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Daniel Albright, *Lyricality in English Literature*

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## REVIEWS

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### LYRICALITY in English Literature

Daniel Albright

Daniel Albright. *Lyricality in English Literature*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985. 276 pp. \$24.50.

Reviewed by Anne Williams

The qualities we now usually call lyrical were first dissociated from any particular genre in Romantic poetry, and Romantic critics tended to assume that lyricality (barely distinguishable from poetry itself) is a real but ineffable quality best expressed in striking metaphors. These notions have proved influential for more than two centuries. Daniel Albright's *Lyricality in English Literature* may be seen as a post-modernist variation built upon the Romantic themes. The book is subtle and sophisticated, eloquent and often witty; yet if judged

as a comprehensive description of the lyric mode it is, like many others in the same tradition, ultimately unsatisfying.

The first chapter explores the fundamental premise that the lyrical is "poetry attempting to supersede its own verbal nature, attempting to lose itself in music" (1). The sign of the lyrical is not any particular form or theme or "manner of imitation"; and yet, since words can never *be* music, "the ideal lyric . . . cannot be written at all" (22). Thus in texts striving toward the lyrical the representational functions of language begin to break under the pressure. The one true sign of the lyrical is a palpable absence or inadequacy: "Whenever we feel *something is missing*, whether it is a recognizably human author, or the customary world representation, or simply sense, we are in the domain of the lyrical" (3).

Since the very essence of the lyrical is a drive toward metamorphosis—words into music—Albright conceives of the lyrical as a domain jointly ruled by Ariel and Proteus. Shakespeare's Ariel is the sprite who playfully (and mendaciously) transforms bones into coral, dead eyes into pearls, sublimates the dull materiality of the lower world into the un- or anti-natural world of song. Ariel is "disengaged, dispassionate, almost contentless creativity, an imagination so engrossed in the continual play of images that it cannot be bothered to attend to the real." While Ariel transmutes "lower" natural forms into a "higher" stasis, "a man made of coral, the glacial rose" (39), there is another kind of transformation more common in nature, whose god is Proteus. He represents "random mutation within the lower world, change that is conducive to a delirium of identity, a shapeless incoherence" (49). Both of these gods are magicians, Albright writes, who know nothing of mimesis, and either kind of transformation results in a world not familiar, but "rich and strange." In three subsequent chapters, Albright explores the ways in which the lyric speaker, his subjects, and his world are affected by the powers of lyrical strangeness.

According to this view, lyricality, is paradoxically, the lest personal of literary modes: "a purely lyrical poem should be read deconstructively, for any personal authority is a tenuous illusion that readily disperses into language, a field of neutral inflexibles, language's own self-engrossment" (13). The ideal lyric poet is a visionary bard whose myth was most fully articulated by Blake; he so fully participates in his art that he takes the shape of his subjects, and escapes the limitations of his medium. He is the archetypal self for the lyric poet, who always feels backwards toward "a consciousness more synthetic and indiscriminate than his own." Yet no human being can be a bard, and thus the audience will always recognize that the lyric speaker is consciously or unconsciously posing, opening up a dimension Albright calls "lyrical irony." For such a poet, the most compelling

subject will be the failure of imagination, the death of the bard. The bard's power over his audience is authentic if limited, epitomized in the rhetorical power of dead Alonzo transformed into coral. Hence "lyrical ethics" are best illustrated in the motif Albright calls the "admonitory statue": "The change from man to statue suggests a purity, a simplicity, an implacability impossible to a merely organic creature; the marble is streamlined into moral perfection, and it loudly or silently compels the spectator to imitate it" (90).

Chapter three, "Natura Lyrica," considers the appearances of the natural world when refracted in the lyrical mode. Ideal lyrical nature is, Albright states, a world "newborn and embryonic, not yet congealed into particular forms." He suggests that the bard's perceptions have a kind of manic-depressive rhythm which reveals itself alternately in an impulse toward perceiving the sublime everywhere, and a counter-tendency toward a state of limbo. The sublime is, according to Albright, "Ariel's tendency to see the aura of awe infusing pedestrian things," "an aesthetic of indeterminacy . . . a willed unfocusing," so that the poet of the sublime "recognizes the differences dormant in every created thing, a pensive decomposition of form" (115). Limbo, his depressive phase, is a Protean vision of nature dissolved into "prevailing categorilessness" where no margins are fixed and no forms stable. Satire best presents a lyrical view of the natural world for it "introduces a disquieting element of instability into the outer world, manifesting the spirit of Proteus at his most malevolent." Satire is "a kind of digesting machine, which renders increasingly misshapen versions of its objects—first ape, then pig, then curd of ass's milk, then feces. . . ." The logical extreme of lyrical transformation, then, is utter formlessness, chaos, the death of nature.

The human subject in poetry is similarly transformed under the pressure of the lyrical, a tendency Albright believes is present from the first in the lyric's ancient role as panegyric. In Chapter four, "Lyrical Society," the author discusses several genres and aspects of the lyrical which focus on human beings, yet always with the effect of transforming them into the non- or anti-human. Wordsworth's "Essay on Epitaphs," he argues, demonstrates that the function of an epitaph is to present the subject "midway between the heavenly and the earthly life." The more extended form of the elegy also "effects a metamorphosis of its subject from the human into the superhuman," "a movement from the historical self of its subject to some satisfying unhistorical or post-historical condition." Here, too, one sees the contrary powers of Ariel and Proteus. Elegies ruled by the former conclude in some benign final image (a star, a flower), whereas those under the sway of Proteus tend toward identification of the elegist and his subject, the living and the dead, the horizontal Protean confusion of categories.

Women, a favored focus of the lyrical, are also subject to these two divergent effects. Ariel's lyricists, who feel attraction toward their subject, transform her into "a doll, sheer artifice" (210). The Protean lyricist, however, celebrates his object's "resistance to fixity," and often expresses revulsion, which may manifest itself in satire. But both modes of transformation, Albright argues, constitute a kind of "disfigurement," a changing of the natural into the grotesque. In a final section, Albright considers the status of the personae which tend to inhabit lyrical poems. These fictions, he says, have two aspects—perceptual modality and self-consciousness—which the reader may evaluate in determining a work's degree of lyricality.

The fifth and final chapter, "Music and Metaphor," is the only one explicitly devoted to technique. Here Albright discusses the extent to which words may in fact be musical. In arguing that music is "to a large degree antithetical to the world we know," he provides a different perspective on the proposition that the lyrical constitutes a violation of language. In its metaphorical dimension, language most clearly shows the strain of lyricity, and the pure lyric, language as music, would be nonsense. Thus the poet who most successfully achieves musicality "deliberately contrives the ruin of language, the destruction of denotation and reference so that his singing will be the purer" (245). In the purest forms of lyric, then, we see the destruction of the poetic speaker, the world, society, and even language itself.

A perspective that challenges conventional assumptions can be indispensable; Albright's perspective is provocative in both good and bad senses of the word. His is an ambitious and wide-ranging work, and it shows a refreshing independence of thought and method. The book itself manifests something of Ariel's playfulness. More than once the author declares that his purpose is not to prove, but only to explore his thesis; and to this end he often eschews the staid world of scholarly convention. There are no footnotes (there is a bibliography of works cited) and, more unhappily, only proper names are indexed. Academic discussions of the lyric (quite plentiful recently) are virtually ignored: Albright prefers to rely mostly upon the theoretical statements of practicing poets.

In spite of some important virtues, however, I suspect that many readers will find the book's argument difficult and ultimately unconvincing. Pursuing the basic assumption that the lyrical is a synchronic mode which exists to the extent that words are music results in a view that the lyrical is impersonal, inexpressive, and ultimately impossible, not so much a quality or a mode as an unrealizable ideal. This is, in fact, a book written to support a negative thesis (always a tricky proposition), though the view that the lyrical is somehow ineffable is supported by Romantic tradition. More-



over, any poet's attempts at lyricism, in this light, appear sinister, dangerous, almost psychotic. In forcing language toward the lyrical, he articulates an uncreating word which annihilates everything within its purview—man, nature, language itself. Through his terrible word-magic he intentionally disfigures his beloved; he murders to transform, and feels "a secret glee in the uncanny irrelation of the transfigured creature . . . to its homely source" (162).

Some readers, I should add, may be both stimulated and disconcerted by the equally unconventional appearance of certain favorite works when observed through Albright's lens. Miltonists may not wish to hear that "Lycidas is a spirit of disenchantment, a sober spoilsport," that at the poem's end his "transformation is incomplete . . . he is still dripping mud and seaweed onto the celestial floor" (192). Romanticists will want to challenge Albright's statement that in Wordsworth's "Essay on Epitaphs" "indiscriminateness, triteness . . . become proofs of sincerity and almost of poetic excellence" (171), or that similes in Shelley's "To a Skylark" which compare the bird to poet, maiden, glowworm and flower "[cross] the line from the unapprehended relation to the nonrelation," that they constitute "a lovely absurdity" (249), and thus serve only to demonstrate the impossibility of writing an ideal lyric.

In evaluating the book's contribution, one should keep in mind the dimension Albright calls "modality of perception." The author's sensibility appears to be centered in the early twentieth century, with Pound, Eliot, Yeats—where, literary historians might argue, the last extremes of Romantic lyricality were beginning to be explored. Starting with these poets' theory and practices, Albright looks backward, and from this perspective sees intimations of the indeterminacy he senses at the heart of the lyrical mode. Consequently, this critical performance might tentatively be compared to the effect of a minor, contrapuntal theme extracted from a rich, complex counterpoint and played as a solo, for the post-Pater vantage point is everything here. And yet the premise that lyricality is language aspiring to the condition of music is, in the long history of the lyric's evolution, a late and eccentric axiom.

Finally, I was puzzled by another fundamental argumentative strategy that remains implicit but is constantly powerful. The argument depends upon metaphors to convey the essence of the lyrical. Ariel and Proteus are as telling here as Wordsworth's fountain or Shelley's glowing coals. In fact Albright virtually identifies the metaphorical and the lyrical when he writes that the latter is "a swerving aside, a lifting at right angles from the usual axis of narrative of logical discourse—the antimimetic principle" (3). (This formulation so closely echoes Jakobson's distinction between the metamorphic and metonymic—which has also been described as the

crucial difference between poetry and prose—that it can hardly be accidental.) And Albright constantly declares this lyrical transformation (metaphorically speaking) to be "magic." Paradoxically, however, the book's conception of lyricality assumes the necessary failure of magic, the failure of metaphor. Albright apparently maintains that although the lyric poet's language continually seeks to enact the transformation of one thing into another (a change which language effects through metaphor), we readers are never deceived; the beloved's face perversely remains a grotesque, unnatural jumble of pearls, suns, snow, cherries, and golden wires. In other words, Albright's reader must accept the presiding metaphors of his argument even as he is urged to cultivate a relentless literal-mindedness in response to the poet's.

This book offers the reader an exciting yet disturbing voyage through a realm of literature which appears, more than ever, rich and strange—and the author seems bent upon practicing what he probes.

**Jackie DiSalvo. *War of Titans: Blake's Critique of Milton and the Politics of Religion*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984. xi + 391 pp. \$35.**

**Reviewed by Robert F. Gleckner**

Christopher Hill, a sort of presiding deus in this book (as well as, apparently, an early reader of its manuscript version), was right: "DiSalvo's linking of Blake and Marx is brilliantly dashing, and will annoy the orthodox in both camps" (press release by University of Pittsburgh Press). At least I *think* he's right, for it is difficult to know precisely what an "orthodox" Blakean or "orthodox" Marxist is, not to say what "brilliantly dashing" means. For purposes of this review, I shall eschew commentary on the relationship of "brilliantly dashing" to its only minimally buried variant, "dashingly brilliant," and the relevance of both to DiSalvo's *War of Titans*; and I shall attempt a definition of neither of Hill's orthodoxies. Instead, whatever her ideological and critical druthers are, and however *she* defines those druthers, let me grant them to DiSalvo and try to determine not whether they are the "right" druthers but, rather, whether her "approach" to Blake is illuminating or not. To be more specific, is her approach to "Blake's Critique of