyric poetry (epic and narrative verse work a bit differently) and how they manifest themselves in language.

First of all, we can distinguish three kinds of time: empirical time, subjective time, and duration. Since understanding duration depends on grasping the others, I’ll deal with empirical and subjective time first.

We’ve all known the disparity between empirical (or “clock”) time and subjective time. Just think of the last boring party you attended, when every fifteen minutes by the clock took an hour of the soul’ s time to pass. In general, our experience of time is conditioned by the extent to which our imagination is engaged: the more engaged it is, the faster empirical time seems to pass; the less engaged, the slower. Obviously there is almost nothing of empirical time in a

poem, unless it lay simply in the poem's length; this empirical time would be reckoned by something appropriately ridiculous like "syllables per second". Even that measure is not truly empirical, of course, as can be seen by a comparative reading of "Strange Fruit,"[2] by Seamus Heaney, and "Something I've Not Done,"[3] by W. S. Merwin.

Strange Fruit

Here is the girl's head like an exhumed gourd.
Oval-faced, prune-skinned, prune-stones for teeth.
They unswaddled the wet fern of her hair
And made an exhibition of its coil,
Let the air at her leathery beauty.
Pash of tallow, perishable treasure:
Her broken nose is dark as a turf clod,
Her eyeholes blank as pools in the old workings.
Diodorus Siculus confessed
His gradual ease among the likes of this:
Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible
Beheaded girl, outstaring axe
And beatification, outstaring
What had begun to feel like reverence.

Something I've Not Done

Something I've not done
is following me
I haven't done it again and again
so it has many footsteps
like a drumstick that's grown old and never been used

In late afternoon I hear it come closer
at times it climbs out of a sea
onto my shoulders
and I shrug it off

losing one more chance

Every morning
it's drunk up part of my breath for the day
and knows which way
I'm going
and already it's not done there

But once more I say I'll lay hands on it
tomorrow
and add its footsteps to my heart
and its story to my regrets
and its silence to my compass

Both poems contain nearly the same number of syllables: Heaney's 137, Merwin's 138. "By the clock" they should take an almost equal amount of time to recite' the fact is, however, that in ten timed readings "Strange Fruit" required between 12 and 16 more seconds to recite than "Something I've Not Done". Some of the variance is attributable to interpretation, but any sensitive reader will admit that if both are recited acceptably, "Strange Fruit" should always take longer than "Something I've Not Done". In each poem, a theoretically empirical time has been transformed into a subjective time proper to the poet's imaginative experience.

This subjective time manifests itself technically in three major ways: prosody, syntax, and semantic density. Of course these are classes of technique; each one can be broken down into the poetic equivalents of quarks and gluons. But our intention is to look at poems the way a good naturalist observes an animal—for the purpose of description, not dissection.

Take prosody, a term scholars have argued over for centuries. My humble definition is that prosody means the manipulation of sound and rhythm in language. Of sound I'll have little

to say in detail, since the subject is both too minute and too vast; I do suggest, however, that the individual sounds in a poem are like notes in a piece of music: their sonority has a profound effect on the rhythm of the piece, but they do not constitute the rhythm. Rhythm itself, which I'll focus on, is the pattern of relative stress given to the sounds.

In language, as a music, rhythm is the clearest manifestation of time; it is the interface between subjective and empirical time. Or, if you will, rhythm transforms empirical time into subjective time by charging it with emotion. Looking again at "Strange Fruit" and "Something I've Not Done", it's clear that punctuation or lack of it, line-breaks, and phrasing all contribute to the large rhythmic differences between the poems. By making his poem read slowly, Heaney holds each image before us and forces us into a meditative state of mind similar to his own' Merwin's poem, on the other hand, uses a swift rhythm to reinforce *his* anxious mental state. Each poem' prosodic form is organic, meaning that it fulfills the statement Harvey Gross makes in his fine book, *Sound And Form In Modern Poetry*: "In the arts of time—music and literature—rhythmic forms transmit certain kinds of information about the nature of our inner life."[4] This is true not only of largely unmetrical poems such as Heaney's and Merwin's, but also of metrical works such as Allen Grossman's "The Ballad of the Bone Boat."[5] The following stanzas are characteristic of Grossman's tactic:

The Ballad of the Bone Boat

I dreamed I sailed alone
In a long boat, a white bone;
Like a strong thought, or a right name
The sail had so seam

* *

The sea and the sky were on dark thing,
The eye and the hand as cold.
Unbound was my hair, unbound was my dress;
Nothing beckoned or called

But the words of a song
That had a death in its tune
And death in its changes and close—
A song which I sang in the eye of the moon,
And a secret name that I chose.

And this is the song: "Straight is the way
When the compass is a stone,
And the sail has no seam, and the boat is a bone,
Ant the mast is bent like a tree that bears
The wind-fruit of the moon."

Grossman's rhythmic allusions to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and to nursery rhymes in general reinforce its dreamy, childlike tone. In other words, the poem's prosody is simultaneously artificial and organic; its very artifice, grounded in a rhythm suggestive of empirical time, emphasizes the subjective nature of his tale.

If rhythm is the pattern of relative stress given to the sounds in a poem, where does this pattern come from? It arises primarily from the poem's syntax; the manipulation of syntax, in other words, is part of prosody. But when we concentrate on sound and rhythm, we experience them as a musical flow; when we concentrate on syntax, we experience the individual "notes" of that music. This is analogous to our usual experience of time as a flow, which becomes a series of discreet moments when we concentrate on the structure of that flow. As an agent of serial

time, syntax orders the poem's particulars; as in life, the things we experience condition our reactions to whatever follows.

Besides establishing prosodic form, syntax structures our serial experience of the poem "Skin Diving,"[6] may help clarify this point: "The snorkel is the easiest woodwind." Imagine that turned around on its fulcrum: "The easiest woodwind is the snorkel." A terrible transformation! The altered syntax makes it prosodically weak, because "is" argues that something as awkward–sounding as a snorkel can be "the easiest woodwind;" only the syntactical offering of "snorkel" first allows the poet to convince us. When we switch the phrases, the final gargled syllables of "snorkel" undermine our trust of Matthews' metaphor. The rhetorical force, in other words is literally a matter of syntactical timing.

Of course, syntax doesn't just argue the validity of metaphors; it also presents words in such a way that our inner experience of the language matches the external action being described. This is Aristotle's concept of *mimesis*, or imitation of nature. Take, for example, the ninth and tenth lines of "Skin Diving":

> I love this exact and calm
> suspense . . .

One would lose very little, in terms of prosody, by changing it to read

> I love this suspense, exact
> and calm . . .

But the original more effectively evokes the physical feeling of suspension. And by syntactically delaying "suspense" until its adjectives are given, the word's occurrence surprises;

the line-break only emphasizes the unexpectedness of "suspense." By mimesis and surprise, syntax intensifies our sense of immersion in the poem's subjective time.

In general, the more syntax is structured to convince, to match inward and outward experience, and to surprise, the more our imaginations are engaged. And as mentioned earlier, that engagement is the essence of subjective time in poetry.

But the third characteristic of syntax is perhaps the most engaging: its provision for simultaneous meanings. We've already seen it in Matthews' use of "suspense," but in that case its double sense is not dependent upon the syntax; the word would signify both physical suspension and mental anticipation no matter where it appeared in the sentence. However, the final two lines of "Skin Diving: do provide and example:

> But here, in poise and in hard thought,
> I look down to find myself happy.

The last line can be glossed as either "I *happen* to look down and discover I'm happy," or "I look down *in order to* see myself as happy." Both meanings carry equal weight. But this rich ambiguity would be lost were the syntax altered to:

> But here I look down, in poise and in hard
> thought, to find myself happy.

So much emphasis then is placed upon the *act* of looking that it seems *willed*, not casual, making "I look down *in order to* see myself as happy" the dominant reading. Our imaginative engagement, and therefore the power of the poem's subjective time, is diluted.

The latter function of syntax leads directly to the third technical manifestation of subjective time in poetry: semantic density. By this I mean the frequency of image as Pound

defined it (in part): "an intellectual and emotional complex."[7] I'm suggesting that *every* semantic unit or meaning-complex even when more than one arise from a single word or phrase, constitutes an image. The higher the image frequency, the more engaged our imagination must be to absorb it; the greater the semantic density, therefore, the further the reader feels from the passage of empirical time.

An extreme example is Charles Wright's poem "White,"[8] from which I'll quote three stanzas:

> **White**
>
> Carafe, compotier, sea shell, vase:
> Blank spaces, white objects;
> Luminous knots along the black rope.
>
> *
>
> The clouds, great piles of oblivion, cruise
> Over the world, the wind at their backs
> Forever. They darken whomever they please.
>
> ***
>
> White, and the leaf clicks; dry rock;
> White, and the wave spills.
> Dogwood, the stripe, headlights, teeth.

Can we say that subjective time flows here? Barely, at best. The rhythms are broken, disjointed; the syntax half-realized; the imagery is dense with significance. But it's all to the point, of course. How better could one render those spells of nameless dread and ecstasy, of mortal awe, that so often seem to come at us out of nowhere? The story-line of the poet's past is brokenly glimpsed amid the erupting images—images connected only by the poet's struggling

consciousness, which externalizes them as the idea of whiteness. Even subjective time seems almost to vanish. Though I'm anticipating my argument, let me observe that in "White", subjective time comes close to being submerged in a groundswell of duration.

But one final point before we examine duration. Both of the times we have looked at in poetry—empirical and subjective—share a singular quality which Henri Bergson termed "succession."[9] Succession refers to the serial nature of time, a quality (as noted earlier) foremost in our minds when we think of prosody and syntax: on the one hand, a succession of discreet sounds and stresses; on the other, a succession of semantic units or images. And this succession is always uni-directional: we experience it from beginning to end, from the arbitrary now in which we start reading to that point in the future at which the utterance stops.

The idea of duration is complicated by Bergson's somewhat circuitous expression of it.[10] Essentially, though, it corresponds to Jung's idea of the collective unconscious.[11] Defined as a universally human repository of instincts and archetypes, the collective unconscious underlies the personal unconscious, which in turn is made up of things forgotten or repressed from individual experience; in the same way, duration underlies subjective time. Perhaps a better definition of duration has been provided indirectly by a student of Jung's, M. L. von Franz, who describes the "primordial time dimension (which) . . . continues to exist beside our usual time but can be reached only in exceptional unconscious mental conditions . . . . " When we experience duration, as von Franz writes, "(the) ordinary time experience with its subdivisions of past, present and future fades."[12] Time in these states seems neither an indivisible continuum nor a

succession of discreet moments; it appears as a vast structure in which all moments exist simultaneously.

But what form does this duration take in poetry? Since duration parallels subjective time, we would expect to find it in the modes we have already mentioned: prosody, syntax, and semantic density. Take for example Marvin Bell's "Origin of Dreams":[13]

> Out from muted bee-sounds and musketry
> (the hard works of our ears, dissembling),
> under steeply-held birds (in that air
> the mind draws of our laid breathing),
> out from light dust and the retinal gray,
> your face as in your forties appears
> as if to be pictured, and will not go away.
>
> I have shut up all my cameras, really,
> Father, and thought I did not speak to you,
> Since you are dead. But you last;
> Are proved in the distance of a wrist.
> Your face in dreams sends a crinkly static
> And seems, in its mica- or leaf-like texture,
> The nightworks of the viscera.
>
> But feeling's not fancy, fancying you.
> I don't forget you, or give stinks for thanks
> I think I think the bed's a balcony,
> Until we sleep. Then our good intentions
> Lower us to the dead, where we live.
> I think that light's a sheet for the days,
> Which we lose. Then we go looking.

What a complex work! But let's look at our three major classes in turn and see if we can find duration in them.

To comprehend the duration in Bell's prosody, we have to imagine it as a single, simultaneous occurrence. Visualize the poem's sound and rhythm as a pattern, let's say, painted onto a canvas; assign different color values to the various sounds and different widths of brushstroke to the various stresses if it helps you picture it. Moving our eyes from left to right, we find the first stanza drawn out as a complex series of interlocking waves and loops, a web of utterance and echoes; the second stanza disentangles from it, the complex web resolving itself into several thinner lines intersecting only here and there; and finally stanza three, in which the threads ravel into a few strong, distinct lines shooting downward like roots. What we have as the form of duration in Bell's prosody is the artistic cousin of a seismograph reading: an abstract tableau or triptych.

How about syntax? In the realm of subjective time we followed it like a thread through the labyrinth of rhetorical argument, mimesis and surprise, let it lead us toward simultaneous meanings. But in the realm of duration, we find syntax spread out before us like a frieze: all at once we see the entire labyrinth from above; every passageway in the poem is open, every twist and turn of the thread we followed visible. If we're projecting well, we can run our fingers over the complicated curves and whorls, feel as we follow it from left to right the subtleties of shape and texture. Seen in its durational aspect, the syntax of Bell's poem takes on the fateful character of a relief map.

If prosody and syntax in their durational aspects are painting and frieze, then semantic density is free-standing sculpture. Visualize each image—the metaphors, the puns, the semantic echoes—projected into space. It is an hourglass figure, the top more dense than the bottom.

There are few smooth surfaces; those that are swirl away into little pockets and caverns which open on the far side of the figure. All of the poem's meanings are simultaneous here, but being three-dimensional we can't take it in all at once. We can circle it again and again without exhausting the nuances, touch it without ever grasping it entirely.

All this is very impressionistic, but the concept duration by its very nature tends to resist explication; or it may simply belong to a study of greater scope. What our attempt to grasp duration might do, I think, is suggest why some verbal structures—which is what poems are, after all—are great, while others are merely entertaining or clever. Great poems engage the reader's imagination not only on the level of subjective time, but give access as well to the "primordial time" of duration. This access is rarely given on a first reading, of course, though we may glimpse it. In re-reading, however, the serial aspects of prosody, syntax, and semantic density become familiar; the sense of subjective time diminishes, and whatever duration the poet has been able to incarnate in his or her poem emerges.

Ultimately, we need to ask the question that has haunted aesthetics since the collapse of theological certainty: *So what*? It's a question which remains even after we've asserted that a new and more fruitful criticism might arise from this time-based viewpoint, or that it might set higher standards for a new generation of poets. Perhaps one answer lies in something mentioned earlier—that each reader brings to a poem his or her own perception of it. In *The Bow And The Lyre*, Octavio Paz extends this observation:

> The poet always consecrates a historical experience, which can be personal, social, or both at once. But as he speaks to us of all those events, feelings, experiences, and persons, the poet speaks to us of *something else*: of what he is

> doing, of what he is being in relation to us and in us. He speaks to us of the poem itself, of the act of creating and naming. And more: he induces us to repeat, to re-create his poem, to name what he names; and in doing so, he reveals to us that which we are.[14]

The answer to "So what?" is that poetry, at its best, gives access to that primordial condition from which we ordinarily feel fallen or divorce. It heals, however briefly, by restoring us to the reality of our own duration.

Footnotes

[1] "On Open Form," by W. S. Merwin, in *Naked Poetry*, Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey, eds., Bobbs-Merrill, 1969: pp. 270-272.

[2] *North*, by Seamus Heaney, Oxford University Press, 1976: p. 39.

[3] *Writings To An Unfinished Accompaniment*, by W. S. Merwin, Atheneum, 1973: p. 25.

[4] *Sound And Form In Modern Poetry; A Study Of Prosody From Thomas Hardy To Robert Lowell*, by Harvey Gross, The university of Michigan Press, 1964: p. 11.

[5] *The Woman On The Bridge Over The Chicago River*, by Allen Grossman, New Directions, 1979, pp. 45-46.

[6] *Rising And Falling*, by William Matthews, Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1979: p. 32.

[7] "A Retrospect" in *Literary Essays Of Ezra Pound*, T. S. Eliot, ed. New Directions, 1954, p. 4.

[8] *Hard Freight*, by Charles Wright, Wesleyan University Press, 1973: p. 22.

[9] *Time And Free Will*, by Henri Bergson, translated by F. L. Pogson, Harper & Row, 1960: pp. 100-104.

[10] Ibid., pp. 105-106.

[11] *The Portable Jung*, by C. G. Jung, translated by R. C. F. Hull, Joseph Campbell, ed., Viking, 1971: pp. 59-60.

[12] "Time and Synchronicity in Analytic Psychology," by M. L. von Franz, *The Voices Of Time*, J. T. Fraser, ed., George Braziller, 1966: p. 221.

[13] *Residue Of Song*, by Marvin Bell, Atheneum, 1974: p. 17.

[14] *The Bow And The Lyre*, by Octavio Paz, translated by Ruth L. C. Simms, McGraw-Hill, 1973: p. 173.