theories and methodologies

Why Lyric?

JONATHAN CULLER

POETRY IS ALIVE IN OUR CULTURE, BUT IN ITS OWN WORLD: NEVER HAVE THERE BEEN SO MANY POETS AND POETRY READINGS, BOOKS, JOURNALS, and online sites. Poetry has certainly seemed threatened, though, in schools and universities, where literary studies focus on prose fiction—narrative has become the norm of literature—or else on other sorts of cultural texts, which can be read symptomatically.

Narrative is treated not as one possible literary form but as the very condition of experience, which is made intelligible by narrative form that traces causal sequence and represents experience as something accomplished and able to be narrated. When poetry is studied, it is frequently assimilated—not surprisingly—to the model of narrative fiction. Ever since the novel became the main form of literary experience for students and general readers, a model of poetry based on representation has come to hold sway: the fictional representation of a speaker character, whose novelistic situation the reader is asked to reconstruct by asking, what would lead someone to speak thus and to feel thus? Criticism and pedagogy, reacting against the Romantic notion of lyric as expression of intense personal experience, have adopted the model of the dramatic monologue as the way to align poetry with the novel: the lyric is conceived as a fictional imitation of the act of a speaker, and to interpret the lyric is to work out what sort of person is speaking, in what circumstances and with what attitude or, ideally, drama of attitudes.

Along with the pedagogical dominance of narrative, forces that help establish and reinforce the conception of poetry as a dramatization of the encounter between a consciousness and the world include the post-Enlightenment assumption that experience takes priority over reflection, modernism's claim to objectivity and treatment of the poem as artifact, and the New Criticism's insistence that interpretation focus on the words on the page, not on the author, which

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generated the assumption that the speaker of a lyric is not the poet but a persona. "Once we have dissociated the speaker of the lyric from the personality of the poet," W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks write, "even the tiniest lyric reveals itself as drama" (675).

This model suits the many poems that do strive to be dramatic monologues, expressions of the thought and character of a fictional speaker, and it has been successfully adapted to many others, but it is deadly for poetry to try to compete with narrative—by promoting lyrics as representations of the experience of subjects—on terrain where narrative has obvious advantages. If narrative is about what happens next, lyric is about what happens now—in the reader's engagement with each line—and teachers and scholars should celebrate its singularity, its difference from narrative.[1] Consider what the model of lyric as dramatic monologue misses: stress on the reconstruction of the dramatic situation deprives rhythm and sound patterning of any constitutive role (at best they reinforce or undercut meaning); it devalues intertextual relations, except when they can be assimilated to allusions made by the consciousness dramatized; and it ignores the characteristic extravagance of lyric, which frequently engages in speech acts without a known real-world counterpart (Baker; Culler). A successful revival of the study and teaching of lyric may depend on foregrounding such aspects of lyric.

René Wellek, in a notorious article, "Genre Theory, the Lyric and *Erlebnis*," concludes that the generic idea of lyric as expression of intense subjective experience does not work:

> These terms cannot take care of the enormous variety, in history and different literatures, of lyrical forms and constantly lead into an insoluble psychological cul de sac: the supposed intensity, inwardness and immediacy of an experience that can never be demonstrated as certain and can never be shown to be relevant to the quality of art. . . . The way out is obvious. One must abandon attempts to define the general nature of the lyric or the lyrical. Nothing beyond generalities of the tritest kind can result from it. (251–52)

Wellek proposes that we focus instead on describing the conventions and traditions of particular forms or genres, such as the ode, elegy, and song.

New lyric studies, of the sort instantiated by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins's manifesto "Lyrical Studies," appear to share Wellek's skepticism about the possibility of the lyric as a transhistorical category and propose both to undertake historical studies of how the lyric has been constructed at various times and places and to identify other ways in which poetry has functioned. Jackson and Prins critique what they see as our tendency to "read 'the lyric' as a genre defined in terms of subjective expression" (523), and in *Dickinson's Misery* Jackson engages the modern "lyricization of poetry" and explores other ways of conceiving of Dickinson's verse, which for her was caught up in various practices of everyday life. But if we are to encourage the study and teaching of poetry, the historical study of different poetic practices should be joined to a revival of the idea of the lyric as a poetic activity that has persisted since the days of Sappho, despite lyric's different social functions and manifestations.

If we were to study only forms like elegies, odes, and songs (the last scarcely more susceptible of precise definition than the lyric itself), large numbers of historically and aesthetically important lyrics would be left aside or else our definitions of these forms would be grotesquely stretched, but the category *lyric* has the virtue of directing our attention to nonnarrative poetry in general and highlighting a tradition that runs back to Horace, who sought to take his place among the *lyrici vates* ("lyric poets"), and to his Greek precursors. Will we not learn more about poetry by studying the lyric in its historical manifestations, however diverse they prove to be, than

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by studying only certain forms—ode, sonnet, elegy, song, hymn, epithalamion?

The problem may lie in Wellek's apparent assumption that if the concept of lyric is to be retained, it must be linked to intensity, inwardness, and immediacy. If, on the contrary, we take lyric to be short nonnarrative poems, whose most salient characteristics remain to be defined, then the crucial step may be to displace the dominant pedagogical paradigm that sees lyrics as fundamentally dramatic monologues. Let us consider a poem that is easy to read as a dramatic monologue so as to note both the plausibility of reading lyric in this novelizing way and what is missed by such a model. How might a shift to a different framework for lyric revive for us some of the distinctive features of this often hyperbolic poetic act? Here is Robert Frost's "Spring Pools":

> These pools that, though in forests, still reflect
> The total sky almost without defect,
> And like the flowers beside them, chill and
> shiver,
> Will like the flowers beside them soon be gone,
> And yet not out by any brook or river,
> But up by roots to bring dark foliage on.
> The trees that have it in their pent up buds
> To darken nature and be summer woods—
> Let them think twice before they use their
> powers
> To blot out and drink up and sweep away
> These flowery waters and these watery flowers
> From snow that melted only yesterday.

According to our current models, to read this as a lyric is to focus on a speaker and see the poem as a drama of attitudes. The poem's metrical form and its rhyme scheme are irrelevant to such an approach. We do not even seem to allow the poet's metrical construction to enter into relation with the speaker. Thus, in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" the Duke's remark "Even had you skill / In speech—(which I have not)—" is not taken to be ironically undercut by the brilliant pentameter couplets whose enjambments make them flow so deftly that they surprise us with the occasional end-stopped rhyme (350). When we focus on Frost's speaker, the deictic of "these pools" gives us a situation (this model inclines us to ignore the plural of "forests," which takes us away from a singular situation to a general condition of pools in forests). Imagining the speaker as a man standing before *these* pools, we can construct a little narrative: he notices that they still reflect the sky almost perfectly because there are as yet no leaves, but this mirroring is threatened. The pools reflecting the sky, like the flowers there beside them, which live briefly in the sunlight, will vanish, and so he links them with the flowers: both shiver and will soon be gone. Realizing that the water of these pools will be sucked up by the trees to create the leaves that will blot out the sky, he bursts out in indignation at what the trees "have it in them" to do: destroy the short-lived presences of this scene through their power to "blot out and drink up and sweep away." "Let them think twice," with its tone of colloquial bluster, usually signals a threat—you'd better think twice about doing that, because otherwise . . .—though there is no empirical threat here.

The piquancy of this poem lies in its departure from usual attitudes to nature and the spring, a poetic speaker's defense of the underdog, as it were. Instead of celebrating the budding of trees, the forest's coming to life, the poem presents the burgeoning of leaves as trees' exploiting their power to "darken nature," to devastate not just the early flowers but also the pools that enabled the trees to leave.

Reading this as something overheard, we project a character, a situation, and a narrative, including this reaction that is comical in the realistic frame: muttering "let them think twice" about trees, which proceed in their natural operation without any sort of thinking. What this approach has trouble dealing with are those elements that do not make much sense in an empirical frame, such as the flowery chiasmus of "these flowery waters and these watery flowers," which melds the two

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elements as part of a process, or the ritualistic repetition "And like the flowers beside them, chill and shiver, / Will like the flowers beside them soon be gone." But especially foreign to the model of the dramatic monologue is the literary allusion of the final line, which has to be attributed to the poet addressing readers rather than to the character looking at the pools: "From snow that melted only yesterday." Answering François Villon's famous question "Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?" ("Where are the snows of yesteryear?" [31]), the poet tells us where they are: melted into pools that the trees drink to bring on summer foliage. The refrain of Villon's poem about human transience is here taken literally and made the basis of a poem about the transience of nature, which surprises by showing the possibility of valuing any moment in an ongoing process: here the beginnings of spring, which would usually be seen only as precursors to the lushness of spring itself. From this perspective, the blustery "Let them think twice" functions like bardic requests to time, seasons, and natural forces to hasten or slow their operation. The desire for a responsive nature that this poem from a generally down-to-earth poet manifests in its "Let them think twice" shifts the work into the mode of those poems in the lyric tradition that call to be calling, both to display their poetic calling and to mark the belief that language can sometimes make things happen, through acts of naming, highlighting, and reordering, as well as through the instigation of poetic forms that will repeat as readers or listeners take them up and articulate them anew.

A model more attuned to these elements and aspects of lyric emerges from Greek and Latin literature. As a term for a genre, *lyric* dates from the Hellenistic period, when the librarians of Alexandria, collecting the poetic production that remained from Greek antiquity, canonized nine *lyrici vates*, Sappho, Pindar, Anacreon, Alcaeus, and others less well known today. The term *lyric* preserves the reference to verse sung to the lyre, and the fact that we still speak of the lyrics of songs suggests some useful corrections to the model of lyric that dominates literary pedagogy.

The classical lyric was generally addressed to someone. Ralph Johnson reports that only fourteen percent of Horace's poems and nine percent of Catullus's are meditative, while seventy percent of Horace's and eighty-seven percent of Catullus's are addressed to another person, but with Mallarmé seventy percent are meditative while only twenty-five percent are addressed to someone. Johnson claims that with the modern lyric, "the disintegration of pronominal form entails the disintegration of emotional content": the Greek lyric is direct, addressed to its real audience, while the modern lyric is no longer addressed and is therefore solipsistic (3). Not for the first time, with the help of traditional oppositions—public/private, speech/writing, integrated/alienated—the classical is held up as a norm to suggest the individualistic, alienated character of the modern. The move is so familiar that it can seem just another case of mythmaking; but this dubious interpretation of the classical model should not prevent us from allowing a description of classical origins to exercise some leverage on our thinking. The Greek model is useful because it treats the poem as an event addressed to an audience, performed for an audience, even if it idealizes situations of social ritual, which did not obtain even in classical times (Horace, for instance, presents himself as a lyric singer though there is no evidence he could play the lyre or that his odes were ever sung to an audience rather than solely written.)

This model leads us to think of the lyric speaker not as a character in a novel, whose motivations must be elucidated, but as a performer picking up traditional elements and presenting them to an audience, whether listeners at a ceremony or readers of poems. In ancient Greece, poetry was a form of epideictic discourse, a rhetorical transaction and instrument of ethical paideia. The audience

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was expected to make observations (*theôros*) about what was praiseworthy, worthy of belief (Walker 9, 149).[2] In Plato's *Protagoras*, where the participants discuss the arguments of a poem by Simonides, everyone takes it for granted that, as Protagoras says, the most important part of a man's paideia is to "be capable concerning verses"—capable of judging which sayings of poets were rightly done and to give reasons when questioned (333–40). (Socrates argues against this view.)

By this model, we should think of the poem as discourse addressed, a rhetorical transaction, so the hyperbolic forms of address characteristic of lyric—from apostrophes to birds and clouds and urns to obsessional addresses to a mistress—would be foregrounded. Charles Baudelaire writes of lyric, "Tout d'abord, constatons que l'hyperbole et l'apostrophe sont des formes de langage qui lui sont non seulement des plus agréables, mais aussi des plus necessaires" ("First of all, let us note that hyperbole and apostrophe are the forms of language that are not only most agreeable but also most necessary to it" [164; my trans.]). Lyric is characteristically extravagant, performing speech acts not recorded in everyday speech and deploying not only meter and rhyme, which connote the poetic when encountered elsewhere, but also its own special tenses, such as the lyric present: "I walk through the long schoolroom questioning" or "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day" (Yeats; Hopkins). The special language of lyric generates this distinctive lyric temporality.

Northrop Frye speaks of the roots of lyric as *melos* and *opsis*, babble and doodle—neither of which is reducible to narrative representation, both of which involve patterning of language (275). And *melos*, in its relation to song, calls us to focus on the lyric as linguistic event. Lyric is the foregrounding of language, in its material dimensions, and thus both embodies and attracts interest in language and languages—in the forms, shapes, and rhythms of discourse. If we believe language is the medium for the formation of subjectivity, lyric ought to be crucial, as the site where language is linked not only to structures of identification and displacement before the consolidation of subject positions but especially to rhythm and the bodily experience of temporality, on the one hand, and to the formative dwelling in a particular language, on the other. Narrative structures are translatable, but lyric, in its peculiar structural patterning, figures the givenness, the untranscendability, of a particular language, which seems to its users a condition of experience.

And lyric is memorable language—made memorable by its rhythmical shaping and phonological patterning. Lyric once suffused culture in that bastardized form the advertising jingle: "You'll wonder where the yellow went, when you brush your teeth with Pepsodent" or "Bryllcream! A little dab'll do ya. . . ." Today it's those over fifty who have these bits of doggerel indelibly fixed in their brains. Lyric has lost even this parodic support. The power to embed bits of language in your mind, to invade and occupy it, is a salient feature of lyrics: poems seek to inscribe themselves in mechanical memory, *Gedächtnis*, ask to be learned by heart, taken in, introjected, or housed as bits of alterity that can be repeated, considered, treasured, or ironically cited. The force of poetry is linked to its ability to get itself remembered, like those bits of song that stick in your mind, you don't know why.

The new lyric studies should not only explore different historical manifestations of lyric but also propose new normative models of lyric, emphasizing features that can become the basis of new typologies—such as the distinction between lyrics in the present tense, which exploit that special temporality of lyric, and those in the past, which offer brief anecdotes that genre makes signify. A proliferation of models and typologies should help bring poetry back into literary studies.

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Notes

1. My revision of Alice Fulton's dictum "Fiction is about what happens next. Poetry is about what happens now" seems to me to sharpen the opposition at which it aims (7).

2. Epideictic rhetoric, Walker argues, derives from archaic lyric and, unlike pragmatic rhetoric, is directed to an audience that does not make decisions but forms opinions in response to the discourse, which thus "shapes and cultivates the basic codes of value and belief by which a society or culture lives" (9).

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