

FROM RHETORIC TO DECONSTRUCTION

Lecture Ten: Lyric Poetry

THE EXPRESSIVE AND THE MIMETIC

Lyric: non-narrative poetry. But consider Aristotle's definition: "the poet may imitate by narration—in which case he can either take another personality as Homer does, **or speak in his own person unchanged...**" Underlying it is the idea that the end of the poem is the imitation of action—even that of the lyrical poem. As the poet's relation to his work is most directly personal in lyric poetry, the expressive constituent became more prominent than the mimetic. Hence the concept of the lyric as a non-narrative poem, expressing a state of mind, a mood, the growth of one's thought, etc. But note that most lyric poems have a "narrative base" and can be described in terms of action. Very apparent in Imagism, the most restrictive movement in modern English & American poetry, as, for instance, in "**All the while they were talking the new morality / Her eyes explored me. / And when I arose to go / Her fingers were like the tissue / Of a Japanese paper napkin**" (Ezra Pound, "The Encounter").

VOICE, SPEAKER, PERSONA

T. S. Eliot in "The Three Voices of Poetry" (1953): the voices we hear in a poem are
the voice of the poet talking to himself or to nobody,
the voice of the poet addressing an audience,
the voice of the poet when he creates a dramatic character speaking in verse.

The second voice clearly raises the question of who speaks in the poem? (It is also implied in the first.) Is the speaker identical with the poet as Eliot implies? Even when the figure in the poem seems identical with the poet, there is some distance between this figure and the man who wrote the poem > the speaker of a poem is a character invented for a particular purpose: **persona** (role, mask). Very apparent in dialogue poems presenting divided states of mind (Yeats, "Dialogue of Self and Soul").

DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE, DRAMATIC LYRIC

Eliot's third voice: persona not truly dramatic; rather: a character presenting himself (personal qualities, temperament, etc.) at a significant or critical moment in his life, in a special situation, speaking to someone whose presence is not directly revealed but can be inferred. Perfected by Robert Browning > **dramatic monologue** (Browning's "My Last Duchess," T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," W. H. Auden's "A Bride in the 1930's," Douglas Dunn, "A Gardener Speaks, in the Grounds of a Great House, to His Lordship"). One of the dominant forms of English poetry from the late 19th c. to the present. In finer classification distinguished from the **dramatic lyric** in which what is revealed is not the lyric speaker's personal qualities, but his thoughts (Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," although his thoughts are meant to reveal his personal qualities as they are now—full self-consciousness—and as once they were—naivety, unconsciousness of self).

CONTROL OF EMOTION

Most important consideration for the lyric poet: the way emotion is expressed. (Thought arises out of emotion, but thought also gives rise to emotion). A problem since poetry became reflective. Theoretically first addressed by Friedrich Schiller. Schieller contrasts contemporary forms of humanity with earlier ones. With the Greeks "sense [the emotional self] and intellect did not as yet rule over strictly separate domains," and human nature was not yet divided "into its several aspects," as with the moderns. The individual Greek qualified to be the representative of the whole of humanity, the individual modern man represents only a fragment of the "complete image of the species." The reason: the growing complexity of civilization, the growing oppressiveness of society (*Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man—Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* [1795]). The poets of antiquity spontaneous (at one with their world, presenting it, did not see themselves in opposition to it—the greatest punishment: banishment), modern poets reflective (in conflict with their world, they look at it from the outside; no totality; totality only an ideal; the real related to the ideal > reflectivity/criticism which either takes the form of **elegy** or **satire**) (*On Naive and Reflective Poetry—Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* [1795-6]). Still, this state is an advance on the naive state as it allows the artist greater freedom of approach to reality.

- What Schiller highlights is the danger of the poet as an alienated/fragmented being expressing his particular emotions or thoughts which may have nothing to do with those of others.
- The “naive” and the “reflective” states are not necessarily limited to particular epochs (Euripides already “reflective,” Shakespeare “naive”).
- Similar considerations at work in Wordsworth’s “Preface” to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800): “**All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.**” Poetry thus “**takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.**” A way of overcoming the split between intuition and intellect? The emotions reproduced by contemplation will be like the emotions of other men = personal emotions converted into common emotions. But this is an endorsement of the reflective state.
 - Consider the underlying idea of “Tintern Abbey” (1798): comparing what he was when he first came among these mountains and what he is now, the speaker of the poem describes the change as a gain:

... the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite: a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, ...

[But now he is]

... well-pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

T. S. Eliot’s theory about “the dissociation of sensibility” (the separation of thought from feeling), that is, the loss of the “unified sensibility” (the capacity for “a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling”) that the poets of the English Renaissance and the metaphysical poets of the 17th c. still had, rests on similar perceptions as Schiller’s essay (“The Metaphysical Poets” [1921]), but it exemplifies a conservative reaction (Sch. accepts the situation, Eliot disapproves of it).

The same objective pursued in different ways by modernist poets. **Imagism** inspired by the conviction that the poet should use “absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation” (F. S. Flint, “Imagisme” [1913]); that “the natural object is always the adequate symbol” (Ezra Pound in “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” [1913]). T. S. Eliot—despite his disagreement with the Wordsworthian formula—stressed the need to separate “the mind which creates” from “the man who suffers” (the progress of an artist: a continual extinction of personality; the poet’s task: not to express personal emotions, but to use the ordinary ones) (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” [1919]); the “objective correlative” (“Hamlet” [1919]).

Postmodern theories proposing the “death of the author” or reducing him to the status of medium through which particular meanings are conveyed carry the modernist position to extremes.