

Introduction

This book traces elements of fictional texts – deemed “lyrical” in ways that I define below – that elicit certain human abilities, abilities that we seem to share across historical periods and generally find appealing. The lyric poems and lyrical sections in prose are varied and cover a long time span in the European tradition. They involve themes of love (and the loss of the beloved), mourning, distinct moments of pleasure, experiences of happiness, and warfare. They might teach us about these emotions or situations in themselves, or their history, but that is not the focus of this book. Their representations of these affects and the situations in which they arise, however, deploy specific, ascertainable means and they unlock certain abilities within us, as if they allowed us to move closer to what we are as human beings. That will be the focus of this book.

My title “Lyric Humanity” suggests that as human beings we share direct experiences of the world, and experiences of representations of that world, that we readily qualify as lyrical. The predication also indicates something about humanity, that one can attribute a quality of (the genre of) the lyric to human beings as a group. In this way, as well, one can imagine that the literary genre reveals something specific about humanity, something not revealed by, say, epic or satire. A first step for me will be to consider the historical definition and practice of the lyric genre, even if they prove to be of limited value in accounting for the wide range of our actual reading experiences.

We can move away from genre, in a further sense of the juxtaposition of lyric and humanity, to understand “lyrical” in a much larger extension, including meanings foreign certainly to the historical definitions of the lyric as a mimetic form. In this sense the attribute “lyric” can be attached to objects, experiences, or sensations, and to many texts that on their own would never have been classified as belonging to the genre of lyric. I would like to work with both of these meanings, the strictly generic and the less technical, more common usage, while keeping in mind “humanity” as the

ultimate horizon of the discussion. That being said, I will insist on an anchoring of the more extensive meaning in specific features of the literary texts.

The Genre of Lyric and the Lyrical in Common Usage

The common modern usage of “lyric” or “lyrical” is on several counts far removed from the historical, generic one. Our current usage of the term might include love poems, poems relating intense, subjective, affective experience of attachment and loss, often containing themes of natural beauty, especially involving circumscribed objects or landscape features (a flower, a meadow, a pond, stream, or river, etc.) as opposed to “grand” vistas or expanses. Themes might include as well living beings evoked in their intimacy. In this loose, current usage, experiences of various sights and sounds can be qualified as “lyrical,” as much as the objects, situations, or representations themselves.

Moreover, in the domain of literature poems are not the only form to be thought of in this way. Prose narrative can become lyrical, whether in the form of a descriptive pause or by a change in focus, by a shift away from a forward-moving manner of representing action. The adjective “lyrical” can characterize other media, as well (opera, film, video, painting, or photography) – an extension that I will not address in these pages. The vagueness and wide application of the concept of lyric and the lyrical notwithstanding, I would like to hold on to our common usage of the term, since it reflects real reading experiences and addresses real human abilities. My project in this book will imply bridging this looser but far from arbitrary understanding of the term and its more constrained and technical generic meaning in history. I will do so both on the practical, heuristic level (what do we find in texts that we perceive as lyrical?) and on the historical level, by centering my attention on the early modern period, and using it as a reference point even when considering classical and modern materials.

For it is during the late medieval and early modern period that the genre of the lyric begins its recentering on the subjective-affective meanings that it has today. This shift can be understood through the following developments. They allow us to perceive both its original sense, often foreign to modern readers, and the emergence of what is more familiar to us.

Although still intensely connected to musical form – many lyric poems were set to music and composed to be sung – the early modern lyric comes to be largely practiced as a written and visual form. Petrarch introduced his poems to Laura by addressing an audience that *listens* to his sighs (“Voi

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ch'ascoltate in rime sparse il suono / di quei sospiri . . .").¹ Two hundred years later, in his collection *Les amours*, Pierre de Ronsard invites the reader to "see" the sufferings of the poet-lover, in the first edition (1552). Then, in the last edition published during his lifetime (1584), he summons the reader to come "read" his poems, in order to "see" his suffering.² The written and visual nature of lyric is encouraged by printing and the rise of the poem collection – in imitation of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* – and by the concomitant popularity of shorter, fixed forms (the sonnet, the epigram, short odes, etc.) and the occasional use of images (accompanying devices, emblems). This stands in contrast to the classical origins of the lyric poet, *lyrikos*, a figure related to, and perhaps derivative of, the *melopoios*, the composer of performances in which music and speech are mixed.³ The increasingly autonomous written form of the lyric collection allows precisely the sort of intricate, intentional verbal construction and imaginative response on the part of the reader that I will be highlighting in the following pages.

The rise of the poem collection, while traceable most immediately to Petrarch, also derives from Horace's reorientation of lyric poetry as a book reflecting more or less the character traits of its author.⁴ Horace acknowledges the traditional epideictic themes of lyric (songs celebrating gods and their children, songs praising victorious pugilists, songs of love's woes, and drinking or table songs⁵) but seems to open the way for a more person-centered poetry, something the early modern period will develop in its reflection on his oeuvre, through imitation and commentary.

Rather than representing a modern turn to the subjective or private, however, Horatian poetics is always aware of an audience, and the commentary tradition – whether concerning the vernacular (Petrarch) or classical authors – favors rhetorical tools in guiding the reader to understanding lyric poetry.⁶ Lyric is bound to persuasion, both in its epideictic tendency and in its frequent deliberative intent. Love lyric praises the beloved and attempts to persuade the beloved, just as much as it delivers illustrations or proofs of its "argument" to an informed reader. Elegiac poetry has similar rhetorical aims. We are far, then, from lyric as the most intimate expression of a self, replete with the fleshed-out details of a particular life.⁷

The nonsubjective origins of lyric are made clear in a famous classical and medieval division of enunciation into three modes: the dramatic or mimetic mode (the poet consistently has others speak), the narrative mode (only the poet speaks), and the common or mixed mode (sometimes the poet speaks, sometimes the poet lets others speak). Lyric is assigned to the

latter mode.⁸ During the early modern period, especially amorous lyric comes to be more closely aligned with the narrative mode, in the sense that the collections feature the voice of the poet, in his or her various travails, and the commentary tradition sometimes assumes the lyric collection to be truly autobiographical.⁹

The modern notion of lyric – in the tripartite division of drama, epic, and lyric – emerges only at the end of the eighteenth century, and is the source of all that we associate with it today. It comprises private, intimate, subjective feelings reflecting a soul in its sensitivity and in its removal from or even transcendence of ordinary life, and concerns themes of love, loss, death, and beauty, both human and in the natural world. Lyric poetry can be a special kind of speech, tethered to apostrophe, and a special kind of discourse, eschewing argument or persuasion in favor of expression of a self and observation tinged with personal sentiment.¹⁰

In the following pages, I will move frequently from lyric as it manifests itself in a formal, generic mode (in the form of epigrams, elegies, and sonnets) to episodes within prose narrative that I call “lyric.” In doing so I will not be jettisoning the generic definition entirely. As we will see, lyric episodes retain some of the features of the history of the form, most notably its reliance on rhetoric and deliberative reasoning. Conversely, these episodes do not entirely validate our current, vague notion of lyric. They most often do not convey an interior experience of a self and its projection onto the world. Instead, they manage to evoke both intimacy and distance, allowing the reader to adopt a character’s or a subject’s point of view without sacrificing the reader’s perspective from the outside, and who is able to perceive independently, as it were, the world that so moves a particular person. This is essential to the sort of abilities that lyric can solicit and activate in the reader.

Definitions and Principles

For this is a book about what the lyrical – lyric poems or lyric episodes in prose – can *do*. It is about how lyrical representation can realize, actualize, certain human abilities. It is about elements in lyric, in its representation of the world, that indicate and call upon the way we empathize, scrutinize particular circumstances, project a future and consider an ending to this future, deliberate about pleasure and convey happiness. In the Conclusion, I discuss these abilities in a more abstract way; in the meantime, the focus is squarely on the literary texts, not on those abilities in and of themselves. Each chapter features a set of poems or a set of lyric episodes in prose; it

isolates characteristics of the text that both let the reader be attentive to certain abilities and that convey a certain lyric precipitate, if not a specificity. Each chapter's selection of texts is motivated by a different set of things that lyric can do.

At the same time, this is not a theory of lyric.¹¹ As the preceding paragraphs have made clear, I am not interested in any hard-and-fast distinctions between lyric and other generic forms of literature, and the definitions offered below are heuristic rather than theoretical. They derive from my reading experiences more than from any poetics, although I am not indifferent to poetics and theory. We will consider not only verse but also prose; I am interested in lyrical sections of prose as much as in poems that qualify as lyric. What an informed reader might sense is lyrical is more of a guide in these cases than a well-delineated definition of what a lyric poem is, in contrast to other genres, for example. The use of the attribute "lyrical" points to a practice and an effect of lyric that are more pertinent than the ideal form itself. In this sense, the way of proceeding will be Aristotelian rather than Platonic. I will tend to use the nouns and adjectives "lyric," "lyrical," "lyricism" without specifying the technical usage, aware of but not limited by the poetic form itself and the history of the genre.

The following are some of the features of lyric this book will highlight.

1. *Lyric as a cognitive power.* Among the generic forms of what we call literature today, the lyrical has always seemed to be the most experimental, but also the most ritualistic, with cognitive and collectively shared sensory powers that exceed other forms. It is both a thought experiment, a reconceiving, and, for the audience or readers, a celebratory removal or suspension from a train of events and experiences, through the myriad resources of language. We can reconceive the world, or we can choose to come much closer to some elements of this world, and we can remove ourselves, however briefly, from the forward motion of events and the time they mark out. This book will elucidate some elements of these powers of the lyrical.

2. *Lyric as recognizable representation of reality, and its imaginative expansion.* Furthermore, this book is about literature as mimesis or mimetic representation, that is, about the linguistic means of rendering present a reality (circumstances, persons, actions, events) and, secondarily, the rendering of the experiences of persons in certain circumstances. Lyric always contains elements of mimetic representation; it is never purely formal (in comparison to music) unless it becomes a private language, in which case it is unintelligible or irreducibly enigmatic. It does not

construct experiences that are beyond recognition to other human beings. To be sure, lyric, as opposed to epic and drama (and the novel), is removed from mere narration of actions and description, by its modes of enunciation, by the ritualistic attempt at making itself an event, and by its intermittent conveying of values or truths disconnected from a story or a specific world.¹² However, as we will see in the following pages, lyric – in verse and in episodic prose form – maintains its connection to rhetoric in its traditional, historical sense, and in a broader sense of intentional, systematic communication. Argumentative structure and dialectic, the use of specific figures, all present in classical and early modern lyric, have purchase on a reader/listener only if they are allied with proofs, and proofs are, in turn, only such if they can rely on a shared and communicable world. Truths and values are received by an audience only if they are validated by experiences that are summoned by the poem or speech, explicitly or not. All beauty is destined to vanish quickly because *this* rose has withered quickly. My emphasis on the mimetic aspects of lyric arises, admittedly, from my humanist, early modern perspective; I wish to emphasize how rich such a perspective can be, even when dealing with texts far removed from the times of Ronsard and Madame de Lafayette.

At the same time, the grounding of lyric in mimetic representation is not a prison. It offers radical possibilities. Similar to the way in which fiction is thought of, it can present impossible things as if they were possible, in a world that we find *comprehensible* nevertheless. The rhetorical figure of *adynaton*, the invocation of an impossible thing (on the model of “I will love you even if the stars fall from the sky”), is a small example of this improbable aspect of lyric. This kind of fiction can be decidedly mimetic, close to what we recognize as reality, while holding out the possibility of the impossible.

3. *Lyric as a doing*. This book is centered on what lyrical texts, in the terms that are outlined in the previous pages, can *do*, in the reading experience, rather than on their respective contributions to an essence of lyric, to the history of lyric or its themes. In the classical and early modern tradition, this “doing” of lyric is often understood as persuasion (Orpheus and the gods of the underworld) or as a moving, softening of the inanimate or savage world (Orpheus, again, as singer causing beings or objects impermeable to emotion to feel). The reading experience can resemble the working of these powers. But that is not the way I am thinking of the pragmatics of lyric. I understand power not as dominating but as rendering possible, enabling. Lyric does not make stones weep but it does enable us to understand ourselves and others as human beings, and it does this not

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because it tells us to understand ourselves and others but because its particular way of representing reality allows us to. Is this a cliché? If so, it is one that is worth recalling and coming back to.

4. *Lyric as particularly responsive to close reading.* I should add that only close reading, indeed very close reading, can disclose the means by which lyric or lyrical episodes achieve this human understanding and experience. The genre itself, especially as it gathers reflective, affective meanings in its evolution, is one of intense attention to the world. The following chapters will feature detailed analyses. They are, then, of necessity “dense,” and go counter to more narratively driven exposition. But showing how things work often entails going deeply into the little cogs of the instrument.

The selection of texts that I examine in the following pages is motivated by two things: first, their relevance to a certain kind of pragmatic power that lyric possesses, and each chapter highlights a different aspect of that power. Second, the pleasure that I have derived from reading, many times, these texts is, I admit, a real motivation.

My only justification for this primacy of my own reading pleasure is that I am not alone in finding these writings wonderful. Indeed, finally, with the exception of some secondary texts used as sources or contrasting material, the poetry and the prose that I will be looking at are extremely well known, from the Orpheus sections in Virgil and Ovid to the most famous funeral elegy in the Renaissance to the *Princesse de Clèves*, the poetry of Baudelaire, and the writings of Flaubert. Even my most recent examples, taken from two contemporary French novels, by Jean Rouaud and Jean Echenoz, are known to an English-speaking public. They can be counted, arguably, among the best living writers on the continent. We will be traversing a familiar landscape, despite the fact that beyond the Latin poetry I will be discussing only the French literary tradition.

The reverse of the coin, as it were, is that it will be difficult to do justice to all of the scholarship surrounding the poetry and the prose, and that I have had to limit severely discussion of historical and social contexts. That being said, my own perspective as a twenty-first-century reader is tempered, in the classical and early modern material, by the use of medieval and humanist commentaries, just as my readings of the modern materials are informed by a humanist framework. This anchoring in the early modern period means that I share some of the ethical concerns and some of the philological reflexes we identify with that period, namely, both a concern with the manifestations of the human and a tendency to frame understanding of a literary text in rhetorical terms. One goes, as we will see, with the other.

Elements of Lyric in Verse and in Prose

The readings offered in this book, while not intended to provide any theoretical contribution, are assembled coherently, but not as a set of examples all repeating the same attributes of lyric. The poems and prose passages together present an aggregate of literary elements. These elements are emphasized variously, never completely, and distinct enough such that I can give a summary account of them.

1. *Lyric as praise.* The lyrical episodes or poems usually contain some elements of the discourse of praise, in keeping with the classical origins of the genre. The natural tendency of the text, to speak anthropomorphically, is not to be neutral and avoid any affective and evaluative register. If such an affective register is present, this is not in the service of a choice to mitigate, to denigrate, to vilify, or to ridicule. Instead, whether this concerns a person, another being, or a circumstance, the tendency is to praise. This epideictic impulse sometimes is explicit and rhetorically elaborated, or sometimes entirely implicit, a distinct sense we get from or about the narrator's attitude.

2. *Lyric and detail.* The lyrical episodes or poems usually, but not always, involve the valorization of a detail, or of a small thing. This sounds at the same time trivial and vague. Whether it is the corner of a woman's mouth, a raindrop, a hand holding the edge of a garment, a rose petal, specks of dust, even, in some cases, a word itself, these texts very often make detail important. The grand, ample, or universal is not absent, of course, but that is not what strikes us about the text.

3. *Lyric and the suspension of time and action.* Especially in cases of lyrical episodes within larger texts, we are offered a sense of suspension: suspended action, suspended time, and, parallel to this, suspension of rules and of necessity. The suspension of "normal life" entails an impression of possibility, of expansion into a different space or time, into a different kind of world. This suspension is often experienced as a slowing-down or as a drawing-back. This suspension can take place in time, explicitly or implicitly, as a change in rhythm, a syntactic change, a change in modes of narration, or in focalization.

4. *Lyric and the movement of uplifting or rising.* Sometimes this suspension comes in the form of an elevation of the spectator's gaze, as if in a landscape, as if in a road leading upward, or the noting of a place from which we lift our eyes toward the sky or a horizon. Sometimes it is a perspective, a panorama, an enlarged space contemplated from above. This seems to conflict with the valorization of the detail, but does not, since the

perspective is made palpable by a strategic use of detail. Our knowledge of the expansive is attained through the salience of a detail.

5. *Lyric and the person.* Lyrical episodes are connected with a person or with persons. There has to be someone looking, someone experiencing; a representation without the possibility of sympathetic viewing or some extent of identification is not really lyrical. The person may be a character in the representation or the narrator outside it. This personal aspect of the lyrical can also be interpersonal, a constitution of the shared intimate. Indeed, many lyrical episodes deal with intimacy and construct the circumstances that make a place intimate.

6. *Lyric and affect and reason.* The lyrical is not equivalent to the affective, in the sense that emotions such as love, longing, and sadness are both not sufficient to identify the lyrical and sometimes not even necessary. Similarly, the lyrical does not exclude the rational: Many of my examples show the crucial role of reasoning in happiness, desire, and seduction. There are, to be sure, lyrical scenarios in which the rational does not play a part, but it is also not true that these scenarios are exclusively affective. You can talk and you can do it cogently.

7. *Lyric and irony.* The lyrical is compatible with irony. All of the writers I look at in this book ironize, to some extent, the “pathetic” features of their representations, those elements that both convey affective states and wish to provoke affective states in the reader. The lyrical is not naïve, and perhaps it is more moving emotionally precisely because the distance allowed by irony underlines the importance of the affects, when and since they are combined with awareness. It is not that the affects are a product of choice (otherwise, they would not be affects), but their representation is validated by choice.

8. *Lyric and the moment.* The lyrical can involve an intense sensation of time, as I have just suggested, and an intense awareness of the present, of a moment, of the ephemeral. It is perhaps less inclined to emphasize the future, the eternal, and the past, except to use them as ways of illuminating the present, or as ways of highlighting possibilities of extending a moment or projecting it beyond the immediate circumstance. Space and movement in space are often a representational equivalent of time.

9. *Lyric and apostrophe.* The lyrical, especially in its manifestation as a verse poem, traditionally features a form of address to a person, an animal, a thing, nature, a god, and so forth. Apostrophe is often present in the examples I will be surveying. In lyrical episodes set within narrative, however, apostrophe is sometimes implied but often not present at all. The slowing-down of the representation has, perhaps, the effect that

conventional apostrophe produces in poetry, the turning of attention to something else, the stepping-out of the subject to think about other things.

Two traditional attributes of lyric are barely present in the texts I am reading; indeed, they are at times entirely absent. Lyric has classical connections to song or more generally music. While, say, Ronsard's ode is often set to music in the Renaissance, the other examples contain little musical element. Sound resemblance (alliteration, paronomasia) and rhythm are instruments in the rhetorical quiver of the poets, and sometimes of the prose writers, but they do not consistently produce the impression of sung language. As in the matter of apostrophe, one can argue that the suspension of the habitual flow of chronicle-like narrative can be the equivalent of song in relation to ordinary speech. But that is far removed from the ancient importance of musical harmony to poetry.

Another of the features of lyric – this time considerably more modern – that is commonly thought to be essential is subjectivity, a lyric self. Perhaps because my approach is informed by classical and early modern poetry, this element of lyric seems largely irrelevant to the lyrical as I analyze it. To be sure, the episodes and the poems construct to some extent a subjective vision of the world, and the lyrical gives an occasion for a character's intimate experiences, thoughts, and feelings to be made available to the reader or to other characters. In many instances, however, the subjective point of view is absent, or present only to the extent that all language manifests subjectivity by expressing intention. In any event, the distinction between the "subjective" and the "objective" is usually irrelevant to the effects of the lyrical, within the world of the poem or the novel. It is of little import to the lyrical, for example, that a character or agent within a representation be presented as deluded, a creator of a separate world of their soul. That can be the case, but it is not of the essence. It is also not the case that the lyrical depends on entering into the self of a narrator or a character. The lyrical, in my examples, is always a representation of the world and most often, above all, a connection to others.

The final parameter of this book, one that I have touched on before, is primacy of the human. That is, lyric reveals aspects of what makes us human, and it trains us to realize those aspects, in the sense both of awareness of humanity and of actualization of humanity. I mean "humanity" first in the way classical and early modern culture would, *grosso modo*, speak about humanity. In classical antiquity, the term *humanitas* could, in addition to "human nature," have the meanings of affability, good will, goodness, love of fellow human beings, culture, courtesy, and civilized behavior. Humanity, in classical and early modern times, often implied the