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Lyric Reading and Empathy

DOI 10.1515/jlt-2017-0012

Abstract: Numerous studies on lyric poetry have considered formalist questions, speakers or historical contexts. The act and the action of reading, however, were less often explored. Thus, the following questions arise: Is there a lyric reading? What are the reader's motivations? Does the same logic apply to narrative, satirical and didactic poems? How can it be described? This article outlines the many problems which the heterogeneity of poetry is likely to generate. It further intends to examine how the notion of »empathy« could help to actualize this specific way of reading. Based on recent research on intentionality and empathy, this paper makes apparent some of the general principles for a holistic theory of lyric, which enables to link poetics, psychology and anthropology.

Keywords: intentionality, embodiment, poetry, emotion, motivations, lyric

In France, as well as in a lot of other European countries, theoreticians of the 18th century certainly considered the pleasure and emotions involved in reading poetry more thoroughly than contemporary critics. Nowadays, in spite of the prevalence of scientific discourse on emotions, the role of sensitivity and awareness of the affective experience in a genre – lyric poetry – has not yet been determined enough. And yet most contemporary critics neglect the affective investment, as if it were nothing but a simple psychological issue, an »affective fallacy« (cf. Wimsatt/Beardsley 1954), or as if it were restricted to an impact on a wide audience, to a necessarily naive reading, a kind of »Uncritical Reading« (cf. Warner 2012) or a »first degree« reading (cf. Barthes 1975), which confuses the work and its results. What are the reader's motivations? How can we understand a lyric discourse? How do we gather all pertinent information? Is it enjoyable for the reader to act in this way? Why does he continue to do so? How does his reading proceed within a lyric text? How does he decide whether a poem is a success or a failure? Does the same logic apply to narrative, satirical or didactic poems? Poetry anthologies show us that not all poetry is lyric; poems are not even necessarily homogenous, often mixing different types of discourse and various intentions. It is also recommendable to avoid generalizations, even

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if the aim of our work is to distinguish – as precisely as possible – a lyric text from a narrative poem by specifying their respective features. Since an utterance necessarily requires a speaker, the lyric act – whether it could be text, performance or video – involves the active participation of the reader. In other words, to be realized and appreciated, the lyric text demands that it be read lyrically. Is this a pleonasm, or an automatism? What does this mean exactly?

1 The Absence of Lyric Reading from Contemporary Criticism

Apart from recitation, the role of reading generally receives little consideration in the three dominant critical tendencies of poetry criticism: the first tendency is the formalism (or structuralism), the second focuses on enunciation and the last is based on context. In all three cases, the emphasis is on the power of the author or the strength of the text, which leads to a view of a passive reader. What does he do except being fulfilled or carried away? Faced with the omnipotence of the production or the product, reading becomes limited to a direct reception, to a way of re-saying (reading, aloud or silently, as »co-« or »re-speaker«). In that case, reading means being completely absorbed, without any particular autonomy, real freedom, or personal investment. Is it not curious then that the reader engages in a complex act, confronted with the rhythms of the language, with metaphors whose effects have been appreciated for centuries? Most theories of the lyric are embedded in the idea of questioning either the position of the »I« or the »subject« – its fictional or autobiographical content, and its differences with respect to the narration – or the forms of poetry, but without enough examining the importance of reading.

Formalist approaches, which were developed mainly during structuralism, are more interested in the poeticity of certain poems rather than in their lyric particularity. The poetic form, consisting of parallelisms (cf. Jakobson 1960) and sometimes directed by ritual scansion, is connected to precise utterance features, like the exclamatory sentence (cf. Valéry 1996; Maulpoix 2000) and the apostrophe (cf. Culler 2015), which create an overarching »diction« (Genette 1993) which persists in the entire poem. It therefore becomes easier to blend »poetry« and »lyric«. As a reflexive concept, the poem only results in a »poet's poetry« (cf. Murat 2008). The reader passively experiences this kind of achievement as an extension of the form turned into the lyric act par excellence.

This perspective solicited strong resistance in France in a post-structuralist, enunciative or discursive movement, accompanied by the late translation of Käte

Hamburger's essay in 1986 (cf. Bricco 2012). It was within this framework that theories of the »*sujet lyrique*«, a reply to the German »*Lyrisches Ich*«, were developed throughout the 1990s and in the wake of the Bordeaux conference (cf. Rabaté 1996; Rabaté/Sermet/Vadé 1996; cf. the Spanish debate: Cabo Aseguinolaza/Gullón 1998). Focusing on the voice, this approach did not necessarily enrich the role of the reader, confining him to a »re-enunciation« of the poem (cf. Brophy/Gallagher 2006; Watteyne 2006; Bricco 2012). Reading endorses the speaker who is carried by the poem. In this case, the lyric act focuses on the voice and the persona, on the »*sujet de l'énonciation*« of the poem.

The third approach offers a more contextual perspective based on biographical, historical, sociological and geographical facts, which summon the poet »in person« (cf. Dickow 2015). Genetic criticism shows that it would be absurd to assign variations, corrections, or substitutions to a »lyric subject«. In the same way, the poet has participated in literary groups, which can, through disputes, prescribe forms. These forms determine numerous aesthetic choices (cf. Durand 2008). In this case, the poetic act articulates itself around contextual knowledge founded on facts, and the reader accompanies experts in the discovery of the poem. Thus, the uncritical reader is no longer able to consider the poem beyond its critical accompaniment and a deeper restitution of the context of writing.

Despite different presuppositions, these three approaches are not mutually exclusive: some appreciate the »history of forms« (cf. Murat 2008), others the voice in the poem's genesis (cf. Collot 1998). In my opinion, the three perspectives retain their validity, necessity and complementarity, and it would be risky to separate them from another. Still, it proves to be difficult to connect them naturally. There is consensus in terms of reading: it accomplishes what is already there, elaborating the text or the author's world (or the speaker's), but without the reader's own activity. As a consequence, the lyric act could work without any reader's activity. Could the reading be done without desire and aim? Is the reader meant to experience the poems while understanding them, and while maybe even creating a world (cf. Semino 1997)?

At a time when lyric studies are becoming more international, particularly under the aegis of a »lyricology«, the conditions of reading are at risk of being obscured in favor of a duality. On the one hand, the formalist, enunciative and thematic theoretical work deals with the lyric object, while on the other hand, contextual approaches draw out the poem's features with respect to its author and his era.

2 Reading and Theoretical Paradoxes

Critical and uncritical definitions of poetry become highly variable depending on the readers. We can take at least four criteria: historical, sociological, cultural and discursive. These variations can be *historical* (one era to another), or *sociological* (from one group to another, in production with distinct poetic movements as in reception with the different educational grades or with varied purposes of reading; cf. Fish 1982). However, they can also be related to their form: *culturally*, Japanese poetry does not follow the same rules as English poetry (diction, syllables, rhyme). Furthermore, in terms of *discursiveness*, poetry is heterogeneous (by its lyric, narrative, critical, and didactic components, which are sometimes mixed). In terms of reading, these differences become apparent when considering the education level of contemporary readers. The more educated a reader, the more his definition of poetry moves away from versification to consider diverse forms, sometimes even contemporary multimedia forms. In this way, the expectations and definitions of the same genre suffer from fundamental divergences.

Is it not illusory, therefore, to merely take the largest corpus, which belongs to a community of expert readers, academic scholars in fact, or those coming from more educated cultural environments (cf. Shusterman 1992)? In French-speaking countries, the expectation of versification and rhymes in the elementary grades originates from the main poetic criteria leading up to the middle of the 19th century, without managing to adapt to more contemporary, more flexible norms. Canonical modern poets like Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Apollinaire are studied. They are often used for close reading techniques (cf. Jackson 2005), besides learning through memorization. Does it astonish then that people resist the idea of reading poetry, and that it remains associated with analytical complexity, leaving out any ideas of embodiment, rhythmicity and the effectiveness of the imagery?

From a critical point of view, the disconnection of the descriptions from the readings remains problematic: how can one find a description of the lyric object or of lyric reading when the variations are so considerable? This disparity increases further if we consider the historical, sociological and cultural contexts or again the functions of poetry within different communities: certain hymns are recited with fervor (with a liturgical translation) just as others add an esthetical purpose (with a poetic translation; cf. Claudel 2008), in the same way that some people use cathedrals as places of worship while others admire their architecture.

The discursive heterogeneity of poetry also gives rise to numerous reservations concerning general observations of this art form. If we take Baudelaire's well-known poem »À une passante« (cf. Baudelaire 1975, 92sq.), which partially serves as the foundation of Jonathan Culler's theory (cf. 2015), we see that this sonnet is composed of a narrative sequence (v. 3–9) followed by a lyric sequence

(starting from the second hemistich of v. 9). Can we consider this to be a prototypical lyric poem and draw a fundamental example from it for a theory, even when, quantitatively, there are more lines in a narrative than in a lyric discourse? If yes, why? It is even more troubling that the poem's musicality is identical in its narrative and lyric parts: in this way, the rhythm of the verse can be felt at »Soulevant, balançant le feston et l'ourlet« (v. 4) or at »La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue« (v. 8). Is this not rather a poetic problem than a lyrical one? Would it not be absurd to use a »narratological« approach for the narrative sequence of the poem and a »lyricological« one for the lyric tercets?

Problems very often appear in criticism, because it diffracts the reading. Here again, we can look at another one of Baudelaire's poem, his well-known »Spleen«, (»Quand le ciel bas et lourd pèse comme un couvercle«, cf. *ibid.*, 74sq.). The paradox of this poem arises from the fact that it creates two completely opposed orientations. The speaker (the »lyric subject« as a voice and a character) is completely powerless and beaten down. His head is lowered and he suffers from humiliation. In this respect, he contrasts with the powerful poet, Charles Baudelaire, who unfurls magnificent, Parnassian, alexandrine quatrains, able to strike down his literary adversaries. Yet very few readers are surprised by this contradiction, and numerous critics have even underlined the expressivity of the quatrains, which could represent the imprisonment of the conscience. Is this desperate speaker aware of the rhymes, the sections, the effects of the accents, even of the literary conflicts? Is he responsible for corrections to manuscripts? Does he change from one poem to another, from one book to another, while Baudelaire's imagination often remains the same, as well as his versification technique? Nothing seems clear in this critical approach, which is very different from participatory reading, in which the search for meaning assumes that everything matches up. Furthermore, by reading the poem aloud, we should do exactly this: re-enunciate the speaker's discourse. Who could be credited for the alexandrine scansion which itself stems from a tradition? Who has this diction, and how can we avoid confusing it with the poem's desperate character?

It is not necessary, however, to have an »I« or a speaker. The evocation of a landscape will suffice, as the following example shows (cf. Jaccottet 2014, 434):

La terre tout entière visible	The entire earth, visible
mesurable	measurable
pleine de temps	brimming with time
suspendue à une plume qui monte	hanging from a rising feather
de plus en plus lumineuse	catching more and more light

We grasp the fullness in the first three lines, the spiritual ascension of the moment without the help of a character to mediate this. This kind of experience shows that

we construct affective situations (with or without characters), which can be attributed directly to the text. Is there a reason to identify oneself with a voice or do we have another kind of affective participation?

Amongst numerous pitfalls, I will highlight yet another important one, namely terminology. The word »lyric« causes conflicts in different western languages. It is sometimes associated with a poet's sublime posture like in French »*lyrisme*« (cf. Maulpoix 2000; Rodriguez 2006), in »lyricism« in English, or in the »lyric hero« of the Russian formalists (cf. Tynianov 1991). Sometimes it is fused with poetry, as it is the case with »*Lyrik*« and »*Gedicht*« in German (cf. Lamping 2000), or »*lirico*« and »*poetico*« in Italian (cf. Mazzoni 2012). These kinds of confusions lead excellent critics into problematic formulations, which range from speaking of »medieval lyricism« when the idea only came into being with Romanticism to postulating that all poetry is lyric or believing that the ancient Greeks produced lyric poetry before the term existed. Should one therefore rather speak of »melic poetry« (cf. Calame 1998)? All this underlines the difficulties in formulating an in-depth and exacting »lyricology«. And yet, there are ways of writing and specifically of reading lyric poetry, which are transcultural and transhistorical, and which coincide with identifiable and strongly differentiable modalities – just like storytelling and argumentation.

3 Resolving Paradoxes through Lyric Intentionality

Based on two summaries of contemporary French criticism (cf. Bricco 2012; Gefen/Vouilloux 2013), I demonstrated the need for integrating a pragmatics of the lyric reading beyond the enunciative or formalist approaches, since reading a lyric text remains an action, which is pre-oriented and oriented during its accomplishment. How can this action of reading lyrically be qualified? What is the main orientation for reaching a goal or, at least, an assessable result (failure or success)? What do readers do when they are moved, attentive, and empathetic (cf. Shusterman 2008)? To answer these questions, one must first think about the specific intentionality of the lyric discourse, leaving aside the antagonisms of subject and object, text and context, form and meaning. Even if readers are not necessarily aware of what they do exactly, they know it is more than being passively moved (cf. Pacherie 2015). In a critical approach, not only the text is lyric and oriented in a specific way, but also it is read in a lyric orientation, instead of narrative or argumentative orientations, which would be disappointing.

Yet most theories are only centered on the object (form or representation), as if the text were only lyric, autonomous, observable without the activity of observation, without acting. A lyricology, like a narratology, would be at risk of qualifying

only a series of structuring traits (formal or thematic), without taking account of the fundamental intentional relationship that orients them. Just as narratology does not resolve all the problems of the story, notably the anthropological ones of »storytelling«, lyricology must also identify its territory and its limits.

Reading a text cannot be summarized as the understanding of a succession of words, phrases or sequences. When lyric intentionality is established as a way to approach a text, it qualifies the characteristic shaping, the specific representation of the intentional object and the principles of its acquisition (cf. Benoist 2005), which here is the reading. It thus describes the unifying, participatory, fundamentally empathetic activities of esthetic readings, all while re-visiting the academic and mainly argumentative approaches which observe each element separately from the text through a systematic attention (cf. Schaeffer 2015). Reading can be called »lyric«, just like a text or a kind of writing. Its description should not be separated from that of the object, in the measure in which this object, the lyric text, guides this kind of intentionality. The text is not the fruit of a single subjective or community-based interpretation (cf. Fish 1982) or of an actualization (cf. Iser 1980), but of an interaction with the text's intentionality. Also, a reflection on lyric intentionality includes a lyricology that takes various formal, enunciative and contextual observations into account. It inscribes these observations in a more general understanding, in the logical procedures of configuration, progression, and participation. Furthermore, intentionality makes it possible to understand why the lyric object is not necessarily a text, or the reception of a reading, but that it can exist in an intermedial space (e. g., performance, opera, cinema).

If I previously discussed a »pact« to qualify lyric intentionality (cf. Rodriguez 2003), it was to better understand our ways of acting within the »lyric«. How, as a reader, are we players in this process (cf. Rancière 2009)? The idea of a »pact« indicated a specific intentionality, potentially shareable in and by the discourse, much more than a »reading contract«. In this I showed that when confronted with the heterogeneity of poetic texts, the attention in reading often adopted »dominant features« (lyric, narrative or critical). A lyric reading had to be envisioned (concretely: a lyric dominance), which incorporates the composite nature of numerous texts (Rimbaud's *Une Saison en enfer*, for example), while other readings will tend to capture them from a narrative or ironic perspective. This means that the specificity of lyric reading *intends* to produce an affective experience of reality through a formation that embodies it. From this, a description of the lyric act, texts, and modalities of writing and reading can integrate the smallest features. Parallelisms, apostrophes and images are not enough to establish the definition of the lyric by themselves. The »lyric act« involves interactions which accomplish it (I include here readers or critics).

In this framework, I can only synthesize years of research and stress that lyric intentionality resolves the articulation of form and representation, of subject and object, of texts and contexts, beyond debatable causalities. The intentionality of a text has only meaning with respect to certain readings. If lyric intentionality works through the affective experience, this does not mean that only emotions are represented – in fact, all experiences exist in lyric poetry (war, sexuality, grief, urban life) – but beneath an affective filter (cf. Rodriguez 2003). This inevitably implies that lyric intentionality cannot take place without any empathetic capacities for reading, in terms of moving points of view and the emotional recognition of experiences. This is due to the representation of the experience, creating itself through the bias of an »affective configuration«, which transforms a lot of poems' features into a »textual embodiment« (cf. Rodriguez 2006). Consequently, a lyricology must take as much an interest in formal components, like »plot« in narratology, as it does in affective representations of experience, in the way that narratology must necessarily deal with plot and the logic of the action. The guarantee given by intentionality is then to orient and assemble these descriptive critical ideas into shareable reading practices, in order to achieve an intensification of the affective and cognitive relationships.

But is intentionality enough to motivate an undertaking of the lyric act? Where does the pleasure, or even the desire, come from to accomplish this kind of reading? If intentionality induces to accomplish an act (through pleasure, but also through work, chance or curiosity), it does not contain all the motivations. Also, we often simultaneously act upon several intentions; we can start and finish a reading differently. If desire and pleasure trigger the action, they do not guide it to its achievement (cf. Pacherie 2015). We can also conduct actions in an inappropriate way (read a lyric text narratively, which is disappointing). Ultimately, intentionality can even appear after the fact, following a number of initial attempts. This is where empathy is particularly interesting. Why adopt an empathetic act to accomplish a lyric reading? And why, in response, does lyric reading increase one's empathetic capacities?

4 Empathetic Tension in the Lyric Act

To move through lyric texts, across various obstacles, we are animated by motivations and skills. One of the most important investments in lyric reading is not simply esthetic or formal, but comes from an »empathetic« tension (cf. Rodriguez 2013), which applies to numerous daily relationship-based modes (cf. Decety/Ickes 2009; Decety 2012). Not only do we accomplish an act (according to the intentionality), but also we enrich our activity through empathy, which feeds our attention:

what are we trying to feel through a lyric text? How do we achieve this and what is the aim? The attention to forms, to prosody, and to rhymes (cf. Jarvis 2011) is carried by this kind of empathy, which is closer to »artefact emotions« than to »fiction emotions« (cf. Kneepkens/Zwaan 1994). The pleasure when confronted with a startling composition can go together with the pleasure of crossing a disenchanted world, like Baudelaire's »Spleen« (cf. Schaeffer 2015). Indeed, the increased empathy in lyric poetry is activated when faced with an embodied shaping and when faced with these affective representations. This means that the activity of reading involves a typically empathetic »I feel and understand« that »the text does what the speaker says that he feels«. From a shifting point of view, we glean signs with a view to an affective participation, all while savoring the detachment linked to an enhanced aesthetic (phonic, visual), which itself increases our attention to sensitive constructions in the language. It is empathy with respect to the represented situation, the sensitive effects of language, without looking for identification (to whom? to what?). Critical acts do not contradict this kind of investment, but they can help in rereading texts with increased esthetic attention. We are able then to enrich our first reading, which is often a simple understanding of the affective situations (»what is this lyric text talking about?«), to reach an attention for detail (cf. *ibid.*) that savors a more complex lyric construction. The most intricate stylistic, thematic observations can be brought into considerations of the entire process of the lyric reading. The lyric act in itself is not enough, it is always involved in activities, relationships and situations (from reading or from writing). Our very goal is to understand this interweaving in the most thorough way possible, in its details and its variations as well as its whole nature.

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