

Wires, Mirrors, Tricks of the Light: Zoë Skoulding and Lyric Poetry

Samuel Rogers, University of the West of England, Bristol

Introduction: Expanded Lyric

The main focus of this discussion is lyric poetry: how it speaks; how it sees; and how it can be read as a set of possible formulations of subject and object. In the period from 1980 to the present, the short, first-person lyric remains the dominant mode for poetry in English. However, delineating the genre is a challenge, even in introductory resources such as David Mikics's *New Handbook of Literary Terms*: 'It is difficult to give a definition of lyric poetry. The lyric poem can be contrasted to the narrative poem [...] or it can be defined on the basis of its length [...]. But these definitions seem insufficiently essential.'¹ Like most commentators, Mikics resorts to describing the lyric as private and introverted, pointing back to its ancient origins in a small-scale form of song and music. Nonetheless, it is Romanticism with which lyric is most strongly associated. As William Christie explains, it was in the Romantic period in which 'the lyric came to be seen as synonymous with poetry itself', and in which 'England and much of the rest of Europe had channelled most of its literary energy and aspiration into lyric poetry'.² It is for this reason that expression of individual subjectivity and observation of external objects, via a stable construction of poetic

¹ David Mikics, 'Lyric', in *A New Handbook of Literary Terms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 172–74 (p. 172).

² William Christie, 'Lyric', in *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era 1760–1850, Volume 1 & 2*, ed. by Christopher John Murray (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004), pp. 700-01 (p. 700).

voice, remains a major expectation of this genre. However, Jonathan Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* (2015) is one important indicator of an ongoing reevaluation of the lyric. Culler surveys a 'broader lyric tradition',³ both by analysing lyric poems from antiquity to the present, and by revisiting earlier discussions of lyric poetics. With the advent of Practical Criticism and New Criticism, Culler suggests, the idea of lyric as 'mimetic [...] imitation of the experience of the subject' (p. 1) was superseded by 'treating lyrics as spoken by a persona' (p. 77). Both models are found to be restrictive, and Culler presents a corrective theory indebted to Hegel's lectures on aesthetics and Käthe Hamburger's Hegelian account in *Die Logik der Dichtung* (1957).⁴ Ultimately, he asserts that the lyric is a non-mimetic form; that the lyric voice is a 'formal principle of unity' rather than a representation of the self; and that 'our attention should be directed to experiencing the poem itself as an event' (p. 350), which includes attending to the musical and ritualistic elements of lyric technique, as well as the possibility of reading lyric 'as a form of social action' (p. 8).

One of the main strengths of Hamburger's argument is shifting the focus sharply away from the expression of subjective experience, whilst nonetheless treating the speaking subject of the lyric 'I' as the defining feature of the genre. For Hamburger, '[f]ictional literature is mimesis of reality because it is not statement,

³ Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015; pbk 2017), p.

82. Further references are given parenthetically.

⁴ Hegel's lectures, which my discussion does not engage with, appear in English as *Hegel's Aesthetics:*

Lectures on Fine Art, trans. by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 2 vols.

Hamburger's text was translated into English as *The Logic of Literature* (1973).

but rather formation, “facsimile”⁵. By contrast, lyric is connected to ‘the statement system of language’ (p. 232), with Hamburger suggesting that ‘we experience the lyric statement as a reality statement’ (p. 271). At this point, it suffices to state some basic details of Hamburger’s broader ‘statement system’. She notes ‘[t]he recurrent use of [...] the term "statement" [*Aussage*] in German schools of logic, grammar, and theory of language’ (p. 24) and places her own focus squarely in the third of these fields, noting that ‘the concept of statement [...] presents itself here as the subject–object structure of language’ (p. 31). According to the theory of language she endorses, ‘[n]ot only the "statement" (i.e., assertive) sentence, but also sentences expressing questions, wishes, commands and exclamations are statements: *statements of a statement-subject about a statement-object*’ (p. 31). In fact, for Hamburger ‘the whole of life which manifests itself in language, is described by the concept "statement"', with the sole exception to this rule being ‘narration in narrative literature’ (p. 31). In asserting that ‘the *lyrical statement-subject* [...] constitutes the lyric’ (p. 240, original italics), Hamburger is not merely saying that the lyric is a subjective form; rather, she is logically extending the premise that ‘we do *not* experience a poem’s statements as semblance, as fiction or illusion’ (p. 271). Nor is she suggesting that the lyric is comparable to a statement of fact or opinion, as communicating information: indeed, ‘the lyric poem is a reality statement’ that ‘has no function in a context of reality’ (p. 269). Perhaps it is sufficient to summarise that, as readers of lyric, we experience the lyric subject and the language they marshal not

⁵ Käthe Hamburger, *The Logic of Literature*, trans. by Marilyn J. Rose, 2nd edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 286. Further references are given parenthetically.

as a representation of something real or fictive, but as constituting their own reality which we choose to occupy for the duration of the text. This enables Culler's argument that '[t]he fundamental characteristic of lyric [...] is not the description or interpretation of a past event but the iterative and iterable performance of an event in the lyric present' (p. 226).

Hamburger's model of lyric is particularly evocative in relation to modernist, postmodernist, and experimental poetics, where ideas of poetry as utterance, as performance, or as linguistic artefact rather than mimetic representation are working assumptions of the poems themselves. As Hamburger suggests, this theory of the lyric may comfortably allow experimental writing, and even poems that actively work against traditional simplifications of lyric subjectivity, to be recognized as contributing to the lyric tradition:

if the lyric I is fixed not as merely a 'subject' in the personalized sense of this concept, but instead as a statement-subject, then [...] the concept of subjectivity will be eliminated from the theory of the lyric, and it will be possible to categorize even the most modern forms and theories of lyric poetry [...] within this generic concept. (p. 235)

Viewing the lyric subject not as the expression of a stable subjectivity (whether fictive or biographical), 'but instead solely as logico-linguistic' (p. 244), seems helpful for reading a range of poetics. This includes not only the (late) modernist work extant in Hamburger's time of writing, but also subsequent branches of British and Irish poetry which interrogate the lyric voice: the retro-modernist programme of the British Poetry Revival; the Cambridge School; contemporary 'linguistically innovative' writing; thoroughgoing work of postmodernist surface; and poetry which continues

to bring a softened form of postmodernism into the poetic mainstream.⁶ In these poetries, the idea of a stable poetic identity expressed in language may seem redundant; however, analysing the relationship between a statement-subject and statement-object seems a clear way of approaching poems that already foreground their linguistic construction. As Ian Gregson explains in *Postmodern Literature*, a principle characteristic of postmodernism is the ‘desire to reveal that what claims to be real or natural is actually artificial, is actually fabricated’.⁷ This triggers ‘a constitutive suspicion of all claims to authenticity, all claims to direct expression of the truth’, so that ‘what appears to point to something “out there” in the world actually refers back on itself to an internally coherent structure of meanings’.⁸ If this wrenches texts away from authenticity and expression, it may seem that lyric voice and contemporary poetry are uneasy bedfellows; however, in Hamburger’s model, there is no reason that ‘a writing which is pure textual play’ cannot also contain the subject–object formulation of the lyric statement.⁹

Evidently, Hamburger’s theory usefully squares the lyric genre with what she calls ‘the modern description of a poem as a verbal structure’ (p. 234). However, there are some complications here. Whilst it is compelling to argue that lyric is not (and has never been) a mimetic account of subjectivity, or a communicating of

⁶ There are substantial differences between these varieties of modernist and postmodernist poetry, and the usefulness of the categories given here is open to debate. For the purposes of my discussion, working out these finer points seems unnecessary, as I am gesturing towards the whole range of poetries that question realism, experiment with unsettling poetic voice, and foreground the linguistic or textual.

⁷ Ian Gregson, *Postmodern Literature* (London: Arnold, 2004), p.4.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.15.

information about the self, Culler does note that ‘the romantic model of lyric as an expression of the poet has remained very much on the horizon for poets in the twentieth century – if only as a model to be resisted or rejected’ (p. 85). Culler does not quite pursue the implication of this: that however we define the lyric genre in theory, its practice in contemporary poetry is fraught by contestation. As we shall begin to see in my discussion, ‘the romantic model of lyric’ does live on in contemporary poetry, at least where its assumptions are interrogated and alternatives offered. Rather than subscribe to a single theory of lyric, I wish to suggest that the contemporary lyric can be seen as a series of possible formulations – some endorsed, some rejected, and some temporarily tried on for size. A further complication arises from Hamburger’s view of lyric ‘as a reality statement, whereby we are not able to say anything definite about the relation of the lyric I to the empirical I of the poet’ (pp. 287–88). This is restated in Culler’s observation that, according to this Hegelian model, ‘subjectivity is not the expression of personal affect nor the articulation of individual experience, but above all a formal unifying function for lyric’ (p. 105). Whilst these ideas offer a possibility for resituating modernist and postmodernist poetics as a vital part of a broader lyric tradition, the more we attempt to read contemporary experimental poems solely as linguistic systems with no referent ‘out there’, the more we are reminded that a vital strand of contemporary poetry insistently refers to embodied experience of an ‘out there’ beyond the text. Poetry that actively points to the epistemological uncertainty of reality, as well as the impossibility of clear expression through the medium of language, can nonetheless produce some of the most sustained accounts of

embodied experience of environment, landscape, nature, or place, as an ‘out there’ beyond the text.¹⁰

In order to begin exploring these questions and complications, the rest of my discussion will hone in on the poetry of Zoë Skoulding, taking a sample of her poetry as a case study for a broader range of lyric experimentation in contemporary poetry. A former editor of *Poetry Wales* (2008–2014), Skoulding has published five full-length collections of poetry from 1998 onwards, in addition to numerous chapbooks. Her critical works include *Contemporary Women’s Poetry and Urban Space: Experimental Cities* (2013), and *Poetry & Listening: The Noise of Lyric* (2020). In my discussion, I limit my focus to her earlier output, analysing poems from *The Mirror Trade* (2004) and a chapbook written collaboratively with Ian Davidson, *Dark Wires* (2007). Davidson is another important figure in contemporary British and Irish poetry, with four full-length collections of poetry and a significant number of shorter publications. His critical work includes two monographs, *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry* (2007) and *Radical Spaces of Poetry* (2010), whilst Skoulding and Davidson also co-edited *Placing Poetry* (2013).

Dominant themes of Skoulding’s critical and creative writing include urban space, sound, and their relationships with poetry and identity. Within these key areas, Skoulding’s critical writing has contributed substantially to understanding lyric poetry within an expanded frame of reference. For example, in her first monograph,

¹⁰ For example, see *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry*, ed. by Harriet Tarlo (Exeter: Shearsman, 2011), which includes both the poets of my discussion alongside numerous others.

she shows how ‘the “I” of [Denise] Riley’s work often seems isolated, yet its isolation spatializes the poem [...]; the space between speaker and listener is given as much attention as the lyric self’.¹¹ In this discussion, Skoulding is able to account for Riley’s work as a vital interaction with the lyric tradition, whilst recognizing that it ‘puts language in a public and therefore political context even when it appears to be enacting personal and individual concerns’.¹² In her more recent monograph, Skoulding follows this up substantially, beginning from the premise: ‘If lyric is understood in a social, collective context, it is also subject to noise and interference.’¹³ In this volume, she connects her argument to a contemporary body of writing that critiques ‘the notion of autonomous selfhood on which [the] traditional understanding of lyric has depended’.¹⁴ This includes work by Culler and Riley, as well as Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, and John Wilkinson. Where Culler takes his modified sense of lyric as an opportunity to formally analyse ritualized effects of rhythm, sound, and meaning, Skoulding more radically positions lyric, asking how it relates to material experience of the acoustic and auditory.

In my current discussion, I am not specifically interested in the questions of sound or urban space that have occupied much of Skoulding’s critical writing and found creative expression particularly in *Remains of a Future City* (2008) and *The Museum of Disappearing Sounds* (2013). Instead, my aim is to analyse how her

¹¹ Zoë Skoulding, *Contemporary Women’s Poetry and Urban Space: Experimental Cities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 31.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Skoulding, *Poetry & Listening: The Noise of Lyric* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), p. 2.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

poetry explores the complexities of looking. It is for this reason that I choose to focus on her earlier poetry, as one of its dominant concerns is visual perception, questioning the role of the human eye and other visual apparatuses in mediating between the viewer and the world. Nonetheless, my discussion dovetails to some extent with Skoulding's own writing on the lyric. In *Poetry & Listening*, one of her foundational interests is 'an openness to noise that breaks down boundaries between speaker and listener, and between subject and object'.¹⁵ If 'noise' were a metaphor for visual interference here (which is not her intention), this is an accurate summary of what happens in many of Skoulding's poems of *The Mirror Trade*, and gives some sense of what I will attempt to explore. Even more fittingly, Skoulding's critical discussion works to strengthen our understanding of an 'expanded sense' or lyric poetry which 'does not signal an uncomplicated personal expression in a formal structure, but a series of problems relating to language, affect and politics'.¹⁶ This notion of lyric as 'a series of problems' is invaluable, not only to reading Skoulding's own poetry, but to understanding the contemporary lyric genre in a way that accounts for its complexities. In what follows, I offer a handful of possible, provisional styles of lyric which help elucidate Skoulding's work, but which also offer starting points for thinking about contemporary lyric in an expanded, flexible way.

So far, I have suggested that Hamburger's work from the 1950s – with its emphasis on the statement-subject and statement-object – offers a useful way of analysing contemporary lyric poetry, including poetry that challenges traditional

¹⁵ Skoulding, *Poetry & Listening*, p. 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.14.

simplifications of language and subjectivity. However, I've also suggested that Hamburger's severing of the lyric poem from external reality may be too absolute, especially when reading poetry based in embodied experience of place. I've hinted that treating the lyric genre as a plurality of possibilities, or as a debate between possible formulations of the subject, is a promising approach; I've also asserted that what Culler calls 'the romantic model of lyric' (p. 85) must remain among the notions of lyric in play, if we are to register the way contemporary poets push against its limits. If modern lyric poems actively explore, contest, and reject the idea of a stable, expressive subjectivity, then it is insufficient to say that subjectivity is not a working element of the genre. In the remainder of my discussion, I analyse selections of Skoulding's poetry under the umbrella of a series of hypothetical sub-sets of contemporary lyric poetry: binocular lyric; (dis)embodied lyric; and mirror lyric. These are intended not as earnest attempts to categorize styles of poetic writing, but rather as ways of drawing out a range of thematic concerns from the poems, whilst acknowledging the variety of possibilities for lyric writing that are offered by Skoulding.

Following Hamburger's emphasis on subject-object relations as the crux of lyric poetry, I will use James Elkins's influential book, *The Object Stares Back* (1996) as a way of complexifying my readings. Elkins puts forward a theory of visual experience, based on the fundamental fact that 'seeing is irrational, inconsistent, and undependable'.¹⁷ In addition to showing that seeing is far from neutral or

¹⁷ James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 11. Further references are given parenthetically.

objective, he also emphasizes that it is a two-way process, since ‘seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer’ (pp. 11–12). As I try illuminate some of the complexities of seeing in Skoulding’s poetry, I will draw out some specific ideas from Elkins, the meaning and usefulness of which will be relatively self-evident. I also owe a more generalized debt to Elkins, as the notion of the object looking back will figure throughout my discussion. Though Elkins does not focus on literature in his argument, his challenge to the traditional subject–object relationship has obvious ramifications for lyric poetry:

there is no such thing as just looking, and there is no such thing as an object that is simply looked at by something else called an observer. Looking is much too complex to be reduced to a formula that has a looking subject and a seen object. If I observe attentively enough, I find that my observations are tangled with the object, [...] that looking is something I do but also something that happens to me. (p. 35)

This troubles the Romantic model of lyric poetry; but it also offers a way of expanding Hamburger’s ‘logico-linguistic’ approach (p. 244), which does maintain an easy separation of subject and object, if only as functions of language rather than empirical realities. By pursuing Elkins’s line of thought, I have two aims: 1) to shed light on Skoulding’s poetry and its visual concerns; 2) to begin suggesting a way in which the contemporary understandings of the lyric genre can be expanded a little further, by revealing the various possibilities that present themselves in these tangled relationships of subjects and objects.

Binocular Lyric

In this first analysis of Skoulding's poetry, I will look at three poems from *The Mirror Trade*, suggesting the ways in which seeing (and therefore the relationship between subject and object) is depicted as conflicted and/or doubled. In the companion poems 'Binocular' and 'The Naming of Binocular Bay', we can begin to see Skoulding's use of the lyric to investigate modes and technologies of viewing. The first poem is inscribed 'i.m. Peter Skoulding', presumably the poet's father.¹⁸ In past tense, the lyric subject recounts looking through the dedicatee's binoculars from a beach, to glimpse him 'sailing far out at sea'. In comparison to a poem like 'Through Trees' – a visually striking series of justified columns, lacking both punctuation and a lyric 'I'¹⁹ – 'Binocular' works in much more comfortable lyric territory in its form, subject matter, and mode of address. Rather than see Skoulding as a poet who switches between lyrical and experimental forms, we might adopt Hamburger's defining of the lyric in terms of how '[t]he lyric I transforms objective reality into a reality of subjective experience' (p. 286), 'regardless of whether or not this I names itself in the first-person form' (p. 291). This allows both the lyrical and experimental strands of Skoulding's work to be treated as lyric, since what matters for Hamburger is the 'subject-object polarity' (p. 242). However, in 'Binocular' (and throughout her poetry), Skoulding actively unsettles the relation of the subject and the object, and the notion of a 'polarity' between them, whether in the reality of the lyric or the reality of lived experience. Throughout *The Mirror Trade*, Skoulding echoes Elkins in

¹⁸ Zoë Skoulding, 'Binocular', in *The Mirror Trade* (Bridgend: Seren, 2004), p. 12. Further quotes are from this page.

¹⁹ Skoulding, 'Through Trees', in *The Mirror Trade*, pp. 31–36.

emphasizing that the eyes are imperfect instruments, whilst any apparatus we employ introduces new limitations or complexities. In 'Binocular', the view is by no means simple: as the lyric subject inexpertly operates the binoculars, trees appear in place of the sea, whilst 'layers of blue' make it hard to distinguish sky from water. The clumsily used binoculars do not simply obscure objects from the subject's clear view, but also insist that the act of viewing alters the object: matching the unsteady hand of the speaker who is 'giddy on the beach', 'landscapes juddered', '[s]pace / reeled', and 'sky wobbled', all suggesting how our view of the world alters reality. This culminates in the final line: when 'I move and the sea is empty', it seems Peter Skoulding vanishes because the subject's gaze is pointed in another direction. Or was his brief apparition in this elegiac poem just a trick of the light? It is unclear here whether the act of imperfect seeing was a remembered fact or an elegiac fiction.

In 'Binocular', a further complication is that the lenses used originally served a military purpose, 'made to arrow to the point of threat'. The lack of stability and neutrality in vision is a theme throughout Skoulding's writing, but here she hints at a parallel point: that seeing is an act of power, with military and imperial contexts. For Elkin, looking is inherently an act of power, including our decisions about what to ignore: 'I do not focus on anything that is not connected in some way with my own desires and actions', Elkin writes, asserting that 'eyes can understand only desire and possession' (p. 22). Skoulding is intently attuned to this relationship between seeing and possessing, which 'The Naming of Binocular Bay' follows up, offering 'military

optics' and cartography as two power-laden ways of seeing.²⁰ In this poem, both the binoculars and the map also have familial associations which partly transform them from empirical objects by reorienting them to 'the subject-pole' of Hamburger's model (p. 249 and *passim*). That is, their function in the poem is oriented towards expressing the emotional attachments of the speaking subject. The poem seems to refer to the poet's father again, though here in the third person. A memory of his 1940s Zeiss binoculars, 'looted by his father in the aftermath', is juxtaposed with the speaker's contemporary view 'through a Russian pair'. On an inherited map, the name of 'binocular bay' has been inscribed, 'layered' and 'floating', so that the official information of the Ordnance Survey bristles against 'his private map' as competing acts of naming. In the lyric present, the subject's own view is contaminated by her consideration of these inherited acts of seeing and naming: as she sees a cormorant diving, 'its feathers spreading inkstains', the mediation of the viewed object is coloured by the map's representation of ocean as blue ink on paper. Equally, we might say that the subject's view has been coloured by the object of the map, which carried more than just topographical information. Here, we see the truth of Elkins's statement that 'objects and observers alter one another, and meaning goes in both directions' (p. 43).

As we have seen, this pair of poems do use the lyric to draw objects into the 'sense-nexus' – which for Hamburger emerges when 'statements form a cohesive bond, guided by the sense, or poetic meaning, which the lyric I wishes to express' (p.

²⁰ Skoulding, 'The Naming of Binocular Bay', in *The Mirror Trade*, pp. 13. Further quotes are from this page.

249). This movement away from the 'object-pole' and toward the 'subject-pole' is for Hamburger 'the process which engenders the lyric' (p. 249). However, we have begun to see that Skoulding's poems also systematically disturb the boundary between subject and object in a way that makes Hamburger's polarity model simplistic, necessitating recourse to more nuanced ideas of subjectivity and vision. In 'Binocular', pinpointing a subject and an object is more tricky than it first seems. Ultimately, the objects brought into the poem include the addressed dedicatee, the binoculars, and the landscape/seascape viewed; but as the title registers, the subject's binocular mode of seeing can itself become an object of contemplation. Rather than only transforming objects into a subjective reality, the poem also turns subjectivity into an object of contemplation: in this sense, the poem itself 'looks back', inspecting and interpreting the subject. From another angle, the addressee of the poem occupies the position of subject as well as object: with a 'scuffed strap', the binoculars are a tangible reminder of him, and the view they offer is his view, reanimated by a poem that addresses him. Whilst upsetting the idea of a clear 'subject-object polarity', this nonetheless cuts to the emotional core of this elegiac lyric.

Meanwhile, 'Naming of Binocular Bay' ends with a stanza that undercuts the forms of seeing employed by the poem, suggesting that the binoculars offer 'tunnel vision' and are 'blinded' by the imperfections of 'smeared lenses'. Here, we may find recourse to Elkins's insistence that '[e]ach act of vision mingles seeing with not seeing' (p. 201), so that 'human sight is [...] a determinate trading of blindness and insights' (p. 202). As this helps us appreciate, Skoulding's poem ultimately reminds us that its subjects each lack a clear, uninterrupted view of their objects. This self-

aware admission leads Skoulding to the closing image of ‘what seems / to be in my grasp’, turning the binoculars into ‘two eyes fused / in a single open mouth’. The striking defamiliarization of this image upsets the subject–object binary again, as the binoculars become a viewing subject whilst the speaker’s human apparatus is now implicated in the flaws of her instrument. Interestingly, Elkins has the same image in reverse, asking us to view the human head as ‘a binocular range finder, capable of comparing the view of an object from two different positions’ (p. 66). In his view as in Skoulding’s, viewing something from two positions does not mean objectively verifying, but rather doubling the number of flawed, subjective perspectives. As this image closes the poem, the binoculars look startlingly out at the reader, examining our human perspective as we momentarily puzzle at the metaphorical transformation, which fuses two components into one binocular meaning. In her doctoral thesis, where a number of the poems of *The Mirror Trade* first appeared, Skoulding observes that this poem ‘refers to the inadequacy of language without enacting it, thematically circling some of the interests of avant-garde writers like [Lyn] Hejinian and drawing them into tension with the less questioning use of the voice to be found in “mainstream” poetry’.²¹ As suggested by the two halves of the binocular image resolving into an ‘open mouth’, this poetry is about voice as well as vision. It is a binocular poetry in the sense ‘performed by or adapted to both eyes’;²² but it seems to have them looking in two directions, refusing a singular perspective

²¹ Skoulding, ‘Geographies of the Self’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Wales, Bangor, 2001), p. 144.

²² ‘binocular, adj. and n.’, entry 2, *OED Online* <www.oed.com/view/Entry/19164> [accessed 28 July 2021].

or singular way of speaking. We encounter lyric here as an uneven and contested terrain, where different poetic possibilities look across at each other, as well as looking provocatively out at us readers.

The presence of multiple subjects, objects, and modes of viewing is clearer in 'Words Like Crystalline', one of the longest poems of Skoulding's collection. Its six unnumbered sections enact slight modifications in tone and address but share a sustained exploration of three kinds of viewing (by no means independent of each other). Firstly, some acts of viewing (either explicit or implied) are attributable to the statement-subject in the lyric present. In this mode, the speaking subject makes intimate invitations for the romantic object to look back ('Drink me / only with your eyes').²³ However, they also undergo unexplained separations that seem both spatial and emotional ('suddenly we're miles apart / across a table'; p. 8).²⁴ If these uncertainties make the position of the subject unclear, the addressed object 'you' is equally unstable: the second-person pronoun appears first in generalized form ('everything you are or know'; p. 8) but becomes an intimate object whose gaze alters the lyric subject ('When you look at me I'm all transduced'; p. 8). When the speaking subject rejects the returned gaze ('*You don't know me. / You think you do.*

²³ Skoulding, 'Words Like Crystalline', in *The Mirror Trade*, pp. 8-10 (p. 8). Further references are given parenthetically.

²⁴ In using the lyric to combine interpersonal intimacy and proximity with spatial uprootedness and distance, some of Skoulding's work is reminiscent of Lee Harwood's early writing. I discuss this element of Harwood in an earlier analysis of lyric poetry: Samuel Rogers, 'Transatlantic or Nomadic? Lyric Voice in Lee Harwood's *The Man with Blue Eyes* (1966)', *Symbiosis*, 21.1 (2017), 93-114.

You don't.'; p. 8), it is both the lover's and the reader's enquiring eye that is resisted by the subject-turned-object. This recognizably lyrical level of subject-object relations coexists with a second kind of seeing: a privileged, authoritative viewpoint which transcends individual subjectivity. This is signalled by the epigram from *Paradise Lost*, III. 481-83, where Milton describes the foolish and misguided ascending to heaven, before being swept sideways into limbo. Skoulding's lyric speaker temporarily borrows the viewpoint of the epic narrator, albeit with the cosmos as concentric spheres replaced with a contemporary view of planet Earth in environmental catastrophe:

Out here in the ninth sphere there's a serious wobble;
water's trembling to crash down in cataracts,
send the planets into swerves.

All this time its frozen quartz was ticking. (p. 8)

Adopting the privileged perspective of the Miltonic narrator, Skoulding's lyric subject uses the 'scale effect' of imagining our planet as a clock, with the melting polar ice as a quartz crystal counting down to its own destruction.²⁵ Echoing the movement of a

²⁵ Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) has an extended discussion of such privileged viewpoints of Earth as a miniaturized whole (pp. 29–46). He argues that literature and criticism must engage with such 'scale effects' (p. 10 and *passim*) in order to understand how familiar scales of human thought are environmentally damaging. We might argue that Skoulding's multi-levelled view, and its unsettling of the human subject, is an example of such engagement. For an ecocritical discussion of Skoulding's later poetry, see Louise Chamberlain, "'The unfenced border': Boundaries, Borders

quartz oscillator, the speaker is said to 'oscillate between the inside and the out' (p. 8), pointing to the multiple levels of subject position that complexify the poem.

While the temporary external perspective seems the privileged one, the transformation of the water into 'cataracts' makes the globe an eyeball, flipping the positions of the viewing subject and the perceived object. On the following page, this repeats in reverse: the sclera, as the outer layer of the human eye, recalls Milton's 'crystalline sphere'; figured as 'the whole globe', it 'rolls in its orbit, meeting its double only in mirrors, in glass, in water' (p. 9). To read and appreciate this poem effectively, it is productive to follow Hamburger's view of the lyric as a non-mimetic utterance defined by the interactions between a 'logico-linguistic' subject-pole and object-pole. This enables a poem with unstable modes of address, which calls attention to the construction of poetic voice, to still be considered in its contribution to lyric genre. However, it is essential to account for the fact that these poles occupy provisional axes in coexistent spheres. The Earth as perceived object attempts to look back, the blindness of its cataracts mirroring our own blindness in accelerating the 'serious wobble' in environmental health. Meanwhile, the more grounded eye-globe of the lyric subject is attune to 'meeting its double', as the surface of a watery planet sends back a reflection, becoming itself a perceiving eye. Evidently, it is the poem which offers the opportunity of this binocular view, the lyric becoming not merely a space for subjective reflection, but a reflective surface in the visual sense, where globes become eyes and multi-layered subjects and objects regard one

and Thresholds in the Poetry of Zoë Skoulding and Patrick McGuinness', *International Journal of Welsh Writing in English*, 2 (2014), 83–105.

another. In Skoulding's approach to the lyric, Elkins's fundamental assertion that 'the object stares back' is a vital component of the poetry. This brings us to the third kind of viewing found in the poem: the viewpoints afforded by language (and therefore the poem), not as expressions of a subject, but as themselves a kind of looking. As the title of the poem indicates, it is words that are the starting point. In the line 'And only words like *crystalline* will do for this,' (p. 8) the poem offers 'crystalline' as one example of word that invites its explorations; but in another partly-present sense, Skoulding suggests that language may have the qualities of crystal, akin to '[t]he crystalline lens [that] lies behind the iris. / It lies. Light passes through it' (p. 8). When we say that the language of a text is crystal clear, perhaps we identify an object that looks back at us, like our 'double / [...] in mirrors' (p. 9), possessing the same possibilities for duplicity, duplication, and distortion as the perceiving subject's eye.

(Dis)embodied Lyric

Turning now to *Dark Wires*, we find a poetry that benefits from Hamburger's Hegelian theory of the lyric subject as a purely linguistic position. However, it also frustrates this definition through an insistence on embodied experience of place as an active component of the text, even when the speaking subject seems disembodied. As the blurb of the text stresses, the poems 'were written collaboratively over a two-year period by e-mail'.²⁶ Whilst the Romantic model of lyric works with a model of subjectivity that may be implicitly linked to a more stable

26 Ian Davidson and Zoë Skoulding, *Dark Wires* (Sheffield: West House Books, 2007), back cover blurb.

epistemological and spatial experience, the poems of *Dark Wires* were assembled ‘in the disembodied space of the virtual’, as one of the authors puts it.²⁷ Given that this is a ‘disembodied’ poetry, with two separate authors converging into single texts, it is useful to recall Hamburger’s view that ‘[t]he lyric poem is an open logical structure [...] constituted by a statement subject’ (p. 286). The poems of *Dark Wires* make no distinction between who authored any particular passage and when a lyric ‘I’ does appear, it is a shared statement subject. Hamburger’s idea of ‘the statemental I [that] posits itself as a lyric I’ is a useful way of including experimental, collaborative writing in the remit of lyric poetry (p. 285). However, over-hasty application of Hamburger’s model would miss the fact that Davidson and Skoulding seem to actively respond to and interrogate the Romantic tradition of lyric, conceived of as implying a more stable conception of voice and self.

In the opening poem, ‘Abasement Garden’, there seems to be a stable speaking identity for at least part of the poem, but its ability to achieve a coherency of experience that might be related through poetic self-expression is denied. Each of the first three stanzas contains a different place, so that the ‘I’ of the poem is rapidly shifted from ‘abasement garden’ to ‘flour cellar’ to ‘under ground’.²⁸ In each apparent location, the position of the speaker in terms of power and agency is also altered, so that ‘abasement garden’ is ‘where / I pushed out every shoot’, ‘flour cellar’ is ‘where I was covered in dust / falling’, and ‘under ground’ is ‘where I hid’.

²⁷ Davidson and Skoulding, ‘Mind Melding’, *New Welsh Review*, 67 (2005), 000-00 (p. 45).

²⁸ Davidson and Skoulding, ‘Abasement Garden’, in *Dark Wires*, [p. 5]. Further quotations are from this page. Page numbers are inferred for this unpaginated volume

The position of authority suggested by 'I pushed out every shoot' is quickly undermined, and the sense of uncertainty this creates is added to by the ambiguities involved in each location, suggesting a problematic relationship between the speaking self and its environment. The ambiguity comes from the lack of explanation for the falling, the hiding, and the shifts in setting, but also it comes from the linguistic multiplicities created by punning, unusual syntax, and lack of punctuation. For example, the pun of 'damp rose' allows the rising damp of the basement to be subverted by 'the rose fell from her hand'; this uncertainty of how the surroundings relate to the speaker is then confused further when the effect of the pun is absorbed into the imagery of the poem, with 'thought patterns / falling as petals'.

The mysteries surrounding the narrative of the poem lead one of its authors to describe it as 'a detective story',²⁹ though perhaps a parody of a detective story is closer to the truth, with the reader and the speaker attempting to decipher how they each relate to the textual mechanisms of the poem. For the reader, the main cause for sleuthing is the abasement of the title's pun, which sees the fall of the speaker from its initial position of authority to an underground hiding place. The lyric subject appears to flee in the lines 'spiral stares / looking back / my feet echoed'. Here, the speaker is 'looking back' for their pursuer; but in the substitution of 'stairs' for its homonym 'stares', the object-pole of the poem does its own 'looking back'. Here, we might return to Elkins: 'To see is to be seen, and everything I see is like an eye, collecting my gaze, blinking, staring, focusing and reflecting, sending my look back to me' (p. 51). Davidson and Skoulding use this multidirectional seeing to add to

29 Davidson and Skoulding, 'Mind Melding', p. 38.

the instability of the speaking subject. As in Skoulding's poetry, this makes it harder to identify the single subject-pole and object-pole that characterize lyric for Hamburger. Nonetheless, the centrality of speaking and seeing make the poem a further experiment in the possibilities of expanded lyric practice.

Dark Wires certainly presents obstacles to the Romantic model of lyric in both its form and content, needing to be navigated via shifts in perspective and associations across the surface of the text, rather than via the stable self-expression of a fixed self. Davidson and Skoulding make this point themselves in the essay 'Disobedience: Collaborative Writing and the Walk Poem', stating that their writing involves 'a process of making outward movements within an aesthetic that subordinates the containment and depth of the individual lyric self to an open, interconnected discourse'.³⁰ While I think this poetry can be usefully read in the context of the lyric genre, it would be remiss to overlook that the two writers clearly see their work as countering the assumptions of lyric. In this, they signal an opposition between the 'containment and depth' of the lyric subject and (implicitly therefore) the open textual surface of a poetry whose movements are 'outward'. The spatial metaphors suggest a poetry that is oriented toward Hamburger's object-pole, away from the interiority of the self. Perhaps surprisingly, their essay also emphasizes embodied experiences of space, suggesting implicitly that, as in the naïve formulation of lyric, the poems are taken to express the authors' lived experience. The subject of their essay is therefore given as 'rambling and how that

30 Davidson and Skoulding, 'Disobedience: Collaborative Writing and the Walk Poem', in *Necessary Steps*, ed. by David Kennedy (Exeter: Shearsman, 2007), pp. 000-00 (p. 30).

term might apply both to local walks that inform our work and to a collaborative, conversational process through which we wrote poems'.³¹

The conflation of the process of walking and writing in that one word, 'rambling', hints at a parallel between text and experience that is somewhat at odds with the postmodern techniques of the poetry. Usefully, Hamburger foreshadows many of the assumptions of contemporary experimental writing: 'We are dealing only with *that* reality which the lyric I signifies as being *its*, that subjective, existential reality which can it be compared to any objective reality which might form the semantic nucleus of its statements' (p. 285). However, Davidson and Skoulding are eager to emphasize the ways in which the 'rambling' of the poem's subjective reality is directly connected to the 'rambling' of their embodied experience of place. The blurb of the chapbook identifies specific places of composition ('the writers were variously located in north Wales and different parts of Europe and Africa'), and the 'Disobedience' essay makes even more direct connections. For example, 'the place where Zoë had been picking sloes' is given as context to the lines 'sloes furring the tongue another / stone in the wall numbers coming / loose', suggesting that the ambiguous lines of the poems can be read as an expression of an aspect of the authors' experience, if only the reader could undertake more detective work to piece together the clues.³² A similar suggestion seems to be made in Davidson and Skoulding's 'Mind Melding' feature in the *New Welsh Review*, with the question 'Do

31 Ibid., p.28.

32 Ibid., p.31.

you think someone could disentangle who wrote what in that poem?'.³³ It may be useful to consider this question in parallel with comments made by Alice Notley, whose work Davidson and Skoulding discuss in their 'Disobedience' essay: 'These lines are not completely clear because I can forget for a time what they mean, but they are clear in the sense that they are a knot – they aren't a blur. A knot can be untied'.³⁴ In the context of Notley's comments, the proposed possibility of 'disentangling' the images of the poem to correspond to the writing body of one of its two authors suggests an inherent, underlying connection between a text and its creator(s). It suggests an authentic lyric self that lies dormant under the surface of the text, not speaking as directly as the 'I' of more traditional poetry, but expressing itself through language and creating an objective link with the text.

Whilst embodied experience of place can be seen to shape the poems, this is also a two-way street, as the poets suggest: 'we walk with the memory of texts in our heads, so that the walk can be shaped by them'.³⁵ They argue that walking involves 'a dialogue between the body and the external physical environment',³⁶ as opposed to a relationship based on an active subject and passive object. In these ways, Davidson and Skoulding express a view of experience in which a place or space is necessarily opened up to an elsewhere – geographical, cultural, or textually – and the body's experience of place is complicated, involving factors outside of immediate sensory perception. Once interactions between body and space are conceived of like

33 Davidson and Skoulding, 'Mind Melding', p. 38.

34 Alice Notley, *Coming After: Essays on Poetry* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p.145.

35 Davidson and Skoulding, 'Disobedience', p. 31.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

this, an attempt at representing an embodied experience of space goes hand-in-hand with a denial of traditional lyric poetry's implicitly fixed perspective and coherent, isolated experience. So, whilst Skoulding and Davidson assert that 'the poem is not simply a reduction of concrete experience of the walk to an abstraction which is re-concretised by the reader',³⁷ their 'process of making outward movements'³⁸ can be seen to mirror and represent a contemporary bodily experience of space. Thus, *Dark Wires* employs the tactics of postmodern play across the surface of its text in order to express an experience of place within a form of contemporary lyric driven by embodied experience.

'Train' is another poem from *Dark Wires* in which the 'statemental I' might usefully be read through Hamburger's theory of the lyric, but which also seems to explore and challenge a more conventional view of that genre, as well as muddling the subject-object binary. In the fourth stanza, the subject shared by the two authors appears to offer a commentary on itself:

I could be perfectly composed
between four edges I could control the series
of characters unfolding every story a long
lie this is what has happened to me.³⁹

Here, the notion of authentic, expressive speaker is offered ('this is what has happened to me') but is revealed as a deceptive unity in which multiple characters

³⁷ Ibid., p.32.

³⁸ Ibid., p.30.

³⁹ Davidson and Skoulding, 'Train', in *Dark Wires*, [pp. 15–16 (p. 15)]. Further references are given parenthetically.

are collapsed. 'I could be perfectly composed' is a reflection on the emotional composure of the subject, but this is contradicted by two other senses of 'composed' that are also in play: 'made up, formed, compounded of (a material, or constituent elements)' and 'construct[ed] (in words); [...] produce[d] in literary form'.⁴⁰ The nature of the speaking subject, and therefore of the lyric, is up for grabs here, and it makes no sense to read the poem without keeping multiple possibilities of the lyric genre in mind. Sometimes, the lyric 'I' offers security and stability 'between four edges'; but the poem insistently tests this against a poetry of 'outward movement', beginning with the movement of the titular train. In the preceding stanza, where the lyric subject first appears, 'I got carried away over the lines crossing / like intersecting teeth snagged over territories' (p. 15). Here, familiar expressions of emotional exuberance (getting 'carried away', perhaps even crossing the line) are overrun by the sense that the lyric 'I' is geographically 'carried away' by the train, whose network of tracks enact a sort of violence with their 'intersecting teeth', becoming a figurative mouth that displaces lyric speech. Ultimately, the poem does offer some affirmation that an authentic lyric subject can exist within a poetics of 'outward movements', or within a geographical uprootedness: 'I have an inner life / where things resonate. It spills through / this horizon right to left, a single ringing wire' (p. 15). However, this assurance is double-edged. The fluidity and instability of the poem's mode of address make this statement provisional at best, while the

⁴⁰ 'compose, v.', entries 4 and 5, *OED Online* <www.oed.com/view/Entry/37781> [accessed 29 July 2021].

previous stanza's 'he' and 'she' (the 'characters unfolding') make it difficult to pinpoint where 'an inner life' might begin and end in this poem. Moreover, if the 'I' of this statement 'spills through' the landscape, are they a stable voice made mobile by transportation, or they a diffuse presence dispersed beyond coherence? The lines may offer an embodied experience of place and mobility on one level, but on another the image of the 'inner life' as a 'ringing wire' returns us to a disembodiment of the lyric voice carried down copper wires into email inboxes.

Mirror Lyric

The poems of *Dark Wires* are experiments in ways of speaking with and through the lyric. However, they also maintain the same strong emphasis on seeing that we find in Skoulding's work of this time. 'Train' begins by calling our attention to 'the letters' (and therefore the poem's materials), 'a train window', 'cameras', a 'lens', and 'an old man's eye' as a variety of framing and viewing mechanisms. The poem goes on to undertake a series of what might be called visual experiments which play with the stability of the Romantic lyric by interrogating the relationship between subject and object. Again, I wish to suggest that these procedures characterize the lyric genre as a set of debates around subject-object relation, which comes to the fore in analyses of seeing. In the seventh stanza of the poem, two visual fields are seen from the train: the 'trees in winter speeded up' and 'an outline of passengers moving across' (p. 15). Rather than a single polarity of subject-object, the world runs on multiple axes here, as elements of the visual field appear to move away from the viewer independently. The effect dumfounds the lyric subject, who 'can connect nothing' with these observations. Moreover, the subject is split or multiplied, as it seems

'another's eye' is doing half the seeing. Once again, Elkins's discussion of seeing offers a parallel for the literary derangements of subject and object. In his formulation, both subject and object are plural: 'How can the observer look at the object if it is multiplying and changing under his very eyes? The supposedly static object is a moving target' (p. 39); 'I am divided, and at times my modes of seeing are so distinct from one another that they could belong to different people' (p. 40). The poem makes similar discoveries in connecting the self in motion, the lyric voice, and the science of vision, whilst suggesting the shared limits of these. This is encapsulated in the subject's frustrated admission that 'the rest [is] out of my field of vision' (p. 15).

Having offered binocular viewing and (dis)embodied viewing as dual possibilities for understanding the complex 'subject-object polarity' of contemporary lyric, I will finally return to reflective surfaces as an adjacent possibility in Davidson and Skoulding's poetry. The ninth stanza of 'Train' returns to 'she', who temporarily becomes the seeing subject and

checks

her face shaken in the window as light

contamination spills in pure country, its

landscape wrinkled as skin. (p. 16)

The act of checking one's reflection on a moving train is uncanny here, as the face itself is 'shaken' in the reflected image. The uncertainty of 'as' creates two meanings: the observation happens *at the same time* that 'light / contamination spills' from the train; but also, the face is perceived *in the form of* light pollution. Both meanings are in play, though the image of the landscape as skin nudges us toward the latter,

suggesting an image of the self emitted into the 'pure country', further upsetting the boundary between subject and object. The eleventh stanza of the poem returns to similar territory, as it is the overlapping reflections of train windows which give the impression that 'the red light flashing is my forehead'. This leads to a more startling realization that 'I'm glass right through' (p. 16). Perhaps the poetry wills the self into a crystalline transparency here, so that what's inside may be authentically regarded. However, the poem's experiments with speaking, seeing, and moving remind us that perception, poetic expression, and identity are never clear as glass, though much like the 'silted [...] window' of the train (p. 15), they do create mirror-selves, viewed as objects that look resolutely back to perceive the subject.

Common sense would seem to dictate that mirrors are spaces for self-reflection, offering an assurance of the self's continuity and coherence. For Elkins, however, mirrors are an archetype of the object that returns our gaze and becomes its own subject. He writes, '[t]he mirror has a special kind of empty eye. It waits to see, but it cannot see without me to see it' (p. 49). Far from assuring the subject of its separateness, both the mirror and the viewer become inter-dependent subject-objects. This helps illuminate the importance of mirrors within Skoulding's troubling of the subject-object binary. Like other visual technologies (such as binoculars and photography), mirrors in Skoulding's poems remind us that viewing is not simply an absorbing of visual data from an outside to an inside. Moreover, in her collection's title poem, 'The Mirror Trade', the visual phenomenon of mirroring is a way of examining how the self relates to wider geographies, beyond the immediate interaction of subject and object. Skoulding's note to the poem informs us that '[t]he secrets of the Venetian mirror industry, of which Sabine Melchior-Bonnet's *The*

Mirror: A History gives an account, were once closely guarded on the island of Murano'.⁴¹ In this sense, the mirror does offer an image of isolation and interiority, since for those producing the mirrors '[i]t's death to leave the island with this knowledge'.⁴² Set against this, the production of mirrors is regarded as the creation of another, possible space, defined by its relationship with the island: 'craft pure depth to capture space, annex / the country of illusions which looks in on us'. The interiority of the island is therefore given a double, in the negative space of the mirror, with its own depth and its own power to look. Of course, the mirrors as perceiving subjects have the greatest power in this poem: they can leave the island unscathed, as 'we send out / pieces of ourselves which bear no trace of us'. Loaded onto ships, the mirrors will soon reflect other, distant places, erasing any perception of the island or its annexed double. Although the mirrors are ascribed depth here, the poem's interest is in a reflective surface, which points to the problems of selfhood and objecthood, and ultimately causes 'ourselves' to vanish without a trace.

Conceiving of Skoulding as a writer of 'mirror lyric', my point is not only that she explores face-to-face encounters of the subject and object. Beyond this, there are forms of doubling or mirroring in her poems that seem informed by the workings of reflective surfaces. Again, these effects are part of her questioning 'the tendency to see the eye as a boundary between the mind and the world',⁴³ which complicate Hamburger's subject-object polarity model. 'Mostly Water' is a good example, and

⁴¹ Skoulding, 'Notes', in *The Mirror Trade*, pp. 70–71 (p. 70).

⁴² Skoulding, 'The Mirror Trade', in *The Mirror Trade*, p. 11. Further quotes are from this page.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. ii.

Skoulding describes this poem as a deliberate attempt to disturb the 'boundary between the mind and the world' by 'confus[ing] the relationship between viewer and object'.⁴⁴ The opening lines, 'Coming down over Budapest / the plane's all eyes',⁴⁵ create a privileged, aerial perspective that is above the landscape, and able to view it as a whole. This position is immediately questioned with the image 'dark spots / float up to stain the sky', which takes a vantage point on the ground, but also, as Skoulding notes, problematizes the eye as boundary by suggesting that 'blemishes on the eye are located in the air'.⁴⁶ Here, the aeroplane passengers, the viewer on the ground, and the sky as a viewed surface, all seem to look at and mirror one another, making it impossible to pinpoint a fixed subject and object. Throughout the poem, the environment refuses to be passively viewed and made external to the subject of the overhead perspective. Even when the experience of an aeroplane passenger is more firmly established ('Cold swells down my gullet // as I swallow bottled water'), there is another kind of mirroring 'as the Danube' below does the opposite of the commodified water in the bottle, and 'rises to silence roads'. The imagery and grammar create an inextricable link between the water in the bottle and the water of the river – between that which may become a part of the body, and that which must remain external to it.

The inside and the outside continue to mirror each other, as the Danube is described as 'peristalsis of the city squeezing in'. The physiological term for waves of

⁴⁴ Skoulding, 'Geographies of the Self', p. 148.

⁴⁵ Skoulding, 'Mostly Water', in *The Mirror Trade*, p. 14. Further quotes are from this page.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

muscular contractions draws a comparison between the body and the water, with a shared motion of waves. Here, the landscape below not only reflects the airborne subject above, but becomes itself a human body, refuting the autonomy of the subject by 'squeezing in' past the boundaries of the speaking subject. This culminates, as Skoulding explains, with the world below the plane 'looking back at the observer and taking on physical agency as the river 'lifts itself from tints of grey / to turquoise, muscles up to blue''.⁴⁷ In a basic sense, the poem refers to the river flooding and breaking its normal boundaries as an infringement of the human city. However, this reading is complicated because the viewer in the plane is implicated in the flooding – 'air travel, after all, is related to the environmental conditions that produce floods'.⁴⁸ In setting up the subject and object as imperfect mirrors to each other, the poem explores a complex relationship between the supposed interiority of an 'I' or eye and the supposed externality of the viewed object, using the lyric to represent these complex and multi-layered experiences of place.

Whilst mirrors reflect an image of ourselves, they also frame a particular, limited view of space, as was suggested by the act of annexing in 'The Mirror Trade'. Skoulding's interest in mirrors and other visual apparatus is directly related to this 'process of "enframing", or seeing the world as a picture' which has '[grown] out of a particular vision of selfhood'.⁴⁹ In this sense, mirrors are akin to the lyric poem, with its conventions of framing the world through the privileged viewpoint of a subject. In

⁴⁷ Skoulding, 'Geographies of the Self', p. 148.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Skoulding, 'Geographies of the Self', p. 18.

keeping with this, Skoulding talks about the concern with language and the linguistic 'I' simultaneously with the concern about vision and lenses. So, in an interview with Fiona Owen, Skoulding says that her poetry has concurrently 'gone from focusing on looking, to interrogating how I look' and 'from having a frustration with language not being transparent, to enjoying it not being at all a transparent medium and working with it as something that is more opaque'.⁵⁰ As we have already encountered, Skoulding's early poetry is full of surfaces that promise transparency – crystal, quartz, lenses, water – but which only offer another way of seeing imperfectly, or which may even look back at the viewing subject. In many cases, these apparatuses of viewing are also foils for the poem itself, offering ways for Skoulding to think through the workings of language as a non-transparent medium, thereby looking for ways to demagnetize the poles of subject and object. The sense of embracing the opaqueness of language is postmodern, but it does not trigger a move into total self-reflexivity and self-referentiality in the way that Gregson's account of postmodernism describes; it is, as Skoulding suggests, tied to an urge to represent spatial experience.

Returning to the example of 'The Mirror Trade', it is clear that Skoulding's imagery refers not only to the process of producing mirrors, but also self-reflexively to the construction of a poem. The snaring of air, the stealing of 'water from fire' and the crafting of 'pure depth to capture space' all allude to a view of writing as grasping and reproducing some essential aspect of reality. This is then countered in

⁵⁰ Fiona Owen and Skoulding, 'A City of Words: Zoë Skoulding interviewed by Fiona Owen', *Planet*, 166 (2004), 000-00 (p. 59).

the poem's closing lines, 'we send out / pieces of ourselves which bear no trace of us', which suggest a different view of lyric poems. As Skoulding writes,

the poem itself is an ensnaring, controlling representation of an 'ethereal world' and yet, once it is released, that control is lost and 'it bears no trace of us' as it is liberated to other gazes or readings.⁵¹

Here, poems are not mirrors held up for simple self-reflection, but mirrors pointed outward, offering readers artistic objects that, in Elkins's sense, 'are no longer just things out there to be seen but also places where I can think about seeing and being seen' (p. 70).

Hopefully this discussion has succeeded in illuminating some of the rich complexities of Skoulding's poetry, including her collaborative work with Davidson. However, there is also a broader point at stake here that relates to contemporary understandings of the lyric genre. I began by examining Hamburger's model of the lyric as a form of statement characterized by the 'logico-linguistic' relationship between the subject and object. I have attempted to show the value of this for current British and Irish poetry, as a way of acknowledging experimental and/or postmodernist writing as a vital component of the lyric tradition. I have also tried to move beyond the restrictions of Hamburger's formulations, by suggesting some ways in which subject-object are complexified and called into question. Skoulding's earlier writing offered an ideal case study for this, and we have seen how her explorations of perception and visual apparatuses are sustained attempts to

⁵¹ Skoulding, 'Geographies of the Self', p. 146.

complicate simplistic notions of the subject and object. Using theories of vision and subjectivity from Elkins in particular, I've treated Skoulding's poems as offering a wide range of possibilities for formulating the subject and the object. My assertion is that the lyric genre should be characterized in these terms: as a spectrum of possibilities for speaking, seeing, and being seen. Somewhere within this spectrum sits the familiar Romantic model of lyric, which continues to shape the way we think of poetry and subjectivity, if only by giving poets a form of lyric to interrogate and resist. Finally, I have tried to acknowledge that poems themselves have particular ways of looking, making the act of reading itself a two-way process in which the poem-object insistently looks back. To read lyric poetry, then, is to enter a hall of mirrors where every surface is both seen and seeing. 'In a good hall of mirrors,' Elkins writes, 'the exit cannot be seen at all, and it seems there is no way out – and then a moment later, with a slight change in position, there are nothing but exit doors wherever you look' (p. 39).