

Lyric

Scott Brewster



The New Critical Idiom

LYRIC

Scott Brewster

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Critical Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

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1

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, if we use the term 'lyric' we usually mean the words of a song. Most dictionary definitions describe lyric in two ways: as denoting a short poem expressing the poet's own thoughts and feelings, or a composition that is meant to be sung. The notion of the lyric poet or the singer-songwriter sharing her or his deepest, most private sentiments has become predominant in modern culture. There are certain consistent features in definitions of lyric: it is characterised by brevity, deploys a first-person speaker or persona, involves performance, and is an outlet for personal emotion. Yet these definitions highlight a series of unresolved questions that have shaped the theory, practice and interpretation of lyric for many centuries. Is lyric about display and public entertainment; is it something that can be shared or is it a matter of private experience; is it something for others, or just for oneself?

The first definition stresses the subjective nature of the lyric form, in that it is a concentrated expression of individual emotion, while the second stresses its intersubjective character through its relation to music and public performance. The first meaning reflects a theory that developed in the later eighteenth century, which defined lyric in terms of heightened emotion and

authentic sentiment, and presented it as a (usually brief) moment of intensified awareness. M. H. Abrams summarises this view: 'lyric is any fairly short poem, consisting of the utterance by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought, and feeling' (Abrams 1993: 108–9). This speaker can muse in solitude or, as in dramatic lyric, address another presence in a particular situation. As we shall see, however, the lyric persona is not to be confused with the poet her- or himself: the emphasis on the author's sincerity and authenticity has been profoundly questioned by literary and critical theory in recent decades. (This demystification of the figure of the autonomous artist owes a debt to earlier conceptions of lyric, as subsequent chapters demonstrate.) Whether the 'I' speaks alone or to others, expresses emotion directly or adopts an elaborate disguise, lyric is fundamentally concerned with the conditions and nature of address.

The connection with music acknowledges the etymological origins of lyric: the term derives from the Greek *lurikos* ('for the lyre'), where verses would be sung or recited to the accompaniment of a lyre. In its earliest form, then, lyric involved some form of appeal or address to others. This implies a very different aesthetic experience from that associated with the isolated individual, who speaks or sings alone. Although the link between poetry and music has gradually diminished since the Renaissance, the relationship between words and performance has remained central to the understanding of lyric. In keeping with its origins, this book sees lyric *as a performance*, and will pay close attention to the voices and structures of address that are heard or invoked in lyric texts.

LYRIC AND GENRE

Lyric has proved a problematic case for genre theory. At times it is treated as a timeless, universal aesthetic disposition, at others it is identified as a generic category clearly defined by its subject matter, formal features and purposes. Andrew Welsh proposes that '[l]yric is finally less a particular genre of poetry than a distinctive way of organizing language' (Welsh 1978: 21). Ancient

Greece classified lyric in various ways: Sappho's poems were arranged on the basis of their metre, while Pindar's lyrics were categorised according to the content, function and occasion of the poem (Harvey 1955: 159). The Roman rhetorician Quintilian catalogued lyric as one of eight poetic genres, but made no attempt to define its nature. In perhaps the best known classification, Aristotle divides literary genres into the epic, dramatic and lyric, even if he barely refers to the lyric in his *Poetics*. Lyric poetry is merely a minor component of tragedy, alongside plot, character, diction, reasoning and spectacle (Aristotle 1996: 11). Aristotle's silence makes lyric 'the problematic term in this triad' (Frow 2006: 59), since it remains unclear whether lyric is a mode of presentation of speech or an essential, 'natural' form. In the sixteenth century, Antonio Sebastiano Minturno located the lyric or 'melic' as one of three 'presentational modes' alongside the epic and the dramatic (Fowler 1982: 218), but later theorists imply that lyric is as much a state of mind as a poetic style. For Hegel, lyric discloses the inner world of an individual who is separated from a wider community, while for Viëtor lyric is a 'basic attitude' that expresses feeling (Hernandi 1972: 12). As Gérard Genette points out, Aristotle's tripartite division conflates *mode*, a linguistic category that describes the means of enunciation, with *genre*, a literary category that refers to formal and thematic features (Genette 1992: 60–72). Many modern theories of genre are founded on this conflation or confusion of categories, and neither of these systems of classification assigns lyric a proper place (Duff 2000: 3).

Modern theory has tended to distribute genres on the basis of divisions between lyric, dramatic and narrative (Fowler 1982: 236), and in recent decades there have been various attempts at the generic classification of lyric. Paul Hernandi's 'Map of Modes' represents lyric diagrammatically: a vertical axis connects 'meditative poetry' and 'quasi-dramatic monologue', while the horizontal axis lists 'songlike poems' and the 'objective correlative' (Hernandi 1972: 166). While lyric is positioned at the 'private' point of the 'Compass of Perspectives', its coordinates are determined in relation to the 'authorial' and 'interpersonal' bearings of the compass, which positions it at the uncertain boundary

between the public and the private. Other critical accounts have deemed it impossible to provide a comprehensive generic account of the lyric form; Preminger and Brogan argue that the term should be understood as embracing a wide range of subgenres of poetic practice (Preminger and Brogan 1993: 713–27). René Wellek is more trenchant: ‘One must abandon attempts to define the general nature of the lyric and the lyrical. Nothing beyond generalities of the tritest kind can result from it’ (Wellek 1970: 225). Philip Hobsbaum concludes that, due to the wide range of verse patterns (including stanzaic forms and line lengths) used for modes of lyric verse from the Renaissance onwards, lyric ‘cannot be of much use as a defining term, at least so far as metre is concerned’ (Hobsbaum 1996: 178–79).

Yet this terminological looseness has constituted lyric’s strength, and has underpinned its constant reinvention. Lyric practice has exploited its proximity to other genres, such as elegy, epigram or dramatic monologue, either through their similar forms or shared function and subject matter. Love, death and nature have remained staple features of lyric poetry. Equally, it has blurred the boundaries between ‘serious’ and ‘minor’, religious and secular lyric forms, which have borrowed freely from each other at various historical moments. Lyric can be viewed as an umbrella term under which a variety of verse forms shelter, and its flexibility has aided its gradual ascent through the generic hierarchy to become the dominant mode of modern poetry.

From the early nineteenth century onwards, lyric came to be identified as the very essence of poetry, the most intense, passionate and authentic poetic mode. In ‘The Two Kinds of Poetry’ (1833), John Stuart Mill sees lyric as the primordial, pre-eminent poetic form, exemplifying the maxim *Nascitur Poeta* (‘a poet is born not made’):

Lyric poetry, as it was the earliest kind, is also, if the view we are now taking of poetry be correct, more eminently and peculiarly poetry than any other: it is the poetry most natural to a really poetic temperament, and least capable of being successfully imitated by one not so endowed by nature.

(Mill 1989: 57)

In 'What is Poetry?' (1833), Mill portrays narrative and rhetoric as inimical to lyric: ballads, which derive their interest from storytelling, are 'the lowest and most elementary kind of poetry', a poetry that appeals to 'childhood' and the 'childhood of society' (Mill 1973: 77). Those whose minds and hearts have the 'greatest depth and elevation' appreciate that, in contrast to the true picture of life conveyed by fiction, the 'truth of poetry is to paint the human soul truly' (*ibid.*: 78). In 1918, Charles Whitmore concludes that when the 'vitality' of lyric is extinguished, 'true poetry is practically at an end' and thus 'an examination of the lyric, and a definition of its peculiar qualities, would be likely to throw light on the nature of poetry itself' (Whitmore 1918: 584). Whitmore defines lyric as poetry at its most spontaneous, elevated and intense: 'in the pure lyric the imagination is wholly unhampered, wholly unalloyed ... the lyric is the union of concision and amplitude in a highly developed and recurrent metrical form' (*ibid.*: 595). This view contrasts sharply with Helen Gardner's valuation several decades later: she treats lyric as a minor literary form, and contends that a major poet cannot claim the title 'on a handful of lyrics however exquisite' (Gardner 1949: 3).

The panegyrics of Mill and Whitmore identify the features most commonly associated with lyric: it involves a first-person speaker, reveals personal feeling that is often articulated in the present tense, and is characterised by its brevity. Helen Vendler has recently elaborated on these lyric 'virtues': 'extreme compression, the appearance of spontaneity, an intense and expressive rhythm, a binding of sense by sound, a structure which enacts the experience represented, an abstraction from the heterogeneity of life' (quoted by Cook 2004: 579). This book demonstrates that these virtues are far from incontrovertible, however. Hegel declares in *The Philosophy of History* (1837, 1858) that lyric poetry is 'the expression of subjectivity' (Bergstrom 2002: 12), but the nature of that 'expression' has remained subject to debate. For many, lyric 'is the most autobiographical of all poetry ... undividedly the expression of the elemental emotions' (Schelling 1913: 245), but the lyric self has also been regarded as an elaborate construction rather than a product of sincerity and spontaneity. Catherine Ing's characterisation of the Elizabethan lyric

highlights the distinctions between these versions of poetic subjectivity. In the 'personal' lyric, 'the reader expects to find a revelation of strong personal emotion, usually of an intimate kind'. It is often longer than song lyric, and deals with 'subtleties and intimacies of emotion requiring careful and often prolonged expression'. It conveys a 'singular' occasion, and the reader senses that 'we are sharing in a private and probably unusual experience with a particular person'. In 'impersonal' lyric, the emotion or situation should be generalised, and nothing should connect the feeling intimately with an individual whose 'privacy might seem to be invaded by the overhearing of his utterance'. Ing concludes: 'Lyric of the first type is a voice from the invisible, lyric of the second type the speech of a personality' (Ing 1951: 15). Accounts of lyric subjectivity tend to occupy various points of this spectrum between the invisible voice and personal speech, and Chapter 1 explores the question of the lyric voice in detail.

Most modern definitions of the lyric treat it as a short poem concerned with an isolated or singular experience. Elder Olson identifies an inextricable connection between its formal concentration and its subject matter:

The peculiar nature of lyric poetry is related, not to its verbal brevity, but to the brevity of the human behaviour which it depicts. Its verbal brevity, in general, is a consequence of the brevity of its action.

(Olson 1964: 2)

Lyric is seen as a suspension or interlude, a unique intensification of literary language distinct from everyday experience. Arnold Stein argues that 'the moment of happiness is a lyric moment, and there are no adequate symbols or translations which can stand for that lyric parenthesis' (Stein 1962: 185). This 'moment' is separated from a larger narrative. Coleridge remarks in *Biographia Literaria* that '[a] poem of any length neither can be, or ought to be, all poetry' (Wimsatt and Brooks 1970: 434), while Edgar Allan Poe declares that '[w]hat we term long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief poetical effects' (Poe 1984: 15). For Poe, lyric intensity cannot be found in long poems (Wimsatt and Brooks 1970: 589). T. S. Eliot, however, dismisses any necessary

relation between brevity and the expression of the poet's thoughts and feelings: 'How short does a poem have to be, to be called a lyric?' (Eliot 1990: 97). Alistair Fowler points out that Renaissance tragedy contains lyric and narrative sections that are subsidiary to the main action, while Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* provides a good example of the 'lyrical' novel in the twentieth century (Fowler 1982: 60, 211). As Chapter 4 demonstrates, Wordsworth's *Prelude* complicates distinctions between the self-contained lyric moment and narrative momentum in the long poem. Epic and longer narrative poems are now rare, but we still need to distinguish between short lyrics and extended lyric sequences, such as John Berryman's *The Dream Songs*, Douglas Dunn's *Elegies* or Tony Harrison's *School of Eloquence*. These qualifications suggest that brevity is not necessarily the signature of lyric.

Given these difficulties in classifying lyric as a genre or sub-genre, and in identifying its characteristics, the task of defining the term lyrical, possibly the 'most lawless category' (Rhys 1913: vi), becomes highly problematic. Novels, films, musical compositions, dance routines or visual art can all be designated lyrical by critics, usually meaning that these works seem impassioned, melodic, inspired, high-flown, enthusiastic, and so on. Yet if the term can be applied to a range of non-poetic art forms, its value in specifying the properties particular to lyric is called into question. As David Lindley acerbically comments: 'It is no doubt vain to hope for a ban on the modal use of "lyrical" outside very specific contexts, but it is hard to see what effort of discrimination could make it useful' (Lindley 1985: 24).

LYRIC AND HISTORY

The notion that lyric is the primordial essence of pure poetry is part of a wider tendency in the modern period to characterise lyric as capturing fundamental, enduring human emotions, and to assume that it is an unchanging aesthetic category. For example, W. R. Johnson declares it 'immutable and universal. Its accidents may and always do show extraordinary variations as it unfolds in time, but its substance abides' (Johnson 1982: 2). Yet assumptions about lyric are far from timeless. Lindley stresses the

importance of historicising lyric practice: 'the only proper way to use the term "lyric" is with precise historical awareness ... As critics we can only attempt to be scrupulous in always using a generic term like "lyric" with the fullest possible historical awareness' (Lindley 1985: 84). Fowler points out that lyric, as defined by literary theory from Cicero to Dryden, must 'not be confused with the modern term' (Fowler 1982: 220), and our recent understanding of lyric is largely a product of the nineteenth century, when it became the 'dominant mode' of literature (*ibid.*: 206). The traditional privileging of lyric as 'immutable and universal' has led many critics to view lyric as a reactionary mode which seeks to 'exclude history and otherness' (Jeffreys 1995: 198).

Yet it is reductive to claim that lyric ignores or refuses the conflicts and discontinuities of history. Subsequent chapters demonstrate that in certain periods, competing ideas about lyric have coexisted, and conceptions and valuations of lyric have often shifted to accommodate changing historical conditions. Francis Turner Palgrave's *The Golden Treasury* of 1861 used the achievements of English lyric as a means of burnishing imperial power. Palgrave ends his Preface in expansive mode: 'wherever the Poets of England are honoured, wherever the dominant language of the world is spoken, it is hoped that they will find fit audience' (Palgrave 1964: xii). Palgrave homogenises the cultural difference that comprises 'English' literature, and also overlooks the multi-linguistic and transnational roots of English lyric. As we shall see, the earliest English lyrics are Anglo-Saxon laments influenced by Northern European poetic practice; medieval lyric was a blend of 'imported' and indigenous forms; while the modern lyric tradition originated in Provence and was refined in Italy and France before arriving on English shores. The long tradition of English love lyrics is the legacy of not only classical writers such as Sappho, Horace and Ovid, but also medieval writers such as Petrarch (1304–74) and Pierre de Ronsard (1524–85). Yet the rise and decline in the critical fortunes of lyric have often been linked to the expression of a sense of nationhood. For example, Ernest Rhys's *Lyric Poetry* and Frederick Schelling's *The English Lyric*, both published in 1913 at a time of acute international tension, consistently link the development of lyric to the national tale.

The fashioning of a 'national' lyric could also become entangled with gender politics: Margaret Dickie observes that in the United States, lyric tended to be treated as a minor, 'feminine' form, subordinate to the masculine epic in the attempt to articulate national ambition:

Lyric poetry has been a neglected genre in American literary history. In the nineteenth century, it was regarded as insufficient to express the new country. The earliest call for an American literature in the 1830s and 1840s emphasized, above all else, length and the need for an impressive form to express a large country.

(Dickie 1991: 7)

Similarly, in Victorian Britain, the isolated, private Romantic lyric came to be regarded as insufficiently masculine, socially engaged and productive at a time of imperial expansion (Byron 2003: 56). This perception echoed attitudes in the eighteenth century towards the 'effeminate' modern lyric's inferiority to the 'manly' epic, and this can be linked to Wordsworth's effort to 'remasculinise' the lyric in *Lyrical Ballads* (Patey 1993: 603–4).

Palgrave's *Treasury* is an attempt 'to include in it all the best original Lyrical pieces and Songs in our language, by writers not living – and none beside the best'. This canon-forming project claims to be 'acquainted with no strict and exhaustive definition of Lyrical Poetry', yet its definition of lyric has become the principal model in modern literary criticism: 'Lyrical has been here held essentially to imply that each Poem shall turn on some single thought, feeling or situation. In accordance with this, narrative, descriptive, and didactic poems – unless accompanied by rapidity of movement, brevity, and the colouring of human passion – have been excluded' (Palgrave 1964: ix). As Marjorie Perloff comments:

The *Golden Treasury* can ... be seen as emblematic of the codification of Romantic theory, with its gradual privileging of the lyric above the other literary modes ... by the turn of the [twentieth] century, for most would-be practitioners of the craft in England and America, poetry meant Palgrave.

(Perloff 1985: 177–78)

Yet this privileging of lyric is far from an inexorable development. Mark Jeffreys has commented that the most important transformations in the way that the term lyric was used took place in the early modern period: lyric emerges as a dominant category from a 'welter of shorter poetic genres', and it is only in the nineteenth century that it comes to be 'mythologized as the purest and oldest of poetic genres' (Jeffreys 1995: 197). Arthur Marotti observes that in Renaissance England, the lyrics produced by courtiers were treated as 'ephemeral "toys", usually not worth preserving' (Marotti 1991: 28). Lyric poems were written mainly for particular occasions, and hence were seen as having only momentary significance; it was only when these lyrics became 'enshrined in the fixity of print' that they could be termed 'literature' (*ibid.*: 36). Ironically, although Palgrave's definition affirms the Romantic theory of lyric, the Romantic period valued epic more than lyric, and Romantic women poets were until recently regarded as minor figures, partly because they eschewed the 'masculine' epic. The privileging of lyric in the nineteenth century was a response to the dominance of prose fiction, which superseded epic, the primary narrative poetic form: 'Lyric became the dominant form of poetry only as poetry's authority was reduced to the cramped margins of culture' (Jeffreys 1995: 200). The difficulty of providing a stable definition of lyric at different historical moments is also linked to changing critical tastes and assumptions. Jeffreys notes how the term lyric has disappeared from the title of poetic anthologies in recent decades, a situation that further complicates any attempt to identify a lyric canon: 'An abundance of texts can be found that fit the requirements of any definition of lyric, but no such definition satisfactorily includes all the well known poems considered lyric or lyrical' (*ibid.*: 203).

The inclination to subsume all poetic forms into the category of lyric is encouraged by anthologies that extract passages from long poems and present them as self-contained lyrics. This tendency led C. S. Lewis to lament readers' desire to regard *Paradise Lost* as a lyric, searching it for 'little ebullient patches of delight' (Matterson and Jones 2000: 83). The academy and the literary-critical industry have played a significant 'institutional' role in fostering the dominant version of the modern lyric. Tom Furniss