

Kenneth Lincoln: On "In a Station of the Metro"

How do we think about this? The first step, after hearing the poem? seeing and registering its lines? would be listening for the syllable, the opening phoneme "In" joined with the following "a." We have some forty phonemes or pure sounds to work with as English syllables? a scale of notes half the range of an ordinary piano? composed of consonants, vowels, and double vowels called diphthongs (nineteen English vowels in all, compared with seven in Italian). These are the building blocks of language, some languages using fewer than thirty phonemes (eleven in Polynesian), others more than eighty (141 in Khoisan or "Bushman").

With Pound's title, "In a Station of the Metro," the vowels hold sway. The inner sounds come forward along the roof of the mouth to peek: the first syllable seems to get more weight or stress, as we normally say "In a," so the phrase rocks down and forward, as might the rest of the title. This is not the way iambic English normally sways, but stress-slack trochaically, "In a Station of the Metro." Catchy as that close analysis may be, it's not poetic. Where's the dithyrambic variable? An alternative rhythm is set up through ordinary syntax in the sweep of the title? how we would normally phrase it, if asked directions, say, by an American tourist in Paris. "In a Station of the Metro," the vernacular cadence has it. Here syntax works through syllables gathered in sequence. These phrasings cadence minims, countering formal inclinations close-up with longer-range idiomatic patterns; and this cadencing leads quickly to a third variable, structure, in what versifiers call the poetic line (or sentence to a prose writer). Where the line ends is significant, at least where it seems to pause, visually, for beneath the voice the given course of the eye may be countered by the ear's vernacular norms. Syllable and syntax tense within structure, and a principle begins to emerge: stress and counterstress, form and usage, close look and perspective listening. This syncopation leads toward what we might call the periodicity of art, or patterned variation. Such internal sway makes it challenging and interesting and, for that matter, appealing.

So far we are still feeling for a drift in Pound's title, which seems to be approachable with at least two cadences: formally, a series of trochees falling in four beats, "In a Station of the Metro," and more informally, "In a Station of the Metro," two long anapestic phrasings that rise, cluster, and fall gracefully to the first line. The reverse cadences work with and against each other, creating a dynamic that makes for the tensile strength of the rhythmic line. As Boas speaks of literary style in all poetry, "repetition, particularly rhythmic repetition, is one of its fundamental, esthetic traits." Dithyrambic rhythm, stressed repetition with variation, holds sway, singing with a different heart.

Reversing metric tilt, the verse description thickens in the opening line: again, the syllables could group iambically in six-beat phrasings, "The apparition of these faces in the crowd," but this seems stiff, too formal. The idiomatic ear takes over to adjust the pattern to our liking, "The apparition of these faces in the crowd"? a lovely sprung rhythm, mysteriously cadenced, three extended anapestic phrasings with half the full stresses.

Is there an emerging fourth variable, one we could call style, everything from diction, to metrics, to shaped or formed structures, as well as the artist's personage in the wings? At first, with the title, the style seems neutral, even a bit flat: a place, underground, of public transport,

in diction and rhythm no more elegant sounding than pedestrian directions. But as the title flows haiku-like into the first line, we come up, metrically and etymologically, against the Latinate "ap-par-i-tion," which seems to pick up the diction and rhythmic pace, to pop up phonemically with the double ps. The buried off rhyme between "i-tion" and "fac-es," set against the compact density of "crowd," complicates and gives texture to the lines, all the while remaining relatively ordinary in setting, language, and technique. So the style is normative, even vernacular, but capable of opening up, thickening, deepening, as long as style never calls attention to itself over the terms of the poem itself?its own being, apart from the maker.

So far, so good, perhaps, but halfway in the couplet blossoms: "Petals on a wet, black bough." The poem turns radically on the semicolon; the line pause, or break, seems to twist everything around and back on itself, structurally causing us to read the apparitional faces as an image or sign, a simile (faces like petals) or symbol (petals of faces). Here the sounds-as-syntactically-structured-signs begin to makesense; that is, they move toward meaning. "The image is itself the speech," Pound insists. "The image is the word beyond formulated language." If "faces" may suggest "petals," and a metro station in a French (not too foreign to Norman English) city may occasion a poetic vision, what does it all add up to? Be patient, test the ear and eye: Is the syntax of the first word iambic, as ordinarily spoken ("Petals"? never in a hundred years), or trochaic, " Petals on a wet, black bough"? That's better, but seems still a bit too regular, too monotonous. The ear must override the routine mind's-eye and vary the stress, to adjust a formal mishmash, as so, " Petals on a wet, black bough." That's at least more metrically engaging, with the trochee-become-dactyl giving way, somewhere in the cluster of unstressed syllables, to the reasserted iambs in the second and third phrases.

Something is still amiss, the pattern is not quite taut. What if the regular expectations of one pattern repeating another slough off, and we hear normative voice emphasis, against drilled image closure, weighting all three last syllables??"Petals on a wet, black bough." It's irregular, but arresting, powerfully sprung into place. The line seems to hang petal-like, about to fall; on a syllabic or phonemic level, the last vowels moan, "eh" "ae" "ow" and the dental t clangs off the labial b as the plosive k cuts off before the second labial b. This is the musical equivalent of thirds, fourths, fifths, and diminished sevenths chorded into an arrhythmic cadence. The last word, "bough," hangs there, suspended, no consonant to nail it down, unforgettable. All this is achieved by reversing the iambic expectation with a trochee, "Petals," then reversing that with an anapest, "on a wet," trying to right the line's rhythm, then drilling the eidetic image to a close, " black bough." The imploded spondee fairly crackles at the edges and vowels out woefully in the middle of words. The syllables pace sequentially together through space, measured in the time it takes to read them, and at the same time the sounds radiate larger and smaller fields of energy, three-dimensionally, like tiny fireworks shooting off in the sky. It feels like connecting the dots of a child's coloring book, only to find Van Gogh's Starry Night bursting off the page. Minus the closing dental, "bough" almost rhymes with "crowd," positionally above it. This creates a couplet effect, an attempt to couple, at least, against the dissonant tension working the lines. Pound tries to explain by analogy, "my experience in Paris should have gone into paint. If instead of colour I had perceived sound or planes in relation, I should have expressed it in music or in sculpture."

Beyond a native poetics, there's something Eastern behind the Western surface of all this. Structurally, a proportional metric cadences the lines, beginning with the title, syllabically 8-12-7, supra-metrically 4-6-4, and metrically normative as 2-3-3. Haiku syllables run 5-7-5, more or less proportionate to Pound's freer construction. So Confucius complements Homer, The

Analects adds to The Odyssey, something deeper in the human psyche circles the globe. The near couplet draws all poetry closer, aesthetically, in a manner of speaking, ethnic or our own. Pound stands somewhere in the middle as global translator. A Westerner born in Hailey, Idaho, graduate of Penn with Williams and Hilda Doolittle, expatriate back to the European classics, highbrow to the art of London, Paris, and Venice; then in the middle of his life, an alleged war subversive, convicted of lowly treason, imprisoned for twelve years in a Maryland mental institution, released to return to Italy, where he lived out his life twenty more years, writing cantos in silence. Such is the man behind the near couplet.

What can we say about early-twentieth-century American verse, by way of Pound's example, and ethnopoeitics? "I think these examples demonstrate," Boas admits, "that it is not easy to discover from published material the stylistic pattern of primitive narrative. Sometimes the rendering is bald and dry owing to the difficulties of expression that the interpreter cannot overcome; sometimes elaborated in a superimposed literary style that does not belong to the original." Yes, the crossover difficulty is immense, but let's hazard some provisional guidelines about modernism, as Boas does about oral translations into print. Rejecting a "rather smarmy" Victorian aesthetics, the new American poetry is microsyllabically concise, even minimalist?cut in Fenollosa's term for ideogrammatic diction, sprung in Hopkins's term for meter, even thrust past conventional rhythm, as Pound argued the vortical trochee's heave against built-in iambic conventions?but still patterned in its own native poetics. Modernist verse is sometimes near-rhymed, as in Dickinson's "success in Circuit," slant telling; almost pairing, the near verse remains startling, arresting, thoughtful, though shy of "visionary" in the Romantic sense. Formally, Pound's two lines break into a hexameter-tetrameter couplet, neither heroic nor coupling, but appositional, the images of faces and petals working by analogy. "So we get mimesis without the cosmic designs that once made it meaningful," Donald Wesling concludes of modernist "organic vitalism" in The Chances of Rhyme. "The artist imitates that which is within the thing, not, as in a copy, in the spirit of idle rivalry, but, *natura naturans*, grasping the process of the thing through sympathetic identification. Thus the writer will convey to us his sense of order through the order of his syllables."

The six-four couplet structure tilts and rebalances, off and leaning back into pattern, completing the ten-stressed meter of an older, evenly accented and rhymed "heroic" couplet. Contrasts are key within the patterns. The artist places a natural, even classical, image of blossoms against obdurate urban modernity, a "station" of the "metro" (commuter station of the secular cross). Still, an ancient nature blossoms from the dank roots and rails of the city. The diction hovers in some middle range, not too fancy, never overstated, echoing voices of the people, yet concentrated into urgency, depth, intensity of feeling. Disillusion pitches against true illusion, skepticism against belief. Communal transcends personal. The upright lyric I is suspect: this is not the self-construct of Wordsworth, Emerson, Tennyson, or Hopkins, but *dramatis personae* or ironic mask (the dramatic monologues of Browning, Poe, and Hardy anticipate early modernists Frost, Eliot, and Stevens). The first-person eye dissolves into more inclusive consideration, an indirect, hard-worn eye, back to the masses, back to the common tribe.

"In a poem of this sort," Pound says, "one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective." What does the poet mean by this, what does the poem signify, finally what's its sense? Perhaps something about the ghosts of people in crowds, dim-lighted, massed in public transit, going somewhere, but really nowhere, given the mortal condition. A minor epiphany springs back with nature's petals in season?set against the unseen trunk of a massive, rooted blossomer

whose rain-soaked limb, dark against the darkness, backgrounds the lights of petaled faces, commuting to work, on the brink of war, anonymously together, going home. The fine points are crucial. "An epic diffusiveness," Boas discovers among swirling particulars, "an insistence on details is characteristic of most free primitive narrative." As Two Shields sang with a bear's heart, "a wind from the north comes for me."

Pound may have been thinking of Eurydice in hell, Kora underground (as was his rival-friend Williams at the time) , and the Orphic mystery cults that sprang up around loss and recovery. Early Greeks saw the elegiac celebration of gain-in-loss through the stories of Orpheus, losing Eurydice looking back, torn apart by jealous would-be lovers and thrown into the river, where his head kept singing of his beloved and charmed all the plants and animals to come down to the waters: Perhaps. Pound may have been foreshadowing Yeats's "O chestnut-tree, great rooted blossomer, / Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?" in "Among School Children." Or his moment may have been simply a vision of color, a preverbal insight, a visitation. That's one of the secrets of good literature: there's always more to be considered beyond the parsing, assumptions to be revised, mysteries.

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