Introduction

Erik Gray

DOI:10.1093/oso/9780198752974.003.0001

Abstract and Keywords

This chapter sets out the book’s scope, methodology, and premises. The book’s topic is erotic love (*eros*)—as opposed to other forms such as friendship (*philia*) and family or divine love (*agape*)—and its relation to poetry, especially lyric poetry, across the Western tradition. Given the historicist bent of most current criticism, it is relatively rare for a book to juxtapose works from many different periods, as this one does. But such transhistorical criticism has advantages, not least in revealing often surprising similarities and continuities among works from very different contexts. Notably, love lyrics consistently foreground the tensions between privacy and publicity, as well as between singularity and convention.

*Keywords:* eros, love, lyric, historicism, transhistorical, juxtaposition, private, public
Love, writes Plato, turns anyone it touches into a poet. But why? What is the connection between love and poetry that leads us to associate them so closely with one another? For love is not merely a topic that many poems happen to address. Rather there exists an understanding, shared across different periods of the Western literary tradition, that a poem is the form of expression most naturally suited to love.

By love I mean specifically what is usually called romantic or erotic love, the type that is immediately suggested by the term "love poetry." Such love differs from other forms—love of God; love of one’s neighbor; love for one’s children; friendship—in a number of key particulars. It is characterized, in the first place, by exclusivity: erotic love is directed toward a single person and seeks the same in return. Hence it often involves jealousy. Moreover, since it differs from divine or family love in being based on choice—it is never simply a given but has a distinct beginning, as well as the ever-present possibility of an end—erotic love always contains some element of doubt. It also includes a sexual or physical element, however much that aspect may be sublimated into different forms. And perhaps as a consequence, it is characterized even more than other forms of love by irrationality and by extremes of emotion, both pleasurable and painful.

In saying that poetry is naturally suited to love, I do not mean to suggest that it is unique among the arts in this regard. Various prose genres, for instance, are also famously successful in expressing, representing, and evoking feelings of love—stories, novels, essays, plays. (I return to the association between love and drama in Chapter 1.) Perhaps most notable in this category are letters: several aspects of epistolary discourse affiliate it to both love and poetry. Like erotic love, a letter tends to be directed to a single, specified other, whose absence it inherently both recognizes and seeks to overcome. Like lyric poems, letters are therefore often written largely or wholly in the second person—an intimate form of discourse that distinguishes letters from other prose genres and helps make the love letter, like the love poem, such a standard genre. And many non-literary art forms are likewise intimately associated with love, including, above all, music. If music, in Shakespeare’s words, is “the food of love,” that is because it seems to work more directly and profoundly on the emotions than any other art.
But poetry lies halfway between prose and music and combines the advantages of both. Poetry adds to prose a physical dimension, an exploitation of the sheer bodily pleasures of language: the sensuousness of rhythm; the satisfying coupling of rhyme; the gratification that inheres simply in the physical articulation of words. All of these may be present in prose, but they are central to poetry, which is thus able to suggest forms of intimate communication that transcend the limits of everyday language. At the same time, poetry is more specific, and in that sense more personal, than music. Music may be the most universal art form, the most capable of conveying feelings beyond the reach of language. But its very universality puts music at odds with the demands of love. If erotic love is characterized by its focus on the individual, then language for all its limitations has the advantage over music, which is ill suited to convey a particular story or even a specifiable emotion. Thus Stendhal, in his treatise On Love (1822), at one point begins to expatiate on the erotic effect of music: “I just realized tonight that music, at its best, puts the heart in exactly the same state that it experiences in the delightful presence of the beloved.” But he immediately corrects himself. Music communicates not love, he concludes, but only an unspecific intensity that reinforces whatever the listener is already feeling: “the effect [is] simply to make me reflect more vividly on what is occupying my thoughts.”

Robert Browning highlights a similar problem in his dramatic monologue “A Serenade at the Villa” (1855). The poem’s speaker describes the various methods he used to woo his beloved as he stood beneath her window the night before:

What they could my words expressed,
O my love, my all, my one!
Singing helped the verses best,
And when singing’s best was done,
To my lute I left the rest.
The progression seems intuitive: the speaker’s message of love begins in speech, then rises to song, and climaxes in pure melody. Yet this hierarchy is undercut by the rest of the poem. Music is an imprecise medium; however expressive the speaker’s lute-playing may have been, it has failed to communicate certain basic points of information, including his identity. The poem therefore begins, ironically, with the speaker’s having to explain, “That was I, you heard last night” (l. 1). The words of today’s poem are necessary to complete the effect of last night’s music, to personalize it. W. H. Auden frames the problem thus:

**(p. 4)** I believe I could produce a piece of music which would express to a listener what I mean when I think the word *love*, but it would be impossible for me to compose it in such a way that he would know that this love was felt for *You* (not for God, or my mother, or the decimal system). The language of music is, as it were, intransitive.⁸
My aim is not to stage a contest between different forms of art, however, but simply to suggest why poetry in particular is so generally and consistently associated with erotic love. I have mentioned some of the most evident points of contact (poetry’s sensuality; its mingled transcendence and specificity), and in what follows I will return to these, along with many others. But first it is worth considering a possible objection to the very question I am posing. In Graham Greene’s novel *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), a character remembers having “read somewhere that love had been invented in the eleventh century by the troubadours.” Greene’s character is recalling, broadly but not inaccurately, the provocative thesis forwarded at the start of C. S. Lewis’s highly influential study *The Allegory of Love* (1936). Lewis contends that courtly love, as represented and expounded by the poets of medieval France, had no real precedent either in literature or in practice but “appears quite suddenly” in their poetry. He then further claims that the feelings of love that people experience today are all traceable to this single source—that is, that what we think of as love, at least in its most salient aspects, was a new concept in the eleventh century that has since been diffused and become thoroughly internalized. If we accept this claim, then our original question is obviously answered in advance. Poetry is associated with love, the argument goes, because love was introduced by poets; the connection is a purely historical one.
Lewis’s thesis attracted much notice when it appeared, as evidenced by Greene’s casual reference to it a dozen years later. It fell in with the contemporary structuralist tendency to view apparently instinctive behaviors as culturally determined. And it received reinforcement from Denis de Rougemont’s important treatise *Love in the Western World* (1940), which similarly treats love as the product of a cultural inheritance centered in medieval Provence. But critics also began almost immediately to dispute Lewis’s claim, pointing out accounts of love very similar to those of the troubadours in much earlier texts and in literary traditions unconnected to that of medieval Europe. Tim Hancock provides an excellent survey of these reactions and of subsequent debates about the nature of love, in which he shows that thinkers in recent decades, including not only philosophers and literary critics but sociologists and evolutionary biologists, have increasingly reached consensus that love is not a medieval or even Western invention but a widespread and surprisingly consistent phenomenon. Few scholars of love today would trace it all to the troubadours. And yet, for all its flaws, Lewis’s argument retains its interest as something more than just a historical curiosity. Even if it is true that love begets poetry, as Plato suggests, it also remains true, as Lewis claims, that poetry often returns the favor. The affiliation between love and poetry, in other words, may have its roots in certain shared attributes, but it has been sustained by centuries of self-reinforcing cultural practice. To understand love necessarily involves an inquiry as well into the history of poetry.

This book therefore explores the nature of both love and poetry by examining the associations between them, inherent and inherited. It is intended not as a comprehensive history of Western love poetry—a topic too large for any single book—but as an investigation into the meaning and function of different forms, tropes, and images employed by poets across the centuries to express or describe love. In each chapter I consider poems from an array of different periods and literary traditions in order to achieve as full as possible an understanding of the structures that they share. Numerous studies already exist of individual authors or eras of love poetry; my debt to these works is recorded in the various chapters and their notes. But there have been very few attempts to establish an integral theory of the enduring relation between poetry and the experience of erotic love.
My approach in this study may raise a serious concern: namely, that love (to say nothing of poetry) is a highly variable concept, the understanding of which alters radically from age to age; clearly love means something quite different to Sappho, to Petrarch, to Emily Dickinson, and to Pablo Neruda. It may seem extremely inadvisable therefore to examine works from such different eras side by side. Certainly it has become extremely rare. Historicism, for so long now the dominant mode in literary studies, tends to work synchronically, focusing on the distinctive characteristics of a demarcated period. When works of criticism with a wider historical scope do appear, they usually move chronologically, tracing a literary development or line of influence. But critics have been very wary of analysis that moves in a more freely transhistorical manner, for fear of falling into the trap of anachronism or of imposing a specious unity that ignores historical difference.

These qualms are understandable, but they are also readily answerable, and they should not stand in the way of a particularly fruitful mode of critical inquiry. To begin with, there is no reason to think that a comparative view must be an essentialist one—that it implies the assumption of an unchanging, universal understanding of love shared by all these writers. What it does assume is sufficient similarity between them to make comparison worthwhile. A kiss (to take the subject of Chapter 3) may have very different implications for Catullus in the first century BCE than it does for Ben Jonson in seventeenth-century England or for Sara Teasdale in twentieth-century America. But there remains enough of a family resemblance in these poets’ conceptions of kissing, and of poetry, that they all choose to communicate the act of kissing in verse, making use in each case of similar strategies. It therefore seems worthwhile to read these works together, attending to their differences but with a particular eye to the resemblances they display. Just as the acknowledged absence of a universal standard of justice or beauty has not prevented thinkers in the fields of ethics and aesthetics from inquiring into the nature of those two concepts, and into the relation between them, so the varying definitions of love should not deter us from investigating the broader relation of poetics to erotics.
The great benefit of such juxtapositional criticism is to reveal the often surprising continuities and similarities that exist among works from a wide variety of contexts. In the chapters that follow I have therefore sought to offer as broad a sampling as possible of Western love poetry. Even so it has naturally been impossible to represent more than a small selection of languages and periods, and I have necessarily ended up concentrating on those I know best. But I have tried to include a sufficiently diverse range of examples to be able to begin drawing general conclusions. I am conscious that there still remain imbalances and disproportions in my selection of examples, generally reflective of the biases of the literary tradition as a whole. The majority of poets and speakers I discuss, for instance, are male; more of them, both male and female, describe heterosexual than queer forms of attraction. But it is worth noting that expressions of erotic love often display remarkable consistencies across genders and sexualities, as across times and places. As Thomas Gould writes, in his discussion of Plato’s homosexual model of love, the behaviors and discourses associated with love “are actually hardier than such details as, for instance, which sex” the lovers should be. This is not in any way to deny the distinction between male and female, hetero and queer experiences of desire, but merely to affirm once again the possibility of taking the differences into account while examining the elements that recur.
Love poetry is a capacious category that comprises all poetic
genres, and this book draws examples from many types of
verse, including longer narrative, dramatic, and didactic
poems. The great majority of the love poems I discuss,
however, are lyric poems. The nature of lyric has long been a
topic of scholarly debate, which has only intensified in recent
years, as some critics have called into question the validity of
the notion of “lyric” as a poetic genre. But the concept and
the term remain useful to designate an important category of
poems that, as Jonathan Culler persuasively demonstrates in
his comprehensive *Theory of the Lyric*, consistently feature a
number of distinctive characteristics, even if no one
characteristic can be considered definitive or universally
applicable. Following Culler (among others), therefore, I use
the term lyric to refer to short, non-narrative poems that
typically include certain recognizable elements: they are often
written in a present tense that casts the poem less as a
mimetic representation than as a speech act, an iterable
event; they tend to foreground, even more than other poems,
the non-semantic elements of language, such as sound and
rhythm; and they frequently focus on the first and second
person. All of these characteristics, especially the last two—
the foregrounding of language’s “nonrational” elements and
the distinctive concentration on “I” and “you”—contribute to
(p.9) make lyric the vehicle of choice for love poets. As
Culler puts it, “love poetry can easily stand as paradigmatic
for the lyric tradition.”
The chapters that follow work cumulatively to set out some of the central tropes of love poetry and their implications. Chapter 1, which lays the foundation for the rest, considers the relation between love and poetry by examining different theories of each. It begins with Horace’s *Art of Poetry* and Ovid’s *Art of Love*, which give very similar accounts of their respective subjects. Both phenomena are said to involve a counterpointing of contradictory forces: impulse and artistry, spontaneity and deliberate craft. The parallel is not peculiar to these two writers but persists in the work of thinkers across very different periods. Thus the Romantics of the early nineteenth century—Stendhal, William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley—describe a similar balance; both poetry and love, in their accounts, consist of a two-stage process in which momentary inspiration is followed and fulfilled by self-conscious reflection. These dualities find their ultimate model in Plato, particularly in the *Phaedrus*, which describes love as an effect of simultaneous disorientation and recognition. The same dichotomy is fundamental to poetry, notably through poetry’s use of meter, with its reliance on recognizable pattern and original variation, and metaphor, with its emphasis on both similarity and difference.

Chapter 2 differs from the others in following a largely chronological trajectory as it describes the invitation poem, a genre of love poetry with its roots in the biblical Song of Songs. The chief purpose of the chapter, however, is not to outline a literary history but to explore how the invitation poem reflects on major questions that have always surrounded the nature of love, including some of those already raised. Does love entail recognition or fresh discovery, a completion of the self or a disruption of its contours? Is love primarily an instinctive passion or a cultural practice? The invitation poem, with its displacement of erotic desire onto an imagined landscape, negotiates these possibilities through its fusion of inward and outward, homecoming and exile, intimacy and alienation. The tradition initiated by the Song of Songs alters over the centuries, as poets including Christopher Marlowe and Charles Baudelaire, among many others, highlight different points of contact between the poetic and erotic imagination. The invitation genre, I argue, can thus be seen as an archetypal form of love lyric, encompassing and emphasizing some of the central paradoxes that link love to poetry.
Chapter 3 concerns kissing, which has always figured prominently in the love poetry tradition. A poem is the natural correlative to a kiss. Both are oral pleasures; both are simultaneously sensual and spiritual, providing satisfaction in themselves while also sublimating or substituting for more intimate forms of erotic contact. Above all, both reflect many of the contradictions that cluster around love. Like a poem, a kiss at once communicates and interferes with communication; it is both discrete and unbounded; it represents both union and separation. Taking as its central figure the Renaissance poet Joannes Secundus, whose neoclassical *Basia* (Kisses) have exerted a lasting influence, the chapter considers the different structures that poets have consistently deployed to communicate the experience of a kiss, including not only rhyme but such tropes as chiasmus, parataxis, and polyptoton, all of which help figure forth the erotic tensions inherent in the act of kissing.

Chapter 4 focuses on poetry’s use of animals to explore the complexities of love. Animals feature in poems as direct objects of love or erotic fascination, as in Catullus’ address to his mistress’s sparrow, or as lovers themselves and thus models for human relationships, as in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Parliament of Fowls*, or in various other, more figurative capacities, as in Elizabeth Bishop’s “Love is feathered like a bird.” Although creatures of all kinds populate love poetry, birds, as these examples suggest, are the most ubiquitous. The mating behaviors of birds, at once instinctive and highly patterned, offer a natural parallel to the combination of impulse and predetermined structure that characterizes both love and poetry, as Chapter 1 describes. And, while the same could be said of other animals, birds employ song as a key component of their courtship and so reflect the work of love poetry. A focus on birds and other animals also offers the poet scope to celebrate the role of sexual desire in love. Yet animals, in their mingled familiarity and alienness, ultimately appeal to love poets less as direct models than as signs of erotic uncertainty, queerness, and inconclusiveness.
In contrast to kissing or animals, marriage, which forms the subject of Chapter 5, is far more rarely represented by love poets, at least in their lyric poetry. Lyric, with its brevity, its intensity, its reliance on gaps and significant silences, seems ideally suited to a particular type of love—what Stendhal calls passionate love, typified by novelty, absence, uncertainty. But marital love, powerful though it may be, lacks these particular qualities. Lyrics that address marriage tend therefore to be either wedding poems (epithalamia), which stop short on the threshold of marriage, or elegies for a lost spouse, which begin where marriage ends and erotic distance is reimposed. Yet, if the pleasure and even purpose of marriage lie in discovering freedom and self-realization within strictly prescribed (p.11) limits, then lyric could just as well be seen as the genre most suited to marital love. This chapter examines the tradition of marriage lyric that has developed, for the most part, in recent centuries, as the ideal of loving, companionate marriage has spread. Beginning with the work of the Victorian poet and theorist Coventry Patmore, whose seminal treatise on meter illustrates the same ideals of regularity and variety that mark his poems about marriage, the chapter ranges from Anne Bradstreet to Seamus Heaney, Rachel Hadas, and other contemporary poets of marital love.

The Conclusion is brief, not because there is nothing left to say but because there is so much. The points of contact between love and poetry are endless, as are the potential topics for investigation. These chapters offer a sample, a starting point for reflecting on the capacities of poetry to express and to shape our experience as well as our understanding of love.
Our natural reaction when confronted with something that we find beautiful is a complex or even self-contradictory one. The first effect of beauty, writes Elaine Scarry, is that “It seems to incite, even to require, the act of replication....Beauty, as both Plato’s Symposium and everyday life confirm, prompts begetting.” A person struck by the beauty of an object, an idea, or another person, is seized by the desire to reproduce, describe, analyze, or in some way perpetuate what he or she perceives. Yet Scarry also remarks that beauty produces an impression of perfect singularity. “The beautiful thing seems—is—incomparable, unprecedented”; it “fills the mind” with what she calls “the ‘never before in the history of the world’ feeling.” Clearly there exists an inherent tension between these two responses—the need to find or produce an equivalent to the beautiful object, and the conviction that the object can have no equivalent, that its beauty is by definition unique.

When it comes to love, which as Plato (among many others) observes is closely related to the sense of beauty and often arises from it, that tension reaches the level of paradox. On the one hand, as Richard Terdiman remarks, “People love being in love, and when they are they talk and write about it with an expansive intensity.” Whispers and text messages as much as poems and novels attest to the inherent need of love to find a language. Few things cause a lover more distress than being forbidden to speak (or write) of and to the beloved. On the other hand, this discursive impulse is countered by a deep-rooted conviction that love is ineffable—that common language lacks the resources to express the unique particularity of the lover’s experience. As Terdiman says, “Love insists on representation; love blocks representation....So love can’t speak and does speak.” The problem is intractable; it arises not so much from cultural conventions that may deem it inappropriate to declare one’s love as from a sense that words themselves are simply inappropriate to passion.
Of all the paradoxes that characterize love poetry, this is the most basic: love both requires language and renounces it. Love poetry therefore succeeds by displaying its own failure. Other types of poetry, such as elegy, also regularly underscore the insufficiency of language; but in love poetry the failure of words is not a concession but a claim, a foundation rather than a vanishing point. Consider, for instance, Sonnet 54 of Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella* (1591):

> Because I breathe not love to every one,  
> Nor do not use set colours for to wear,  
> Nor nourish special locks of vowed hair;  
> Nor give each speech a full point of a groan,  
> The courtly nymphs, acquainted with the moan  
> Of them, who in their lips love’s standard bear:  
>  
> “What, he?” say they of me, “now I dare swear;  
> He cannot love; no, no, let him alone.”  
> And think so still, so Stella know my mind.  
> Profess indeed I do not Cupid’s art;  
> But you fair maids, at length this true shall find,  
> That his right badge is but worn in the heart;  
> Dumb swans, not chattering pies, do lovers prove;  
> They love indeed, who quake to say they love.  

(p.13) The final line, which marks the midpoint of Sidney’s sequence of 108 sonnets, involves multiple levels of paradox.29 Taken just on its own, the line presents an obvious conundrum: a declaration of love that denies the validity of such declarations. But, taken in context, at the end of a Petrarchan sonnet (and in the middle of a full-dress Petrarchan sequence), Astrophil’s affirmation of an inner feeling that defies display is doubly ironic, since by Sidney’s time the love sonnet was already the most codified, most conventional, and thus in a sense most public form of discourse imaginable. Even Sidney’s witty use of conventional form to reject convention is itself a recognizable convention.30 Many sonnets use the same ploy; indeed, the whole Petrarchan tradition is based on the ironic juxtaposition of predetermined structures with what are alleged to be spontaneously overflowing feelings.
Yet Petrarchan love is not therefore false or disingenuous—to the contrary. All love speech is conventional, because language itself is conventional. If a lover were to use “never before in the history of the world” language in an attempt to express the uniqueness of his or her feeling, the result would be gibberish. The lover has no choice but to use a public medium for private ends.31 The Petrarchan response to this dilemma is to emphasize the limitations of language rather than trying to ignore or deny them. Sidney, for instance, foregrounds the inescapability of convention at every turn. His sonnet presents a stark dichotomy—the octave describing love as a codified public demonstration, the sestet love as an unspoken private experience—only to reveal the opposition to be unsustainable. The line marking the turn between the two parts is paradigmatic: “And think so still, so Stella know my mind.” The first clause dismisses the “courtly nymphs” of the octave, with their faith in superficial rhetoric, while the second introduces Stella, with her apparently unmediated access to the speaker’s inner thoughts. Yet the line itself makes use of the highly conventional rhetorical figure of chiasmus (think so still—so Stella know), with a phonetic reduplication at its center that blurs the very distinction it is trying to draw. Moreover, the sestet continues to address, not Stella, but the same public of “fair maids” as before. And, while true love is now said to be located “in the heart” rather than “in [the] lips,” it is still “worn” as an outward “badge,” just as courtly lovers are said to “bear” it as a “standard.”
But Sidney’s lines are all the more moving for their conscious self-contradictions. In the first place, their insistent use of traditional tropes paradoxically produces a sense of arder. The rhetoric presents an intensified version of the basic love paradox: *Language* (the sonnet implies) *can only produce clichés like these, because it is necessarily based on common understanding; my love is unlike any other; I know therefore that I cannot express it rightly—and yet I cannot help trying.* The effect is one of both self-awareness and compulsion. At the same time, by foregrounding linguistic and literary conventions, Sidney is able to foreground as well his original use of or departure from those conventions. This principle underlies all poetry to some extent, but the effect is maximized in a work so filled with conventional forms. Thus the turn in line 9 may be ironically counter-effective, as we just noted, because it makes use of a chiasmus (“think so still, so Stella know”) to abjure rhetorical display. But it is also highly effective, because the inexact match between the two outer elements of this particular chiasmus highlights the crucial difference between what others may “think” and what Stella must “know.” This is a minor example, but it nevertheless suggests the great appeal of poetry as a medium for love. Poetry is more ready than other forms of language both to acknowledge its indebtedness to common forms and to draw attention to even the most minute variations. The lover can thus grant the insuperable opposition between love and language and, in part, supersede it.

Not all love poems are Petrarchan sonnets or rely so heavily on the self-conscious use of convention. But they all entail the same inherent irony, which gives rise to the many paradoxes described in the following pages. Love is a private, inward experience, yet with an irrepressible centrifugal tendency; it is a form of self-exposure that nevertheless resists expression. In poetry, especially lyric poetry—a shared, public mode, but with a bent toward singularity and silence—love finds its fittest form.

Notes:


For this definition I have drawn on many different accounts of erotic love, but see in particular Robert C. Solomon, *Love: Emotion, Myth, and Metaphor* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1990): “Romantic love, unlike the love of God...is essentially sexual, secular, personal and always tentative, tenuous, never certain” (p. xxvi; see also pp. 13–15). Many of these characteristics are also named by Harry G. Frankfurt in *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), including love’s particularity and its risk or uncertainty—although note that Frankfurt specifically denies that erotic love provides a good example of the love he describes (pp. 43–7, 62).


On the centrality of second-person address to lyric poetry, see Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 186–243. Love letters are not always in prose, of course: there is a long tradition of epistolary love poetry, dating back at least as far as Ovid’s *Heroides*. But my point is that letters inherently carry erotic connotations, just as poems do.

William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* 1.1.1; all quotations from Shakespeare refer to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edn, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). Because erotic love depends on the possibility of “change unfolding in lives and in time,” it is far less strongly identified with the visual arts, which are comparatively limited in their ability to represent an unfolding narrative; see Richard Terdiman, “Can We Read the Book of Love?” *PMLA* 126 (2011), 472–82, p. 478. On the subject of love and visual art, see Alexander Nehamas, “The Good of Friendship,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 110 (2010), 267–94. As objects of erotic attraction, by contrast, works of visual art have the great advantage of existing as unique instances; hence the prevalence of the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea in all its incarnations. Other art forms likewise relate to love each in a different way.
Introduction

(6) De l’amour, ed. Patrick Poivre d’Arvor (Chaintreaux: Éditions France-Empire Monde, 2009), 60


(8) W. H. Auden, “Dichtung und Wahrheit (An Unwritten Poem)” (1959), section V, in Collected Poems, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 648. As Browning’s poem suggests, it is not always possible to distinguish between poetry and music, since they often meet in the form of song. A number of the poems I discuss may originally have been accompanied by music, now lost; on the topic of this missing musical dimension, see Ted Gioia’s wide-ranging Love Songs: The Hidden History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).


(11) “We are so familiar with the erotic tradition of modern Europe that we mistake it for something natural and universal…but a glance at classical antiquity or at the Dark Ages at once shows us that what we took for ‘nature’ is really a special state of affairs, which will probably have an end, and which certainly had a beginning in eleventh-century Provence” (Lewis, The Allegory of Love, 3).


Specialized studies of love poetry do of course offer insights of a more general nature as well, often quite explicitly. I would single out in particular Anne Carson’s brilliant *Eros the Bittersweet*, which focuses on archaic and classical Greek literature but also proposes broader theories of the relation between writing and erotic desire.


I have limited my study to Western poetry only because I am not familiar enough with other traditions to be able to distinguish what may be singular in any given poem from what is representative. “Western” itself is a notoriously imprecise term; I include the biblical Song of Songs, for instance, which grows out of an ancient Near Eastern tradition of love poetry, but which, because of its canonical status, has exerted an enormous influence on the literature of the Judeo-Christian West.
Likewise, Jeanne Heuving observes: “While there are important differences in the ways that love poetry has been written over the centuries...there are many commonalities.” Notably, Heuving claims, poetry about love is characterized by its focus on the other in preference to the self: “love invades or floods the subject with an infusion of otherness that supplants the subject’s usual egoistic moorings and changes his or her orientation toward otherness itself.” See Jeanne Heuving, *The Transmutation of Love and Avant-Garde Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016), 36.


This list roughly corresponds to three of the “four parameters” that Culler offers as characteristic of lyric (the fourth being hyperbole); see *Theory of the Lyric*, 33–8.
(21) Blasing uses the term “nonrational” (Lyric Poetry, 2) in preference to “irrational,” which would affirm logic as the norm from which lyric deviates, whereas she considers the features of lyric language (rhythm, sound) to be primary, as they are in language acquisition.

(22) Culler, Theory of the Lyric, 207.


(26) Terdiman, “Can We Read the Book of Love?” 478. In the words of Jeanne Heuving: “Throughout different epochs, poets have testified to the synergistic relations between being in love and writing love. While being in love leads to poetry writing, writing love poetry intensifies love, causing poets to write more poetry” (The Transmutation of Love, 1; see also pp. 36–51, where these synergistic relations are explored in depth).

(27) Terdiman, “Can We Read the Book of Love?” 472, 478.


(29) Note that it is not the middle line of the volume as a whole but only of the sonnets, since Astrophil and Stella, like Petrarch’s Canzoniere, also includes a number of other poems of varying length.


Access brought to you by: