

What Makes the Genre of Lyric Compelling?

Katalin Pálincás

Culler, Jonathan. *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2015. x + 391 pages. ISBN 978-0-674-74426-4. Hb. \$41.

The renewed interest in theories of poetry in recent years has been evinced in numerous conference panels, prominent publications, and academic collaborations (such as the Historical Poetics group or the International Network for the Study of Lyric). Since his famous essay on apostrophe first published in 1977, Jonathan Culler has been a leader in the field and this long-awaited book counts as a major contribution to it.

Theory of the Lyric is avowedly ambitious: admitting the ultimate inadequacy of any definition, Culler wishes to expound not what lyric is but how it works and has continued to be a compelling discursive force over about three thousand years, from classical antiquity to the present. With such a bold claim for the continuity of Western lyric, he openly contends recent historicist accounts, in particular Virginia Jackson's idea of lyricization in *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005) and her entry on lyric in the new edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (2012). Whereas Jackson argues that a historic variety of poetic practices of composition and circulation and an array of subgenres have been merged into the modern idea of lyric and that this has then been projected back in lyric reading, Culler insists on the necessity of a broad generic term, which, in his view, can serve as a nuanced tool and enable much-needed comparative work. The key to Culler's idea of lyric is poetics and the lyric tradition, the latter of which challenges linearity and detaches poems from the historical context. Even if one finds Culler's critique of new historicism too hasty, his rigorous theoretical investigation appears to justify the view of the lyric he offers.

As a study of poetics, *Theory of the Lyric* seeks to identify the underlying discursive strategies that make lyric poems work and be compelling in their distinctive ways. Provocatively, Culler names as key characteristics not the standard ones, that is, subjectivity, emotion, and brevity, but ritual and *epideixis*. He argues that some of the most salient features of lyric poems, such as rhythm and sound effects, the lyric present, the performative aspect and the iterability of poems, all foreground lyric as ritual discourse to be performed over and over again in different contexts. *Epideixis*, which for Culler points beyond a mere rhetoric of praise and blame to the practice of attributing values and thereby creating communities, is a major concern in

lyric poems as they, he argues, make statements that pertain to this world, hold up truths, however inconvenient or strange, cast new light on perceived ideas, and signal the emergence of the previously unthinkable (122).

Culler also disputes two influential models of lyric: the expressive romantic model and the model of reading poems as utterances of fictional speakers. Although, arguably, these interpretative models survive as dominant mainly in pedagogy, elements of expressivity, subjective interiority, and the figure of the lyric speaker pervade thinking about the lyric in most contexts. Culler's reconceptualization of lyric as having distinctive discursive features and effects and performing important social and cultural work suggests different directions for lyric studies.

The seven chapters of the book serve as seven takes on lyric theory. The first sets the breadth and poses key questions: through masterful interpretations of paradigmatic poems of the Western lyric tradition (by Sappho, Horace, Petrarch, Goethe, Leopardi, Baudelaire, Lorca, Williams, and Ashbery), Culler identifies four interrelated parameters as central to lyric discourse. The first parameter is the unique "enunciative apparatus" with a range of effects of voicing and aurality; the second is the non-mimetic character and the way lyric creates a poetic event; the third is the ritualistic element that helps readers remember and re-activate poems; and the fourth is the hyperbolic quality through which poems typically imagine transformative experiences. The subsequent chapters of the book explore these parameters in depth, while adding several further aspects.

In discussing lyric as a genre, for instance, Culler maintains that genre categories can be effective tools to analyze how knowledge is accumulated and transformed over time. He argues that genre is essential as "it is at the level of genre that [literature] has a history" (89). Genre study demonstrates how certain discursive possibilities change or remain available and appealing throughout centuries; eventually, he writes, a genre is "a historically evolving set of possibilities with potential to surprise" (90). The book serves as a masterful demonstration of such an approach.

The chapter on theories of the lyric puts Hegel in the focus and proposes a revised interpretation of his robust model of lyric subjectivity. In Culler's reading, Hegelian subjectivity is not a straightforward equivalent for the expression of individual experience. Rather, it works to create a formal unity: instead of a means of individuation, poetic subjectivity as a "formal unifying function for lyric" (105) becomes a vessel for the articulation of universal experience and invites the reader's identification. Besides Hegel, Culler finds lyric performativity and Roland Greene's notion that lyric works

in the tension between the fictional and the ritualistic as theoretically most relevant.

The chapter on rhythm and repetition argues that rhythm creates a primary physical experience: it elicits a strong bodily response and makes poems stick in the mind. Also, through the use of powerful formulaic language, poems can effectively renew perception, inform and shape future experience. Therefore, instead of recuperating a poem's rhythm into various interpretations, we should make an effort to account for its effect: "rhythm seems not so much a matter of interpretation as a direct experience, the result of a rhythmic competence, though mediated by culture; it thus offers a somatic experience that seems to have a different status than the comprehension of a poem" (171). Enlisting Amittai Aviram's and Mutlu Blasing's recent work on the materiality of poetic language, Culler provocatively argues that rhythm means a break away from semantic reference: rhythm in the broadest possible sense is "an event without representation" (138). With its incantatory sound effects and the force of a ritual, poetic language relies not so much on individuation, Culler insists, but on shared psychological and social aspects of language use—rhythm moves us away from both mimesis and subjectivity.

The section on lyric address reconsiders the significance of apostrophe and indirection: such forms mark the speech as lyric discourse, create the visionary poetic "I," and offer a stance for the reader to embody—a vatic stance pervades the lyric tradition even when poets resist it. For Culler the various forms of indirection count as ritualistic elements; therefore, a poem should be considered an event with the performance of the prospective audience in view, rather than a reflection or a meditation overheard. *Theory of the Lyric* moves the emphasis from the meditative, singular, and subjective lyric to the celebratory, ritualistic, and communal effects that subtend the genre. Also, by way of forms of indirection, lyric resists the disenchantment of the world and, Culler notes, in a gesture towards the nonhuman turn in criticism, that poets have not only granted agency to nonhuman beings and have imagined a sentient universe, but were the first to probe the divide between the human and the nonhuman.

In the chapter somewhat misleadingly entitled "Lyric Structure," Culler discusses Northrop Frye's *melos* and *opsis* (sound patterning and visual patterning), the ritualistic-fictional tension, and the lyric present. The complicated diagram that Culler sketches posits the fictional and ritual as two poles defining the domain of lyric and argues again for the strong pull of ritual. Lyric temporality as a specific discursive now—neither timeless, nor eternal, nor outside of time, but creating an iterable moment and thus a vital connection between the present of lyric utterance and the present of reading—counts as an

effect of ritual and a key to the epideictic function of lyric: while it keeps a distance, lyric discourse has statements to offer that pertain to the reader's present.

The last and perhaps most exciting section considers the sociopolitical engagement of lyric. While the situatedness of a poem in its actual historical context is one thing, Culler emphasizes, its reception in an entirely different context is another. Lyric poems yield a wide range of readings, including dialectically opposed ones, and, through the indeterminacy of meaning and memorable verbal patterning, they can work subliminally: in the case of lyric, "much of its social efficacy may depend on its ability to embed itself in the mind of readers . . . as instances of alterity that can be repeated, considered, treasured, or ironically cited" (305). The claim that lyric is not mimetic is at the heart of this chapter. In reference to Jacques Rancière's idea of the aesthetic regime, Culler contends that lyric poems participate in the social not through representation, as most historicist readings assume, but through the "restructuring of the sensuous and affective domain of life" (330) and through creating memorable language that can infiltrate, expose, and critique ideologies. Yet, this social effect, which Culler demonstrates with readings of W. H. Auden's "September 1, 1939" in the aftermath of 9/11, is not unproblematic, since exactly the epideictic and ritual function of poetry, the strong appeal of poetic phrases, could result in selective appreciation and misreading which returns us to a controversial claim of the book: Culler contends that producing ever more insightful interpretations is not the end goal in our encounters with poems; hermeneutics should give way to a range of approaches, such as appreciation, memorization, imitation, translation, and so on. While this provocative position holds much truth and is laudable in an age of popular and spoken word poetic forms, Culler casts doubt on it in the last chapter and points out the need for a rigorous interpretative practice.

One of the merits of *Theory of the Lyric* is that, while it engages with an astounding range of historical and recent lyric theories, it also keeps the general audience in view. Culler, one of the most erudite scholars in the field, never misses the appeal and breadth of the genre. Understandably, the book remains firmly within the core of the Western lyric tradition; testing Culler's claims in other poetics and, most importantly, with poems that do not confirm so easily his idea of lyric, could yield exciting challenges.

Independent Researcher, Budapest