***Theory of the Lyric*. Jonathan Culler. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015. Pp. 416 (cloth).**

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Theory of the Lyric: that is to say, neither *the* theory nor *a* theory. The fruit of many years' thinking, Jonathan Culler's impressive new study reflects, rightly, upon what it means to theorise that slippery but compelling thing called lyric. Or to theorise those countless, disparate things which have at some point been called lyrics. Do we begin with a set of criteria—brevity, subjective expression, rhyme and rhythm—and then decide that this poem is in, that poem out? Or do we begin with a set of unambiguous instances, of canonized lyrics, and then from them derive a concept, the idea of the lyric as such? Culler's first chapter takes this second approach; it moves inductively. It traces an arc through nine poems—by Sappho, Horace, Petrarch, Goethe, Leopardi, Baudelaire, Lorca, Williams, and Ashbery—and then, reviewing this material, it proposes four "parameters": lyric as voicing, lyric as event, lyric as ritual, and lyric as hyperbole. These parameters recur throughout *Theory of the Lyric*, tested by many other poems and tried against a series of major theories. But much as Culler is committed to his parameters, the chapter also demonstrates and critiques an approach. Culler thinks about the legitimacy and the limits of an inductive solution to the relation of universal and particular, in the field of literary theory and with regard to the problem of genre, by watching it at work. This is the great virtue of Culler's study, that it is always operating at multiple levels, that it offers both a theory of the lyric and a meditation on such theories.

To this end, subsequent chapters in *Theory of the Lyric* weigh the most influential attempts to define and to understand lyric poetry in the Western tradition, from Plato to Hegel, Longinus to Frye, Mill to Adorno. Culler's accounts are models of good, even-handed sense, and even when he is most critical—as for instance in objecting to the historicism of Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins—he allows that important lessons have been learned. In necessary counterpoint, the book also ranges across the history of lyric itself, spanning some two and a half millennia. This, too, is a Western canon, as Culler freely admits. He gives considerable attention to Greek and Roman poetry in the Greek and in the Latin, there are excursions into French, German, Italian, and Spanish poetry, and many of his examples are British and American poems in English. At

one point he scans some verses from "The Message", the 1982 smash hit by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. But there are no love poems from ancient Egypt, no songs from the *Shijing*, no ghazals by Rūmī or Ḥāfiẓ, no lüshi by Du Fu or Li Po. This choice, too, is a consequence of the practical and conceptual difficulties involved in the task at hand. We must derive our "generalities" from "a sufficient / phalanx of particulars", Ezra Pound once said, paraphrasing Aristotle, but too large a phalanx would disband into a rabble.[1]

The problem with canons and traditions, imposing their geographical, cultural, and political centres, is also one of scale, and that is a problem for genre itself. In his second chapter, "Lyric as Genre", Culler defends his very choice of subject. The "broader category, *poetry*, has a long history but is too broad to be of much use", he suggests.[2] And when instead we dispense with lyric and focus on specific subgenres—the ode, the elegy, the sonnet, the villanelle—we find that "no established array of lyric genres" presents itself. The subgenres proliferate endlessly and without logical relation, as we struggle to account for yet more poems: "pastoral, praise poem, lover's complaint, valediction, hymn, epithalamion", and so on, ad infinitum (*TL* 88). More persuasive than Culler's preference for lyric over poetry or aubade, is his thoughtful consideration of the nature and utility of all such categories. Any account of a genre, he counsels, must be both historical and theoretical. "As historical categories, genres have a dual orientation, diachronic and synchronic, toward a historical tradition and toward a function in the cultural system of a particular historical period" (*TL* 47). So in part *Theory of the Lyric* offers a defence of the idea of genre, against the worst excesses of empirical literary studies. Lyric is a historical rather than a transcendental category, but thinking about lyric allows us to read Theognis in relation to Maya Angelou. This "both highlights features that might otherwise be neglected or obscured and brings out similarities and differences that are crucial both for poets and for readers" (*TL* 89). It is by no means the only important strategy for reading these poems, but it is, for Culler, essential to our pleasure in and understanding of them.

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[1] Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1996), p. 461.

[2] Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 87. Hereafter abbreviated *TL*.

Pleasure and understanding, moreover, do not mean interpretation. "Poetics and hermeneutics may be difficult to separate in practice", Culler writes, "but in theory they are quite distinct" (*TL* 5). Until the twentieth century, engaging with a lyric poem did not mean puzzling over the text in order to tease out its implications and complications. For Culler, the contemporary critical compulsion to generate ever-new interpretations is a historical anomaly. Earlier readers would instead "parse, imitate, translate, memorize, evaluate, or identify allusions and rhetorical or prosodic strategies"; they could "acquire knowledge of the tradition and develop considerable expertise and power of discrimination"; but they had no need to seize upon surprising new meanings. Culler recognises that lyrics do "demand careful attention", but he argues that the recent and peculiar dominance of hermeneutics has obscured the many other important ways in which we might engage with lyric poems. In this he aims, gently but firmly, to redirect the energies and reframe the values of contemporary scholarship and pedagogy. As an exercise in poetics, *Theory of the Lyric* seeks not ingenious interpretation but supple description.

What sorts of generalities, then, should structure the descriptions prompted by a theory of the lyric? Culler is quick to reject the notion of definitive essences or of general laws which every lyric simply obeys. Instead he refers to his four parameters as "parameters of variation" (*TL* 38). Rather than "a set of necessary features or invariants", they represent common possibilities and propensities. Elsewhere Culler essays other theoretical models, other forms of generality or universal. He is particularly interested in the tension between the ritualistic and the fictional, for instance. This is the difference between thinking of lyric as epideictic discourse—offering praise and blame, establishing shared values—and thinking of lyric as "the fictional imitation of a real-world speech act" (*TL* 7). On the one hand, lyric is an event; on the other, lyric is the representation of an event. The classic form of the latter is the dramatic monologue, and because this fictional model so dominates the criticism and the teaching of lyric poetry, Culler eagerly stresses the importance of ritual, which animates lyric's rhythms and its structure of address, and which gives lyric the authority to bestow praise, lay blame, and tell the truth. But ultimately what matters is the tension between the two; they are "forces rather than a continuum on which poems are situated" (*TL* 263).

Something more like that continuum is the case with Frye's famous distinction between *melos* and *opsis*, babble and doodle, charm and riddle, sound patterning and visual or semantic patterning. Culler offers a sympathetic account of Frye's theory, which can be used to map lyric subgenres and to locate particular poems, but he also cautions that the opposition is unequal: *melos* is fundamental to lyric, *opsis* is not. So, though there are no necessary features, there are "fundamental underlying structure[s] of lyric" (*TL* 259). Chief amongst these are rhythm and repetition, the subject of Culler's fourth chapter, and indirect or triangulated address, the subject of the fifth, an expanded and revised version of Culler's seminal essay on apostrophe, first published in *diacritics* in 1977. Here, the "root-form of presentation for lyric" is "address to the reader by means of address to something or someone else" (*TL* 186). Though apostrophe is by no means essential, indirect address is fundamental. Even when a poem hails no bird or petitions no beloved, indirect address "takes the form of an underlying convention" (*TL* 259). That is to say, in the historically determined tradition of lyric, such generalities are sufficiently strong to be present even in their apparent absence. Thus, in sampling the history of Western lyric and the history of Western lyric theory, and in proposing his own parameters and common possibilities, Culler is careful to consider how best to conceive each generality and what sorts of reading it encourages: the pleasures and the insights it opens up.

There is much that is familiar in Culler's patient accounts of rhythm and repetition and of lyric address, as there is in later chapters on distinctive lyric structures such as hyperbole and the present tense, and on the complex relations between lyric and society. The discussion of metre, for example, offers an elegant summary first of the difference between French and English prosodies, and then of the quarrel between classical scansion and Derek Attridge's more recent prosodic theory. This, too, is a consequence of the book's double function: at once an argument about the lyric and a survey of previous arguments. And when Culler turns to read particular poems, in order to exhibit or test a given argument, the results are frequently excellent. One might quibble at his suggestion that "The Red Wheelbarrow" has no "regular metrical scheme" (*TL* 31) and that Williams's lineation "prompts readers to treat each line as if it were a breath group and to pause" (*TL* 163). (That is certainly not how Williams

reads the poem.)[3] But Culler's discussion of verbal rhythm in Hopkins's "The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo" moves winningly from deft analysis of alliteration to broader reflection on the compelling effects of such "energetic play", of the "proliferation of echoing signs", even when a poem's content or message seems slight, trite, or unsympathetic (*TL* 180).

Moreover, *Theory of the Lyric* does have a strong argument to make, and it is one which raises good new questions, perhaps especially for readers of modern poetry. Culler insists that the popular notion of lyric as the representation of a fictional utterance mistakes a relatively minor part of the tradition, epitomised by the dramatic monologue, for the whole of that tradition. Instead, most lyric poems offer "statements with real illocutionary force, seeking to persuade listeners to take a particular view of an issue or problem" (*TL* 121). In making this argument central, Culler puts to the side the rather tired problem of the lyric subject, especially as a reflection of the bourgeois ideology of the individual. For Culler, lyric is a genre directly engaged with social and political realities, engaged in ways that the epic or the novel cannot be. *Les Fleurs du mal* thus offers "a distinctive vision of the world—not a fictional universe but our world, in all its grim and seductive nefariousness" (*TL* 124). Lyric registers what Badiou calls the passion for the real. If we are accustomed to reading the history of modern poetry as a deconstruction of the putatively unified lyric subject, *Theory of the Lyric* suggests instead that we might reconsider that history in terms of lyric's ritual authority. The problem motivating experiments by the Objectivists or the Negritude movement would then be the generic propensity to pronounce authoritatively; the responsibility involved in praising, blaming, and telling truths is at once an opportunity and an anxiety. This emphasis on lyric authority also offers a new approach to longer works. If we usually read *Paterson* and *The Maximus Poems* in terms of epic, and if the temptation has been to read shorter works such as *The Waste Land* or *Briggflatts* as "pocket epics", we could instead look for fundamental lyric structures in the longer poems of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. After all, *The Cantos*—"the songs"—is nothing if not an attempt to persuade readers with an illocutionary force, and often in a heightened ritual mode.

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[3] Hear, for instance, Williams's recording of the poem, made on 9 January 1942: https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Williams-WC/01_Columbia-Univ_01-09-42/Williams-WC_01_The-Red-Wheelbarrow_Columbia-Univ_01-09-42.mp3.

Early in *Theory of the Lyric*, Culler acknowledges that the very idea of genre can seem opposed to modern aesthetics. "What we value in literature is the singularity of a literary work", he writes, "and to expect it to conform to the conventions of a genre or to approach it through the lens of genre is to aim at something other than its distinctive literariness" (*TL* 41). So in moving into modernity we confront not simply changes in the forms and the meanings of lyric, but changes in the value of lyric as a category shaping the ways poets write and the ways their audiences read. In discussing a modern poem, Culler often highlights the work's antagonistic relation to the genre. Kenneth Koch's poems "mock" the "pretensions" of apostrophe by addressing a preposterous array of addressees: My Fifties, Jewishness, The Roman Forum, Psychoanalysis, and Orgasms (*TL* 212). In "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island", Frank O'Hara "gives us a comic version of the aubade" (*TL* 237). But much more interesting, and much less comfortable for contemporary criticism, is the thought that a work by Langston Hughes or Andrea Brady might assume an authority to speak about this world, our world, and that such a work's capacity to compel interest and even assent depends upon its rhythm.

The other troubling consequence of Culler's conception of lyric as "a ritualistic form with occasional fictional elements", is that its power to work in the world, to establish values, to critique the status quo, "may ultimately depend upon some sort of catchiness or memorability" (*TL* 336-7). Without recourse to sales figures and statistical analyses of rates of quotation, catchiness can be difficult to get to grips with critically. But *Theory of the Lyric* suggests that the effort would be worth while, not least because catchiness is politically indifferent. Think of the great lines: "A terrible beauty is born", "I will show you fear in a handful of dust", "What thou lovest well remains, / the rest is dross". For all that criticism, after Adorno, might locate modern lyric's utopian urge in the compromised autonomy of its form, Culler argues that, in order to fulfil that urge, lyrics must also "establish themselves as memorable"; they must "live as poems" in the popular imagination. But that means that Eliot and Plath have a better chance of "bringing into play their critical edge" than Louis Zukofsky or M. NourbeSe Philip. This does not mean a simple division between traditional and experimental poetry. It does mean we could think again about how, in comparison to Pindar and Petrarch, modernist and late modernist poetry sometimes exploits and sometimes resists memorability, and why.