

Toti O'Brien

MANNER OF SPEAKING

IN RESPONSE TO MY POETRY, an editor commented: "Could it have been less conversational and more lyrical?"

I confess feedback is kind of wasted on me. I was one of those kids to whom advice goes in one ear and out the other. Of course, Dad explained the phenomena with the perfect emptiness of my skull, holding nothing apt to provide resistance, at least slow the flow.

My irredeemable stubbornness and imperviousness to criticism haven't changed. I still forget objections the minute I hear them, perversely insisting in whatever error I chose. But the bit about conversational-versus-lyrical stuck with me for a day, then sporadically came back due to a serendipitous circumstance.

On the morning when I received the note I had had an eureka moment—a sudden insight about my writing practice. Rare thing. I usually write inconsiderately. Should I give it some pondering, I guess I'd refrain altogether.

But a thought came on its own that morning—rosy and cool, soft, polite like a kiss on the forehead. The word 'conversation' crossed my mind and I savored it, enjoying its rhythm and sound.

"Yes," I said to myself, "this is what I'd like my writing to be. A conversation. A direct, friendly voice a reader could place at a comfortable distance (not too invasive, not too remote), turn on and off, interrupt, resume, accept or reject in a non-confrontational manner, never intimidated, with a feeling of warmth and good company".

I had basked in the glare of my discovery almost until lunchtime. Then the feedback confused me, opposing the conversational quality to the lyrical one, somehow polarizing the two, while implying one would be preferable to the other... and apparently I had made the wrong choice.

Well, I know it is a matter of taste. Also a matter of definition, in a quintessentially undefined domain. Hypothetically, someone could describe as lyrical what someone else would call conversational. If it sounds farfetched, just give it a try. Therefore the comment didn't bother me, yet ignited further musing.

I had to examine the word 'conversation' more closely, split it between its two components. Con = together. *Versation* = a condition described by Latin *versare* = making verse(s). Here we go! Isn't 'verse' the basic unit of poetry? Now, where does this term come from?

Latin, and it means turn. It originally indicated the furrow a plow traces on a field. A straight line—true—but once completed, whoever is doing the job turns around and digs another one, going the opposite way. Then the meaning extended to the line traced on paper with ink. When it's done, the scribe needs to start over, and over, and over.

Versare is to return at something so frequently, those back and forth motions become rather a presence, a kind of belonging. Up to the fifteen hundreds 'conversation' didn't only define verbal exchange. It described

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all forms of agreeable coexistence, of time spent together not because of necessity but because, whenever you'd leave, something deep and strong summoned you to retrace your steps.

Besides twist, twirl, turn around—drawing figure eights, spirals, ellipses—*versare* also means 'pour' in romance languages, adding a sense of direction, motioning from a source to an outlet, circulating. Thus a conversation is fluid, dynamic, reciprocal.

Oral poetry forms like *stornelli* (which means little turns) come to mind, where a caller starts and improvisers respond, each delivering their strophe in tuneful co-creation. Conversations can't be the sole property of anyone. In-betweenness and co-authoring are unavoidable—it must be why the style remains neutral, non-descript. Kind of: "Who said this? I didn't. You don't know? It doesn't matter. We were just having a conversation."

Now about lyrical. Let me tell you right front I love the term. It attracts me, unlike—for instance—attributes such as elegiac, epic, dramatic. Lyrical evokes song and sound, very agreeable associations due to the lyre—an obsolete instrument the Greek god Apollon carried around in all occasions.

It's depicted as a triangular frame with strings. Perhaps a precursor of the guitar—which would make it cozy, bluesy, confidential. Most likely a precursor or the harp—which would make it slightly artificial, suspiciously angelical, and a tad pretentious. I have a hard time with harps.

I have a hard time with Apollon as well, a character I never could really place. Maybe because mythology presents him like the polar opposite of Dionysus, god of wine, dance, theater, all sorts of frolicking, fun, intemperance and excess.

As an antidote, Apollon had to be necessarily a bore, though endowed with a lyre. What kind of music could he possibly play? A morning-after chant of repentance? A wall-flower lament? What kind of lyrics?

Still when I think of 'lyrical' nothing Greek, remote, or divine comes to mind. I figure something gracious, aerial, not too burdened with gravity (or logic, its mental equivalent). Fragmented (unworried of continuity). Suspended, slightly on edge or, in fact, trespassing the borders. Actually kind of Dionysiac, I'd dare say. I like lyrical. Sometimes I try to be that way.

Tried. The term lost attraction when, years ago, a pharmaceutical company appropriated it for an antidepressant. I don't know which silly demon possessed the advertising team. My mom took those pills for a while, to no avail. Was the concoction supposed to make you so worryless, so happy, you'd go around singing all day? Or impromptu versifying, spontaneously rhyming? Mother didn't.

I was strangely yet increasingly disturbed by the name printed on the box. It seemed to convey a subtle irony, frankly inappropriate. It sounded like a bad joke. It might be why I have shifted towards the colloquial, without really noticing. I just took a wrong turn, then unflinchingly marched on.