

Who Reads Poetry?

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MY TITLE IS MEANT TO POSE A REAL QUESTION. IT'S AN OLD QUESTION, BUT IT IS WORTH ASKING WHY THE ANXIETY BETRAYED BY THE QUESTION has been around for so long, and especially why it has spiked in recent years. The question expresses a worry that nobody reads much poetry, or that few people do, or that the right people don't at the right times or in the right ways. So it's a real question to which it's difficult to give a real answer, since the sane response to such anxiety tends to be either "You're right to worry, since nobody reads poetry these days" or "Don't worry; lots of people do. You just haven't noticed." In her 2006 address as outgoing president of the MLA, Marjorie Perloff gave a little of both responses. "Out in the world beyond the academy, individual poets are warmly celebrated . . .," Perloff told her audience (654). Don't worry, in other words. On the other hand, do worry, since that "beyond" means that those gathered—that is, literary critics, members of the MLA, all of us in that room or reading this journal—have not noticed such warm popular celebrations because we are the ones who don't read poetry these days or who don't read it in the right ways. "A specter is haunting the academy, the specter of literature," Perloff warned us, turning worry into revolutionary foreboding (658). We sat back in our seats, reassured. Oh good, we thought, poetry is about to make a comeback.

Why should such a warning be reassuring? If Perloff is right that dissertations in departments of literature tend to be about history or anthropology or religion, about everything except literature, then that specter means we are in trouble. "Why is the 'merely' literary so suspect today?" Perloff asked (655). Whether or not one agrees with the apprehension that literature—and especially poetry—is being ignored by the academy, it's worth noticing that the payoff for agreeing is that what has been turned into a ghost can be brought back. Perloff in fact ended her warning about the demise of literary study in literary studies with a prediction that it's time for a resurrection of what has been killed off, for a return of the repressed. Many of us do feel that it's high time we put the poetry back in poetics and answered emerging

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arguments against close reading or the literary, but we might also want to ask what such wholesale claims have come to represent for us. These arguments are often made in relation to the large abstraction of the Romantic lyric, as when in 2001 Mary Poovey described “the lyricization of literary criticism” in terms of our dependence on “the genre of the romantic lyric” (422). Poovey’s argument was the mirror image of Perloff’s: we can’t see outside the model of the “organic whole” in literary studies, Poovey asserted, or won’t see through to history and money and illness and accidents, because we’re caught inside a poem (436). While Perloff claimed that we read everything except poems, Poovey claimed that we read nothing but. But what poem? What kind of poem? Whose poem, when? While Poovey complains that literary studies is trapped in the model of the Romantic lyric, it’s clear that she is one of the literary critics Perloff has in mind who don’t want to read any poems themselves. Yet the problem with both ends of the spectrum is that the abstraction of poetry is just that: an abstraction. It can be an idea of what we’re trapped in or an idea of what we’ve ignored at our peril, but poetry as idea has a long history as a trump card in any argument, and the notion that we can liberate literary studies from it, like the notion that we can redeem literary studies by bringing it back, grants a power to poetry that should surprise us at a time when, we’re told, we don’t read it.

The history of the idealization of poetry has included many fascinating chapters, but we may be in the middle of one of the strangest so far. While (as Perloff points out) Plato so idealized the power of poetry that he exiled the poets, he did so at a time and place in which there was no question of who reads (or hears or sees) poetry. Everybody did. When, as Perloff also points out, Philip Sidney defended the poet’s power of invention, he did not do so because no one cared about the poet’s inventions. Everyone did. When John Stuart Mill pushed the definition of lyric poetry beyond the ho-

rizon of anyone’s practice (except maybe, in a pinch, Shelley’s), he did not do so because no one was reading all the poetry that fell short of his mark. As Stuart Curran has put it, in the first half of the nineteenth century “the most eccentric feature of [the] entire culture [was] that it was simply mad for poetry” (5). When Theodor Adorno suggested that the modern lyric “is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism,” he did not do so because he worried that his audience did not care about poetry; on the contrary, he worried that his title “Lyric and Society” would make his audience think that “a sphere of expression whose very essence lies in defying the power of social organization . . . must be arrogantly made by the sociologist into the opposite of that which it knows itself to be” (63, 56). Adorno was afraid that the listeners to his 1957 radio address would care about the lyric so much that they would be angry at a critic who tampered with their ideal. Not until recently has the idealization of poetry—and, after Romanticism, the idealization specifically of the lyric—attached so much power to a genre we keep being told that most of us don’t read.

It could be argued that this notion of power is left over from the history that idealized the poetic genres everyone did read, but I think that something else is going on when Perloff invokes the specter of newborn rhapsodes slouching toward us or when Poovey invokes an idea of reading that depends on a model of a poem no one reads. In these cases and in many other early-twenty-first-century instances (in the public poetry revival projects of Pinsky [e.g., Pinsky and Dietz] and Gioia, Eagleton’s nostalgia for a practical criticism of poetry, Longenbach’s claim that “poets since the time of Callamachus have resisted their own usefulness” [xi], Stewart’s assertion that poetry is “a force against effacement—not merely for individuals but for communities through time as well” [2], and Jarvis’s contention that “a different kind of thinking happens in verse” [4]) there lurks the fear that poetry and poetry read-

ing are nearing extinction. While most critics would not claim with Poovey (and Plato) that getting rid of poetic reading would be a good thing, the animus behind their claims that poetry and poetic reading and thinking *are* good things is that the portents warn that we may be losing something poetry represents: subjective experience, say, or deep thought, or social consciousness, or beauty, or truth, or literature. Now, we may just be stuck with that zeitgeist these days, as civilized governance and the earth itself seem to be on their ways out. But our idealization of poetry is at least partly why we seem to think that we are in danger of losing access to the ideal. Our own abstract idea of the lyric makes it possible for us to imagine that we could liberate reading from it or that we are losing our academic discipline, culture, or minds if people aren't reading it.

As I have argued elsewhere, neither the lyricization nor the delyricization of criticism has effected this shift from poetry as cultural practice to poetry as pathetic abstraction. Instead, the lyricization of poetry itself—the historical transformation of many varied poetic genres into the single abstraction of the post-Romantic lyric—is responsible for our current, spectral ideal of a genre powerful enough to overcome our habits of not reading it. But my way of phrasing that idea betrays the problem. The notion that poetry is or ever was one genre is the primary symptom of the lyricization of poetry: the songs, riddles, epigrams, sonnets, epitaphs, *blasons*, lieder, elegies, marches, dialogues, conceits, ballads, epistles, hymns, odes, eclogues, and monodramas considered lyric in the Western tradition before the early nineteenth century were not lyric in the same sense as the poetry that we think of as lyric.¹ The fact that we think of almost all poetry as lyric is the secondary symptom of lyricization. When the stipulative functions of particular genres are collapsed into one big idea of poems as lyrics, then the only function poems can perform in our culture is to become individual or communal ideals.² Such

ideals might bind particular groups or sub-cultures (in slams, for example, or avant-garde blogs, or poetry cafés, or salons, or university, library, and museum reading series), but the more ideally lyric poems and poetry culture have become, the fewer actual poetic genres address readers in specific ways. That ratio is responsible for our twenty-first-century sense that poetry is all-important and at the same time already in its afterlife.

The 1974 *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* emphasized the problem of defining the lyric as an issue of historicity: “Most of the problem with the modern (i.e., 1550 to the present) critical use of the term [*lyric*] is due to an overextension of the phrase to cover a body of poetic writing that has drastically altered its nature in the centuries of its development” (460). One strategy that twentieth-century academic lyric studies used to compensate for that problem was to create transhistorical categories of lyric reading. So, for example, as Jonathan Culler points out in his essay here, the notion of the lyric I as a speaker in a dramatic monologue came to dominate modern interpretation—and, in my experience, still does.³ The definition of a lyric as a short, nonnarrative poem depicting the subjective experience of a speaker became the normative definition also—thanks to lyricization—of poetry. Although the retro-projection of an abstracted Romantic lyric often takes the rap for that limited definition, Romantic poetry itself was less subject to such a caricature than the twentieth-century interpretations of that poetry were. Thus, one way out of our current double bind would be not to reject the lyricized version of the lyric that we have inherited, to embrace only odes and ballads and hymns, or to look forward only to avant-garde postlyrics but instead to trace the history that the *Princeton Encyclopedia* alluded to—the history of lyricization.

Consider an exemplary nineteenth-century post-Romantic lyric written after the Civil War by Herman Melville. It is the first poem in his

1866 volume of poetry, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, but it does not appear in the table of contents for that volume. Instead, it seems to function as an italicized preface or as a portent of the poems that follow it in the chronological order of the war's events:

The Portent
(1859)

*Hanging from the beam,
Slowly swaying (such the law),
Gaunt the shadow on your green,
Shenandoah!*
*The cut is on the crown
(Lo, John Brown),
And the stabs shall heal no more.*

*Hidden in the cap
Is the anguish none can draw;
So your future veils its face,
Shenandoah!*
*But the streaming beard is shown
(Weird John Brown),
The meteor of the war.*

It is a weird poem. One can understand William Dean Howells's influential *Atlantic Monthly* review of the volume, which had already, a year after publication, proved another of Melville's commercial flops:

Mr. Melville's work possesses the negative virtues of originality in such a degree that it not only reminds you of no poetry you have read, but of no life you have known. Is it possible—you ask yourself, after running over all these celebrative, inscriptive, and memorial verses—that there has really been a great war . . . ? Or is it only that Mr. Melville's inner consciousness has been perturbed, and filled with the phantasms of enlistments, marches, fights in the air, parenthetic bulletin-boards, and tortured humanity shedding, not words and blood, but words alone? (xlii)

What was so original in 1866 or 1867 about poems like "*The Portent*"? Howells's complaint that they are ahistorical seems odd, given that many of them chronicle particular battles and

figures and that they are all dated (in chronological order, until the second group to which Howells alludes, "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial"). The real problem that Howells perceives is that Melville's Civil War poems were lyrics, at least in our current sense of the term: many of them, like "*The Portent*," are short, nonnarrative poems, and Howells thinks that these poems represent only Melville's subjective experience, his "inner consciousness." But does "*The Portent*" represent any subjective experience at all? If so, who is the subject? And is that subject the speaker of these lines?

The poem is about the obscurity of consciousness, about our lack of access to the historical experience of John Brown. Brown is certainly not the speaker of these lines; he is depicted hanging (wounded by earlier "*stabs*" to the head) seven years before the poem was written, his death the prelude to the war for which Melville's volume serves as epitaph. The stanzas' apostrophes are addressed to "*Shenandoah!*": the landscape of some of the war's bloodiest battles, which have and haven't happened yet. That double perspective—the represented view of the war's instigation in the state execution of John Brown (a Northern intellectualist perspective) and the retrospective view of that execution as "portent" of all of the executions that followed, during the war—is one of the weirdest things about the poem, and one of the reasons it can't be said to represent anyone's subjective experience. This is why Timothy Sweet's interesting contention about *Battle-Pieces* as a whole, that the poems represent "the mode of political subjectivity prescribed by a militaristic state," doesn't feel quite right for "*The Portent*" (165). Instead, the appearance of a political subjectivity here may be what Howells rightly called a "negative virtue." Subjectivity (political or otherwise) is inaccessible to the dead political radical John Brown; it is no less inaccessible to the italics that describe Brown's hanging figure. Between the italics' lack of perspicacity, or thought, and the dead body's dead thoughts ("*Hidden in the*

cap”), we can draw our own conclusions: we know that the violence that Brown’s raid and execution inaugurated escalated after 1861, and we know that the personified Shenandoah can’t know what was about to happen.

Should people have known enough to read Brown’s death—and the meteor that appeared in 1859 over New York, where Melville was writing, a month after the raid and a month before the execution—as a portent of horrific violence? What if they had? Would that knowledge have changed history? “*The Portent*” doesn’t really ask those questions. In fact, what seems most remarkable to me about this lyric is that no one is there to ask any questions at all. “[T]he anguish none can draw” while “*the streaming beard is shown*” is indeed a negative and passive virtue of “(Weird John Brown).” The parentheses make a difference—they enclose the closest thing we get to subjective commentary, which takes the form of passive, pseudo-choral remarks: “(such the law),” “(Lo, John Brown),” “(Weird John Brown).” But whose remarks are these? A lyric speaker’s? In a reading of the parenthesis in “Shiloh: A Requiem,” the most beautiful poem in *Battle-Pieces*, Michael Warner renders the stunning line “(what like a bullet can undecieve!)” in terms that may help us answer that question:

The line itself lingers in parentheses, floating free of its scene. Its picture of subjectivity, apparently merely negative, is in reality mediated by the conventions of lyric, with its eternal, placeless, overheard speech. . . . The text as lyric . . . is . . . an implied analogue to the work of the bullet, though for better and worse a less efficient one. . . . The work of lyric, by which we give ourselves an analogue to [the dead soldiers’] momentary undecision, makes it possible to imagine their changed recognition as something other than a tragically inconsequential irony. (51)

To position the lines that, in Warner’s felicitous phrase, “linger in parentheses” as lyric in this way is to account for some of the distance

that irked Howells; it is also to describe lyric in terms that echo Mill’s “eternal, placeless, overheard speech.”⁴ That’s one moment in the history of lyricization, and a relevant one for Melville, since Mill’s essay “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties” was first published in 1833 and again in 1859. But perhaps what accounts for these passively lingering, vagrant lyric parentheses is not our enlightened interpellation—their ways of hailing our superior knowledge—but their disconnection from the lines outside the parentheses, which belong to not-yet-lyricized or at least differently lyricized genres. The address to Shenandoah echoes the repeated address of the river song “Oh, Shenandoah,” originally an early-nineteenth-century boatmen’s song that Melville may well have heard from other sailors.⁵ The song intersects the sonnet in the middle of each seven-line stanza; the symmetrical arrangement of the uneven lines in these two even stanzas makes the poem not look like a sonnet (and it doesn’t work like a sonnet, either—or not like an Elizabethan or Italian sonnet or the British Victorian blend of the two favored by magazine poets in the United States). The rage for high literary sonnets just after the war (especially in the pages of Howells’s *Atlantic Monthly* and in *Harper’s*, where Melville published the five poems that preceded *Battle-Pieces*) on the heels of the many popular ballads and songs and tales that flooded newspapers and magazines during the war is a sequence nicely captured by Melville’s mix of aspects of the two modes. He also riffs on the common tetrameter-trimeter alternating patterns of popular verse, turning sixes and eights to fives and sevens punctuated by threes and fours, all symmetrically arranged in their odd variations. Unlike the popular poetry that circulated outside books, Melville’s verse incorporated genres rendered practically unrecognizable by their alienation from their expected contexts.⁶ The same thing could be said of the lines we could call, after Warner, lyric—but to read those lines, we would need to understand lyric, at least in

our modern, post-Mill sense, as the exception rather than the rule for the battle poetry that Howells expected to find in Melville's book but did not (instead he found "parenthetic bulletin-boards").

In Melville's hands, the lyric in parentheses marked a departure from the poetry everyone was reading during the war, an idea of poetic power that could only be read in retrospect or between brackets. While in 2006 Perloff invoked a rhapsodic lyricism that could save literature, in 1866 Melville invoked a lyricism that, even when belatedly recognized, could not save the dead. In contrast to the pathos of the river song's familiar lines ("Oh, Shenandoah, I long to hear you. . . . Oh, Shenandoah, I long to see you"), the lines in parentheses do not dream of an afterlife of poetic, or anthropomorphic, recognition. Their lyricism is inhuman and inhumane, eerily powerful and utterly unread. Turning John Brown into a lyric means that he—and the revolution of which he dreamed—is a specter that cannot and should not be brought back.⁷ Melville's poem emerged during a much earlier chapter in the history of lyricization, and learning to read it may teach us to read the signs of the reversals to come. Looking back in this way is one way to look forward to a new lyric studies.

NOTES

1. For an elaboration of the idea of lyricization in the case of the circulation and reception of Emily Dickinson's work, see my *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*.

2. The notion that the function of genre is stipulative in relation to culture is drawn (*pace* Perloff) from linguistic anthropology, particularly from the work of Silverstein and Urban.

3. For an account of the derivation of the lyric speaker from Victorian dramatic monologue, see also Tucker, "Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric."

4. Mill wrote, "Eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*" (348). The tradition of lyric reading derived from Mill has added timelessness and placelessness to his distinction.

5. Bone's 1932 book on river (or "chantey") songs, *Capstan Bars*, places "Oh, Shenandoah" at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

6. For an extended, important argument about the circulation of nineteenth-century poetry outside books in the United States, see McGill.

7. Melville's weird prose "Supplement" at the end of *Battle-Pieces* in part argues for amnesty during Reconstruction and altogether presents a disturbing (and unpopular) political perspective on the war and its aftermath.

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