

philologist as “literary, studious, argumentative.” Boy, does that fit our profession!

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Action and Idiosyncrasy in the Lyric

To the Editor:

In “Ideologies of Lyric: A Problem of Genre in Contemporary Anglophone Poetics” (110 [1995]: 196–205), Mark Jeffreys argues the futility of trying to assign lyric to a specific ideology: “a given lyric text . . . is *not* inevitably representative of a specific ideology simply because it has been identified as a lyric” (196). Concomitantly, he argues that critical questions concerning the supposed ideology of the lyric serve the ideological positions of postmodern “critical schools”: hastening to displace the New Critics and their vocabularies, postmodern theorists have reduced the lyric to “a metonymy for New Critical ideology and, in the extreme case, for all of Western literary authority since Plato” (203). The lyric has been marginalized as a subject of contemporary critical discourse because of the prejudice against the supposedly united New Critical argument for presence and ahistoricity. Jeffreys points out, however, that “the New Critical era’s views of lyric were far less simplistic and unified than recent caricatures of New Criticism have suggested” (196) and that critical arguments about lyric are really arguments for authority—attempts to rule lyric (203).

Jeffreys’s argument is extremely important, I believe, because it implicitly questions how we as academics perceive, study, teach, and write about lyric and other “literary” subject matter. Those in university English departments who, enamored of theory, neglect the primary literary text in favor of a theoretical one fail to realize that the primary text—be it a collection of poems, a novel, a play, et cetera—is also theoretical in that it theorizes an approach to a real-life problem or situation. All literary texts are theoretical in this sense.

Jeffreys finds deconstructive theory regarding the lyric simplistic and historically uninformed (197). I believe that rigorously knowledgeable questions about antiquity reveal inadequacies in the deconstructive project: although Derrida has routinely deconstructed Plato and Aristotle and although it seems natural for deconstructive critics to equate “voice” with “presence” after reading Derrida and to criticize classical concepts of lyric from that perspective, a serious problem arises when we consider that Plato and Aristotle never read Derrida.

Their preoccupations were their own, and deconstructive criticism has not yet understood the relation between what Plato and Aristotle wrote and how they lived and acted in Greek society.

The Greeks prized “voice,” or speech, because it was the closest thing to action. Writing, which was farther from action, was prized less. Although the Greeks valued theory, they valued action more, because action manifested the social self to the polis. It was through action that the Greeks discovered themselves as human or social beings. Theory offered little in this regard. For instance, while Plato wrote the dialogues, it was more important that Socrates lived them. André Gide provides a perfect example of the classical concern for the discrepancy between theory and action when in *L’immoraliste* Michel says, “How well I understood then that almost every ethical teaching of the great philosophers of antiquity was a teaching by example as much as—even more than—by words!” ([New York: Vintage-Random, 1970] 100–01). The same holds true today. Our bodies decide things first.

Jeffreys finds Marxist theory more conducive to theorizing the lyric. Theodor Adorno, for example, focuses on the social role of lyric, especially the utopian impulse for change. Marxist theories “represent a more affirmative, perhaps even radical, vision of the ideological possibilities of such poetry” (Jeffreys 199–200).

Jeffreys has some reservations about viewing lyric solely as resistance literature (200), and so have I. The utopian impulse is as old as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*—wherein the king’s subjects pray to the gods for relief from the tyrant and get it—and is only one motive for the lyric. Marxist circumscription adds little to our understanding of the genre.

Instead of looking at lyric as creating “the dream of a world in which things would be different” (199), I believe it would be more profitable to look at lyric as creating the dream of a world in which *the person* would be different. Within a framework in which human beings are the measure of value, we can understand lyric as a social, private, and idiosyncratic phenomenon more than an ideological one.

The same can be said for postmodernist theory and the New Criticism. Take, for example, Cleanth Brooks and Paul de Man. Both follow in the tradition of “close reading.” Both wrote brilliant essays on the rhetoric of criticism that are tours de force of critical reading, critical practice. What marks and at the same time separates their work, I would argue, is not so much critical ideology as social motive, private motive, and idiosyncrasy. Similarly, as Jeffreys points out, C. Day Lewis and Elder Olson thought about lyric idiosyncratically and, as a result, picked different lyrics to fill out their collections (200–02).

The importance of social motive, private motive, and idiosyncrasy to lyric and to critical theory is illustrated in de Man's "Lyric and Modernity." In this essay, which deals with the meaning of modernity, de Man examines William Butler Yeats's attempt to distance his poetry from that of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. In a 1936 anthology of modern English poetry, Yeats declared that his poetry was "good" and "modern" because it was representational while the poetry of Eliot and Pound wasn't good or modern because it had lost the mimetic function. The distinction came down to one between self (read "social") and soul (read "private" or "idiosyncratic"), between a poetry (Yeats's) that depended on an outside world and one (Eliot and Pound's) that depended on the private soul's fancy. Truly modern poetry, according to Yeats, involved an awareness of the "incessant conflict" between self and soul. As de Man points out, Yeats worried about the loss of self in this conflict because such a loss meant loss of representation and of action as embodied in poetry. This loss is, according to de Man, what modernity is all about. But is it really? What we may be dealing with here is de Man's idiosyncratic behavior as a deconstructive critic.

What should not be overlooked in de Man's account is his return to Aristotle and the *Poetics*, wherein the lyric poet imitates something like action. Aristotle analyzes action in terms of conflict in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and as James Kinneavy pointed out forty years ago in *A Study of Three Contemporary Theories of Lyric Poetry*, conflict, emotion, and choice as components of action relate directly to the object of imitation in the *Poetics*. De Man's return to Aristotle is an acknowledgment that important theoretical discussions of lyric have historically begun on Aristotle's turf. Willingly or unwillingly, de Man returns to the source.

DENNIS RYAN
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Birth of the Cyberqueer

To the Editor:

I found it quite impossible to understand the first sentence of Donald Morton's "Birth of the Cyberqueer" (110 [1995]: 369–81) and so read no further. Instead, to explain my failure, I turned to statistics. From a hurried count, I found that this sentence has about ninety words, twelve commas, one colon, one pair of parentheses, and two words identified by quotation marks as bearing special meanings. It includes several current buzzwords, opaque to all except a few initiates: *ludic*, *textuality*, *communal-*

ity, *libidinal economy*. The purpose of such a sentence is clearly not communication of information but verbal virtuosity. I contend that this is bad writing by any definition.

Shouldn't *PMLA*'s editorial readers insist on good style as well as good content? Or does this opening sentence seem queer only to me?

Second, I think that we have had enough of the coy puns made within words with parentheses (the first sentence contains one). Users of this device must view themselves as (a) cute critics, but I increasingly find such clichés merely (ped)antic and ludic(rous) crap(ulence).

WILLIAM B. HUNTER
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Reply:

William B. Hunter raises the important issue—which one hears in many sites—of the relation between language and radical intervention: isn't commonsensical ("readily readable") language capable of breaking through the thick of ideology (congealed commonsense) to produce new understanding in the reader, or does any use of commonsensical language end up reproducing the ruling ideology (leaving the dominant knowledges intact)? Hunter's complaint echoes, for instance, that of L. G. Wolf, who expresses a similar distaste for "'problematic' language," presumably from a leftist position (*Socialist Review* 21.3–4 [1991]).

What is instructive is the "logic" by which Hunter concludes that my essay is an example of "bad writing." Having failed to "understand the first sentence," he decided to read "no further." Anxious over his "failure" as a reader, he converts it into my failure as writer. Instead of admitting that he is not familiar with the range of concepts used in my sentences and does not wish to bother to acquire the knowledges necessary to comprehending the text, he proposes that the failure of communication is the result of the presence, beginning in the first sentence, of unusual punctuation and "buzzwords." Hence he shifts from reading to counting and compiles statistics to show that the "bad style" of the first sentence is characteristic of the entire text, which is also therefore unreadable.

However, the contradictions of his letter indicate that for all his counting, Hunter has not succeeded in overcoming his anxiety. The troubling concepts he first designates "buzzwords" "opaque to all except a few initiates" become a few sentences later nothing but transparent "clichés" boringly familiar to everyone. Hunter thus anxiously dismisses what he calls my "queer" text on the contradictory grounds that it is simultaneously unreadable and already read.