

3. On Lyricisation

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Why Not Medieval Lyric ?

This paper takes its title from Ardis Butterfield’s 2015 ‘Why medieval lyric?’ an important statement on what scholars of medieval short verse can take from recent conversations about lyric, and what they can bring to these conversations. Yet, whilst lyric is seeing something of a resurgence in medieval scholarship, the relationship has not been reciprocal. Recent cross-period studies of the lyric have largely ignored the medieval period, at best treating it as historical stepping stone towards later, more conventional, lyricism.¹

This paper will attempt to outline why medieval short poetry has largely been overlooked by lyric studies, and suggest that the answer has much to offer wider debates about the trans-historical potential of lyric. Occurring at the boundary between a transhistorical notion of lyric-ness and a historically distinct series of practices which defy categorisation as lyric, medieval short verse can offer means of negotiating and synchronising these distinct approaches.

In theory, the idea that lyric might be a transhistorical category emphasising connections across periods rather than within them create space for medieval lyric or any poetry which takes up transhistorical features of lyric. In practice, however, any transhistorical lyric category will reinforce the established canon of lyric and fail to engage with medieval short verse which frequently challenges key elements of lyric-ness. On the other hand, approaches to lyric which emphasise ‘lyricisation’ as the collapse of many historically precise genres of short poetry into an all-encompassing idea of lyric only serve to separate medieval poetry further from the broader lyric tradition. They imply little connection between these short medieval poems and later, undeniably lyric, verse – and can even imply that lyric is somehow absent from the spirit of medieval poetry.

If neither of these approaches has encouraged exploration of medieval lyric poetry, this is not because medieval short verse has little to add to current issues in the field of lyric studies. On the contrary, sitting at the fault-line of current debates about the (trans)historicity of lyric, means that

¹ Medieval lyric is largely absent from major cross-period studies including C. Hošek and P. A. Parker, eds, *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* (Ithaca, 1985); Marion. Thain, ed., *The Lyric Poem* (Cambridge, 2013); Jonathan. Culler, *Theory of Lyric* (Cambridge, MA, 2015); and Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, eds, *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Baltimore, 2014). The last of these, as a collection of pre-existing critical material on theories of lyric, is revealing in that only one article out of forty-eight pays particular attention to medieval lyric.

medieval verse has more to say about the efficacy of current theoretical approaches. In this paper, I will offer several examples of medieval verse which sit at the margin of lyric to negotiate trans-historical and historicist approaches, and use them to consider ways in which historically specific challenges to our general notions of lyric can broaden our understanding of what lyric is and does.

Jacob McGuinn (U of London, UK)

Lyric Forbearance – Reading JH Prynne’s Field Notes

What is common between lyric and history? Asking this question means locating some common space, some commonality of space, between lyricisation and historicisation. In his reading of Wordsworth’s ‘The Solitary Reaper’, JH Prynne outlines something like that common space as ‘field notes’: reading which spans the difference between the field as a surface which the poem gives to be read, and the field of reading which that surface sponsors. Wordsworth’s poem, about fields, in Prynne’s reading becomes a primal scene of the lyric: in order to write the Reaper’s work-song, the poem must mute it. That muting of history constitutes the poem’s substance. However, in reading Prynne, we can also develop the ways this models reading as forbearance: a debt which is not recalled. ‘The Solitary Reaper’ in this way marks a primal scene for lyric reading, but also for historicisation. By marking the points of common emergence of these ideas in this reading, I want to refine our concept of this common space, this shared field, entwining recollection and forbearance.

In this paper, reading Prynne’s forbearance, I want to develop some of the ways in which the categorical processes by which a lyric emerges are common with the processes by which history emerges. ‘History’ emerges through the lyric ‘field’ established in procedures of lyricisation. Lyricisation is the form of this history. The poem’s gambit of lyricisation— the problem of presenting the reaper’s song while remaining conscious of the poem’s incapacity to present it — installs the gambit of historicisation. But it also presents the problem of forbearance: of the ways the poem must refuse to transform its subject’s history, while at the same time recognising that such a refusal constitutes a further muting of it. How are we to read this transformation, and this muting, as the field of reading itself? With Prynne, we might see how the problem of lyric’s history emerges in a field of history which is itself given to transformation, mutations and muting. But we might also develop the ways that such muting structures poetic reading. And with Prynne, we might also develop some of the ways the procedures of lyric writing already constitute a common field for reading.

David Nowell Smith (East Anglia, UK)

The Lyric Art-Object and the Intermedia ‘Between’

Recent accounts of the ontology and ideology of lyric have centred, albeit often implicitly, on the question of objecthood. Virginia Jackson’s theory of ‘lyric reading’ demands vigilance towards practices of “lyricization”, editorial as well as critical, in which diverse textual productions are moulded into a narrow, historically contingent, orthodoxy. Heather Dubrow’s work on early modern deixis notes that the coexistence between print, manuscript, and sung versions, shows their deictics to be far more mobile than a narrow model of lyric address would assume, but also calls into question an ontology of the lyric poem as unitary, textual object. Both arguments are embedded in specific historical practices, yet also speak to our current moment, where the dominance of print is challenged by new technologies, both through alternative forms of dissemination (most recently digital publishing, but also artists’ books, performance pieces, sound works) and through new practices of composition.

The proposed paper will think through tensions immanent in the notion of ‘objecthood’ in lyric, taking as its case study the Scottish poet WS Graham (1918-86). Throughout his published work, Graham was avowedly committed to a model of the poem as ‘art object’: he described poetic making as discovering “the whole / Formal scheme which Art is” (*Approaches to How they Behave*, 1967), and outlined his own aspiration as to make / An object that will stand and will not move” (*The Thermal Stair*, 1964). In the *Poetry Book Society Bulletin* of Spring 1970 he wrote: “The poet only speaks one way. He hears nothing back. His words as he utters them are not conditioned by a real ear replying from the other side. That is why he has to make the poem stand stationary as an Art object.” And yet, Graham borrowed this notion of objecthood from the art theories of Wassily Kandinsky, Naum Gabo, Clement Greenberg—his search for a medium-specificity of poetry is already conditioned by an intermedia ‘between’. Moreover, Graham’s archive is full of mixed-media work—letterpoems, illuminated manuscripts, artists’ books—marked by provisionality and incompleteness, and irreducible to the honed model of objecthood that characterises his published work and his statements on poetics.

Graham’s work poses two pertinent questions for lyric theory. (1) How might these competing notions of objecthood be mapped onto their different modes of circulation—print versus manuscript, publication versus coterie? (2) How does the role of *address* change across these different objects? Graham’s model of the “stationary” art-object is shaped by the programmatic absence of the addressee, attempting both to breach and inhabit this absence. As he wrote elsewhere: “The poem is the replying chord to the reader. It is the reader’s involuntary reply” (*Notes For a Poetry of Release*, 1946). How do different models of circulation and objecthood negotiate such absences? The paper will finish with a reflection on two different kinds of lyric ‘between-ness’: the constitutive absence the poem would supposedly overcome, and the interstices between competing modes of objecthood within lyric poems themselves.