

Carol Snow

My Lyric and Time

“...I was faced by the trouble that I had acquired all this knowledge gradually but when I had it I had it completely at one time.”

— Gertrude Stein, “The Gradual Making of The Making of Americans”

“... And you thought,
because you had grown used to other measures,
that this would be for just a little while.
But now you were in time, and time is long.
And time goes on, and time grows large, and time
is like a relapse after a long illness.”

— Rainer Maria Rilke, “Requiem for a Friend” (trans. Stephen Mitchell)

SKETCH

What is done being made?
Your eyes moved over the face of the sketch.

That short poem is mine; and I’ll call this short talk, “My Lyric and Time.”

I think of lyric as a voice enabled by music to enter the stream of time. A voice moving through time and (word by word, phrase by phrase, in its rhythm) moving us through time; a voice singing from point of view, from what Reginald Shepherd calls in his lovely introduction to *Lyric Postmodernisms*, “subjectivity and its discontents.” So that in the lyric poem, the author both conveys and inhabits the work.

I can see that my poems selected for the new anthology not only sing from point of view; “point of view” is often their subject. As in “Prospect (The Graces)” — the earliest of these poems — “...at this distance, I am what: an eye? attention? abstraction? / Null if I do not speak? This distance?”

Another, “Frame” — a complicated description of the reflection in a sliding mirror — is *trapped* in point of view:

“This much of a bicycle: foreshortened handlebars, a section of pitchfork
of frame, a shallow arc of wheel, a bike lock hanging from the handlebars

(all this upside down). I am hidden behind the file cabinet;
the bicycle is hanging from the ceiling but you will not know that.
We are not allowing the whole of the bicycle
In here.”

In these two poems, and in my work in general, I notice that description tends to be of a static object — though watery reflection might jiggle it a little — where the subject matter (content object) does not move through time. Instead, seeing itself is the dynamic principle.

Here is “Pool,” a somewhat later poem. The subject/content is still static (or semi-static: as a work of art?), an Henri Matisse paper cut-out that used to live in New York at the pre-Taniguchi Museum of Modern Art. Now not only the external object but seeing itself is described, so that the subject/content becomes in part ‘seeing itself as a dynamic principle.’¹

POOL

Saw (into) and entered the wide corridor.
(Narrow room.)

Attracted by the promise of the purity of ‘figure and ground.’

“...and the blue beside the white in the striping is the color / of the river Loire when you read about it
in old books...”

Yes, but that stripe or sash of white paper, a scroll
which turned corners — banding walls
‘papered’ with a brownish burlap — was wide, was water.

I have always adored the sea. And now...

And painted blue
paper Matisse had *cut to the quick in color*, he called it, into the contours of portions
of bodies emerging from the — overlaid the — white; blue, whole
silhouettes arched like dolphins, expressing abandon — hovered, overlapping the — almost
abandoning
the frieze, in places:

the frieze adorning the walls recreating Matisse’s dining room.

Yes, but the doorways — so also a stretch of lintel
above which *Women and Monkeys* had hung — had been narrowed, so the area of the room was
contracted.

As time is, in the Museum.

And now that I can no longer...

Walls recreating the walls of his dining room,
where Matisse worked on *The Swimming Pool* only in the evenings.

And time, in the work, is contracted.

*I have always adored the sea, Matisse said. And now that I can no longer go for a swim, I have
surrounded myself with it.*

As white.

Yes, but noticed in one corner an area of white for which blue forms served — not as bodies — as
borders but open: walls of a corridor or banks to a channel
of white, the white itself — ‘broad’ would be a pun — pooled, recognizably
bodily; and then —

where ‘then’ was our seeing and moving closer to see more closely —

where fragments of blue (but almost body almost) fragmented the white so that
neither color was ‘figure’ or ‘ground’ — emblem, banner — anymore, yet. a passage

“And time, in the work is contracted.”

And I come to notice that when I engage with or describe an event in time (rather than an object),
it tends to be epiphany, an instant of insight, sometimes an “oops” moment, not a story unfolding.
(Nor is thought very often transcribed in that “musing” way of thinking through time in a direction
toward conclusion.) When I am faced by the trouble of evoking such a moment and all that
comprised and contributed to it, the problem becomes how to contract, the Stein problem: “...when I
had it I had it completely at one time.”

Wanting to convey everything at once in this way has resulted in interruption, layering,
fragmentation; trying to bring all parts of the poem forward at once, as Cezanne did in painting. In
“Bridge” and in later poems like “Error” and “Bit,” the work starts to include back-story, flashbacks,
illustration, seeming digression but really association — thoughts, quotes, “that occurs to me,”
“which reminds me of” — in order to present the whole. Here’s the opening of “Bit”:

‘A slight’

sounded.

Reverberating—in what box?—or reiterated
—like a booster shot, like the rooster in Bishop—sustained

(this illustrated by my tilting half a glass of orange juice
up over an empty glass—“I’m a little teapot...”;
more precisely: The Mystery Spot, “Cannons ready!” horizon to the rim, *the extreme verge*,
surface tension...

“And then...” That the poems of mine in *Lyric Postmodernisms* are relatively early (five of the seven,
from my first book) became cause for reflection. Whether my work might be moving away from “the
lyric.”

I do know that continuing in the direction of describing the seen, to describing seeing, my work (and
life, I suppose) looked to become a bit of an inward spiraling loop: in danger of observing watching
seeing, attending to listening to hearing (as what is noted and described).

So some newer poems — though still moved toward juxtaposition, quotation, elaboration and
fragmentation — try to engage with more external materials. In each, I’m building a ‘complex’ of
associations rather like Pound in the *Cantos*, though these poems tend to be short and all the sources
are cited. They still provide content, something to read, but perhaps *for* rather than *about* insight;
perhaps the reader herself can have the insight, can provide the dynamic principle.

Seeing takes time, reading takes time; we read *in time* and can only be reading the words where
we are (like hearing in song). Maybe this new work also wants to use time a little differently. It is
still composed, has a musical order and proposed (initial order of) juxtapositions. But it wants to
be about “knowing everything at the same time” rather than to be singing a favorite song; not to
move through time but to be more like a static object. Since on the page, the reader can review and
explore and reconfigure and reconsider the still work...

As one views the justly famous fifteen-stone *Karesansui* (dry-landscape “Zen garden”) at Ryoan-ji
Temple, which in part inspired these poems, and about which — in “Dream Song 73: *Karesansui*,
Ryoan-ji” — John Berryman wrote: “Differ them photographs. Plans lie. How big it is! From
nowhere can one see *all* the stones.”

I’ll close with one of the “Karesansui” poems and with the following questions: Is there still point of
view? Can this be considered “lyric”?²

ABOVE

“but helicopters or a Brooklyn reproduction
will fix that—”

“I was faced by the trouble that I” — “Differ them photographs,” — “had acquired all this knowledge” — “plans
lie:” — “gradually
but” — “how big it is!” — “when I had it” — “...—from nowhere” — “I had it” — “can one see” — “completely”
— “*all*” — “at one time.” — “the stones—”

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¹“...and the blue beside the white...” is from Robert Hass’s “Not Going to New York: A Letter.”

²The epigraph to “Above” is from the same John Berryman “Dream Song.”

NOTES:

Berryman, John. *The Dream Songs* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1959): “Dream Song 73: *Karesansui*, Ryoan-ji”

Hass, Robert. *Praise* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1974): “Not Going to New York: A Letter”

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, edited and translated by Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1982): “Requiem für Eine Freundin”

Shepherd, Reginald, editor. *Lyric Postmodernisms* (Denver: Counterpath Press, 2008): “Introduction”

Snow, Carol. *Artist and Model* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990): “Frame”; “Prospect (The Graces)”

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reprinted by permission.

— *For* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2000): “Pool”

— *The Seventy Prepositions* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2004): “Bit”

— “Above” subtext: Epigraph) John Berryman, “Dream Song 73: *Karesansui*, Ryoan-ji” Line 1) Gertrude Stein,
“The Gradual Making of The Making of Americans”; Berryman; Stein; Berryman; Stein Line 2) Stein, continued;
Berryman; Stein; Berryman; Stein; Berryman; Stein; Berryman; Stein; Berryman

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Stein, Gertrude. *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, Carl Van Vecten, ed. (New York: Random House, Inc., 1962): “The
Gradual Making of The Making of Americans”