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Recitation Lyric Time(s) I

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ABSTRACT: What is the time of the lyric? For Augustine, the recitation of a hymn illustrates the workings of time in the human mind; for Giorgio Agamben, the poem itself exemplifies the structure of what he defines as 'messianic time'. By focusing on Dante's sonnet 'Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare' and looking at the double act of the *recitation* of the poem and the *re-citation* of prior gestures, the temporality of both the single poem and lyric discourse will come into focus.

Recitation

Lyric Time(s) I

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The current debate on the lyric is imbued with diverse temporalities, but they are rarely explored in their multilevel interactions. What is the time of lyric writing and reading? What is the temporality of the lyric as a literary genre? How do present poems relate to past and future poems? Summarizing the formation of the modern idea of lyric in the nineteenth century in their introduction to *The Lyric Theory Reader*, Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins write:

If for Hegel the ideal lyric poet would move civilization forward in its perfect self-expression, for [John Stuart] Mill the ideal lyric poet would have to be the representative of both original nature and acquired culture, something no one yet had done perfectly. For such idealized accounts, the lyric poet could only be an imagined figure, a hero of a poetry yet to appear (as indeed the poet became rather explicitly

for Ralph Waldo Emerson, until Walt Whitman volunteered for the job).¹

This concept of the lyric, or rather of the ideal lyric project, is patently authoritarian, essentialist, and teleological. It is also quite voyeuristic, if we consider that, according to such a definition, the reader witnesses — unseen — a first person subject (precariously assimilated to the actual poet) confessing itself to itself.² This way the subject is observed in its autonomous self-formation and an enormous power is accredited to individual speech. Jackson and Prins, indeed, purport to show that this idea of the lyric is a creation of the nineteenth century that twentieth-century literary criticism has turned into a real, given genre rather than an ideal yet to be achieved.

By being read *as* lyric, a wide range of short verse writing has thus been *lyricized*: a historically situated interpretive frame has been inappropriately applied to a variety of poetic forms produced not only afterwards, but also in the previous centuries. The creation of such an *archigenre* is what Gérard Genette called a ‘retrospective illusion’.³ Regardless of the historical accuracy of Jackson and Prins’s

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- 1 *The Lyric Theory Reader. A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 1–8 (p. 3). See also pp. 11–16, the editors’ introduction to the section ‘Genre Theory’.
 - 2 Northrop Frye echoes John Stuart Mill’s declaration ‘eloquence is heard; poetry is overheard’ when he states that a lyric poem is ‘pre-eminently the utterance that is overheard’. Cf. John Stuart Mill, ‘What is Poetry?’, *The Monthly Repository*, n.s., 7 (1833), pp. 60–70 (p. 64) and Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 249. For T. S. Eliot, in first-person poetry, or ‘meditative verse’, the poet is ‘talking to himself — or to nobody’, ‘The Three Voices of Poetry’, in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), pp. 89–102 (p. 89).
 - 3 Gérard Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) (a selection repr. in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, pp. 17–30).

analysis, I would contend that the process they outline could help define the inner workings of the lyric as a genre instead of shattering it. In other words, I argue that it is possible to historicize the post-Romantic conception without ending up with a series of entirely unrelated texts. Two and a half millennia of literary production have contributed to the shaping of the Romantic idea of lyric as much as that idea has contributed to produce poems that intend to be lyric.

Perhaps, this is my claim, the lyric itself allows for a ‘retrospective illusion.’⁴ One should thus look for a set of reiterated gestures⁵ that could help gather together texts from different epochs and describe the lyric as a trans-historical discursive mode — rather than a historical and contextual literary genre.⁶ If the process outlined by Jackson and Prins has reduced historical difference to ideal sameness, how can one recover diversity without renouncing any theoretical perspective? I want to approach the

4 For the retrospective definition of the lyric in ancient literary theory and its productive anachronism, see W. Ralph Johnson, *The Idea of Lyric: Lyric Modes in Ancient and Modern Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 83–95.

5 For Dominique Rabaté, the poem itself is a *lyric gesture* of renunciation or *re-citation*, see *Gestes lyriques* (Paris: José Corti, 2013); ‘Énonciation poétique, énonciation lyrique’, in *Figures du sujet lyrique*, ed. by Dominique Rabaté (Paris: PUF, 1996), pp. 65–79; and ‘A World of Gestures’, *Journal of Literary Theory*, 11.1 (2017), special issue *Theories of Lyric*, ed. by Claudia Hillebrandt, Sonja Klimek, Ralph Müller, William Waters, and Rüdiger Zymner, pp. 89–96.

6 *Transhistorical* does not mean *meta-historical*. Instead of focusing on contextual differences, a transhistorical approach, as that pursued by Jonathan Culler in *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), seeks traces of historical continuity in cultural artefacts. It does not propose immutable ahistorical features, but rather traces recurrences across contextual variations. Through iteration, difference can emerge, and variations allow tracking continuity. See Francesco Giusti, ‘The Lyric in Theory. A Conversation with Jonathan Culler’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 27 May 2017.

lyric from a specific angle, namely the multilayered and asynchronous temporalities that the lyric both establishes and is constituted by. As a general key to unlock them, I shall deploy the term *recite*, from Latin *recitare* ‘read aloud, repeat from memory, declaim’, which is composed of *re-* ‘back, again’ and *citare* ‘to summon’. At different moments, I shall use the word in both its senses of ‘to repeat aloud’ and ‘to quote again’. By shedding light on this double act — the *recitation* of the poem and the *re-citation* of prior lyric gestures — correspondences between the time of the poem and the time of the genre might emerge.

In Augustine’s *Confessions*, the recitation of a poem is presented as a good example of his notion of time (XI, 38):

Imagine that I am to recite [*dicturus*] a hymn [*canticum*] that I know. Before I start, my expectation [*expectatio*] extends to the hymn as a whole. But once I begin, whatever part of that expectation I have plucked away goes into the past and is retained in my memory: the life force of my performance [*actionis*] is in tension [*distenditur*] between memory (because of what I have already spoken) and expectation (because of what I have yet to say). My awareness [*attentio*] is in the present though; and through it what was future crosses over to become the past. The longer the performance continues, the more my expectation is reduced and my memory prolonged, until expectation is entirely exhausted: and once the whole performance [*actio*] of the hymn is finished it shifts into memory.⁷

For Augustine, the recitation of a *canticum* is a suitable instance of the workings of temporality in the human mind:

7 Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. and trans. by Carolyn J.-B. Hammond, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014–16), II: pp. 253–55.

on the one hand the establishment of past and future, on the other hand the progressive subdivision of the present — from the whole poem down to the individual syllables. Both past and future are produced in the act of reading, the former as memory and the latter as expectation. As memory extends itself, so expectation is gradually reduced. The action of voicing marks the present moment that sets apart what has been already repeated from what is yet to come. At the same time, as Augustine observes, an arbitrary subdivision of the text/time delimits the extension of the present.

I do not want to enter Augustine's discussion of time here; rather I am interested in this passage as the trace of a textual practice. In the retrieval of memory, past and future have nothing to do with the acquisition or transmission of knowledge: it is posited that the reciter already knows the poem. The present is thus an action, not a reflection. In recitation, expectation does not concern unforeseeable events, but rather the anticipation of what is going to happen, or is likely to happen. In order to have expectations, the reciter (or the reader) must recognize the unfolding of a structure; in order for time to pass, the structure must be recognizable. The unexpected, one might deduce, breaks the passing of time. The deviance — the event that could not be predicted based on previously known causes — erupts as an error, a *clinamen* — in the terms of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* (II, 289–94) which translate the *parénklisis* of Epicurean physics. Nothing, of course, prevents one from tracing outcomes back to some anterior causes — this is probably one of the aims of retrospective narration.

I will leave aside the question of error for now, and focus instead on the temporality of reading. The present moment of reading can be established only within some

kind of recursive structure — which distends itself in a system of recollections and expectations — and under the condition that the gesture is performed again. In the case of a poem, the present moment, which is an action in time, is also the re-enactment of the past: the poem already exists for the reader, just as in Augustine's example it is already in the reciter's memory.

In *The Time That Remains*, Giorgio Agamben also refers to a poem to exemplify what he defines as *messianic time*: a time that is moving towards its end, but whose end and fulfilment — the Apocalypse — are beyond time. Here Agamben connects time not to the performing reader, but to the structure of the poem itself. Expectations are not generated by prior knowledge, but by the internal organization of the text. For him,

[t]he sestina — and, in this sense, every poem — is a soteriological device which, through the sophisticated *mēchanē* of the announcement and retrieval of rhyming end words (which correspond to typological relations between past and present), transforms chronological time into messianic time. Just as this time is not other to chronological time or eternity, but is the transformation that time undergoes when it is taken for a remnant, so too is the time of the sestina the metamorphosis that time undergoes insofar as it is the time of the end, the *time that the poem takes to come to an end*.⁸

Agamben refers specifically to the system of rhymes, but in *The End of the Poem* he seems to imply that even non-

8 Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. by Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 82–83.

rhyiming poems work in accordance to *messianic time*.⁹ They establish their own time. This time is not something other than *chronos*; it is rather an organization of *chronos* into a *kairos* that not only moves towards its anticipated end, but is also internally structured in a system of announcements and retrievals, that is, in a system of expectations and memories. If *messianic time* marks the beginning and the end of time, thus reducing its openness, it also animates it through the repetition of rhymes, where each ending sound anticipates and recalls identical ones:

Through this complicated to-and-fro directed forward and backward, the chronological sequence of linear homogeneous time is completely transformed into rhythmic constellations themselves in movement. It is not that there is another time, coming from who-knows-where that would substitute for chronological time; to the contrary, what we have is the same time that organizes itself through its own somewhat hidden internal pulsation, in order to make place for the time of the poem.¹⁰

As progressing in the poem line after line, the reader is caught in the fleeting present of enunciation in which the memory of previous words meets the expectation of the words to come.

Given that Augustine's and Agamben's exemplifications illustrate the temporality active within the poem, the question arises whether this multidirectional temporality might be operative at the level of the literary genre too. To explore this hypothesis, I shall focus in the second part of my contribution on Rilke's decision not to translate, but

9 Giorgio Agamben, 'The End of the Poem', in *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 109–15.

10 Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, p. 82.

rather to rewrite Dante's *Vita nova* (1293–1295) in the first of the *Duineser Elegien* (1912), and on the reasons for that suggested in the poem itself. From *recitation* in the sense of *repeating* a poem *aloud*, I shall then expand to *re-citation* in the sense of *quoting* another poem *again*. But before reaching the level of the literary genre, I shall first look at Dante's 'Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare' ('Such sweet decorum and such gentle grace') and the ways in which this sonnet, written several years earlier, is subsequently included in the prosimetric structure of the *Vita nova*. What kind of relationship does the lyric poem establish with the surrounding narrative prose? What kind of temporality is Dante offering here for the lyric?

Robert Pogue Harrison defines 'Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare' as the 'ideal lyric' of the *Vita nova* inasmuch as it presents a fully-fledged 'circle of incorporation', and for Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden it constitutes a 'moment of perfect plenitude'.¹¹ The sonnet is generally acknowledged to be the fullest embodiment of the praise (*loda*) that Dante proposes in *Vita nova* 10 (XVII–XIX) as his new poetic style.¹²

11 Although this is the poem in which Dante gets closest to the bodily presence of Beatrice, for Harrison the lady is still withdrawing something of herself from full revelation while at once animating the poetic voice, see Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 31–46 (pp. 31 and 44). In their account of the sonnet, Gragnolati and Southerden instead think of the poem as an accomplished full revelation in an ecstatic now, 'a (temporary) leap into the instantaneity of glory, which the poem does not so much describe as actively perform', see Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden, 'Dalla perdita al possesso. Forme di temporalità non lineare nelle epifanie liriche di Cavalcanti, Dante e Petrarca', *Chroniques italiennes*, séries web 32 (1/2017), pp. 136–54 (pp. 143 and 147) <http://www.univ-paris3.fr/medias/fichier/gragnolati-southerden_1501152291404.pdf> [accessed 20 December 2018]. Translation of the authors.

12 I follow the text and the subdivision of the text into 31 paragraphs

Such sweet decorum and such gentle grace
 attends my lady's greeting as she moves
 that lips can only tremble into silence,
 and eyes dare not attempt to gaze at her.
 Moving benignly clothed in humility,
 untouched by all the praise along her way,
 she seems to be a creature come from Heaven
 to Earth to manifest a miracle.
 Miraculously gracious to behold,
 her sweetness reaches, through the eyes, the heart
 (who has not felt this cannot understand),
 and from her lips it seems there moves a gracious
 spirit, so deeply loving that it glides
 into the souls of men, whispering: 'Sigh!' ¹³

To understand the specific temporality of this poem, one has to pay attention to how it is embedded in the prose of paragraph 17 (XXVI) of the *Vita nova*. Indeed, the preceding narrative (*ragione*, in Dante's terms) provides the scene of enunciation that frames the lyric utterance. Before saying (*dire*) the sonnet,¹⁴ Dante describes the wondrous appearance of Beatrice in the streets of Florence and the

provided in Dante Alighieri, *Vita nova*, ed. by Guglielmo Gorni (Turin: Einaudi, 1996). The corresponding section in Barbi's edition is provided in Roman numerals in parenthesis. 'Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare / la donna mia quand'ella altrui saluta, / ch'ogne lingua deven tremando muta / e gli occhi no l'ardiscon di guardare. // Ella si va, sentendosi laudare, / benignamente d'umiltà vestuta; / e par che sia una cosa venuta / da cielo in terra a miracol mostrare. / Mostrasi sì piacente a chi la mira, / che dà per gli occhi una dolcezza al core, / che 'ntender no-lla può chi no-lla prova; / e par che della sua labbia si mova / un spirito soave pien d'amore, / che va dicendo all'anima: Sospira.' (Dante, *Vita nova*, pp. 159–61.)

- 13 Dante Alighieri, *Dante's Vita Nuova. New Edition: A Translation and an Essay*, ed. and trans. by Mark Musa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 57.
- 14 Although the *Vita nova* as a literary work strongly marks its being *written*, it consistently presents the production of poetry as an act of *saying* and associates it with verbs of vocalization (*dire*). This act does not expect a passive reader or listener; it is rather meant to respond to someone or to engender a variety of active responses.

effect she has on the people who hasten to see her. This is a recurrent event: Beatrice attracts and affects her beholders every time she makes an appearance in a public place. As Dante openly declares, he composes the sonnet to share Beatrice's miraculous operations with the people who cannot see her in person (but probably have heard of her). Therefore, the poem is not a representation of a prior real event to be interpreted by selected expert readers (Dante's fellow love poets), as it is the case with the sonnet 'A ciascun'alma presa e gentil core' ('To every captive soul and loving heart') in the first paragraph (III). Rather it is conceived as a verbal substitute for Beatrice that, when recited, aims to induce the same actual effects in its readers that the actual woman induces in her beholders. The poem is meant to let other people participate in the iterable advent of Beatrice.

Furthermore, the enunciation of the poem — reenacted at every recitation of the text — covers and articulates a definite time span. As we read in Dante's prose, just after Beatrice's passage, several bystanders express in words their wonder at the event and their admiration for the woman's angelic beauty. The presence of Beatrice engenders in them so strong an honesty that, during the actual event of Beatrice's appearance, they cannot but fall silent and lower their eyes. The pleasant inner experience of her manifestation is so intense that bystanders are not able to retell it, and no one could look at her without sighing upon the very first glance. No one but Dante apparently. Even though exposed to Beatrice's impact, the poet wants to say the event while it happens, before he is eventually forced to sigh too. The poem wants to make the event present to the readers while it is taking place and up to the (expected) sighing, between Beatrice's first appearance on

the scene and the silence that her passing by imposes on bystanders.¹⁵

The crystallized moment — which encapsulates iteration — moves toward the final sigh that is the threshold to the fullness of experience and from where the poem can begin (again). The poem ‘happens’ after its end and before its beginning. The iterability of the poem as event is not made explicit in the poem, but only in the prose.¹⁶ The poem, though, offers itself for repetition in different ‘presents’ thanks to its verbal tenses (present and gerund), the establishment of its own *kairos*, and the (shareable) open position of its speaker. Referentiality is kept open in the poem: the utterance finds its referents only in the larger world in which it takes place, in this case the fictional world created by the narrative in which it is inserted.¹⁷ As a member of a responsive collectivity, the speaker is left relatively non-individuated since the active role is delegated to Beatrice. By inserting in the frame narrative of the *Vita nova* a poem that he had written previously, Dante identifies him-

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- 15 Perhaps, in order to be able to look and speak, the speaker has to partially withdraw his presence from the scene of passing and greeting, or at least slightly delay Beatrice’s effect on him. Indeed, Beatrice addresses her greeting to others (*altrui*). Of course, the narrative reason could also apply here: in paragraph 5 (X–XII), Beatrice had already denied her sweet greeting to Dante and this deprivation caused the adoption of the style of praise, which does not ask for any kind of reciprocation.
- 16 The notion of the poem as event shares some traits with Attridge’s concept of *act-event*: the position of both activity and passivity in which the reader finds herself when responding to a text as a literary work, see Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). For Attridge, this response concerns literature in general; I am interested in the linguistic and rhetorical strategies by which the lyric enables such response.
- 17 In other cases, a more stable referent can be provided by our ‘real’ world in the context of the re-enactment of the poem, by literary history, or by paratextual or macrotextual elements, such as titles, epigraphs, or recurrent proper names (for instance, Laura in Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*).

self as the author — the first person to *say* the poem — but also as a reader of the product of a creative power which lies somewhere else.¹⁸ In other words, he is already re-enacting it.

The verbal gesture of saying or praising the beloved (or any other object of cultural value) — with no ambition to contain her in a full representation — is an act of presence as much as a quotable form. The poem is an effect of Beatrice that intends to have the same, or at least a similar, effect on its readers. Over a certain time span, the presence of the speaker is engendered by the presence of Beatrice as much as the presence of the reader is engendered (up to the conclusive sigh) by the presence of the poem.¹⁹ One could say, following Agamben, that the fullness of experience is beyond the limits of the poem, in the silence brought about by the sigh, but the entire utterance moves toward that silence which is outside of the poem, outside of the articulation of time.

The poem is not just made of words that, when read out loud, are translated into bodily actions or bring forth what they convey as meaning, as it happens in an oath, a court sentence, or an instruction book, what could be

18 As at least twelve other poems included in the *Vita nova*, ‘Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare’ had an attested previous circulation as a free-standing poem, see Dante Alighieri, *Rime giovanili e della Vita nuova*, ed. by Teodolinda Barolini, notes by Manuele Gragnolati (Milano: Rizzoli Bur, 2009), pp. 392–402. The subsequent transmission of the *Vita nova* shows the resistance of the lyric to be fully absorbed into the self-exegetical prose, and to a certain extent, into Dante’s authorial self-projection. Boccaccio transcribes the *Vita nova*, moving Dante’s analytical annotations to the poems (*divisioni*) to the margins and, following this model, the 1576 *edition princeps* published by Sermantelli does not print them. See Jelena Todorović, *Dante and the Dynamics of Textual Exchange* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), pp. 4–6.

19 In *The Body of Beatrice*, Harrison investigates in depth this generative power delegated to Beatrice.

called a *performative* utterance in J. L. Austin's sense of the term.²⁰ These kinds of words, in their precise arrangement, are re-performed as a real utterance by someone else and every time they establish a 'now' of the event. Jonathan Culler aptly distinguishes this kind of *performance* from Austin's *performativity* and specifically credits the lyric with it.²¹ Yet there is something else: These words are not simply the presentation of a feeling, situation, or condition with which the reader can empathize or identify herself. Even for the reader, it is not a matter of external referentiality. In the lyric poem the repeatable *verbal gesture* is the real gesture. Language and act coincide in a performance that does not actualize anything but itself in the external world. The re-enactment or re-citation of such gestures, which always entails an interplay between memories and expectations, could have a role in the self-recognition of the literary genre across centuries. By re-citing these gestures, perhaps, one could even act as a lyric subject.

20 John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

21 Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 125–31.

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