

REVIEWS

Anne Williams, Prophetic Strain: The Greater Lyric in the Eighteenth Century. Chicago University Press, 1984. 185 pp. \$22.00 (paper \$10.95).

In this study of the "greater lyric," Anne Williams has attempted to account for the emergence within Eighteenth Century poetry of that kind of poetic voice, the lyrical, so commonly regarded as the property of Romantic and Nineteenth Century literature. For this reason alone, one can fairly expect that Prophetic Strain will offer an appreciation of the lyric which will, from an historical perspective, enrich one's understanding of this form.

The explicit thesis of Williams' study is that Eighteenth Century poems such as Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard," Johnson's "The Vanity of Human Wishes," Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village," and Wordsworth's "The Ruined Cottage" can only be fully understood by an awareness of how the lyrical mode is at work in each. Throughout, the lyrical "strain" is seen as an element which, when overlooked, leaves the interpreter of these poems at a loss to account for the unity of their expression. Accordingly, it is not surprising that Williams should concentrate on works that have historically been considered as failing to adequately unify their subject matter. However, by demonstrating that elements such as the epitaph in Gray's "Elegy" are the effect of a process of lyrical appropriation going on throughout the Eighteenth Century, Williams is seeking to realign the perspective from which this century's poetry is read. The success of Williams' thesis depends however on two crucial chapters. It is these chapters that will be of the greatest interest to students of the later development of the lyric.

The first of these chapters is devoted to establishing a definition of the lyric that will serve as a guide in uncovering what Williams regards as the tradition of the "greater lyric." In elaborating this definition, Williams seeks to negotiate a resolution to the conflicting interpretations of literature as either expressive or imitative in nature. In the face of these alternatives, the lyric represents neither a mirror nor a lamp but both at the same time. Williams writes: "The lyric mode . . . is a representation of an act of self-expression . . . The lyric mode exists in literature when the author induces the reader to know, from within, the virtual experience of a more or less particularized consciousness. When this aim constitutes the predominant organizing of a poem, we say that the poem is a lyric" (15). What is implied by a "more or less particularized consciousness" is nothing less than the subjective consciousness that has been regarded as the hallmark of