Theory of the Lyric

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ABSTRACT

Illustrating the argument of Culler’s *Theory of the Lyric* with examples from American poetry, this paper contests the New Criticism’s model of lyric as dramatic monologue by a fictional persona, arguing instead for a default model of lyric as poetic discourse about our world, which subordinates fictional and representational elements to ritualistic features of poetic discourse, such as sound patterning, lyric address, and the lyric present tense. For a great many lyrics it is counterproductive to ask who is speaking or on what situation.

Keywords:
lyric, poetics, dramatic monologue, New Criticism
The project that culminated in my *Theory of the Lyric* originated in my fascination with lyrics’ strange way of addressing time, winds, urns, trees, or the dead and asking them to do something or to stop doing what they are doing.¹ From the Greeks to the moderns, poets call on a universe they hope will prove responsive, and their demands often prove seductive:

“O wild West Wind, thou breath of autumn’s being

(Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind”)

Lion! J’étais pensif, ô bête prisonnière,
Devant la majesté de ta grave crinière;

(Victor Hugo, “Baraques de la foire”)

Leaf! You are so big!
How can you change your
Color, then just fall!

(Frank O’Hara, “Les Etiquettes Jaunes”)

These moments are non-mimetic, ritualistic, foregrounding the event of poetic enunciation, a lyric now. What do such strange ways of speaking tell us about the investments and ambitions of lyric poetry and how we should approach it? This is a project in poetics, not hermeneutics—for me an important distinction: it does not try to produce a theory that would offer new interpretations of poems, but seeks to understand how they function, what the conventions and strategies of the lyric are.

I attempt to work out a general framework of a poetics of the lyric, in which attention to various features of lyric that entice readers and make lyric distinctive is encouraged and not resisted, as it is by the narrow models of lyric that have in recent years organized most approaches to lyric poetry. I here illustrate some aspects of this theory with examples from American literature.

Lyric poetry has a long history in the West but an uncertain generic status. The great comparatist Earl Miner concludes, “Lyric is the foundation genre for the poetics or literary assumptions of cultures throughout the world. Only Western poetics differs. Even the major civilizations that have not shown a need to develop a systematic poetics (the Islamic, for instance) have demonstrably based their ideas of literature on lyric assumptions.” (Miner 2000, 4–5). And he adds “The first thing to be said of lyric poetic systems is that they are not mimetic.”

One might argue that it is for quite contingent reasons—the fact that Aristotle wrote a treatise on mimetic poetry, poetry as an imitation of action, and not on the other poetic forms that were central to Greek culture—that Western literary theory neglected the lyric

¹. This essay distills some important points, with salient examples, from my *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), which offers greater detail and numerous examples from languages other than English. A paperback edition was published in October 2017.
until the romantic era. Aristotle was thoroughly familiar with the Greek lyric, as numerous examples in his Rhetoric show, but he omitted it from the Poetics, I claim, because he viewed it not as a form of mimesis but as epideictic, like oratory, a versified discourse about what is to be valued, praised or blamed.

At any rate, because of Aristotle’s decision, lyric was treated as a miscellaneous collection of minor forms, despite the flourishing of lyric in ancient Rome, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. Lyric was finally made one of three fundamental genres in the late 18th century, when a more vigorous and highly-developed conception of the individual subject made it possible to conceive of lyric as mimetic: an imitation of the experience of the subject. The Abbé Batteux’s Principes de la littérature (1775) emphatically reinserts the lyric within the Aristotelian framework of literature as mimesis—mimesis of feeling—and lays the groundwork for the romantic elevation of lyric to the poetic norm or even the essence of literature, even though thinkers quickly moved from a mimetic to an expressive theory of the lyric. Hegel offers the fullest exposition of the romantic theory of the lyric, as subjectivity coming to consciousness of itself. The lyric poet absorbs the external world, stamps it with inner consciousness, and gives expression to this enriched poetic inner life, this subjectivity (for discussion, see Culler 2015, chapter 3).

This conception of the lyric, as representation of subjective experience, while widely disseminated and influential, no longer has great currency in the academic world. It has been replaced by a variant that treats the lyric not as mimesis of the experience of the poet but as a 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. This has become the dominant model in the pedagogy of the lyric in the Anglo-American world, though not elsewhere. In Helen Vendler’s widely used textbook, for instance, students are asked, when confronting a poem, to work out who is speaking, in what circumstances, to what end, and to chart the drama of attitudes that the poem captures (Vendler 2002, xlii, v-vi, 114). The most explicit theoretical account of this widespread implicit theory is Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s: lyric is an imitation but of a speech act. In effect, the dramatic monologue, which puts on stage a character speaking to a defined audience or to him – or herself, is made the model for lyric, which becomes the fictional imitation or representation of a real-world speech act (Smith 1979, 8, 142; 1968, 17). Since this conception of the lyric as dramatic monologue is not so common outside the Anglophone world, I should perhaps illustrate how fundamental it has seemed in America. One of the leading New Critics, John Crowe Ransom, offers a remarkable version of this claim:

The poet does not speak in his own but in an assumed character, not in the actual but in an assumed situation, and the first thing we do as readers of poetry is to determine precisely what character and what situation are assumed. In this examination lies the possibility of critical understanding and, at the same time, of illusion and the enjoyment. (Ransom 1938, 254-5)

From there it is only a step to conclude that the poem “may be said to be a dramatic monologue… Browning only literalized and made readable for the platform or the concert hall
the thing that had always been the poem’s lawful form.” This is very strange: “lawful form” as if any other conception of the poem is unlawful, deviant.

Of course, many great poems in the English tradition are dramatic monologues, and it is possible to read other lyrics in this way, but even in those cases this model deflects attention from what is most singular, most mind-blowing even, in those lyrics, and puts readers on a prosaic, novelizing track: the reader looks for a speaker who can be treated as a character in a novel, whose situation and motives one must reconstruct while neglecting the verse, which is produced by the poet, not the fictional speaker. This model gives students a clear task but it is extraordinarily limited and limiting. It leads to neglect of the most salient features of many lyrics, which are not to be found in ordinary speech acts—from rhythm and sound patterning to intertextual relations. Wallace Stevens’ “Bantams in Pine Woods” is perhaps an extreme case but illustrates an important aspect of the appeal of lyric:

Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
Of tan with henna hackles, halt!

The poem gives us not mimesis of a voice but voicing, an important distinction for me: vocal effects that tend to be inversely related to representation; the more voicing, the less mimesis of a voice, and the less plausible the dramatic monologue model.

In sum, the model of lyric as intense expression of the subjective experience of the poet does not fit a great many poems, ancient or modern, and, more important, it leads away from the language of the poem to an experience of the poet, which a reader is supposed to try to reconstruct. But our attention should be directed to experiencing the poem itself as an event, not to discovering what the author might have experienced. The dramatic monologue model also demands of the reader a reconstruction—this time of the situation and motives of a fictional speaker/character, rather than the author. But for many poems of the tradition, attempting to work out who is speaking brings no benefits and obscures rather than clarifies what the poem itself is doing. Even when it is possible to imagine a speaker, this orientation emphasizes the fictional dimension of the poem, neglecting those ritualistic and musical elements that make the poem compel our attention in the first place. And for very many lyrics, there is no plausible empirical situation of speech. Many of Dickinson’s most famous lyrics present an impossible speech situation.

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

Or “I heard a fly buzz when I died…..” We need to focus on what the poet is doing and not try to imagine the situation of an alleged speaker.

A different kind of lyric structure is apparent in the poem of William Carlos William usually called “The Red Wheelbarrow”.

Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
Of tan with henna hackles, halt!
so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens.

Here there seems no reason to imagine a speaker-character or to attempt novelistically to supply a context of utterance. Trying to answer those questions would risk deflecting attention from what is most salient about the poem. Hugh Kenner writes:

Try to imagine an occasion for this sentence to be said: ‘So much depends upon a red wheel-barrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens.’ Try it over, in any voice you like: it is impossible. … And to go on with the dialogue? To whom might the sentence be spoken, for what purpose? … Not only is what the sentence says banal, if you heard someone say it you’d wince. But hammered on the typewriter into a thing made, and this without displacing a single word except typographically, the sixteen words exist in a different zone altogether, a zone remote from the world of sayers and sayings.

(Kenner 1975, 59-60)

He adds, “Yet you do say, you do go through the motions of saying. But art lifts the saying out of the zone of things said.”

The reader does say it, but the spatial disposition is crucial, revealing a structure not detectable when heard, but the line and the stanza are still the functional units, not the page, as in concrete poetry: we have four two-line stanzas, the first line of each stanza consisting of three words (with two syllables stressed), the second of one word of two syllables. Lineation seems to serve as instruction for voicing, as the reader seems invited to treat the lines as breath groups, pausing at line and stanza endings. Of course the enjambment produced by the verse pattern separates “wheel” from “barrow” and “rain” from “water,” contributing to the sense of basic constituents of a world. Without rhyme or a conventional metrical scheme, the poem succeeds in producing memorable language, in an unorthodox, unfinished version of the poem of praise.

Here there seems resistance to both the romantic/expressive model of lyric and its modern successor, lyric as a drama of the attitudes of a character. The poem does not create a character making an assertion in a fictional world but makes a statement about our world. The assertion of value places this poem in the epideictic tradition of lyrics of praise, but the poem seems to stop too soon or, rather, the specification of chickens and rainwater makes it mysterious what the claim might be, so we puzzle over it, but we remember it.
A more promising theoretical framework, then, takes the lyric as, at bottom, a statement about this world rather than the projection of a fictional speaker and a fictional world. This model, which can be traced back to Pindar, is centered on lyric as public discourse about meaning and value—made distinctive by its ritualistic elements. This model holds for many modern poems. Consider Robert Frost’s “Nothing Gold Can Stay”:

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith, who discusses this example, admits that “The appropriateness of the conclusion is experienced without regard for the speaker’s particular motives or circumstances” (Smith 1979, 135). This is important: there is no point in trying to imagine a speaker, motives, and circumstances. We can analyze the progression by which the gold of the first line becomes the gold of the last line—the symbol of enduring value becomes ultimately transitory—without imagining a speaker who revises his or her observations and comes to a realization. That would be unnecessary novelizing. But my favorite example of the importance of avoiding the dramatic monologue model is not American: Philip Larkin’s most famous poem, “This Be the Verse”:

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were soppy-stern
And half at one another’s throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don’t have any kids yourself.

Accounts of lyric as dramatic monologue or as fiction make little allowance for such poems, which appear throughout the history of the genre, from Pindar to this day; they claim to cast values in a new light, to disclose aspects of the world and praise what should be noted and remembered, but they claim especially to offer thought in memorable form, truths to
be considered, absorbed, and repeated by readers. If this is Larkin’s most famous poem, it is, first, because readers do not expect to encounter “fuck” in a poem with rhymes and regular quatrains, but also because it claims to tell an inconvenient truth and proposes unexpected measures. Although teachers and critics often maintain that searching for the author’s message in a poem is a beginner’s mistake, we know that poems often present propositions about our world instead of creating a textual or fictional world.

Larkin’s poem offers an excellent demonstration of what is at stake, for it would, of course, be possible to read it as generating a textual, fictional speaker and world, and to ask who is speaking, in what circumstances, and to what end. We could imagine, for example, a misanthropic drunk in a bar who is complaining about his parents and the world in general and telling everyone what they should do about it. But to treat the poem in this way is to trivialize it: to relativize its claims by making them the assertions of an individual whom you would probably go out of your way to avoid and thus depriving them of any authority—an authority that they implicitly claim by virtue of their carefully constructed nature (the rhythms and rhymes that make the poem more than a rant). To treat this poem as the discourse of a fictional speaker is to set aside as marginal everything that distinguishes this language from the rant of a drunk in a bar: everything that belongs to what I call the ritualistic dimension of lyric (on which more shortly) and which makes this language that you want to repeat, to reread, to recite.

Emily Dickinson, whom we credit with an especially fertile and quirky imagination, nevertheless writes many such poems, which make claims about our world, not about an imagined or fictional world: “Hope is a thing with feathers,” “Tell the truth but tell it slant,” “The Soul selects her own Society,” or “The Heart asks Pleasure—first”:

The Heart asks Pleasure—first—
And then—Excuse from Pain—
And then—those little Anodynes
That deaden suffering—
And then—to go to sleep—
And then—if it should be
The will of its Inquisitor
The privilege to die—

Trying to imagine a speaker would be a diversion from appreciating the poem. What we have is a poetic reflection on the propensities of the human heart, with a real kicker in the tail, when “inquisitor” and “privilege” give us a distinctive judgment but not relativized to a particular speaker.

If we take this model as point of departure, then we can develop a broader framework that recognizes the role of fictional elements, such as plot and character—fictional speakers and representation of events—while maintaining the primacy of all those other aspects of lyric not reducible to story, starting with lyric’s availability for reiteration, repetition. The positing of a fictional speaker-character is an inappropriate general strategy for the lyric, but since the positing of a speaker is a pertinent response to some poems, we need a model that allows for it by acknowledging the tension in lyric between the fictional (story and
character) on the one hand and, on the other, what we might call song or, better, the ritualistic, while recognizing the ultimate dominance of song or the ritualistic as distinctive of lyric.

This distinction between the fictional elements and the ritualistic elements I take from Roland Greene’s *Post-Petrarchism*. In discussing lyric sequences—a series of related poems in which some sort of broad narrative is tantalizingly offered, as in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* or Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*—Greene argues that “lyric discourse is defined by the dialectical play of ritual and fictional phenomena, correlative modes of apprehension that are nearly always available in every lyric, though particular specimens, collections, and schools may try to protect one at the expense of the other.” (Greene 1991, 5). The ritual element is, first, everything that can be construed as directions for performance: “In the full play of its ritual mode, which goes well beyond prosodic elements to include rhetorical, semantic, and symbolic features, lyric is utterance uniquely disposed to be re-uttered,” and it offers “a performative unity into which readers and auditors may enter at will.” This possibility of freely entering is a crucial feature of the lyric, often neglected in critical accounts: lyrics are poems made to be uttered by readers, who may come ritualistically to occupy the place of the lyric. C. S. Lewis writes of the Elizabethan love sonnet that a good sonnet, like a good song, “was like a good public prayer: the test was whether the congregation can ‘join’ and make it their own…It does not matter who is speaking in ‘Since there’s no helpe’ any more than in ‘Oh mistress mine’…The whole body of sonnet sequences is more like an erotic liturgy than a series of erotic confidences” (Lewis 1954, 491).

I argue that central to the lyric tradition is this tension between fictional/representational elements and the ritualistic, everything that can be considered as instructions for performance rather than fictional representation. That tension comes out especially clearly in sonnet sequences, where readers struggle to identify a character and a plot but keep encountering rhymes, repetitions, elements of address, prominent sound patterning, and so on.

From the ritualistic perspective, the reader voices the poem and the poem itself is the event. The fictional is what we produce when we attempt to imagine a persona or speaker and a world or situation of utterance and past events that are evoked in the act of lyric enunciation but characteristically remain subordinated in various ways to a present of enunciation.

Taking as a starting point or default model this conception of lyric as not as fiction but as epideixis, discourse making claims about the world, one can then explore the characteristic ways in which lyrics can incorporate fictional elements, whether identifiable speakers, characters, rudimentary plots, as in ballads, or simply incidents made notable by their insertion in the fundamentally hyperbolic space of a lyric poem.

Here is an amazing little poem by Emily Dickinson that illustrates for me the possible operations of lyric:

> A Thought went up my mind today—
> That I have had before—
> But did not finish — some way back—
> I could not fix the Year—
Nor where it went — nor why it came
The second time to me—
Nor definitely, what it was—
Have I the Art to say—

But somewhere — in my Soul — I know—
I’ve met the Thing before—
It just reminded me — ’twas all—
And came my way no more—

This little poem could be read as meta-commentary on poets’ vatic pretensions—as though any poetic thought would necessarily be significant and worth striving to preserve. But if the poem is making fun of that assumption, it also, of course, shows that even the most evanescent thought—one that cannot be specified at all—allows the self-realization of a poem. The thought itself is not invested with significance except as the occasion of a poetic event, created above all by the stanza form, which is the more impressive for the nullity of its referent. This little poem is paradigmatic for lyric in its exploitation of language’s ability to make much of nothing, even as it slyly mocks that procedure. It also helps to justify my otherwise admittedly strange claim that there is an underlying hyperbolic character, part of the conventions of the genre, to even the most modest lyric poem.

This poem also gives us a past incident pulled into the present of lyric enunciation to adduce its significance, a major lyric structure. Lyrics that remain entirely narrated in the past tense are not very common prior to the 20th century: in the Norton Anthology of Poetry only 123 of 1266 poems are in the past tense and 21 of those are ballads (only two of Shakespeare’s 154 sonnets remain in the past throughout. There is usually some present tense conclusion. (Cf. “Because I could not stop for Death.”) Poems that remain in the past either become allegorical, as in “I heard a fly buzz when I died,” or, as in many 20th century poems, presume that the reader can imagine the present significance of the incident. Theodore Roethke’s well-known “My Papa’s Waltz” is one such:

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother’s countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.
You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

This poem, entirely in the past tense, a report of habitual incident, is an example of what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls the “pointless anecdotes” that suffuse modern poetry: “anecdotes of which the only point could be, ‘This is a kind of thing that happens.’” (Smith 1968, 253). She suggests that the paradoxical effect of what she calls the “non-assertive conclusion” of such lyrics, the failure to indicate the significance of the events, is in fact to heighten the importance of what is presented, even if that significance is left for the reader to imagine.

The present tense and the present of enunciation are central to lyrics in all languages. We have apostrophic poems that call upon something or someone; we have poems of definition that use the simple present for claims about the world. But in English there is an especially distinctive lyric use of the simple present: lyrics use a special non-progressive present with verbs of action to incorporate events while reducing their fictional, narrative character and increasing their ritualistic feel. In English, to note occurrences in the present, we use the present progressive tense: I am walking. When we encounter the unmarked non-progressive present tense with occurrences, we can guess that we are dealing with a foreigner or a poem.

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second street,
Uncertain and afraid…

(Auden)

I taste a liquor never brewed,
From tankards scooped in pearl;

(Dickinson)

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
A kind old nun in a white hood replies

(Yeats)

In both colloquial and formal English, such action verbs require the progressive form—I am walking through the long schoolroom—without which they would mark a habitual action and lead one to expect a temporal indication: “I often sit in one of the dives on 52nd street”; “I taste a liquor never brewed whenever I get a chance.” It is the combination of simple present and lack of temporal specification with action verbs that makes this a distinctive tense in English poetry. These lyric presents are not the gnomic present of general truths, which can use verbs of action—“a rolling stone gathers no moss”; “man hands on misery to man”—but they lift us into a special poetic register of something that has happened, is happening, happens, in the strange time of the lyric now.
For instance, Frost’s “Stopping by Woods” presents itself as a dramatic monologue; we need to imagine a fictional speaker who stops in “these woods,” who delays the fulfillment of obligations to watch the woods fill up with snow.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

A curious feature of this poem, which opposes nature, woods, snow, and death to the human world of promises and obligations, is that the norms and values of the human world are delegated to the horse (“My little horse must think it queer/ To stop without a farmhouse near”). But then we are told:

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.

Here we have something other than the observation of an event by a speaker. We hear a different note. A speaker describing what is happening at a given moment would say something like “he is shaking his harness bells.” Frost’s formulation, “He gives his harness bells a shake,” introduces a distance from any particular fictional moment and marks this as a different kind of discourse, a ritualistic act not tied to a specific observable moment. We still need a speaker of course, but the special temporality of this utterance moves us into a different discursive region. What makes this poem more than an anecdote is this simple present, on the one hand, and on the other the repetition of the final line,

And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
As critics have often noted, this repetition moves us, anecdote and all, into a figurative, poetic register. But let me move back from the question of lyric time. In this project I am not trying to tell people how to decide whether something is a lyric or not; I start not from a definition but inductively—from a series of hyper-canonical lyrics of the Western tradition and seek to identify their salient features. I take the concept of lyric to be a historically-evolving one, but based not on strict boundary conditions, nor on essential features, but on prototypes: lyrics are poems like this, or this or this. What are the issues that arise from these poems? What are the parameters on which they differ? I take it as a working hypothesis that there is a lyric tradition and that an attempt to understand it and the central features of poems within it is crucial not only for the reading and appreciation of the poems themselves but crucial also to an understanding of revolts against the tradition and the consequent modifications and expansions of it.

I should say that I do not have strong views about how much contemporary poetry ought to be considered lyric or read within the frame of the Western lyric tradition. The question is to what extent reference to the parameters of that tradition is presupposed, as something to be cited, parodied, denounced, or worked against? Or one can ask whether approaching a given poem or poetic corpus in relation to the lyric tradition enriches the experience of and reflection on the poems in question. There is certainly a broad array of poems that resist the lyric model, that resist being related to a figure of voice or to ritual utterance or to inscription to be recited. These range from shaped poems and concrete poems that can scarcely be read, only seen or described, to poems that refuse in other ways a relation to voicing and an enunciating reader: poems for which the page rather than the vocalizable line is the crucial unit—much L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E Poetry for instance. Charles Bernstein’s poem entitled “this poem intentionally left blank” consists of a blank page:

______________________top margin_________________________
|                                               |
| Charles Bernstein                             |
|                                               |
| THIS POEM INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK            |
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|                                               |

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Poets have certainly succeeded in producing texts that doubtless require to be read by other models. I do not want to claim that Language Poetry is still lyric. But I do think that a good deal of even contemporary poetry achieves its effects by engaging the lyric tradition, and I offer in conclusion the, to me, very intriguing example of “This Room,” the opening poem of John Ashbery’s 2000 collection, Your Name Here. The title of the collection alludes to bureaucratic language practices—forms, publicity, where each of us can become the you interpellated by publicity, bureaucracy—the you who has just won a million dollars in a lottery or the you to which an iterable bureaucratic process applies, as we fill in the form. “Your name here” foregrounds the problem of singularization and iterability, central to lyric.

This Room

The room I entered was a dream of this room. Surely all those feet on the sofa were mine. The oval portrait of a dog was me at an early age. Something shimmers, something is hushed up.

We had macaroni for lunch every day except Sunday, when a small quail was induced to be served to us. Why do I tell you these things? You are not even here.

The poem connects the problem of singularization and iterability with the characteristic deictic effects of lyric,—this room, this stanza—where the you, as in this poem, remains unlocated. I offer Ashbery’s poem as emblematic of the way in which the structure of lyric recuperates the recital of past events, but this poem is unusual both in the explicitness with which it foregrounds the relation of lyric address—“Why do I tell you these things? You are not even here”—and in its hyperbolization of the strangeness of lyric recuperation, as in “the oval portrait of a dog was me at an early age.” As so often with Ashbery, we are induced to cast around for points of reference among literary or non-literary discourses. So this portrait recalls Dylan Thomas’s “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog,” Poe’s short story “The Oval Portrait,” or the portraits by William Wegman of dogs as people, the cliché of identity tied up with the childhood pet, or the commonplace that after a certain time master and dog come to resemble one another.

What most intrigues me here is the involution of the formulation, “a small quail was induced to be served to us.” However it works, this enigmatic example is hyperbolic in the strangeness that it relates to dream, and the poem is exemplary in the conclusion with its joking but deeply serious foregrounding of the structure of song and ode, as well as the tradition of the love sonnet. This final line could be taken to sum up the tradition of the lover’s complaint; one could even say that studying lyric can be thought of as working to answer this question: “Why do I tell you these things? You are not even here.”
To resume crudely, I think it is crucial for any theory of the lyric to foreground those features of the lyric that distinguish it from narrative fiction, which now so dominates the field of literary studies. Whence the importance of adopting a default model of lyric as non-mimetic and non-fictional, though it can incorporate fictional and representational elements in its fundamentally ritualistic structures. And since it is not fiction, we begin with the presumption that this is discourse about our world, not a fictional world, though filled with strange imaginings that we treat as figurative. The ritualistic takes many forms, from varied types of repetition, sound patterning, metrical structures, rhymes, refrain, to apostrophes that stress the now of lyric enunciation, as the poem seeks to be itself an event rather than the representation of past events.

The incantatory elements or the ritualistic dimensions of lyric—rhythm, lyric address and invocation, and sound-patterning of all kinds—are very often what initially attracts us to a poem—prior to exploration of its meaning—and of course they are what make lyrics different from prose reflections on the world.

The historical connection of lyric with song might provide a salutary corrective model for thinking about this literary form. With song we allow ourselves to be seduced without much guilt by sensuous form, and to dwell in the realm of sonorous patterning without an insistent quest for meaning, but this does not imply that our discriminating faculties are somehow switched off. In our engagement with song, as we pursue our pleasure, we develop considerable expertise—knowledge of what we like and what we dislike, a sense of affinities among particular singers and composers and of different types of music—without necessarily trying to interpret particular musical texts. Something comparable ought to be possible in the realm of poetry—attending to our pleasure while also gaining confidence in our ability to appreciate what secured our attention. Poets do not demand interpretation of readers but expect what Coleridge called ‘poetic faith’ that their statements require no supplementation, at least for the duration of a reading.

The duration of a reading is the lyric event, which one should keep in view, perhaps especially in an academic study of poetry. Susan Stewart writes, “I propose that the sound of poetry is heard in the way that a promise is heard. A promise is an action made in speech, …something that ‘happens,’ that ‘occurs’ as an event and can be continually called on, called to mind, in the unfolding present.” (Stewart 2002, 104). It is important that poems are not recalled as a fact is remembered but are, as she says, registered as able to be recalled, to be uttered or experienced again; even if you only remember a few of their words, or sometimes, maddeningly, just a rhythm, there is the promise of an event that can be reproduced in the present of articulation.

The notion of lyric sound as promise points, finally, to the value to which lyric especially ministers—a love of the sonorous phrase, the memorable formulation, whether it is the expression of an attitude one explores in repeating—“I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day”—or an elegant piece of sonority—“Dormeuse, amas doré d’ombres et d’abandons,”—these phrases that, as Valéry says, create the need to be heard again. Found in poems are all sorts of phrases, especially unimaginable ones, that stretch the imagination, offering us reproducible experiences of pleasure and puzzlement, as we speak them to ourselves and occasionally, to others—as we should do more often.
REFERENCES