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Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2015. 416pp. $39.95. £29.95. ISBN 9780674744264.

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Jonathan Culler's *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (2011) has won the hearts of many for its clarity and common sense approach to knotty and often abstruse theoretical questions. His latest book, *Theory of the Lyric*, has the same deftly illuminating touch, while delving into much greater detail, and arguing more forcefully his own particular angle on the subject. The subject here is lyric poetry and how most of us (academic specialists) do not know what lyric poetry is or how to read it, let alone teach it to undergraduates. Not that Culler himself would state the case in such aggressive terms; as a writer and interlocutor, he sounds unfailingly patient, rational, and persevering. Nevertheless his "Introduction" spotlights some very common approaches to lyric poetry, all of which, he argues, have led to misunderstandings about what lyric is and how it operates. Since the nineteenth century, the traditional approach has been to focus on the enunciation of the "I" of the poet; lyric poetry is here a medium for subjective, personal expression. Currently academic orthodoxy, by contrast, distances the poem from its author and assumes the text is spoken by a fictional persona in a secondary, fictional world; the "I" of the poem is here a "speaker" in a dramatic monologue. Culler argues against both these approaches since, on the one hand, lyric address is rarely direct and personal, and on the other, it rarely constructs fictional worlds which would sustain a character, motivation, plot or event.

Two other widely accepted practices also invoke his critique: historicism and hermeneutics. To the historicist claim that there cannot be a theory of the lyric that transcends a poem's historical context, Culler objects that poets themselves strive to create transhistorical lineages, and poetic genres are always in the process of evolution and transformation across time (3). Finally Culler argues that lyric poems don't require us to produce new interpretations. Poetics should not concern itself with asking, "what does this mean?" but should rather seek to understand and explain the techniques that make

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meaning possible (6). Culler's book certainly provides an excellent example of the critical approach that focuses on the "how" rather than the "what" of lyric poetry. But in practice, when one comes to discuss individual poems, it's difficult even for Culler to avoid the "what." Rather ironically, one thing this magisterial work of theory does is open the way for many more nuanced interpretations of lyric poems.

Indeed, a particular strength of Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* is that it develops its theoretical positions through readings of poetry, rather than the other way around. Thus in Chapter One, entitled "An Inductive Approach," he begins "not with definitions but with prototypes" (10), which leads him to range widely through Greek, Latin, German, French, Italian, English, and American poetry, leapfrogging ably from classical to contemporary periods. With Sappho's address to Aphrodite, we're introduced to the idea of lyric as performative act, rather than reported or represented event. Aphrodite appears to arrive in the poem as Sappho invokes her presence; thus lyric strives to *be* the event, rather than narrate it (10). This poem also introduces us to Culler's notion of triangulated address, whether the poem voices an address to a silent human auditor, very often by means of an apostrophe to an impossible, non-human listener (in this case, the goddess of love). Lyrics like this one are also characteristically ritualistic, and act in the way charms do, to invoke supernatural events.

Next, Horace and Petrarch provide examples of poems addressing readers in the distinctive present tense of lyric, without this address necessarily issuing from a fully fictionalised speaker or persona. The refrain of Goethe's famous "Heidenröslein" (Heath Rose) pulls the narrated event into an eternal present, demonstrating again how lyric tends to performing the "now" rather than recalling the past (21). With Baudelaire's "A une passante" ("To a Woman Passing By"), the issue becomes more complicated since a substantial portion of the poem narrates a past event. Culler argues that the narration operates within a present-tense lyric frame, but does this mean that the narrated episode isn't lyric, or isn't fully in the past? And what of the different voices of the poem, the one in the poem (which other critics would refer to as the "speaker"), who lacks emotional control or hope, and the other voice (the poet's), who is supremely in control of the poem's rhythm and structure?

Full of the music of these and other poems—by Leopardi, Lorca, William Carlos Williams, and John Ashberry, Culler steers us gracefully toward four parameters for lyric poetry that he sets out at the end of the first chapter. Lyric is characterised by 1) the complexity of the enunciative apparatus, meaning that lyric creates effects of voicing, without necessarily creating speakers or voices; 2) performativity, in that it strives to be the event; 3) ritualistic aspect, including incantatory rhythms, refrains, etc.; and 4) hyperbole, or characteristically extravagant modes of address. Later chapters develop these ideas from different angles and in greater detail, so that Culler's study partakes of one aspect of lyric that he praises: repetition as an aid to memorability.

The second chapter thus adopts a different tack to arrive at similar theoretical conclusions. Here in "Lyric as Genre," Culler traces the development of lyric, beginning with the ancient Greeks who thought of lyric as "oracular speech that produces truth" (49) and who subdivided the genre into charmingly specific sub-categories such as the lyric of rejected lovers, virgins, processions, hymns, praises, banquets, marriages, victories, thanks, and farewell. From Pindar through Horace and Catullus, troubadour lyrics, and Ronsard, Culler pursues his theme that (*pace* Aristotle) lyric poetry is rarely imitative of reality, and neither is it typically confessional, but instead performs, reflects, advises and warns a public audience. With Romantic theory and practice comes the idea that lyric poetry expresses (like the lamp, rather than the mirror, in M. H. Abrams's formulation), and the expression is of passionate feeling. In reaction against poetry's vatic utterance, in France, with Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and Verlaine, lyric becomes the ground for thematic and formal experiment (76). If modernist (and now postmodernist) poets in England resist the unity of voice and subjectivity associated with lyric, nevertheless their assaults on the lyric tradition only work because a sense of that tradition persists, Culler rightly argues. He thus arrives at a second account of lyric as "the Western tradition of short, non-narrative highly rhythmical productions, often stanzaic, whose aural dimension is crucial" (89).

In Chapter Three, "Theories of Lyric," Culler takes us on a tour round modern and contemporary theoretical discussion of lyric, from Hegel through Käte Hamburger's influential *The Lyrical Genre* and its translation into French to Anglo-American theory, in particular that of Barbara Hernstein-

Smith. Culler finds objectionable Hernstein-Smith's view that lyric poems "represent personal utterances," unsurprisingly, since for him, they are unrepresentational, not personal or confessional, and not utterances voiced by speakers. But while Culler is convincing in his critique of the notion of lyric *personae*, it's harder to grasp what, in his view, the lyric subject is, or how we should describe or talk about the "I" in lyric poems. When I call to mind specific poems that have especially moved me, it's hard not to identify the poem's "I" with a particular voice and even poetic life-project (or poetic arc?). Seamus Heaney's "The Blackbird of Glanmore" is far more moving if one knows the biographical circumstances (the death of Heaney's brother at age 4), the fact that a poem echoes an earlier, powerfully raw poem on the same subject, and its placement (last) in the volume which suggests that the subject of the poem is not only Christopher's disappearance but the poet's too. There does seem to *be* a lyric subject, even if it's more ghostly and difficult to grasp than we might at first think. But while radically illuminating on what it's *not*, Culler seems to shy away from describing what a lyric subject *is.* This may be a deliberate strategy to downplay an aspect of lyric that has been granted exaggerated importance in the past. But if the lyric subject is ghostly, a voicing rather than a voice, something that can never be grasped, still it seems inherent to the process of reading that we should *try* to grasp it.

One of the delightful tensions of *Theory of the Lyric* is the way its author pieces together a meticulously rational account to argue for a greater appreciation of lyric poetry's sub-rational, somatic effects. The fourth chapter, "Rhythm and Repetition," gets to the heart of this matter. Like the sublime, rhythm is beyond representation (165); it gives a somatic quality to words (138) such that we seem to hear, not a speaker's utterance but "language echoing itself" (134). If lyric's origins are in religious chant and incantation, its rhythmic patterning retains that original function. Rhythm is what urges us not to understand what the poetry is saying, but to learn it by heart. Culler describes this force as a release from the drive towards meaning; rhythm makes us feel free (167). In conclusion he cites a brilliant passage from Stephen Booth's *Precious Nonsense:* the human mind "'wants to understand what it does not understand'; it works away at it for years, until it understands. 'What does the mind have then? What it wanted? No. What it has is understanding of something that it now understands.'" Whereas the poem, paraphrases Culler, "in giving us an impression of the rightness of what we

don't understand, . . . has 'the ability . . . to free us from the limits of the human mind.'" This is, Culler adds, "a miniature version of the sublime, to which rhythm, along with other forms of repetition, energetically ministers" (185).

Culler's chapter on rhythm argues persuasively for attention to poetry's aural effects, its *melos* rather than its *opsis.* As he rightly shows, rhythmic effects precede the meaning of words, and words in poetry are often memorable for their aural effects rather than their meaning. It remains to be questioned, though, whether rhythm is something separable from meaning altogether. While I agree with Culler's view that it is limiting to consider rhythm only in the way it contributes to semantic meaning, I think there are other forms of meaning in rhythm of which we need to be aware. If a critic's task is to understand whether a poem "works" and if so, how, this judgement has something to do with the meaningfulness of its rhythm. As an amateur musician, I'm immediately aware of a professional player's greater skill in directing the rhythm of their playing towards a specific interpretation; every note has a direction and intentionality within a structured sound pattern. Particular phrasing (including rhythm) is chosen to communicate a particular mood, colour or intensity. The risk, in describing rhythm as a form of the sublime, is to suggest that rhythm's function is to frustrate and break down communication, whereas I think the reverse is often the case.

Chapter Five circles back to the question of address, allowing Culler this time to unfold the distinctiveness of lyric enunciation. Still working through a rich poetic field, Culler demonstrates how lyric address is often ritualistic; it deploys the vocative to call another into the poem's presence; and this invocation characteristically happens now, in the poem's present tense. Finally, he points out, this other being invoked in lyric poetry is often something that can't answer: a tree, a river, an animal or a god, so a silent human addressee may also be assumed to be present (lyric's distinctive "triangulation of address," 242). Through this hyperbolic mode of address, lyric "risks animating the world" (38). This brings Culler's theory into close alignment with ecocriticism, since both approaches underline how poetry strives to transcend anthropocentric perspectives. An astonishing poem by A. R. Ammons called "Aubade" helps Culler articulate the nature of this non-human addressee:

I don't mean "you" as anyone in particular

but I mean the center of motions millions of
years have taught us to seek . . .

. . . it is a yearning
like a painful sweetness, a nearly reachable

presence that nearly feels like love (238)

Long before ecocriticism, Culler argues, poets "have risked embarrassment in addressing things that could not hear in an attempt to give us a world that is perhaps not more intelligible but more in tune with the passionate feelings, benign, hostile, and ecstatic, that life has inspired" (242).

In Chapter Six, "Lyric Structures," Culler considers Northrop Frye's mapping of lyric into two sets of opposing poles: *melos* (sound, "charm") versus *opsis* (visual image, riddle), and "inscape" (expression) versus "outscape" (mimetic representation) (247). In Culler's view, *melos* is indispensible to lyric, while *opsis* is optional. Expressing a self, too, seems central to lyric, whereas representation signals that we have reached its outer edges. Dramatic monologues such as Browning's, in which a speaker relates a past anecdote, are so far from lyric's central ground that they have practically tipped over into fiction (258). One might question whether the lines between lyric and other genres are as clearly visible as Culler here and elsewhere suggests. Surely, for example, modernist fiction borrows lyric strategies in its rhythmic patterning, disruption of temporal sequence, and expressive narrative voicing. On the other hand, Culler's account of the "iterable *now* of lyric enunciation" would seem to be specific to short forms of writing (289). Nevertheless, there are oddities of time in fiction as well as epic poetry; and all of these oddities, not just lyric enunciation's, are repeated every time the work is read.

In his closing chapter, Culler rebuts the characterisation of lyric as a "language cut off from worldly purposes" (296). On the contrary, in his account we find lyric making claims about the world, engaging the reader's ethical sense, and making itself publically heard. Not only does lyric have things to say to society, it has an armoury of strategies to make itself remembered, "to embed itself in the mind of readers, to invade and occupy it, to be taken in, introjected, or housed as instances of alterity that can be

repeated, considered, treasured, or ironically cited" (305). Culler confronts the paradox, however, that while lyric poems may seek to challenge social orthodoxies in complex ways, often they are not remembered for their revolutionary iconoclasm but for their sound-effects and short, more graspable, turns of phrase. A poem's relation to society is thus highly unpredictable, and highly variable over time, as Culler illustrates with reference to Auden's "September 1, 1939." This poem, while rejected by Auden himself, has been much treasured and quoted by readers since, especially the line, "we must love one another or die," which Auden refuted as "a damned lie!" (340).

That critics should resist "producing new interpretations" seems to me a Quixotic aim, since that is what reading inevitably does, even reading as rigorously theoretical as Culler's. If lyric has a social function, as Culler argues in this last chapter, then it must be absorbed and "introjected," which are also forms of interpretation. Culler recalls that Renaissance readers mined lyric poetry for maxims, as indeed they did with drama and epic, while modern readers continue to cull messages from texts ("we must love one another or die"). Interpretation of what we read, see, hear seems hard-wired into human consciousness, and it's hard to see the value, even if it were possible, of exempting critics from this process. But other aspects of lyric poetry come sharply into focus, for the first time in this ground-breaking study. Lyric's invocation of the non-human other deserves greater critical attention, especially in a generation for whom ecological questions are becoming increasingly important. Triangulation of address may be found in other literary genres, but the configuration Culler describes does seem to belong distinctively to lyric poetry. If we have become skilled in reading poetic images and metaphors, we need to sharpen our ears to appreciate the soundscapes of lyric poetry, as Culler convincingly shows. No other work in English that I know of marshals current thinking on the lyric so comprehensively nor with such steady, penetrating intelligence. For anyone interested in poetry, whether lyric or otherwise, this book should be essential reading.