

Lyric and lyric sequences

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Let us start with a daring question, one that we will try to answer in due course. And the question is: What is lyric?

Books and articles dealing with this issue are hard to find and their conclusions remain elusive. Most turn to the safety of a historical approach quite useful in itself, but leaving everything else less than clear cut. Many seem to be responsible for the easy adoption of romantic criteria, uncritically confining lyric to the expression of human subjectivity. Surprisingly enough such a statement seldom meets with fierce opposition, as if romantic ideology could still rule unchallenged.

When compared to the vast, illuminating bibliography on Drama and Narrative extending from Greek culture to our own days, the bibliography on lyric is brief and unconvincing.

Notwithstanding this obviously discouraging state of affairs, the fact is that people do recognise a lyric piece of writing, and that is fortunate indeed!

If recognition is possible and reading can be enjoyed, then it follows that there must be some perceptible traits in a type of discourse the main description of which apparently defies human intelligence. That is the aim of my lecture but I will have to digress a little before I get to it.

For better and for worse Western criticism is grounded on Aristotle's *Poetics*, and as far as we know, Aristotle did not choose to discuss the lyric instance. In *Metaphysics* his philosophy emphatically points out to movement and energy, in other words, to action, as the kernel of human life and human society. Accordingly, the philosopher's attention centers on the imitation of human actions by means of speech. Hence this criterion leads to a distinction between Narrative and Drama, implying the superiority of the latter, since it comes nearer to human dialogue.

Thus we understand now that such a criterion would lend a poor hand to a kind of speech where action can hardly be found. As a matter of fact a lyric utterance seems to lack action, especially if we take action to mean, as Aristotle has repeatedly enhanced, a coherent plot. As a result of this the Aristotelian tradition has led Western criticism to neglect the lyric genre.

Nowadays Aristotle's classification still holds because its linguistic basis has gained new credibility. The criteria of such a classification, however, and the hierarchy they outline, have lost ground, especially in an era where non-imitative art is deliberately produced.

Anyway, the two traditional modes of uttering human speech — Drama and Narrative — have later on been joined by a third entity — Lyric — which, after all, has nothing to do either with Aristotelic thought or its linguistic recovery. Such an inconsistency doesn't seem to concern contemporary criticism, though I must say I personally find it deeply disturbing.

As early as 1564, Minturno worried about the lack of any explanation for a literary fact that theory totally ignored. He did his best to make room for Lyric within the strict boundaries of mimetic theory. His approach, however, didn't prove relevant though he must be remembered as the first and only one of the few to take interest in the matter.

It is obvious that the theoretical frame we have inherited can hardly deny its Greek sources, so let us tackle the problem, and try to distinguish the main features of a lyric utterance when compared to both Narrative and Drama.

Common speech generally implies dialogue and narration. This fact alone should explain why Drama and Narrative have so easily been traced in literary texts.

Conversely, literary texts very often disclose the expression of intimate feelings and thoughts conveyed in a way that cannot be labelled either as dialogue or narration, although something similar to those procedures may sometimes occur. Let it also be said that it is quite unusual to talk at length about one's intimate feelings and thoughts in front of other human beings. Thus the difference between common speech and a lyric utterance is indeed striking.

Nevertheless, expressing intimate feelings and thoughts is undoubtedly familiar to all of us when carried out in the deep silence of our minds. I do not mean what twentieth century criticism has chosen to call stream of consciousness or its related counterpart, the interior monologue, but a perfectly coherent discourse where difficult conceits are frequently developed and where syntax shows a most intricate though fully equipped completeness. Needless to say, that these mental reasonings may either lend expression to our inmost feelings and thoughts or resort to a fictional mask which takes possession of the silent voice of the I.

Lyric as a literary genre is to the best of my understanding the expression of this third kind of utterance human speech is capable of. We are aware of its existence though common speech seems reluctant to acknowledge it. But we are also aware that extensive mental narratives and continued mental dramatic utterances are possible, though not usual, even if common speech seems to welcome them more easily.

Thus our first step has been taken. It consists of the full recognition of a kind of utterance that from now on we will call lyric. Though it generally takes place in a mental, silent territory, it may and does break into sound. History tells us that lyric utterances have long made their way towards the audience with the support of music. Music has compelled these utterances to acquire a particular kind of intensity and measure; that is, what first looked silent has surrendered to the power of human voice. The matter seems likely to arouse some contradiction, but once we come to the conclusion that common speech makes little room for lyric utterances, it is only natural that an alternative had to be discovered. Music, of course, has proved to be a lasting influence on Lyric, even after the two arts went their separate ways. Yet, though we must acknowledge this undeniable feature, let us proceed. After all, measure and rhythm are not alien to Narrative and Drama as we all know by experience; so they cannot fully explain the lyric mode.

From a linguistic point of view, it seems easy to understand that the lyric utterance reveals itself as *immediate*, that is, it makes no use of an intermediate instance to carry its voice. When compared to Narrative, what strikes us first is the absence of a narrator. When compared to Drama, the lyric utterance seems to flow just as the words of a dramatic character spring out of his or her mouth, with the exception that no character has been presented to impersonate the voice. The voice is there, in direct approach. This must be the reason why the speaking voice is generally taken as the expression of its nearest human support, the author. Hence the persisting belief in its being the expression of human subjectivity, as if human subjectivity could not and would not make use of other kinds of utterance. Hence the biographical phallacies that seem not to be able to tell the difference between reality and a too successful illusion. Hence the inability to recognise fiction in a voice which seems to convey its own truth.

Immediacy is then the most striking feature of the lyric mode.

It is perfectly acceptable to admit that the immediate voice we are listening to may, at any time, introduce a narrator and give place to narration or present characters and make room for dialogue. Nevertheless neither can be held responsible for the basic structure of the utterance. Their appearance will be recognised as merely episodic. Let us call to mind here that Drama often gives way to narration and even to lyric utterances without running the risk of being confused with another mode, just like Narrative may include dialogue by way of direct speech. This doesn't mean that we are shifting from Drama to Narrative whenever narration happens, or that Narrative turns into Drama whenever dialogue breaks, or even that Lyric ceases whenever either narration or dialogue are detected. Narration is not identical with Narrative and does occur outside its scope.

Dialogue clearly differs from Drama, as common speech unmistakably shows. What matters is the recurrent, structuring mode. Once this is recognised, the lion's share consists of mixed discourse.

The first sonnet of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* is a case in point.

Loving in truth, and faine in verse my love to show,
 That the deare She might take some pleasure of my paine:
 Pleasure might cause her reade, reading might make her know,
 Knowledge might pitie winne, and pitie grace obtaine,
 I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
 Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertaine:
 Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
 Some fresh and fruitfull showers upon my sunne-burn'd brain.
 But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay,
 Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Studie's blowes,
 And others' feete still seem'd but strangers in my way.
 Thus great with child to speake, and helplesse in my throwes,
 Biting my trewand pen, beating my selfe for spite,
 'Foole', said my Muse to me, 'looke in thy heart and write.'
 (William A. J. Ringler, Oxford, 1962: 165)

We are faced with an immediate utterance. The voice we are listening to makes no use of any intermediate instance to reach us. Yet, a character is introduced in the last line, and a voice is lent to this character so that it may speak using the direct speech: '*Foole*', said my Muse to me '*looke in thy heart and write*'. In spite of the occurrence of direct speech, no one would deny that the poem belongs to the lyric mode.

If we focus on what we have been reading we will also notice that this sonnet draws a small, but very clear line of action. The lyric 'I' shows itself as a poet who desperately seeks to write love poetry in order to win the affections of the *deare She*, until the Muse gives him some advice.

There is sufficient evidence to help us to realize that lyric poetry includes action and characters. Most of it deals with a thin action that remains far from a coherent plot. Allow me to remind you, however, that some Narrative and Drama offer a thin action too. The reason why it seems difficult for us to be conscious of the tenuous kind of action generally to be found in a lyric piece of writing is grounded on Aristotle's legacy, for it has established the type of plot we are still used to.

As there is action in lyric poetry, so there are characters. Sidney's sonnet offers us three characters: The lyric I which, of course, is the main character, the dear *She*, and the Muse.

In most lyric poems, characters seem hard to find because the great majority is reduced to one character: the immediate lyric I, or lyric voice. Besides, this character — or characters when there is more than one, as it is the case with this sonnet by Sidney — does not follow the kind of presentation we are used to both in Narrative and in Drama. The lyric voice presents itself while speaking, that is, it depends upon its own immediacy.

After careful analysis it becomes clear that several sweeping assertions about the lyric are proven wrong, seem to have been originated by deep prejudice, and that prejudice can probably be traced to the Aristotelian tradition which has penetrated Western criticism so powerfully.

Going back to Sidney's sonnet, a good example, we can easily detect two contradicting points of view. The lyric I and his Muse do not share a common belief. The Muse seems to know better.

Literary criticism has generally handled the question of point of view in very narrow terms. When reading the bibliography on that difficult subject we get the impression that there is no point of view outside Narrative, which, of course, is wrong. Let us not discuss the matter now, at least on theoretical grounds. Instead, let us stress that point of view is always present in human speech, and as such it must occur in all literary modes.

If it seems absent from many lyric poems, that is due to the fact that in most of them only one point of view can be perceived: the point of view of the lyric I, that is, the point of view of the only character in the poem. But never doubt it is there. In some poems the lyric I adopts two conflicting points of view. In a few poems — and Sidney's sonnet is one of them — two characters offer two different points of view. In this particular case the issue becomes more visible. Since the lyric I is either the only or, at least an overwhelming, main character in lyric poetry, his or her point of view prevails.

With the help of Gérard Genette's established terminology, let us also distinguish, within the wide scope of point of view, the eye that sees from the voice that is speaking. It is undeniable that the eye is bound to see *something*, and the voice to speak about *something*. Earl Miner in *Comparative Poetics* (Princeton, 1990) calls this *something* "point of attention".

Bearing this notion in mind, I will try to explain why, in lyric poetry, the ascendancy of the lyric I becomes so complete. In fact, the lyric I proves to be, if not the only, at least the main point of attention. In a great part of lyric poems, the lyric I is his or her own point of attention, that is, both point of view and point of attention converge in the same instance. In Sidney's sonnet, even the Muse's point of view, which seems to disagree with the point of view of the lyric I, — 'Foole' ... 'looke in thy heart and write' — undoubtedly centers on the same point of attention.

Many lyric poems are devoted to the description of the beloved Mistress, that is, the voice of the lyric I reports the observation of another character. The character being described seems to invade the whole poem, and turns out to be the clearly discernible point of attention. Nevertheless the voice we are listening to develops an outstanding point of view which often imposes itself. The voice seems to be more important than the character spoken about, since it shapes the image that is being conveyed to the audience. The viewer overpowers the object submitted to examination. The interaction between point of view and point of attention contributes to the predominance of the lyric I.

Such is the case with the famous sonnet 130 belonging to Shakespeare's sequence: (*The Complete Works*, Oxford, 1988)

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
 Coral is far more red than her lips' red.
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
 I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
 And in some perfumes is there more delight
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
 I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound.
 I grant I never saw a goddess go:
 My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
 As any she belied with false compare.

It is true that, here, the pervading influence of ironic inversion emphasizes a rather uncommon point of view. As a result the lyric I draws attention to itself.

Let us consider, however, another example, sonnet 7 in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (William A. J. Ringler, Oxford, 1962: 168):

When Nature made her chiefe worke, *Stella's* eyes,
 In colour blacke, why wrapt she beames so bright?
 Would she in beemie blacke, like painter wise,
 Frame daintiest lustre, mixt of shades and light?

Or did she else that sober hue devise,
 In object best to knit and strength our sight,
 Least if no vaile those brave gleames did disguise,
 They sun-like should more dazle then delight?
 Or would she her miraculous power show,
 That whereas blacke seems Beautie's contrary,
 She even in blacke doth make all beauties flow?
 Both so and thus, she minding *Love* should be
 Placed ever there, gave him this mourning weed,
 To honor all their deaths, who for her bleed.

In this particular case, in the first quatrain two characters share the point of attention: Nature and Stella, through the metonymy of her eyes. As we can notice, the point of view of the lyric I surpasses the point of attention in so far as it is responsible for a kind of praise which gives full testimony to some particular traits. The character of the speaking voice is mainly depicted by what is being expressed. Relating this sonnet to the first poem in the sequence, a poem we have read a few minutes ago, we come to the conclusion that the poet followed the Muse's advice, since he is writing love poetry. His description of the dear She, now bearing the name of Stella, tells us that he is aware of the literary conventions of his craft. It is the character of a poet that is being depicted, and not merely the character of a lover.

Thus the lyric I overpowers the whole discourse. His or her voice imposes itself by means of its immediacy, and the immediate utterance it implies carries in itself the display of a main character involved in minimal action. The point of view of the main character is predominant, falling heavily on the main character proper. Hence the intensity one generally detects in a lyric poem. This intensity results from a type of concentration difficult to be found elsewhere. The lyric I organizes the whole text, establishing its basic coherence.

This leading instance is, however, a fictional entity. We should bear that in mind, since the power it enjoys reinforces an illusion of truth which has been the source of a considerable amount of mistakes.

Now that we are aware of at least some distinctive features pertaining to the lyric mode, we should be able to understand why a lyric sequence seems to tell a story. This historical genre developed from the original pattern set by Petrarca's *Canzoniere*. This collection consists of a series of poems combined in a given order so that the whole may convey the impression of a continuous meaning. The meaning holds because each poem is part of it and all poems contribute together to extend the almost unsuspected capacities of the lyric mode we were able to discern.

When comparing Narrative with Drama it becomes clear that both can tell a story, though only Narrative can do it according to the narrative mode. We have already seen that a lyric poem has got a minimal action, and at least one character. A lyric sequence provides room for the required development of action and character, since each poem, in an ordered series, adds further elements to those perceived in the previous ones. The complex whole resulting from the connexion of the separate parts conveys the impression of continuity, though each part, in itself, seems to be autonomous and doesn't look like a fragment. It only becomes a fragment when its meaning is analysed against the meaning of the entire sequence. Contrary to Narrative or Drama, the parts of a lyric sequence are complete and make sense in isolation. When put together their meaning changes into an expanded reality.

This meaning results from the transition of one poem to another, following the continuous, ordered series of a considerable number of pieces of writing. If the order were changed, the meaning would be seriously altered, while in Narrative or Drama the plot can be told in a different way and still keep its outline. Of course the action generally displayed by a lyric poem and a lyric sequence is made of indispensable details. Such details cannot be translated into a few traits. They can find its full expression only in the course of an extended continuity.

Let it be understood, however, that this continuity is different from the continuity conveyed by Narrative. There a permanent flux is being delivered, while a lyric sequence is built by means of an ordered series where each unity starts and ends, being followed by the next. This interrupted continuity derives its meaning from both the transition and the break it implies.

There is no doubt that the story a sequence tells is still grounded on the overall tyranny of the lyric I. The major point of view as well as the persisting point of attention fall on this instance. The enlarged extension, however, offers new opportunities. The action can be developed, acquire a remarkable length and include complex turnings. The number of characters may be increased. There is room to explore their featuring and to lend detail to their interaction.

Lyric sequences are thus able to develop, and reinforce the latent possibilities existing in the lyric mode. Hence they provide the clear recognition of action and character in a genre which seemed not to favour either. Maybe Shakespeare's sequence remains the best example of increased action and character by means of the flowing of continuous meaning.

To my mind, lyric sequences are to be taken as the most influent genre that Lyric has ever produced. They are able to further the hidden capacities of lyric poems into unsuspected realms, going well beyond the original limited scope of the lyric mode.

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