The Lyric Theory Reader
A Critical Anthology
Edited by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins
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General Introduction

We take it for granted that we know what a lyric is. As a term derived from ancient Greek to designate a song accompanied by the lyre, its association with musical performance persists today in popular "song lyrics" with instrumental accompaniment, but "lyric poetry" is also invoked more abstractly as a literary productions that is read, not sung. Often a poem is called lyric when it represents an utterance in the first person, an expression of personal feeling, according to a model of modern lyric reading that diverges from the way poems were performed (and read) in antiquity. Or as an alternative to expressive reading, a poem may be called lyric when it foregrounds the musicality of language by appeal to the ear or to the eye. Sometimes poems are called lyrics simply because they are short; sometimes lyric is defined in opposition to narrative, assuming a modern binary in literary modes; increasingly, lyric is a way to describe the essence of poetry, a poem at its most poetic. Whether we think about the lyric as ancient origin or modern imaginary, on the page or in the air, we need to have some idea of what a lyric is (or was) in the first place. Yet it has become as notoriously difficult to define the lyric as it is impossible to define poetry itself. How is it possible that almost all poetry has come to be read as essentially lyric and at the same time we do not seem to know how to define the lyric? Since assumptions widely shared are usually the ideas least and last investigated, it may be the case that because we have come to think of all poetry as lyric, we have not really wanted a concise definition of lyric. Perhaps the lyric has become so difficult to define because we need it to be blurry around the edges, to remain capacious enough to include all kinds of verse and all kinds of ideas about what poetry is or should be.

Yet such problems of definition are also always invitations to theorists. This anthology traces a critical genealogy of the modern idea of lyric as it has emerged in Anglo-American literary criticism of the past century. To say that the lyric is a modern idea or theory rather than an ancient gene might surprise readers accustomed to thinking about lyric poetry as a given in the Western tradition—indeed, as the oldest form in that tradition, the origin of literature and civilization. It is true that if we think of choral hymns or Sappho's odes or even tribal chants or popular song as the roots of lyric, a critical genealogy of lyric as a modern literary idea does not make much sense. But the concept of lyric as the oldest form of poetic expression is actually a relatively recent notion: specifically, it is a post-Enlightenment idea,
developed steadily over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Lyric Theory Reader traces only the past century's consolidation of our current thinking about the lyric, though the history of that idea is a much longer story, and whoever "we" are is subject to change. By "our current thinking" we mean primarily literary criticism that has proven influential for Anglo-American readers and poets both inside and outside the academy in the past century. Although the critics included in this anthology did not invent the lyric, we can trace the sources and direction of their influence by gathering the recent history of critical thought about the lyric. The purpose of this volume is to demonstrate how a reading of poetry as lyric that emerged by fits and starts in the nineteenth century became mainstream practice in the development of modern literary criticism in the twentieth century. The majority of the essays selected for this volume were written after the middle of the twentieth century; we think that by examining the most recent chapter of the critical history of the lyric, we may be able to see not only where our ideas have come from but also where they might be going.

The history of lyric reading is the history of thinking about poetry as more and more abstract and ineffable. A resistance to definition may be the best basis for definition of the lyric—and of poetry—we currently have. While it is still common to cite the definition of lyric in "official verse culture" (as described by Charles Bernstein in his 1992 manifesto, A Poetics) in terms of a record of the voice or the mind speaking to itself (as in T. S. Eliot's understanding of the "first voice" of poetry, for which see section 3), in practice the lyric is whatever we think poetry is. Sometimes we think that the lyric is what contemporary poetry recites against, as in recent avant-garde or conceptual thinking about poetics that views the lyric as a mimetically remnant of Romanticism, for example. And sometimes we think that the lyric is the most fundamental and unchanging poetic form, as when Helen Vendler writes, "the lyric remains the genre that directs its immense toward the performance of the mind in solitary speech" (see section 2). These may seem like competing definitions of the lyric in our contemporary moment, but their difference is only apparent inasmuch as they share a general sense that the lyric is the genre of personal expression, a sense assumed whenever we talk about the "lyric." What they disagree about is the value to attribute to that general sense.

The survey of twentieth- and twenty-first-century criticism offered here shows that this general definition of the lyric (whether valued or devalued) now seems to us a given because twentieth-century literary criticism made it up. Kenneth Brower (see section 3) was enormously influential in creating the dramatic model of "the mind in solitary speech" that Vendler (his student) expanded, but that was not the model for most of the other critics included here. The many overlapping models of the lyric in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries contribute to making our current sense of lyric poetry very large, so large that we think we know what we mean when we refer to poems as lyric (whether we think that is a good or a bad thing), but also too large to mean anything in particular.

This is not to say that the twentieth century invented the lyric out of whole cloth. The modern invention of the lyric has usually been attributed to Romanticism. Mary Poovey has gone so far as to claim that "contemporary literary criticism" elaborated the romantic lyric—both in the sense that it treats its analytic objects as if they were lyrics and in the sense that it contains features that perform lyric functions." But it does not make much sense to talk about "the romantic lyric" as if the lyric was in fact one genre in the nineteenth century and ever after—whether a contemporary revision of the genre does or does not more organize literary criticism as such. It seems more accurate to describe the lyric as a project modern literary criticism took from the nineteenth century and made its own. In the late eighteenth century, neoclassical and popular verse genres began to merge into larger categories, eventuating in what in 1899 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe called "the three natural forms of poetry"; the narrative, the lyric, and the dramatic. Goethe suggested that all poetry could be fitted into these three major categories and that if one put the "three main elements on a circle, equidistant from one another" one could see how the various categories formed a system of genres, the system of literature itself.

This way of thinking indicated a shift not only in the fortunes of the lyric but also in the conception of the form and function of literary genres—in many ways, it marked the invention not simply of the modern lyric, but of literary as we know it. Before that, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge had signaled the movement of popular genres with particular social functions toward the abstract literary lyric in their Lyric Ballads (1798), but the term remained adjectival rather than nominal. In the 1830s and 1840s, G. W. F. Hegel famously elevated the name of the lyric to one of the highest places in his Aesthetics, considering it "the pure representation of subjectivity and therefore a form likely to further the spirit of the age." Hegel cast the lyric as the most difficult of modern genres because in it the poet must become "the centre which holds the whole lyric work of art together," and in order to do so he must achieve a "specific mood" and "must identify himself with this particularization of himself with himself so that it is he feels and envisions himself..." Hegel repeated these assertions because he saw no less than the achievement of subjectivity at stake in the lyric: "In this way alone does [the poet], then become a self-born subjective entity (Selbstbild)." That attainment of subjective wholeness would in turn represent both perfect expression and the dialectical accomplishment of historical progress, for in his expression the poet moves us all forward toward enlightenment. Hegel's was an idealized version of the lyric: indeed, especially in comparison to the enormous variety of verse genres in active circulation in the nineteenth century: epistles and hymns, ballads and elegies, drinking songs and odes. The immense social currency of so many verse genres seems to have inspired nineteenth-century thinkers to imagine a transcendent poetic genre ever more abstracted from that currency, a genre ever more a perfect idea rather than an imperfect practice.

In 1853, John Stuart Mill paralleled Hegel in claiming that lyric poetry is "more eminently and peculiarly poetry than any other," yet he sought in vain for an adequate representative of a lyric poet among his British contemporaries. Though he praised Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley, he lamented that "the genius of Wordsworth is essentially analytical," and that Shelley "is the reverse in the sense that he had immense lyrical gifts but had not, at the period of his deplorably early death, reached sufficiently far that intellectual progress of which he was capable." For Hegel the ideal lyric poet would move civilization forward in his perfect self-expression, for Mill the ideal lyric poet would have to be the representative of both original nature and acquired culture, something no one had done perfectly. For such individual accounts, the lyric poet could only be an imagined figure, a hero of a poetry yet to appear (as indeed the poet became rather explicitly for Ralph Waldo Emerson, until Walt Whitman volunteered for the job).

It is a bit ironic that the nineteenth-century definition of the lyric as "utterance overlaid"—the construction that appears most often in twentieth-century literary criticism—is taken from an essay in which Mill failed to find any poet who could be called purely lyric, who could represent the "lyric" essence of poetry. Actually, in Mill's argument the idea that "eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard" (13) is so not much a definition of the essence of lyric as it is a distinction between discursive modes of direct and indirect address. Popular verse such as the Core-Law Ballads could not fit his definition of poetry because such verse directly addressed its readers for political purposes. In contrast, "the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener."
as Mill famously declared: "Poetry is feeling confusing itself to itself, in moments of solitude." (11) But of course the solitude of the lyric poet is a solitude we witness, a solitude exhibited in public. Mill ventured various metaphors for that predicament when he wrote that lyric song "has always seemed to us like the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen in the next" or that "it may be said that poetry that is printed on hot-pressed paper, and sold at a bookseller's shop, is a soliloquy in full dress, and on the stage" (12). Such extravagant metaphors testify to the peculiar pressures on the notion of the lyric ideal in the nineteenth century, yet they also indicate that even a writer like Mill, who thought of the lyric as poetry's utopian horizon, knew that his requirement that the lyric poet be unconscious of the audience always already posed a problem.

If nineteenth-century thinking about poetry sought to distinguish a transcendent version of lyric from contemporary cultures of circulation and at the same time imagined an ideal (and perhaps impossible) new culture of circulation, the twentieth-century criticism that inherited these ambitions for the lyric tended to embrace it not as an ideal to be aspired toward but as the given poetic genre already in circulation. When in 1937 Northrop Frye (see section 3) defined the lyric as "preeminently the utterance that is overheard," he so far as to say that there was no word for the audience of the lyric because "the poet, so to speak, turns his back on his listeners." Over a century after Mill and Hegel, the self-absorption of the lyric poet ceased to be a utopian horizon or a problem to be metaphorically solved and was assumed as a normative practice. Turning away from listeners became what the modern lyric poet did for a living.

Thus what began in the nineteenth century as an aspiration became in the twentieth century a real genre—indeed, become not only the genre to which poetry aspired but the genre so identified with poetry that poetry became another name for it. In this process, the lyric first became an abstraction that could include various verse genres, then poetry became a genre that could include lyric. In the second half of the nineteenth century, there was an uneven progression toward that exchange of terms, but in this anthology we gather a range of criticism that inherits those terms. In many of the essays included in this anthology, critics struggle with this lyricized idea of poetry, working to reconcile the theoretical self-enclosure of the lyric with the ways lyric poems are or were or could be read. Jonathan Culler, one of the foremost contemporary theorists of the lyric, suggests that "observing particular shifts in the lyric does not ... prevent one from maintaining a broad conception of lyric as genre" (see section 4). Yet even if we embrace such a broad conception (as indeed the twentieth century did) how do we account for the historical shifts that brought it about? As Culler observes, our answer to that question will depend on what we think a literary genre is in the first place. While Culler forces an account of genre as "a set of norms or structural possibilities," this anthology presents a critical history of how such a broad conception of the lyric as a genre became the genre.

It has become common to credit the Anglo-American New Criticism of the middle of the twentieth century with the elevation of the self-enclosed lyric to paradigmatic status, but the history of twentieth-century thinking about poetry is not that simple. The late-twentieth-century demand for a theory of Lyric Poetry Beyond New Criticism (as the title of an important early anthology of criticism phrased it) made New Criticism seem more monumental than it was. The New Critics were hardly a coherent group, and there were many differences among them. While it is possible to say that J. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, T. S. Eliot, W. K. Wimsatt, Monroe Beardsley, and Reuben Brower (the critics included here in section 5), along with John Crowe Ransom, Yvor Winters, R. P. Blackmur, Allen Tate, Williams Empson, and many others shared a lyricized view of poetry, precisely for that reason modernist critics did not tend to think about the lyric" but rather assumed that most poetry conforms to lyric protocols. As Brooks and Warren wrote in the first edition of Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students in 1958 (see section 3), "classifications such as 'lyric of meditation,' and religious lyric and 'poems of patriotism,' or the 'soumet,' 'the Ode,' 'the song,' etc. are arbitrary and irrational classifications that should give way to 'poetry as a thing in itself' worthy of study." The emphasis on 'poetry as a thing in itself' was an emphasis shared by many critics in the twentieth century, but as this anthology demonstrates, what it meant for poetry to be 'a thing in itself' varied dramatically from critic to critic. We think it is more productive to view New Criticism as part of a longer history of abstraction in which various verse genres (as in Brooks and Warren's list) were collapsed into a large, lyricized idea of poetry as such. This "super-sizing" of the lyric remained in place after the New Criticism, and in fact critics were struggling with it before the New Criticism. It is not an idea created and promoted by a particular school of thought but an ongoing historical process of thinking about poetry in which we are still very much engaged.

What did characterize the New Criticism was a focus on making poetry available to all kinds of readers. As the subtitle of Brooks and Warren's anthology suggests, in the middle of the twentieth century (with the rise of a university system broadly accessible to the middle class) the college classroom became the community of readers ideally positioned to resolve the contradictions evident in Mill's metaphors. Students were addressed by poets precisely because they were taught that they could all "overhear" the poet speaking to herself. Robert Lowell complained later in the twentieth century that "the modern world has destroyed the intelligent poet's audience and given him students," whether or not an audience for poetry deteriorated in this period, the audience for which classroom practice came to be referred to as "the lyric" could be generated by teaching students to read poetry from all periods "as a thing in itself." In the middle of the century, that first-person subject of the poem came to be called "the speaker," a dramatic person considered a fiction made for the purposes of the poem. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith has pointed out, the advantage of thinking about (and teaching) "the lyric" as a speaker or a dramatic fiction is that "the context of a fiction utterance... is understood to be historically indeterminate." A fictional person of all times and all places, the first-person speaker of the lyric could speak to no one in particular and thus to all of us.

No wonder this way of reading was so widespread in the middle of the twentieth century if it made the teaching of such a variety of poems to each variety of student "listener" possible. At the same time, the suspension of that fiction over any particular historical context or society beyond the classroom created problems for critics like René Wellek, who tried to place this lyricized version of poetry in literary history, or for later critics like Stanley Fish, who realized that such fictions were products of the spatial interpretive community of the classroom. Other critics tried to provide a context for this lyric fiction in earlier poetic models or to posit it as an essential (perhaps even universal) experience embedded in the phenomenology of lyric reading. Earlier in the century, Franklin Kell School literary theory had argued that the lyric fiction was itself a product of a decadent capitalist society in which poems had become commodities, and this line of thought has produced a critical discourse worried about the investments of New Criticism. After the middle of the century, structuralist critics focused on how poetic fictions worked in everyday discourse and in the formal world of the poem itself, post-structuralist readers attended to the limits within which these fictions did not work or broke down under sustained attention; and Heideggerian phenomenological readers explored the interior worlds of thought and feeling in lyric fictions. But since the late twentieth century, critics have also pushed back against the fiction of the lyric, whether in the interest of post-lyric textual or conceptual
poetics or in the interest of sexual politics or in the interest of challenging the Western inheritance of the lyric with other models. We have given some representative examples of these approaches both to give readers a survey of their diversity and to think about the general sense of the lyric as fictional and that such diverse approaches continue to share. Precisely because it has been shared for so long by such a range of readers, it is a fiction that has remained unexamined.

The Lyric Theory Reader is neither a defense of nor an attack on lyric. How can we defend or attack a moving target? Because what a lyric is or was keeps changing, this volume invites readers to examine moments in the intellectual history of a received idea over the past century. It is therefore both an anthology of criticism and a critical anthology that makes an argument about the history of reading. A longer history would ideally include earlier critics who have proven influential for twentieth-century criticism (classical treatises by Aristotle and Horace and Longinus, or apologias penned by poets like Sir Philip Sidney and Alexander Pope and Shelley, or other-quoted passages from Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria and meditations from William Hazlitt’s essay “On Poetry in General,” or Mill’s “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties,” or Edgar Allan Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition,” or Matthew Arnold’s “The Study of Poetry,” just to name a few obvious examples). But such a sampling of classic writing on poetry is already available in other anthologies, while our focus is on twentieth-century literary criticism, where the reworking of familiar questions about poetry also draws attention to discontinuities and divergences within only apparently continuous histories of interpretation. Rather than proposing or pursuing a straightforward line of influence or progressive development in discourses about lyric, we emphasize a looser logic that attributes later ideas about lyric to earlier moments in literary history and discover in these historical moments the latent possibilities of later ideas. Thus reading lyric, where lyric is the object of interpretation, necessarily involves lyric reading, where lyric is part of the interpretive process to be called into question. Our aim is to provoke debate about theoretical questions that remain unsettled: where, when, how, and why do we discover theories of lyric, and what are the critical genealogies of such theories?

This anthology is divided into three parts, containing multiple sections, with an introduction to each section explaining the critical context and theoretical implications of essays we have selected and (in some cases) excerpted for inclusion. Part One draws a large circle around the history of lyric reading in the twentieth century by asking an apparently simple question: “How does lyric become a genre?” Rather than always being a genre, we present examples of modern genre theory that take up the question of lyric, demonstrating how changing ideas about the form and functions of literary genres made it possible to imagine lyric as a modern idea. A brief introduction to genre theory (section 1) is followed by critical essays that project this idea back into literary history by identifying particular poets or poems as “models of lyric” (section 2). These two sections offer complementary “macro” and “micro” perspectives (one broadly generic, the other specifically historical) on the logic by which lyric can have come to be identified with poetry as such. To lay the theoretical groundwork for the anthology as a whole, the first section begins with an introductory essay that sets the stage for the subsequent sections, readers may select from essays in the remaining sections according to historical and critical interests.

Part Two is dedicated to twentieth-century lyric readers, featuring five major critical trends or schools of criticism that consolidated modern thinking about poetry as lyric, albeit with different critical investments. The techniques of close reading developed in Anglo-American New Criticism (section 3) paved the way for structuralist and post-structuralist readings of lyric (sections 4 and 5). In these various approaches to formalist analysis, lyric serves as an exemplary literary artifact for critics who want to demonstrate the construction of a text as organic unity or linguistic pattern or to deconstruct its deconstruction. Meanwhile, critics associated with the legacy of Frankfurt School thought (section 6) have pursued a Marxist reading of lyric as exemplifying the social contracations of modernity. Other critics have been more interested in tracing a phenomenology of lyric reading (section 7) to describe an experience of lyric not as an object of thought but as a mode of perception and an instrument for thinking. What these different approaches to lyric reading have in common is the idea that lyric is an important category for modern critical thought. For all of these critics, for all sorts of different reasons, the lyric is a fiction in which they find ways to believe.

Given the ambitious claims for lyric made by critics in the first two parts of the anthology, Part Three explores a series of critical disclaimers that we call “lyric departures.” Here we present critics who depart, in both senses, from an idea of lyric that they seek to call into question. The essays included in section 8 mark a radical break from an expressive model of lyric in order to explore avant-garde poetics that do not revolve around the assumption of lyric subjectivity or the figure of voice. By placing this argument within, rather than outside, a history of lyric reading that it seems to reject, our anthology makes it possible to see how readers and writers committed to this strain of anti-lyricism are part of the very tradition they critique. The essays included in the last two sections challenge traditional lyric reading in another way, not through rejection of history but through an insistence on alternate histories. We include several examples of gender criticism and queer theory that generate different histories of lyric reading by foregrounding questions of sexual difference (section 9). These histories are further expanded by critical explorations in comparative poetics, where modern lyric reading is brought into dialogue with poetry from non-Western traditions (section 10). Looking ahead to more diverse modes of lyric reading, necessarily involves looking back on a critical framework that has been consolidated in the course of the twentieth century, a framework that continues to serve many different purposes.

Our anthology provides an overview of the modern consolidation of lyric as a genre of critical reading: our central argument is that the lyricization of poetry is a product of twentieth-century critical thought, and our purpose is to make available some exemplary instances of that thought and its many variations. In this respect, the Lyric Theory Reader is a companion to Theory of the Novel, edited by Michael McKeon and also published by The Johns Hopkins University Press (2006). In his anthology, McKeon argues that “modernity conjures several, seemingly contradictory elements: the emergence of the novel genre, the decay of the genre system, and the movement to replace the historical theory of the novel by the transhistorical theory of narrative” (15). The same may be said, sustains Mutuana, of the modern emergence of lyric as a genre, the decay of the genre system, and the movement to replace historical poetic genres by a transhistorical theory of lyric. Like McKeon’s anthology, our anthology highlights these only apparently contradictory elements. The introductory essays provide an interpretive framework for the selected readings in each section and together make a sustained argument about the gradual lyricization of poetry that reached its culmination in twentieth-century criticism.

The essays gathered here are not comprehensive, but we think they are representative. What they represent is not a developmental narrative, exactly, and they also do not constitute an influence study. Rather, our anthology presents an intellectual history of a theory of lyric reading that has circulated both within and beyond the classroom, wherever poetry is being taught and read and discussed and debated today. Such an intellectual history offers a timely critical perspective at a moment when all kinds of claims are being made
for poetry as a way of redeeming a decadent culture, of restoring literaryness to literary studies, of making personal expression possible in public, of bestowing creative freedom on poet, critic, and reader alike. Those deep investments in what poetry can do for us have a history as poetic practice but also as critical construction. The Lyric Theory Reader encourages the next generation of lyric theory readers—students, teachers, scholars, critics, poets—to reflect further on the paths by which we have reached the point of such idealization of the potential function of poetry in our time. Histories of poetic practices often establish poetry as a stable term that then takes various forms or is used in a range of ways at different places at different times. This volume instead surveys the idea of poetry as lyric that emerged at a particular place and time (the twentieth century in Anglo-America); once we see the outlines of that idea, that notion of poetry may not seem so stable or appropriate for other places and other times, and from that insight other histories of reading—and other ideas of poetry and its possibilities—may appear.

NOTES


3. See, for example, Craig Dorward’s introduction to the Anthology of Conceptual Writing on the Churchiv website at www.churchiv.com/anthology.


PART ONE

How Does Lyric Become a Genre?