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Lyric Words, not Worlds
(Abstract)


The notion that a lyric poem generates a world seems derived from the analysis of narrative fiction and risks setting the study of lyric poetry on the wrong track. Although lyrics often contain fictional elements – minimally sketched characters and incident – it is best to start from the presumption that they are at bottom not fiction. One can then analyze the tension between what one might call fiction and song, or fictional elements and ritualistic elements, as in Roland Greene’s analysis of lyric sequences. The positing of a fictional world created by a lyric poem and including a fictional speaker or persona risks trivializing lyric poems by relativizing their claims to the situation of a particular individual instead of granting them the authority of poetic form. Even lyrics that do create a fictional speaker often make claims about the world – our world and not a special fictional world – that are authorized by the poet. A superior default model for thinking about lyric, then is the classical concept of lyric as epideictic discourse, closer to oratory than to mimesis. The lyric characteristically strives to be itself an event rather than a representation of an event.

References

Hamburger, Käte, Die Logik der Dichtung [1957], Stuttgart 21968.