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Qui chante? The Lyric's Voice as Impersonation

Starting from the imperative to not just read, but to speak lyric poems out loud, this paper considers ways in which poems change depending on who utters them. Beyond the familiar distinction between the poem's author and the lyrical 'I' – the voice in which the poet chooses to utter the poem – any performer who speaks a poem also *impersonates* the text. Reading is the first act of interpretation; others follow. Sound is an indispensable constitutive aspect of the lyric poem, too often neglected. Each reading of a poem can turn into a momentary *ec-stasis*.

Keywords: lyric, song, performance, voicing, Diotima, ventriloquism, impersonation, charm

In the December 2017 thirtieth anniversary issue of « Qui Parle? » Marjorie Perloff reminds us of the abiding human self that speaks when a human being utters words. She acknowledges that “[a] belief in the individual – in difference – is currently taboo; indeed, it is suspect today to differentiate the human from the animal or, for that matter, from the life of growing plants. [...] As for me, I proudly embrace my individuality.”¹ Perloff makes clear that current taboos don't touch her. Her biography is unique, her experiences are her own, and even her name is self-chosen. Perloff's scholarship over many decades has accordingly been a humanist exploration of poetic voices and their unique utterances. In this paper, taking Perloff's proud defense of self and individuality as inspiration, I want to consider one particular, constitutive quality of the lyric poem which constitutes part of its human situatedness and which can be described provision-

¹ Perloff (2017: 339).

ally as the lyric's mutable voice. I propose to investigate the origin, the constitution, and the durability of the particular voice in which the lyric poem sounds. When a poem is spoken or performed, it is inevitably rendered in the voice of its speaker, the speaker of that particular moment. The customary 'I' of the lyric poem, which we habitually and conventionally distinguish from the poem's author, makes the momentary appropriation of a lyric text by a performer even more significant. Performance by a speaker changes the poem, perhaps not existentially, but certainly in its effect; it completes the poem. The speaker, whoever she or he may be, contributes to the poem's coming into being in the moment of its performance, in the moment of its *impersonation*. This ineradicable mutability of the poem, contingent upon the voice which speaks it, asks to be explored more fully in its relationship with the poem's semantic meaning, its address and affect, and its potential for intervening into our human world. The key feature added in the poem's performance is the embodied, living voice, with its unique tone, timbre, sonority, and breathing. That voice belongs to a speaker who is not interchangeable, whose particularity matters. The question *qui chante?* needs to be asked – and answered – with some urgency in each performance of a lyric poem.

In asking the question *qui chante?* in this way, I am taking certain things for granted: when I say 'lyric', I am here speaking about short poems that I imagine being read out loud, whether to oneself or to an audience that either listens or simply 'overhears' (in John Stuart Mill's much-debated term) the voicing.² I do not concern myself with silent reading, although any silent reading involves a specific voice, namely the reader's own, that he or she hears internally in the act of reading. In addition, I take the 'lyric' in lyric poetry – it's after all a musical term – seriously by considering a poem as a song in the widest sense, as a *carmen* (in its Latin root), from which the word 'charm' both in the simple sense of magic and bewitching and also in the extended bewitching 'charm' of the erotic derives. Lyrics and the erotic have been related from the beginning. In Plato's "Symposium", as we will see a little later, Diotima develops an entire philosophy of Eros out of an analogy with poetry, which she says is the creation of something out of nothing. By refusing to remain with the speaker, lyrics, in reaching out, kindle a desire that is present but as yet undirected. The lyric must be uttered and this utterance gives the desire direction. In conceptualizing the act of speaking a poem or reading it out loud, we should always think of the 'reader' as simultaneously being a 'speaker'. The German lan-

² Mill (1833) wrote in "Poetry and its Varieties": "Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling: but, if we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*." This is the conventional manner of quoting the passage. A different critical edition published by Duisburg-Essen University renders the text as follows: "But if we may be excused the seeming affectation of the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*." Compare Paragraph 14 at: https://www.uni-due.de/lyriktheorie/texte/1833_mill1.html#edition [27/06/2019]. By qualifying his antithesis as a "seeming affectation", Mill relegates it from a philosophical argument to the realm of play.

guage insists on the difference between the *Leser* ('reader') and the *Vorleser* ('one who reads aloud'); in English, a welcome oscillation between the concepts means that we do not have to contend with the difference: the reader can be both *Leser* and *Sprecher*.

My choice of *chanter* as the verb describing the performance of the lyric inscribes itself into the centuries-old tradition of considering lyric poetry as part of a musical practice. Our age's fixation on writing makes this reminder oddly necessary. Yet writing came to poetry pretty late in the history of human civilization. Only remember that Virgil 'sings' of arms and the man, that Milton exhorts the heavenly muse to 'sing' and not to write, that Whitman wrote not "Book of Myself" but "Song of Myself", and that Pound wrote few manifestos but many "Cantos".³ This continuing poetic practice is not some helpless sentimental memory, as Winfried Eckel apparently asserts.⁴ In those oral cultures in which poetry originated – unlike ours at present – poems would have been generically close to prayer and incantation and would always have been a performance of some kind. In other words, every lyric would have had an original or even originary voice, and since at every performance a different speaker might have lent his voice to the lyric, the voice of the lyric would have been mutable. A full historical account of a lyric poem would include the history of its performances. This task is obviously impossible to achieve. But the fact that the performance history of a poem is irrecoverable does not mean it is irrelevant: it becomes part of the poem's largely undocumented interpretation.

The poetry slams of recent decades have done much to bring orality and performance back into consciousness. They foreground the event-character of a poem, privileging its ontology over its meaning; they require an audience that feels addressed and lets the performer know by responding that it has been touched, and they bring new prominence to the person of the performer who, like the ancient bard or rhapsode, is recognized in connection with the text. The intimate connection of an artefact not just with its author but also with its interpreter is a matter of course in the field of music. Let's attempt an analogy: When we listen to a recording of a Beethoven symphony, we listen for the mutable performance; in this case, for the style of individual conductors and orchestras. Classical music lovers, I among them, can hear and appreciate, without being told explicitly, whether Karajan, Haitink or Celibidache is conducting. Professional musicians, I not among them, can read the score of the symphony and sound it in their minds.

We behave in our reading of lyric poetry, by contrast, as if we were all trained conductors as well as readers and as if every reading of the 'score' – the text of

³ These examples are taken from Gioia (2016: 11).

⁴ Eckel (2016: 204) speaks of a „sentimentalische Erinnerung an etwas, auf das in einer reinen Schriftkultur verzichtet werden muss.“ Cf. also Bers / Trilcke (2007: 16, FN 36). The ductus of renunciation [„Verzicht“] seems to me needlessly defeatist.

the poem – were exhaustive and exclusive. Well, it is not. The time has come to rethink that particular act of hubris. We need training in sounding poems, listening to them, and trying out the interpretations that the score – that is, the scripted text – offers us.⁵ A sonnet (originally a musical form), a ghazal, a free-verse poem in long and short lines – all of them offer us markers for vocal interpretation as part of their genre and contained in their poetic structure. If we disregard them and consider the lyric poem as simply an assembly of words printed on a page, we act as if the score of the symphony in the library were enough and its performance in the concert hall were secondary. Performing the lyric is essential, but it is never its own excuse. Poor Ion, the rhapsode, is proof of what can happen if skilled performance is mistaken for expert subject knowledge. When Socrates leads Ion into the quandary of having overestimated his abilities, Ion must lose. While I've always felt a bit sorry for Ion – naturally I root for him rather than for Socrates – I must acknowledge that he loses his debate because his hubris leads him into claiming expertise in all sorts of fields beyond poetic performance. Had he claimed only what was properly his, the skill of rhapsody, he would have won the debate. Let us, as readers of lyric, at least aspire to being good rhapsodes, too.

What, then, are some of the formal and performative features of lyric that constitutes the 'score' and that direct it towards the 'event' of its vocalizing? To begin with, the first person is by far the most frequent fictitious speaking situation in which lyrics are rendered. Bonnie Costello has recently enlarged our horizons by calling attention to the less frequent but significant occurrences of the plural pronoun 'we' in lyric poetry, but the 'I' remains by far the most frequent subject position that lyricists adopt.⁶ Except for multi-person-voice poems like T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," which gestures towards the epic in its composite whole, poems generally want that single 'I' to voice them.⁷ Furthermore, lyric poems speak overwhelmingly in the present tense. If even narrative fiction, most often told in the past tense, still can make us feel to us as if it happened only at the moment of its reading, in an eternal present, how much more does the lyric insist upon its being here with us right now! The lyric's form on the page, as we conventionally encounter it, is reminiscent of a script for performance: its lineation, syntax, stanzaic shape, repetition, emphatic punctuation – all these mark potentialities for performance. The poem is shaped for breathing and speaking. The lyric poem finally emerges as an assembly of multiple acts of potential impersonation.

⁵ Rüdiger Zymner insists that "written language [...] has neither rhythm, nor sound, nor actual musicality", and that these are merely "perceptual constructs by the reader" (cf. Zymner 2009: 47 [Translation mine, T.A.]), but this assertion creates a distinction without a difference. Unless a reader constructs a text in his or her mind or mouth – and that can only be done by employing rhythm, sound, etc., no communication has taken place and the text has never become a text that acts in the world; it has remained a potential text, or simply a 'pre-text' in all senses of that term. Cf. also Bers / Trilcke (2017: 15).

⁶ Costello (2017).

⁷ Eliot (1971: 37-55).

Where is the mysterious, mutable voice located? The poem's voice seems to me to be latent in the text. It can be activated by a competent reader (or rhapsode, if you will), and it will last, much like a concert or a recital, probably only as long as the performance lasts. It is fully alive only in that rhapsodic performance, when it becomes, in T.S. Eliot's words, "music heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all, but you are the music / While the music lasts."⁸ How interesting, by the way, that Eliot chooses the semantic field of music to illustrate what "The point of intersection of the timeless / With time" might be like.

The potentially powerful voice of the poem is therefore also subject to immense change. Every performer will articulate it differently; the human dimension is part of the interpretation. For a counterfactual moment of horror, just imagine a poem read by a computerized voice: the poem, *qua* poem, is dead on arrival. A poem read in this manner would probably feel shorn of its essence. Hearing the computerized voice uttering, in a merely phonically correct recitation, the words that compose it, would eviscerate the poem, leaving the corpse of a text. The words of the lyric poem are, instead, akin in character to the words spoken by an actor in a stage drama, though drama frequently contains performance instructions in its paratexts. Unlike in a lyric poem which is open to highly individualized interpretation, the playwright has imagined a character in full, and the jobs of the actor and director consist in bringing a credible character to life. Stage directions often give specific orders for how a word, a line, a scene is to be voiced. Drama, for all its sparseness, can thus be a fairly prescriptive literary genre, even if we obviously are accustomed to paying attention to the ways in which individual performers give life to characters. Laurence Olivier's Hamlet is different from Ralph Fiennes'. Yet there is universal consensus that acting is a highly specialized art and that it requires training. Have we forgotten that performing poems might be just as challenging? At the other end of the textual spectrum, in narrative fiction, the reader silently constructs a world inside her brain as she puts the events narrated into motion. For all of its many words, narrative fiction may still be the least prescriptive of all major textual genres because our individual readerly imaginations can do with the text what we please. Witness the disappointment so many imaginative readers feel when their favorite novel has been put on screen and has thus been pictorially determined. Narrative fiction enables the reader to be her own director and performer in ways that drama and the lyric appear to discourage.

Lyric poetry, because of its brevity and its absence of stage directions and its continuity of voice – conventionally, at least – from beginning to end, thus shares a portion of prescriptiveness with drama but its sense of potentiality with prose fiction. Once spoken by a person, the poem's potentiality becomes reality. Relying on competent readers to unpack that potential and to give the poem a voice and a character, the poem wants and waits to be *im-personated*. As the

⁸ "The Dry Salvages." In: *Ibid.*, 136.

readers of lyric, we are both its principal actor and its conductor; with our bodies and voices, we even become its instrument(s). That's why we speak of performing a poem, not of staging it. A 'staging' implies a particular script that is repeated night after night (in German: *eine Inszenierung*). A 'performance' is a one-time unrepeatable occurrence with unique characteristics (in German: *eine Aufführung*). Poems are performed.

The latent and mutable voice of the poem is related to, but not identical with, the notion of the poem's address. Will Waters has written what may well be the definitive study on poetry's address with his 2003 book "Poetry's Touch." In investigating the long and varied tradition of poems that say 'you' in various degrees of explicitness, Waters references lyric poetry's versatility, or perhaps even promiscuity, in speaking in various and shifting contexts and in addressing those who would hear. Waters even considers the possibility that hearers would not feel addressed by a poem but would instead want to "enter" the poem as its "utterer": here, Waters draws on terms used by Helen Vendler and concludes, with full justification, "But this is the very stuff of imaginative reading."⁹ In thus giving agency to the poem's potential functions, Waters comes close to suggesting that the poem, its addressee, and the reader – and we can imagine this group either as a twosome or a threesome, depending on who feels addressed – constitute an interactive set of agents who give life to the event of a poem's being spoken. So readers impersonate poems, but poems also impersonate: the text is always there waiting to be adopted, as it were. Whenever a lyric poem is spoken or performed by a reader, that reader lends her voice temporarily to the words written by the author. At the same time, this same reader is the first audience of the words; hearing them, however, spoken in her own voice. As both messenger and addressee, the reader/speaker is positioned *between* the author and any other potential listener, while the lyric poem itself mediates – or is positioned between – the author and the speaker/audience. At least two acts of "impersonation" take place: the reader/speaker of the lyric impersonates the poem by giving voice, face, and expression to words on the page, and the poem impersonates its author by standing in for his absence.

Both impersonations described here constitute far more than acts of mere ventriloquism because they are at once interpretive. The rhetoric scholar Stephen Sutherland has compared the process of revising one's writing – scholarly writing, that is – to an act of ventriloquism: "the metaphor of revision as ventriloquism – which acknowledges how revision is shaped not only by a writer's intentions but also by convention, audience, and language itself – can become a heuristic."¹⁰ Sutherland writes in the context of teaching student writers to revise their work, and he quotes poets hesitatingly. But what he says applies to the performance of the lyric: when we read that poem, it directs our voice even as we

⁹ Waters (2003: 14).

¹⁰ Sutherland (2014: 28).

employ our voice. As performers, we are standing beside ourselves, we are *ec-static*, in rhetorical terms. Sutherland quotes Jean-Luc Nancy in support of the idea that “every spoken word is the simultaneity of at least two different modes of that spoken word; even when I am by myself, there is the one that is said and the one that is heard.”¹¹ Sutherland further adduces the terms Judith Butler employs in “Giving an Account of Oneself” where she explains that “in self-recognition, [societal] norms ‘orchestrate’ the ‘forms that a subject may take.’”¹² Again, like T.S. Eliot, Butler resorts to the semantic field of music and the notion of ‘orchestrating’ a self. The root meaning of *orchesis* is dance, a kinetic performance in ancient Greek culture that was, like the rhapsodic performance of poetry, executed in public and with expressive movement. Poetry in its fullness is inextricably inserted in the social space in which it occurs.

Whether solitary or before an audience, the reader of the lyric lends herself to the totality of the emotional moment evoked by the lyric. Readers ‘perform’ a poem not just to sound the words but to feel their sense and to alter their own emotional state – and perhaps that of the audience – for the duration of the lyrical event. Unlike actors on stage, readers of lyric don neither costume nor mask. The voice alone is foregrounded. Unprotected and willingly, as they read or perform, readers abandon their quotidian selves in favor of impersonating the poem’s ontological being, a being which, in turn, comes into existence – and in an original manner – during each lyric event.¹³ Each reading is a kinetic performance of *ec-stasis*, a practice that Sutherland also illuminates through his reading of Adrienne Rich’s essay “When We Dead Awaken.”¹⁴

In an important recent essay collection, Anna Bers and Peer Trilcke discuss not so much how to perform lyrics, but focus instead on the „Phänomene des Performativen in der Lyrik“: they choose a phenomenological approach and insist on nominalizing the act of performing into „das Performative“ which grants, at least implicitly, that performance might be a categorical or constitutive quality of the lyric. I applaud their approach and the essays, but I take issue nonetheless with the insistence on „Phänomene“ because I doubt that an account of phenomena alone can capture the charm of performance. As Robert Lowell insisted, a poem “*is* an event, not a record of an event.”¹⁵

The event-character of the lyric poem constitutes its potential for impersonation. Much as the score of the poem stands between writer and performer, so poetry is always becoming. The lyric hovers in a mid-position akin to that described by Diotima in a dialogue that Socrates recounts more than midway

¹¹ Ibid, 31.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ I restrict this claim to a first reading, not including subsequent readings.

¹⁴ Sutherland (2014: 38).

¹⁵ Vendler (1988: 291).

through the “Symposium.” In deciding the question of whether love is a god who has the qualities of beauty and goodness, Diotima first negates love’s divinity and in its stead establishes the category of the ‘in-between’. Love, in Diotima’s view, is one of several qualities that partake of two worlds. Just as correct judgment, which we can exercise even in partial ignorance, lies between ignorance and knowledge, so love is not static at all but instead fully dynamic, between mortal and immortal, between human and god, serving as messenger.¹⁶ In her subsequent speech, Diotima then shows how “everything that is responsible for creating something out of nothing is a kind of poetry.”¹⁷ If we read this portion of the “Symposium,” which is about the desire of love, the desire to be in the presence of the beautiful and to possess it, as applying to poetry – as Diotima models for us – we realize that the female speaker drives the argument towards the precedence of reproduction over possession. “All of us are pregnant,” says Diotima, and “whenever pregnant animals or persons draw near to beauty, they become gentle and joyfully disposed and give birth and reproduce.”¹⁸ Therefore, love does not want beauty, but reproduction and birth in beauty.¹⁹ Socrates is not convinced; he says “Maybe” at this point.

Guided by Diotima, I conclude by offering the notion that performing a poem, voicing it, impersonating it, is somehow like the occasion of being pregnant and wanting to deliver. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “language is fossil poetry,”²⁰ and surely it is no accident that, in English, delivering a baby and delivering a speech use the same verb for the action of bringing something out of oneself into the world. The delivery of a letter is somewhat more prosaic than all that, but ‘deliverance’, another cognate, has decided overtones of salvation. The lyric poem, in being delivered, acts as that messenger that brings a potentiality unto actuality.

The concept of the messenger also bring us back to the root meaning of ‘impersonation.’ A messenger is he or she who lends his person to the message that is communicated. In daily usage, ‘impersonation’ may initially suggest deceit, but in more positive terms, it also suggests the transportation of a message, perhaps even the ‘transport’ that the addressee may experience. Wallace Stevens articulates that transport convincingly in the concluding lines of « Esthétique du Mal, » the key poem in his 1947 volume “Transport to Summer,” in which he foregrounds the physicality of life, the sound heard by real ears privileged over the mere shadowy existence of metaphysical beings who, in a final musical metaphor, experience only “the minor” of what we, the hearers of the “right chorale,” feel. Marjorie Perloff’s response to « Qui Parle? » has mutated, in Stevens’s poem, to a response to the question, « *Qui chante?* »:

¹⁶ See Plato (1989) Symposium 203 A.

¹⁷ Ibid. 205 C.

¹⁸ Ibid. 206 C-D.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, 206 E.

²⁰ Emerson (1983: 457).

The greatest poverty is not to live
In a physical world, to feel that one's desire
Is too difficult to tell from despair. Perhaps,
After death, the non-physical people, in paradise,
Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe
The green corn gleaming and experience
The minor of what we feel.
[...]
This is the thesis scrivined in delight,
The reverberating psalm, the right chorale.
[...]
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
With the metaphysical changes that occur,
Merely in living as and where we live.²¹

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²¹ Stevens (1996: 286-287).