

REVIEW ARTICLE

What Is This Thing Called Lyric?

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What is the New Lyric Studies, and why does it seem—to some of us—so disturbing and so hard to avoid, so misleading, so important, and so useful? The term refers to ideas set forth, or at least implied, by Yopie Prins in *Victorian Sappho* (1999); codified by Virginia Jackson in *Dickinson's Misery* (2005); summarized in a 2008 special issue of *PMLA*, in Jackson's long entry for "lyric" in the new *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (2012), and in the forewords and headnotes to the present volume;¹ anticipated, in one way, by historically oriented theorists of genre, such as Alastair Fowler, and in another by classics of deconstruction, especially Paul de Man; and rejected or resisted—more or less successfully, and more or less explicitly—by critics who emphasize continuities between present-day notions of lyric (on the one hand) and (on the other) earlier ways of reading, writing, and describing poems.

The New Lyric Studies (unless I have misread it) insists on these propositions:

1. Readers of poetry in Western languages before the twentieth century recognized verse in genres and subgenres: not only narrative and (what we now call) lyric but ballads, hymns, odes, cradle songs, epigrams, poems of seduction, funeral elegies, and many more. All these subgenres changed over time.

This article reviews Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, eds., *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. vi+665. Parenthetical page numbers are from the book under review.

1. Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton University Press, 1999); Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005; repr., Princeton University Press, 2007); "The New Lyric Studies," special cluster in *PMLA* 123 (2008): 181–234; Roland Greene, Stephen Cushman, Claire Cavanagh, Jahan Ramazani, and Paul F. Rouzer, eds., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed. (Princeton University Press, 2012). Jonathan Culler's important and long-awaited *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) appeared while this review article was in production. For Culler's response to the New Lyric Studies, see his chap. 2.

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2. Many subgenres have become hard to see, because we take most short poems to be part of a large category called “lyric,” dependent on print, and by now on academia too: “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” (2).

3. “Lyric”—both the meanings of the word and the kinds of experience we understand it to name—has itself changed over time. “The capacious modern idea of the lyric that emerged near the end of the eighteenth century and developed in fits and starts over the course of the nineteenth has shifted in many directions” (382). While that idea once involved music or classical precursors (Sappho, Alcaeus), it now refers primarily to poems—or, rather, to ways of reading poems—that ask us to imagine a more or less introspective, meditative individual, who might or might not be the author or the reader: “lyric is the genre of personal expression” (2).

4. “Lyric reading” (Jackson’s phrase) necessarily sets the poem, and the imagined psyche behind the poem, apart from the author’s literal body and from the facts about her life: hence “a great deal of lyric reading in the twentieth century attempted to restore lyrics to the social or historical resonance that the circulation of lyrics as such tends to suppress.”² Historically oriented readers push back against, or try to render visible, the frames implied by the category “lyric,” in order to speak about bodies, reception, institutions, and *mentalité*, in ways that “lyric” tends to foreclose.³

5. “Lyric reading” has roots in the Romantic period, but it came to dominate Anglo-American practices only during the early twentieth century, as the theories and pedagogies of the group now commonly called New Critics spread through universities. “The abstraction or collapse of various verse genres into a large idea of poetry as such . . . had been going on for a century and a half before [I. A.] Richards’s *Practical Criticism* (1929) or [John Crowe] Ransom’s *New Criticism* (1941) set the terms for the reading of poems as self-sufficient forms” (159). That process of “abstraction or collapse” is what Jackson and Prins call “lyricization.”⁴

6. Lyricization is largely irreversible: we cannot get all the way out of the habit of recognizing, or misrecognizing, lyric in many short poems (it is some-

2. Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery*, 70.

3. Both *Victorian Sappho* and *Dickinson’s Misery* also pursued complicated, and largely persuasive, arguments about the gender of the poet’s body and about the nineteenth-century figure called the Poetess; these arguments do not much appear in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, and my response to this book cannot address them.

4. In Christopher Nealon’s summary, “Jackson has argued that the professionalization of literary criticism from the time of the New Critics has produced a tendency to read all poems as lyrics, where ‘lyric’ means a record or the voice of the mind speaking to itself, as in T. S. Eliot’s conception” (488). Jackson and Prins label Nealon’s sentence a “reductive paraphrase,” but it is what a smart reader could easily take away from Jackson’s complicated book (455).

thing like the fall into experience). But this mode of lyric reading is modern: either the poets of the past (before 1880, or 1780, or some other point) did not have “lyric” in our modern sense, or (thanks to lyricization) we cannot know whether they did. “Dickinson may only have become a lyric poet through the posthumous transmission and reception of her writing as lyric.”⁵

7. When we find, in literary history, figures who can stand for lyric poetry—Sappho, for example, and Emily Dickinson—these figures will also be figures for absence, incompleteness, self-cancellation, and inaccessibility, not just because other people’s interiorities are in one sense always inaccessible (the famous philosophical problem of other minds), nor because lyric evokes this unknowability (Dickinson’s “I’m Nobody,” or her “liquor never brewed”), but because the lyric poetry that we see in the past is a modern creation; it was not really, wholly, genuinely, or confirmably there. A special theory of Sappho’s relativity (dependent in part on the fact that she survives in fragments and on the famous stories about her) may also set the terms for a general theory: “Sappho gives birth to a tradition of lyric reading that kills the very thing it would bring to life.”⁶

The Lyric Theory Reader collates critical and scholarly writings on poetry—most well known to scholars, some recent ones less so—in order to show how our senses of “lyric” and “poetry” have developed, that is, what brought us to this pass: it promises “a critical genealogy of the modern idea of lyric,” even as it shows how that idea has been internally inconsistent, or confusingly defined (1). None of the fifty pieces dates from before the twentieth century; the oldest, by I. A. Richards, comes from 1924. Some essays discuss the term “lyric” at length; others never use it. The collection ends up terrifically comprehensive, and only sporadically partisan: it is the sort of thing all of us working on modern or contemporary poetry (and some who study older poetry) should want to own.⁷ It contains evidence for all the propositions I have outlined above—and, to the editors’ credit, evidence against them too. That is a good thing, as some of them seem to be wrong.

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What can the word “lyric” these days mean? A poem with one speaker; a poem in which the poet speaks to herself; “short, intense and exquisite

5. Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery*, 212.

6. Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, 13, 40.

7. That makes it a sequel of sorts to *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), though Hosek and Parker used all-new, not reprinted, work. An earlier and influential collection of modern essays on lyric in English is *Forms of Lyric*, ed. Reuben Brower (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), with contributions from Helen Vendler, Geoffrey Hartman, and Paul de Man.

redactions of impassioned speech” (a notion with “recognizable beginnings in the early Renaissance”) (Roland Greene);⁸ a poem involving apostrophe, “a turning aside from whatever is taken to be the real or normal addressee” (Jonathan Culler) (69); ancient Greek poems accompanied by lyre; “a genre of song,” “by definition musical” (Robert von Hallberg);⁹ poems that can be sung; poems that resemble song; “the voicing of one moment’s state of feeling” (Mark Booth);¹⁰ “any fairly short, non-narrative poem presenting a single speaker who expresses a state of mind or a process of thought and feeling” (M. H. Abrams);¹¹ work that is “personal, subjective, short, meditative, emotive, private, musical” (Dean Rader);¹² “a special kind of personal utterance” whose subcategories include “hymn, laud, ode and nocturne” (Gabrielle Starr);¹³ verse, or poetic language, “made abstract,” so that it does not represent a socially specifiable individual but instead makes available emotions and a psychological position, “an utterance for us to utter as ours,” much as sheet music can be played by any sufficiently skilled musician (Helen Vendler) (88);¹⁴ a poem that descends from, or resembles, other poems often called lyric.

The history of a word is always related—but can often be distinguished—from the history of the practices it may denote. Sometimes some of the practices must have come first (as with “masturbation”).¹⁵ Often practices, and vernacular discussions, came decades or centuries before academics gave them their current names. That might have been the case with “lyric,” except that we can find the word in English (along with an array of meanings) in the sixteenth century. Heather Dubrow finds that “many English Renaissance writers and readers were cognizant of the category,” citing Michael Drayton, George Puttenham, and Philip Sidney, along with such well-known titles as Ben Jonson’s “A Celebration of Charis in Ten Lyrick Peeeces.” “But the period . . . did not have an uncontroversial formula for cat-

8. Roland Greene, “The Lyric,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 3, ed. Glyn Norton (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 216.

9. Robert von Hallberg, *Lyric Powers* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 144, 227.

10. Mark Booth, *The Experience of Songs* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 73.

11. M. H. Abrams, quoted in Walt Hunter, “Lyric and Its Discontents,” *Minnesota Review*, n.s., no. 79 (2012): 78.

12. Dean Rader, “The Epic Lyric: Genre and Contemporary American Indian Poetry,” in *Speak to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary American Indian Poetry*, ed. Dean Rader and Janice Gould (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 129.

13. G. Gabrielle Starr, *Lyric Generations: Poetry and the Novel in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 75.

14. Helen Vendler, *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3.

15. See Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone, 2005).

egorizing poems as lyric, and many commentaries are inconsistent.”¹⁶ That does not mean that we ought to discard the category. On the contrary, Dubrow argues, we can see how it functioned by looking at poems, and at their constituent myths, from Orpheus to King David.

Nigel Smith finds “210 instances” of the word “lyric” “in 114 separate texts between 1630 and 1660”; most assumed that it resembled song and/or descended from “Alcaeus, Anacreon and Sappho. . . . Everyone claimed to know what lyric was.”¹⁷ “Lyrick,” or “The Lyrick Poet,” could often mean Horace, whose odes and epodes were complex and not normally sung.¹⁸ After 1660, writes David Fairer, poets who wrote what they themselves chose to call lyric “were interested in recovering a classical genealogy.”¹⁹ For the Augustans the term overlapped with “ode.”²⁰ As David Duff explains, two concepts of “lyric” separated themselves from classical precedents during the early nineteenth century, but the concepts were not the same: “an introspective conception of lyric, involving not simply self-expression but also self-analysis,” on the one hand, and “a musical idea of lyric” (like Palgrave’s) on the other: both ideas “have their roots in earlier poetic theory and practice.”²¹ Scott Brewster’s concise, responsible *Lyric* (2009) examines the ways in which the word “lyric” was used alongside the reception histories of famous poems it appears to denote. For Brewster, the “oral convention, or necessary fiction, of the speaking lyric ‘I’” unifies poems called “lyric” from various periods, and “some of the assumptions underpinning the modern idea . . . are already visible well before Romanticism.”²²

Prins and Jackson must know all about these earlier usages. Indeed, Jackson’s wonderful entry on “lyric” for the *Princeton Encyclopedia* comes near to pointing them out. Yet the lyricization thesis sometimes requires them to write as if they did not, or as if nothing connected these usages one to another. “An abundance of texts can be found,” complained Mark Jeffreys in 1995, for “any definition of lyric, but no such definition satisfactorily includes all the well-known poems considered lyric or lyrical.” Jeffreys concluded—perhaps hastily—that Greek, Roman, Renaissance, Romantic and

16. Heather Dubrow, *The Challenges of Orpheus: Lyric Poetry and Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 16.

17. Nigel Smith, “Lyric and the English Revolution,” in *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations*, ed. Marion Thain (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 73.

18. Joshua Scodel, “Lyric,” in *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, vol. 2, ed. Gordon Braden, Robert Cummings, and Stuart Gillespie (Oxford University Press, 2001), 217.

19. David Fairer, “Modulation and Expression in the Lyric Ode, 1660–1750,” in Thain, *Lyric Poem*, 95.

20. Ralph Cohen, “The Return to the Ode,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. John Sitter (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 209.

21. David Duff, “The Retuning of the Sky,” in Thain, *Lyric Poem*, 136.

22. Scott Brewster, *Lyric* (London: Routledge, 2009), 12, 71. An earlier book with much the same ambit is David Lindley, *Lyric* (London: Methuen, 1985).

New Critical definitions “have no common core.”²³ And yet it is hard to find definitions that do not apply, for example, to Thomas Wyatt’s “My lute, awake,” or—bar those that take actual singing—to Elizabeth Bishop’s “One Art.”

Some definitions for “lyric” do conflict with others, not only across periods but also within them. Here is Juliana Spahr in 2002, introducing the anthology *American Women Poets in the Twenty-First Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*: “most of the poets and critics in this collection use the word ‘lyric’ to refer to interiority and/or intimate speech that avoids confessions, clear speech, or common sense”; lyric is for them “the genre of and about impossibility and difficulty” (557). We are not in the *Golden Treasury* any more.

On the other hand, we may not have gone far: lyric remains the literary genre of intimate feeling, of “private ejaculations” (as the title page for George Herbert’s *The Temple* put it)—and “feeling,” interiority, emotion, are necessarily complicated for Spahr, as they were not for Francis Palgrave.²⁴ For Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “the lyric poet must be continually aware of herself from the *inside*, as a subject, a speaker” (527), which covers Palgrave’s passion, and Spahr’s resistance, and Wyatt’s lute, and Sidney’s “‘Fool,’ said my muse to me; ‘looke in thy heart, and write.’”²⁵ Still other critics have seen lyric poetry, or true poetry, or genuine poetry, as a way of resisting individuality, or resisting meaning. “The strongest poets have tended to establish their mastery,” says Harold Bloom, “by the paradox of . . . *an achieved dearth of meaning*” (281). That dearth recommends itself, too, for Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, for whom “a poem has nothing to recount, nothing to say”; “a poem . . . is nothing but pure wanting-to-say,” and poetry escapes from under us, “forever lost and borne away . . . by the very fact of language” (410–11, 407). The self escapes too: there is nothing left to express.

Lacoue-Labarthe is writing about Paul Celan, whose poetry really can seem to work that way. The argument also makes sense if you have been reading Gertrude Stein, Dylan Thomas, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Nathaniel Mackey, or Jorie Graham. Does it work for George Herbert? For Rudyard Kipling? For Langston Hughes? Some people (not thinking historically) will dismiss Kipling as a bad poet, or not a poet, or never a lyric poet, since his poetry does not seem to embody the qualities that Lacoue-Labarthe, and Bloom, describe. But—leaving aside the argument that he is a good poet, or, as George Orwell significantly put it, “a good bad poet”—such echt-Kipling examples as “Sestina of the Tramp Royal” should still trouble

23. Mark Jeffreys, “Ideologies of Lyric: A Problem of Genre in Contemporary Anglophone Poetics,” *PMLA* 110 (1995): 203.

24. George Herbert, *Works*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford University Press, 1941), 1.

25. Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella* 1, in *Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford University Press, 1989), 153.

attempts to define lyric (let alone poetry) in opposition to other kinds of language use.²⁶

Daniel Albright, who passed away unexpectedly while this review essay was underway, offered another definition, or nondefinition. “A lyric is that which resists definition,” he wrote in *Lyricality in English Literature* (1985). “The history of lyric,” Albright decided, “is the history of incantation,” since lyric works resemble “magic spells.” Lyric poetry (long before French symbolists said so) aspired both to accompany, and to imitate, “the passionate inconsequence of music” (conceived as a nonreferential genre).²⁷ These aspirations make “lyric” not the name of a genre but the name of a mode: you can find lyricism in all manner of texts, even in sufficiently evocative realist novels (straining against their realism), although the texts that are most lyrical, most often, are (unsurprisingly) short poems. Lyric escapes from prose meaning almost as the soul, or the spirit, escape from the body in *pneuma*, the Greek word that meant both “spirit” and “breath.”²⁸

We do not find Albright in *The Lyric Theory Reader*. Nor do we find Fowler, who believed in 1982 that “lyric” and “elegiac,” having been separable genres, joined up in the nineteenth century and became a mode.²⁹ Fowler also opined that “in modern poetry, the collapse of many kinds into ‘lyric,’ has given subgenre an enlarged function,” even though many “modern subgenres . . . are unrecognized” and do not have names.³⁰ Nor does *The Lyric Theory Reader* find room for Starr, who in 2004 explained how “lyric” helped Samuel Richardson and others create the eighteenth-century novel: “lyric worked to mark the boundaries that related interior experience to communal life.”³¹

We do, however, get an excerpt from Allen Grossman’s *Summa Lyrica*, which tried to render explicit, and philosophical, the axioms and assumptions that we (we readers after Romanticism) already bring to the poems that we know best. For Grossman, “the process of creation of human presence through acknowledgement” was in some sense the great goal of all lyric poems. “Lyric is the genre of the ‘other mind’” (420), the way that we

26. George Orwell, “Rudyard Kipling,” in *Kipling and the Critics*, ed. Elliot L. Gilbert (New York University Press, 1965), 85.

27. Daniel Albright, *Lyricality in English Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), viii, 1, 67.

28. On wind, air, and breath in Romantic period poets, a classic treatment is M. H. Abrams, “The Correspondent Breeze,” *Kenyon Review* 19 (1957): 119–30; but it is easy to find wind, breath, and spirit in lyric, or lyrical, poetry almost no matter how far back we go—“Western wind,” for example.

29. Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 206; Lindley, *Lyric*, 13.

30. Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 114.

31. Starr, *Lyric Generations*, 13.

come to imagine other people's inward lives (as against their actions or their social being or their physical bodies). To read a lyric poem is not to follow directions but to have an experience, almost like meeting a person: criticism of poetry, therefore, for Grossman, "must precipitate no conclusion that might be known ahead of time by either of us, must acknowledge the inutility of anything that can be taught in this matter and the splendor of anything that can be learned" (422–23).

* * *

There is no way, using internal features alone, to distinguish nonpoems from bad poems—at least not in the modern period, or by modern criteria. Nor can we distinguish ineffectively lyrical, or bad lyric, poems categorically from nonlyric poems, at least not after antiquity; the criteria for definition (set forward by those critics who think that we can define it) are too closely bound up with someone's notion of some reader's experience. We can, however, say what succeeds, aesthetically or emotionally, for us, when we read what we have learned to call "poetry," and what we have tried to call "lyric," making our evaluations—and then, and therefore, our definitions—explicit. We can also try to see what historically specified groups of people have meant by a term.

And then we can see if the groups had anything in common; whether we can learn anything from the way one historical group informed the next. "No definition of the lyric poem or of the novel can, in short, be wholly transhistorical," Marjorie Perloff reminds us, and "the writing of lyric poetry . . . undergoes change" (467). Yet to accept these claims (and who could reject them?) does not force us to posit a moment (analogous perhaps to the Wilde trials if we are studying sex) before which whatever people wrote, read, and heard could not possibly have been "lyric" in our modern sense. Lyric poetry was not just the same in 1850 or 1400 as in 1950, but neither was an apple, or an earlobe;³² nevertheless, we hypothesize that apples and earlobes were present in 1400 and in 1850 and that some people enjoyed them in some way—though "earlobe," the word, dates only to 1859. Did John Donne have earlobes? Did John Donne write lyric poems?

We can—and *The Lyric Theory Reader* includes critics who do—define the word "lyric" in ways that lets us apply the term across many cultures, with or without an Aristotelian frame. Earl Miner, the most ambitious definer, tells us that lyric poetry is a thing that exists both in tribal oral cultures and in our own; that it promises "intense brevities"; that the knowledge it conveys is "affective and expressive" (584, 587); that it is "not mimetic" in the manner

32. Apples really have changed: see Rowan Jacobsen, *Apples of Uncommon Character* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

of narrative or descriptive poetry (579); and that it has some near relation to song, or sound. But we may ask—having seen such broad definitions—whether they point to any common experience, across cultures or centuries.

We can always answer that question in the negative, in advance, by invoking the problem of other minds. We cannot know whether early modern readers understood Sidney's sadness as we think we understand Sidney's sadness, or John Ashbery's sadness, for the same reason that I cannot truly know whether you see what I see when I see "red."

Or we can look at what actual readers have said. Mark Jeffreys notwithstanding, we can find very good evidence that something a lot like "lyric," and a lot like the prevalent modern idea of lyric—introspective, expressive, with much attention to sound—existed, if not in all times and all places, then centuries before the New Critics were born, even though if the set of poems with those qualities did not do, for those other times and places, the cultural and theoretical work that it did for John Stuart Mill. As Jackson and Prins admit, "the more we try to differentiate lyric through cross-cultural comparison, the more it appears to be a universal phenomenon" (568). Why "appears"?

If the New Lyric Studies means that some earlier generations created the kind of literary artifacts that we have learned to call lyric less often, attributed less importance to them, and called them by a variety of names, then the New Lyric Studies has got something right. But if the New Lyric Studies means that earlier poets never did, or could not have done, the things that we call lyric now, then plenty of counterexamples beckon. Here is the first stanza of a poem from the twelfth century, by Castelloza, one of the *trobairitz* (women troubadours), in the original Occitan and then in Claudia Keelan's recent colloquial translation:

Ja de chantar non derg' aver talan,
 quar on mais chan
 e pietz me vai d'amor,
 que plaing e plor
 fan en mi lor estatge;
 car en mala merce
 ai mes mon cor e me,
 e s'en breu no. m rete,
 trop ai faich lonc badatge.

[I should give up on song, / since the more I sing, / the more love goes wrong, / and these tears and groans / move in and build my home; / yet even so I know, / if I ended this poem right now, / I've already droned on too long.]³³

33. Claudia Keelan, *Truth of My Songs: Poems of the Trobairitz* (Richmond, CA: Omnidawn, 2015), 40–41.

The poem obviously depends upon troubadour conventions. It could not be mistaken for a twenty-first-century poem, nor for a commercially viable twenty-first-century popular song. And yet I can think of no way to hear this poem as something wholly outside the modern sense of lyric (introspective; like music; both personal and shared; grounded in emotions both specific and familiar; self-conscious, even self-descriptive; brief, and intricately patterned) without appealing to a priori, unfalsifiable, claims that the people of the past were categorically unlike us, and so what we do can never be like what they did.

Here is a discussion of poetry in Chinese by Yen Yü (ca. 1180–1235), apparently viewed as conservative in his own time: “there are three dimensions of poetry to which one must pay special heed: to the openings and closures of poems, to syntax, and to crucial elements of diction. There are two absolutely essential characteristics of poetry: it must flow freely and not be restricted, or it must be thoroughly imbued with deeply moving expression. There is one ultimate attainment of poetry: enter the spirit. When poetry enters spirit, it is perfect and complete.”³⁴ It is not quite Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions recollected in tranquility,” but it comes close: surprisingly so, if you are committed to a certain kind of historicist view of the things that we now call “poetry,” or call “lyric.”

And this capacious, frustrating book seems to admit the problem. David Damrosch, in the very last essay in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, considers the varied frames and contexts we might bring to an ancient Egyptian poem: since “Egyptian lyrics . . . appear to have been composed as songs,” we might “think of this poem less in a context of Heine and Shakespeare and more in a context of Willie Nelson and Linda Ronstadt” (638–39). Those contexts are not the same, but they are not disjunct; Heine and Willie Nelson, or Shakespeare and Sondheim, overlap in what they seem to have done with words, and one name for that overlap is “lyric.” As for lyric interiority, the dialogue of the self with the self, is it really exclusively modern? or Romantic? Damrosch quotes another Egyptian poem: “I say to my heart within me a prayer: / if far away from me is my lover tonight / then I am like someone already in the grave” (636).

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The claim about the supersizing of “lyric” looks much better when Jackson and Prins locate its beginnings around the Romantic period, and not in later academe: in the course of “the nineteenth-century history of the lyri-

34. Yen Yü, “An Analysis of Poetry,” trans. Richard John Lynn, in *The Shorter Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*, ed. Victor Mair (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 54.

zation of poetry”—a process that extends from Charlotte Smith to Francis Palgrave, Dylan Thomas, Harold Bloom, and Garrison Keillor—“stipulative verse genres that once belonged to neo-classical taxonomies or to specific modes of circulation gradually collapsed into a more and more abstract idea of poetry that then became associated with the lyric” (452). That collapse explains how Matthew Arnold came to call Dryden and Pope “classics of our prose.”³⁵ But Jackson and Prins add, less convincingly, that “the audience for that more abstract, lyricized poetic genre eventually became literary critics, as professional reading practices displaced popular or local verse reading practices” (452). Tell that to Keillor, in whose anthologies the lyric paradigm of the *Golden Treasury*—short, simple, musical, expressive, and putatively universal—survives almost unchanged.³⁶

One of the best things about *The Lyric Theory Reader* is the way that its writers not only quarrel with one another but anticipate, and undermine, parts of the thesis implied by the whole. “The term ‘lyric’ itself is unsatisfactory,” T. S. Eliot decided in 1953; “the word cannot be satisfactorily defined” (197). “One must abandon attempts to define the general nature of the lyric or the lyrical” and instead look at “the history . . . of genres”: so Rene Wellek in 1967 (51). Not all the so-called New Critics fare so well: Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in *Understanding Poetry* (1938) recommended “thinking of a poem as a piece of writing which gives us a certain effect in which, we discover, the ‘poetry’ inheres” (188).

Such writings have, as logicians used to say, a certain dormitive quality. But they point to something less silly than they sound. When you find a flagrantly circular definition like this one, you might be in the presence of a covert appeal to experience or to tacit competence, analogous to mastery of spoken language. “We learn so naturally by forms and formulae,” wrote Rosalie Colie in the early 1970s, “that we often entirely fail to recognize them for what they are.”³⁷ We think that we know what poetry (or good poetry) and lyric poetry (or lyric work, or good lyric work) are because we have already read some. And we are not alone. Our habits and tastes and not-yet-explicit reactions (the kind that Richards tried to study) tell us how to use a word correctly even if we cannot say why that usage is correct. “Poetry” is harder to define uncontroversially than “earlobe” but easier perhaps than “truth,” or “person,” or “than.” And if poetry—and the kinds of poetry, including “lyric”—owe their definitions to experience, we cannot learn how

35. Matthew Arnold, *English Literature and Irish Politics: Works*, vol. 9, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973), 181.

36. See *Good Poems*, ed. Garrison Keillor (New York: Penguin, 2003), *Good Poems for Hard Times*, ed. Garrison Keillor (New York: Penguin, 2006), and *Good Poems, American Places*, ed. Garrison Keillor (New York: Penguin, 2012).

37. Rosalie Colie, *The Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 5.

to use those definitions, what kind of work they do, by looking only at explicit theories that people developed in order to explain the kinds of experience that they already believed they had had.

“It is crucial to the notion of genres,” writes Culler, “that people might have been wrong about them,” saying one thing and doing, or implying, another as they read, or described, or produced particular texts (65). That is one reason why theories of poetry, or of lyric poetry, or lyric as a mode, have taken account of the tropes and the implications inside successive generations of poems. “When conventions are living,” writes W. R. Johnson, describing the poetry of ancient Greece, “there is no need for critics to distinguish among kinds of poems and to list the characteristic formal elements” (96). Johnson was, Jackson and Prins gloss, “assuming the continuity of a longer Western tradition,” so that his “approach to lyric theory is both retrospective (looking back on classical lyric) and prospective. . . . Indeed, only in the presence of this modern idea [can] we discover what was always implicit or ‘absent’ in ancient lyric theory” (87).

But Johnson’s much-cited book (*The Idea of Lyric: Lyric Modes in Ancient and Modern Poetry* [1982]) does not so much assume that continuity as give some evidence in its favor. Dubrow and others have done similar work for early modern writers. Cristanne Miller has responded crisply to the claim that Emily Dickinson did not write lyric poems: “dynamics in sound, form and thought in Dickinson’s poetry,” Miller concludes, “mark it as distinctly lyric as understood by her immediate predecessors and contemporaries,” as do “patterns of her borrowing or adoption of popular poetic forms, modes, and idioms.”³⁸

Lyric reading, or reading for lyric qualities, in the sense that the “lyricization” thesis implies (compactness, interiority, musical density; the speech of the self to the self) was not the dominant kind of reading applied to verse for much of the long eighteenth century, but it was available, and sometimes celebrated, too. You can find all those qualities (mixed with humor, as you might expect) in Matthew Prior’s couplets about his birthday. (Early eighteenth-century verse was full of “lyric” in other senses of the term.)³⁹ Of Henry Howard’s Tudor-era poem “So cruel prison,” Thomas Warton wrote in 1774:

In the poet’s situation, nothing can be more natural and striking than the reflection with which he opens his complaint. There is also much beauty in the abruptness of his exordial exclamation. The superb palace, where he had passed the most pleasing days of his youth with the son of a king, was

38. Cristanne Miller, *Reading in Time: Emily Dickinson in the Nineteenth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 17; also see chap. 1 in general. Dickinson (Miller adds) never used the word “lyric,” but her contemporaries often did (29).

39. See, e.g., Lindley, *Lyric*, 66–68.

now converted into a tedious and solitary prison! This unexpected vicissitude of fortune awakens a new and interesting train of thought. The comparison of his past and present circumstances recalls their juvenile sports and amusements; which were more to be regretted, as young Richmond was now dead. Having described some of these with great elegance, he recurs to his first idea by a beautiful apostrophe. He appeals to the place of his confinement, once the source of his highest pleasures.⁴⁰

In what we might have to call “close reading” *avant la lettre*, Warton admires, and strives to bring out through his prose, such qualities as authenticity, introspection, the exploration of mixed feelings, compression, sadness about the mere passing of time in a life, regret at the thought of death, attention to people not present, and address to inanimate or absent objects (for which Warton—like Culler—uses the term “apostrophe”).

It is difficult to find a definition of lyric, the singular noun, that would not fit Warton’s description of Surrey’s poem; and if lyrics are made, not found (through “lyricization,” the process of treating poetry as lyric), then “lyricization” had already taken place. You might find it even long before print, if you look for it: Marisa Galvez has argued that “modern conceptions of poetry and the poet,” among them the proper function of poets’ names and the idea that poetry “captures the most essential qualities of human nature,” arose in the late medieval uses and transformations of Continental songbooks. Galvez’s study encompasses both the Spanish Archpriest’s implication that he and his book are “an instrument that needs to be played” and an Occitan poet’s insistence that “A mos ops chant e a mos ops flaujol” (For myself alone I sing, and toot my horn).⁴¹

* * *

Yet there is no way to disprove the lyricization thesis, in principle, for the same reason there is no way to disprove certain Freudian claims: all resistance confirms the claim. If you find something before the twentieth century that looks like what we now call lyric—either a single poem, or a critic’s pronouncement—and you adduce it as a counterexample to Prins and Jackson’s contention that “the modern idea of the lyric as a genre . . . emerged and took hold earlier in the twentieth century,” then you have only demonstrated the ubiquity of lyricization: we see it anywhere we look (504). We do not know what is happening in the mind we imagine to have produced, say,

40. Thomas Warton, *History of English Poetry*, 3 vols. (1774–81; repr., New York: Johnson Reprint, 1968), 3:15.

41. Marisa Galvez, *Songbook: How Lyrics Became Poetry in Medieval Europe* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 3, 44, 110.

Astrophil and Stella, and so we cannot prove that we are not reading it anachronistically when we read it as lyric. But we do not know what is happening in anyone's mind, not even if they are standing in front of us. We cannot even know that they have minds, although—as Alan Turing put it tartly in 1950—“instead of arguing continually over this point it is usual to have the polite convention that everyone thinks.”⁴²

Such claims solicit, and receive, sophisticated defenses in philosophy departments (consider Wittgenstein's elaborations on “I know that I am a human being”).⁴³ And yet the view that persons exist, and that we think and feel, is perhaps required if we are to keep on doing literary criticism at all, rather than simply duplicating the work of historians or philosophers. The debate over intention and meaning in general, so active in English departments during the 1980s, may continue forever, but it should not be used as a trump in all our arguments about how to read particular poems or sets of poems—especially not when we have evidence about how people do read them, and about how people read them centuries ago. And the problem with the New Lyric Studies—or rather with the parts to which I object—is not just the general problem of the hermeneutic circle (whose invocation forecloses the gathering of evidence) but what the evidence, once gathered, seems to show: some of the people who wrote and read some poems before 1900, and before 1800, and before 1300, seem to say some of the things about poetry whose dissemination (if not indeed whose origins) Jackson and Prins attribute to twentieth-century academe.

If you have been in this line of work for a while, you may remember Stanley Fish's claim (from “How to Recognize a Poem When You See One,” included in *The Lyric Theory Reader* [1980]) that he could get his students to treat a random roster of names, “Jacobs-Rosenbaum/Levin/Thorne,” as a Renaissance lyric poem (78). *Dickinson's Misery* began with a restaging (as Jackson acknowledged) of Fish's famous stunt, using Dickinson's manuscripts: “how would we recognize a lyric in the lines in figure 5 if we had not seen them first in print, or . . . if we had not already decided that Dickinson wrote poems?”⁴⁴ Jackson was making a point about the authority of inherited (and, perhaps, anachronistic) paradigms, while Fish was making a slightly different point about the authority of communities and institutions: “the paying of a certain kind of attention,” he wrote, “results in the emergence of poetic qualities” (79).

But it does so automatically only if those qualities need not include taste or feeling (aka aesthetic evaluation and affective response). Fish got his stu-

42. Alan Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” *Mind* 49 (1950): 446.

43. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Harper, 1972), 2e.

44. Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*, 32, 246.

dents to interpret “Jacobs-Rosenbaum” as if it were Donne, but he does not say that he got them to like or admire it. “Definitions of poetry are recipes,” Fish continued, “for by directing readers what to look for in a poem, they instruct them in ways of looking that will produce what they expect to see” (80). Actual recipes instruct us in ways of cooking that will produce what we expect to eat; and, like recipes for producing poems (or kinds of poems: odes, mad songs, “lyric”), recipes for food require ingredients, and recipes can fail. One ingredient, recommended by Wordsworth and Yen Yü, has been strong emotion; another, linguistic elements that enable us to imagine a speaking, or singing, voice.

Many medieval and early modern “lyrics” were really sung—they fit extant song forms, as sonnets, and as most modern poems, do not. Why such durable association between song and fictive interiority, musical words and words for the inner life? Hearing words sung is not quite like hearing speech: “the singer’s words are sung for us in that he says something that is also said somehow in extension *by us*,” conjectured Mark Booth in 1981; “we are drawn into . . . the self offered by the song.”⁴⁵ The separation in practice between “lyric” and “lyrics” that has almost, but not quite, taken place when John Donne writes “The Triple Foole” (in which he fears that his poetry will be sung, once it circulates, even against his wishes), holds tenuously or ambiguously even today, when some of us have to tell our well-meaning students, every year, not to write their “Introduction to Poetry” papers on Taylor Swift, but then turn around and try to perform close readings of “Full fathom five” or “Sir Patrick Spens.”⁴⁶

That dilemma reflects the “lyricization” thesis at its most persuasive, where it highlights not how poetry gets read in general but how it gets treated, and why, within English departments. Introductory-level university teaching, with its emphasis on close textual analysis and on imagined speakers, and its lack of historical context except what teachers provide, encourages us to teach all kinds of poetic composition, from Hesiod to Harriette Mullen, as if they were what we call “lyric” now, whether or not the shoe fits (and whether or not the cobbler wanted it there). Conversely, academic publishing exerts pressure in the reverse direction, toward arguments that make new research a prerequisite for basic understanding, and arguments that make the familiar strange.

45. Booth, *Experience of Songs*, 15; on print-era poetry as against words meant for songs, see also 23–24, 90–95. And yet “the separation of poems specifically written from music from the ‘literary lyric’ cannot be made absolute” (Lindley, *Lyric*, 26).

46. On the place of the ballad in poetry pedagogy, see Steve Newman, *Ballad Collection, Lyric, and the Canon: The Call of the Popular from the Restoration to New Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), esp. the introduction and chap. 5.

And yet there are historical and theoretical reasons to keep on using “lyric” as a frame for a large, important and chronologically extended set of poems. We should probably teach our students to do so as well, whether or not they argue (and they may be right) that the most useful definitions of “lyric” ought to include Taylor Swift, or Bob Dylan, or Nas, or Goliardic song. Some changes in the distance between speech and song, between verse analogous to music and verse readily set to actual music, seem integral to the history of “lyric,” the word, as well as to “lyric,” the poetic kind or mode. These changes in the idea of lyric, and in lyrics, reflect larger historical changes, not least the rise of audio recordings; essays about them would merit another book.

Both sung words, and spoken words, imply a human speaker (unless we are in science fiction). Can “lyric poetry . . . provide,” Barbara Johnson asked in 1998, “the assumption that the human *has been* or *can be* defined so that it can then be presupposed without the question of its definition’s [*sic*] being raised?” (316). Johnson follows Paul de Man in implying that the set of modern texts that we call lyric poems solicit bad faith: they claim to be songs and are not songs (299); they claim to provide the same human presence that they snatch away (“the lyric depends entirely for its existence on the denial of phenomenality as the surest means to recover what it denies”), especially but not only when they are elegiac or memorial (301).

If you want to ally yourself with poems that do such things, you will end up—de Man continued—inside “the uneasy combination of funereal monumentality with paranoid fear that characterizes the hermeneutics and the pedagogy of lyric poetry” (302). So lyric poetry is not like sheet music; it is more like a death trap. And if “lyric” is, as de Man kept saying, “not a genre” but a way to avoid genre, not a kind of poetry so much as a way to mystify what poems do, then critics should hold the category at arm’s length in order “to allow for non-comprehension and enumerate non-anthropomorphic, non-elegiac, non-celebratory, non-lyrical, non-poetic, that is to say, prosaic, or, better, *historical* modes of language power” (303). If you want to know how deconstruction could lead to New Historicism in the 1980s, how attention to putative inconsistencies in high-culture poetic texts (attention modeled on Continental philosophy) could lead to the study of other kinds of texts (in ways modeled on social and cultural history), now you know.

Jackson and Prins seem to support de Man. His 1984 essay on Baudelaire (they say) shows that “the lyric is in itself an illusion, a creation of readers who want to believe in it” (271). It is. And so is the value of a dollar; so are punk rock, and the welfare state, and love, and Harvard University. If everyone who believes in them ceased to believe in them, and acted as if they did not exist, they would lose their existence and their function from that day forward, and belong only to history. On the other hand, if you believe in them, they have non-self-contradictory implications and effects; they are at

least as real as Tinkerbell is to Peter.⁴⁷ The more interesting questions are just what you have to believe; whether you believe what I believe; how we can tell; how we came to agree (if, in fact, we agree); and how much we have in common with what readers, at what prior moments, on the basis of what texts, used to believe.

* * *

Apparently, if you want to believe in “lyric,” in the most important current senses for the term, you have to believe that there are persons too. Lyric in the Renaissance, writes Roland Greene, “comes to be seen as the most readily available fictional space” where writers, readers, or listeners may ask, “What is the value of an individual consciousness, of one person’s experience?”⁴⁸ To ask about the boundaries of lyric is to ask (as Turing also asked) what a person is, how we know, and why we care; it is to ask about what Herbert Tucker called “the recreative illusion of character,” evoked not just in dramatic monologue but in the “lyric cries” of earlier and later periods (153). That account of how poems—lyric poems—evoke individuals joins Greene’s and Ferry’s accounts of the sixteenth century, Starr’s account of the eighteenth, and many accounts of Romantics and Victorians (from Abrams and Geoffrey Hartman to Tucker and beyond), up to Albright’s, Johnson’s, Culler’s, Damrosch’s, Grossman’s, Vendler’s, Miner’s, and other accounts of lyric that cross, or ignore, period boundaries.

If lyric lets us ask what people are, and why we might care about them when they are alive, why do its paths so often lead to the grave? (Albright: “lyrical society is composed of the dead.”)⁴⁹ Why has the new importance given to lyric in the Romantic period seemed—to Geoffrey Hartman, to Fowler, to Starr and others—to arise from a mid-eighteenth-century interest in graveyards, inscriptions, and epitaphs?⁵⁰ Why does de Man associate it with the tomb? Why does Seth Lerer discover one more point for the origins of English lyric in “the Anglo-Saxon afterlife,” the cairns of Old English

47. On general arguments about “social construction,” applicable to universities, money, fairies, and—especially—laboratory science, see Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Regarding facts and anachronistic conceptions in literary studies, see also Richard Strier, *Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): ideas cannot be anachronistic or impossible “merely because they are non-hegemonic” (6).

48. Greene, “Lyric,” 225.

49. Albright, *Lyricality*, 171.

50. See Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays, 1958–1970* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 207 (inscriptions) and 210–12 (epitaphs and graves); and Joshua Scodel, *The English Poetic Epitaph* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), esp. chap. 12.

speakers in a French-ruled land? (107).⁵¹ Why do lyric poetry and memorial elegy (“elegy” in the contemporary sense) seem so closely allied?⁵²

We can say, putting all these views together, that lyric poetry disembodies and that it tries to construct a new, acoustic or verbal, body. When the poetic “I” speaks of itself—as Starr put it, writing about the eighteenth-century lyric—“bodies disappear.”⁵³ Lyric, in the term’s central, durable senses, tends or aspires to replace the live, mortal, present body of one person present in one place at one time (the body of the poet or the body of the reader or the body of the singer or the body of somebody who has been addressed) with something else (impressions or inscriptions or spirits or memorials or “poetic artifice”), by means of a variety of forms and tropes, to a variety of emotive ends (commemoration, ecstatic joy, frustration, thanksgiving, reflection, and so on).⁵⁴ No wonder that contemporary theorists and practitioners of lyric from Terrance Hayes to Maria Negroni liken lyric to a vampire, a speaking corpse, “wind in a box”; no wonder the concept refuses to die.⁵⁵

This disembodiment, this artful, expressive replacement, either works, or it does not; either it makes good on whatever promise it implies, or it does not. Anne Ferry, writing on Sidney and Shakespeare, observed that the subtlest lyric could highlight “the inescapable difference between inward states and their rendering in language.”⁵⁶ Other skeptics have been less subtle, or less generous to what readers thought that poets did.

Jackson and Prins sometimes make mistakes about history; more often they just sound like skeptics. They also locate poetry, and its critics, wholly and strangely within the academy. But the tools that make us into fluent readers of poetry, readers who trust one another’s observations about how a poem works or what it does—and tools that make a few of us, in turn, able to write poems that others remember—are not like the tools of Physics 1 or French A; they are more like the tools of French for Conversation, or the habits acquired by native or near-native users of French or Thai or American Sign Language, which has its own poetry too. (Is that poetry “lyric”?)

51. On Old English lyric as “lyric” in a strong sense, see Lois Bragg, *The Lyric Speakers of Old English Poetry* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991).

52. On the critical history of the modern (memorial or funereal) elegy, see esp. Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Jahan Ramazani, *The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Harding to Heaney* (University of Chicago Press, 1994).

53. Starr, *Lyric Generations*, 75.

54. Greene, “Lyric,” 225.

55. Terrance Hayes, *Wind in a Box* (New York: Penguin, 2006); Maria Negroni, *Dark Museum*, trans. Michelle Gil-Montero (Notre Dame, IN: Action, 2015), 9–10.

56. Anne Ferry, *The “Inward” Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 250. For another theory of lyric as an attempt to represent the unrepresentable “inner” self, see Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford University Press, 2000).

And those habits of liking poetry, of comprehending poetry as an art form, even of writing critically about it, need not come from academe; they did not for William Blake, nor do they, today, for many admirers of Saul Williams, or Patricia Lockwood, or Lorde, or Audre Lorde.⁵⁷

Something called poetry, and something called lyric, in some ways resembling earlier poems also called “lyric,” takes place—gets composed, admired, and discussed—both within and outside academe. That has been the case since before the founding of departments of literature, and what looks like “lyric” was also made long before that.⁵⁸ *The Lyric Theory Reader*, taken all in all, implies as much, even though its editors say otherwise. And lyric seems likely to go on being made. The *Reader* does well to set “classic” pieces of academic criticism, from many competing schools, alongside recent critics on recent poems; but almost all those recent critics speak of, and to, a post-avant-garde, grounded in radical modernism and skeptical of any lyric tradition labeled as such. Most of them are critics, such as Nealon, Drew Milne, and the Marjorie Perloff of the 1980s, who have asked contemporary poets to reject whatever “lyric” means. What if the anthology had included more critics (besides those already quoted, perhaps James Longenbach, Bonnie Costello, Robert von Hallberg, Clare Cavanagh, Kevin Young) who sought to clarify or preserve it?

Without contraries is no progression; let Culler’s, or Warton’s, or Albright’s, claim—that “lyric” has almost always been with us in some form, even if it is not called by that name; even if it does not dominate every literary period where it occurs—stand as the contrary, or the antithesis, to the New Lyric Studies’ claim that “lyricization” occludes the categories and the ways of reading of even the recent past. Can we have, now, a synthesis? What could it accomplish? Is this ambitious, admirable, yet partial anthology the best that we can do?

57. For decidedly nonacademic, but very seriously intended, criticism of modern poetry (along with present-day song lyrics and much else), see the crowdsourced annotations and mini-essays at the website genius.com.

58. On the origin of those departments, see, generally, James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton University Press, 2014); and also Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000).