

Poetics, Fictionality, and the Lyric

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ABSTRACT: Benjamin Hrushovski's important contributions to a systematic poetics make what he calls an "Internal Field of Reference" a necessary feature of a literary work. How does this adaptation of the concept of fictional world work for the genre of the lyric poem? This essay argues that in taking fictionality as a norm, this framework produces a distorted model for the lyric and that one would do better to adopt Käte Hamburger's distinction between fictional discourse and lyric and to treat lyric as fundamentally a nonmimetic, nonfictional discourse that makes claims about the world. Roland Greene's conception of a foundational tension between fictional and ritualistic elements in the lyric is a useful corrective, but often in the lyric the ritualistic dominates the fictional and prevents it from being a necessary condition of literariness.

AS FOUNDER OF THE Porter Institute of Poetics and Semiotics at Tel Aviv University and of the journal *Poetics Today*, Benjamin Hrushovski (as Harshav was then known) articulated a vision of a poetics that would stand to literature as linguistics stands to language: attempting to provide a model that would account for the nature and functioning of the works we call literature. As early as 1968, in "The Elusive Science of Literature," he called for the "vigorous development of a systematic poetics," arguing that it is "only poetics which can provide a systematic description of literature as a whole, can embody within one system the scientific assessment of its parts and heterogeneous phenomena, and can provide the rational tools and methods for the study of specific issues and texts."¹ His various essays on aspects of poetics were contributions to a "systematic, comprehensive theory of the work of literature," as he put it in the preface to *Explorations in Poetics* (7), which collected a number of these. Unfortunately,

¹ Benjamin Harshav [Hrushovski], *Explorations in Poetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 239, 238. Hereafter, page numbers to this work will be given in the text.

in the period when it would have been most positively received—the heyday of structuralism—Hrushovski did not produce the long-planned, comprehensive work, several times outlined, and so never rivaled in fame theorists such as Gérard Genette, who did produce a systematic account of one part of this field. But taken together, Hrushovski’s essays constitute a formidable body of work and provide stimulating and very useful accounts of a range of issues, especially the functioning of sound patterns in poetry and the relations between literariness and fictionality.

In his 1989 essay “Literariness Revisited,” revised for *Explorations in Poetics*, he takes up the problem of developing a theory of literariness or literary form that applies to lyric poetry as well as to narrative fiction—scarcely an easy task. Rejecting the identification of literariness with the poetic function of language, since all candidates for the title of literariness can be observed outside literature as well as within it, he argues that “we are dealing with multi-dimensional objects with changing and optional forms on all levels and in all aspects” (166). This means that such elements as meter, rhyme, plot, and character appear only in some literary works, not all. But he goes on to maintain that there is one principle exclusive to literature: “A literary text is a text which projects an *Internal Field of Reference*. At the same time the text or the readers’ construct from it may refer to *External Fields of Reference* as well,” but “the projection of an Internal Field of Reference (IFR) is a unique and necessary though not sufficient condition for a text to be a work of literature” (169).

The notion of internal field of reference replaces that of the fictional world of the text, but it functions in much the same way, as a version of fictionality, as he makes clear in “Fictionality and Fields of Reference,” the opening essay of *Explorations in Poetics*. Works establish their internal field of reference and simultaneously refer to it, and their assertions are true of this internal field of reference: statements about Emma Bovary are true within this internal field of reference. He notes that literary works also contain references to external fields of reference, as in novels that discuss the society of a particular time and place, but the internal field of reference is necessary to the literary work.

This account has the disadvantage, for any theory of lyric poetry, of assimilating lyric to fiction.² Many lyric poems seem fictional in that they are products of the imagination but they seek to make assertions about the world. Pindar’s odes, long regarded as the acme of lyric achievement in the ancient world, celebrate the victors of real-world contests and articulate virtues that citizens are urged to cultivate. These poems are public acts of ceremonious praise that address central issues of the day, attributing to victorious individuals values that are to be recommended. Today as well, many lyrics are statements with real illocutionary force, seeking to persuade listeners to take a particular view of an issue or problem, as in Philip Larkin’s most famous poem, “This Be the Verse,” which begins,

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.

² For a fuller discussion of this problem, see Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), esp. chap. 3.

The frame of reference here is not internal but external—not some fictional mum and dad. And the poem makes this clear when it concludes with an apothegm about our world and a recommendation for action:

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 fiction make little allowance for such poems, which appear throughout the history of the genre; they claim to offer truths, to cast values in a new light, to disclose aspects of the world, and to praise what should be noted and remembered, but they claim especially to offer thought in memorable form. Classicist Mark Payne writes, “I do not think that we yet have a good way of naming the conceptual resources of the lyric in this regard. None of the available terms—*gnome*, *sententia*, maxim, and so on—seem to me to capture what is distinctively lyric, namely the sense of the sudden emergence of new conceptual possibilities. The terms we have equate universality with the preconceived, the proverbial, the commonplace, whereas what we have here is, by contrast, the novel, the unexpected, the unthinkable.”³

Twentieth-century criticism has been inclined to ignore this crucial dimension of lyric and to treat poems as the discourse of a fictional speaker, whose situation (read “fictional world”) must be reconstructed so that a poem’s assertions may be relativized to that fictional condition and frame of reference. Critics since the mid-twentieth century have made it an article of faith that, as John Crowe Ransom put it, “[t]he 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 the illusion and the enjoyment.” From there it takes only a small leap for Ransom to conclude that the poem “may be said to be a dramatic monologue. . . . Browning only literalized and made readier for the platform or the concert hall the thing that had always been the poem’s lawful form.”⁴ It takes a powerful ideology to imagine other forms of lyric as unlawful.

Taking lyric to be fiction, literary pedagogy and to some extent literary criticism have indeed taken the dramatic monologue as the model for lyric. But the dramatic monologue is only a particular form of lyric, a special case, and not a general model. A more promising approach is that of the German theorist Käte Hamburger, whose discussion “The Lyrical Genre” in *The Logic of Literature* distinguishes two logical possibilities: a linguistic sequence can be the statement of a real subject about an object or a function that creates fictive subjects and thus mimetic forms. The latter function does not belong to the statement system of language: the author uses language to create a fictional representation of reality, in the form of fictional characters who may speak. Mimesis of enunciation is thus distinguished from real enunciation, and lyric belongs to real enunciation or statement, nonmimetic and nonfictive. Our experience of a novel, she writes, is very different from our experience of a poem, which is the statement of a subject and not the representation of a fictional utterance or statement. “The much disputed lyric I is a statement

³ Mark Payne, “Ideas in Lyric Communication: Pindar and Celan,” *Modern Philology* 105 (2007): 14.

⁴ John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1938), 254–55.

subject” (or “subject of enunciation,” *ein Aussagesubjekt*), and its statements are real propositions of the experience of an object (*Wirklichkeitsaussage*).⁵

This statement subject is not a personal “I” but a linguistic function. Since the statement subject is a subject of enunciation and not a person, “the concept of subjectivity,” Hamburger writes, “will be eliminated from the theory of the lyric, and it will be possible to categorize even the most modern forms and theories of lyric poetry—such as text and text theory—within this generic concept” (235). “What distinguishes the experience of lyric poetry from that of a novel or a drama is that we do not experience a poem’s statements as semblance, as fiction or illusion” (271). The force of her argument is thus to distinguish the mediating function of fictional assertions, which posit a fictional narrator and fictional world, from lyric assertions, which we receive directly, as statements of a lyric subject. There is a crucial difference between treating the lyric as projecting a fictional world, with a fictional speaker-persona, and maintaining that the lyric makes real statements about this world, even though the relation of these statements to the experience of the author is indeterminate.⁶

Hamburger’s insistence that lyric is not a fictional mode, that lyrics do not project a fictional world but make reality statements about this world, has the implication, significant for a theory of the lyric, that lyrics can tell truths and can also lie. That poets lie is a long-standing accusation, which critics and theorists have too often sought to rebut by treating lyric as fiction, but the risk that alleged truths might be lies is a cost of trying to speak of the world and make it intelligible. Without the possibility of lies, there is no truth.

There are two other points to emphasize in pursuing Hamburger’s line of thinking, which puts the theory of the lyric on a promising track. First, the terms “fiction” and “fictional” bring confusion to reflection on lyric. In English “fiction” means novels and short stories—you don’t find poetry in the fiction section of a bookstore or library. But we consider all literature fictional in the sense that it is a creation of the imagination: poems may recount experiences that did not or do not occur, and the subject of enunciation implied by first-person statements of a poem can appear just as fictional as the narrator of a novel or short story, in the sense that both are invented. But to speak of a fictional speaker or fictional speech act risks deploying for lyric a model based on fiction and thus implicitly assimilating poetry to fictional narrative and neglecting its distinguishing features.

Second, while lyric is not fiction, it may contain fictional elements. In fact, we have a well-established term for poems that contain representations of the linguistic act of a fictional speaker: the dramatic monologue (*Rollengedicht* in German) combines features of the lyric and of fiction. In distinguishing lyric from dramatic monologue, Hamburger’s theory has the great virtue of resisting the dominant tendency of twentieth-century lyric pedagogy: treating lyric as a mimetic form and reading poems as if they were minifictions. Her work is valuable in taking the essential first step of treating lyric enunciation not as the fictional imitation of an ordinary speech act but as a linguistic event of another type, an act of poetic enunciation that one can attribute—why not?—to the poet, but a poet who remains in a biographically indeterminate relation to the claims of the poem itself.

⁵ Käte Hamburger, *The Logic of Literature*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 233–34. Hereafter, page numbers to this work will be given in the text.

⁶ Certainly the historical range of lyrics suggests that the relation between the subject of lyric sentences and the poet as biographical individual is indeterminate, and any model of the lyric that attempts to fix or prescribe that relationship will be inadequate.

For lyric, what we need is not a theory of fictionality but an alternative model. In the Western lyric tradition, the best model is that of lyric as epideictic discourse, a form of oratory, as it was for the Greeks: a public discourse articulating values, distributing praise and blame. This is not to say that lyrics do not contain fictional elements. Often they do, but they are not necessary or even central to the lyric. Lyrics often have minimal plots, or anecdotes (though usually related to a present of enunciation in which their significance is articulated or else left for readers to infer). And lyrics sometimes have fictional characters, either characterized speakers or protagonists who act. What we require, then, is 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, and the crucial step is to reject this as a general model for the lyric and treat it as one possibility among others: a particular determination of lyric rather than the default model. We need a model that allows for it by acknowledging the tension in lyric between story and character, on the one hand, and song, on the other, but acknowledges the ultimate dominance of song as distinctive of lyric.

In his study of lyric sequences the Renaissance scholar Roland Greene posits a tension between fictional elements and what he calls the *ritualistic* dimension or ritualistic elements of lyric. In the case of the lyric sequence—a series of related poems in which a broad narrative is discernible—Greene maintains that “lyric discourse is defined by the dialectical play of ritual and fictional phenomena, or 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.”⁷ For him, the ritual element is everything that can be construed as “directions for a 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” (7). On the other hand, there is the fictional element, “where the poem’s voice is posited not as the reader-auditor but as character,” “where the history evoked by the work is not merely coextensive with its performance” but involves a plot and circumstances that suggest a fictional world (10). The fictional is not only what we produce when we attempt to imagine a fictional speaker and a situation of utterance, as in the dramatic monologue, but also the past events that are evoked in the act of lyric enunciation and subordinated in various ways to present meaning. The notion of a countervailing ritualistic dimension, while it alludes to anthropological and religious domains that may or may not be relevant, seems especially promising, for it captures first of all the principle of iterability (lyrics are constructed for repetition), along with a certain ceremoniousness and the possibility of making something happen in the world (practitioners of rituals hope they will be efficacious). The concept of ritual encourages concentration on the formal properties of lyric utterance, from rhythm and rhyme to other sorts of linguistic patterning.

Greene is studying not the lyric per se but the lyric sequence, from Petrarch to Neruda, where a series of lyrics from one author creates an impetus to posit a fictional world, a plot of some kind, and a speaker-character with divergent moods. In his account of the lyric sequence he is inclined to grant equivalence to these two elements or modes, the ritualistic and the fictional: “A

⁷ Roland Greene, *Post-Petrarchism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 5. Hereafter, page numbers to this work will be given in the text.

poem that seems to embody one of these phenomena will nearly always see the alternative mode break forth, suddenly and incontestably, to interrogate it, and the critic who reads by passing over these interrogations will discover that certain of lyric's resources, and much of its appeal, must remain unaccountable" (11).

It is certainly true that a focus on the fictional element alone, which the model of lyric as dramatic monologue promotes, leaves unaccountable many other elements, and especially the appeal of lyric that depends on its ritualistic aspects. These require that we right the balance. Whether a neglect of the fictional, in the case of individual lyrics that do not have speakers, has unhappy consequences is less certain. In a lyric sequence such as Petrarch's *Canzoniere* or Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, the tension between the ritualistic and the fictional is clearly central—readers struggle to find a plot but keep encountering rhyme schemes, figurative structures, and all these distracting ritualistic elements—but in individual lyrics the fictional may not make itself felt, except if imposed by our critical model of lyric. Moreover, lyrical sequences with reconstructable plots are relatively rare. Many sonnet sequences are better seen as erotic liturgies rather than stories, as C. S. Lewis notes.⁸ Most lyrics are encountered either in isolation or in a collection where there may be little plot to reconstruct and where attention naturally falls on the range of affects, the characteristic verbal and rhythmical techniques, and the general ethos of the poems. In Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, for instance, there is no real plot, despite efforts of critics to find one, nor a consistent fictional speaker, despite the ubiquity of the first person. The collection's attraction lies especially in the range of attitudes brilliantly made available, as readers accede to a distinctive vision of the world—not a fictional universe but our world, in all its grim and nefarious seductiveness. In some lyric sequences and in dramatic monologues the fictional may trump the ritualistic, but the opposite is far more common, though seldom explicitly acknowledged. For the lyric in general, criticism must resist the dominance of the fictional, lest the distinctiveness of lyric be lost.

Of course, there would be ways of adjusting Harshav's model to make it fit the lyric. After all, it does allow for external reference, and it insists that literary reference is "double-directed," toward aspects of the eternal world as well as toward the lyric's fictional world. But insistence on the necessity of an internal field of reference as a defining characteristic of the literary creates an unfortunate emphasis. During his discussion of internal fields of reference he cites Keats's "To Autumn," arguing that while *autumn* might seem an external reference, "in Keats's poem 'To Autumn' we are presented with an Internal FR and cannot ask whether it is true or false outside of it. The selection of referents in this poem, making up the presentation of 'Autumn,' is unique and not arguable" (170). Certainly there is a sense in which this is true: we cannot argue that Autumn does not sit "careless on the granary floor" or "keep / Steady" her laden head across a brook, but is it not more accurate to say that this is because these are figurative elements enlisted in the evocation and celebration of autumn, a real season and not just a mental one? If we take this poem as truly a celebration of autumn, counterpoint to the usual celebration of spring and seeking to make the case that "thou hast thy music too," then we can indeed disagree about whether the mourning of gnats, singing of hedge crickets, and twittering of swallows are indeed musical, and whether Keats has made his case for autumn. The frame of fictionality distracts

⁸ Lewis maintains 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 help' 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." C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 491.

us from concentration on the poem as ritualistic discourse, as phonological and figurative patterning, made to be repeated as a claim about our world. Harshav's own insistence that the literary works are "multi-dimensional objects with changing and optional forms on all levels and in all aspects" (166) ought to permit us to make fictionality a possible dimension rather than a necessary one. A