Ann Chou

May 3, 2012

Love Poetry

Erik Gray

**The Collapse of Spaces and Times in “When I Heard at the Close of the Day”**

Walt Whitman’s poem “When I Heard at the Close of the Day” describes the transcendent happiness that comes to the speaker when his lover joins him. The coming of joy unfolds with a remarkable emotional intensity. The progressions which dictate space, time, and anticipation mediate the poem’s sense of linear movement in ways that heighten the intensity of feeling and fulfillment. The coming of joy is also intensely satisfying because the speaker manipulates the progressions in a way that transforms fulfillment into renewal. This is important because, as Anne Carson writes in *Eros the Bittersweet*, “Then Ends Where Now Begins” (154). Much of Carson’s other commentary is also relevant to the poem’s transition from a then-before-desire to a now-of-desire moment. The speaker’s modulations of the progressions towards fulfillment, specificity, physical unity, and happiness prolong the pleasure he has experienced and enable him to replace “then” with a beginning.

Carson’s understanding of desire illuminates the experience of desire in “When I Heard at the Close of the Day”. Eros is founded on a paradox: if desire is wanting what you don’t have, it is impossible to have what you desire because by having it, you cannot want it. Inextricable from this paradox of space is a paradox of time. Carson explains, “A desire to bring the absent into presence, or to collapse far and near, is also a desire to foreclose then upon now” (111). In this moment—the moment of desire—two kinds of time appear: time as transience and time as repetition. Carson presents the Greek adverb *deute*, a crasis of *de* (“now”) and *aute* (“again and again”), as a representation of the temporal collapse in desire and as a starting point for thinking about the same issue in writing. The act of writing is an act of manipulating time because it makes permanent what is transient—language. As it is being written or read, “Where I Heard” telescopes a moment from the past into the present, making a moment occur again, and again. Here it goes again, it says. This is true of all literary acts, but the distinction between now and then is particularly sharp in Whitman’s poem because what the speaker describes is a memory and he manipulates the perception of time within the poem itself. The speaker appears to look back on desire, enclosing the poem with past-tense verbs like “When I heard” and “Then I was happy”. He distorts time within this memory in such a way that the moment absence becomes presence and anticipation becomes fulfillment feels like the most present and most prolonged moment in the poem.

The poem’s most significant progression, which runs from anticipation to fulfillment, is most relevant to the temporal issues of desire because it continually redefines the “now” moments of fulfillment into “before now” moments of anticipation. This progression from anticipation to fulfillment occurs on two levels—one for the speaker and one for the reader. It is quite clear for the speaker: he spends most of the poem waiting for his lover’s arrival. The thought of his lover and his lover’s presence produce a joy that is presented as a resolution to the unhappiness the speaker feels earlier. The pacing of the poem, as influenced by line length and syntax, emphasizes the slowness and impatience that grows while waiting. The lines describing the waiting periods before the speaker thinks of his friend, and before his friend arrives, are the longest, while the ones which offer statements of certainty and achievement—his declarations of happiness and his lover’s arrival—are shorter and don’t appear until the ends of sentences. As the moment of the lover’s arrival approaches in line 6, the passage of days accelerates, and two days pass in the space of a line.

Control over the reader’s senses of anticipation and fulfillment comes through the speaker’s careful allocation of information. The first half of the poem is communicated through a “when…then…” structure. However, the poem feels front-loaded because the first six lines only contain the “when” half, and this delaying of the “then” resolution heightens the reader’s sense of anticipation. This sense is first set up by the use of the word “still” in the first two lines. By qualifying the speaker’s dissatisfaction as a state only “up until now”, “still” predicts a change to his mood. The third line appears to offer a resolution by beginning with the contrastive phrase “but the day”. But this is followed by three lines which describe things that occur universally every single day. Right when we think we might understand what lies behind the speaker’s renewed spirit, a change hinted ever since the first line, the causes are further withdrawn and our anticipation is further prolonged. An explanation for the happiness of these lines doesn’t appear until line 6—“when I thought how my dear friend, my lover, was on his way coming” and the long-awaited “then” does not appear until the end of the line. This moment of realization begins three days and two lines of anticipation, as speaker and reader await the lover. Once and again, “now” is revealed to actually be a “then leading up to now.” By renewing anticipation in moments of fulfillment, these “now” moments share likeness with the point in “now” Sokrates identifies as “a shaft sunk into time and emerging onto timelessness” (157). Even in the clearest instance of desire’s now moment, the lover’s arrival at the end of line 8, the speaker draws back again. Even when the speaker is in the arms of his lover, the reader’s view of the lover is delayed for two lines while the speaker listens to the waters rolling up the shores. Here, anticipation and fulfillment become located in the same place, creating in this scene a point in space and time where the reader can experience as “now” and “here” what the writer knows as “then” and “there”.

The speaker’s description of specific days through unspecific language and images, in addition to prolonging anticipation, sets up a focusing from the general to the specific. In the first line, the speaker remembers a particular day—“the” day he heard of his fame and the unhappiness that followed in the night. But in the next line, the time “when” expands to mean “whenever”, referring not to a specific day, but to all the times he caroused and achieved. The vagueness of “else” clouds the sense of place in addition to time. Within the first two lines, there is an expansion from a specific day to a general state; from a specific night to always. In line three the speaker again emphasizes the singularity of “the” day but goes on for three lines to identify it with general actions of rising at dawn, breathing air, watching the moon fade, none of which are specific enough to convincingly explain the day’s singularity. In the final lines, the opposite happens. In the presence of his lover, the speaker now devotes five entire lines to the single moment of lying next to his lover at night. This contraction is analogous to the desire to extend the now moment. The number of prepositional clauses suddenly proliferates: the lover is by the speaker, under the cover, and in the cool night; his face is in the stillness and in the autumn moonbeams. The movement towards detail prolongs and firms the memory of this moment. Again, this echoes Carson’s understanding of the affinity between desire and writing. Poetry opposes transience because repetition creates an intersection between “now” and “then” and specificity prolongs the present.

The passage of time as it occurs across a day also plays an important role in structuring the changes in mood. The close of day, the period which begins the poem, is traditionally associated with the coming of peace. But here it is followed by a restless night. The satisfaction of the poem’s ending lies in its reversion to natural order, to the reclamation of night as a time of stillness. In the first half of the poem, anticipation comes at night, and fulfillment comes with the morning. The close of day is followed by an unhappy night. In the morning, happiness comes as the moon, the last vestige of the night, dissolves. This is inverted in the second half, where the day becomes a waiting period for the fulfillment that comes at night. Days pass happily, and the lover arrives at last, with the close of day. Here, the newly joyous night takes on qualities of the day—the night is “cool”, which is the same adjective used to describe the waters he laughed with (line 5). The light of the moon reappears this time as “autumn moonbeams”, taking on the fecundity of autumn in line 3. This progression can also be traced in the fluctuating function of the word “still”. It is used twice in the first two lines to describe a state of unhappiness “continued until now”, but once the lover has come and evening fallen, it is used twice in the final five lines to describe a state of tranquility.

Carson’s lover wants something from space as much as he wants something from time. Desire is a collapse between now and then that occurs with a collapse between here and there. The progression towards physical unity—between the speaker, his lover, and the external world—is also what makes the conclusion so satisfying. This growing happiness is most closely tied to the speaker’s anticipation of his lover’s arrival, and the arrival itself, but the first change in his mood actually precedes both events. This change is made possible by the speaker’s growing physicality and his immersion and delight in the natural world. Even though he revels in nature and remembers that his lover is visiting on the same day, the reveling predates the remembering, not just in the poem but in the story too. The events of lines 3-6 can be assumed to occur in chronological order since the events of lines 3-5 follow a traditional timeline (he sees the sun rise after the moon sinks after he wakes). Therefore his delight in the physical world doesn’t initially correspond with his lover’s arrival. Rather, it corresponds to his shift in attention from an urbanized world, signaled by the nameless capitol of the first line, to an interior one. He rejects traditional sources of fulfillment—fame, carousal, and achievement—and focuses on his place in relation to the natural world. The weariness of the first two lines is replaced by refreshed energy, as autumn breathes a new breath into him and the main images of waking and washing at dawn suggest rebirth. His senses become extremely acute and nature becomes imbued with human or dislocated qualities: the speaker tastes his breath (7), autumn has a ripe breath (3), and liquids and sands rustle (11).

This joy the speaker takes in nature grows closer to the joy of seeing his lover until the two become the same joy. After thinking of his lover’s arrival, everything he touches is enhanced—air becomes sweeter and food more nourishing. And once his lover has come the speaker says, “I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands, as directed to me, whispering, to congratulate me” (11). The speaker’s happiness now wedges into his exchange with nature. The relationship between the speaker and the physical world is now inextricable from the lover’s presence. The final image of the speaker, his lover, and the autumn moonbeams in bed is one of unity achieved between the three.

The goal of a lover, Carson writes, is to enter “a space-time where absent is present and ‘now’ can include ‘then’ without ceasing to be ‘now’” (117). The speaker of “When I Heard at the Close of the Day” enacts the relation to time that Sokrates puts forth in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, which is to “assimilate ‘now’ in such a way that it prolongs itself over the whole of life, and beyond” (157). According to Sokrates, the sensation that occurs in the now of desire harkens back to the immortal beginning of your soul, and thus “then” disappears into this blind point. In Whitman’s poem, every time fulfillment is reached—when the speaker rises from his bed refreshed, when he remembers his lover’s arrival, when his lover arrives, and when he is in his lover’s presence—the instance of accomplishment opens up into a beginning, renewing a wave of anticipation for more knowledge, for the lover to come closer, for a more complete happiness, and for the moment to extend.

Works Cited

Carson, Anne. *Eros the Bittersweet*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986. Print.

Whitman, Walt. “When I Heard at the Close of Day.” Love Poems. Ed. Peter Washington. New York: Random House, 1993. 161. Print.