

Jonathan Culler

LITERARY THEORY

A Very Short Introduction

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Chapter 5

Rhetoric, Poetics, and Poetry

Poetics I have defined as the attempt to account for literary effects by describing the conventions and reading operations that make them possible. It is closely allied to *rhetoric*, which since classical times has been the study of the persuasive and expressive resources of language: the techniques of language and thought that can be used to construct effective discourses. Aristotle separated rhetoric from poetics, treating rhetoric as the art of persuasion and poetics as the art of imitation or representation. Medieval and Renaissance traditions, though, assimilated the two: rhetoric became the art of eloquence, and poetry (since it seeks to teach, to delight, and to move) was a superior instance of this art. In the nineteenth century, rhetoric came to be seen as artifice divorced from the genuine activities of thought or of poetic imagination and fell into disfavour. In the late twentieth century rhetoric has been revived as the study of the structuring powers of discourse.

Poetry is related to rhetoric: poetry is language that makes abundant use of figures of speech and language that aims to be powerfully persuasive. And, ever since Plato excluded poets from his ideal republic, when poetry has been attacked or denigrated, it has been as deceptive or frivolous rhetoric that misleads citizens and calls up extravagant desires. Aristotle asserted the value of poetry by focusing on imitation (*mimesis*) rather than rhetoric. He argued that poetry provides a safe

outlet for the release of intense emotions. And he claimed that poetry models the valuable experience of passing from ignorance to knowledge. (Thus, in the key moment of 'recognition' in tragic drama, the hero realizes his error and spectators realize that 'there but for the grace of God go I'.) Poetics, as an account of the resources and strategies of literature, is not reducible to an account of rhetorical figures, but poetics could be seen as part of an expanded rhetoric that studies the resources for linguistic acts of all kinds.

Rhetorical figures

Literary theory has been much concerned with rhetoric, and theorists debate the nature and function of rhetorical figures. A rhetorical figure has generally been defined as an alteration of or swerve from 'ordinary' usage; for instance, 'My love is a rose' uses *rose* to mean not the flower but something beautiful and precious (this is the figure of metaphor). Or 'The Secret Sits' makes the secret an agent capable of sitting (personification). Rhetoricians formerly attempted to distinguish specific 'tropes' which 'turn' or alter the meaning of a word (as in metaphor) from more miscellaneous 'figures' of indirection which arrange words to achieve special effects. Some figures are: alliteration (the repetition of a consonant); apostrophe (addressing something that is not a regular listener, as in 'Be still, my heart!'); and assonance (the repetition of a vowel sound).

Recent theory rarely distinguishes *figure* from *trope* and has even questioned the notion of an 'ordinary' or 'literal' meaning from which figures or tropes swerve. For example, is the term *metaphor* itself literal or figurative? Jacques Derrida, in 'White Mythology', shows how theoretical accounts of metaphor seem inevitably to rely on metaphors. Some theorists have even embraced the paradoxical conclusion that language is fundamentally figurative and that what we call literal language consists of figures whose figurative nature has been forgotten.

When we talk of ‘grasping’ a ‘hard problem’, for instance, these two expressions become literal through the forgetting of their possible figurality.

From this perspective, it’s not that there is no distinction between literal and figurative but rather that tropes and figures are fundamental structures of language, not exceptions and distortions. Traditionally, the most important figure has been metaphor. A metaphor treats something *as* something else (calling George a donkey or my love a red, red rose). Metaphor is thus a version of a basic way of knowing: we know something by seeing it *as* something. Theorists speak of ‘metaphors we live by’, basic metaphorical schemes, like ‘life is a journey’. Such schemes structure our ways of thinking about the world: we try to ‘get somewhere’ in life, ‘find our way’, ‘know where we’re going’, ‘encounter obstacles’, and so on.

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Metaphor has been treated as basic to language and the imagination because it is cognitively respectable, not inherently frivolous or ornamental. Its literary force, though, may depend on its incongruity. Wordsworth’s phrase ‘the child is father to the man’ stops you, makes you think, and then lets you see the relationship of generations in a new light: the child’s relationship to the man he later becomes is compared to a father’s relation to his child. Because a metaphor can carry an elaborate proposition, even a theory, it is the rhetorical figure most easily justified.

But theorists have also stressed the importance of other figures. For Roman Jakobson, metaphor and metonymy are the two fundamental structures of language: if metaphor links by means of similarity, metonymy links by means of contiguity. Metonymy moves from one thing to another that is contiguous with it, as when we say ‘the Crown’ for ‘the Queen’. Metonymy produces order by linking things in spatial and temporal series, moving from one thing to another within a given domain, rather than linking one domain to another, as metaphor can

do. Other theorists add *synecdoche* and *irony* to complete a list of ‘four master tropes’. Synecdoche is the substitution of part for whole: ‘ten hands’ for ‘ten workers’. It infers qualities of the whole from those of a part and allows parts to represent wholes. Irony juxtaposes appearance and reality; what happens is the opposite of what is expected (what if it rains on the weather forecaster’s picnic?). These four master tropes – metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony – are used by the historian Hayden White to analyse historical explanation or ‘emplotment’ as he calls it: they are the basic rhetorical structures by which we make sense of experience. The fundamental idea of rhetoric as a discipline, which comes out well in this fourfold example, is that there are basic structures of language which underlie and make possible the meanings produced in a wide variety of discourses.

Genres

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Literature depends on rhetorical figures but also on larger structures, particularly literary genres. What are genres and what is their role? Are terms like *epic* and *novel* simply convenient ways of classifying works on the basis of gross resemblances or do they have functions for readers and writers?

For readers, genres are sets of conventions and expectations: knowing whether we are reading a detective story or a romance, a lyric poem or a tragedy, we are on the lookout for different things and make assumptions about what will be significant. Reading a detective story, we look for clues in a way we don’t when reading a tragedy. What would be a striking figure in a lyric – ‘the Secret sits in the middle’ – might be a minor circumstantial detail in a ghost story or work of science fiction, where secrets might have acquired bodies.

Historically, many theorists of genre have followed the Greeks, who divided works among three broad classes according to who speaks: *poetic* or *lyric*, where the narrator speaks in the first person, *epic* or

narrative, where the narrator speaks in his own voice but allows characters to speak in theirs, and *drama*, where the characters do all the talking. Another way of making this distinction is to focus on the relation of speaker to audience. In epic, there is oral recitation: a poet directly confronting the listening audience. In drama, the author is concealed from the audience and the characters on stage talk. In lyric – the most complicated case – the poet, in singing or chanting, turns his back on his listeners, so to speak, and ‘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’. To these three elementary genres we can add the modern genre of the novel, which addresses the reader through a book – a topic we’ll take up in Chapter 6.

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Epic and tragic drama were in ancient times and in the Renaissance the crowning achievements of literature, the highest accomplishments of any aspiring poet. The invention of the novel brought a new competitor onto the literary scene, but between the late eighteenth century and the mid-twentieth century, the lyric, a short non-narrative poem, came to be identified with the essence of literature. Once seen primarily as a mode of elevated expression, the elegant formulation of cultural values and attitudes, lyric poetry later came to be seen as the expression of powerful feeling, dealing at once with everyday life and transcendent values, giving concrete expression to the most inward feelings of the individual subject. This idea still holds sway. Contemporary theorists, though, have come to treat lyric less as expression of the poet’s feelings and more as associative and imaginative work on language – an experimenting with linguistic connections and formulations that makes poetry a disruption of culture rather than the main repository of its values.

Poetry as word and act

Literary theory that is focused on poetry debates, among other things, the relative importance of different ways of viewing poems: a poem is

both a structure made of words (a text) and an event (an act of the poet, an experience of the reader, an event in literary history). For the poem conceived as verbal construction, a major question is the relation between meaning and the non-semantic features of language, such as sound and rhythm. How do the non-semantic features of language work? What effects, conscious and unconscious, do they have? What sorts of interaction between semantic and non-semantic features can be expected?

For the poem as act, a key question has been the relation between the act of the author who writes the poem and that of the speaker or ‘voice’ that speaks there. This is a complicated matter. The author does not speak the poem; to write it, the author imagines him or herself or another voice speaking it. To read a poem – for instance, ‘The Secret Sits’ – is to say the words, ‘We dance round in a ring and suppose . . .’ The poem seems to be an utterance, but it is the utterance of a voice of indeterminate status. To read its words is to put yourself in the position of saying them or else to imagine another voice saying them – the voice, we often say, of a narrator or speaker constructed by the author. Thus we have, on the one hand, the historical individual, Robert Frost, and on the other, the voice of this particular utterance. Intermediary between those two figures is another figure: the image of poetic voice that emerges from the study of a range of poems by a single poet (in Frost’s case, perhaps, that of a crusty, down-to-earth but reflective observer of rural life). The importance of these different figures varies from one poet to another and from one sort of critical study to another. But in thinking about lyric, it is crucial to *begin* with a distinction between the voice that speaks and the poet who made the poem, thus creating this figure of voice.

Lyric poetry, according to a well-known saying by John Stuart Mill, is utterance overheard. Now when we overhear an utterance that engages our attention, what we characteristically do is imagine or reconstruct a speaker and a context: identifying a tone of voice, we infer the posture,

situations, concerns, and attitudes of a speaker (sometimes coinciding with what we know of the author, but often not). This has been the dominant approach to the lyric in the twentieth century, and a succinct justification might be that literary works are fictional imitations of 'real world' utterances. Lyrics, then, are fictional imitations of personal utterance. It is as if each poem began with the invisible words, '[For example, I or someone could say] My love is like a red, red rose,' or '[For example, I or someone could say] We dance round in a ring and suppose . . .' Interpreting the poem, then, is a matter of working out, from indications of the text and from our general knowledge about speakers and common situations, the nature of the speaker's attitudes. What might lead someone to speak thus? The dominant mode of appreciation of poetry in schools and universities has been to focus on the complexities of the speaker's attitude, on the poem as the dramatization of thoughts and feelings of a speaker whom one reconstructs.

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This is a productive approach to the lyric, for many poems do present a speaker who is performing recognizable speech acts: meditating on the significance of an experience, chiding a friend or lover, expressing admiration or devotion, for example. But if we turn to the beginnings of some of the most famous lyrics, such as Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' or Blake's 'The Tiger', difficulties arise: 'O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being!' or 'Tiger, Tiger, burning bright | In the forests of the night'. It is hard to imagine what sort of situation would lead someone to speak in this way or what non-poetic act they would be performing. The answer we are likely to come up with is that these speakers are getting carried away and waxing poetical, extravagantly posturing. If we try to understand these poems as fictional imitations of ordinary speech acts, the act seems to be that of imitating poetry itself.

The extravagance of lyric

What such examples suggest is the extravagance of lyric. Not only do lyric poems seem willing to address almost anything in preference to an actual audience (the wind, a tiger, my soul); they do so in hyperbolic accents. Exaggeration is the name of the game here: the tiger is not just orange but ‘burning’; the wind is the very ‘breath of Autumn’s being’ and, later in the poem, saviour and destroyer. Even sardonic poems are based on hyperbolic condensations, as when Frost reduces human activity to dancing round in a ring and treats the many forms of knowledge as ‘supposing’.

We touch here on a major theoretical issue, a paradox that seems to lie at the core of lyric poetry. The extravagance of poetry includes its aspiration to what theorists since classical times have called the ‘sublime’: a relation to what exceeds human capabilities of understanding, provokes awe or passionate intensity, gives the speaker a sense of something beyond the human. But this transcendent aspiration is linked to rhetorical figures such as *apostrophe*, the trope of addressing what is not an actual listener, *personification*, the attribution of human qualities to what is not human, and *prosopopoeia*, the granting of speech to inanimate objects. How can the highest aspirations of verse be linked to such rhetorical devices?

When lyrics swerve from or play upon the circuit of communication to address what is not really a listener – a wind, a tiger, or the heart – this is sometimes said to signify strong feeling that leads the speaker to burst out in speech. But the emotional intensity attaches especially to the act of address or invocation itself, which frequently wills a state of affairs and attempts to call it into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to the speaker’s desire. ‘O lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud,’ Shelley’s speaker urges the West Wind. The hyperbolic demand that the universe hear you and act accordingly is a move by which speakers

constitute themselves as sublime poets or as visionary: someone who can address Nature and to whom it might respond. The 'O' of invocation is a figure of poetic vocation, a move by which the speaking voice claims to be not a mere speaker of verse but an embodiment of poetic tradition and of the spirit of poetry. Calling winds to blow or calling for the unborn to hear your cries is an act of poetic ritual. It is ritualistic, in that the winds do not come and the unborn do not hear. Voice calls in order to be calling. It calls in order to dramatize voice: to summon images of its power so as to establish its identity as poetic and prophetic voice. The impossible, hyperbolic imperatives of apostrophes evoke poetic events, things that will be accomplished, if they are accomplished at all, in the event of the poem.

Narrative poems recount an event; lyrics, we might say, strive to be an event. But there is no guarantee that the poem will work, and apostrophe – as my brief quotations indicate – is what is most blatantly, most embarrassingly 'poetical', most mystificatory and vulnerable to dismissal as hyperbolic nonsense. 'Lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!' Sure. Pull the other one. To be a poet is to strive to bring this sort of thing off, to wager that it won't be dismissed as a lot of nonsense.

A major problem for the theory of poetry, as I've said, is the relation between the poem as a structure made of words and the poem as event. Apostrophes both attempt to make something happen and expose that happening as based on verbal devices – as on the empty 'O' of apostrophic address: 'O wild West Wind!'

To stress apostrophe, personification, prosopopoeia, and hyperbole is to join the theorists who through the ages have emphasized what *distinguishes* the lyric from other speech acts, what makes it the most literary of forms. The lyric, Northrop Frye writes, 'is the genre that most clearly shows the hypothetical core of literature, narrative and meaning in their literal aspects as word-order and word-pattern'. That is, lyric shows us meaning or story emerging from verbal patterning. You repeat

words that echo in a rhythmical structure and see if story or sense won't emerge.

Rhythmic words

Frye, whose *Anatomy of Criticism* is an invaluable compendium of thinking about lyric and other genres, calls the basic constituents of lyric *babble* and *doodle*, whose roots are *charm* and *riddle*. Poems babble, foregrounding non-semantic features of language – sound, rhythm, repetition of letters – to produce charm or incantation:

This darksome burn, horseback brown,
His rollrock highroad roaring down . . .

Poems doodle or riddle us, in their wayward indirection, their puzzling formulations: what is a 'rollrock highroad'? What of 'the Secret that sits in the middle and knows'?

Such features are very prominent in nursery rhymes and ballads, where frequently pleasure lies in rhythm, incantation, and strangeness of image:

Pease porridge hot,
Pease porridge cold,
Pease porridge in the pot,
Nine days old.

The rhythmical pattern and the rhyme scheme flaunt the organization of this piece of language and can both provoke special interpretive attention (as when rhyme raises the question of relation of the rhyme words) and suspend enquiry: poetry has its own order which gives pleasure, so there's no need to ask about meaning; the rhythmical organization lets language get under the guard of intelligence and lodge itself in mechanical memory. We remember 'Pease porridge hot'

without bothering to enquire what pease porridge might be, and even if we find out we are likely to forget that before we forget 'Pease porridge hot'.

The foregrounding and making strange of language through metrical organization and repetition of sounds is the basis of poetry. Theories of poetry then posit relations between different types of organization of language – metrical, phonological, semantic, thematic – or, to put it most generally, between the semantic and non-semantic dimensions of language, between what the poem says and how it says it. The poem is a structure of signifiers that absorbs and reconstitutes the signifieds, in that its formal patterns have effects on its semantic structures, assimilating the meanings words have in other contexts and subjecting them to new organization, altering stress and focus, shifting literal meanings to figurative ones, bringing terms into alignment, according to patterns of parallelism. It is the scandal of poetry that 'contingent' features of sound and rhythm systematically infect and affect thought.

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Interpreting poems

At this level, the lyric is based on a convention of unity and autonomy, as if there were a rule: don't treat the poem as we might a bit of conversation, a fragment that needs a larger context to explain it, but assume that it has a structure of its own. Try to read it as if it were an aesthetic whole. The tradition of poetics makes available various theoretical models. The Russian Formalists of the early twentieth century posit that one level of structure in a poem should mirror another; Romantic theorists and English and American New Critics draw an analogy between poems and natural organisms: all the parts of the poem should fit together harmoniously. Post-structuralist readings posit an ineluctable tension between what poems do and what they say, the impossibility for a poem, or perhaps any piece of language, to practise what it preaches.

Recent conceptions of poems as intertextual constructions stress that poems are energized by echoes of past poems – echoes which they may not master. Unity becomes less a property of poems than something interpreters seek, whether they look for harmonious fusion or unresolved tension. To do this, readers identify oppositions in the poem (as between ‘us’ and the Secret or between knowing and supposing) and see how other elements of the poem, particularly figurative expressions, align themselves with these oppositions.

Take Ezra Pound’s famous two-line poem, ‘In a Station of the Metro’:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

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Interpreting this involves working with the contrast between crowds in the subway and the natural scene. The pairing of the two lines enforces the parallel between the faces in the darkness of the subway and the petals on the black bough of a tree. But what then? The interpretation of poems depends not just on the convention of unity but also on the convention of significance: the rule is that poems, however slight in appearance, are supposed to be about something important, and therefore concrete details should be taken to have general significance. They should be read as the sign or ‘objective correlative’, to use T. S. Eliot’s term, for important feelings or intimations of significance.

To make the opposition in Pound’s little poem significant, readers need to reflect on how the parallel might work. Is the poem *contrasting* the urban crowd scene in the metro with the peaceful natural scene of petals on a wet tree limb or is it *equating* them, noting a similarity? Both options are possible, but the latter seems to make possible a richer reading by prompting a step powerfully underwritten by the tradition of poetic interpretation. The perception of *resemblance* between faces in the crowd and petals on a bough – seeing faces in the crowd as petals on a bough – is an instance of the poetic imagination ‘seeing the world

anew', grasping unexpected relationships and, perhaps, appreciating what to other observers would be trivial or oppressive, finding profundity in formal appearance. This little poem thus can become a reflection on the power of poetic imagination to achieve the effects that the poem itself achieves. An example like this illustrates a basic convention of poetic interpretation: consider what this poem and its procedures say about poetry or the creation of meaning. Poems, in their deployment of rhetorical operations, may be read as explorations in poetics, just as novels, as we shall see next, are at some level reflections on the making intelligible of our experience of time and are thus explorations in narrative theory.

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