

Literary History: A Systematic Approach

Lecture 3: Poetic Subjectivity as a Marker of Early Modernity (c. 1550-1700)

1) The Basic Outline Revisited

2) Why Poetry?

a) What Is Poetry?

b) Poetry and Modernity

3) Subjectivity and Poetic Form

4) Early Modern Authorship

1) The Basic Outline Revisited

traditional criteria for art and literature
(based on the ideal of objective truth)



mimetic criteria----->
pragmatic criteria----->
expressive criteria----->
reflexive criteria----->



modern criteria for art and literature
(based on the emerging interface of
subjectivity and mediality)

Modernization: Renaissance Romanticism Postmodernism
Compensation: Neo-Classicism Modernism

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1500 1660 1800 1900 2000

2) Why Poetry?

a) What Is Poetry?

Die Gattung der Lyrik ist grundsätzlich als literarisches Medium zu begreifen, in dem im Laufe der Geschichte der englischen Kultur in wechselnden sozialen und kulturellen Kontexten die Erfahrungswelt des Individuums, von innen heraus und zugleich in ihrer jeweiligen historischen Situiertheit, erkundet und ästhetisch vermittelt wird, so daß der Leser diese beiden Aspekte, also die subjektive Perspektive wie ihre außersubjektive Bedingtheit, nachzuvollziehen und stellvertretend nachzuerfahren vermag. Es ist dabei vorauszusetzen, daß das Subjekt keinen autonomen, gesellschaftsunabhängigen Status besitzt, sondern – unter anderem – das Medium des lyrischen Textes benutzt, um sich hier allererst zu konstituieren, seine Subjektivität hervorzubringen und sich ihrer zu vergewissern.

(Hühn 1995, 9)

b) Poetry and Modernity

Einerseits greift [die Lyrik] auf das reichhaltige Formenrepertoire kultischer Dichtung zurück, andererseits entsteht sie in krasser weltanschaulicher Abwendung von deren Traditionen – was könnte den animistischen und kollektivistischen Bestrebungen der frühen Religionen ferner stehen als die Hinwendung zum Ich und dessen Ort in der Welt? Die Verweltlichung ist damit zugleich Sündenfall der Dichtung und Geburtsstunde der Lyrik. Doch dem Bruch in der Weltsicht entspricht kein Bruch in der Formensprache: Assonanz und Rhythmus stellen – ganz in der Tradition kultischer Dichtungsvermittlung – das Äquivalent zu Reim und Metrik in der sich alsbald verschriftlichenden Lyrik dar.

(Stephan 2000, 115f.)

> Poetry as a 'Paradigm of Modernity' (cf. Iser 1964/91, Homann 1999)

3) Subjectivity and Poetic Form

[P]rose withholds itself from view [...] it becomes identified with the linguistic substratum so that whereas one recognizes that it emerges relatively late, it presents itself as prior to verse or any specific discourse. It can thus claim a foundational role and functions as the ground of reference, a sort of degree-zero of language for all further elaboration. [Thus,] verse is seen as developmentally second. But we know it to be developmentally first. Well then, if verse is first *and* verse is second, where is prose? [...]

Prose is meant to have no place; prose does not happen. Prose is what assigns place.

(Kittay/Godzich 1997, 197)

The Cultural Importance of Iambic Pentameter

English – in its grammatical structure, its vocabulary, and its accentuation – well suits iambic rhythm. [...] Trochaic and triple meters run against the natural rhythms of English, and it is mainly for this reason that such meters have been employed less often [...] than iambic measures.

(Steele 1999, 13/241)

[I]ambic pentameter did not simply emerge from the language: it was an historical invention. In fact it was invented twice. The first time was in the fourteenth century when it took the form of Chaucer's Middle English pentameter. Between then and the early sixteenth century massive phonological changes took place [...] so that poets could no longer discern Chaucer's metre and the pentameter was reintroduced. Wyatt and Surrey translated Italian sonnets by Petrarch into English and into iambic pentameter [...] Promoted into dominance by the new courtly culture, pentameter is a historically constituted institution. It is not natural to English poetry but it is a specific cultural phenomenon, a discursive form.

(Easthope 1983, 54f.)

The Cultural Importance of the Sonnet

> *The Birth of the Modern Mind* (Oppenheimer 1989)

The sonnet has many things going for it. It is concise enough to allow memorability, prescriptive enough to interest both the amateur and the professional poet, not so stringent as to be tedious [...], and it looks solidly, comfortingly square on the page. Its turn [...] seems to match our need to blink, have second thoughts, and come again, or askance, or unstuck. You know where you are with a sonnet, though not necessarily where you are going [...]

(Laird 2001, 24)

When the poet says "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun", he is not only giving over Petrarchan epithets like "that sun, thine eye". To rewrite in this way, without entirely erasing, a traditional idealizing language of laudatory admiration is to reconstitute what is traditionally understood to be the poet lover's proper self. So explicitly to revise the visual language of poetry and desire is to come upon and actually to express a novel desire of language that is utterly at odds with what has come before.

(Fineman 1986, 179)

> *The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity* (Fineman 1986)

Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542, cf. Hühn 1995, 21-35)

Some fowls there be that have so perfect sight
Again the sun their eyes for to defend,
And some because the light does them offend
Do never 'pear but in the dark of night.
Other rejoice that see the fire bright
And ween to play in it, as they do pretend,
And find the contrary of it that they intend.
Alas, of that sort I may be by right,
For to withstand her look I am not able
And yet can I not hide me in no dark place,
Remembrance so followeth me of that face.
So that with teary eyes, swollen and unstable,
My destiny to behold her doth me lead,
Yet do I know I run into the glead.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616, cf. Hühn 1995, 79-100)

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My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks,
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go,
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
 As any she belied with false compare.

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Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd,
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd:
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

4) Early Modern Authorship

Inspiration [< God]

(*poeta vates*)

⇒ Utterance

⇒ subjective/
emancipatory elements



Imitation [< Tradition < God]

(*poeta doctus*)

⇒ Composition

⇒ normative/
compensatory elements

[True poets] most properly do imitate to teach & delight : and to imitate, borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be : but range [...] into the divine consideration of what may be and should be.

[T]he poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth. [...] [T]he poet never maketh any Circles about your imagination, to conjure you to beleefe for true what he writeth : he citeth not authorities of other histories, but even for his entrie, calleth the sweete Muses to inspire unto him a good invention.

Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesie* [1595]. Reprint Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1904.

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