

Reviews

JONATHAN CULLER, *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015. Pp. xii + 391. \$39.95.

In his Preface to *Theory of the Lyric*, Jonathan Culler notes that the seed from which his ambitious new book developed was a 1975 essay on the figure of apostrophe, “in which [he] argued that this strange habit of address was central to the lyric tradition.” And again, “My early work on lyric address provides the foundation for the broader, more comprehensive investigation that I undertake here” (pp. vii, viii). It is a curious admission on the author’s part, suggesting as it does that what is probably the most original and useful of the seven chapters in *Theory of the Lyric* (chapter 5) was conceived more than forty years ago. Is the backward look of the apostrophe chapter an aberration, or is anachronism a problem throughout?

In defining what lyric is and does, Culler repeatedly submits to critique what he takes to be “the dominant model in the pedagogy of the lyric in the Anglo-American world,” namely the notion that lyric is the “representation of the action of a fictional speaker: in this account, the lyric is spoken by a persona, whose situation and motivation one needs to reconstruct” (p. 2). Here Culler seems to be thinking of the New Critical distinction, made by critics like Reuben Brower, Cleanth Brooks, and W. K. Wimsatt, between poet and speaker—the notion that the speaker is to be understood as an invented character, by no means the “real” poet—as well as of such classic studies of the lyric genre as Robert Langbaum’s *Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Random House, 1957); Meyer Abrams’s “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric” (in *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965]); and Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s two early books, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968), and *On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978). Half a century later, this dramatic theory of the lyric is by no means *the*—or even *a*—dominant model, not

only because theory has moved elsewhere but also because our own poetry is no longer primarily concerned with the invention of lyric personae. On the contrary, as Virginia Jackson makes clear in her synoptic essay on the history of *lyric* for the new edition of the PEEP (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, Fourth Edition*, ed. Roland Greene, et al. [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2012]), given that, in our day, the categories *lyric* and *poetry* are used almost synonymously (the other members of the conventional triad, narrative and dramatic poetry, being all but obsolete), neither Romantic expressivist theory nor the dramatic paradigm of the post-World War II era any longer seem adequate.

Culler is quite aware of theories like Jackson's own: Jackson argues that the term *lyric* may well refer to the way we read a given poem rather than to its inherent nature. He also takes up, mainly to criticize them, the theories of Paul de Man and Theodor Adorno. But although Culler does reject the romantic expressivist model, his own theory of the lyric, as outlined in chapter 3, is a modified Hegelianism. In Hegel's *Aesthetics*, poetry (lyric) is, in Culler's words, distinguished by "the centrality of subjectivity coming to consciousness of itself through experience and reflection" (p. 92). But it is not just a *cri de coeur*: poetry, as Hegel puts it, is "the absolute and true art of the spirit and its expression as spirit, since everything that consciousness conceives and shapes spiritually within its own inner being speech alone can adopt, express, and bring before our imagination" (p. 93). The key word here is "imagination": although Hegel does hold that prosody contributes to the intensification of a given poem's subjectivity, he subordinates the role of language to the larger category of imaginative transformation: the role of "spirit" is to universalize individual feeling so as to bring it into a timeless realm of truth.

As such, Hegelianism becomes somewhat grandiose; a valuable corrective, Culler suggests, may be found in the theory of Käte Hamburger (in *Die Logik der Dichtung* [Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1977]), who argues that the lyric "I" must be understood not as the voice of the biographical person, but as linguistic function: the lyric poet uses language so as to make the experience recorded seem as *real* as possible, even if it is largely invented (pp. 107–8). Thus lyric is not merely personal expression, but neither is it—and here Culler comes back to his critique of Herrnstein Smith—*fictive utterance*, an imitation speech act (pp. 113–20). Following Hamburger, Culler posits that "the subjectivity at work in the lyric is a formal principle of unity more than the consciousness of a given individual" (p. 350). Add to this—and here Culler draws on Roland Greene—that the lyric is distinguished by its

“*ritualistic* dimension. . . the principle of iterability—lyrics are constructed for repetition—along with a certain ceremoniousness” (pp. 122–23). “Lyric, I conclude,” says Culler, “involves a tension between ritualistic and fictional elements” (p. 7); it is, moreover, a genre that has remained intact from classical poetry to the present.

So how do lyrics, chosen without regard for historical and geographical boundaries, display this tension? In chapter 1, “An Inductive Approach,” Culler chooses nine poems for discussion: Sappho’s “Ode to Aphrodite,” Horace’s Ode 1.5 (“*Quis multa gracilis te puer in rosa . . .*”), the opening sonnet in Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s “Heidenröslein,” Giacomo Leopardi’s “L’infinito,” Charles Baudelaire’s “A une passante,” Federico García Lorca’s “La luna asoma,” William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow,” and John Ashbery’s “This Room.” Only two of these nine poems were written in English, so that rhyme and rhythm, diction and syntax, and even the poems’ tropes and rhetorical figures are at least partially occluded for those of Culler’s readers who cannot make out the original. The use of non-English models is intentional, Culler’s aim being to analyze not what Roman Jakobson called *poeticity*—language in its poetic function—much less thematic content, but the lyric as genre, as a particular structure. In practice what this means—and Culler is best in dealing with classical forms—is concentration on modes of enunciation, the relation of speaker to addressee, the latter possibly being an animal, vegetable, or inanimate object. Indeed, Culler observes, in both Sappho’s and Horace’s otherwise quite unlike odes, “the intricacy of the apostrophic gesture and, in Sappho’s case, the embedded proso-popoeia (making the addressee [Aphrodite] speak) prevent the poems from being adequately read as a fictional imitation of a real-world speech act, but of course the first does produce a speaker-character named Sappho and the second gives us an ‘I’ whose judgments are presented as wisdom” (p. 19).

Here is the focus on apostrophe that will pervade Culler’s book. Even in the case of Goethe’s famous “folk” ballad “Heidenröslein,” whose third-person narrative contains no reference to a lyric “I,” the evocation of the rose in the refrain (“Röslein, Röslein, Röslein, rot / Röslein auf der Heiden”) is a form of address, which “disrupts narrative and bring it back to a present of discourse” (p. 24). “The reader, invited to repeat the refrain, finds him- or herself in the position of the ‘Knabe’ [youth] who addresses the rose, and the poem produces the result that the rose predicts: you will always think of me” (p. 24). Again then, it is the use of apostrophe that draws the reader into the lyric construct.

But is this the most distinctive feature of Goethe's modern ballad? In making this case—"This is a lyric where it would be pointless to ask who is speaking or in what circumstances" (p. 24)—Culler curiously ignores the poem's deep irony. The third stanza, rhyming *abaab*, followed by the refrain, reads: "Und der wilde Knabe brach / 's Röslein auf der Heiden; / Röslein wehrte sich und stach, / Half ihm doch kein Weh und Ach, / Mußt es eben leiden" (p. 22). Culler uses the translation of David Wellbery: "And the wild youth broke / The little rose on the heath; / Little rose resisted and pricked, / But no 'woe' and 'oh' helped her, / She just had to suffer it" (p. 23). This translation not only diminishes what Culler calls the ritualistic element, since Wellbery uses neither Goethe's alternating 4- and 3-stress ballad lines nor the rhyme of the original, but—more important—the translation makes a crucial error. "*Ihm*" in line 4 is the masculine pronoun—*him*—as opposed to *ihr* (feminine). "But no 'woe' and 'oh' helped her" is thus simply wrong. The fifth line omits the pronoun, so that "just had to suffer it" refers back to "him." In other words, in a twist on the more familiar ballad theme—the death of the rose—here it is *she* who has the last word, retaliating for the youth's "plucking" with a deadly prick—a prick whose consequences he must suffer. In its third incarnation, accordingly, the refrain takes on a very different meaning.

Culler, as we know from the emphatic statement in his Introduction, wants to theorize lyric without resorting to hermeneutics; "it would be beneficial for literary studies and for the fortunes of poetry generally if all other ways of engaging with poems were not subordinated to interpretation" (p. 5). He is right, I believe, to argue that criticism too often tries to determine what a poem "says" rather than what it *is*, formally and structurally. But can one merely separate form from meaning? The brilliance of Goethe's ballad, it seems to me, is precisely a function of seemingly minor verbal and syntactic adjustments, which complicate and enrich its overt narrative.

Indeed, to discuss poetic devices like apostrophe and hyperbole, without concern for verbal nuance and syntactic or phonemic function, makes for some rather simplistic readings of canonical poems. In the case of William Blake's "The Tyger," Culler analyzes the "charm-rhythm, the language of incantation, invocation," arguing that the "interpretive efforts" to understand the poem may well be misguided, being as they are "in some measure the product of a desire to justify the hold that such strange rhythmic sequences have on us" (p. 142). But surely—and common-sensically—the greatness of Blake's poem is a function of the way those incantatory rhythms are used to articulate a marvelously complex response to the very existence, in our world, of

the exotic, frightening, and deeply symbolic animal known in English as “tiger.”

A further difficulty has to do with Culler’s assumption, never really argued, that the lyric is essentially a short, self-contained poetic form. Brief mention is given to the lyric sequence, as in the case of the sonnet cycle, but Culler’s conception of lyric does not allow for the crucial role of context. Commenting on the “spatial disposition” of Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow,” Culler calls this minimalist poem “an unorthodox, unfinished version of the poem of praise,” a “poem of notation, recording a minor epiphany” (pp. 31–32). But in its original publication, “So much depends . . .” was not titled “The Red Wheelbarrow”; it was #XXII of the long prose-verse sequence *Spring and All*, which is by no means “unfinished,” culminating as it does in the “Black-eyed Susan” (#XXVII). Again, Williams’s poems are almost always defined by their place in particular sequences, juxtaposition and context being crucial.

Indeed, the focus on lyric as short poem means that T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*—arguably the two most important poems in English of the twentieth century—are never so much as mentioned. *The Waste Land* has been called a collage; it has narrative passages as well as satiric ones, but its larger movement is certainly that of lyric, as is that of a Pound Canto like #3: “I sat on the Dogana steps / For the gondolas cost too much, that year.” And what about Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, Blaise Cendrars’s *La Prose du Transsibérien*, Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, Louis Zukofsky’s “Eighty Flowers,” George Oppen’s *Of Being Numerous*, Susan Howe’s *Therow*? How do we designate these texts, which are central to any study of twentieth-century poetry?

Indeed, as we progress through the century, Culler’s paradigm—the short first-person poem, embodying a complex enunciatory apparatus and forms of iteration—becomes less and less central to poetic discourse. Ashbery’s own favorite among his poems—*Three Poems*—is written in prose. The first “long poem” in Susan Howe’s *The Quarry* is an essay shading into lyric at crucial points. The Brazilian poet Augusto de Campos, who just won the Neruda Prize for his concrete poetry, currently on exhibit in the SESC Pompeia museum in São Paulo, produces visual poems that can be animated by digital means or shown as videos. If all these works are regarded as somehow not meeting the criteria for lyric, what kind of poetry do they constitute?

Culler could respond that his survey covers classical as well as modern lyric exemplars from every century before the twentieth. But even in the nineteenth, from which Culler draws so many of his

examples, we have Baudelaire's prose poems in *Spleen de Paris* and Arthur Rimbaud's *Illuminations*. In the end, the avowedly ahistorical approach of *Theory of the Lyric* cannot account for much that is most significant in poetry. Perhaps it would have been more fruitful, after all, to focus on *language* rather than on modes of enunciation and to relate figures like hyperbole to what it is that is being exaggerated—in short, to a given poem's meaning.

Even in the case of nursery rhyme, which Culler takes up in his fairly pro-forma chapter on "Rhythm and Repetition," sound cannot be isolated from semantics. Consider the Mother Goose lyric "Little Boy Blue": "Little Boy Blue, come blow your horn. / The sheep's in the meadow, the cow's in the corn. / Where is the boy that looks after the sheep? / 'Under the haycock, fast asleep.'" Citing the first couplet, Culler comments: "the rhyme horn/corn makes *corn* seem right; the parallelism between sheep and cow, and the fact that *Blue* of 'Little Boy Blue' is the past tense of *blow*, all bolster the poem's ability to deafen us to the illogic of its claim about the sheep, since the meadow seems a fine place for a sheep" (p. 185). The pun on "blue" is certainly significant. But the "illogic" that Culler speaks of is dispelled in the second couplet, which calls the order of the first into question. The meadow *is* a fine place for sheep, but the little shepherd is unaccountably sleeping. The emphatic rhythm of "*Under the háycóck*," followed by a caesura, underscores the surprise of the response. Children—at least this was the case with my children—love this little riddling stanza. Why is this little blue boy sleeping?

Theory of the Lyric is a learned book; it covers a great deal of ground and testifies to Culler's familiarity both with an astonishing variety of lyric poems in a number of languages as well as the major theories put forward over the past half-century. His discussion of classical, Renaissance, and romantic poems is useful, if not especially new. But, when it comes to the poetry of the long twentieth century, Culler's lyric theory puts him in the position of giving pride of place to Gerard Manley Hopkins and Robert Frost rather than the revolution in poetry we associate with Eliot and Pound, Stevens and Williams, Gertrude Stein, H. D., and Mina Loy, as well as their European counterparts. Non-narrative, non-dramatic, and yet not fully "lyric" poetry: what is its place?

MARJORIE PERLOFF
 Stanford University
 University of Southern California