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Langer, Ullrich. Lyric in the Renaissance: From Petrarch to Montaigne

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Langer, Ullrich.

Lyric in the Renaissance: From Petrarch to Montaigne.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 218. ISBN 978-1-107-11028-1 (hardcover) CDN\$109.95.

Ullrich Langer's *Lyric in the Renaissance: From Petrarch to Montaigne* offers a reading of early modern lyric that cuts obliquely across all of our usual categories for understanding the period, welcomingly unsettling both historicist and formalist perspectives alike. In this respect, Langer's title is somewhat misleading: although he treats many of the great lyric collections of the Renaissance, as well as the *Essays*, in chronological order, his impressive survey is not another history of Petrarchism. Instead, he reads these texts from a very particular angle, with an eye for something he calls the "effect of singularity," a kind of lyrical "intensity" observable in poetry and in certain stretches of prose. In focusing on the "effect of singularity," Langer examines what lyric *does* as opposed to what it *is*. The distinction is important, as Langer is trying not to define an essential quality of lyric but to draw out those features of a poet's language that allow him or her to point to something in its radical singularity—a radical singularity that assumes a unique form in every text examined.

Langer develops this theoretical framework in the first chapter and then proceeds in chapters 2 and 3 to illustrate how Petrarch's *Canzoniere* and Charles d'Orléans's *rondeaux* create their own effects of singularity: in the *Canzoniere*, it is the uniqueness of the beloved and of the moment of encounter, and, in the *rondeaux*, that of the subject's loss and melancholy. As Langer shows, the poems' efforts to point towards these instances of singularity do not rely on the linguistic strategies one might suppose, and particularly not on those described in ancient or modern theories of the singular. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, for example, lyric is defined as a genre that communicates the probable—that is, the potentially universal—while historiography is said to relate the contingent and singular. With this in mind, one might be tempted to assume that the techniques of historiography—vivid descriptions and minute renditions—resemble those analyzed by Langer in his readings of Petrarch and Charles d'Orléans. In fact, it is quite the contrary. As Langer explains, neither author reports on specific details or provides lengthy descriptions to point to the singular. Instead, Petrarch's poems gesture towards the singular precisely at

those moments where little or almost no semantic value is conveyed and where the language of the poem relies heavily on devices like deictics and contrast. The sparseness that allows for the singular to emerge is even more palpable in Charles d'Orléans's *rondeaux*. Through their minimal variation in vocabulary, rhetorical questions and lack of resolution, these poems suggest the specificity of the loss suffered by the subject.

While Petrarch and Charles d'Orléans developed their techniques for producing the singular independently of one another, the next chapters show how the effect of the singular is produced in collections that take the *Canzoniere* as a model. Ronsard's *Les Amours (de Cassandre)* consciously imitate the love poems dedicated to Laura, but they displace the relationship between lover and beloved from a sacred context to an explicitly erotic one. Consequently, the sonnets that Langer analyzes gesture not towards the singularity of the beloved herself but rather towards the uniqueness of the erotic entanglement. In a series of masterful readings that counter the well-worn accounts of Ronsard's self-glorification, Langer shows how *Les Amours* suggests a unique form of reciprocity binding lover and beloved. From this communion between lovers, we move to the solitude of Du Bellay's verse in chapter 5. Although Du Bellay's *L'Olive* was among the first French collections to imitate the *Canzoniere*, Du Bellay soon rejected the poetics of Petrarchism in favour of a simpler style, closer to prose. The elegiac poems of the *Regrets* illustrate how Du Bellay uses seemingly unpoetic features—harsh rhymes and deictics—to point towards his isolation and melancholy.

Langer's discussion of Du Bellay's prose-like cadences leads into a final section on Montaigne's *Essays*. Despite the fact that they are not part of the lyric genre, the *Essays*' place is well deserved in Langer's study. A close analysis of the verses Montaigne includes in his work, in particular those of Virgil and Lucretius, suggests that the essayist read ancient lyric through the lens of vernacular poetry and, especially, with attention to lyric's capacity to point towards the singular and even the sublime—which Langer defines as that which cannot be grasped by conventional language. As Langer argues, key sentences of Montaigne's own prose can achieve this same sublime quality of pointing towards the absolute singular and ineffable.

The analyses of this final chapter are particularly clear and convincing—in part because the concept of the sublime helps clarify what Langer means by the “effect of singularity.” In his interpretations of Montaigne's prose and of specific

lines of ancient poetry, it is clear that Langer identifies the effect of singularity with a certain experience of the sublime. In Langer's earlier chapters, however, it is occasionally difficult to pinpoint what Langer sees as the poems' effects. Although Langer explains in detail what he means by the singular and shows through his close readings how it is produced, his analyses would benefit from a more thorough theoretical and practical discussion of what it means to call these instances of the singular "effects." What precisely is the difference between what a poem *is* and what it *does*? If the effect is not identical with the text of the poem, and if it is equally separate from the poem's historical reception, where exactly do we locate it historically and theoretically? This final question perhaps exceeds the bounds of Langer's study, but it is certainly worth thinking about for anyone interested in lyric generally, and, especially, for those captivated by the undeniable effects of the poetry from a historically distant period like the Renaissance.

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Lara, Jaime.

Birdman of Assisi: Art and the Apocalyptic in the Colonial Andes.

Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies / Bilingual Press Editorial Bilingüe, 2016. Pp. xiii, 353 + 220 colour ill., 2 maps. ISBN 978-0-8669-8529-1 (hardcover) US\$79.95.

Several decades ago Luis Weckmann noted how Latin America—in both the past and the present—has been profoundly shaped by medieval legacies. The history of Saint Francis in the region clearly confirms this observation, but nothing transported across the Atlantic ever remains the same. In *Birdman of Assisi* Jaime Lara provides a tour de force of the iconography of the Poverello in the colonial Andes, illuminating processes of cultural transfer in the Spanish world through an analysis of one of the most cherished figures of the Middle Ages. To follow the reception of the Italian saint in Peru, he investigates an array of media but centres on one important transformation in vice-regal art: when the angelic Saint Francis of Europe acquired wings in America, he became more birdlike and apocalyptic in both the colonial imagination and in visual forms.