

The Space of Poetry

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“Had we but world enough and time, this coyness, Lady, were no crime,” and I could explain the wonders of the world while making you all mine. We are, however, on a budget, and so I will limit myself to a few observations on something about which I know little, but which was poured into me, as they say in my almost-native Dutch, with the baby food.

Perhaps it was because we were living in the Netherlands and I was exhibiting dangerous tendencies of falling for that ugly and un-poetic language, or, what is more likely, because both of my parents were professors of English and American literature, but my father and mother read poetry in our truly native tongue to my sister and myself starting at a very early age. Though I was often as annoyed as I am sure some of you are this evening to being subjected to discourses on this rarified form of expression, over time these poems opened a new world to me. I mean that as literally as I can, and that for me has always been the point. I am amazed by the ability of art, in any form or medium, to make evoke, and then make knowable a world whose immensity and complexity is unending, even if the agent of experience is small. Poems do more than describe or provide metaphors: they amalgamate intimations into complete worlds –or at least the ones I love do. In fact, that is the kind of art I like in any medium. And, that is

why I have dedicated my life to talking about and showing art, since that is much more fun than making it.

To return to *To His Coy Mistress*, which Andrew Marvel wrote around 1650. After the come-on, which you sense is almost whispered, this is a poem that suddenly opens up:

We would sit down and think which way
To walk and pass our long love's day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
Shouldst rubies find: I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the Flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast;
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart;

We have moved from an intimate scene to the farthest extent of the British Empire, and the poem is as much a testimony to the English' command of territory as it is to the desire of one man to possess one woman. It is, in other words, about power; the power of the man, of the woman to be so attractive, of the British Empire, and of the language to meld these together into a flow that is as potent and unstoppable as that of either the Ganges or the Humber.

I think I first read the poem, or had my mother read it to me, when I was discovering what it meant to fall in love, and the sense that there is something immense and overwhelming was as new to my consciousness as the realization that there was a world out there ready for me, first on bicycle, then by car and airplane, to conquer. The poem was my map towards adulthood, and all the possibilities it possessed. That it was really a little bauble of seduction composed four centuries ago was and is of no relevance –it is river of language that swept and continues to sweep me away.

But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity,
Thy beauty shall no more be found,
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound

My echoing song: then worms shall try
That long preserved virginity,
And your quaint honour turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust: The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace

And so I was brought back to reality, though of course this dreadful evocation was only the poet's way to get things going. Even better, for an impetuous adolescent, was the rampaging finish to this little ditty, the part that made you want to go sing your love off the rooftops, or the riverside:

Now therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,
Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour
Than languish in his slow-chapt power.
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,
And tear our pleasures with rough strife

Thorough the iron gates of life:

Thus, though we cannot make our sun

Stand still, yet we will make him run.

I was sold on the power of poetry, though somehow it never worked whenever I tried it, either borrowed from the greats or of my own concoction, on flesh-and-blood coy things.

So, “when I was young and easy, and in the mercy of his means,” to quote Dylan Thomas, I delved into the Romantics after that, from Wordsworth to the French symbolists, and tested my knowledge on T.S. Eliot. But it was a much shorter poem that stayed with me, one that connected me to a realization that the world I was entering was not always a pretty place. Poems sometimes are more than a window into another world. Sometimes they can be like a bomb, and few are as explosive as *London*, by William Blake:

I wander thro' each charter'd street,

Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,

And mark in every face I meet

Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,

In every Infant's cry of fear,

In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning Church appalls;
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new born Infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

It was the sense of geometry and rhythm that tied me to this poem. From the moment that you hit the bass drum incantation of the first line, where the couplets combine with the evocation of the grid of legal and physical enclosures that defined life in London, you are lost in an environment that is larger than you, without beginning or end. It is a truly anti-human place, one created by the “mind-forg’d manacles” of the industrial revolution.

The violence of this poem is palpable as the desire in Marvel's. London is a place of weakness, woe, fear, signs, curses, blood and death. The whole cycle of man's life is here, from birth to death, and all of it is one shout of anguish against containment –a

structure the poem by its very language makes evident. If the last poem expanded our purview, even when we confronted our limitations, this one drills down into the core not only of our societal evils, but also into the essential fact of modern life: that we are always everywhere contained by the world we have made, and alienated from each other and the world we imagine once existed. The Humber promised leisure, love and defiant connection; the Thames here is contained and its bondage confronts us with the true result of our hubris. As Martin Heidegger told us, all of our reality has become nothing but arranging and re-arranging of goods and people. We are but “standing reserve.”

You will not be surprised that I read such poems spatially. The poetics of space are for me very real. It is the ability to fix in sticks and stones, steel and concrete, urban grids and suburban sprawl, the realities of everyday life, that is the power of architecture and art. It is the ability to make that power something we can become aware of that is its poetry, but poetry speaks more beautifully and harrowingly of architecture than architecture opens up to poetry.

I leave you, however, with hope, or at least with the slippery enigma of art, which for me is the same thing. It is a poem I believe my father pointed out to me when I first showed more than a passing interest in museums. But it might also have been when, in my sophomore enthusiasm at discovering popular culture, I spoke of the “oh wow” moment I had noticed in great American films: the moment when James Dean, in “East of

Eden,” realizes that his brother’s girlfriend loves him, while they are sitting on a Ferris wheel, or when Marlon Brando, in “On the Waterfront,” becomes aware of his brother’s betrayal. All they can say is: “Wow.” That inarticulate moment, so far outside of the world of language, is exactly what the language of poetry makes possible. It is the wonder it teases out of our everyday world or, with strangely greater effort, out of art. It is the wonder, here is “Musee des Beaux-Arts,” by W.H. Auden, that transforms our world into art, but only for a fleeting moment, for poetry goes back to silence, turns into nothing but pure potential, the moment after it is spoken, and the Ohio River slides by outside, with world enough and time:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters; how well, they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse

Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away

Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may

Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone

As it had to on the **white** legs disappearing into the green

Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen

Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,

had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.