Taking Lyrics Literally: Teaching Poetry in a Prose Culture

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Having spent two fruitless weeks attempting to write an essay offering practical advice on how to teach lyric poetry, I had to face the perhaps bizarre truth that I feel much less hollow elaborating theoretical projections about how to direct one’s teaching than I do pretending to offer practical wisdom. In this case my hollowness may in fact have been as close as I could come to wisdom. For it suggests that I have yet to find a current theoretical approach to values capable of providing an adequate framework for the practical tasks involved in teaching lyric poetry. But in my view it will not suffice to rely on sharing moderately successful teaching strategies without formulating the ends they serve or the visions of poetry that define the qualities they foreground. So here I will try to elaborate a way of thinking about the lyric that can cogently draw connections between how we might best structure conversation about particular poems and how we might describe the basic values lyrics make available or reinforce for cultural life.

For me all the ladders start with the New Criticism. That movement, in its various manifestations, had the cumulative effect of showing how a wide range of desires might be satisfied by focusing on how poems work before making claims about what they might be saying, or how they might be evading uncomfortable realities. But at the same time the actual theories proposed to defend those practices and to make claims for the overall importance of close reading to cultural life were manifestly problematic. The most obvious reason for the eventual failure of New Critical theory was that it had come to prefer text to act (or Brooks to Burke) so that it could not adequately open itself to the range of human interests that generate efforts at lyric expression. In order to develop a language of values appropriate for this hypostasizing of texts as the locus of value claims, the theorists were forced to a language of ‘organic form’ that simply did not have the power to mediate sufficiently between what writers can produce and what cultures need. Instead the academic culture shaped by New Criticism bought into what Denis Donoghue calls an ‘antithetical’ model
of values in which they based the importance of literary experience on its ability to carry 'non-discursive truths' that opposed science's 'mere' ability to develop and test discursive hypotheses. This commitment led critics to make claims about special 'knowledge' from literary experience that had much more shrillness than they did substance. Seeking knowledge led to thematic criticism, however eloquent the rhetoric of poetry as experience, and it proved impossible to correlate the allegory necessary for a knowledge claim with the performative energies within the text that made it seem worth heeding in the first place. Ironically, readers got so frustrated with thematic readings providing nothing workable as knowledge that they gravitated toward an idealized sodal criticism, where one actually could make knowledge claims about texts, if only in terms of their relationships to contexts.

This historicist inversion of New Critical projections about literary knowledge establishes the basic challenge faced by contemporary defenses of poetry. We still have to claim that extended experience of the lyric develops powers and modes of attention that are sharply at odds with many of the epistemic priorities driving Enlightenment modernity. Yet we cannot return to the old dichotomy between scientific truth and non-discursive truth. Therefore, I propose that we treat the lyric as resisting the very idea that 'truth' is a workable ideal for literary productions. This is not to say that we do not learn many things from lyric texts. It is to say that we are likely to run into trouble if we treat this learning in terms of any discourse about 'truth' or knowledge that we inherit from the Enlightenment. Far better to begin at the opposite pole. Perhaps lyric is important for our culture because it invites us to explore values that are opposed to the entire psychological apparatus set in place by Enlightenment idealizations about knowledge and judgment in accord with stateable criteria.

The most succinct way to define what I mean by psychologies put in place by Enlightenment epistemic ideals is to turn to a piece of wisdom passed on to me by a humanist dean at UC Berkeley. She told me that being a dean meant constantly hearing the sentence 'studies have shown,' then bracing oneself for the disguised ideological content that follows. I will call the culture that culminates in the clause 'studies have shown' the pure product of epistemically oriented Enlightenment values. An adequate theory of the lyric will have to challenge the specific general psychological tendencies reinforced by this cultural orientation. This orientation has us envision a teleology in which humans' basic goal is to know themselves. The phrase is ancient, but its force for modernity is to lead us to envision maturity as the ability to represent our own interests to ourselves, to understand the psychology involved in much the same way that we understand the interrelations of molecules, and to be able to take responsibility for ourselves because we submit these interests to public criteria for assessment. Humanists are likely to shift the criteria, to talk about 'human well-being' rather than about 'utility.' But how we represent our