

Ode to Bicycles

I was walking
down
a sizzling road:
the sun popped like
a field of blazing maize,
the
earth
was hot,
an infinite circle
with an empty
blue sky overhead.

A few bicycles
passed
me by,
the only
insects
in
that dry
moment of summer,
silent,
swift,
translucent;
they
barely stirred
the air.

Workers and girls
were riding to their
factories,
giving
their eyes
to summer,
their heads to the sky,
sitting on the
hard
beetle backs
of the whirling
bicycles
that whirred
as they rode by
bridges, rosebushes, brambles
and midday.

I thought about evening when the boys
wash up,
sing, eat, raise
a cup
of wine
in honor
of love
and life,
and waiting
at the door,
the bicycle,
stilled,
because
only moving
does it have a soul,
and fallen there
it isn't
a translucent insect
humming
through summer
but
a cold
skeleton
that will return to
life
only
when it's needed,
when it's light,
that is,
with
the
resurrection
of each day.

-Pablo Neruda

Notes

I tend to read a lot of Pablo Neruda simply because I locate his sensibility at the opposite end of the spectrum when compared with someone like Auden. Where Auden is flighty, form-perfect, obscure and intellectual, Neruda is rustic, free-flowing, grounded in reality and direct. It is precisely for this, this difference in perspective and approach to poetry, that I like Neruda. His poems inform my intelligence and mould my imagination in a totally different way than I'm used to.

Ode to bicycles is one of a collection from the 'Third book of odes' which includes, among others, another favourite called *Ode to a Village Movie Theater*.

Ode to bicycles starts with a few compact lines setting the scene up. I like how, in the first stanza, Neruda immediately creates an expansive feeling of oppressive afternoon heat so much so that you can almost feel yourself squinting your eyes. The usage of the verbs -- 'sizzling', 'popped' and 'blazing' -- is perfect simply because a) they suit their objects wonderfully: 'sizzling road', 'popping sun' and 'blazing maize', and b) these verbs are made to work a lot; they are physical verbs ["that paint a definite picture"](#) (see section 6). And they work well with "field", "infinite" and "empty" to create a visual effect of sun, sweat and a rolling countryside thrown open.

It is in this setting that Neruda introduces his posse of bicycles -- "insects" -- and within a few lines elevates them to a surreal status -- "silent ... translucent" -- ensuring that we'll never look at them the same way. I admire the placement and the use of the metaphor "insects" because it somehow captures the mechanical, oiled and creaky quality that a bicycle has, bringing it to life while keeping the proportions intact -- bicycles are insects on a scale measuring means of transport; small and unobtrusive. Metaphors can make or mar a poem and this is one which immediately raises the quality of the poem by a significant notch. I particularly like how Neruda maintains a) the narrative of him walking and the bicycles passing him by thus retaining the sense of time in the present, and b) that hot sensation ('dry' and 'summer') which conjures up images of muscles pedalling and battling friction. Moreover, the most important adjective, in my opinion, 'translucent', in addition to tying up well with "insects", brings the poem alive, instilling on paper an image of a bicycle glinting in the sun.

Having focussed his poetic camera finely in the first two stanzas, Neruda zooms out, adding other incidental elements to the picture -- workers, girls, factories and other vegetation. This seems to be important in maintaining that magnitude of space introduced in the first stanza, of a sweeping landscape where the eye can see till the horizon, unhindered in its vision. He also seems to say that these other elements are not quite as important as the object of description, the bicycle, which has now gained momentum and whirs as compared to barely stirring the air previously. Neruda also cleverly builds up that thirsty feeling, using "summer" and "midday" quite intelligently. One also gets a social sense of the bicycle -- that it belongs not to the rich, but to the poor, to the young and the physically fit, not to those suited to a pedantic form of life. Another thing to note is the "hard / beetle backs" which sustain the thread of the "insects" metaphor and also lend a quality of hardness to the lives of those who cycle.

Tightly reined in so far, Neruda now lets go in the coda. He makes a few quick switches: from the reality around him into his imagination -- "I thought"; from the sweeping landscape

to the confines of an imagined house/ common room (as hinted at by the door); from day to night. That carefully built up feeling of sun, thirst, sweat and grime is now rapidly quenched, extinguished, with words such as "evening", "wash" and "wine" which seem to instantly cool the poem down, descending it to the lower temperatures of the after-work hours. Neruda facilitates this by evoking "love" and "life" which slow the poem down after the marching motion of the first few stanzas. Having cooled down, Neruda again focusses back on the bicycle and closes exquisitely, knitting it with the "insect" metaphor, bringing it back to life in our eyes, even if it is to show that it is now lifeless, at least temporarily. He infuses a notion of sadness and abandonment -- the bicycles now "waiting / at the door" and then "fallen". The last few lines, in particular, are exemplary, especially "the bicycle, / stilled, / because / only moving / does it have a soul, / and fallen there / it isn't / a translucent insect / humming / through summer / but / a cold / skeleton". The rapid back-and-forth shifting of contrast is breathtaking: "stilled / moving / fallen / humming"; "soul / skeleton"; "summer / cold"; "insect" (alive and warm) / "skeleton" (cold and lifeless) -- a fabulous flourish at the finish.