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Lyrical Antibiography
Daniel Albright

Nowadays most readers are comfortable with the notion that biography is a species of fiction, that a biographer, if he agrees to observe some principle of non-contradiction of contemporary written sources, is free to invent, to ascribe any sort of convenient and striking identity to his subject. In this abyss of freedom the biographer toils patiently and with such good humor as he can muster. The autobiographer, of course, has always enjoyed such a reputation for fancifulness and complicated, ingenious self-delusion. Among the many resources dubious to the historian but available to the biographer or the autobiographer is the lyric mode; and I have asked myself whether the lyric mode is likely to be useful for biographical purposes, whether it will be compatible with the usual modes of biographical discourse, and whether a coherent image or shadow of a personality can be produced by strictly lyrical means. Many of the example discussed here are taken from Victorian poets, who often used the lyric mode with biographical or autobiographical intention, as a kind of intimate publicity.

Occasionally one comes across a plausibly lyrical poem which sounds like a traditional biography immensely abbreviated and accelerated, such as Auden's sonnet "A. E. Housman" (1938):

No one, not even Cambridge, was to blame
(Blame if you like the human situation):
Heart-injured in North London, he became
The Latin Scholar of his generation.

Deliberately he chose the dry-as-dust,

Kept tears like dirty postcards in a drawer;
Food was his public love, his private lust
Something to do with violence and the poor.

In savage foot-notes on unjust editions
He timidly attacked the life he led,
And put the money of his feelings on

The uncritical relations of the dead,
Where only geographical divisions
Parted the coarse hanged soldier from the don.

Here is pungency, sharpness of line, clear perspective; Auden has taken a few choice details of Housman's life and through a process of psychological triangulation inferred the whole. But why are such lyrics so rare? Why are our anthologies not crammed with such rapid and devastating character studies? The answer lies, I think, in the fact that few lives are suitable for treatment within the compass of a lyric poem. The usual subjects of panegyric--the king, the hero, the noble patron--do not much commend themselves to song-like brevity of expression. Flattery requires amplitude; and as the recitation of the list of accomplishments gets longer and more detailed, the poem is likely to sink out of the lyrical and into some lower, more earthy domain, not song but representation. Poems like Tennyson's "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington" strain at the boundaries of the lyric, tread out their grave measure, seem in danger of swelling into full-scale biography.

Housman fits inside a lyric because his life was uneventful, suppressed, involuted, tremulous, like the lyric mode itself. Indeed the most salient features of Housman's biography exist not in public life--to the world at large Housman was almost invisible--but in phantasmagoria, the imaginary classical antiquity where swordsmen and librarians embraced effortlessly and full of passion. Auden's skill at describing Housman's personality by lyrical

means is noteworthy: much of Housman's reticence, his guilt, is suggested by the fact that his secret homosexuality is demoted to a simile, "tears like dirty postcards in a drawer." I think it is generally true that biographical lyrics work best when the subject is someone turned away from the world of deeds, of social accomplishment; one Gerard Manley Hopkins' few successful character-pieces is a poem about St. Alphonsus Rodriguez, who spent forty sober and tranquil years as a janitor at a Jesuit college in Majorca. The lyric poet who wishes to write about an emperor or a swashbuckler is far from helpless--for one thing he has a body of mythological parallels to guide and focus his imagination--but the lyric poet who wishes to write about a saint, a scholar, another poet, anyone outside the world of The Tatler or People magazine, will find that his task is much simpler. What invites prosaic representation will not facilitate lyric poetry.

It seems, then, that lives unsuitable for the standard biographical approach--the endless accumulation of detail rendered significant by some psychological hypothesis--are precisely the lives most suitable for biographical lyrics. This suggests that there is some antithesis between the lyrical mode and the biographical mode, at least according to our usual conception of the biographical mode. This is what I mean by lyrical anti-biography: we turn to the lyric in order to verbalize intuitions of identity that would not fit into regular biographical discourse, matters too extreme or fantastic or impudent to belong in a dignified narrative of someone's life. The gist of Housman or Alphonsus Rodriguez is interior, almost beyond the possibility of evidence; and where facts are lacking or irrelevant, the lyrical imagination is liberated, given permission to invent a non-world, an anti-world, a plane of reality at right angles to our commonplace surfaces, a locus where fleeting ideas and feelings can embody themselves without the normal constraints of science.

I believe that poetry, if it constructs a secure and well-defined region of operation, will seem non-lyrical, even if that region is obviously unreal; we do not credit the Eden of Paradise Lost as an actual place, but it is a zone of being that has a proper weight, ecology, physics--it does not seem especially lyrical. A lyric poem usually posits some poorly-constituted space full of metaphors and other sorts of shifty half-objects; when Coleridge and other Romantics speak of the dissolving and deconstructive powers of the imagination, they are moving toward a theory of the lyric. People who have the odd fortune to reside inside lyric poems, like Housman and Rodriguez, normally are indeterminant and evasive folk who resist neat formulae of identity. Indeed they are often outside of history entirely, for many lyric poems are inhabited by the unborn and the dead; indeed a lyric like Ben Jonson's double ode on Cary and Morison moves from a child who refuses to be born to a noble soul siderealized beyond the human. If there are any two classes of men about whom it would be difficult to write a two-volume biography, one might suggest a fetus and a spectre oblivious of its past life; and they are just the species that appear comfortably in lyric poems.

There are many long poems not in themselves especially lyrical but containing passages of a lyrical nature; and a study of one or two such passages might prove helpful in determining the relation of lyric to biography. John Donne's "The Progress of the Soul" (1601) is a "biography" of the soul that dwelt in the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; and if ever there was a proper theme for lyrical biography, this is it, for Donne conceives this soul as completely characterless, a neutral spark that flits from fruit to bird to fish to she-ape without contamination or conclusion, an endless metamorphosis of identity, an animate hovering. The poem is full of remarkable passages:

Out crept a sparrow, this soul's moving inn,
On whose raw arms stiff feathers now begin,
As children's teeth through gums, to break with pain;
His flesh is jelly yet, and his bones threads,
All a new downy mantle overspreads . . . (ll. 181-185)

Donne is fascinated by these half-articulations of a blank creative germ, these potentialities that precede any gross definition of form. Indeed it is hard to imagine any biography more lyrical than that of an unhatched bird.

But perhaps I am being unfair in choosing a biographical poem that does not concern a human being. Let us turn instead to Tennyson's "Enoch Arden" (1862), a fictitious story, but, as scholars have pointed out, a narrative of a situation that was near the center of Tennyson's emotional life: the feeling that he was a kind of ghost returned to trouble the lives of those whom he loved. To this extent it may be called an autobiographical poem. The poem tells, in simple blank verse, the story of a good-hearted sailor, long shipwrecked on a deserted island and at last found, restored to England to become a furtive witness of his loving wife, now married to his best friend, and of her children by two husbands. Much of the poem is workmanlike narrative, as rich in circumstantial detail as a story in prose:

. . . Enoch Arden, a rough sailor's lad,
Made orphan by a winter shipwreck, played
Among the waste and lumber of the shore,

Hard coils of cordage, swarthy fishing-nets,
Anchors of rusty fluke, and boats updrawn; (ll. 14-18)

But sometimes the verse calls attention to itself, grows incantatory and gaudy, full of anaphora, lyrical:

No sail from day to day, but every day
The sunrise broken into scarlet shafts

Among the palms and ferns and precipices;
The blaze upon the waters to the east;
The blaze upon his island overhead;
The blaze upon the waters to the west;
Then the great stars that globed themselves in Heaven,
The hollower-bellowing ocean, and again
The scarlet shafts of sunrise--but no sail. (ll. 587-95)

At last Enoch is discovered by a crew strayed off course, and he approaches them

Brown, looking hardly human, strangely clad,
Muttering and mumbling, idiotlike it seemed,
With inarticulate rage, and making signs (ll. 634-36)

All that blazing has, it seems, burnt away his brain until he has lost every human faculty, undergone what Samuel Beckett calls loss of species. The sailors take him home, and Enoch Arden slowly is assimilated back into European society; and this assimilation is accompanied by a shift from the lyrical to the narrative mode. As a creature of pure sensation, uninflected by civilization, amorphous and gibbering, Enoch is a lyrical figment; as a man with complicated social relations, restrained and carefully qualified, he must fall out of the lyrical.

There is a sense in which every poet, as he starts to write a lyric, must undergo this same transformation. Insofar as he is a lyric poet he must extricate himself from the prose of things, abandon his usual identity, become a denizen of a high-pitched sensational feeling-world. Tennyson is a case in point. In "The Holy Grail" (1869) the pure Sir Galahad cries out "If I lose myself, I save myself!" (l. 178); and this cry resonates throughout Tennyson's later poetry. In "The Ancient Sage" (1885), another quasi-autobiographical poem, Tennyson versified a peculiar experience, what he called a "waking trance . . . This has generally come upon me through repeating my own name two or three times to myself silently" (Mem. i 320):

for more than once when I
Sat all alone, revolving in myself

The word that is the symbol of myself,
The mortal limit of the Self was loosed,
And past into the Nameless, as a cloud
Melts into Heaven. I touched my limbs, the limbs
Were strange not mine--and yet no shade of doubt,
But utter clearness, and through loss of Self
The gain of such large life as matched with ours
Were Sun to spark . . . (ll. 229-38)

I propose that every poet, when he composes a lyric, must for the moment enter into a domain of intense non-identity; and therefore when we as literary critics try to construct the subject behind the poem, the persona used by the poet, we are puzzled, for we discover a non-person, an unTennyson or antiShelley difficult to reconcile with such biographical information as we may possess. As we have seen, lyric poems with a biographical intent tend to present not a clear portrait but a shrunken oblique thing, or a corpse, or a cloud; and when we study what appear to be autobiographical lyrics we will find the same sort of entity. The image of the author, if reconstructed from the evidence of a lyric poem, does not yield a distinct character full of telling quirks and anecdotes but instead an unearthly and disconnected sensibility, full of an inhuman largeness of passion, or tumult, or lethargy, or apathy, a field of feeling that refuses to coagulate into a particular man. The lyric poem seems to offer us insight into the depths of the poet, into his most precious and revealing experiences, into the real self compared to which the social person is only a hollow mask; but I think that this insight is generally illusory, that no critical labor will succeed in reconciling the poet as inferred from his lyric poems with the poet who likes to smell rotten apples, or flirts with his half-sister, or loses all his money in a mechanical wood-carving scheme.

Certainly a biographer of Tennyson who neglected to record the poet's swervings into sublime anonymity would be remiss in his duties; but whatever ingenuity he might expend to

relate such mystical states to Tennyson's matter-of-fact public life will, I think, be superfluous. Indeed the author of every lyric poem is Anonymous. Certain modern theorists have said that this is true of every text, lyrical or otherwise; but most texts offer an impression, a shadow, of a subject and an object, in a fashion almost impossible in a lyric poem. W. H. Auden has noticed that in love poems the object of admiration is essentially arbitrary:

It is quite in order that a poet should write a sonnet expressing his devotion to Miss Smith because the poet, Miss Smith, and all his readers know perfectly well that, had he chanced to fall in love with Miss Jones instead, his feeling would be exactly the same. (The Dyer's Hand, p. 458)

One might go one step further than Auden and suggest that, in a lyric poem, the emotion expressed is as independent of the lover as of the beloved, a free-floating affection or loathing that affiliates itself with no one in particular. It seems that a measure of the lyrical quality of any poem is the degree to which it fails to terminate either in a man who feels or in an object felt; a lyric poem is that which hovers.

The easiest way to test the relation between biography and lyric poetry is to ask what sort of biography we would write of a poet if we knew nothing about him except his lyric poems. George Bernard Shaw, in The Quintessence of Ibsenism, quotes two opinions of Shelley, one from a contemporary reviewer who called him a devil, and another from Matthew Arnold, his famous reference to Shelley as a beautiful ineffectual angel beating his wings in a void. Shaw thought that the first opinion was more correct, and better tended to confirm his own high opinion of Shelley; but a biographer of Shelley could not go very far if he could describe his subject only as an angel or a devil. The implied author of many of Shelley's poems is indeed an angel, or a continent, or a heavenly body, or the universe's ground of being, a range of personae tending to interfere with proper biographical scrutiny. From the perspective of contemporary

accounts Shelley was a moody promiscuous fellow expelled from Oxford; from the perspective of his lyrics he was an angel writing love poems to an ellipsis mark. These perspectives will not easily converge, though occasionally, as in the Epipsychidion, they do attain a partial focus.

There are a few poets who went to great lengths to make a genuine lyric autobiography, to embody themselves in a series of short poems. One of them was Yeats, who set out, as he said, "with the thought of putting my very self into poetry" (Essays and Introductions, p. 271); to some extent his whole career is a continual experiment on that theme, though the notion of self mutates strangely as Yeats discovers which fractions of identity can be conveyed in a lyric poem. One difficulty with the concept of writing autobiography via lyric poetry is that the intensity and compression of a single poem tend to present a momentary feeling as something absolute, invariant; so that a poem about disappointment in love seems to suggest that this mood is incurable, that the poet's dreariness, which has already infected the cosmos, overclouded the sun and made the trees weep, will prolong itself until Judgment Day. But other poems suggest that this is not the case. Autobiography ought to be able to transcend all such changes of emotion, to posit an overself that varies between sadness and joy; but the lyric mode seems incapable of offering a mediate self moving through various feeling-states. No amount of rapid transitions from one emotion to the next can remedy this essential defect.

IV.

My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top.

While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less

It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless.

V.

Although the summer sunlight gild
Cloudy leafage of the sky,
Or wintry moonlight sink the field
In storm-scattered intricacy,
I cannot look thereon,
Responsibility so weighs me down.

Things said or done long years ago,
Or things I did not do or say
But thought that I might say or do,
Weigh me down, and not a day
But something is recalled,
My conscience or my vanity appalled.

These are two sections of Yeats's poetic sequence "Vacillation" (1932). It is an autobiography in which all the prose of life is deleted, and what remain are a few flashes of ecstasy and despair; but these glimpses, these photographs shot with lightning, do not add up to an image of a man. The shock of juxtaposition of these contrary states of feeling makes a considerable aesthetic effect, but it inhibits us from imagining the full character who travelled between them. Yeats, one might say, dwells in the white space between the sections of the poem, hidden from our view. We try to draw lines to connect them, to form the picture of a sensibility; but there are insufficient data, and the face does not constitute itself among so much contradiction, so much vacillation. T. S. Eliot wrote a strange book called After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy (1933), denouncing Yeats, Lawrence, and Pound, indeed fearing for their souls; most of his argument would be hard to recommend, but in one passage, discussing Lawrence, he diagnoses accurately the aesthetic error of Yeats's "Vacillation":

It is in fact in moments of moral and spiritual struggle depending upon spiritual sanctions, rather than in those "bewildering minutes" in which we are all very much alike,

that men and women come nearest to being real. (p. 46)

To write lyric autobiography, the poet must assume that he is most himself in moments of extreme feeling; but it seems more likely that his blaze of nerves and his season of melancholy will be, however precious or memorable, the occasions when he is least characteristic, self-possessed, determinate. Intense feeling is anyone's feeling; all men who have a toothache are the same man. This is one reason why lyric poems often closely imitate or translate previous lyric poems; if you have described your toothache well, you have also described mine.

A lyric poem tempts us to autobiographical interpretation because it is often so overtly intimate, suffused with personalness, that we imagine that this intimacy points in the direction of the poet, when in fact its true object is the poem. But anyone who tries to verbalize a moving experience and then rereads his account at a later date is likely to feel a certain estrangement from his earlier mood; and I suspect that this feeling of recoil is keener in great poets than in most of us. Every utterance, no matter how authentic, will eventually take on the aspect of a deliberate mask or prevarication; and Yeats developed the doctrine of the Mask or antiself precisely because his autobiographical urge was strong. To write an extensive canon of lyric poetry is to record the story of a soul; but it is easier to say that it is the story of a soul diametrically opposed to one's own, such is the intensity of self-alienation between the poet and his lyrics.

Once when Yeats was a young man he heard, when half-asleep, a voice that was not his own voice speaking through his lips, saying "We make an image of him who sleeps, and it is not him who sleeps but it is like him who sleeps, and we call it Emmanuel." This self-oracle seemed so important to Yeats that he recorded it in his unpublished autobiography (Memoirs p. 126), and

in A Vision (p. 233), and in his novel The Speckled Bird (I, 9). He felt as if he had been snatched away by the Sidhe and a heap of shavings or a log shaped in his likeness had been left in his bed as a sign of abduction; and surely this declension from man into the dead image of a man represents the nightmare of a poet who feels that his emotional life is being stolen from him and replaced by a body of poems, as if his collected lyrics constituted a changeling or golem mocking the sensibility of the man behind them. Eliot says of the poet that "the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (Selected Essays, p. 10) have little to do with each other; but in the case of Yeats there is a certain anxiety that the man who suffers will be usurped, expunged, by the mind that creates. Our deepest feelings, the feelings recorded in lyric poems, seem not to pertain to ourselves at all, as if we were only the vicars of our own moods.

So the strategy of composing an autobiography by lyrical means seems to fail. But there is perhaps a subtler method for introducing an autobiographical aspect into lyric poems. A poet who acknowledges within his poems the fact that the feelings expressed are not his own but belong to some artifact, some conscious mask, seems to preclude every possibility of autobiography but in fact, strangely enough, enables it. I cannot display myself in a poem; but I can display a false self, emphasize its falsity, and then by the repudiation or destruction of that bad image give some sense of the shock of nakedness my face would give, were I able to present it. God cannot be directly manifest, but by the smashing of an idol something of his impossible presence can be suggested. Yeats was a master of such outrageous self-images, golden birds, mad old ladies, all manner of remote sham personae erected only to collapse; what gives "The Circus Animals' Desertion" (1938) its astonishing force is precisely this rejection of a series of incorrect Yeatses in favor of some genuine gross lapsed self hinted at but not quite displayed at

the end of the poem. In a letter written near the end of his life, Yeats said, "When all the sensuous images are dissolved we meet death" (Letters, p. 917); and I think that he meant that, after a lifetime of creating images of himself, his final task was to undo those images. The lyric is not very useful for the usual kind of autobiography; but for the autobiography of self-dissolution it is a fine tool indeed. It is possible that every literary composition exists in a state of tension between a constructed identity and the deconstruction of that identity; and that much of the savor of poetry comes from the struggle between autobiography and the lyricalness that opposes it.