

Reading Historical Poetics

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This special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* originated in a 2014 conference we organized at the University of Chicago, “Poetic Genre and Social Imagination: Pope to Swinburne.” The conference was intended to highlight compelling new approaches to an old question: the relation between culture and poetic form. The focus on British poetry from the early eighteenth to the late nineteenth century was partly motivated by our own scholarly interests and partly meant to expand the concentration on the latter half of the nineteenth century that has typified British historical poetics in American English departments.

Listening to the lively presentations and conversations at the conference, however, we realized that there was not much consensus about what historical poetics is (or should be). In fact, the label *historical poetics* is associated with two quite different contemporary critical movements. It is also true that “historical” and “poetics” are contested concepts, as Yopie Prins notes in this issue. And before they are contested, they are ambiguous: although Anglo-American specialists in poetry often describe what they do as “poetics,” for example, this word has long been used (and is still used by scholars like Tzvetan Todorov and Gérard Genette) to refer to the theory of literature as such—a usage more recently extended, on both sides of the Atlantic, to the theory of anything at all (the poetics of speech, of prose, of space, of identity, etc.).¹ At the theoretical

¹ The tendency of Anglo-American critics to use “poetics” in a narrower sense to designate their scholarly interest in poetry may have something to do with their proximity to institutionalized creative writing. But there are older examples of this narrow use of the term as well. Ernst Robert Curtius (1973: 468), for example, defines poetics using two subcategories: “the history of the theory of poetry” and “poetics, which has to do with the technique of poetical composition.”

level, moreover, any historical poetics (or poetic historiography) has to confront the possibility that these terms are, in some important sense, contradictory. As Aristotle (1995: 1451b 4–6) writes in the *Poetics*, “Poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars.” If recent (and perhaps now abating) trends in literary studies reversed the wisdom of this comparison, substituting “ideological” for “philosophical” and thus adding any number of skeptical qualifications to “elevated,” a historical poetics (or a poetic historiography) would not necessarily need to make the defensive comparison in the first place. The theory of poetry would be historical; the theory of historiography would be poetic (as it was for Hayden White; see, e.g., White 1978). But how to show this without losing the distinctiveness of poetry from the mass of other historical and cultural phenomena? Or without jettisoning the truth claims of history in favor of poetic invention?

Beyond the essays collected here, two recent groups have tackled the problem of historical poetics differently. A working group of comparatists at the University of Chicago has approached the subject by way of the culminating, unfinished work, *Istoričeskaia poëtika* (*Historical Poetics*, 1940), of the neglected Russian scholar of epic and folklore Alexander Veselovsky (1838–1906).² In the introduction Veselovsky draws on the nascent field of cultural anthropology for a definition of literary history. He views literature from a broad cultural vantage, through the elements that compose a literary work: “Literary history is the history of social thought in its imagistic-poetic survival and in the forms that express this sedimentation” (Veselovsky 2015: 40). The task of the literary historian in this model is to explain the rise and fall of these cultural “survivals,” traces of preexisting cultural forms that have accumulated in literature’s formal and thematic features, including plot elements, verse forms, prosody, imagery, thematic clusters, and conceptual categories. Literary history therefore relies not on reference to proximate or period ideas of political and social history but on the autonomy and primacy of cultural

² Veselovsky’s neglect abroad may be explained by the diminishment of his reputation by the Communist government in the late 1940s for its comparative analysis of Western thought in the study of Slavic and near Eastern traditions (see Erlich 1980: 140–41).

history (i.e., *Kulturgeschichte*, the key concept of Veselovsky's contemporary Jacob Burckhardt). Rather than turn to the political or social environment to explain the style of a work (as a positivist might), or to a philosophy of historical progress that culminates in a subjective present (as in G. W. F. Hegel), Veselovsky proposes that literary history attend to the evolution of genre and form over the *longue durée* by reference to genre and form's founding or originary features. Combining the textual criticism of classical philology with the ethnographic analysis of cultural anthropology and sociology, Veselovsky reads the phenomena of ritual and literature as different manifestations of cultural expression that may emerge, decline, and rise again along the time line of a given tradition. He therefore emphasizes especially the encounter between popular and "high" genres, as well as the encounter between different national and cultural traditions.

The revival of Veselovsky's work demonstrates the continued vitality within the Russian tradition of a theory of literature that took root at the height of Romanticism and has been neglected in the American academy.³ However, as Boris Maslov (2013: 102) argues, Veselovsky's historical poetics might also provide comparatists with the means to resolve that perennial impasse of comparative literature, between the task of critical theory in choosing an object of study (outlining the boundaries of the field of literary studies; defining what counts as a "text") and that of a literary-critical methodology in analyzing that object. This group has appealed to literature's prehistory as social ritual in archaic culture to explain the advent of new literary forms in later periods (e.g., the nineteenth-century realist novel); fostered a sensitivity to the distinct conceptual or aesthetic shapes that different cultural phenomena take within literary works and genres (religious motifs versus class values; linguistic formulas versus image patterns); set in motion a shift of literary periodization from proximate historical context to more general claims of literary theory; and proposed the use of an underlying analogy between collective and individual expressions in the literary

³ This tradition includes not only the Russian formalist movement but also the literary theorists Mikhail Bakhtin and Vladimir Propp, the classical philologists Olga Freidenberg and Mikhail Gasparov, and the literary historian Viktor Zhirmunsky (see Shaitanov 2001: 429–32 and, more generally, Jarvis 2014).

realm, accommodating individual artistic intention within a broad-ranging theory of cultural studies.⁴ Yet many of their insights have come in the field of narrative studies, reflecting Veselovsky's focus on folklore and epic rather than on lyric poetry.

The second group of scholars—an American circle that has claimed the banner of historical poetics—is not genetically descended from Veselovsky and in fact would challenge key tenets that persist in the current application of his method, beginning with the assertion that literature can be reliably measured by relation to its archaic prehistory.⁵ For these critics, the evolution of genres reflects that of reading practices in interpretive communities, not cultural shifts reflected in literary forms as they have advanced from an originary moment.

The American circle is best understood as one among the numerous strains of New Formalism in the last two decades, even if its constituents might hesitate to use that designation themselves.⁶ These formalisms are diverse, but they share the ambition to replace old formalism and New Historicism with “an historically informed formalist criticism.”⁷ For American historical poetics, this is achieved by showing that both formalist and historicist methods have been hobbled by overreliance on the model of subjective, overheard expression that J. S. Mill described in “What Is Poetry?” and “The Two Kinds of Poetry” (1833).⁸ They argue that this type of poem emerged as “lyric” late in the eighteenth century and slowly colonized all verse genres, including previously distinct lyric

⁴ A bibliography of recent articles and books by this group of scholars, as well as a collection of fundamental texts by Bakhtin, Freidenberg, Vasily Radlov, Yuri Tynyanov, Veselovsky, and Zhirmunsky may be found at the Historical Poetics Online Resource, lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/historicalpoetics (see also Kliger and Maslov 2015).

⁵ One of the group's common critiques is directed at those who claim lyric as the most universal or most ancient genre. On the mythologization of primitive society more specifically, see Jackson 1998 and Martin 2015. For more on the formation of the American historical poetics reading group and its affiliated members, see Prins 2008 and her essay collected in this issue.

⁶ A broad sampling and critique of New Formalist method is surveyed by Marjorie Levinson (2007). Some important pieces not covered in that discussion include Levine 2006 and Tucker 2006. See also Levine 2015 and Ferguson and Brenkman 2015.

⁷ This is James Breslin's (1984: xiv) phrase, commonly cited in this body of criticism. For a short account of formalist retorts to New Historicism, see Wolfson 2000.

⁸ These essays were later revised and published together as “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties” (1859).

subgenres, to the extent that by the twentieth century there was no longer a clear line between “lyric” and poetry. This process of “lyricization” narrowed the resources available to poets and critics alike, so that even its inversions rely on the same root assumptions. Their chronology traces cause and effect: the nineteenth-century sentimental lyric produced the modernist lyric of impersonality; nineteenth-century genteel criticism’s emphasis on the poet’s subjective expression became New Criticism’s emphasis on the objective interpretation of the “speaker.”⁹ The history of lyricization extends through the twentieth century and into our own, these critics argue. It is as evident in the conceptualist rhetoric of anti-expressivity as it is in MFA dogmas about “finding your voice.”

Of course, other critics have noted this narrowing of poetry into what is commonly called Romantic lyric (see Jeffrey 1995).¹⁰ What makes the American circle’s position distinct is that, instead of offering a refined definition of lyric, they propose as an object of interpretation “lyric reading,” the process of mediation that has made poetry a single genre of modern vintage and the “one genre indisputably literary and independent of social contingency” (Jackson 2005: 7). By unearthing the “social contingency” that lyric reading conceals, these critics claim to reveal cultural formations on a vast scale, as astronomers view invisible planets from the gravitational pull of their neighbors. Here it is helpful to borrow Marjorie Levinson’s (2007: 559) division of New Formalism into two camps, one that reacts against the cultural studies orientation of New Historicism and one that seeks continuity with it. The American historical poetics group is solidly in the latter. As Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (1999: 529) put it, “Cultural studies has so far avoided the

⁹ Jonathan Culler (2015: 84) critiques this cause-and-effect chronology as “historically irresponsible,” arguing that the poem of intense personal expression that became the nineteenth-century norm needs to be more clearly distinguished from the way that “Anglo-American New Criticism, after the 1940s, takes the poem away from the historical author and treats it as the speech of a persona.”

¹⁰ Mary Poovey’s argument that modern criticism has been “lyricized” by Romantic lyric, blinding it to the world outside poems, resembles the claims of Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (1999). But for Jackson (2008), at least, Poovey’s (2001) solution—stop reading poems—shows that she confuses Romantic lyric with poetry itself and thus perpetuates the key problem.

study of lyric because lyrics have been misunderstood as the personal subjective utterances of historical subjects.” If lyric is instead understood as a “cultural pattern” (529), we can begin to recognize “the terms of subjectivity as themselves quite lyrically generic, particularly by the latter part of the nineteenth century” (523). In locating the stakes of their project in discussions of subjectivity as such, Jackson and Prins establish “lyrical studies” as a new chapter in the critique of the subject. In their view, lyric is not merely evidence of subjectivity to be critiqued. Rather, lyricization is a key part of the production of subjectivity in the first place.

The call to stop reading “poems” and start historicizing “lyric,” then, is not only a summons to self-awareness for inheritors of modern interpretive method in the field of poetics (though it is certainly that). More grandly, it is a prolegomenon to a metapoetics capable of interpreting culture outside the damage wrought by lyric reading. This is why lyricization underwrites almost all the scholarship by members of the group, including wide-ranging work in book history, textual criticism, adaptation and remediation theory, and “historical prosody.”¹¹ Presumably this theory would translate beyond poetry: if we would not recognize poetics without the critical fiction of lyric, neither would we recognize theories of the novel, new media, or culture.¹² Accordingly, a much-needed renewal of the institution of modern criticism begins with the revision of lyric reading in which it is rooted.

The road to the clear, ambitious claims of this argument runs through the transatlantic nineteenth century—which happens to be the shared focus of the American historical poetics group. Is this a problem? Or is it inevitable, as these critics would say, given that modern Anglo-American criticism emerges from this context? One important question

¹¹ The group’s importance to the revival of scholarly interest in meter deserves special note. Prins suggests that, as the study of genre has benefited from the recovery of obscured reading practices, so historical prosody should recover obscured metrical theories and methods of scansion in vogue before meter’s twentieth-century abstraction into the dominant foot-substitution model (one might think of this as “metricization”). The goal is not a better practical method in the present but a “theoretical perspective on lyric voice” provided by historical accounts of the metrical mediation of voice (Prins 2000: 110; see also Prins 2004, 2008, 2011; Martin 2012).

¹² For two extensions of the group’s method beyond poetry, see McGill 2003 and Williams 2010.

is how far the status quo this group sets out to overturn runs beyond its scholarly field. The claim that “the songs, riddles, epigrams, sonnets, epitaphs, *blasons*, lieder, elegies, marches, dialogues, conceits, ballads, epistles, hymns, odes, eclogues, and monodramas considered lyric in the Western tradition before the early nineteenth century were not lyric in the same sense as the poetry that we think of as lyric” (Jackson 2008: 183) risks undermining a good point by overstating a problem. Once we grant the argument that Romantic lyric is not coterminous with lyric as a genre, that poetry comprises numerous genres, and that, as Genette (1992) suggests in *The Architext*, the concept of genre itself does not require univocal and hierarchical exclusions, it should be possible to describe and interpret features common to poems over time—including features common to the kinds of lyric poems listed above.¹³ The American circle resists this hermeneutic step, however, emphasizing reading practices and interpretations recovered from history more than their own readings. This is a coherent position, philosophically speaking, and a modest one, since it marks these critics’ sense of their work (and their reading group) as only one chapter in a reception history. But even if this position might satisfy worries about aesthetics masking ideology, what does such relativism do to the enterprise of literary history? Does it make identifying continuities beyond immediate contexts—that is, the traditional work of literary history—impossible?

Prins offers one answer to this question by presenting a rich constellation of parodies, visual illustrations, and vocal recordings in the reception history of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem “A Musical Instrument” as evidence of a “historical process of . . . ‘thinking-through-reading,’ by which poems are read as such through the generic conventions that make up the history of reading poetry.” For Prins, such evidence helps counteract the inherent limitations of interpretive authority any one reader or critic can claim. Her position counters Simon Jarvis’s Adornean argument that “works of art are records of a historical process of thinking-through-making” that can be uncovered only by close attention to technique, so that works of art are, in an

¹³ For examples of this sort of work—which sometimes also contests the assumption that lyric is a genre and instead considers it a mode—see Culler 2015 and Von Hallberg 2008, as well as Johnson’s (1982) older but still-important book *The Idea of Lyric*.

important sense, authorities unto themselves (Jarvis 2014: 100–101; see also Jarvis 1998, 1999, 2005). Jarvis’s essay in this issue contends that Robert Browning’s metrical experiments in *Fifine at the Fair*, amplified by the shape of a single anomalous line in the middle of this long poem, work in dialectical interplay with “exuberant metaphysical, epistemological, and aesthetic speculation.” In this poem, Jarvis argues, technique enables the development of “a poetics in which thinking need not be an activity which is always already dependent on verbal making-explicit, but one in which there can be musical thinking, painterly thinking, pianistic thinking—and thinking in verse.”

Andrea Brady and Caroline Levine focus their essays on a similar question: how do the defining features of a historical verse genre challenge social attitudes on power relations that have persisted to the present day? Brady outlines the eighteenth-century critical dispute over John Milton’s “Lycidas” that has had a pervasive influence on modern readings of pastoral. She argues that the poem’s revision of pastoral conventions, which was so distasteful to Samuel Johnson, should be read as a recuperation of the ethical and political value of labor that belongs to the monody tradition in ancient Greek lyric. Levine reads a later lyric poem on labor, John Clare’s “Harvest Morning,” as a microcosm of asymmetrical social relations that confronts inequality through its use of the Spenserian stanza. By attending to Clare’s overlapping thematic and formal repetitions, Levine continues her project of strategic formalism, which seeks “to revalue repetition in literary studies” both as a response of poetics to the totalizing claims of critical theory and as a mode of conceptualizing practical political change (see Levine 2006, 2015).

Naomi Levine proposes in her essay on Barrett Browning a category of “historiographical poetics” in which the poet’s innovations of blank verse in *Aurora Leigh* reveal a fully theorized history of rhyme positioned against the one offered in Henry Hallam’s *Literature of Europe* (1837–39). By assimilating the modes of literary historiography with the techniques of verse, Barrett Browning’s poetry demonstrates that poetic form may be “a uniquely powerful language for making—and settling—historiographical arguments.” Dino Franco Felluga likewise seeks to answer a deeper theoretical question prompted by the rhyme in Byron’s *Don Juan*: what makes a novel in verse? In Felluga’s reading, Byron defeats both the value claims of lyric and the truth claims of the realist novel by parodying

the authority of voice in his use of rhymes. Like Barrett Browning's historiographical poetics, Byron's verse techniques highlight the historiographical work that can be found in the composition methods of individual poems.

With the exception of Prins, who remains (with Jackson) the most important theorist for the American circle, the critics included in this issue do not correspond neatly to one of the two groups we have sketched. There are, however, important overlaps in their reading methods. For example, Brady's claim that in "Lycidas" Milton accessed a poetic tradition stretching into Greek antiquity suggests a conception of deep literary history shared with Veselovsky. In a different way, Felluga's interest in thinking comparatively about the emergence of new literary features in the rapidly evolving genre of the realist novel also reflects priorities of that method. Naomi Levine's argument that Barrett Browning contested mainstream historiography in her poems, marginalia, and prose criticism reflects the American circle's ambition to broaden the terms by which poetry incarnates the poetic knowledge of a period. Yet the essays also display crucial differences, both with existing approaches to historical poetics and with each other. The question of representation and its critique, and the importance of those concepts for poetry, is central to these differences. In declining to take the linguistic turn (as he sometimes puts it), Jarvis constructs a phenomenology of verse that responds to the historical experience of reading in the present even as it anchors this experience in something more fundamental than any representation, including those of cultural history: the human body. Caroline Levine, meanwhile, reverses the critique of representation by reading poetic technique representationally. She claims that the formal dimensions of art can be said to "organize experience according to some of the same formal patterns that organize the social world," a position that might enable a dialogue between poetry and social theory.

Because historical poetics proceeds from assumptions as various as history and poetry themselves, these assumptions will always need to be tested. This is one reason that the essays assembled here share close attention to individual poems. To some, their close attention will seem myopic. To us, it reflects the important conviction that the usefulness of any literary theory ultimately rests on its capacity to illuminate particular literary texts as art. Whatever else they can be said to do, poets

make poems, and historically sensitive accounts of what they have done in making them must enrich our estimation of their significance and their value.

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