

Lyricist’s Lyrical Lyrics: Widening the Scope of Poetry Studies by Claiming the Obvious¹

Geert Buelens

Utrecht University/ Stellenbosch University

g.buelens@uu.nl

Poetry is all but absent from Cultural Studies. Most treatments of the genre tend to focus on canonized poets whose work is wilfully difficult and obscure. Alternative histories should be explored, opening up possibilities to view poetry again as a culturally relevant art form. The demotic and popular strain provides a case in point. From the Romantics onwards modern poetry linked itself with oral or folk traditions like the ballad. Socially the most popular of these forms is the pop lyric. Since the 1950s rock lyrics have been studied in Social Studies, Cultural Studies, Musicology and some English Departments, but rarely within the context of Poetics or Comparative Literature. Rap and canonized singer-songwriters like Dylan and Cohen are the exceptions to the rule. Systematic attention to both lyrics and performance may open up current ideas of what a poem is and how it works.

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LYRICIST'S LYRICAL LYRICS: WIDENING THE SCOPE OF POETRY STUDIES BY CLAIMING THE OBVIOUS

Listen – I'm not dissin but there's something that you're missin
Maybe you should touch reality
KRS-One/Boogie Down Productions, 'Poetry' (1987)
(in Bradley&DuBois 2010, 145)

It is a truism of sorts to claim that Cultural Studies tries to understand the world we live in and to explain how cultural artefacts both reflect and construct that world and its inherent political tensions. Considering the scope and scale of this ambition, it is only logical that our topics of interest and scrutiny tend to be those which can claim some cultural relevance, which are, in other words, to some extent popular. Esoteric art can, of course, be interesting in and of itself, but if you want to understand general cultural trends and evolutions it rarely offers more than a very limited entry.

Most scholars in the Humanities still do qualitative research, implying that they do in-depth studies of specific cases. They often fail, however, to explain why they choose one case over another. All too often that choice seems arbitrary. That would not be a problem if we still believed that our particular mini-effort was part of larger super-effort aimed at covering and analysing every cultural artefact that has ever been produced. But that is, obviously, no longer the case. Despite the remarkable proliferation of scholars, research centres and research projects – the program book of this very conference offers a case in point – it should be clear that our academic community will never be able to do more than scratch the surface of an astounding global and historical cultural production. This simple fact should force us to think twice whenever we select a case to study. This has always been a weakness of studies in the Humanities but it is even more problematic within the realm of Cultural Studies, I would argue. Opposed though as Cultural Studies has always been to the apolitical anything goes trends in post-modernism it tends to pick its subjects randomly, hoping the selected case has some symptomatic value. We have become so wary of hierarchies that our unspoken assumption seems to be that every case is as relevant as the other or, if we don't believe in this kind of cultural relativism, that we should focus on marginalized cultural products in order to give a voice to whatever is oppressed.

The scholar of modern poetry faces peculiar challenges in this respect. It should not be hard to argue that modern poetry, in most Western societies, is a marginal, maybe even marginalized genre. (In Hermann Glaser's *Kleine deutsche Kulturgeschichte von 1945 bis heute*, for example, it is only mentioned in passing.) Because of its elitist history, however, poetry as a genre cannot claim that 'marginalized' status the way ethnic, post-colonial or queer literatures can. Consequently, the genre is remarkably absent from Cultural Studies. In the more than 600 pages of the second edition of Simon During's *Cultural Studies Reader* (1999) poetry is mentioned nine times (basically because Walter Benjamin tended to discuss it) and only once one of the authors quotes and discusses an actual stanza. (Television is mentioned 76 times in the book, film 46 times, advertising 41, fashion 21, and opera 10 times; of the major art forms only jazz seems to be in an even direr place than poetry, being only dealt with a mere 5 times, by Adorno – and we all know how he felt about this subject).² Also, judging by the number of times poetry is dealt with in panels at this conference (twice, once in a session on Bosnia Herzegovina, once in this one), it seems as if poetry as a cultural practice is considered all but irrelevant.

This judgement betrays both a geographical and a historical bias. In the current uprisings in

² Chris Barker's 2008 *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* does not mention poetry or poems at all.

Yemen and Tunisia, for example, poets and public recitations play a more central role than the much hyped Facebook & Twitter. (Bukhari & de Pous 2011) And 95 years ago, during the Easter Rising, poets formed the heart of the Irish revolution. During the First World War, literally millions of poems were written and published as comments, incitements and moments of mourning. (Marsland 1991) From this astounding production most scholars, especially in the English speaking world, have only remembered, studied and canonised poems which originally had a very limited readership and which reflect the highly anachronistic view Western audiences developed about the Great War during the 1960s and 1970s. In other words, for our literary understanding of the First World War, the pacifist movements opposing the Vietnam war seem to have been more important than the actual literary production of the 1910s. (Todman 2005, 153-186) If we were to treat the music scene around May 68 the way we study the poetry of the Great War, we would devote more time to Iannis Xenakis' Kraanerg than to the Rolling Stones' 'Street Fighting Man' or The Beatles' 'Revolution', just like we rather study Wilfred Owen's and Isaac Rosenberg's highly unrepresentative war poems than the popular and actually influential ones by the likes of Jessie Pope or Henry Newbolt, or – in a German context – Ernst Lissauer's 'Hassgesang gegen England', which was actually being taught to German children (An. 1915) and distributed to millions of soldiers.

The poems that were actually popular and instrumental in bringing about change in modern societies have rarely been the ones that have been canonised and scrutinized, unless they became anthems in specific nationalist contexts (like the ones by Robert Burns in Scotland, Hungary's national poet Sándor Petőfi or his counterparts in Poland, the Balkans, the Baltic states or Flanders). These poems' anthem-like qualities are at odds with the characteristics of most of the poetry of the modern era that is being anthologized, taught and analysed. Consequently, if there is such a thing as a European canon of modern poetry, it tends to exclude these many National Poets, focusing instead on the very few, mostly French, German and English poets whose poems and poetics inspired the work of the once trendsetting Formalists and New Critics. Most histories or assessments of modern poetry – whether *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik* by Hugo Friedrich, Octavio Paz's *Children of the mire*, the many studies by Marjorie Perloff or William Marx's recent *Adieu à la littérature* – tend to favour and thus canonize these authors and their difficult, often impersonal, indeterminate, Apollonian poems, at the detriment of more social types of poetry. These histories – typically starting with Blake, Hölderlin or Baudelaire, focusing on Rimbaud, Valéry and Pound and ending with Beckett, Celan or the Language poets – sketch a view of modern poetry as a genre which is wilfully difficult and obscure. It has lost its representational function and communicates at best indirectly, presenting a dark and broken world through fragmented pieces of highly metaphorical or even self-referential language.

I would like to argue that alternative histories should be explored, opening up possibilities to view poetry again as a culturally relevant art form. Despite the fact that modern poetry from the Romantics onwards linked itself with oral or folk traditions like the ballad this demotic tradition has not received quite as much attention as the esoteric one. Socially the most popular of these forms is the pop lyric, the origins of which are to be situated both in the folk tradition (of British broadside ballads and work songs, and African-American hollers & chants) and the popular music industry (including Tin Pan Alley, but within a European context also music-hall stars like Maurice Chevalier). Since the late 1950s pop and rock lyrics have been studied in Social Studies, Cultural Studies, Musicology and some English Departments, but rarely within the context of Poetics or Comparative Literature.³ Hence, a

³ Frith & Goodwin 1990 gives a great overview and selection. Hinz 2000 provides a German approach. Early examples of a sociological approach are Horton 1957 & Carey 1969.

genealogy or history of the popular song lyric in all its variants and incarnations is still missing,⁴ let alone a story which also includes the many moments of mutual inspiration between lyric and poem writing. Jerome Rothenberg & Pierre Joris' admirable two volume *Poems for the Millennium* features Tom Waits and Bessie Smith alongside Lorca, Apollinaire and Cummings, but that remains a rare exception.

The 2006 edition of the *Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, for instance, jumps from 'Soliloquy' to 'Sonnet'; it does not deal with 'Song'. And its entry on 'Lyric' starts with: "That the lyric was originally a song set to the lyre, and later to other musical instruments, is worth remembering now only because the post-Renaissance lyric, or lyrical passage, though not often intended to be sung, nevertheless tends to be relatively mellifluous in sound and rhythm" (Childs & Fowler 2006, 132, my emphasis).⁵ The tendency of modern poetry to – in the words of Walter Pater – "aspire towards the condition of music" (Pater 1990, 51) is generally acknowledged, but those modern texts which were written to be part of that music are not usually taken into consideration, not even if they are part of high culture opera's.

Within Cultural Studies the status of the 'Song' is not exactly strong either. Take another reference work, *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism* (Childs & Hentzi 1995). It includes entries on subjects like 'Glance' or 'Suture', but not on 'Song', 'Folk' or 'Lyric', not even on 'Popular literature' for that matter. Interestingly though, it does have quite a substantial entry on 'Toasts' - "narrative folk poems from the African-American oral tradition", as they are described there (305). Cultural Studies tends to study popular song forms of literature primarily within the context of specific disciplines like African-American Studies but not in and of itself.

When song lyrics are studied within English Departments it seems to happen mainly within the context of the traditional Great Authors framework, like for instance in the hundreds of books that have been written with criticism and interpretations of say, Bob Dylan, Lennon & McCartney or – to a lesser extent – Leonard Cohen or Van Morrison. For a short period of time in the late 1960s and early 1970s – before the spectacular rise of Cultural Studies and the crisis of traditional language and literature departments set in – rock lyrics as a poetical sub-genre were treated as a general addition to the world of poetry. Anthologies and commentaries were produced which did not treat Dylan as the new Keats, but presented a wide range of lyricists, from Chuck Berry to Nina Simone and from Donovan to Curtis Mayfield. Their poetic qualities were explored, as well as their social relevance. Interestingly, this happened at first outside of the academy, in fanzines like *Cheetah*,⁶ magazines like *Rolling Stone* or in small Bantam Book pockets of alternative poetry that were so much an element of the late sixties counter culture. (The *Poems of Mao Tse-Tung* was published in the same series.) The first one to deal with popular lyrics, as far as I know, was edited by Village Voice journalist Richard Goldstein. His 1969 *The Poetry of Rock* not only paved the way for the even more militant follow-up *The Poetry of Soul* ("the expression of the Black man's condition in

⁴ A few national histories are, for America: Yerbury 1971, Wilder 1972, Hamm 1979 & Furia 1990. For France: Hawkins 2000.

⁵ The *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (4th, 1999) has a substantial entry on 'Song' which, tellingly, ends with this remark: "In the 19th c. there was no revival of song-writing in England, though Thomas Lovell Beddoes and Thomas Hardy both showed a considerable gift for the song lyric. In more recent times dramatists have again become aware of the importance of songs in plays. The work of W. B. Yeats, Sean O'Casey, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Brendan Behan and John Arden - among a number of others - illustrates the point." (Cuddon & Preston 1999, 843). This reference work also has entries on 'Ballad' and 'Folksong'.

⁶ *Cheetah*, for example, saw the first publication (December 1967) of Robert Christgau's 'Rock Lyrics Are Poetry (Maybe)'.

(fascist Amerika [sic])”, xiii) but also for a few scholarly articles⁷ and, tellingly, teaching aids like the 2 volume *Poetry of Relevance* edited by Homer Hogan in 1970. Hogan, associate professor of English in Canada at the time, explicitly aimed at linking “poems of our literary heritage and songs that express contemporary interests and concerns”. Consequently, Shakespeare, Blake and Hopkins were featured next to Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell and Jim Morrison. (A similar effort is David R. Pichaske’s 1972 *Beowulf to Beatles*, with an extended reprint in 1981). All of these are concerned with the declining status of official poetry; they try to interest students and enliven the poetry scene by including song lyrics. The arguments to do so, however, tend to stress that these songs of Dylan, Paul Simon or Grace Slick have the same characteristics as the canonized poems: they use surrealist images and irony, form a coherent unity despite their ambiguity, they communicate indirectly/by implication only, and happen to advocate “non-conformity and independent thinking” (Mosher in Scheurer 1989, 145). In other words: they underscore, rather than challenge the general view of modern poetry and the main cultural values of the late 1960s; these lyrics can easily be incorporated within that framework. Interpreting pop lyrics, we are led to believe, does not need a critical apparatus of its own, as if the actual performance of the lyric is not an intrinsic part of the song.⁸

Moreover, the pop canon which was established in the early seventies has not been substantially updated: Bob Dylan, The Beatles, Leonard Cohen, Randy Newman, Lou Reed, Patti Smith are still very much the writers that are anthologized and scrutinized. All of these songwriters - with the interesting exception of Randy Newman who started out as a Tin Pan Alley/Brill Building type of songwriter – have stressed their links with and interest in ‘official’ poetry. Cohen and Smith started out as poets, the others cherished their Ginsberg/Delmore Schwarz-connections or would end up publishing their work in poetry volumes. They embraced the bohemian lifestyles that were explored in Paris in the 19th century and also explicitly used themes and forms from so-called high literature. Consequently, they can be regarded as literary equivalents of what Richard Taruskin in a musicological discussion of post-Sergeant Pepper-rock aptly calls “upward ‘sociostylistic’ mobility”. (327) All very interesting and – as a cultural phenomenon – still under-researched, I think. But as cultural and literary production goes, we should also try to look beyond this Anglo-Saxon canon, to see how the forms and images and story-telling of popular music in general have changed in the last decades, to see how local traditions of poetry and folk song writing have been influenced by and probably merged with that English language canon.

Three interesting exceptions might inspire us in this respect.

1. German literature and German literary scholars have quite consistently treated song lyrics as literature: the canonical tradition ranging from Wedekind, Klabund and, of course, Brecht up to Wolf Biermann and Franz Jozef Degenhardt is treated in textbooks, literary histories and monographs; German academics, traditionally strong in methodology and conceptualisations have also contributed to the yet still minimally developed field of pop lyric theory (e.g. Urban 1979 & Behrendt 1991).

2. French chansonniers like Brassens, Ferré, Brel and Gainsbourg are studied in literary circles as well. Thirty years after he died Brassens even had his manuscripts edited (Tillieu 2002), like he was a latter day Mallarmé. Gainsbourg’s lyrics have been published with extensive annotations and a critical apparatus (Gainsbourg 2009) The abundant number of French rap artists also received quite some critical attention. (Boucher 1998; Vicherat 2001)

⁷ Harold F. Mosher’s, ‘The Lyrics of American Pop Music: A New Poetry’ (1972) explicitly acknowledges Goldstein as the instigator. For a recent reassessment of Goldstein’s anthology: Astor 2010.

⁸ Exceptions are chapters 8-10 in Frith 1996 and chapter 6 (‘Lyric, Music and Performance’) of Brewster 2009. A thorough German attempt at theorizing this problem is Behrendt 1991.

Whereas the songwriters are primarily studied within a French national context, the French hip-hop scene is obviously linked with its American origins, but also with indigenous traditions, both in Africa (les griots) and France itself (Medieval troubadours, Surrealism and Oulipo). (Barret 2008) Local academic customs had their impact on both the structuralist and psycho-analytic approach in French rap studies.

3. The final example is again related to the success of African-American Studies and counts as the most important American addition to the white singer-songwriter canon discussed earlier: the study of rap lyrics, which in 1992 was first stimulated by a Penguin edition called *Rap. The Lyrics* and which has now culminated in the *Anthology of Rap*, a glorious 860 page hardback volume published from Yale University Press in 2010, with a foreword by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in which the grand old man of African-American Studies not only links rap to ‘toasting’ (Bradley & DuBois 2010, xxii-xxiii) but also claims that this book assembles “a new vanguard of American poetry” (xxvi). This is by no means a new claim,⁹ but in terms of scope, momentum and popular success rap and hip-hop criticism may well have developed into the leading forms of textual (poetical) analysis. Indeed, as Baz Dreisinger recently claimed in *The New York Times* “[t]he flourishing field of hip-hop studies has lately come to resemble a college English Department ca. 1950”, with its canonical studies (Chang 2005), New Criticist text analysis (Jay-Z 2010 and rapgenius.com offer some spectacular examples)¹⁰ and even some Marxist criticism (Charnas 2010; Greenburg 2011). Similarities with the traditional English Department are striking indeed. While it is becoming rare in Literary Studies to devote a book to a general analysis of a specific work by a canonized author this is precisely what is being done in hip-hop studies (e.g. Gasteier 2009 and Dyson & Daulatzai 2009 on Nas’s *Illmatic*). And the Great Author itself seems to resurface in the monographs or readers about luminaries like Tupac Shakur (Meadows 2010 lists no less than 25 titles), Jay-Z (Brown 2005; Bailey 2011) or Lil’Kim (Thomas 2009). Still, hip-hop studies offers more than that. Apart from the many Masters theses and PhD dissertations excerpted and discussed in Meadows’ recent *Research and Information Guide* (2010), monographs have been written about hip-hop’s history (Toop 1984-2000; Dufresne 1991), its poetics (Costello & Foster Wallace 1990; Potter 1995; Béthune 1999; Perry 2004; Dyson 2007), its language (Buckholz 2010) and even its place in academia (Baker 1993; Bock et al 2007). Rap records are used as material for cultural and political history (Clover 2009; White 2011) as they are being scrutinized within Gender and Cultural Studies (Kage 2002; Cheney 2005; Jeffries 2011). That’s the Joint, a massive 600+ page Hip-Hop Studies reader has just been reprinted (Forman & Neal 2004, 2011).

Yet, for all these clear signs of a lively critical culture, even the most explicit and ambitious treatments of rap as a form of poetry are marked by a peculiar apologetic tone. Jay-Z states in *Decoded* that he wanted “to make the case that hip-hop lyrics – not just my lyrics, but those of every great MC – are poetry if you look at them closely enough.” (235) Adam Bradley’s acclaimed *Book of Rhymes* seems to be fighting against similar prejudices: “The best MCs [...] deserve consideration alongside the giants of American poetry. We ignore them at our own expense.” (xiii) The literary canonization of lyricists should probably not be our main concern. But why not treat their work as an interesting art form in its own right, without wanting to prove its ‘depth’ or intertextual intricateness? Lyrics deserve a transnational treatment, I believe, both historically and theoretically. The pop song is one of the pre-

⁹ See for a few examples: Costello & Foster Wallace 1990, 100-1; Baker 1993, 94; Perry 2004; Bradley 2009; Pate 2010. As early as 1984 rap was associated with art (the NPR broadcast *Rappin* presented “the lively story of the urban verbal art form of ‘rappin’”). In his 1987 track ‘Poetry’ Boogie Down Production’s KRS-One made it clear what his ambition was: “I’m teaching poetry”.

¹⁰ The mission statement of rapgenius.com states it is their aim “to critique rap as poetry”.

eminent cultural forces of our time, yet it still lacks a critical framework to study its form, meaning both the texts and their performance, to understand what is generic, what is locally specific about them, how formats of the 1920s can be compared to those of the folk age, the rock age and the rap age. How did we get from ‘Jokerman’ to ‘Poker Face’, from ‘Crazy Blues’ to ‘Crazy in Love’, from ‘Be-Bop-A-Lula’ to ‘Goo goo goo joob’ and from ‘De do do do’, to ‘Dip trip, flip / fantasia’? Now those are questions.

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