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English 119

September 20, 1993

### A Time to Mourn

Funerals and memorial services are for the living, the cliché goes. They are an organized way to express grief and put it behind us, a way to stop thinking about the past (“Remember when...?”) and the future (“She could have been...”) and return to the present in which we must live. In “When Lilacs Last by the Dooryard Bloom’d,” Walt Whitman conducts such a memorial service, forcing himself and his readers to cease grieving for Abraham Lincoln and move toward a future worthy of Lincoln’s efforts, as a way of keeping the fallen President’s memory perpetually present. Whitman reinforces this determination to leave the past behind by repeatedly manipulating verb tenses throughout the poem.

The poem begins in the sad past of 1865, when lilacs “bloom’d,” Venus “droop’d,” and the nation “mourn’d” for the fallen president (“Lilacs” 1-3). Immediately Whitman uses tense to force his readers to leave the past behind by reminding us that “Ever-returning spring” brings a “trinity sure” to mind: lilacs, the star, and the memory of Lincoln. Moreover, like the Holy Trinity of Christian symbolism, this trinity exists in the present, always the same, always true, always with us. The symbol representing the truth is described in the present tense: “...near the white-wash’d palings, / Stands the lilac-bush” (12-13, emphasis mine). And, in affirmation of the present, the narrator tells us that

“a sprig with its flower I break” (17) at the same time that the hidden hermit thrush “sings by himself a song” (22). In choosing the present tense to describe these eternal symbols, Whitman reminds us that truth and love are timeless.

The lilac and birdsong prompt the narrator to remember Lincoln’s funeral procession, with a grief so real that past events seem to become real in the present. Amid positive images of birth-budding violets, sprouting grain, and blooming trees, “night and day journeys a coffin” (32). The narrator’s present-tense report makes this stark contrast seem as if he had just now observed it; the coffin “passes,” it “journey[s], and he “give[s]” it the spray of lilac (stanza 6). His memory keeps these past actions alive.

Again the narrator gathers his composure and forces his attention back away from the past by choosing the present tense. He assures that he does not mourn for Lincoln alone but for everyone who has died in the past: “Blossoms and branches green to all coffins I bring” (47); “I cover you with roses and early lilies, / ...I break the sprigs from the bushes” (50, 52). But his grasp on the present is still weak, and his memories again draw him back, as he turns to address the evening star: Now I know what you must have meant a month since I walk’d” (56). He tells the thrush “I hear, I come presently...” (68), “But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain’d me” (69). Memories of the fallen president, “the dead one there I loved” (71), make the future without Lincoln seem overwhelming; the poet shifts into the future tense as he wrestles with the impossibility of finding a suitable way to mourn his lost leader (Stanza 10).

Whitman’s solution to this dilemma is to escape out of time entirely. He poses the question “how shall I warble for the dead one there I loved?” (71) and answers in phrases *without* verb tense—fragments that use present participles to construct a timeless picture

of the vital, growing America that was Lincoln's dream and will be his best monument:  
 "growing spring and farms and homes," "the fresh sweet herbage under foot," and above  
 all,

the city at hand with dwellings so dense, and stacks of chimneys,  
 And all the scenes of life and the workshops, and the workmen homeward  
 returning.....

The varied and ample land, the South and the North in the light, Ohio's  
 shores and flashing Missouri....

The miracle spreading bathing all, the fulfill'd noon,

The coming eve delicious, the welcome night and the starts,

Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land. (87-98)

To celebrate this escape out of time, the poet returns to the present tense and encourages the thrush to sing on. The bird's carol uses present tense to remind us that death is always with us, just as are life and joy, the objects of human curiosity, day and night. But the song's calm acceptance of death sends Whitman's memory back to the past one last time, to a month before Whitman's death and a night when Whitman found himself at the edge of a marsh, listening to another thrush, smelling lilacs and watching the evening star. That night Whitman had thought the thrush "sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I love" (128) in memory of the soldiers who died during the Civil War—the men whom Whitman had nursed and whose sufferings he describes so graphically (171-184).

This memory, underscored by the thrush's song, "sadly sinking and fainting...and yet again bursting with joy" (190), is transformed, just as Whitman would later claim

Lincoln's death had been, into one of those "climax moments on the stage of universal Time...suddenly ringing down the curtain" (*Prose* 2: 508). At last, through the agency of the thrush's carol, Whitman passes from the grief of the past into the determination of the present and future:

As that powerful psalm in the night I heard from recesses,  
Panting, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves,  
I leave thee there in the dooryard, blooming, returning with spring.

(192-194, emphasis mine)

His grief has been mastered. From here on, he will live and write about Lincoln in the present tense, and, in doing so, will keep the memories of Lincoln, his fallen soldiers, the lilac, the star, and the thrush ever alive, ever well, ever present. The funeral is over; life can go on.

Works Cited

- Whitman, Walt. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." *American Literature: A Prentice Hall Anthology*. Ed. Emory Elliott et al. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991. 1: 2014-2020.
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