

The Language of Lyric

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In proposing to discuss the language of lyric, I no doubt appear doubly out of fashion: first in presupposing that something such as the lyric is a viable critical category, and second in imagining a distinctive poetic language or language of lyric. Let me therefore offer a rudimentary defense of each position before proceeding to my discussion of what I take to be two key features of the language of lyric. The skepticism about the category of lyric in critical circles these days seems primarily a historicist complaint: are not the poems we call lyric, from the Greeks to the present, so varied, so tied to radically different cultural practices and social circumstances, that the idea of a theory of the lyric is bizarre, if not ridiculous?¹ And if, as we critics tend to think, what we most value in literature is its singularity, the distinctiveness of the individual work, is not any attempt to produce an account of the lyric at worst risible and at best a regression to the days of classical genre criticism, when theorists, perhaps misreading Aristotle, sought to lay down the law for the production of each recognized genre? Is not the idea of lyric an

¹ The historicist critique of lyric is most amply expressed in the editorial material of Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, eds., *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) and in Jackson's entry for *Lyric* in the 2012 *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. For a response, see my *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

abusive modern notion, created to bring widely different poems under the same sort of interpretive attention, as objects of close reading?

There are several compelling arguments for preserving the category of lyric. The first is that it is not just the creation of critics but has been created by poets themselves as they have read their predecessors and sought to do something continuous with what they had done, as Horace strives to take his place among the *lyrici vates* or Wordsworth takes up the sonnet. Second, perhaps most obviously, if we scrap the term *lyric*, we find ourselves practically empty-handed when confronting the long tradition of short, non-narrative poems. We have a few terms for particular types of lyric, but *Ode* has varied as much as lyric itself: from the Pindaric ode to the Horatian ode, to the odes of Ronsard, Cowley, and Keats, and the occasional poem that goes by that name in the 20th century. And once we go beyond a series of special thematic categories—Aubade, Epithalamion, Elegy (in the modern sense), and so on—we find that we lack a term for the majority of short poems from whatever era. If we just call them ‘poems’, we fail to distinguish them from narrative, didactic, and epic poems. Finally, the most immediately compelling argument for the category *lyric* is pedagogical. When we teach poems, if we do not give our students a model or conceptual framework in which to encounter them, they will approach them with whatever implicit model of the lyric they assimilated in secondary school. If we do not tell them what to look for, outline some parameters at least, they will make assumptions about what these literary objects are and operate with some sort of theory of the lyric—doubtless a very unsatisfactory one. It is worth trying to say something about the salient parameters of the lyric.

In thinking about a poetics of the lyric an obvious question is whether there is a special language of poetry. For several centuries the idea of poetic diction has been out of favor, even though a special language seems amply represented in poems many people value highly—in Keats, for instance. But we are more likely to take as normative Wordsworth’s claim that poetry should be the real language of man or Frost’s that it should capture the living sounds of speech than the actual practice of Keats or Gerard Manley Hopkins. But even if we continue to resist the notion

of a special poetic language, we should still ask whether there are not particular uses of language that are characteristic of, even distinctive of lyric, and how they work.

Roland Greene, speaking of lyric sequences, has argued that there is a fundamental tension between what he calls the *fictional* and the *ritualistic*.² Reading a sonnet sequence, we work hard to construct characters and a plot, but we keep encountering such things as rhymes, lexical patterning, and repetition of sounds. They get in the way of our pursuit of the fiction—this slew of elements vastly more relevant to ritualistic performance than to fictional representation. For the individual lyric, this is even more true; it is often more ritualistic than representational. In *The Logic of Literature* Käte Hamburger argues that while novels belong to a system of fictional representation, lyrics belong to the statement-system of language and are not mimetic. Except for the dramatic monologue, *röllengedicht*, which lies on the boundary of lyric and fiction, lyric language is not relativized to a fictional speaker or narrator.³ Lyric utterance is about this world rather than a fictional world. And a correlate of this is that with lyrics, unlike novels, where the discourse is attributed to a narrator, the reader can occupy the position of the speaker, ritualistically performing these lines, saying: ‘I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed’, ‘J’ai plus de souvenirs que si j’avais mille ans’, ‘Du musst dein leben ändern’, or ‘The force that through the green fuse drives the flower | Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees | Is my destroyer’.

Lyric pedagogy, since the days of the new criticism, has been inclined to treat lyrics as fictional imitations of real-world speaks acts, spoken by a fictional persona, so that to understand the poem is to ask why someone would say these words.⁴ This approach makes the poem into a mini-novel with a character whose

² Roland Greene, *Post-Petrarchism: Origins and Innovations of the Western Lyric Sequence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

³ Hamburger, *The Logic of Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973).

⁴ Helen Vendler’s influential textbook begins with this presumption: ‘Given that each poem is a fictive speech by an imagined speaker...’ she urges students to ask what speech act is being performed, what sort of speaker is constructed, what sort of drama of attitudes is enacted, and finally, “under what circumstances would I find myself saying this?” See *Poems, Poets, Poetry* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2010), p. iii. The most explicit account of this model comes from

motives are to be analyzed, and thus can be encouraging for students accustomed to fiction, pedagogically effective, but it has two major flaws. 1. In defining a poem as an imitation of a real world speech act it treats as ancillary all those aspects of poems—rhythm, sound patterning, intertextual relations—that are most distinctive. 2. It takes a particular case for the norm, ignoring the fact that many poems do not put on stage a fictional character performing non-poetic acts but engage in distinctively poetic acts, which in itself would show why the ‘poetic’ is an operative and necessary concept.

Though often lyrics can be seen as fictional imitations of a recognizable speech act by a speaker-character, many lyrics, presenting themselves as voiced or voiceable, do not project a speaker-character. If we ask who is speaking in Blake’s ‘The Sick Rose’ we obscure the functioning of the poem, which presents an event of distinctive poetic discourse.

O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy;
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.⁵

Real world speakers do occasionally address inanimate objects (cursing computers, for instance), perhaps making a spectacle of themselves, but here we have distinctive poetic address Baudelaire wrote that hyperbole and apostrophe are the forms of language that are not only most agreeable but also most necessary to the lyric.⁶ Marking this language as distinctive, creating a surprisingly strong sense of prophetic revelation, or of stipulation, declaring the rose to be sick, the

Barbara Herrnstein Smith in *On the Margins of Discourse* and, more importantly, in *Poetic Closure, A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 17.

⁵ William Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 213.

⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), II, p. 164.

apostrophic address establishes this speech act as poetic discourse, and as an attempt to be an event rather than a description of an event. Paradoxically, the more such poetry addresses natural or inanimate objects, the more it proffers *figures* of voice, the more it reveals itself at another level as *not* spoken but as writing that through its personification engenders an image of voice, for the readers who are invited to utter the words.

Northrop Frye writes:

The lyric poet normally pretends to be talking to himself or to someone else: a spirit of nature, a Muse, a personal friend, a lover, a god, a personified abstraction, or a natural object. [...] The radical of presentation [i.e., the root form of presentation] in the lyric is the hypothetical form of what in religion is called the 'I-Thou' relationship. The poet, so to speak, turns his back on his listeners, though he may speak for them, and though they may repeat some of his words after him.⁷

Here I would stress, as Frye's 'so to speak' indicates, that his formulation, 'the poet *turns his back* on his listeners' is a figurative attempt to explain a peculiar discursive situation by reference to face to face communication, but it does little more than mark the strangeness. Consider, for instance, that while a lecturer reading from a written text attempts to show that he is speaking directly to his audience, a poet speaking a poem, as in a poetry reading, makes it evident that he is *not* speaking directly to the audience. He or she is not turning his back to them but offering language to listeners, with **indirection**, addressing them through language implicitly or explicitly addressed elsewhere. The situation is not radically different when the poem arrives in written form. I take the underlying structure of lyric to be one of triangulated address, where an audience of readers is addressed through the act of address (implicit or explicit) to an imagined addressee.

The second person pronoun as it appears in lyric has a complexity that is certainly not without analogue in non-poetic speech acts. Of course, English *you* is already more indeterminate than second-person pronouns in other languages, which often distinguish singular from plural or intimate from formal address. But

⁷ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 248-9.

the lyrical *you* is at bottom characterized by the foregrounding of that indeterminate potential that makes *you* at once a specific other, the most general other, and *one*, a pure place holder for indeterminate agency.

In John Ashbery's volume, *Your Name Here*, whose title evokes the questions of singularization and iterability at work in lyric pronouns, the opening poem, 'This Room', concludes with a formulation that may be taken to sum up the history of lyric.

We had macaroni for lunch every day
except Sunday, when a small quail was induced
to be served to us. Why do I tell you these things?
You are not even here.⁸

But his 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons' illustrates even better the functioning of lyric *you*:

This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level.
Look at it talking to you. You look out a window
Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don't have it.⁹

as it interlaces the *you*-addressee and the *you*-one.

I do not, though, want to put too much emphasis on a distinctive use of pronouns, since I think lyric only exploits possibilities already present in other kinds of pronominal play. For me, it is rather the underlying structure of indirection, triangulated address, that is crucial. Lyric tropes on the usual structure of address, with this distinctive mode of indirection, and as Frye's remarks indicate, there is also the fact—once again, distinctive—that in a lyric the reader also occupies the position of enunciation, speaks the poem, in a way he or she does not with a novel, for instance. In novels readers may view things from the perspective of a focalizer/narrator, but we do not repeat his or her words as we read, whereas in lyrics we repeat them, whether subvocalizing or reading aloud.¹⁰

⁸ John Ashbery, *Your Name Here* (New York: Farrar Strauss, 2000), p. 3.

⁹ Ashbery, *Shadow Train* (London: Penguin, 1980).

¹⁰ The poem's soundworld, which is crucial to its indirection or triangulated address, is a soundworld generated by *writing*, rather than harking back to some putative orality.

Though we do not necessarily identify with the sentiments of the poem, the deictic center, the *I here now*, is also that of the reader, who says, ‘O Rose, thou art sick!’ or ‘I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed’.

Linguistic accounts of deixis do note that sometimes the deictic center can be shifted to the time and place of the addressee, of the *you* rather than the *I*. In an advertisement ‘Don’t delay; call today’ evokes the time of the decoder, not the encoder. If in a letter to my son I say ‘write your grandmother now’ he can’t plead that it is too late, since the *now* when I wrote this words is already past. The *now* refers to the time of receipt, not the time of writing. Would this possibility, usually treated as exceptional, help us think about lyric? To explore this we need to think not just about persons but specifically about the time of lyric.

If the pronouns *I* and *you* and structures of address have a more endemically ambiguous functioning in lyric than elsewhere, their distinctiveness becomes clearer still if we look at the present tense. This tense is important for lyric in general, but in English there is an especially distinctive lyric use of the simple present. Generally, to note **occurrences** in the present, we use the present progressive tense: *I am walking*. When we encounter the unmarked non-progressive tense with occurrences, we know immediately that we are dealing a poem.

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
A kind old nun in a white hood replies
 the children’s eyes
In momentary wonder stare upon
A sixty-year-old smiling public man.¹¹

Out on the lawn I lie in bed
Vega conspicuous overhead.¹²

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day¹³

¹¹ W. B. Yeats, ‘Among School Children’, *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1958), p. 212.

¹² W. H. Auden, ‘Out on the Lawn I lie in Bed’, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), p. 29.

¹³ Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark’, *The Poems*, ed. by W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 101.

I wander through each chartered street
Near where the chartered Thames does flow
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.¹⁴

In both colloquial and formal English such action verbs require the progressive form—‘I am walking through the long schoolroom’—without which they would mark a habitual action and lead one to expect a temporal indication: ‘I walk through the schoolroom each morning’. ‘I sometimes lie out on the lawn’. It is that lack of temporal specification that makes this a distinctive tense in English poetry. Huddleston and Pullum’s authoritative *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* treats the English present tense as simply non-past. It notes that with the unmarked, non-progressive present tense there is no explicit reference to ‘any feature of the temporal flow (such as whether the situation is conceived as instantaneous or having a duration through time.)’¹⁵ This unmarked non-progressive present tense, or the simple present, ‘combines freely with states but not with occurrences’ (p. 119). It is used both for states that are temporary, ‘she has a headache’, and those that last or are outside of time, ‘She is Austrian’. But ‘The use of the simple present for dynamic situations is thus very restricted’ (p. 128). It is restricted to a number of special cases, some of which are suggestive for the lyric, but none of which cover its distinctive effects.

Thus, ‘I wake and feel the fell of dark not day’ is not the **historic present**, as when a narrative in the past shifts into the present for vividness, and in any event the historic present is usually temporally localized: *In 2010 David Cameron becomes the British Prime Minister*. Nor is ‘I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day’ a case of the so-called **gnomic present**, of truths: *A rolling stone gathers no moss; Water boils at 100 degrees centigrade*. The gnomic present is a distinct use, definitional, sometimes considered a form of aspect. Lyrics do deploy this gnomic present more frequently

¹⁴ William Blake, ‘London’, *Complete Writings*, p. 216.

¹⁵ Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey Pullum, *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 117; hereafter cited parenthetically.

than discussions of the lyric allow, as they seek to tell truths about this world (and not, pace Sir Philip Sidney, to deliver a golden world):

Water is best, and gold, like a blazing fire in the night, stands out
supreme of all lordly wealth.¹⁶

or

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.¹⁷

This is not a statement relativized to a fictional speaker or about a fictional world but a straightforward declaration, as a truth about our world. Quite a lot of poems in the present tense fit this model, and closely related are poems which state an occurrence that is so habitual as to become not an event but an identity statement, just as 'I walk to work' without temporal specification means that I do this so regularly that it counts as a characteristic of me rather than as a particular event.

Consider:

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes.¹⁸

Is it that she always walks in beauty, such an extent that really no walking is required, or is it that she repeatedly walks in beauty at any *now* one can contemplate? Certainly one effect of the lyric present is to imply that what is reported is something other than or more than a singular event: 'I sit in one of the

¹⁶ Pindar, first Olympian Ode, *Olympian Odes, Pythian Odes*, ed. by William Race (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 43.

¹⁷ Philip Larkin, 'This be the Verse', *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar Straus, 1989), p. 180.

¹⁸ George Gordon, Lord Byron, 'She Walks in Beauty', *Byron's Poetry*, ed. by Frank. McConnell (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 11.

dives | On 52nd street, | Uncertain and afraid...¹⁹ comes across as more than a report on what I did once or what I am doing at a particular moment but without actually becoming habitual. The anomalous lyric present seems to be lifted into a distinctive temporality without removing it from time.

Relevant too to this special lyric present is the **performative** present: 'I promise to pay you tomorrow'. Despite J. L. Austin's stipulation that performative language only works if I am 'not joking or writing a poem', there are of course completely conventional performatives in poetry: 'Arma virumque cano' [Arms and the man I sing] (Virgil) or 'I sing of brooks, of blossoms, birds and bowers' (Herrick).²⁰ This singing is an action I perform by uttering these words. In ordinary English one cannot say 'I hereby wander through each chartered street', but Blake's 'I wander through each chartered street' does seem to have something of that quality, of implying that through the poem I am making this a discursive event. There may be hints of performativity in a range of lyric presents: if 'I wander through each chartered street', does not mean 'I *hereby* wander through each chartered street' might it nonetheless be the case that the sort of wandering at issue here, different from 'I am wandering' can be conceived as that which I do through this poem? Does 'I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day' not imply something like 'I hereby feel the fell of dark'—by virtue of this incantation or articulation?

Another ordinary use of the simple present with occurrences is running commentary, as in sportscasts: 'Smith takes the pass and cuts towards the middle of the field; he evades a tackle by Jones and shoots at the corner of the net'. Again, there is some plausible relation to the lyric usage here, especially in third person present lyrics, where one could imagine an observer reporting on an ongoing process. That does not work for 'She walks in beauty like the night', but is conceivable for something like 'Leda and the Swan': 'He holds her helpless breast upon his breast'.²¹ This model does not work for lyrics in the first person, though, because of its presumption of separation between reporter and participant, which

¹⁹ W. H. Auden, 'September 1, 1939', *Selected Poems*, p. 95.

²⁰ Virgil, *The Aeneid, Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 262; Robert Herrick, *Works* (London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1911), I, p. 3.

²¹ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 211.

does not capture the effect of meditative poems: nothing is gained by thinking that *I* functions as an observer who watches himself as he wanders through each chartered street.

More promising, perhaps, is the next case in Huddleston and Pullum's array, stage directions and synopses, which by convention use the present tense.

A. 'Polonius hides behind the arras'.

The stage direction (A) resembles the running commentary but since it *prescribes* action rather than reports action it could possibly also be assimilated in a way to the performative present. It stipulates something that happens each time the play is performed. A synopsis, on the other hand, describes events that are in a sense already in place: 'After the death of this first wife, Charles Bovary marries Emma'. Like synopses, descriptions of written works or works of art take the present tense when focus is on the present existence of these works:

B1 Shakespeare writes about historical figures.

B2 '*Pride and Prejudice* describes Austen's society with satirical wit.'

B3 'Othello kills Desdemona.'

Of authors, works, and characters, the *Cambridge Grammar* notes, 'we talk about them from the perspective of their present and potentially permanent existence rather than that of their past creation'. (pp. 129-30).

The usage in the various cases of B, which grammars tend to treat as just a special convention, seems to me one that is potentially very relevant to lyric. But since my examples so far have mostly been in the first person, and it is important to consider some third person present tenses also, to get a sense of this tense's import.

Criticism tends to cope with the lyric present by positing a speaker-persona who is in a particular situation, which becomes the deictic center, and from the vantage of which some occurrence is happening in the present. But even in cases where the positing of a speaker-character is completely necessary, the introduction of the simple present changes things. In Robert Frost's 'Stopping by Woods', we need to

imagine a character who stops in ‘these woods’, and who delays the fulfillment of obligations in order to ‘watch these woods fill up with snow’. It is a curious feature of this poem, which opposes Nature, woods, snow, and death to the human world of promises and obligations, that the norms and values of the human world are delegated to the horse (‘My little horse must think it queer | To stop without a farmhouse near’). But when we are told

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.²²

we have something other than the observation of an event at a particular moment that is the present for this character. We hear a different note. A speaker describing what is happening would say ‘he is shaking his harness bells’. ‘He gives his harness bells a shake’ marks this as a different kind of discourse, a ritualistic act not tied to a specific observable moment. We still need a speaker-character, of course, but the special temporality of this utterance moves us into a different discursive region. What makes this poem more than an anecdote is this simple present, on the one hand, and on the other the repetition of the final line.

And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep,

By dint of repetition, these lines move us into a figurative, poetic register.

Consider a different example from Emily Dickinson:

Further in Summer than the Birds,
Pathetic from the Grass,
A minor Nation celebrates
Its unobtrusive Mass.²³

²² *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. by Edward Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1969), p. 224.

²³ *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Thomas Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), p. 1068.

For thinking about a poem like this, lyric pedagogy encourages us to imagine a speaker/persona observing this celebration. But of course the more one tries to imagine a concrete fictional situation, the odder becomes the non-progressive present, which a real speaker would not utter.

The fact that the minor nation ‘celebrates’ rather than ‘is celebrating’ pulls the sentence out of a world of empirical observation and indicates that we need not imagine a speaker at all but can take this as a lyrical discourse about the world, a ritualistic celebration of the sounds of the world as a Mass, where, as the poem concludes, ‘a Druidic Difference | Enhances Nature now’.

A clearer example might be Auden’s ‘The Fall of Rome’:

The piers are pummeled by the waves;
In a lonely field the rain
Lashes an abandoned train;
Outlaws fill the mountain caves.

Fantastic grow the evening gowns;
Agents of the Fisc pursue
Absconding tax defaulters through
The sewers of provincial towns.

* * *

Altogether elsewhere, vast
Herds of reindeer move across
Miles and miles of golden moss,
Silently and very fast.²⁴

The choices of ‘lashes’ rather than ‘is lashing’, ‘pursue’ rather than ‘are pursuing’, and ‘move’ rather than ‘are moving’ push us into a distinctive register: there is no speaker-observer here whose perspective and motivation we must reconstruct but evocation of a condition that is not timeless exactly—not like *Water boils at 100 degrees centigrade*—but mysteriously iterable, like a film loop that keeps running, as the action takes on a mythical quality.

Or consider Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘At the Fishhouses’:

²⁴ W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, p. 183.

Although it is a cold evening,
down by one of the fishhouses
an old man sits netting,
his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,
a dark purple-brown,
and his shuttle worn and polished.
The air smells so strong of codfish
it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water.²⁵

Here the sense of a *now* is palpable—the very lack of first person pronouns intensifies the sense of a scene being described, presented to the reader. The singularity of the scene may be stressed, but it takes on a mythic aspect, something that happens, not just something that is happening: ‘he sits netting’ rather than ‘he is sitting netting’. In both colloquial and formal English, such action verbs require the progressive form—*I am sitting* netting—without which they would mark a habitual action and lead one to expect a temporal indication. It is that lack of temporal specification that makes this a distinctive tense in English poetry—so much so that as soon as you hear a sentence with one of these forms you know you are dealing with a lyric.

In a fine paper of 1974 which is still by far the best discussion of the subject, ‘The Lyric Present: Simple Present Verbs in English Poems’, George T. Wright draws attention to this distinctive use of the simple present tense without temporal qualification: ‘I walk through the long schoolroom questioning’. We admire such a line ‘as simple, ordinary natural English’, he writes. ‘It reports an event that has happened –is happening –happens. Such a confusion in our own verbs may show us that the Yeats is not so speechlike as it at first seems’.²⁶ Wright explores the possibility that this lyric present borrows from the historical present (there are hints of pastness), from the present of repeated action, and borrows even a hint of futurity (as in *Tomorrow I go home*), but he concludes that ‘In effect what we find in such verbs is a new aspect or tense, neither past, nor present but timeless—in its

²⁵ Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrer Strauss, 1969), p. 72.

²⁶ George T. Wright, ‘The Lyric Present: Simple Present Verbs in English Poems’, *PMLA*, 89.3 (1974), p. 563.

feeling a lyric tense. If we do not know when the action is taking place, however, we still feel that it takes time'. Or again, 'It is outside of time but it has duration—a special state but common to all art'.²⁷

While I agree with most of Wright's analysis, I think the allure of the timeless leads him to neglect the oddity of the lyric time of enunciation, which is both that of a speaker/poet and that of the reader, who may speak these words also. It is not timeless but highly temporal, though in an unusual way, a time of iteration. Looking at the uses of the non-progressive present tense that linguistic analysis provides helps to clarify the distinctiveness of this lyric tense. The usage that seems to me closest to the lyric use is, interestingly, the present tense we use to talk about writings—both what authors do in them and what happens in them—but while, as grammars suggest, this seems a special convention (we have to explicitly teach students to use the present tense in this way) the lyric present is broader and not something, in my experience, that one has to teach, which suggests that its linguistic import has yet not been properly understood. I believe it is temporal rather than atemporal—not outside of time—iterative but not located anywhere in particular in time, yet offering a particularly rich sense of time, of the impossible *nows* in which we, reading, repeat these lyric structures. It contributes to the sense of lyric as event, not the fictional representation of an utterance nor as the projection of a fictional world, but an event that occurs in our world, as we repeat these lines.

Classicists studying deixis in the Greek lyric have emphasized the way in which Pindar and others create poems that could be performed on more than one occasion, and indeed, lyric seems constructed for reperformance, potentially ritualistic, with an always iterable *now*. This lyric present is distinctive enough—different enough from the non-lyric uses—to deserve separate characterization, especially because of the fusion of enunciation and reception, in a moment that is repeated, every time the poem is read, which gives it a potentially performative effect.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 565-566.

Linguistic accounts of deixis frequently seem to presuppose a perceptually-given *I*, *here*, and *now* as deictic center: *I* is whoever says ‘I’, and the place and moment of utterance are given. If I say ‘I am now standing here talking’, the deictic center is here and now. The customary presumption then is that in a poem, as in a novel, for deictics to work there must be someone somewhere—a fictional speaker spatially and temporally located—to furnish the deictic center, in relation to which pronouns, tenses, and spatial and temporal adverbs take on meaning. Hence the temptation, for readers and critics, to imagine a fictional character/persona and a fictional situation for every ‘I’ or ‘now’ or present tense.

But one can argue that there is in fact no perceptually given *here* and *now*: what counts as here and now is always a function of a situation.²⁸ In some circumstances—*Don’t press the button now but press it now*—*now* is determined in seconds; in other circumstances, *now* might mean now, as opposed to pre-human times. *Here* can mean here on earth, or here in this city, or here, this spot on my hand. Perhaps, then, the unusual ‘here’ and the ‘now’ of lyric should be seen as a particular literary possibility among others constructions, distinctive certainly, and anomalous, just as address to absent or inanimate others is anomalous: part of a distinctive literary situation of utterance.

Linguistic accounts of deixis do note that sometimes the deictic center can be shifted to the time and place of the reception rather than production: as I mentioned, in ‘Don’t delay; call today’, *today* is the today of the reader, not of the writer of the advertisement. But lyric discourse goes further; it is more anomalous. The lyric *I*, *here*, and *now* are extremely shifty shifters that violate the requirement of a necessary deictic center. In ‘I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed’, the *I* can be whoever says ‘I’: the poet, a speaker/persona, or the reader who articulates the line, aloud or subvocally, none of them exclusively; and the present can be a time of writing, a time of fictional action, or the present of reading.

A poetics of the lyric should focus on the ways and the extent to which linguistic elements, such as deictics, structures of address, and the present tense, have effects other than those treated by conventional linguistic accounts. I have

²⁸ Peter Jones, ‘Philosophical and Theoretical issues in the Study of Deixis’, in *New Essays on Deixis*, ed. by Keith Green (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1995), p. 35 ff.

argued in particular that this anomalous English lyric present is not simply the time of the writer or of a fictional character's present, or of the reader but a different, special temporality, that is iterable, ritualistic. This lyric present is the mark of a distinctive literary situation of utterance, one of the possible effects of the language we inhabit and against whose limits poems are always pushing. It is a linguistic possibility whose resources and distinctive effects it is the task of poetics to try to spell out. More generally, it seems to me crucial to our attempts to promote pedagogically this central strand of the literary tradition that seems threatened, lyric poetry, that we explore all of those aspects of lyric that exceed dramatic monologue, that make lyrics different from little short stories with fictional characters whose situations we seek to understand and more like those pop songs whose lyrics people learn by heart and repeat to themselves, and allow to structure their experience.