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**Cyclical and Linear Time in Tennyson and Browning**

Robert Browning, in “Two in the Campagna”, and Alfred Lord Tennyson, in “Mariana”, underline the progression of time to opposite effects. Browning’s treatment of time in “Two in the Campagna” emphasizes its transience, specifically the difficulty of capturing any one moment. While its “real-time” narration infuses Browning’s poem with urgency, “Mariana” is inhabited by stasis. Tennyson’s descriptions of time’s cyclical progression call attention to the lack of progression in plot.

In “Two in the Campagna”, a poet reflects on the futility of achieving a communion with his beloved that would endure beyond the moment they currently share. This futility is uncovered quickly, but not immediately. The poem begins with a question “I wonder do you feel today” (1) which seems to connect the speaker and his beloved in the same time. However, this intimation of immediacy turns out to be a trick of the enjambment, which continues the line “as I have felt since” (2) thereby introducing a lag. The gaps between “feel” and “have felt” and between “today” and “since” are the gaps that create different moments. Furthermore, the question that began as something that could invite dialogue, turns one-sided. “Do you feel as I have felt” is an empty, reflexive question because, without describing how he feels, it cannot be answered faithfully. The first line becomes more a statement than a question and the object is revealed not to be “you” but “I”.

By the end of the second stanza, it is clear that she cannot feel what he feels because his thoughts have already turned inward. The speaker begins the second stanza by referring to himself three times: “For me, I touched a thought, I know” (6). The first and third self-references do not add any new meaning to the line; instead, they emphasize the speaker’s introspection and draw him farther from perfect communion. The speaker shifts in stanza II to poetry, where he seeks a unity related to the one sought in love. Where he once sought to share a thought with his beloved, he now pleads “help me hold the thought!” (6). But the same challenge—that time passages and makes every connection ephemeral—faces art and love. Here, the attempt to capture or communicate a thought is restricted not by the difficulty of interpersonal connection, but by the limitation of language. The attempt appears even in the poem “Two in the Campagna”, where the extra rhyme in the poem’s ABABA rhyme scheme reflects the speaker’s effort to extend or capture the moment through more words. This fifth line also underlines the futility of that effort—six feet, two less than the usual eight, it always ends just a little early.

In the next two stanzas, the speaker chases the thought through the landscape as if it was carried away on a breeze. The play-by-play account in these stanzas and later in VIII and XI demonstrate most vividly how the monologue unfolds in “real-time”. This draws attention to the speaker’s occupation with living in the present, but also makes the impossibility of extending the present more visible. By drawing attention to the relentless succession of “present” moments, the poem reminds that the here and now only stops changing once it is relegated to the past. Consigning a thought to speech or speech to writing, can preserve it but only by setting it out of reach. already passing. With every word that is spoken or written, the speaker strays further from the thought he tried to capture or moment he tried to extend.

Stanzas V-VII are the poem’s most poignant because while they come closest to carving a hollow in time, human agency is also most removed there. While the “endless fleece”, “everlasting wash of air”, and hazy, immortal subjects “silence and passion, joy and peace” lend the Campagna a sense of infinity, the Campagna also develops a frozen quality. To stop changing is also to stall, a sense created by the five-fold repetition of “such” and alliteration (“performed in play…primal”, “forms of flowers”) in stanza VI. Freezing the moment is also removing action from the moment. The only human action—“letting nature have her way”—is in fact inaction. No action is performed in the Campagna, and this undermines the lovers as well. The speaker’s sweet sentiments in stanzas VIII and IX only describe things wished for in some alternate present, and adopting the wound that “must be” (39), he pronounces the good minute gone.

Despite his failure to capture a moment and despite his melancholic conclusion that infinite passions are chased by hearts only finite, the speaker ends his monologue by picking up where the old thread left off, proclaiming, “Off again!” The endurance of his power of will reflects Browning’s idealization of effort, and the speaker’s occupation with the good minute’s transience testifies to Browning’s view that life is experienced as process.

Similarly, the treatment of time in “Mariana” reflects a notable and opposite impulse in Tennyson’s poetry, described in lecture as the “death instinct” or a retreat towards inertia. If time changes the world too quickly in “Two in the Campagna”, it doesn’t work fast enough in “Mariana”.

In “Mariana”, Tennyson describes a world inhabited by stasis. His subject is Shakespeare’s Mariana, who waits all day and night for her lover to return though he never does and never will. Her loneliness is represented in Mariana’s living arrangement—a grange surrounded by a moat—and the hypersensitive way she approaches her surroundings. Her despair is made explicit in the incantatory refrain repeated with slight variations at the end of every stanza: “She only said, ‘My life is dreary / He cometh not,’ she said; / She said, ‘I am aweary, aweary, / I would that I were dead!’”

Repetition contributes to the poem’s pathos—Mariana’s lover will never return; things will never change. This is most obvious in the repeated refrain, but it is even more painful in repetition through a cyclical recurrence. Since every moment seems different from the last, Mariana’s hope renews continuously but is always disappointed. “Mariana” and “Two in the Campagna” both describe unceasing change, but here the change is iterative.

The cyclical repetition appears in “Mariana” as the never-ending succession of time—the cycle of days and hours carefully gauged by the movement of sunlight and shadows across the floor and the sounds of the world outside. Variations in the refrain also mark the shifts between night and day. They are also writ in the poem’s form: the ABABCDDCABAB rhyme scheme forms a loop with the last four lines in each stanza returning to the ABAB rhyme pattern of the first four lines. This clear progress of time is also a meaningless one: the end of any one day doesn’t cause any permanent change because days reoccur eternally. Tennyson uses temporal change to draw attention to the lack of change in Mariana’s actions and character.

As in “Two in the Campagna”, lines grow shorter at the end of each stanza; here, the tenth and twelfth lines switch from eight-syllables to six. While this creates a sense of rush and incompleteness in Browning’s poem, “Mariana’s” shorter lines draw out the poem by dragging out to match the other lines. The repetition of “aweary aweary” in the eleventh line of every stanza deviates from iambic tetrameter by adding two extra unstressed syllable. Most significantly, the repetition of two words in a row compels a pause to separate them.

Even more dramatically, whether time has moved ceases to matter. The first description of Mariana is of her crying: “Her tears fell with the dews at even; / Her tears fell ere the dews were dried” (13-14). Both lines essentially say the same thing: her tears fell, and nothing new is learned by knowing that Mariana still cried before the dew dried. Instead, the repetition of this action suggests that it doesn’t matter when the dews were dried. The next two lines, “She could not look on the sweet heaven, / Either at morn or eventide” (15-16)”, repeat once more the same point that time changes nothing.

The only thing that changes in “Mariana” is time but even that change is iterative. The time that escapes the grasping hand of “Two in the Campagna” feels elusive because it is linear and therefore transitory. Through their treatments of time, Tennyson and Browning have demonstrated the difference between cyclical and linear progression and their usefulness in shaping plot and feeling.

Works Cited

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