

## CHAPTER I

*Introduction*

A popular song by Bob Dylan might convey the most knowledge about Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* that many English speakers will ever receive. In a stanza of "Tangled Up in Blue," Dylan sings of encountering a woman who hands him a book of poems; the book was composed by an Italian "from the thirteenth century."<sup>1</sup> Each of the poet's words "glowed like burning coal," flowing from the book's pages, and so exact and authentic did they feel that it was as if they had been inscribed "in my soul from me to you." There is much more to know about Petrarch's poetry, yet the lines by Dylan are really not such a bad start. In the singer's verses, the reading of poetry emerges from a distinct personal encounter; every single word "rings true," corresponds to real or possible experience, transmits an extreme intensity that can be expressed only by a comparison to fire, and yet, as a liquid, cannot be contained on the page. Above all, the words convey an intending of another ("from me to you"), as if this intending had come from oneself. Dylan does not say what he read in the book of poetry, let alone reproduce the words or relate their meaning, but instead he describes their searing effect.

This book is meant to contribute to our understanding of this "doing" that lyric poetry achieves in the late medieval and early modern period, something that we can still sense today. Petrarch's vernacular lyric collection stands as the most successful and influential example of this effect, but he is not alone, and poets after him do not necessarily carry the effect of Petrarch's verses to the same result. The impact of lyric involves experiential intensity, a singling-out of moments, a person, a feeling, oneself, that is produced above all by certain, traceable linguistic means, features of a poetic language, and to a lesser extent, by certain thematic scenarios. These features of language are marginal to, or outside of, what we call the lexical or the semantic, as if the requisite effect could only be achieved through a retreat from the richness of a vocabulary. The effect has to do with a pointing, intending function of language, a designation of a self,

and a designation of another, as something radically singular, that is, as something or someone beyond or simply not encompassed by categories, by attributes shared. And yet we remain in the sphere of decidedly “profane” or secular literature; that is, despite certain linguistic and thematic similarities, we are not in the realm of mystical speech and religious poetry. This lyric is understood as erotic and elegiac, and its objects are not God but a human creature, a beloved, or a “self” in its melancholy.

In the chapters that follow, my readings of the lyric of Petrarch, Charles d’Orléans, Ronsard, and Du Bellay concern what I will call, with some variations, an “effect of singularity.” They need to be situated historically and within the theory of a genre, even in brief and reductive ways, mostly because my introductory remarks will have appeared to many specialists of early modern poetry as blatantly modernist, and perhaps on the naive side. My sense is that attentive readings are the only appropriate means to approach what this poetry is doing, and that linkage to theory and insertion into a broader history of the evolution of the lyric in Europe is not where the strength of my arguments lies. Poets practice a poetry that is not always in strict correspondence to the theory that they themselves may espouse, and in their practice they pick up features of previous poets that are not to be found in a conscious repertory of devices. My readings do take place, however, with an awareness of alternative ones deriving from generic and rhetorical-poetic considerations, that seek to problematize modern sympathy with existential and sentimental elements perceived in lyric of the Renaissance. My impulse is to affirm that while such modern sympathy is problematic, it is justified – more so, perhaps, than our carefully non-anachronistic scholarship has been willing to allow.

### The premodern notion of “lyric”

But let me begin with what above all seems to assign modern views of the lyric of Petrarch and his successors to anachronism. The category – or genre – of “lyric” poetry in premodern times is radically different from the one that is current today. Our notion of the “lyric” is determined by its presence as an element in the formal, archetypal triptych lyric–epic–drama, and by its link with subjective expression. Neither this archetypal categorization nor subjectivity characterize the genre, if one can call it that, before the eighteenth century. In the history of the lyric, the term *lyricus* (from *λυρικός*) was first used extensively to designate a certain type of poet or certain types of poetry in the Augustan period: before then, to the extent that documentation has survived, it was secondary to *μέλος*, describing a

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performance with music and speech, or μελοποιός, its composer. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle is famously silent about lyric poetry, although the philosopher is reputed to have written poetry himself, including hymns and elegies.<sup>2</sup> When Horace and Roman writers following him refer to lyric as a group of types of poems, this group includes hymns (poems celebrating gods or their children), *epinicia* (victory songs, or more specifically celebrations of victorious pugilists and horses), songs of youth’s worries of love, and drinking or table songs.<sup>3</sup> During this same period, too, epideictic rhetoric and lyric poetry came to be intertwined, and the poetry was analyzed according to rhetorical categories and the uses of figures. The most influential discussion of the generic category of lyric, for medieval poetic theory, is found in Diomedes’ *Ars grammatica*: the fourth-century grammarian takes up the Platonic tripartite division of modes of enunciation in poetry – the dramatic or imitative or mimetic mode, in which the poet has others speak (e.g., comedy and tragedy), the narrative mode, in which only the poet speaks (e.g., Hesiod, Virgil’s *Georgics*), and the common or mixed mode, in which both the poet and his or her characters speak (e.g., the *Aeneid* and the *Iliad*).<sup>4</sup> This last mode – not the subjective, “narrative” one – also contains a generic category of “lyric” featuring Horace and Archilochus.

Petrarch’s admiration for Horace as foremost a “lyric” and not a “satiric” poet sets up not only the influence that the Roman poet will exert throughout the early modern period but also the generic sedimentation of the lyric and its connection to the type of poetry that Petrarch will leave to his numerous successors. Through his poetic talents and no small measure of audacity, Horace had claimed to add himself to the canonical list of Greek lyric poets, and his poems constituted a *book*, to be read and not necessarily to be performed.<sup>5</sup> The combined effect of Petrarch’s and Horace’s authority, cemented by late-fifteenth- and sixteenth-century editions, poetic imitations, commentaries, and theoretical discourse, transform the poetic scene of the early modern period.<sup>6</sup> Pervasive rhetorical education allows lyric poetry to be associated with the epideictic genre, which is reinforced in turn by Horace’s thematic characterization of lyric’s objects of celebration. With the progressive but uneven diffusion of Aristotle’s *Poetics* in the sixteenth century, and the concomitant rise in importance of mimesis as a criterion for poetry, Italian commentators attempt to assign a mimetic value to lyric poetry and come up with various solutions, including understanding lyric’s *epideixis*, its praise or blame (or instructing or “moving”), as actions, on the model of tragedy or epic.<sup>7</sup> The objects represented, “imitated” by lyric are often conceived

as the *mores* (customs) and the *affectus* (affects, emotions) of the poet or the person featured in the poem, modeled on the Aristotelian ἦθος (moral character) and πάθος (what a character undergoes, emotions). In any event, for the theorists of the genre attempting to find a place for it within Aristotelian categories, a lyric poem establishes a kind of *fabula*, a fiction.

The best early modern vernacular poets are more at ease imitating Petrarch than, for example, Dante, and, despite the lip service paid to epic, and its very intermittently successful practice, more energy seems to be devoted to the sort of poetry associated with the *Canzoniere*. It is, then, only in the Renaissance that the notion of “lyric” begins to be incarnated in brief fixed forms of poetry and the dominance of themes of love. The organization of the “collection” of lyric poems lends it a pseudo-biographical unity that reinforces the quietly emerging link between the person of the poet and poetic composition and provides the vernacular, given the rarity of truly successful national epic poets, with a certain kind of grand literature. Although medieval grammarians assigned lyric poetry to the mixed category of modes of enunciation, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries attempts were made to juggle the elements on all sides of the classification. Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* is understood at times as letting the poet speak (when he addresses his readership) and then representing the lover (when he addresses Laura), thus conforming to the traditional model, and at other times lyric poetry, including poems of the *Canzoniere*, will be assigned to the simple mode, in which the poet himself or herself speaks all the time. One can argue that, as a third option, those among commentators of Petrarch who deny all auto-biographical content to the *Canzoniere* assign it implicitly to the dramatic mode in which the poet himself never speaks.<sup>8</sup> But clearly the question of subjectivity has become increasingly relevant, and connected to most discussions of the lyric as genre, although the terms in which the discussion is led have little to do with the modern notion of the expression of an experiential, intimate self. Indeed, the construction of an Aristotelian fiction, whether it be in the simple mode, enunciated by the poet himself, or in the other modes, involves “customs” and “affects” which are always understood as permeable to universal evaluation. Rhetoric only reinforces this universalizing tendency within Aristotelian mimesis.

This is the generic, theoretical historical context of the poetry I will be reading; an implicit point of this book is the insufficiency of a theory that relies on rhetoric, modes of enunciation and modes of mimetic representation to comprehend the striking effect of singularity of the lyric of this time. That is, we will see that poetic and rhetorical theory is unable to

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account for what is *happening* in the poetry of Petrarch and in the practice of many of the best early modern poets.

**Contemporary vs. early modern vs. classical poetry**

Let me jump ahead and outside of this history of a genre to look at poetry as a compositional practice within its context: here, too, an uninformed modern view is certainly anachronistic, although not fatally so. In contemporary Western culture, “poetry” is perceived largely as the most complex and wrenching use of language – both in the sense of what it does to language and what its composition and its reading entail affectively.<sup>9</sup> It is also most often tied to a generalized notion of the “lyric” (and so opposed to epic, or otherwise expansive narrative verse, which somehow seems nonmodern, archaic). It is just as often thought to involve a scenario of composition that is “private” or subjective, although personal poetry as dramatic performance, connected more or less to rhythm and ritual, has become more prominent in recent years. The phenomenal success of the novel has driven poetry, whether we want to call it lyric or not, into a corner in the house of literary expression, a corner reserved for the initiate. The imperialism of the novel has encouraged poetry at times to assimilate to narrative, and thus to a degree of banality. When left to its own devices, poetry has opted for formal experimentation and self-reflection, or in some cases has moved to the radical limit of a private language, understandable only to the composer of verse whose freedom from metric and topical constraints deprives it at the same time of all anchoring in a collective consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

We have already seen how the history of lyric makes it appear incompatible with these characteristics of contemporary poetry, but one can develop the contrast by considering poetry of the early modern period as a whole and not simply the lyric genre. It was consciously integrated into, or derived from, rhetoric, and thus assured a collective function. Its genres and forms were more or less fixed and repeated; this repetition ensured poetry a cultural integration, a place in cultural memory. Its spoken performance and its silent reading guaranteed poetry aural and visual recognition. Its methods of composition included retrieval of all manner of semantic material from predecessors and contemporaries, which, far from compromising its particular excellence, mostly contributed to its strength and success. Whether identified as lyric or not, poetry was part of an elevated language, a language that was not only more “beautiful” and removed from prosaic speech but also conveyed knowledge that

was compatible with the other intellectual disciplines. Indeed, it could be thought to be more ancient than other areas of inquiry and communication and thus had gathered a cultural consensus and had received some sort of transcendent authority that was lacking or more tenuous in other disciplines. In any event, what we would call logical or scientific thought was not taken to be of a different nature from the thought of the poets, who transmitted knowledge. Far from tending to a private language, poetry, even at its most hermeneutically challenging, affirmed universal truths and was permeable to elucidation by commentary which in turn relied on rhetorical thought and its insertion of communication into systematic, hence shared units.

But this book is not about what makes late medieval and early modern poetry unlike poetry today. To be sure, this study does build on the assumption that early modern poetry starts with premises entirely different from those of contemporary poetry. And yet the most intensely affecting features of the lyric that is the subject of this book, features that can be identified and traced in the poets' works, form a kind of resistance to the notion that poetry is a conduit from the singular to the universal and contradict the belief that poetry does not acknowledge the persistence of the singular at all. In other words, I argue – inevitably and hesitantly, for this is not my primary intention – that there is a modernity of early modern poetry, although it is articulated on the background of cultural conditions extremely different from those around us today.

I will also argue, perhaps less explicitly, that early modern poetry differs from classical poetry through this hint of modernity, through the existential singular which it puts forth especially with and after Petrarch, and through the concomitant effect of intensity it achieves. Love lyric is no longer the “game” that it used to be in Antiquity, a game that displayed many levels of poetic mastery and was informed by irony and the availability of choices, a game whose rules had been set not by arbitrary decision but because schools of poetry had perfected these rules to bring out the inherent beauty of this particular language. The practitioners of this classic poetic game also were always aware of the public and political and festive audience to which it was addressed and aware of the fact that experimentation with language itself, if it ever were a feature of poetry, needed to be measured against or tempered by the kind of larger audience that it wished to engage.<sup>11</sup> Petrarch's poetry, and that of the other poets I will be reading, no longer is quite that. The shift that occurs here, the emergence of the intensity of the singular, both breaks with the classical and contains premises that are incompatible

with modern poetry, while eliciting a kind of sympathy, misplaced or not, from modern readers.

### Early modern poetry and the singular

For the effect that early modern love lyric can bring about, in the poetry of Petrarch and in that of several other poets after him, this *intending of the singular* is a “good thing.” It is a good thing not because it coincides with moral truths that we can cull in the period itself, although that is in part the case. It is a good thing because of where, to some extent, we have come to be now. The intensity of Petrarchan love lyric, of Charles d’Orléans’s melancholy, of Ronsard’s erotic and Du Bellay’s variously nostalgic, melancholy and elegiac lyrics, manifest a capacity that literature shows of designating the human individual as something radically distinct. Whether this is recorded as self-relinquishing love of another, as the (improbable) positing of reciprocity with another, as forms of longing for, and real disconnectedness from, human bonds, or as a consistent self-diminishing, this literature performs a function that cannot *not* mean something salvific in our own historical context. Intending the singular can mean for us today the refusal of the infinite reproduction that industry long ago promised and that technology is now fulfilling. This literature also privileges features of language conveying attentiveness to the particular that can form the basis of an ethical imperative.<sup>12</sup>

This attentiveness to the particular that is close to an ethical imperative needs some sort of definition. On the whole, the readings that constitute the core of the following chapters are more informative than any prior definition that they would then “apply”; the chapters include some preliminary discussion of what I mean by “particular” or “singular.” These two terms are interchangeable for my purposes, since they function as equivalent terms in the opposition between them and the “general” or the “universal.” They designate an object, a circumstance, a person, an event that are determined in space and time. The particular or singular is opposed to the general or the universal, as an object in space and time is opposed to *categories* of objects, circumstances, persons or events that imply no determination in space and time (and hence require no existence to be meaningful). I realize that “singular” has meanings in English (and in other languages containing its cognate) that are not covered by its assimilation to the “particular,” such as “outstanding,” “astonishing,” “unique,” and even “strange.” In a way, poetry can make the “particular” take on these meanings of the “singular”; indeed, it is one of the well-tried definitions



of literariness to say that literature renders the familiar “foreign.” But I am less keen on delineating an essential trait of literature as a thematic privilege accorded to the particular than on identifying a pragmatic literary intention, something that literature does, not something that it is. I am interested in *effects* of particularity or singularity in poetry, features of a poet’s language, manifest in specific poems and thus in a highly complex linguistic web, that convey something like “this and no other.” The poetry that I will be concerned with forgoes certain techniques that we associate with this intention, in particular “realistic” description and other expressions of mimetic fullness, in favor of semantic sparseness and redundancy and temporal and spatial indications that come close to making poetry a kind of gesture.

The attentiveness to the particular this poetry conveys comes close to an ethical imperative but does not constitute an ethics in the sense of a representation of moral conduct between persons. One can say that there is an “ethics” of the epic, of tragedy, of certain strains of narrative in the early modern period, and so on. That is, persons represented in the epic world conduct themselves toward each other in ways that conform to certain moral principles that are adhered to by members of a community. Or, when their conduct does not conform to such principles, it is felt to be defective. The poetry that I am concerned with lacks an essential component of a world in which an ethics can be transmitted: it does not, except very rarely, represent relationships, that is, give substantial weight, an appearance of autonomy, to all the persons evoked in its world. Laura does not act toward her lover Petrarch independently of the poet’s own impressions of her actions; there is no true “intersubjectivity” in the *Canzoniere*. Similarly, Cassandre in Ronsard’s *Amours* cannot be said to be a person possessing what we call “agency,” and neither can this be said of the various beloveds in Renaissance love-poetry collections. Even when the beloved is represented as acting, she or he is doing so in a scenario set up by the poet who doubles as her lover, and she or he is often acting indistinctly, that is, in imitation of previous beloveds in the tradition.

That being said, attentiveness to the extreme particular – *you and no other, this and nothing else* – is close to an ethical imperative. It prepares the lover and the reader to assume a radical distinctiveness of the other human being; it trains, as it were, the lover and the reader to suspend the absorption of an experience of the other human being into a larger category, and refuses, apparently definitively, that this other human being be substituted with another.<sup>13</sup> This radical singularity, or rather the gestures within lyric that mark this singularity, is the ground for what the early



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modern period would call “equity”: a sensitivity to the particular case or circumstance that permits us to *not* apply a general rule. Equity is a feeling that there is, in this case, something that makes the application of a law unjust, although the law itself is not unjust.<sup>14</sup> We cannot, in this particular case, move from these persons and this event to a rule that applies to a larger set of cases. It is the perception of distinctiveness that underlies such feeling and such judgment, and aspects of the lyric I am dealing with in this book constitute a preparation for the perception of radical distinctiveness of the individual human being. In this sense, attentiveness to the particular is close to an ethical imperative.<sup>15</sup>

My sense of the singularity of poetry differs from another, current sense of “singularity” that can be predicated of literature as a whole. For example, Derek Attridge attributes to “the body of texts and the cultural practice” that we call “literature” a “distinctiveness” and a “surprisingness” which he defines this way:

Literary singularity may be said to derive from—though it is much more than—the verbal particularity of the work: specific words in a specific arrangement (which may include spatial arrangement on a page or the use of pauses and other articulating devices in oral delivery). This verbal sequence exists as a literary work only in a reading; singularity, to say it again, has to be understood, like alterity and invention, as an event.<sup>16</sup>

All literary works globally qualify as “singular,” that is, their perception is one of a distinctive language construct (or event) that can be accounted for by the fact that there is in every work of literature a specific choosing and a specific temporal and visual spacing of its elements. I am quite convinced that this is the case, but that is a sense of “singular” that I will not be using in the following pages. Rather, I would like to examine how *some* specific arrangements of words produce relevant effects of singularity that can be located historically and that produce, as a gesture, meaning on an ethical level. For example, Petrarch uses “qui” (“here”) in a way that, in the context of his poem, has a distinct significance and is meant differently from the way in which his predecessors and his successors will employ the same term. So my use of “singular” is directed toward distinguishing features within a specific poet’s work and located within a historical context.

Another sense of the “singularity” of literature that one finds in contemporary discussions involves an identification between particular subjective experience and what is best about literature, that is, that which best resists discourses of generalization dominating other areas of the “human

sciences,” such as sociology and social history. The ability of literature to convey the “extreme singular” is its most effective defense against the onslaught of modernity and an assurance of its survival. Personally, I am quite sympathetic to this line of thought, provided that one pursues it as part of a more consistent defense of the human and the humane in today’s economic and social conditions, and not as a merely antiquarian reaction.

This championing of literature as the irreducible and the infinitely complex is formulated in many contexts. For instance, in a volume dedicated to the “ends of literature,” Claude Burgelin associates – contrary to Aristotle’s distinction between the chronicle of the particular and poetry, or fiction, of the universal – certain forms of contemporary historiography as dense description of the particular (and the biographical) and the focus on an irreducible first-person singular in contemporary (French) novels. They share this “passion for the extreme singular,” although the literary always has the potential to exceed, or defy, the impulse to generalization that inhabits the social sciences.<sup>17</sup> Burgelin associates the singular with the first-person voice in narrative and thus the singular and the subjective become fused. Since lyric poetry represents, for postromantic sensibilities, the greatest distillation of subjectivity, it should present the strongest bulwark against the encroachments of the discourses of the general. On the one hand, this might confirm our implicit conviction that lyric is the most “literary” form of literature, but, on the other hand, lyric’s marginal status within modern literary production make the project of a rallying around the singular subjective (in the form of lyric) seem doomed. As the first chapter will make clear, however, the identification of the singular and the subjective is not a necessary one and certainly not accurate historically. Early modern lyric features a wide variety of processes by which language renders distinct; the subjective voice is only one of them and the others are not simply instruments in serving the first person singular.

### **A history of the singular?**

How can one speak of a historical context to the particular or the singular? Does the concept have a different valence now than it would have had, say, in 1550? The recent history of singularity is a subject which, to be addressed adequately, would require a lengthy book. One can surmise that it needs to be written in conjunction with a history of mechanical reproduction, whether this takes the form of printing and other means of communication, or, in my view more relevantly, the form of industrial reproduction and the capacity to build series of virtually identical objects