

Conclusion

The argument I have been advancing in this thesis is one that steers between two strongly opposed positions; as such, it will perhaps recommend itself to no-one.

On the one hand there are those who argue the traditional position that poetry is as it is because it is the nature of poetry to be the intense expression of personal emotion, couched in lyric modes. In support of this position its proponents can point to a lyric genealogy of poetry, stretching back to the Greek Lyric and embodied in the lyric history of pre-Romantic poetry. The latest expression of this idea is, as Paul de Man, for example, argues, that modernity itself, because of its final understanding of the nature of language, is lyric, and that this is a matter for celebration (176). Against this I have argued the historicity of the lyric and the emergence of lyric thinking at a certain point in critical thought. I have also shown how the lyric came to occupy the place it does in the criticism and production of poetry, by emphasising the series of changes in the sociology and technology of the production and consumption of literature in the early nineteenth century. The lyric is, in short, not a natural mode, but, like everything else, an historically contingent cultural construct. Hence, to underline my opposition to “manic” history, I have chosen for the title of this thesis de Man’s title, and I hope that it will be clear how different our versions of modernity are.

On the other hand there are those who would argue from a newer critical position; in their eyes a history of *the* lyric is the lyric’s own history and to write of the lyric is to give it a prominence in poetic history that it does not deserve. Against this I have argued that lyricism, in its widest sense, is central to Romantic poetics and that although the lyric itself is not a necessary outcome of Romantic poetics, *lyricism* certainly is. Furthermore the only mode that can produce the almost invariably short, typical modern poem, is the lyric.

I have, in support of my thesis, produced what is more or less a survey of a wide range of critical views and poetic practice. And this, with a few exceptions, ranges from the overtly lyrical, critics who argue for the lyric, poets who write only lyrics, to the covertly lyrical, poets who write lyricised longer poems, critics who practice lyric criticism by other names. An equivalent survey, dedicated to proving that the history of British poetry of the last 200 years is something other than lyrical, would have to show an equivalent range and depth of other-than-lyrical critical opinion and poetic practice. This would be an interesting project, but the contortions and special pleading that would accompany might, I suspect, point to its factitiousness.

What I have been arguing for is, then, a recognition of the modern British poem as a literary mode, consumed and produced by a small, though hard to categorise, social grouping, and having also a role in education, coming from a lyric past and characterised by lyricism; or perhaps, more accurately, *having lyricism as its chief rhetorical trope*.

It is appropriate at this point to acknowledge what has been left unexamined. Certainly I have not really touched upon the question of what a modern poetic ought to look like or do, if it is not simply to repeat a more traditional criticism. The second type of criticism I mentioned above would, no doubt, seek always to investigate the particular and the local circumstances of the production and consumption of the individual poetic work, or the poetic *oeuvre*. This is certainly an interesting and valid critical practice, but, as I noted above, it runs the ultimate risk of being more lyric than the lyric itself, in failing to recognise the wider context of the poetic work within critical and poetic practice. A fully local reading would be like an account of, say, *Citizen Kane*, which did not note that it was a film!

Certainly more work needs to be done, probably *à la Bourdieu*, on the details of poetic production and consumption in the various periods of the last 200 years and this would include a consideration of popular as well as “literary” poetry. I have said a little about this in this thesis, but my comments have been limited by the design of the dissertation and because I suspect that there would be astonishingly little change in the production and consumption of poetry within modernity to document. One of the things that cultural history finds most difficult to account for and describe is a *lack* of change, a static cultural field.

I have said little too about the contemporary field of poetry. This is again because I find very little change in the practice and publication of poetry, certainly since the

end of The Movement. It is the case that although all our work on the past is done for the sake of elucidating the present, it is the present which is the most recalcitrant of all periods to deal with.

There are presently a number of critical approaches to poetry: many of them share older or newer critical problems, or older *and* newer critical problems and I have touched on some of these in the course of, particularly, my last chapter. What I think is a fatal flaw in many of these approaches, post-modern or not, is the continued search for something *intrinsic* to poetry, or to language as revealed in poetry. We know that the interchange of influence between society and cultural productions is a two-way affair, social ideas and technologies influence poetry, to use this example, and poetry influences social ideas and technologies. But, the interchange, in this period at any rate, is not of the same order—the influence of poetry on society is much more difficult to account for and of a lesser degree than the influence of society on poetry. It hardly needs saying, of course, that the dichotomy I have just set up for the sake of my argument, between society and some of its cultural productions, is ultimately a meaningless one.

For what the considerations of this thesis have engendered in me is the belief that, on the one hand, poetry as a private and educational aesthetic practice is an area about which little can be said or done beyond the useful scholarly functions of description and discrimination, which I would certainly not wish to devalue, but that poetic criticism is of great interest as an index to the cultural poetics of modernity. This is not because of the superior truthfulness of poetry over prose, poetry is simply one language-game amongst many, but because, in the formation of modernity some of the tropes associated with lyric poetry came to slip across into other discourses, notably the discourses and technologies of subjectivity. Accordingly this thesis leads me, at any rate, towards a cultural poetics of other discourses, traditionally considered of less weight, and more quotidian import, than poetry, such as economic and political theory and practice.

So much, then, for these things.

Appendix: The Lyricised Epigram

We have seen that the advent of modernity brings with it lyricisation of all literary genres. This means then that the traditional lyric is selected as the most likely prototype for a new “supergenre” of poetry; its traditional low status and its previous associations are forgotten as it is elevated into the highest form of poetry. Not only this, but other genres are selected and subjected to a lyric criticism. The most obvious effect of this, over time, is that poems get shorter and shorter. Now there is one other traditional genre of poetry which is also traditionally short—the epigram, though it should be noted that the two genres were perfectly distinct before Romanticism. I should like in this appendix to give a few examples of the way in which the epigram and the lyric have been confused in Romantic criticism, thus demonstrating the lyricisation of the epigram. I should add, though, that the epigram has never received the sustained attention that the lyric has received, so this selection is a little patchy, though I have an interesting recent example.

In one of the few nineteenth-century critical treatments of the epigram, Davenport Adam’s Introduction to his anthology of 1879, the editor gives a genealogy of the epigram, which states that its highest point was the reign of Queen Anne (xv-xvi). Indeed, Adams believes that the epigram is now dead, and its function transferred to prose (xviii). Adams was properly Romantic in this, insofar as throughout his Introduction the epigram is figured as a dry, witty kind of poetry, the sort of poem which, in an age of true poetry, would turn to prose. He is still not lyrical enough, however, to meet with agreement in the twentieth century, which has tended to assimilate the epigram to the lyric (a confusion which dates back to Palgrave (Nixon 13)). For example George R. Hamilton, in a pamphlet on the epigram issued by the British Council, disputes Adam’s genealogy: the high point of the epigram is now the early nineteenth century, and Landor its greatest practitioner (19). Thus Hamilton conforms to the Romantic history of poetry, by making the eighteenth century the

slough from which poetry was rescued by the Romantic poets. Elsewhere in his monograph Hamilton comes up with a version of the trope of the poetic form's being too open-ended to be able to be defined:

As well as short, [the epigram] must be concise, which is not always the same thing.... In successful pieces we may find the flash of wit, the play of humour, or the sudden lift of beauty, but we cannot hope to tie up such virtues in a definition. (5)

The inescapable Geoffrey Grigson goes further than Hamilton; for him the epigram can approach the type of the ideal poem, which, needless to say is lyric:

To be curt is to be pointed, 'to the point'; and since poetry should always be to the point, as far as possible without superfluosity, that really is to say that a good epigram has simply to be a good poem. Like other poems it has to be a particular structure of general application. (*Epigrams* viii)

My two final examples of the lyricised epigram come from the United States. In an article written in epigrams in the *Dalhousie Review*, Robert Beum relates the epigram, despite its "Apollonian nature" to what Robert Graves described as "Muse Poetry" (46); by contrast to the Gravesian pointing to a canon which cannot be specified, which we saw in chapters three and six, Jerene Hewitt's unpublished thesis, "The Epigram in English", represents the Palgravian alternative. The first part of her thesis is an attempt to pin down the characteristics of a wide range of short poems in English; this she does in the genre of the epigram, though she prefers the term "the lyric epigram" to describe the most outstanding examples of the genre (92). The characteristics of the genre as a whole are for her:

1. Universality
2. Longevity
3. Vitality
4. Popularity
5. Rarity of Success
6. Width of Range (687)

But the characteristics of the "lyrical epigram" are:

Intensity

Largeness of Conception

Universal theme. Everyman. Search for the discovery of truth or wisdom.

Subject often one of philosophical concern.

Seemingly direct, actually indirect

Universal through the specific. Points way to larger picture. (689)

The bulk of her thesis, however, is taken up with a sort of anthology, an attempt to suggest a canon of the epigram "to substantiate the claim that the form has been vital

in every age" (92). And she continues "The lyrical epigram will be emphasized, because it has been neglected".

It is my thesis, however, that not only has the epigram/lyric not been neglected, but it has, since the early nineteenth century continued to receive obsessive overt or covert attention. Romantic accounts of the epigram equate it with the lyric using many of the tropes of lyric criticism, as with Hewitt's assertion of the epigram's generic continuity, vitality and identity over time, and of its neglect despite its self-evident value. Moreover her thesis falls squarely into the Palgravian tradition of anthologies, and her work on generics is on the generics of the always already lyricised lyric that has been our concern in this thesis too, though with different motives, and with a different methodology.

