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Some Problems Arising from Defining Lyric Poetry

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Abstract

This paper discusses the nature of lyric, one of the three general categories of poetic literature. It attempts to define the lyric's parameters by investigating David Lindley's definition of lyric through its relation to music, when he states that "the poem written to be sung remains the one to which no critic can deny the label 'lyric'". Expanding Lindley's definition, the paper will suggest that Lindley's definition problematises our notion of lyric. Then it moves on to examine the various critical analyses of lyric according to some critical theories which challenge lyric's musicality as an aesthetically intrinsic feature.

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بعض المشكلات التي تبرز من تعريف الشعر الغنائي

د. باسل المسالمة**

الملخص

يناقش البحث الطبيعة الغنائية في الشعر الإنكليزي، وهي إحدى التصنيفات الثلاثة العامة للشعر في الأدب، ويسعى إلى تعريف معايير الشعر الغنائي بالنظر إلى تعريف الناقد ديفيد ليندلي للشعر الغائي وعلاقته بالموسيقا حين يصرح أن "القصيدة المكتوبة لتغنى هي قصيدة لا يمكن لأي ناقد أن ينكر تسميتها بالقصيدة الغنائية". وبعد أن يوسع البحث هذا التعريف، يطرح فكرة أن تعريف ليندلي يخلق إشكالية في مفهومنا للشعر الغنائي، ثم ينتقل البحث إلى النظر في التحليلات النقدية المختلفة للشعر الغنائي وفق بعض النظريات النقدية التي تتحدى الصفة الغنائية للشعر بوصفها سمة جوهرية وجمالية.

**جامعة دمشق، كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية، قسم اللغة الإنكليزية.

In Aristotle's *Poetics*, literary genres are divided into epic, dramatic, and lyric. In modern theory, the term "lyric" is a flexible term. This flexibility, however, problematises the classical notions of lyric. For some critics, "lyric" has become an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of verse forms. For others, such as Philip Hobsbaum, lyric "cannot be of much use as a defining term, at least so far as metre is concerned."[1] Werner Wolf suggests that,

three existing meanings can be differentiated: a) the narrowest meaning is closest to the origins of the term: the lyric as "a song to be sung", as in the "songs in a musical" ; b) a less narrow meaning in which 'lyric poetry' is distinguished from "narrative or dramatic verse of any kind", but shares the criterion of versification with these forms of 'poetry', and c) a broad meaning in Goethe's sense, in which the 'lyric' or 'lyric poetry' is opposed to drama and narrative fiction as such (not only to versified dramatic and narrative poetry) and thus has advanced to one of the three main forms of fictional literature as a whole. As this variant indicates, 'lyric' has become an umbrella term for most versified literature (except for the epic and verse drama) and has thus become a synonym of 'poetry'.[2]

These three definitions create a terminological confusion, but the main problem of defining lyric arises from its relation to music. Most definitions of lyric poetry still concentrate on its musical and rhythmical qualities and on the importance of the relationship between poetry and music. Looked at in terms of music, the word "lyric" has two different implications. First, a songwriter uses the word "lyric" to describe the words that accompany a song, whereas a poet uses the same word to refer

[1]- See Philip Hobsbaum, *Metre, Rhythm, and Verse Form*. (London: Routledge, 1996), 179.

[2]- See Werner Wolf, "The Lyric: Problems of Definition and a Proposal for Reconceptualisation" in Eva Müller-Zettelmann and Margarete Rubik (eds.), *Theory into Poetry: New Approaches to the Lyric.* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 23.

to a specific type of poetry. Yet the problem arises when we attempt to apply lyric's meanings to a wide range of poems. The term "lyric", as poets most often use it, has no direct connection to what musicians do when they compose the words of a song. Nevertheless, there are obvious similarities between the two, and poets will normally insist that the poetic lyric retains links to its musical kin, especially in its contingency upon complex structures of sound.

The term "lyric", which originally comes from the Greek word *lyre*— an ancient stringed instrument, suggests that poetry was meant to be sung. But although lyric is meant to be accompanied by music, this trait is no longer a distinguishing mark of the lyric. It is possible to find, particularly in twentieth-century poetry, poems that cannot be set to music but are nevertheless called "lyrics". David Lindley's definition of the lyric – as a poem meant to be sung – essentially encompasses the importance of the musical element and is primarily based on the polemical relationship between poetry and music which underlies lyric poetry. This idea, therefore, demands some unmasking.

Lindley's definition of "lyric" as "poems written to be sung" stresses its origin in Greek times. Though this definition has continued to gain prominence in the consistent study of the lyric genre, it is obviously inapplicable to all lyric poems. In this sense it is limited in scope. In the modern usage of the term, "lyric" is any poem "that is short in form, concentrated in its expression, subjective in its observations, personal in subject matter, and songlike in quality."[3] Though this definition combines various traits, it is difficult to classify poems on such grounds, simply because all poetry can be defined in the same way. When studying lyric poetry, most critics find their analyses consistent if they relate poetry to

[3-] See the entry on "lyric" in Jack Myers and Don C. Wukasch, *Dictionary of Poetic Terms*. (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1985).

music, simply because lyric originates from *lyre* and that poetry is essentially musical in nature. However, when we speak of the musicality of lyric poetry this does not necessarily mean that poetry is written always to be sung.

Moreover, when lyric is sung to the accompaniment of an instrument, music has a considerable influence on the meaning and words of the poem. Lyric poems of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, written and prepared for singing, are different from those of the later periods. In the Romantic period, for instance, there was a common belief that all art aspires to the condition of music. Music, for this reason, gained a primary place over poetry. In the Renaissance period, however, there was an opposing view that looks at music as a dangerous art which needs the rational control of words, but it is possible to view lyric generally as the essence of all poetry or, as John Drinkwater has suggested, lyric and lyric poetry are synonymous terms.[4] Most readers, for the past century or so, have defined lyric poetry as poetry or vice versa. In this case "lyric" becomes merely another word for "poetry". This hypothesis is problematic and poses the question: why do critics talk of "lyric poetry" in the first place? What are the other types of poetry and their relationship to lyric?

If we view the lyric from the perspective of subjectivity, we will be unable to differentiate poetry from lyric poetry. Drinkwater argues that if lyric is the expression of personal emotion, so is all poetry, and that all the other modes do not differ from each other in essence (Drinkwater, 29). However, according to J. W. Johnson, this definition – that lyric and lyric poetry are synonymous – is overextensive and extreme because it is confusing in the modern critical usage of the term.[5] This confusion results

[4-] John Drinkwater, *The Lyric*. (London: Martin Secker, 1916), 30.

[5-] See J. W. Johnson, "Lyric", in Alex Preminger (ed.) et al., *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 713.

probably from applying the term to a wide group of literary poetic works, which have changed its nature over time, and this perhaps accounts for the inconsistent attempts to define the nature of the lyric.

In the ancient Greek time, the purpose of using the *melic* (i.e. sung poem) was to distinguish it clearly from other types of poetry like dramatic (spoken) and epic (recited). Consequently, the use of lyric as a sung poem was traditionally based on a generic classification, which tends to be descriptive rather than providing a tangible definition. One of the important points about Lindley's definition (i.e. poems written to be sung) is that these poems will be unmistakably identified as songs. A song is a poem set to music, and Drinkwater classically defines lyric as song (Drinkwater, 58).

To take Lindley's definition a step further, there are certain restrictions that result from the union between poetry and music. In her extensive study on the relationship between poetry and music, Susanne Langer points out that when words and music come together in a song, music swallows words, sentences, and word-structures. She adds that a poem is annihilated when a composer sets it to music.[6] This suggestion underlines the strong effect of music on poetry or, to be more precise, on poems set to music. In the process of listening to a song, it is unlikely that a listener can appreciate the words in view of the fact that the ear is preoccupied by the tune and melody and so little of the poetry is appreciated.

Furthermore, a number of limitations on language and meaning can be strongly felt when poems are set to music. It is doubtful that a musical setting can permit the listener to follow the textual meaning of the poem, because words are often carried along the tune and it is the singer's task, not the poet's, to fit words to musical notes. Eventually, what matters is the sound of words and the human voice more than the poem as a poetic

[6-] Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), 153.

creation. Additionally, a song is a mimesis of the text. A composer provides the audience with his own interpretation of the poem. Edward Cone has suggested that:

The composer is not primarily engaged in "setting" a poem. A composer cannot set a poem directly, for in this sense there is no such thing as "the poem"; what he uses is one reading of the poem—that is to say, a specific performance, for even a silent reading is a kind of performance. He must consider all aspects of the poem that are not realizable in this performance as irrelevant. And to say that he "sets" even this reading is less accurate than to say that he appropriates it; he makes it his own by turning it into music. What we hear in a song, then, is not the poet's persona but the composer's.[7]

Here the relationship between the composer and his song is highlighted, and the relationship between the poet and his poem is implied. The composer is not interested in creating a musical setting for a poem, since his relationship with the poem is not straightforward. His persona, therefore, appears to precede the poetic persona. As Nietzsche has pointed out, "when a composer writes music for a lyrical poem, he is not excited by the images or by the feelings speaking through the text. A necessary relation between the poem and music makes no sense, for the two worlds of tone and image are too remote from each other to enter more than an external relationship." (Quoted by Kramer, 128). This suggestion makes the relation between poems and songs more complicated. Both Lindley and C. Day Lewis attempt to circumscribe the lyric to "poems written to be sung", or poems written for already existing tunes. Yet Lewis refers later to a distinction between the lyric and the lyrical by assuming that the liberation of the lyric from music has enabled the former to break away

[7]- Quoted by Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 127.

from certain conventions, thus expanding its scope. By doing so, lyric is able to treat a greater variety of subjects, and explore the depth of poetic meaning—to be, in fact, a lyrical poem.[8] Lewis's comment suggests that there are restrictions imposed on poems being set to music. Writing about the music of poetry, T.S. Eliot states that,

the music of poetry is not something that exists apart from the meaning. Otherwise, we could have poetry of great musical beauty which made no sense, and I have never come across such poetry....The music of poetry must be the music latent in the common speech of its time....The music of a word arises from its relation to the words immediately preceding and following it, and definitely to the rest of its context.[9]

These statements are quite interesting because they provide a different conception of what "the music of poetry" may mean. Eliot does not talk about poems written to be sung but about poems that gain music from meaning, language, context, and common speech. For Eliot, poetry is inseparable from meaning because the music of poetry is the music of common speech. Words retain their musical qualities from their contexts. Thus, in our modern conception of poetry, the music of poetry begins to emerge not from a musical setting accompanying the poem but from the meaning of words, common speech, and language. But whilst Eliot refers to the music of poetry becoming meaningful within its context, Frye suggests that the music of lyric poetry begins with babble. "It begins in a subconscious babbling among the sounds of words, and out of this arises the rhythm."[10] It is important to notice that Frye asserts the rhythm of speech and not the rhythm of music. Wordsworth's "Lucy", for example, conveys its lyricality and depth of meaning through the use of simple words:

[8-] C. Day Lewis, *The Lyric Impulse.* (London: Chatto and Windus Ltd., 1965), 4.

[9-] T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 29, 31.

[10-] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 271.

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!

Wordsworth's "Lucy" deals with a visionary figure who died young, but this figure is more appreciated by nature than by humanity. More essentially, the poem includes a second figure, a speaker whose life is affected by Lucy's death. At the end of the poem, the speaker indicates that something has happened in the world of the lyric: "But she is in her grave, and, oh,/ The difference to me!" The resonance and meaning of this poem is achieved through strong emotion and through the simplicity of language which emphasises this emotion. The diction is utterly simple, but the sincerity and intensity of the speaker's reactions are undeniable. The words of the lyric are quite ordinary. Thus, the lyricality of the whole poem lies in the use of common speech.

What connects music with lyric, Frye suggests, is the musical sounds that are different from the sounds we hear in ordinary life, and it is the poet who has to use much the same words that everyone else uses.[11] Sound is important in a musical poem but it cannot be isolated and described independently. Eliot emphasises the importance of sound suggesting that "'a musical poem' is a poem which has a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of the secondary meanings of the words which compose it, and that these two patterns are indissoluble and one." (Eliot, 33). From this suggestion one can conclude that it is not possible to isolate the role of sound in the overall effect of the whole poem. As Langer shrewdly observes, "the fullest exploitation of language, sound and rhythm, assonance and sensuous associations, is made in lyric

[11]- Northrop Frye, "Approaching the Lyric", in Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (eds.), *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 35.

poetry" (Langer, 258). Although there was an attempt to associate lyric with lyric poetry, Langer's view may serve to distinguish lyric from other poetic genres. And though music and poetry are both rhythmical, it does not follow that poetic rhythm is exactly the same as musical rhythm. As Lindley affirms, "it is misleading to speak as if poetry derived its rhythmicality from music".[12] For Lindley, poetic rhythm comes not from the rhythm of the words but from a poet's deployment of language's rhythmic possibility in relation to meaning, syntax, rhyme and other patterns of sound.[13]

Eliot differentiates between two types of poems: "some poems were meant to be sung; most poetry, in modern times, is meant to be spoken" (Eliot, 32). This statement suggests a historical change in the conception of lyric poetry. Consequently, the term "lyric" in modern theory has been expanded and thus moved from the scope of singing. This change paved the way for the lyric to employ a variety of themes, meters, attitudes and images.

Most critics and writers agree that modernism revolutionized poetic form. After the First World War, "lyric" came to mean something else. Quoting Ezra Pound, Peter Barry states that "in the progress of modernism, the first heave was to break [the hold of] the pentameter. The second was to challenge the dominance of Georgian subject matter."[14] In twentieth-century poetry, it is possible to find almost non-musical poems which are nevertheless called "lyrics". Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill" are two examples. The former employs dramatic monologue, derived mainly from Robert Browning, but it is still labelled "lyric", whereas the latter uses autobiographical, narrative elements to reveal the passage of time from

12- David Lindley, *Lyric*. (London: Methuen co. Ltd., 1985), 37.
13- Ibid, 41.
14- See Peter Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 4.

childhood to adulthood. The title of Eliot's poem includes the word "song" (albeit for the purpose of irony) that suggests it as lyric. To reveal the poem's musicality, Eliot uses diction, rhythms, and quasi-refrains such as "in the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo."

Jonathan Holden addresses the problem of defining lyric when he states that "there *is* no mode of poetry so pure that could be labelled simply 'lyric'. Modes of poetry, like the genres of literature, not only allude to one another, they partake one another."[15] This indicates that poems may not be completely lyrics but they contain some of the characteristics of the lyric. For some critics, "lyric poetry had long been viewed as dual in its nature, conspired of a major form dedicated to the divine and the heroic and of a minor form with love as its special province."[16] This assumption helps us understand the nature of lyric poetry. Lyric from the ancient times was not defined according to its nature but according to its classification.

Most of the lyric's characteristics are not truly defining features and sometimes they can be refuted. One of the definitions of the lyric, for instance, is that it is "a brief subjective poem strongly marked by imagination, melody, and emotion, and creating for the reader a single, unified impression"; or it is "any fairly short, nonnarrative poem presenting a single speaker who expresses a state of mind or a process of thought and feeling."[17] Yet, in the works that are most considered lyrical, it is likely to find violations of some of these norms. Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, for

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[15-] Jonathan Holden, *The Fate of American Poetry*. (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 5.

[16-] Norman Maclean, "From Action to Image: Theories of the Lyric in the Eighteenth Century", in R. S. Crane (ed.) et al. *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 418-19.

[17-] Both definitions are quoted by Anne Williams, *The Greater Lyric in the Eighteenth Century*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), 7.

example, is a long poem, yet it is considered lyrical by the majority of critics. Some critics define lyric according to brevity. Edgar Allan Poe, for example, suggests that there is no such thing as a long poem for which we can read lyric, and a long poem is a series of short lyrics.[18] However, in his essay "The Three Voices of Poetry", T.S. Eliot asks "How short does a poem have to be, to be called a 'lyric'? The emphasis on brevity, and the suggestion of division into stanzas, seem residual from the association of the voice with music. But there is no necessary relation between brevity and the expression of the poet's own thoughts and feelings." (Eliot, 97). These violations in the definition of lyric suggest that it is a flexible term and that it can be expanded to incorporate other poems and subgenres. Yet an important feature remains in the definition of the lyric – emotion. It is possible to extend the scope of the lyric if one assumes that the lyric is the most emotional or poetical mode of poetry. In modern poetry, however, this trait will not be of significance since, for Eliot, "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape of emotion."[19]

In New Criticism, according to Frye, "the lyric is preeminently the utterance that is overheard." (Frye, 1957, 249) Whereas poems written to be sung are addressed to the audience directly, the overhearing of the utterance emphasises the point that they are addressed to the reader indirectly. Barbara Smith argues that "lyric poems typically represent personal utterances."[20] This is one of the significant issues in defining the lyric, and many studies on the lyric tend to qualify this emphasis on the "personal" or "private". However, this approach to the lyric creates

[18]- See Edgar Allan Poe, "The Poetic Principle", in James A. Harrison (ed.), *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. (New York: 1902), XIV, 266.
[19]- See T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 43.
[20]- Barbara H. Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), 8.

difficulties once we consider poems that do not specify the individual's voice as in the case of poems addressed to an object: the wind, nightingale, urn, moon, etc., or poems addressed indirectly to the audience. Jonathan Culler asserts that "one [may] distinguish two forces in poetry, the narrative and the apostrophic, and that the lyric is characteristically the triumph of the apostrophic."[21] Studying the implications of apostrophe, Culler argues that "the figure of apostrophe is critical because its empty 'O,' devoid of semantic reference, is the figure of voice, a sign of utterance, and yet a figure of voicing, quite resistant to attempts to treat the poem as a fictive representation of personal utterance."[22] Both Culler and Smith confirm significantly that there is a distance between the lyric and its recipients. Because of this confusion in the theory of the lyric, some of the critics have neglected lyric poetry in favour of other poetic modes. In modern literary theory, there is an emphasis on the reader's response and his/her identification with the poet's subjective consciousness. If the lyric is a "figure of voice", as Culler suggests, it is not the voice of the poem but the voice of the reader, as Timothy Bahti maintains:

Whatever once was the lyric's musicality and orality (and we must recall how little is known about Greek "lyric's musicality" and how long and rare it has been since modern lyric cared about an actually listening public), it has become an experience of private reading…I would say there is no lyric without reading. The voice of the lyric, or is to be, the reader's voice.[23]

[21-] Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 149.

[22-] Jonathan Culler, "Changes in the Study of the Lyric", in Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (eds.), *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 40.

[23-] Timothy Bahti, *Ends of the Lyric: Direction and Consequence in Western Poetry*. (Baltimore: The Jones Hopkins University Press, 1996), 6-7.

Bahti breaks a new ground here in defining the lyric. He indicates that the lyric is subjective and personal and gives little attention to the listening public. He also stresses the importance of the reading experience in appreciating a lyric poem.

From this study which shows confusion in understanding the "lyric", it can be concluded that the nature of lyric poetry is deconstructive. In other words, every specific quality that can be attributed to lyric must find the lyric resistant to it, and that any attempt to define what the lyric is will be neither fruitful nor sufficient. It is difficult to define lyric poetry when it has no lyrical quality. The modernist view of the lyric, as an imaginative form of self-expression or self-consciousness and the most private of all genres, is often a belief derived from romantic literature. Nevertheless, the modernist theory of the lyric, with its emphasis on subjectivity, seems to be paradoxical. Symbolism and imagism have influenced lyric poetry because lyric is the voice that sings while images are silent. Interpretations of modernist poetry have been strongly influenced by the idea that the poem is based on opposites. Poststructuralism, reader-response theories, and the New Marxism all assume the model of poetry in which great importance is given to the subjective voice. Thus, although short poems continue to be written, lyric is increasingly absorbed into larger structures, which place it within a world of different contradictions. The nature of romantic lyric problematises the mode by revealing the traces of another voice within the seemingly autonomous lyric voice, as is the case in Wordsworth's poem "Lucy".

In a lyric poem the words are arranged to create the representation of experience rather than the experience itself. The lyric mode is hinged upon a paradox. It is a representation of an act of self-expression, but the lyric poem is also confused and complicated by the nature of poet's medium—words. A lyric poem gives the illusion that it is the expression of self-consciousness of the poet when it is actually a representation of it. The use of the first-person speaker is for the reader to identify with more closely

when the reader enters the "I". In the lyric poem, the poet makes the reader know the experience from within, and this is probably what differentiates the lyric from other poetic modes. One always feels that the poem's consciousness is a kind of power that draws the reader to its centre. When the first-person speaker is identified with the implied poet, it becomes "pure lyric". However, lyric can also be impersonal when the speaker seems to disappear behind the experience. When there is no "I" or "we" in the lyric, it becomes universal, and when the listener interacts with the speaker, the lyric becomes "dramatic". Narrative lyrics are those which tell a story about others or contain more than one character. It should be noted, though, that these are classifications rather than definitions.

Traditionally, the lyric is "overheard" by a reader, rather than addressed to him or her directly. At the end of the twentieth century, lyric is thought to be attenuated in its capacity because it cannot have decisive or clear-cut boundaries between what is lyric and what is not. Poetry is heard first and written second rather than the opposite. The trait that makes lyric poetry distinctive among the other poetic modes is that it is a verbal art and a representation of a communicative utterance. Perhaps a good tendency to understand the nature of the lyric is to take in mind the two opposing forces in the lyric mode. These two impulses often occur in the same poem. Some poems insist on the element of singing, but other features pull us to the opposite direction of non-song.

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