

THE MUSIC OF TIME

POETRY IN THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

JOHN BURNSIDE

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And yet sometimes
The wheel turns of its own weight, the rusty
Pump pumps over your sweating face the clear
Water, cold, so cold! you cup your hands
And gulp from them the dailiness of life.

Randall Jarrell

A NOTE TO THE READER

SINCE WORK BEGAN ON this book, five years ago, the original project – a personal history of twentieth century poetry – has changed considerably; so much so that, when talking about it, I find myself resorting to John Donne's 'simply perfectest' definition, that 'can by no way be express'd but negatives'. In this manner, I can say that *The Music of Time* is not a literary history, or even a survey, in the usual sense; nor is it a textbook or primer on how to read certain poets. I would even add that, while it is tempting to describe these vagabond and occasionally digressive chapters as a personal meditation on a life spent reading and writing poetry, and leave it at that, I would be doing an injustice to an underlying, if occasionally elusive current that I hope will finally emerge from these pages, a current whose central ideas are gradually revealed using the somewhat unconventional methods of investigation (lyrical, imaginative, anti-reductive) that they propose.

In short, my approach has been to step outside the more academic analyses of literature, and write about poetry responsively, which is to say, to discuss poems and ideas of poetry as they inform, not just 'the life of the mind' but also my own day-to-day existence. For this is where poetry works best, in what Randall Jarrell calls 'the dailiness of life' – and what the poets discussed here have achieved, in the face of societal violence, rapid change, environmental degradation and the mechanisation of almost everything, is a continuing, if sometimes minority, culture in which an appreciation of the everyday, and of the 'irrational' (beauty,

for example, or the sense of wonder) provides, not only a counter to overly mechanistic, procedural thinking, but also a basis for what might be described as a science of *belonging*. Returning to Donne's expression by negatives, I am happy to admit that this book is digressive and idiosyncratic, and it is by no means as inclusive as I would have liked (a second volume might include some thoughts on French and Polish poetry, both regretfully omitted here, as well as work from China, Canada, Ghana, Australia – the list goes on). Nevertheless, I dare to hope that these, and its many other flaws, may be partly offset by the experimental nature of the approach, and the audacity of an argument that proposes, not only that poetry is not a minority or elitist art, but is, in some form or another, the central pillar of any nurturing culture. Or, to paraphrase Stephen Spender, the struggle of any society – against external powers, and sometimes with itself – is a struggle for the conditions in which the writing and reading of poetry are not only possible, but also prized.

INTRODUCTION

[...] it has been shown, as well as the narrow limits assigned them would permit, that what is called poetry, in a restricted sense, has a common source with all other forms of order and of beauty, according to which the materials of human life are susceptible of being arranged, and which is poetry in an universal sense.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

AS A YOUNG MAN in the 1910s, the poet and travel writer Osip Mandelstam joined the Acmeist group, a loose affiliation of writers who met regularly at St Petersburg's Stray Dog Café until the authorities closed it down in 1915. The group's founders, Nikolay Gumilev and Sergei Gorodetsky, set as their programme a rejection of the decadence and excess of the Symbolist Movement, with its exclusivist mystique rooted in the music of Wagner, Nietzschean philosophy and the writings of Fyodor Tyutchev, whose finest work, 'Silentium', was a key influence:

How can a heart expression find?
How should another know your mind?
Will he discern what quickens you?
A thought once uttered is untrue.
Dimmed is the fountainhead when stirred:
drink at the source and speak no word.

Live in your inner self alone
 within your soul a world has grown,
 the magic of veiled thoughts that might
 be blinded by the outer light,
 drowned in the noise of day, unheard ...
 take in their song and speak no word.¹

This mood of mystical withdrawal from the public realm, compounded with the sometimes wilful obscurity of second-wave Symbolists such as Vyacheslav Ivanov and Andrei Bely, provoked Gumilev and his friends (the group included such future luminaries as Mikhail Kuzmin, Anna Akhmatova and Georgiy Ivanov) to propose a new poetic art, based on clarity of expression and a new foregrounding of the image as subject, that invites comparison both with the poetic philosophy of Ezra Pound and T. E. Hulme, and with the William Carlos Williams of 'The Red Wheelbarrow'. Like many such groups, however, the Acmeists were something of an odd mix, aligning Gumilev's high rhetoric and penchant for exoticism with the tight, near-Minimalist work collected in Mandelstam's first volume, *Stone* (first published in 1913), and Akhmatova's elegant and economical love lyrics. Mandelstam was never entirely comfortable with the group, and eventually he set out on his own path, but before he did so, he wrote a manifesto-like document, *The Morning of Acmeism*, in which he declared: 'To exist is the artist's greatest pride. He desires no other paradise than existence [...] Love the existence of the thing more than the thing itself and your own existence more than yourself: that is Acmeism's highest commandment.' It is a remark that he is reported to have made at public meetings on several occasions, however, that most resonates for us now. Asked to define the essence of Acmeism, Mandelstam's response summed up everything he believed about this new, post-Symbolist, philosophically engaged aesthetic: Acmeism, he said, was 'homesickness for a world culture'. That may have pleased at least some of his audience, but it was anathema to the new Bolshevik regime – and most of Acmeism's principal adherents soon fell to the Bolshevik

Terror. (Gumilev, who made no attempt to conceal his contempt for the Bolsheviks, was executed in 1921; Ivanov went into exile, where he waged a long-running dispute with Nabokov; Anna Akhmatova survived, but the regime punished her indirectly by persecuting her son with Gumilev, Lev Nikolayevich, who would spend the best part of eighteen years, off and on, in Stalin's labour camps.)

Mandelstam, meanwhile, quickly attracted the attention of the NKVD and, though it has been claimed that he was protected, briefly, by Stalin himself (who had started out as an aspiring poet), he suffered a series of exiles and imprisonments before finally vanishing in the 1930s into a Soviet labour camp, where he is presumed to have died. A few years before that, from yet another period of exile in Voronezh, he would write a poignant rider to that youthful expression of love for the mere fact of existence, a love that transcends even the attachment to self. 'My desire', he said, 'is not to speak about myself but to track down the age, the noise and the germination of time. My memory is inimical to all that is personal.'² It was a sentiment that he had expressed in various forms throughout his brutally truncated career, perhaps most elegantly in the 1923 poem 'The Age':

To free the age from its confinement,
 To instigate a brand new world,
 The discordant, tangled days
 Must be linked, as with a flute.*

Sadly, the new world that Mandelstam had in mind was as different from Stalin's as it was possible to be. Yet that image of the flute remains and, occurring as it does in lines by a poet who, in 1914, could capture the song of 'orioles in the woods' in a string of singing vowel sounds,[†] it seems not overly fanciful to imagine

* Translation by Marc Adler.

† Есть иволги в лесах, и гласных долгота
 В тонических стихах единственная мера,
 Но только раз в году бывает разлита

that we can hear that flute still, weaving the tangled days together, transforming the noise of time into a kind of music.



As the grinding wheels of the Industrial Revolution transmogrified into the ever-shifting cityscapes of modernity, the noise of time would be made manifest in any number of ways, of which the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution were among the most extreme. Anna Akhmatova captured it from the Russian perspective in a poem that marked the outbreak of war with Germany, 'In Memoriam, July 19, 1914':

The hushed road burst in colors then, a soaring
Lament rose, ringing silver like a bell.
And so I covered up my face, imploring
God to destroy me before battle fell.

And from my memory the shadows vanished
Of songs and passions – burdens I'd not need.³

Here, Akhmatova seems to be saying, the preoccupations of her youth (poetry, love, music) would no longer be required, as new burdens were imposed on a desperate people. Those earlier burdens had been light, part of the dailiness of life – and they had been of her own choosing. Now, the pressure was to come from outside, and it would not be optional.

Meanwhile, the chaos being wrought by war, revolution and the rise of fascism would give rise to similar sensations of helplessness and inevitability elsewhere. All of a sudden, history, once conceivable as an ordered narrative, was transformed, in Walter Benjamin's vision, into tragic allegory:

В природе длительность, как в метрике Гомера.

Как бы цезурою зияет этот день:

Уже с утра покой и трудные длинноты,

Волы на пастбище, и золотая лень

Из тростника извлечь богатство целой ноты.

The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair as to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress is this storm.⁴

Elsewhere still, as the cacophony persisted and grew, conservative writers and artists tried to draw together the wisps of an acceptable canon, in hopes of securing some fragments they might shore against their ruin. That fear of cultural collapse was to continue well into the century; here, for example, the English artist-writer Wyndham Lewis recalls his own formulation of a highly Eurocentric canon in his autobiographical sketch *Rude Assignment*:

Darwin, Voltaire, Newton, Raphael, Dante, Epictetus, Aristotle, Sophocles, Plato, Pythagoras: all shedding their light upon the same wide, well-lit Greco-Roman highway, with the same kind of sane and steady ray – one need only mention these to recognize that it was at least excusable to be concerned about the threat of extinction to that tradition.

For a difficult period, it seemed clear that the response of art to the pandemonium of modernity would be entirely defensive, the proposal of a self-defeating museum culture, with values defined by a polite coterie of patrons and trustees who could not see beyond their own social class and culture (or, for that matter, gender and race).

This conservative retreat to higher ground was not universal, however. In fact, many poets relished the challenges of modernity and regarded the winds of historical change as advantageous

to the creation of new ways of seeing, breaking the limits that had been imposed by the class and societal boundaries that men like Wyndham Lewis thought so essential to the continuance of a laudable culture. William Carlos Williams, a keen socialist who spoke out against the poverty and degradation he saw as a general practitioner in Rutherford, New Jersey, spoke of a new 'American idiom' that would allow poets in the United States to break away from received European forms (as a previous generation of innovative prose writers, such as Melville and Hawthorne, had done in fiction, creating a new kind of novel as they went), while an intrepid band of mostly self-educated working-class writers came to feel sufficiently liberated by social change to write and publish in areas and outlets they had rarely been able to access in the past. As they did so, they were eager to offer the social critiques that had been suppressed for so long; here, for example, Clifford Chatterley's prejudice against working people is allowed to speak for itself, in D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*:

And don't fall into errors: in your sense of the word, they are not men. They are animals you don't understand, and never could. Don't thrust your illusions on other people. The masses were always the same, and will always be the same. Nero's slaves were extremely little different from our colliers or the Ford motor-car workmen. I mean Nero's mine slaves and his field slaves. It is the masses: they are the unchangeable.

And here is Langston Hughes, in a poem simply entitled 'Question', subjecting race relations in America to a new kind of scrutiny:

When the old junk man Death
 Comes to gather up our bodies
 And toss them into the sack of oblivion,
 I wonder if he will find
 The corpse of a white multi-millionaire
 Worth more pennies of eternity,
 Than the black torso of
 A Negro cotton-picker?⁵

At the same time, all across Europe and the Americas, those who could entertain notions of tradition that were more fluid than those espoused by the old guard started to assimilate the changes and to respond imaginatively (as opposed to merely reacting). Thus, while he could be accused of the benefit of hindsight, the poet Eugenio Montale was only summarising a lifelong commitment to intellectual integrity when he described (and carefully qualified) this response in his Nobel speech of 1975: 'I have always knocked at the door of that wonderful and terrible enigma which is life', he said, going on to add: 'I have been judged to be a pessimist, but what abyss of ignorance and low egoism is not hidden in one who thinks that Man is the god of himself and that his future can only be triumphant?'



But how had time come to be so noisy in the first place? There had always been wars; there had always been poverty and prejudice. What had been lacking, however, was the intense regulation of day-to-day life that the *measurement* – and, eventually, the industrialisation – of time imposed.

The first human communities had calculated time, on one level, by looking up to the sun and the moon and, on another, by observing the changes in the natural world as they happened, sometimes in minute detail. Even later, when time was measured by human-made devices, the images that governed the hours and days were organic: the flow of water in a clepsydra, the movement of a shadow across the face of a sundial, sand trickling steadily through the neck of an hourglass. The first mechanical clocks did not appear in Europe until late in the thirteenth century, and for a long time they were too large to be located anywhere but in churches and other public spaces. The first pocket watches appeared in the sixteenth century; the first mechanical alarm clock was patented by the French inventor Antoine Redier in 1847. By that time, rumblings from the Efficiency Movement were being heard in the halls of industrial power, and by the 1880s

the new system of scientific management began introducing such 'improvements' in labour practices as Frederick Winslow Taylor's time-and-motion studies. So it was that humanity's experience of measured time progressed from water flowing through a clay funnel to the steady ticking of town hall clocks and, finally, to the digitisation of everything – and as that process continued, our analogues for time and space became more and more remote from the physical world. Alongside the noise of time as manifested in war and the industrialisation of the land, we came to inhabit a world of infinite temporal subdivisions, a lifetime of shift-work and comfort breaks, of upload times and nanoseconds. Now, for too many, the daily round is a long monotone dictated by the mobile phone and the online schedule, a condition of voluntary servitude that allows us, by 'checking in' continuously, to verify the validity of our existence. It is interesting, then, to think that Montale, who so valued the fabric of daily life, should have summarised this condition so perfectly as far back as 1962, when he remarked, in a mood of darkest irony:

It is not true that man is too mechanised, the fact is that he is not mechanised enough. If, one day, he is absorbed and interpenetrated entirely by the universal mechanical order, ideas of freedom and its lack will lose all meaning, for this new man will no longer feel any need to question himself about his destiny, while words like philosophy and art will be forgotten, as the human being (if we can still call him by that name) will come to attain that functional contentment that is the only happiness of which he is capable.⁶

This conclusion was not reached impulsively, or without a long history of evidence, however; what we know most surely about modernity is that it exponentially hastened an industrialisation process that began with the appearance of the Albion flour mills in Lambeth that William Blake so prophetically decried in 'Jerusalem'. Soon Marx and Engels were adding to the prophetic choir,

declaring (in *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848): ‘All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.’ The only valid response to all this noise, however, was not pessimism – an accusation that, in the end, Montale quietly refuted – but that highly singular kind of hope that only flourishes in the absence of optimism. And while this will sound contradictory, it is, nevertheless, significant – for optimism has never been a very sound position from which to work, strategically; it usually operates by blinding us to the real parameters of hope, which only come clear when, as Marianne Moore notes in ‘The Hero’, we have ‘to go slow’:

tired but hopeful –
 hope not being hope
 until all ground for hope has
 vanished; and lenient, looking
 upon a fellow creature’s error with the
 feelings of a mother – a
 woman or a cat.⁷

The twin heroic attributes of which Moore speaks – hope *in extremis* and a form of leniency that is not indulgent so much as informed by a radical responsibility towards our fellow creatures – are the two attributes that strike me as most interesting in the poetry I have chosen, from a wide range of possibilities, to explore in this book.

These poets, to whom I have had sometimes repeated recourse, are rarely optimistic, but they are, nevertheless, creatures of hope, and this is what makes even the least political of them actively dissident, in the best sense of the word. For, unlike optimism, hope is always an act of courage, even when it is contradicted by every rule of logic. Add to this that optimism is a personal concern, while hope is general – and truly inclusive. Optimism speaks of the individual or her kin; hope speaks for the species as a whole.

That said, I have no wish to take issue with Dylan Thomas when he refuses to accept that ‘poets must have positions – other

than upright'.* I agree that what matters most in a poem is its music and how it refreshes the language, strengthening it against the abuses of the unscrupulous and the careless, and allowing it to retain its ability to enchant, to invoke and to particularise in ways that mere denotation, or the sometimes reductive language employed by salesmen, politicians and Gradgrindly industrialists, all too often curtails. The first task, the first impulse, of the poet is an effort at a very specific kind of speech – and, as T. S. Eliot says, in 'Little Gidding': 'Since our concern was speech [...] speech impelled us/ To purify the dialect of the tribe.' Unlike the usual linguistic resources we draw on to describe and delimit and so navigate our environment, that particular form of speech is able to draw on intuition and invocation and all the other as yet unnamed faculties that scientific orthodoxy deems frivolous or unreliable. As Shelley argues, in *A Defence of Poetry*:

Poetry, as has been said, differs in this respect from logic, that it is not subject to the control of the active powers of the mind, and that its birth and recurrence have no necessary connection with the consciousness or will. It is presumptuous to determine that these are the necessary conditions of all mental causation, when mental effects are experienced unsusceptible of being referred to them.

Nevertheless, even poets whose most pressing engagement is with the language are still, by that very token, engaged. To purify the dialect, to enrich the language, to resist those who would let speech slide into mere gossip or drivelling, is also political. To imagine otherwise is to be self-deceived.



* Indeed, discussing the position of Welsh poets in particular during a 1946 radio broadcast, he made what, for many, is so decisive an argument that only the most determinedly ideological reader would seriously dispute him: 'It's the poetry, written in the language which is most natural to the poet, that counts, not his continent, country, island, race, class, or political persuasion.'