

# Julie Carr

## (Introductory Remarks)

To many (though probably not to many here), the term “lyric” is simply synonymous with poetry. For others it means a special kind of poem—short, contained, and intimate, “spoken” by an “overheard” singular and self-revealing subject. But even the subjects of Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s Lyrical Ballads, whose preface holds the perhaps most widely followed and widely resisted banner of lyric poetry, has speaking subjects as inconstant, incomplete, various, and indeed fictional as children, the mad, and ghosts. Most would say we’ve come a long way from the overflow of powerful feeling and from the tranquility in which to recollect it. But even to claim this “long way” is to assume, as Mark Wallace has written, that “lyric’s” concern with the “emotional”...is “a displacement of material conditions onto an often hysterical subjectivity.” “Such a narrow notion of the “emotional,” Wallace goes on, “can easily, and unfortunately, be understood merely as a lack of rigorous thinking, that is, as something which historically has often been associated with feminine behavior and physiology.” But even if we want to maintain pressure on the inclusion of “emotion” in our cotemporary definition of the lyric, or replace it with a broader term such as “affect”—we generally cannot ignore the lyric’s association with song—though the relationship between the written word and the sung, is never one of easy equivalence, but of charged tension, as Blake reminds us when, in his introduction to his *Songs of Innocence*, the piper, urged to write down his song, “plucks a hollow reed” and “stains the water clear.” If, as Jonathan Culler has written, “Writing, in some innate hostility to voice, always seeks to deny or evade the vocative,” if writing is by virtue of its dependence on the technical, its reliance on technique, always somehow hollow, and always a form of staining, it is precisely this tension between lyric as immediate, affective, song and distanced conceptuality, that perhaps makes it most alive.

Robert Kaufman, describing Frankfurt school thinking on the subject, has written that “lyric and aesthetic experience are the ground of possibility for emancipatory thought” precisely because, “the lyric’s special role is to take language, the presumably bottom-line medium of objectivity...and...to subjectivize it, [to] affectively stretch conceptuality’s bounds in order to make something that seems formally like a concept but that does something that ordinary, “objective” concepts generally do not do: sing.”

But in the pages of this anthology it is not as if ideas simply burst into song like members of musical down the street. It is more that song and thought break each *other* open, maybe break each other down;

rather than using lyricism to “express” thinking, these poets allow the lyric to use *them*, and to open, and therefore expand, thinking.

I’ll end my comments with a couple of lines from Brenda Hillman who regrets that she could not be here:

“The music of lyric poetry brings a voice from a wilderness we do not understand, to expose acts of false authority for the ways they are dismaying to human and other earthly life. Its mind is a counterculture.”

Works cited:

Hillman, Brenda. “On Song, Lyric and Strings,” *New American Writing* 25 (2007).

Kaufman, Robert: “Barbarism in American Poetry, Art, and Culture? Afternach: Aesthetic Commitment as Negative Romanticism Since Viet Nam,” in Kaufman, *Negative Romanticism: Adornian Aesthetics in Keats, Shelley, and Modern Poetry* (forthcoming); portions of this chapter appeared, in earlier versions, in Kaufman, “Poetry’s Ethics? Theodor W. Adorno and Robert Duncan on Aesthetic Illusion and Sociopolitical Delusion,” *New German Critique* 97 (Winter 2006): 73-118, and will also appear as “Afternach: Life’s Posthumous Career in Later-Modernist Poetry,” in *The Living Voice: The Meaning of “Life” in British Romantic Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Ross Wilson (forthcoming from Routledge).

Wallace, Mark: “On the Lyric as Experimental Possibility”: <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/wallace/lyric.html>