

*Chicago Review*; Chicago; Fall 1997; Michael Heller;

**Volume:** 43  
**Issue:** 4  
**Start Page:** 66-76  
**ISSN:** 00093696  
**Subject Terms:** Poetry  
Literary

**Abstract:**

*Heller discusses the importance of lyric poetry. The function of lyric is that it exceeds or modifies the very condition it arises from. A reading of the poem "At the Muse's Tomb" is offered.*

**Full Text:**

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Translating the language of things into that of humans entails not only translating silence into audibility; it means translating the nameless into the name. -Walter Benjamin

One of my close friends, also a worker in the mine fields of the poetic, says to me "the lyric is dead." I cannot but agree, if by lyric we mean that private self-regarding effusion of language, that romantic mea culpa by which a world is nostalgically recalled, privileged and measured against what is. Likewise, I would emphatically add, poetry is dead or at least dying out of a swoon of novelty if it subscribes too closely to those collocations of contemporary thought we call theory or cultural studies, studies which invoke other nostalgias for certainty, for "rightness," for order.

Another way of putting this might be: the lyric is dead primarily as it reinforces a masked ideology, including the myth about the "myth of the personal." But, as well, the typical critique that the lyric is "subjective" ought to be juxtaposed against the sub-rosa reality, more difficult to enunciate in the face of avant-garde tribalism (do we know of anything more tribal, more nationalistic than the poetic clique?), which reminds us that poetic bandwagons are never merely matters of aesthetics, indeed, may involve many more "subjective" dimensions than we'd care to explicate.

What can be stated concerning the theory- or philosophically driven work is that it is clearly a product of statism and would-be statism, what Deleuze and Guattari point out in *Towards a Minor Literature* as those "styles or genres or literary movements, even very small ones, [which] have only one single dream: to assume a major function in language, to offer themselves as a sort of state language, [an] official language." On the grounds Deleuze and Guattari are making, the lyric as judged by a post-modern mentality, can never be sufficiently political; it is not doing a man's job, lifting the weight off the masses, creating utopias, etc.

But a case can be made that, in this century, this is precisely the lyric's strength, that strictly speaking, the lyric is neither a product of thought nor of intention but rather comes as a recognition of a gap or rupture in one's thought and intention. (My use of the impersonal singular pronoun is meant to suggest that the lyric qua lyric has no hope of ever becoming a kind of group-think.)

Casting the lyric against other poetic forms, one finds something that is more than merely interesting. narrative mode, the rhetorical mode and the gnomic mode, even the purely private or expressive mode of the lyric (with its hidden ideological baggage) as well, have a kind of self-sufficiency. The reader participates by wandering around the entities created by such forms. Indeed, a form is erected that in some way does not depend on a reader-as in the case of story, a form which, even as it wants hearers, is ultimately enclosed and folded in on itself. Not so much interactive as presentational. The self-containment of such forms, the polished-egg quality of either story or poetico-logical structure may already seem anachronistic when set against the polyvalent and even fuzzy operations of the mind. And the old romantic lyric, especially that poetic trace of delicate impressions caught on the wing, now strikes the reader as orotund and even unsympathetic to contemporary awareness and consciousness.

So we must admit that if we are to talk positively of a lyric moment, of a moment for the lyric, we must acknowledge that while presenting itself as something gathered out of the flux of existence itself, it is no



more free of the contingent, the historical or philosophical than any other form of life or thought. And yet, the function of lyric, and by implication poetry's first principle, is that it exceeds or modifies the very conditions it arises from. Even in the minims of speech or figure, it is always the unplanned, unaccountable supplement. And like a pebble dropped from eternity, it offers itself, in a limited and privileged way, to our curiosity, our inspection. That is why, in speaking of the lyric, the guiding principle for the poet is recognition as opposed to production. I am thinking here of the linguistic philosopher Emile Benveniste's thought that "language is so organized that it permits each speaker to appropriate to himself an entire language by designating himself as I." The poet trains in attentive recognition of such an appropriation, in one sense, because what he or she finds represents the actual objectivities of language, its history and inheritances. But language is also an otherness and does not immediately give us, in its traditions and collective knowledge, an account of our experience. It is this otherness which produces lyric activity with its previously unaccountable tries and assays.

On this basis, I would maintain, there is a place for the lyric, not so much in self-presentation but in a recognition of what, in language, is peculiar to the lyric. The initial moment of lyric production is also, in its refusal of language's history and in its embrace of its otherness, the point of radical undoing, the unaccountable (let us admit, the most personal) trope by which the creative and the resistant impulses are expressed. Because the lyric has no adherence to a priori doctrine, because it is not a pre-thought-out technique or modality, no one, least of all the poet caught in its activity, can predict the form of a lyric utterance. It remains "original," even while subject to the hidden mythos of lyric production and the subterranean mysticisms by which ideologies infuse thought and practice.

Let us go further. If lyric's peculiarity is held in view, wouldn't it be the case that all attempts at keeping the lyric mode alive, or of restoring it, are attempts at recognizing and communicating a particular kind of intersubjectivity? Lyric, as I am thinking of it here, is undoing, opening, un-finishing (uncompleting) the overt or stated concept, logic or discourse which had been deemed finished. It is undoing openly and in print; it is exposure of what is not received idea, not theory, i.e. of what may even just be foolishness and embarrassment. It is radically anti-agenda-driven in that any project which the lyric might undertake can never be something proven or confirmed. It can only be attempted, and that attempt must be made with as full a knowledge of the poetic environment of one's times as is possible. The "intersubjective" lyric must be based on the fullest foundation.

One aspect of "intersubjectivity" revolves around the notion of representation, a term now used almost pejoratively in postmodern discourse. But one could argue (as does Gillian Rose in *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*) that the mode we call representation—the mode perceived as the enemy by post-modern thought—is that mode which creates the conditions not for recognition but for misrecognition. A representation in this sense, since it is always a reduction of all possible elements that are contained in what is being represented, can only be misread. And in this sense, representation can be the central engine by which social and political values and their mystifications might be perceived and acted upon. On the plane of artistic production and tradition, every work of art expresses a hunger for completion by that which has been left out. Or, as Guy Davenport puts it in his beautiful essay, "The Artist as Critic": "A work of art wants to know what it is." Playing on Matthew Arnold's well-known remark, poetry is criticism of life, we might also read this backwards: the lyric which is necessarily a fractionated composition provides life, inversely, with a criticism of poetry. Certainly these two acts of criticism are a good part of the artist's life.

Representation in the sense I'm using it here requires closure to operate. Closure not as the cutting off of thought but as its starting point. Which means that the poet risks making a statement, presenting a version of a state of affairs, so that the poetic object, or as Zukofsky might say, the object's "rested totality" can be contemplated. And found wanting, the basis of further production. A composition must end in order to be a composition. On the other hand, the perpetual frisson of post-modern poetics, its anti-closural bias, which attempts to deliver its reader into a freedom of linguistic signification relies on an old idea—an old 1960s leftist idea one wants to say-of *jouissance* by which the reader is delivered from the State, but, alas, the State remains after the trailing off, the letdown into the prosaic, the non-closure closure from the free-floating signifiers. And often there is no connecting analytical thread between the pleasure of language and the oppressions of modern life. One's high derived from a kind of soma-language holds one even further out of touch than the excrescences of the self-absorbed lyric poet.



Another kind of lyricism is in order. Baudelaire had a formula for poetry which he described as "poetry within history." The phrase is suggestive to me of a rhythm to things, to time and event, to which poetry is receptive, a rhythm-and this is the key point-which lies outside or athwart the rhythm of historical description, discourse or logic. A rhythm which lies outside of the precincts of "theory" as well. By this I mean a poetics, a lyric poetics, which can not be mastered by rationality.

Baudelaire often tried to find this poetry by means of the proscribed; hence his satanism, dandyism and the like. But we are too knowing today to invest in any of these anti-bourgeois demonstrations. An effective rhythm of "poetry within history," if it were to be more than sound or triviality, would require a continual practice of uncertainty and resistance. The expectations for such a poetry would be its ability to resist or treat ironically not only the conventionalized linguistic constructs of contemporary thought and culture but perhaps as importantly, the constructs of literary making as suggested by any theory-community of poets, scholars and critics.

The British poet Geoffrey Hill, in *The Enemy's Country*, his absorbing study of the pressures placed on the poet, includes criticism and by extension "theory" among those forces against which the poet must write. Looking at criticism as part of the poet's contexture, the environment of composition, he writes: "Criticism which is, on many occasions, the faculty and instrument of judgment is on other occasions, possibly more numerous, part of the body of circumstance out of which and against which the single voice of creative intelligence must be made articulate. Modern criticism in this guise is one of the shapes of protean Opinion, one of the petty 'lords of the temporal world'..." Hill's terminologies, "the single voice of creative intelligence" contrasted with the "petty 'lords of the temporal,'" suggest a somewhat past poetry-time, but the fact is, for the most part, the production of poetry is the work of an individual organizing consciousness writing within and often in ambivalent relationship to a pervasive critical and cultural zeitgeist. In other words, poets find themselves inscribed, to use a phrase from David Kellogg's essay, "Perloff's Wittgenstein: W(h)ither Poetic Theory?" in "the contemporary circle of belief," in this case the belief-system fostered by postmodern theory. Such belief-systems are not benign. They produce an anxiety of acceptability, of correctness and righteousness which dictates to practicing poets form, groupings and subject matter.

The poem is not timeless. To be sure, it does lay claim to being infinite, it attempts to reach through through it, not over and beyond it.

-Celan

Any writing on the current state of poetry would be a controlling projection over its past and, however subtle or "objective," an attempt to control its future. Therefore, it might now be useful to think of the activity and production of poetry as a kind of occultism. By occultism, I mean something close to what Merleau-Ponty formulated when he said that occult objects-and he was talking from the viewpoint of anthropology-are those, like charms or fetishes, which we believe put us immediately in touch with supernatural or extraordinary powers. He was contrasting this occultism with the more usual spiritual work-work, such as becoming a member of a religious order, usually requiring initiation, spiritual discipline, knowledge and lengthy preparation.

The potential for occultism is present in all areas of culture and social life, from beliefs in names, in statistics, in dress codes, in status and street address. So too in poetry. In the workings of poetics, in the practice of poets, an analogous situation obtains: all technique, stylistics, theories, movements, naturalisms and non-naturalisms are objects for occultation. Especially in poetry, it would seem that that which is authoritatively asserted is already occult.

In the virtual or as if world of poetry, an occult object can become a spiritual one. Occultism and lyricism have this in common: they create intelligible nodes of language around which all sorts of powers and investitures, human and nonhuman, are gathered. Yet, as figurations of words, they can be interrogated as well as capitulated to. In the meeting place of an individual and a self-created or selfexisting sign, one writes not only to express but also to live through the teachings or insights of that writing.

These nodes and figures of language focus our attention. They create different kinds of fascination with a



poet's work which often can only be found in its lyricism, of character, struggle, etc., elements which have been underplayed or dropped in our more experimental poetries, but which strike me as needing more exploration than ever.

For the appropriate response to poetry is fascination, a certain glimpse of mathematics, of symmetries, some supplied by the reader alone, of an incandescent nature. Even if the poet speaks only within his own borderlines, he or she at the least represents a site where inner echoings and outer world are woven into knots. The social, exterior world is always larger than the poet. And so the poet always finds oneself in one's writing as another "other," a dynamic always threatening to tip the poet's well-being. Always off balance itself, always expressing a kind of madness found only in and through poetry, lyric language is the additive which evens the scales.

At the Muse's Tomb

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**Author(s):** [Heller, Michael](#)**Title:** Notes on Lyric Poetry: Or, at the Muse's Tomb**Source:** *Chicago Review* 43, no. 4 (1997 Fall): p. 66-76 **Acronym:** ChiR [Periodical Record](#)**Standard No:** **ISSN:** 0009-3696**Language:** English**SUBJECT(S)****Descriptor:** American literature - 1900-1999 - poetry - lyric poetry**Document Type:** journal article**Update:** 199801**Accession No:** 1998053873; **MLA Sequence No:** 1998-1-11124**Database:** MLA*See  
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