

A Heart's Pledge in Metaeropoetics

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Essentialism and universalism should be four-letter words: such labels must be repelled as soon as possible by any scholar who discusses lyric poetry (and virtually anything) as part of a cohesive tradition that endures millennia. Critics like Mutlu Konuk Blasing and Jonathan Culler treat lyric as such, as opposed to Virginia Jackson, who considers the contemporary idea of lyric to be a phenomenon that dates back only to the nineteenth century. This debate is touched upon by Erik Gray in a longish footnote highlighting that, according to Blasing, “‘Historicizing’ the lyric as essentially a late-eighteenth- and nineteenth century European invention in effect universalizes a historically and geographically specific model of a subject” (qtd. in 8). Gray, who is a Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and specializes in nineteenth-century British poetry, certainly agrees with Blasing. Following in her footsteps (and more fundamentally, in Culler’s), he offers a transhistorical account of Western lyric, narrowing his scope to love poetry ranging from the biblical Song of Songs to Eavan Boland (1944-).

What Gray mainly focuses on in the volume is the connections between (erotic/passionate/romantic) love and lyric poetry. The first chapter, “Love and Poetry,” investigates Phebe’s curiously worded exclamation from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*: “Dear shepherd, now I find thy saw of might, / ‘Who ever lov’d that lov’d not at first sight?’” (qtd. in 15). Offering her realization in a quote, the shepherdess “is both acting spontaneously and at the same time following a convention of which she is well aware” (Gray 15). Gray contends that this is something love and poetry share: they are both characterized by passion and unpredictability, as well as self-consciousness and forethought. The same paradox pervades Horace’s *The Art of Poetry* (*Ars Poetica*, 19 BC) and Ovid’s *The Art of Love* (*Ars Amatoria*, 2 AD), the two texts after which Gray named his book. He points out that although Wordsworth, Stendhal, Shelley, and John Stuart Mill emphasize spontaneity (instead of artifice or self-consciousness), they all preserve the duality in question. From this, a series of related ambiguities that characterize both love and poetry, follow, such as universality and particularity, familiarity and alienness, sensuality and spirituality—the list is probably endless, but Gray manages to

cleave (pun intended and borrowed from Gray, who adopted it from the King James Bible) a considerable chunk.

The chapters “Invitations,” “Kissing,” and “Marriage” are preoccupied with lyric genres such as the invitation poem (a genre of love poetry that projects desire onto a landscape), the *basium* (kiss poem), and poems about married love that all tackle the kinship between love and poetry. The author argues that the *locus amoenus*, an idealized place that is a common feature of all invitation poems mixes nature and culture, and thus directly addresses a central philosophical question about the nature of love: is it innate and universal (according to Socrates or neuroscience), or is it a cultural phenomenon (as in Ovid and Freudian thinkers)? This question, as Gray points out, is closely related to the contradictory qualities of passion and artifice of/in love poetry. By the same token, *basia* make use of the similarities between kiss and lyric: their combination of emotional immediacy and distance, their indirection and inconclusiveness, their self-generatedness and self-fulfillment. That is to say, these genres are metaerotic and metapoetic at the same time, and this narrows down the scope of texts to a manageable set.

Throughout the book, Gray explores the metaerotopoetic—he does not use this word but I believe it is accurate—possibilities of rhyme and rhythm as they can physically perform the bonds love and poetry share. As Gray claims, based on Wordsworth, “the same principle underlies all poetic form—not just meter but rhyme and many other features of poetry depend on a perception of simultaneous similarity and difference; and it also lies at the heart of *eros*” (134). The author expands on this idea by analyzing how rhyme and meter are varied in specific poems throughout literary history. Ben Jonson’s “To Celia” (1616), for instance, discusses a kiss transmitted via a cup, and this action’s celebrated indirectness is organized by the delayed gratification of the ABCBA rhyme scheme that performs the delayed kiss in effect (88-89). The most fascinating examples, however, are in the “Marriage” chapter. In Gray’s words, “[j]ust as poetic devices such as rhyme and meter provide delight not only through their regularity but through their occasional variation, so it is with long-term attachments” (160). He cunningly compares Patmore’s claim in the treatise “Essay on English Metrical Law” (1857) that the intervals between metrical stresses are more important than the stresses themselves to the point Patmore makes about marriage in “The Angel in the House” (1854): “Not in the crises of events, / . . . / Are life’s delight and depth reveal’d” (qtd. in 163). The same poem depends heavily on its tetrameter beat but uses frequent enjambments elsewhere because “love craves form as much as freedom” (168).

Gray also discusses the metaerotics of rhetoric. He proves kisses to be tautological in Joannes Secundus's "Basium I" (1539) as they reproduce self-touch, chiasmic in Shelley's "Love's Philosophy" (1819) as they connect the physical and the spiritual, and polyptotic in Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591) as they take pleasure in repetition and variation. Besides rhetoric tropes, the dialogic nature of love becomes explicit in the heteroglossia of The Song of Songs and "The Angel in the House." Even the eroticism of conditional clauses is discussed, as they express not only uncertainty but hope. This is especially important in the exceptional case of Anne Bradstreet's "To My Dear and Loving Husband" (1678), where all doubts are resolved in one or two lines to suit married love, where "the answer to every question or need is always already at hand" (170).

In Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), triangulated address is one of the basic parameters that characterize the lyric. Correspondingly, erotic triangulation is a major concern in *The Art of Love Poetry*, and it is paramount in the chapter "Animals." This section explores the many uses of animals in love poetry: a sparrow can be a mediator of desire, as in Catullus, for example, and deer can reassure the reciprocity of love, as in Robert Frost's "Two Look at Two" (1923). Gray contends that animals are frequent in love poetry because they oscillate between subject and object: "[t]hey permit a representation of sexual desire that is both decorously disguised (this is only a bird) and very open (as animal sexuality tends to be). More fundamentally, animals exhibit the basic erotic paradox: they hold their strong appeal for human observers because they seem at once recognizable and inherently alien" (117). Analyzing Michael Field's (the pseudonym of Katharine Harris Bradley and Edith Emma Cooper, a Victorian lesbian couple who wrote their poems together) poetry, Gray also considers the queer possibilities of triangulated love that involves a dog, in a rather surprising manner. And as usual, the metapoetic potential, in triangulating desire with birds: their courtship mingles spontaneity and artifice, just like lyric poetry (118).

Although an excellent book, *The Art of Love Poetry* is not without minor shortcomings. In the Introduction, Gray adopts Culler's parameters of lyric. Lyric poems are "short, non-narrative poems that typically include certain recognizable elements: they are often written in a present tense that casts the poem less as a mimetic representation than as a speech act, an iterable event; they tend to foreground, even more than other poems, the non-semantic elements of language, such as sound and rhythm" (8). Yet non-semantic elements of language are only considered when they are meaningful, which not only goes against Culler's idea of lyric, but also comes across as slightly old-fashioned. Contemporary examples, furthermore, are scarcely employed

in *The Art of Love Poetry*. They are completely missing from the first half of the book, most painfully from the otherwise wonderful chapter on kissing—the reader cannot help feeling that love (and poetry) are dead and people do not kiss anymore. This could have been avoided by not relying almost exclusively on established names. Plenty has been written on Catullus and Chaucer but certainly not enough on living talent.

Interestingly, the most recent poems included in the volume are written by Erik Gray himself. They not only frame the rest of the text delightfully, but call the reader's attention to what lies beyond interpreting poetry. In *Theory of the Lyric*, Culler challenges the contemporary idea that the goal of reading a poem is to interpret it:

In prior centuries readers expected poems to teach and delight; students were not asked to work out the sort of interpretations now deemed proof of serious study. They might parse, imitate, translate, memorize, evaluate, or identify allusions and rhetorical or prosodic strategies We might ponder the fact that . . . the presumption that poems exist to be interpreted has accompanied a diminution of interest in lyric. (5)

Gray does more than interpretation (and pondering): the two frame poems are telling not of his ability to (re)interpret old poetry but of alluring connoisseurship.

Besides its obvious critical merits, *The Art of Love Poetry* is also a pleasure to read. It expands lyric theory and theories of love in such an accessible style that not only academics but even casual readers might appreciate the book. It may also come in handy for poets as it discusses various practical tricks, and, at its most charming moments, it even reads like a handbook of love. A sequel is certainly desired.

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Works Cited

- Blasing, Mutlu Konuk. *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007. Print.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005. Print.