

POETRY AND MEMORY

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Let us begin by establishing a distinction between two kinds of memory: epic and lyric. Epic memory is collective. In an illiterate culture, the rhapsode's task is to celebrate the deeds of his tribe; he tries to find in the past of his people signs of their present greatness. To commit his story to memory, he relies on the repetitive mnemonic devices of poetry. As he creates the founding narrative of his tribe, the epic poet helps to shape the very idea of such a collectivity, which may not even have existed very clearly in the minds of its members before his intervention. And when he sings or recites his poem, he gives his listeners the pleasure of feeling that they are part of a heroic nation, of recognizing themselves in the old stories now recast as collective myths.

The time of epic poetry is long past. One of the last epic poems not received as blatant anachronisms, one of the last to be incorporated into the canon of Western literature, was Camões's *The Lusiads*. But, as scholars note, in *The Lusiads* we find elements that are at odds with the traditional purposes of epic poetry, that do not really belong in a genre meant to be the uncritical celebration of a people's feats: they point to the famous passages in which the poet complains about not getting enough official backing for his attempt to celebrate his nation's heroic deeds. Epic poetry was in a crisis by Camões's time because true epic memory was no longer possible; the modern state, which had already begun to take shape, is a rather more complex affair than the tribe or nation sung by the rhapsode, and it requires mechanisms of legitimation that have little to do with epic poetry.

The development of the modern nation-state was simultaneous with that of the modern individual, and with the growing assertion of lyric poetry as the poetic genre par excellence. Lyric memory is of an individual nature. The lyric poet affirms an individuality and — with the emergence of the modern subject since the Renaissance — a unique subjectivity. The lyric poet, like the epic poet, attempts to forge a myth, but his myth is individual rather than collective: he searches his past for elements that will allow him to build a personal history endowed with consistency and meaning. The lyric poet attempts to

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construct a complete personal mythology, including everything from a myth of origin to a teleology. Just as the epic poet often forges a sense of nationhood that did not even exist beforehand, the lyric poet also puts together an integrated concept of self where perhaps there was nothing before but incoherent or even contradictory drives. Just as the idea of Greece is at least in part a creation of Homer's, the persona of each lyric poet is a product of his or her own self-mythification. In the great autobiographical poem of English Romanticism, *The Prelude*, Wordsworth ransacks his childhood (and, we suspect, reinvents it whenever necessary) in search of signs of his future greatness, constructing a heroic myth of origin for his own exalted personality, the individuality of a genius. To the lyric poet, individual memory is a repertoire of causes, explanations and justifications that allow him or her to create his or her own personal myth of a single, unique individuality, to be appreciated by the reader — who, in turn, through a process of identification, is gratified to realize that his or her own self, as unique as the poet's, has something in common with the poet's. What the lyric poet and the reader of lyric poetry have in common is the human condition, a sequence of life experiences making up a whole shared by all humanity: the reader, just like the poet, began as a child and an adolescent, experienced all the pleasure and horrors specific to each age; he or she also loved, and either was or was not loved in return; feared death and yearned for some sort of immortality, or at least some compensation for mortality; and even if he or she did not experience exile, old age and misery, such things are not beyond his or her powers of imagination. At the same time, the myth of the lyric poet emphasizes that this specific combination of elements common to all mankind make up a singularity — the poet's persona — that is unlike any other, just as a limited number of chessmen moving around in the limited space of a chessboard describe an infinite number of games, no two of which are exactly alike. The pleasure given by lyric poetry relies on this paradoxical coexistence between identification and differentiation, between the repertoire of shared or imagined experiences that are common to poet and reader and the conviction that both the personality that wrote those lines and the one now reading them are, each in its own way, unique.

We are now experiencing another major crisis in Western poetry: the crisis of lyricism. If Camões wrote his great epic at a moment when the project of epic poetry was becoming unfeasible, lyric poets today must face the task of forging their own single and

consistent selves at a time when the very concept of an individual subject is said to be an anachronism. The harbingers of this crisis have been many, but the one closest and most relevant to us who are speakers of Portuguese is the work of Fernando Pessoa. Even as he plays the game of lyric self-construction, Pessoa breaks the rules by creating not one but several different personas, each one associated with its own repertoire of individual memories, with a biography and a name of its own. By becoming a poet who is several poets, a person who is several persons, Pessoa calls the bluff of the Wordsworthian game, exposing the fictional nature of the entire notion of poetic genius as the flourishing of a potential that can be traced back to childhood. By fabricating false memories and attributing them to nonexistent poets who are nevertheless the authors of individualized oeuvres, Pessoa shows just how tenuous is the distinction between re-creation and creation, between the fictionalization of lived experience and the forging of an out-and-out fiction. In this way, Pessoa's work raises a number of serious questions: How valid is the lyric project? Just how relevant are personal experience and individual memory to the elaboration of a poetical oeuvre? What do such words as "real" and "false," "feeling" and "feigning" mean in the context of poetry? If it is possible to forge a fictive personality that authors a real body of work, is there any substance at all behind the myth of personality? Indeed, is there any substance at all in so-called reality? How much more real than literature is reality itself?

In English-language poetry, two of the major figures in the demolition of Romantic lyricism were Eliot and Pound. One of the things that *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos* have in common is the fact that in both poems the lyric self's first-hand personal experience is largely replaced by the author's reading experience. Whereas in Wordsworth the author's living experience and his strong personality are the raw material of the poetry, in Eliot and Pound the memory of what has been experienced is mostly replaced by the memory of what has been read. Wordsworth explains and justifies his individual genius by reviving his childhood; Eliot and Pound construct their lyric selves in opposition to the world they live in, resorting to a mosaic of quotations from and allusions to works they have read. By alluding to such disparate works as Frazer's celebrated *Golden Bough* and the obscure memoirs of one Countess Marie Larisch, Eliot asserts the forcefulness of his individuality as much as Wordsworth does when he evokes the sands of Westmoreland and the cliffs of

Cumberland. Just as the Romantic poet elevates and sanctifies the places associated with his childhood when he includes their names in his poem, Eliot, by elevating to his own personal canon works that have in common above all the fact that they were all read by him, confers on them the supreme tribute. We have here a new kind of poetry, one that we may call post-lyric: a poetry in which the self behind the poems is essentially a thicket of texts. While in his later years Eliot retreated to a more conservative position both aesthetically and politically, Pound became increasingly radical on both counts, carrying his fetishism of individual reading to a paroxysm. As he waded deeper into a megalomaniac life project that culminated in his support of Mussolini, Pound kept adding to his work in progress just about every discovery he made in a lifetime of compulsive reading: Chinese ideograms, the correspondence of John Adams, music scores. It was hardly necessary to find formal solutions that would make the text cohere; the author's self-proclaimed genius made it an a priori truth that whatever solution he might arrive at would necessarily be the right one. In post-Romantic Pound, Romantic egotism reaches one of its all-time heights, but where a Wordsworth would have indulged in the remembrance of events he actually (or supposedly) experienced and hallowed them by enshrining them in his poem, post-lyric Pound canonizes his own readings by incorporating them into his book. Who touches this book touches a man, Whitman wrote; to this Pound seems to reply: Who touches this man touches a library. The replacement of living experience by accumulated reading is now complete.

I am not saying, of course, that intertextuality did not exist in the nineteenth century, that poetry about poetry was a twentieth-century invention. In every period of Western literature poets have dialogued with their antecessors and contemporaries, quoted from and alluded to their works. After all, remembrance of the books one has read is part of one's living experience, and reading earlier poets is a fundamental experience — perhaps *the* fundamental experience — in the making of a poet. Nonetheless, two traits of post-lyric poetry seem to me unprecedented: the tendency to value intertextuality more than non-literary experience, and the tendency to demand from the reader such an abundance of specialized reading that the poem must be read together with a formidable battery of notes and explanations. The first of these tendencies is associated with the claim that the notion of a reality existing outside the text is a positivistic superstition, that reality is no more than

a plethora of overlapping texts — an issue of relevance to our discussion, but which for reasons of space I cannot go into here. As to the second tendency, my point is that when post-lyric poets resort to allusions to other texts (as well as to paintings, films, and so on) they are not, as were the epic and lyric poets of the past, referring to a body of knowledge that a reader of poetry is assumed to be conversant with, but rather drawing on an extremely idiosyncratic reading experience that no one else could conceivably share; consequently, in order to be able to read this or that particular poem one has to master a specific bibliography. When Dante alludes to Virgil, he is making the eminently reasonable assumption that his readers will know what he is talking about; the same may be said of Drummond when he quotes Camões. Even when he or she resorts to his or her own personal memories, the lyric poet engages the reader in a dialogue of similarities and differences: these were my own personal experiences, unique in their way, but also recognizable by any other human being. When he or she alludes to a text, the lyric poet is in fact saying: I have read this particular poem, which I assume you have read too, and this is my response to it; yours may be quite similar or just the opposite, *lecteur, mon semblable*. But when Eliot quotes from Countess Marie Larisch's memoirs, he cannot expect anyone to be familiar with this long-forgotten work, just as Pound, when he strews Chinese ideograms about the page, does not seriously expect his reader to make anything out of them.

My real topic, however, is not Eliot or Pound, but contemporary Brazilian poetry. If I keep returning to Eliot and Pound it is because these two poets — and *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos* in particular — have had a major impact on Brazilian poets since the 1950s, through the writings of the Concrete poets. It seems to me that Concrete poetry itself has been less influential than the kind of poetry written by the poets associated with Concretism in their later, post-Concrete phase: poetry as a discourse on literature — or, more generally, a discourse on such cultural artifacts as works of literature, music, cinema, and so on — rather than a re-creation of existential experience; poetry as evocation of what one has read rather than of what one has lived. To the lyric poet, individual memory is the fundamental raw material; to the post-lyric poet — and those Brazilian poets who have been most influenced by the Concretists are post-lyric — the basic material to be shaped into poetry is one's reading.

The different ways individual memory is put to use in lyric poetry and in post-lyric poetry point to an important contrast between the ways these two kinds of poetry are enjoyed. In addition to the basic pleasures provided by verse — repetition, rhythm, echoes, those effects that account for the basic difference between verse and prose — lyric poetry allows the reader to identify with the poet as a human being who shared the same basic experiences as he or she, for all the differences between their personal circumstances. Reading Emily Dickinson — who lived in another country and in another century, who was a woman while I am a man, who never left her father's house while I have lived at more than ten different addresses in two different countries, who was brought up as a strict Protestant while I had a typically lax Brazilian Catholic upbringing — I draw much pleasure from the realization that she and I share a number of intuitions: a disenchanted skepticism, a nagging concern with ideas of death and posterity. By comparing these perceptions, by considering the similarities and differences between them, I came to elaborate an important part of my own lyric persona, which in turn is an important part of what I take to be my personality. My reading of Dickinson — and of Drummond, Pessoa and so many other lyric poets — played a major role in my intellectual, emotional and moral growth.

The function of a poetry that takes the world of cultural artifacts as its privileged referent is necessarily quite different. Like lyric poetry, post-lyric poetry gives readers the basic pleasures of form, sound and image. But on the plane of meaning, because it privileges the memory of what has been read rather than of what has been experienced, it tends to de-emphasize those issues of self-building that were of fundamental importance in lyricism; in this, post-lyricism is perfectly consistent with the distrust of the autonomy of the subject that characterizes our times. Intellectual issues may be discussed, and here post-lyric poetry provides the same sort of pleasure as theoretical writing. Often questions of poetics are discussed, so that the poem appropriates the language of criticism. But when much of the poem's effect relies on the reader's ability to identify more or less obscure allusions to other works of art, the pleasure of post-lyric poetry comes dangerously close to the sort of thrill felt by the reader of a gossip column when he or she identifies the personages mentioned by the columnist. Indeed, is there any fundamental difference between the pleasure of recognizing, in a post-lyric poem, a subtle reference to a passage of

“Anna Livia Plurabelle” and the frisson felt by the reader of a society column who grasps an elliptical allusion to a titillating episode recently experienced by a well-known couple of socialites? In both cases the reader enjoys the narcissistic thrill of feeling that he or she belongs to an exclusive community — in one case, the community of readers of *Finnegans Wake*; in the other, the chosen few who were present at a dinner party where embarrassing details of the private life of Mr. and Mrs. So-and-So came out into the open. A literature that relies on the snobbish pleasures of belonging to an ingroup is surely a minor sort of literature, in the sense that the pleasure it produces is not of an aesthetic nature — in the same sense that, say, pornographic novels or detective stories are felt to be minor literature. Much of post-lyric poetry, I believe, is of this kind; the worst of it amounts to little more than a variety of intellectual name-dropping.

There is yet an additional problem. To the extent that it privileges the memory of what has been read rather than the memory of what has been experienced, that it is essentially a form of criticism, or a rewriting of the works of the poet’s chosen predecessors, this sort of poetry is not potentially of interest to any human being, but is instead — like criticism — a kind of discourse addressed basically to writers and students of literature. This implies a narrowing of range, a distancing from more general themes — to which I referred above as “the human condition” — that are, at least potentially, of universal interest. The post-lyric poet can no longer say: nothing that is human is alien to me. Much of the human experience that provided the material for lyric and epic poetry is eliminated from the outset; some post-lyric poets, indeed, give one the impression that the human condition — the contingencies of the flesh, the passions, mortality — are themes that should be touched only with a ten-foot pole, or perhaps best left to popular music and the movies. To these poets, poetry (or even literature in general) should soar high above such commonplace trivialities to breathe a more rarefied air in a higher sphere, a sort of Platonic world where pure form — words pared down to pure signifiers, shorn of referents — occupies itself with itself exclusively, for the delectation of refined sensibilities. Perhaps it would not be farfetched to see this attitude as a new version of the decadentism that, exactly one hundred years ago, sought to free art from all that tied it down to the unbearable vulgarity of the real.