the poetry of England is so much what it is, it is the poetry of the things which any of them are shut in in their daily completely daily island life. It makes very beautiful poetry because anything shut in with you can sing.... the life of the things shut up with that daily life is the poetry, think of all the lyrical poets, think what they say and what they have.

Gertrude Stein

Introduction:

The Long and Short of It

> **Lyric** .... *adj*..... Now used as the name for short poems (whether or not intended to be sung), usually divided into stanzas or strophes, and directly expressing the poet's own thoughts and sentiments.
>
> *OED*

> To discuss the length of poetry might seem at first sight a very trivial approach to a serious subject.
>
> Herbert Read (*Form* 61)

This thesis attempts a generic account of the Romantic lyric in Britain and argues that it is the major influence upon modern poetry.

However the wisdom of a generic account of poetry in a period largely dominated by Romantic ideas and ideology may well be doubted. Clifford Siskin, for one, has noted that Romanticism implies the lyricisation of *all* genres (3, 11 &c), so that a poem of whatever kind, or indeed any literary work, is not judged by reference to pre-existing ideas of what a particular genre should look like, or do, but by the amount of sincerity, truth or intensity it contains and whether it is appropriate and sufficient to these qualities.[1] Thus Foucault writes of the genesis of Literature at the beginning of the nineteenth century:

> it breaks with the whole definition of *genres* as forms adapted to an order of representations, and becomes merely a manifestation of language which has no other law than that of affirming ... its own precipitous existence; and so there is nothing for it to do but curve back in a perpetual return upon itself, as if discourse could have no other content than the expression of its own form. (300)

In addition a thorough-going Romanticism can wreak havoc with any scheme of classification because of its critical habits of absorbing and transcending opposites. For example, Robert Langbaum, in his *The Poetry of Experience*, claims the dramatic monologue as *the* modern poem and absorbs the lyric, along with lyricised drama, into an enlarged and lyrically charged genre:

> Ultimately, of course, the same thing is learned in all dramatic monologues, as in all dramatic lyrics and lyrical drama. They all mean the same thing—the greatest possible surge of life. (208)

It would be easy, though dishonest, of me to reverse Langbaum's procedure and absorb the dramatic monologue into the lyric (though, judging by the tone of his remarks, Langbaum would hardly object). I should probably begin by dividing the lyric into a dialectic of the singer and the song, the one the personality of the singer in the dramatic lyric, the other, lyric as a form. Then towards the end of my piece I should transcend the opposition by appealing to an authority such as Yeats and asking, rhetorically, whether, if the answer to his question "How can we tell the dancer from the dance?" is that we cannot, is it not also the case, then, that we cannot tell the singer from the song?

Instead of which I am concerned with the question of shortness. As Herbert Read noted, in the passage from which I have taken the epigraph to this chapter, the question of length is a rather disconcerting one. Read himself stumbles across the question in the course of the argument of his *Form in Modern Poetry*, as the outward sign of the inward intensity that he is searching for in poetry. I keep the question of length in front of me as a reminder of the task I am attempting: to account for the nature of modern British poetry. This thesis began when I asked myself the question "why is it that modern British poetry consists largely of *short* poems?" This question was partly prompted by the observation that before the nineteenth century, although many lyrics and other short poems were written, considerable poems were always long ones.[2] Throughout the criticism that I have studied other critics frequently come across the very practical question of the length of poems when discussing the lyric or the quality of the lyrical, in the same way as Herbert Read did. And it is this that convinces me that the question of the length of poems is one that needs to be pursued.

For the lyric, when mediated through Romantic poetic practice is, I am convinced, the only generic type of poem that can guarantee this shortness. The dramatic monologue, to be sure, can be concerned with intense moments of revelation that uncover, or constitute, the character of the speaker. On the other hand the Romantic emphasis on *Bildung* can make for some very extended poems, *The Prelude*, for example. So in this thesis, whilst conceding the importance of the dramatic monologue, I shall be leaving it to one side, as, perhaps, a topic for a future study.

Another danger in attempting a generic account of the lyric would be to assume that the traditional distinction of poetic kinds into the trio of epic, dramatic and lyric is somehow timeless and unchanging, as, for example, does W.R.Johnson, in his *The Idea of Lyric* (2). Another such critical work is W.E.Rogers' *The Three Genres and the Interpretation of the Lyric*; in this work Rogers' insistence on the timeless nature of the lyric very instructively supplies a Romantic genealogy for it, of the sort I shall be careful to avoid, stressing rather appropriation and reinterpretation than straightforward development—thus, for example, in an appendix I show how, as well as the lyric, the epigram is also lyricised in this criticism.[3]

An interesting example of this approach is Barbara Herrnstein Smith's much-admired study *Poetic Closure*. And this work is very interesting precisely because it reveals how an attentive critical study of poetry cannot avoid disclosing the historicity of the poems it studies. In her Introduction and opening chapter Smith is very concerned to underline that her study is a broad one, based mainly on poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but embracing poetry from every period of literary history (viii-ix). Indeed at one point she even states that

> all these poetic devices are effective by virtue of our psychological construction and particularly our responses to language; and these, in turn, apparently remain constant under extremely diverse circumstances, historical and other. (32)

However in the course of her discussion of one of Shakespeare's sonnets she comes across a device of closure that anticipates a type of Romantic poetic closure:

> The structural features of this sonnet, and in particular its successful closure, are significant here primarily in that they remind us that before the development of the Romantic lyric a poet was likely to represent the dialectical complexity of thought only when he could represent it as ultimately resolved. In other of Shakespeare's sonnets, however, as in much of the poetry of our own time, this sort of conclusion is not available because a condition of ultimately unresolvable complexity is precisely what the poem is intended to represent. (142-43)

And she later devotes the penultimate section of the book to the elucidation of this form of closure in *modern* poetry.[4]

Instead of this working-method I shall be concerned to locate the emergence of the Romantic lyric in a particular period, the early nineteenth century, and in a particular place, Britain. Like the *OED*'s very perceptive definition of "Lyric", I should like to stress the "now".[5] After the first two chapters in which I describe the nature of the lyricism to be found in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* and investigate the protestant

cultural space from which these ideas emerged, I examine, in my third chapter, the lyric in the eighteenth century and describe how changes in the social use of poetry, coupled with changes in publishing technology and practice led to the lyric's establishment at the head of the traditional set of genres. I illustrate this with an account of the changes in the genre of the poetry anthology, and describe Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* (1861) as the key text which effected the lyricisation of the lyric in anthologies.

In the fourth and sixth chapters I follow the ideas associated with the lyric through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At first I concentrate on poetic theory and criticism, but in the twentieth century, and with the demise of the longer poem, which succumbs to the predominance of the prose narrative, leaving the lyric as *the* poetic form, I concentrate more on the poetry. In contrast to an account of lyrical predominance I subjoin, in the fifth chapter, "the case of Clare"—a consideration of the part that lyric played in his poetry, and the part it has played in subsequent criticism of that poetry.

But, to return to an earlier point of anxiety, is there not a danger here that such a broad overview, in neglecting the specificities of each individual poet, or occasion of poetry, is really only a recounting of the old familiar story of the Romantic lyric's triumph? Clifford Siskin has written warningly of this very project:

> I have chosen to write a *generic history*, one that is different in kind from a *history of genre* defined in any essentialist terms. A history of genre imposes a historical narrative on single forms, treating each one as an independent, organic entity evolving naturally toward greater sophistication. The result is usually a Romantic developmental tale such as *the* Novel's rise or *the* Lyric's flowering. (10)

But my project, although it is concerned with *the* lyric, falls, I believe, under the head of Siskin's "generic history"; in Wittgenstein's terminology it would be a "description", not an "interpretation" or an "explanation" (*Philosophical Investigations* §§109, 124, 126, 130 &c). There are a number of reasons why this is the case. Firstly I do not see the lyric as having triumphed, but simply as having prevailed. Secondly the predominance of the lyric should not, in my reading, be taken as implying the final isolation of the poet, an outcome that Romanticism could contemplate with equanimity, as the index of terminal dissociation of humanity and poetry, and a necessary pre-condition for its reintegration. Nor do I see the predominance of the lyric as at all inevitable; material exists within Romanticism for the emergence of a poetic of long poems, and not every Romantic poet has been a writer of lyrics, but lyric is the

predominant form none the less. And finally even if the lyric is shown in subsequent critical accounts not to be the single literary mode which lies behind modern poetry and criticism, I do not believe that this would damage the historical, or genealogical work I have done, in tracing these lyric ideas.

What I do see though, which makes a history of the lyric a useful one to carry out, is, *pace* Siskin, a continuity of a sort. The ideas behind the lyric can be found, sometimes in much the same form, at any time in the last two hundred years. But this cluster of ideas is not an always self-identical discourse, nor is it even strictly a discourse, in the sense of being tied to a particular set of discursive texts, or to an institution. It is not, then, a "literary movement" like, say, Aestheticism, or Imagism, or Modernism, though, as I shall demonstrate, all these "movements" have lyrical ideas running through them. Perhaps a better model for these lyric ideas would be to describe them as a set of tropes, usually found in combination, that runs through, intersects with, other, more located discourses. I do not, in claiming that "it's all lyric now", want to imply that the present is any more homogenous than any other period of the last two centuries, merely that it has fewer poetic ideas to play with, others having lost their hold on the cultural space of poetry.

In any case I believe that if the ways of accounting for poetry which are found in the western tradition are reduced, not to their essential natures, but to a skeletal account of their modes of operations and procedures, then we would find a surprising paucity of theory, in place of the rich abundance we might posit. Beside the basically rhetorical theories of pre-Romantic times we would have only the expressive theories of Romanticism, for formalism, of whatever kind, can be made to serve either set of theories.

I see lyric as the temporality of modernity, an era which was inaugurated by Adam Smith's description of capital in *The Wealth of Nations*. It is easy to see the radical and disruptive power of capital, which, in Smith's formulation, can never pause for rest, but must continue in a ceaseless cycle of accumulation and development ("the great wheel of circulation"). What is less easy to see is the new subjectivity of radical, monadic self-identity, which accompanies it. However, in my first chapter I investigate the connections between these two dynamics of modernity, and try to suggest why it was that the newly lyricised lyric became one of the most cogent metaphors for this new subjectivity.

In the course of my research I have found that there is often, among the critics who are influenced by the tropes of the lyric, an all-pervading vagueness when it comes to the lyric: its value is assumed, but, because of the dispersed nature of these ideas, a precise definition cannot be attached. For example Palgrave, in the Preface to his *Golden Treasury*, refuses to define the lyric, and in this he is enthusiastically echoed by John Dennis, a contemporary critic:

> We think that Mr Palgrave is right, and that he has judged wisely in not giving a definition which much have proved at best partial and unsatisfactory. To say what lyrical poetry is not, is an easy task; to express in a brief sentence what it is ... is well-nigh impossible. And the reason is that the lyric blossoms and may be equally beautiful and perfect under a variety of forms. ("English Lyrical Poetry" 288)

But whatever the terms of the description, I read this passage as describing, not an essence, but the ascription of an essence. To put my argument here in one sentence: I am not interested in the history of the lyric in all its detail, but in the history of the ideas of the lyric; not in whether a poem can be said to be lyrical, but in whether it *is* thought of as being lyrical.[6] But this does not confine me solely to criticism and commentary, since, as against the Romantic idea of the self-sufficiency of poetry and the epiphenomenonal nature of criticism, the ideas of poetic theory and critical writings can be seen to feed into and influence poetic practice too. For example Christopher Clausen notes how the invention of a lyric tradition that Palgrave accomplished with his *Golden Treasury*, over the next hundred years, produced a crop of *Golden Treasury*-type lyrics which can easily slip between the covers of an updated edition (81, Waller 4).

At various points in the thesis I will be discussing writers and critics who have traditionally been thought to have little to say about the lyric, such as Matthew Arnold. This, as well the investigation of the sort of vagueness in critics I illustrated with Dennis, is not for the purpose of giving voice to a previously mute lyric history, or following its previously untraced progress. It is rather to identify the successive, contingent literary, social and technical spaces that the lyric occupies. The end of Grand Narratives should not imply the end of narrative, for, if there is no more narrative, then all we have left is lyric. And Clifford Siskin, again, has pointed out that Romanticism thrives on lyricised narrative:

> The traditional six-poet, 1798-1832 Romanticism of our anthologies and most criticism is itself ... a transformation of history into a short, and therefore sweet, developmental narrative.... it tells the same story of creative epiphany and world-weary despair that we have also employed, on smaller scale, to make Romantic sense of the canonised poems and lives of the poets. (8)

In fact a long narrative, though not necessarily epic, can often be the best response to Romanticism's cry of "make it new!" in each generation. For, as against the imperatives of Romantic history, or even against the post-modern call for a history of discontinuities and epistemological breaks, we must set the observation that cultural history consists of unexpected and inexplicable continuities too. When we find, for example, Herbert Read setting out Coleridge's idea of "organic form" (*Form* 9) in the 1930s, or when we find that one of Ted Hughes' more connected pronouncements repeats Coleridge almost word for word (Underhill 307) then we are entitled to make the connection, tounderscore the stubborn persistence of these ideas, or, as they might be termed, "lyrisemes".

A further objection to a connected narrative such as the present one is that, in tracing the thread of a discourse or a formation through various texts, it neglects the specificities, or "local" qualities, of each text. Certainly it would be unwise to claim that these qualities are unimportant—but in the investigations I make in the following chapters, both critical and poetic, I make no claim to exhaustive readings that will somehow preclude "local" readings; instead I am interested in how the lyric discourse intersects with other texts, and with other discourses in these texts. Indeed my reading of these texts may well facilitate new readings, by making new intertextual connections. And, in my view, general studies, like the present one, are a prerequisite for "local" readings. For, insufficiently theorised "local" readings can reinforce the Romantic *sui generis* fallacy, that is, that each work, each text, is its own and only guide to its interpretation. Hugh Underhill's book *The Problem of Consciousness in Modern Poetry*, for example, contains many close-readings of the works of modern British poets and a number of exemplary contextualisations of them. But because Underhill fails to historicise the "problem of consciousness" and fails to trace it through Romantic poetic practice from Wordsworth onwards, he overrates the extent to which the problematic is exclusive to twentieth-century poetry and takes at face-value its rhetoric of crisis. Moreover, as a result of his failure to historicise the problem his readings come increasingly to resemble one another, as, again and again he locates the dynamic qualities of the poetry in the dialectic of consciousness (Leonard 91-94).

A final precaution I have taken against becoming the lyric's own historian is to restrict my discussion to British critics and poets. This is firstly a practical move, as it would be impossible to deal with the lyric, even in English-speaking countries

alone, in sufficient detail. But it is also a recognition that the terms of Romanticism can have different outcomes in different societies. Although it will clearly be impossible for me to avoid mentioning Poe, T.S.Eliot or Pound, it is necessary to recognise that the poetics that emerged in the United States during the period I am considering are quite different from those to be found in Britain. And the expression of this difference has crystallised around the poetic influence of Whitman, which means that for an American poet the longer poem may be more of an option than for a British colleague, despite the fact that, according to J.E.Miller, Whitman's generics were those of the "lyric-epic" (290-93). Similarly Australian poetry has had quite a different trajectory, though one not uninfluenced by the Romantic lyric. To the extent, then, that this thesis concentrates on the Romantic lyric in Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it *is* a "local" history, as well as a "generic" one.

Notes:

[1] We might also instance the efforts of literary critics who apply speech-acts theory to generic considerations to make lyric into the master genre, the one which imitates speech acts most closely (Fishelov 129, quoting Elder Olson).

[2] It may also be that our understanding of the lyrics and shorter poems of the past is mediated through our modern respect for short poems, and that we see the lyrics and shorter poems of previous ages, and different cultures, through "lyric-spectacles". An example of a type of poetry in our culture, thus appropriated and lyrically understood, would be Elizabethan lyrics. Examples from other cultures would be Japanese and Chinese poetry or Troubadour poetry. The fact that these last three types of poetry were a great influence on Pound, during his Imagist days and after, is not without significance, and it is a consideration I shall be returning to.

[3] Rogers' genealogy, in the chapter "Gestures Towards a Literary History of the Lyric" is via Spenser (184), Donne and Herbert (202), Wordsworth (221), Tennyson (241) and Wallace Stevens (255).

[4] Strictly speaking Smith's thesis is not that of the timelessness of poetry, but that of the unchanging psychological reactions of humans to language, as exemplified by the highly patterned linguistic phenomenon of poetry. This is not quite the same issue, but is close enough for the purposes of my argument.

[5] In fact the whole of the *OED*'s entries for "Lyric", "Lyrical" &c is very interesting. Under **Lyric** sb 3 the quotations given form an exemplary history of lyricisation of the lyric.

[6] Where, in the course of the thesis I appear to be saying that a particular poem or *oeuvre is* lyric, I must be understood as saying "capable of being considered lyric within the lyric paradigm". Though my argument also states that the lyric paradigm is the predominant one in modern poetic theory, criticism and practice.