

A Sense of Continuity: lyric sequences, dramatic cycles and narrative pilgrimages in late medieval and early modern Literature

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The current assertion that lyric poetry lacks action and a coherent plot is widely accepted within the scope of literary criticism. The same assertion is also frequently used to discriminate between the lyric mode, on the one hand, and the narrative and dramatic modes, on the other. The common reading experience of lyric poetry does not seem to contradict the statements I have just mentioned. In fact, most people believe they make sense.

It is my purpose to give the matter a second thought, and bear evidence of how wrong these confident assertions may eventually prove.

Though many lyric poems are meant to be read in isolation, that is, without being linked to any other piece of writing, in order to create a poetic chain, Western Literature has increasingly developed a remarkable, intricate genre known as lyric sequence, whereas Japanese Literature, for instance, has unfolded an elaborate kind of linked poetry, which has little to do with Western literary practice. In any case, Western lyric sequences and Japanese linked poetry convey a sense of continuity leading to a complex whole where the parts, when taken separately, seem to be endowed with autonomous meaning. This autonomy is, however, merely apparent. The truth is that the meaning changes whenever a new unity is added to the previous ones. The full meaning is provided by the reading of the entire collection.

When we consider Shakespeare's lyric sequence, his *Sonnets*, we soon realise that the text expands into a strong strip of action, and frames several characters. Since there is no doubt we are in the presence of lyric poetry, we must come to the conclusion that the lyric mode, similarly to the narrative and dramatic ones, is a powerful transmitter of action, as far as a coherent plot is concerned.

Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, the outstanding example I have conjured up, definitely throws light on the subject. We should, however, bear in mind that even a short, isolated lyric poem usually displays action, even if the action is minimal.

Let us pay attention, for instance, to the following poem by Emily Dickinson:

Presentiment ... is that long Shadow ... on the Lawn ...

Indicative that Suns go down ...

The Notice to the startled Grass

That Darkness ... is about to pass ...¹

The lyric voice releases a sort of metaphoric definition expanding into descriptive images. It is mainly a description, it is true, but an action is announced: the sun goes down and the darkness is about to cover the grass, as it casts a long shadow on the lawn. The description implies the movement

¹ Vide Johnson, Thomas H. ed. 1958: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 2nd. Vol.. Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 581.

from light to darkness. The startled grass emerges as a character disturbed by unexpected change. Let us not forget that the human feeling conferred to the grass by the adjective “startled” is reinforced by the first term of the comparison where the noun belongs —Presentiment. Human beings experience presentiments and get startled.

Many people will hardly acknowledge an action as thin as the one I have just identified. It is not their fault, after all. Western literary traditions and conventions are grounded on Aristotle’s notion of action as a coherent plot. Such a notion originates in Greek drama and epic, since Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, didn’t take lyric poetry into consideration. It also has something to do with the emphasis bestowed by the philosopher on energy and human society, as well as on logic and matters of coherence. Western civilization tends to admit action in literature only when it takes the shape of a coherent plot after the fashion described by Aristotle. Accordingly, plenty of narratives and dramas flourishing in far-Eastern literatures are labelled as lacking in action. The truth is that this is not exact. Such texts display another kind of action, very distant from our own habits and conventions. And so does lyric.

Therefore, Western civilization is so powerfully addicted to the Aristotelian notion of a coherent plot, that it has compelled lyric poetry to take that shape. The effort met with success, though it had to overcome the limited scope offered by a single lyric poem. Moreover, the task required a series of lyric pieces of writing in order to favour a development of action in the framing of a plot. In other words, a sense of continuity had to be put forth.

Continuity is naturally embodied by narrative and drama. It is not difficult to take advantage of that inherent quality and adapt it to the unfolding of a coherent plot. Narrative tenders a constant *continuum*. Drama sets up a series of related scenes. Lyric sequences set up a collection of related poems in a given order, but with a difference: if one takes a piece of a narrative or a scene in a drama, they look like fragments and lack meaning, whereas a poem in a lyric sequence seems to be complete in itself. It promotes a sort of discontinuous continuity.

The plot or strip of action running through the entire sequence is capable of being perceived but harder to find out, as our reading experience easily tells us. The apparent wholeness displayed by each poem is conveyed by a heap of details covering a very thin line of action. The clearness one is used to in either narrative or drama vanishes. The full meaning of the collection becomes rather elusive. The reader would welcome some help, if only he or she could know how to get it.

At this point I think I can promise some help at hand. The history of the genre fortunately provides for it.

It is well known that the original pattern of the lyric sequence was set by Petrarch in his *Canzoniere* or *Rime Sparse* written in the fourteenth century. Petrarch himself had taken Dante’s *Vita Nuova* as a model, although Dante’s work consisted of a narrative frame where related lyric poems had been inserted. Nevertheless, the invention of a fully lyric sequence belongs to Petrarch, and he must be credited with the achievement of disclosing a plot by means of a collection of related lyric poems set up in a given order.

Was the meaning of the whole harder to grasp than the plot of a narrative or of a dramatic piece of writing? In fact it was, but the late medieval and early modern reader could count on some help that later on would no longer be available.

Petrarch’s lyric sequence was wrapped up in a shared world picture and a familiar spiritual belief. They shaped both the collection and the horizon of expectation of its audience. The pattern of Christian salvation, always present in medieval, theocentric thought, conveyed such a clear meaning to the chain of poems that every reader would easily discern it. Even an early modern, humanistic audience would have been able to notice it almost at first sight, for, according to the zeal of an age of Reformation, a rising anthropocentrism had not completely displaced the overall importance of God and the eternal soul.

So, the pattern of salvation was indeed a preexisting, coherent plot presiding over the particular plot exhibited in the lyric sequence. The implied pattern secured the continuity required by a story. It

also afforded a fixed scheme and a steady outcome. Such a stability was able to give strong support to a wavering structure where each new unity not only contributed to further a general meaning but also to throw it out of balance. The vigour of the pattern would firmly hold beyond all contradiction. The soul's struggle for salvation through love, in spite of earthly frailty, advanced the main action. It shed light on all kinds of details. The hymn to the Blessed Virgin, which closed Petrarch's sequence, acted as a conclusion. Human love could, after all, lead to God and to blessedness.

There is no doubt this frame of belief enhanced the meaning of lyric poetry. It also outlined the remaining literary modes and genres.

Dramatic cycles flourished in the late Middle Ages and early modern period. Their ultimate intent derived from the pattern of salvation through Christ, following a chain of biblical episodes. In this case, each play was set up in a given series, and very much after the fashion of a lyric sequence, each one seemed to be complete in itself. The meaning of the whole, however, far exceeded the meaning of the parts. The preexisting pattern of salvation furthered comprehension, and the illiterate, common people in the audience managed to understand a sometimes rather complex production.

Research gives evidence that the yearly presentation of the cycles did not include all the plays that were part of it. Some of them could be omitted; some would be replaced by other biblical episodes. A few, however, were irreplaceable, such as *The Creation*, *The Fall*, *The Nativity*, *The Crucifixion*, *The Resurrection*. These irreplaceable episodes sustained the framing pattern and guaranteed the backbone of the whole cycle.

Moralities and Interludes did not take the shape of dramatic cycles. Their rather thin plots made their way through allegory according to the Christian pattern of salvation, which greatly helped the audience to understand such an abstract text. But the great cycles produced a sense of continuity far more favourable to the development of a coherent plot.

The late Middle Ages also witnessed the appearance of series of framed narratives following the original model set by Boccaccio's *Decameron*. In this particular case, however, the meaning of the general framing was quite wordy. The conjunction of the different tales did not point to the pattern of salvation, nor indeed to any preexisting plot. There was a movement towards continuity but no obvious intent seemed to be pursued. The realistic impulse of the *novella* tended to overlap everything else and drive the audience away, even when some pious tales tried to improve the moral standard of the collection.

I am sure that you still remember that in the title of this paper I mentioned lyric sequences, dramatic cycles and, let me stress it, narrative pilgrimages. In *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer clearly follows the model of Boccaccio's *Decameron* but he shapes his narrative frame in order to meet the Christian pattern of salvation. The pilgrimage provides for a theocentric axis able to further a general plot shedding new light on each one of the separate tales. The pilgrimage becomes much more than a frame. It turns out to be a framing plot enclosing the whole project, a full warrant of continuity. *The Tales* do not convey the same sort of meaning flowing in lyric sequences and dramatic cycles. Their realistic impulse, their ironic ambiguity, and their astounding variety far exceed the requirements of a coherent plot. But, at the same time, the framing pilgrimage enforces a general meaning the reader cannot afford to neglect.

Coming back to lyric poetry, let me remind you that Renaissance lyric sequences follow the Petrarchan model not only in the use of literary conventions but also because they recall the pattern of salvation, so necessary to the understanding of the whole series. When the fashion declines, the abuse of convention gives way to worn-out pieces of writing. A new world picture is on the verge of making its appearance. The pattern of Christian salvation is no longer in the horizon of the audience's expectation, and the original model can no longer be recognized. Authors and their audiences grow distant from the once shared, and literally omnipresent belief in redemption. The indispensable intertextual relationship with Petrarch is fading away, and the sense of continuity cannot survive the loss of its sustaining pattern. Still, such an agony will not lead to death but rather to transformation. This is an issue I intend to develop as soon as the opportunity comes my way.

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