AVATARS OF THE SPEAKING "I": DENISE RILEY'S MEDITATIONS ON POETRY AND IDENTITY[*]*

Esther Sánchez-Pardo
Universidad Complutense de Madrid

ABSTRACT

This paper takes as its point of departure the importance and even urgency of addressing issues of identity and the lyric "I" within contemporary poetry in the UK, which have been matters of concern for a new generation of poets. In Denise Riley's work, the dialectic between the "I" and the "other," between poet and community remains largely unresolved. Her poems strive to create a space that shows some cohesion in terms of its apprehension of gender's centrality to modes of poetic practice, authority and tradition. Throughout this paper, we will try to address the status of the speaking subject, largely a philosophical question that gravitates around the status of the self, and the unfinished conversation between the "I" and its "others," in a reading of Riley's important collection *Mop Mop Georgette: New and Selected Poems 1986-1993*, and her *Selected Poems* (2000) among other works.

KEY WORDS: Cambridge poetry, Denise Riley, lyric "I", identity.

RESUMEN

Este artículo parte de la necesidad, e incluso la urgencia, de abordar las cuestiones de la identidad y del "yo" lírico dentro de la poesía contemporánea del Reino Unido, cuestiones éstas que han merecido la atención de una nueva generación de poetas. En la obra de Denise Riley, la dialéctica entre el "yo" y el "otro", entre el poeta y la comunidad, está en gran medida por resolver. Sus poemas intentan crear un espacio cohesionado en relación a la aprehensión de la importancia del género en la práctica poética y su imbricación con la autoridad y la tradicion. A lo largo del artículo intentaremos abordar la situación del sujeto hablante, una cuestión principalmente filosófica que gravita alrededor de la situación del yo, y de la conversación inacabada entre el "yo" y sus "otros", en una lectura de la importante colección de Riley *Mop Mop Georgette: New and Selected Poems 1986-1993*, y sus *Selected Poems* (2000), entre otras obras.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía de Cambridge, Denise Riley, "yo" lírico, identidad.

This
Representing yourself, desperate to get it right,
As if you could, is that the aim of writing?
"A Shortened Set." *Mop, Mop Georgette*, 22

I'm not outside anything: I'm not inside it either.
There's no democracy in beauty,
"Knowing in the Real World." (*Mop* 34)

INTRODUCTION: BETWEEN CAMBRIDGE AND LONDON

In the past three decades, strong divisions have surfaced among critics and poets around claims for and against subjectivity and formal completion in British poetry. A critical commonplace notes the striking differences between poets in London and poets in Cambridge. Though such groupings are always somewhat inadequate, Keith Tuma deftly articulates a widespread perception, "One stereotype has it that the poets of London are more prourban, outward looking, engaged with everyday life, while Cambridge poets are more self-consciously literary, more sentimental and romantic, more reflective, their urbanity poised against the London group's rudeness, their radical pastorial utopianism against a nonviolent anarchism" (203). Tuma then points to a crucial distinction in the Cambridge poets' "regard for the artifactual status of the poem as a resolved and 'finished' object" (205). If Cambridge poets emphasize the finished quality of a poem, then London poets stress the fluid indeterminacy of perception in their poetry. The point is at the heart of a debate between Cambridge poet Drew Milne and London poet Allen Fisher published in the journal *Parataxis* in 1994. In a public letter to Fisher, Milne complains: "The patterning and sequencing implicit in the titles and wider projects makes me feel that the relation to the whole is too fragmented. At the same time, I find too many of your poems have an unfinished quality, albeit deliberately" (29). In his response, Fisher speaks, sharply,

> [B]oth terms "coherence" and "finished" are continuous with a regressive civic production that you would appear to oppose, the issues of "finish" and "completeness" were critiqued by Gustave Courbet and Charles Baudelaire in the mid-1800s, and subsequently by the later watercolors of Paul Cézanne, since the late nineteenth century the issues of 'coherence and focus' have been critiqued by many physicists concerned with acuity and more recently by Bela Julesz regarding texture. Oliver Braddick on spatial frequency analysis in vision and K.W. Yao and others researching the effect of ions on light-sensitive current in retinal rods. (30)

* This research was partly supported by Research Project PR34/07-15781.

Among other things, what emerges from this response is that Fisher's understanding of perception demands a poetry that is as fragmented and incomplete as perception itself. Milne, in contrast, believes that poetry needs to achieve a moment of reflection from the perceptual flux: "In short, poetry needs to be able to reflect on the power of its refusal to be more, or less, than play" (36). Poetry comes to such reflection through the workings of subjectivity immanent in the poem. The poetic subject does not need to be an objectifying force, which controls perception, but it must be indicative of a way of being that differentiates human experience from sheer flux. Following Adorno, Milne contends that reflection of this order makes art something other than ordinary things in the world. When a poem achieves reflection and steps out the disorder of perception, it is capable of asserting its own formal coherence, something Fisher says it is contrary to the nature of perception and, accordingly, to the nature of human experience.

These competing claims cannot be easily resolved, and they are at the core of basic disagreements in contemporary poetry. In this paper, I do not attempt to settle the score but rather to provide a context that demonstrates how subjectivity can work in tension with form.

Geoffrey Hill's famous inaugural lecture at the University of Leeds in 1977, "Poetry as Menace and Atonement," argues that the subject as manifested in the poem is a "menace" and thereby threatens the coherence of the poem's form. Hill, however, creates too wide a gulf, to such an extent that the only kind of subjectivity that is permissible within a structure of formal completion lacks a fundamental openness to experience. In contrast, Basil Bunting's *Briggflats* (1966) shows that an experiential subjectivity exists only through formal wholeness. Examining Bunting's commitment to both subjectivity and form in the light of Hill's depiction of their tension, we could probably understand better Milne's defence of a poem's finished quality, which is a hallmark of Cambridge poetry. What is remarkable about Bunting's example, as seen through the lens of aesthetics, is that it demonstrates that formal completion does not need to curtail the dynamic and open subjectivity Fisher demands. This reading of Bunting provides a crucial —and overlooked— background for a definitive strain in Cambridge poetry in the late 1960s and 1970s.

The Cambridge poets' understanding of lyric subjectivity presents a subject as exposed to experience. Their current work clearly shows that subjective poetry no longer plays the old music of confessional comment draped in figurative language, it rather explores expressive potentialities in a dynamics in which the dialectics inside/outside remains yet to be addressed from different angles.

DENISE RILEY AND CAMBRIDGE POETRY

In the work of the Cambridge group of poets, the subject in lyric poetry is not in retreat from the world but rather interacts with it. Their work constitutes an intervention in debates in current European thought between subjectivity, language and ethics. The poets I have in mind when I refer to "Cambridge poetry" are J.H.

Prynne (1936-), Douglas Oliver (1937-2000), Peter Riley (1940-), Andrew Crozier (1943-), and Denise Riley (1948-). Prynne is the oldest and best known of the group. He graduated from Jesus College, Cambridge University in 1960 and has since taught and worked as librarian at Gonville and Caius College.

Experience is central to these poets' conception of subjectivity. Denise Riley's work is a case in point. A Cambridge poet who started writing in the late 1960s under the sign of the New York School—and in collaboration with John James and Wendy Mulford—she has been much impressed by American feminist voices such as that of Diane Wakoski, both for her speech-based rhythmic flexibility and her concerns and ironic stance on the social. Riley also owes much to Frank O'Hara, to his programmatics in his "Personism: A Manifesto" and to his poetic practice. They both share an interest in poems that exhibit a multiplicity in tone and address, and frequently borrow painterly and art-historical concerns from art history and theory.[1]

Riley's academic work—on theories of the mother and child, *War in the Nursery* (1983), and on feminist self-representations, *Am I That Name?* (1988)—has taken a Marxist sociologist's line, the latter theorizing on "reflexivity" and on the prompt political appropriation of dominant definitions of womanhood. As a leftist poet and intellectual and as a woman bringing up three children alone, she was in a strong position to understand the difficulties of working women's predicament. In her poetry she has managed to negotiate these stresses with a mixture of lyricism and a fine irony which enabled her to write from some common female experience and establish a distance from the myths of motherhood, acting as a participant-observer on the double burden of women as workers and carers. Throughout her career as a published poet she has been reflecting upon those domestic collisions of "love and economies" that were her starting point. She writes:

> Mothers who were always a set of equipment and a fragile balance
> Mothers who looked over a gulf through the cloud of an act &
> At times speechlessly saw it
> Inside a designation there are people permanently startled to
> Bear it, the not-me against sociology
> Inside the kitchens there is realising of tightropes
> Milk, ... (*Dry* 27)

Denise Riley's work insists that lyric subjectivity understood as a threshold between interiority and exteriority can help women negotiate the demands for self-identity and identity-as-woman. She is certainly one of the best known of the British women poets variously labelled "experimental" or "postmodern." She came to be widely recognized upon the publication of her *Mop Mop Georgette* (1993), a collection in which her best-known poems are represented. Among them, the much anthologised "A Misremembered Lyric," is an elegant sonnet about listening to old

[1] This shows in the rich surface of many of Riley's poems. As Frank O'Hara used to do, Riley borrows a series of elements from painting, such as color and technique.

pop songs on the radio and wondering if one is a good mother.[2] Poems such as "Wherever You Are, Be Somewhere Else," and "Poem Beginning with a Line from Proverbs" can be read for their dark humour and irony on daily life situations.

To read Riley is to be drawn into meditations on language and identity in which the expression of "authenticity" constantly founders and recommences anew. It seems it all starts from a sense that writing poetry involves failure and necessarily engages in a precarious process of re/deconstruction. As it has been argued, Riley constantly questions her voice and reinterprets the speaking "I" and related issues of "interiority and emotional inwardness" within the pressures of mass media and culture (Wills 50). In her poem "Dark Looks," the opening line "Who anyone is or I am is nothing to the work" satirises how the speaking 'I' is always read as a real self no matter how much the poet attests otherwise. By the end of the poem, the poet finds herself at a loss, puzzled by the ruses of language,

> Who anyone is or I am is nothing to the work. The writer
> properly should be the last person that the reader or the listener need think about
> yet the poet with her signature stands up trembling, grateful, mortally
> Embarrassed
> and especially embarrassing to herself, patting her hair and twittering If, if only
> I need not have a physical appearance! To be sheer air, and mousseline!
> (...)
> What forces the lyric person to put itself on trial though it must stay rigorously
> uninteresting?/ Does it count on its dullness to seem human and strongly lovable;
> a veil for he monomania/ which likes to feel itself helpless and touching at times?
> Or else it backs off to get sassy/ since arch isn't far from desperate. So take me or
> leave me. No, wait, I didn't mean leave/ me, wait, just don't—or don't flick and
> skim to the foot of a page and then get up to go— (*Mop* 55)

These lines question the possibility of the lyric by "translating it" into discursive language. The passage shows how Riley's poems interrogate the unstable and precarious status of the lyric "I" to reconstruct and rearticulate it anew. "Dark Looks" addresses contemporary theories of subjectivity and writing through a consideration of textuality, gender and power. The opening lines contain a downright dismissal of the author and the poem moves gradually on to evoke a dilemma which is gender-inflected:

> The writer
> Properly should be the last person that the reader or the listener need think about
> Yet the poet with her signature stands up trembling, gratefully, mortally

[2] In "A Misremembered Lyric," Riley writes, "Do shrimps make good mothers? Yes they do./There is no beauty out of loss; can't do it —/and once the falling rain starts on the upturned/ leaves, and I listen to the rhythm of unhappy pleasure/what I hear is bossy death telling me which way to/go, what I see is a pool with an eye in it. Still let/me know. Looking for a brand-new start. Oh and never/notice yourself ever. As in life you don't." (*Mop* 32)

Embarrassed
And especially embarrassing to herself, patting her hair and twittering. If, if only
I need not have a physical appearance! To be sheer air, and mousseline! (55)

The final lines of the poem go back to the first line's categorical assertion of the author's disappearance from the text by pleading to restore the "I" in a certain way: "So take me or leave me. No wait, I didn't mean leave/ me, wait, just don't—or don't flick and skim to the foot of a page and then get up to go—" (55). The speaker is confused as to whether the "I" is in the text or outside the text, yet the text operates as mediation between that "I" and the reader.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis reads this conflicted lyricism as part of an "interior debating between subjectivities," in which the "social subject" is in "dialogue with the blandishments and pleasures of the singular, lyric "I" and its investiture in diction (65). The issue of the lyric person has been central to discussions of Riley's poetry, including her response to Romana Huk's question of why she does not, "despite its current renouncement as a traditional vehicle for the 'private voice', abandon it altogether." Riley answered, "I don't have the choice of 'abandon' it. You get formed in a certain way" (Riley, "Conversation" 19). Her poetic elaboration of the lyric has elicited criticism as being "at best politically retrogressive and at worst positively narcissistic," comments Huk in regard to the Keery-Wilkinson debate over Riley's use of the "I" (Riley, "Conversation" 20). Keery objects her ubiquituous "self-consciousness" (Riley, "Conversation" 23). Wilkinson finds her "log of reflexiveness" a narcissistic "writer's looking-glass" (61; 69). And in Nigel Wheale's view, her writing "dislocates" the subject through an alertness to the "responsibilities of the pronoun which creates the identity and the agency in writing," thus opening the poems, "to include the reader's subject position" (73-74). DuPlessis sees Riley announcing "a serious and forceful resistance to the lyric" (65); Willis finds "a practice of deviant reading" in which "Riley appropriates the lyric, puts it to her own use, by cutting it up and deforming it" (45); Michael Haslam celebrates the possibility that Riley's work will "vindicate the deep high lyric; and this from a higher or deeper peak or hollow of circumspect awareness of matters of, say, I, who also try for lyric flight, would dare... She desires lyric. She questions the conditions for lyric" (100).

In her poem "A Shortened Set," Riley deftly identifies the lyric's cultural embedding in a social system pre-existing and shaping the "I" when she writes, "I'd thought/ to ask around, what's lyric poetry?/It's bee noise starts before I can:/You do that; love me; die alone" (*Mop* 22). Along the same line, in her appropriately titled poem "Lyric," the "I" answers back to traditional forms of the lyric "I was already knotted in," feeling attracted to the generic conventions (its "sweet music") while also fighting with "whatever motors it swells/to hammer itself out on me" (*Mop* 36). Riley's struggles with the question "What's lyric poetry?" and her responses come from a rich background of intellectual and political activism.

Riley was born in 1948 in Carlisle and adopted by a working-class couple who raised her in Gloucester. She studied moral sciences and fine arts at Cambridge during the late 60s and early 70s, and went on to receive a PhD in philosophy at

Sussex University. Labelling herself a "socialist feminist," she embarked in her "countereducation of reading Marx and Hegel, Engels, Althusser, Freud—among great many other European socialists and theorists of society." She read a good number of poststructuralist philosophers, among whom we should probably singe out Michel Foucault—his theorization on discourses and discursivity—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for isolating "the inevitable ambiguity between collectivity and individuality," and Ludwig Wittgenstein for describing "the intelligibility of words as depending on their positioning," philosophical concerns that circulate through her poetry. This "countereducation" also included readings in developmental psychology and psychoanalysis which were instrumental in the elaboration of her feminist-materialist study of childcare and the state, *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother* (1983). Her work on historical discursivity crystallized in her well-known, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women"* (1988). In the latter, theorizing on the issue of identity, Riley disclaims a collective identity for women, critiquing identity politics and its supporters, "the question of the politics of identity could be rephrased as a question of rhetoric. Not so much of whether there was for a particular moment any thruthful underlying rendition of 'women' or not, but of what the proliferations of addresses, descriptions, and attributions were doing" (Riley, "Short" 122).

As professor, researcher, historian and philosopher, Riley's "various pointed contributions to many debts over social history and policy, gender and identity, and the definition and development of feminist studies in academic discourse" (Wheale 74) give rise to a cross-disciplinary intertextuality within her poetry.

EXPERIENCE IN CAMBRIDGE POETRY

Experience is central to the Cambridge poets' conception of subjectivity, because, implicit in the notion of experience is an element that thwarts conceptual certainty. In his essay "Thrills and Frills: Poetry as Figures of Empirical Lyricism" (1983), Andrew Crozier argues that the poets associated with the Movement of the 1950s—notably Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis—developed a style that brings together a speaking subject and external reality. The poems characteristic of the Movement aesthetic, Crozier writes:

> Are discrete... in the way they wrap around their author-subject. Their occasions are for the most part treated with scepticism, and the texts distort and buckle as a consequence of inner tension. Traditional forms are invoked not so much for the freedom they can confer as for support. They define the space in which the self can act with poetic authority, while at the same time in the absence of assurances provided by conventionally felt poetic experience, they secure the status of the text. (206)

Traditional forms and, he later says, figurative language effectively supplant the need for subject to experience anything in a poem. Figures that don't quite hold up to scrutiny drive his poetry: "the energy of the figures, the rewriting of

the world as it is, is made to guarantee the authenticity of the person, the subject" (220).

Crozier argues that Larkin and other Movement poets put so much stress on the persona that holds together the poem's language, because they were reacting against a tendency of the poetry of the 1940s that freed language from the control of a speaking subject. Crozier has in mind poets influenced by Dylan Thomas, like J.F. Hendry and W.S. Graham. He prefers the 1940s poetry to the staid poetry of the 1950's in part because it places subjectivity in a dynamic relationship with an unstable language. For Crozier, this option proves truer to experience:

> The poet does not constitute at one and the same time the poem's protagonist and boundary. No surrogate enactment of the poet's intelligence is provided as part of the poem's interior, and instead the poem claims to represent the whole person. Through such a mode the things referred to in the poem participate actively in what is imagined, they are not mere figurative devices, and the poet is acted upon as well as acting ...an experiencing creature rather than a mastering intelligence. (228)

Crozier is not merely concerned with the technique of a few poets in the 1940s; rather he is describing what the best poetry since the 1940s has attempted. This poetry responds to the singularity of material things in the world without subsuming them into abstract figures. Further, the poet cannot stand at a distance from what he or she is writing, instead, the poet needs to be open to the vicissitudes of experience. The poem then records a human subject's experience with otherness, that is, with language, things, and people in their own irreducible, non-figurative way. This understanding of poetry motivates the Cambridge poets to write poetry attentive to such singularity through a mode of subjective reflection.

The Cambridge poets have been writing in an intellectual environment where the status of subjectivity was very much in question. In the shadow of Larkin's presence, they inquired into how a poetic subject might be something other than the voice of a carefully constructed persona. From their perspective, a stable persona is impossible to present when they write of the disarming experience of the subject's relation to exteriority. Contemporary European philosophers have been working out how best to articulate the kind of experience that effectively turns a subject inside-out. From the 1940s onwards, Emmanuel Levinas has argued that the subject is fundamentally exposed to claims of exteriority. Otherness always already defines the subject and therefore precludes all attempts the subject may take to objectify it. Therefore, the subject lives in relation to exteriority through sensibility and not through cognition. Levinas uses the term "ethical" to describe the condition in which a subject comes into being as responsive to experience with singular otherness. In this way, it is possible to think of subjectivity in a way that isn't beholden to the objectifying tendencies of representational consciousness.

The Cambridge poets attempt to present this kind of subjectivity in their work. They achieve this end by enacting a moment of reflection in their language. Traditionally, reflection serves epistemology to match things with concepts. But,

can poetry, language at its most resistant to conceptualization, do the work of reflection and serve a thoroughly exposed subject? The "unfolding" of language which, from existential philosophy we know runs counter to cognition and is best exemplified in poetry, takes place in reflection. How exactly this happens in the poetry varies considerably, but we could claim that this movement of reflection in language, which supports a responsive, sensible subject, is definitive of Cambridge poetry.

Levinas holds that subjectivity is possible only through sensibility, which takes place "on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves" (15). This is exactly where Peter Riley locates writing. In *Lines on the Liver* (1981), he writes that love is "at the edge of the person, which is where writing, among other things, takes place" (11). My argument is that this is where the writing of the Cambridge poets takes place, namely on the cusp between subjectivity and exteriority. It is a dangerous place, since it is free of all concepts that might set straight once and for all who exactly we are. Instead, writing —is the very act of using singular, poetic language— places the subject at some distance from certitude in the face of experience, which invariably is an experience with the non-identical, or with that which upsets all efforts to get a cognitive hold of it. Nevertheless, the poets treat this as a hopeful experience, because it highlights the variety of human experience and reminds us of the patience and fortitude needed in coming to some understanding, albeit provisional, of other people and other things.

RILEY, THE 1990S POETIC CLIMATE AND HER CRITICS

In recent years the role of poetry as social and cultural critique underpins many of the essays that have focused on women's writing as cultural intervention. The emphasis that the work of contemporary women poets and critics placed upon naming the past and present in terms of female creativity and productivity becomes a necessary context for registering and revising the "I" or "self" within a theoretically informed writing and reading community skeptical of the self.

In many works by women of the 1980s, writing without a sense of a reading community of poets and critics open to the assertion of a gendered "I" in experimental terms has produced what Linda Kinnahan perceives as, "[T]hat 'I' is accompanied by a sense of fearing accusations of self-expression, of emotionalism, and of self-absorption that historically have been figured as female in our culture. Putting forth the 'I' becomes risky within the experimental community if that name and that I are marked female: the feared consequences range from erasure to condemnation" (*Feminist* 277).

Denise Riley produced a large body of work through the 1970s and 1980s. In 1993 her *Mop, Mop Georgette* appeared, which is the last substantial collection of new work she has published to date. Central to the project of Riley is the necessity of developing a reading community that has some cohesion in terms of its apprehension of gender's centrality to modes of poetic practice, authority, and tradition,

and of correcting a certain male focus within the broader reading community of linguistically innovative poetries.

Back in 1996 critic Linda Kinnahan opened one of her essays as follows, "'The work is/ e.g. to write 'she'...'" These words from the British poet Denise Riley (*Dry* 7) direct us to consider the multifaceted feminist project of contemporary women's poetry, while pointing toward a commonly polarized debate concerning language and its role" (Kinnahan, *Experimental* 620). At that time, Kinnahan made us aware that there was a group of women poets that aimed at communicating women's experiences in women's voices, using an accessible language that enhances self-expressivity. That corpus of poetry informed a politically valuable work accomplished by women who, under the initial impetus of the women's movement of the sixties and seventies, insisted upon the importance of women's perspectives, experiences and expressive modes for poetry. On the other hand, for those poets interested in the materiality of language as mediation, the idea to write "she" entails questioning the notions of authenticity and expressivity. Language as a superstructure becomes a site for investigation of whether poetry and the poetic put the authentic self under question. In this sense, "she" can only be found within quotation marks, as mediated by the cultural and linguistic codes at hand. This is the poetic and political task of experimental women poets, investigating the operation of such codes, rather than expressing true womanhood, an endeavour supported by contemporary theories of language and subjectivity.

Through our discussion of the work of Riley we will end up situating her work as one that engages in experiments with form and language at the crossroads of a strain of innovative poetry published mostly by small presses and little magazines in Britain, and her participation in an experimental poetics informed by feminist politics. Denise Riley's work exemplifies what Mulford describes as the questioning of individual voice typifying much work by women writers. Claire Wills argues this has to do with a reinterpretation of the speaking "I" and related questions of "interiority and emotional inwardness" within the historically specific pressures of mass media and culture (50). In Wills's view, Riley's work represents an investigation of the problem of articulating inwardness and emotion, and of gauging the "authenticity" of feeling, mediating on the purpose of the lyric. Riley's poetry, has been recognized by Wills and Rachel Blau DuPlessis as a textual engagement with the lyric. In her 1993 *Mop Mop Georgette*, Riley investigates the linguistic and discursive constructedness of self that searches for a means of expressivity of the genderd "I." One of her poems queries, "I'd thought/to ask around, what's lyric poetry?/ Its bee noise starts before I can./You do that, love me, die alone" *(Mop* 22). The poems in this volume which insistently proclaim an "I" while examining the discursive determinations of subjectivity, interact with questions of female subjectivity that have been present in Riley's intellectual background and work, including her theorization of the politics and genealogy of feminine identity in her well-known book, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (1988).

The treatment of the "I" in her poetry has been the subject of harsh critique since female subjectivity has been linked to feminized aspects of privacy, emotion and interiority. Romana Huk, in an interview with Riley, observes, "It may be

because you are considered by experimental poets to be experimental that your intense focus on the throes of the personal voice incurs such criticism." (Riley, "Conversation" 20). The debate occurs over the course of essays by Nigel Wheale (1993), James Keery (1994) and Jon Wilkinson (1994), and takes shape under the history of negatively gendered associations of women's expressions of (and experiments with) a lyric self. In her poem "A Shortened Set," she writes:

> I'd thought
> To ask around, what's lyric poetry?
> Its bee noise starts before I can:
> You do that; love me, die alone (*Mop* 22)

Riley strives against any attempt to separate the linguistic from its material context. In her poem "Disintegrate Me" (*Mop* 62-63), she experiments with a dissemination of self in language and then reflects back upon that operation. The poem is part of a series of seven poems in the sequence "Seven Strangely Exciting Lies," and opens with a self that acts as a transcriber and vehicle for external voices —"radio voices" perceived from "my post as zealous secretary, as/transmitter of messages from the dead." The speaker in the poem is in search for an alternative to this subjectivity and queries whether agency can be developed under such circumstances: "all the while a slow hot cut spreads/ to baste me now with questions of my own complicity in harm."[3] The first image in the poem reads as follows:

> There was such brilliance lifting off the sea, its aquamarine strip
> blocked in behind white-dashed mimosas, that it stung my eyes
> all morning as I stood in the old playground, pushing the swing
> steadily, looking out across the water and longing to do without
> these radio voices.(*Mop* 63)

A few lines later, the poem's "I" shifts from the self inhabited by other voices into an almost solipsistic discourse which facilitates a leeway out the dilemmas of agency:

> Could I believe instead in drained
> Abandon, in mild drift out over some creamy acre studded with
> Brick reds, to be lifted, eased above great sienna fields and born
> Onward to be an opened stem or a standing hollow (*Mop* 63)

The poem ends with an open question as to whether this dissolution of self, understood as a denial of responsibility, brings about a denial of agency ("if I un-

[3] Claire Wills suggests that the poem opening image epitomizes the "technologized body": "Even when most turned in on the self, the poet is most subjected to invasion by technology. This, 'It's hard to own perceptions,' since ownership would imply coherence and consistency of the self" (47; 49).

derstood/my own extent of blame then that would prove me agent"), or with an acknowledgement of the "likely truth of helplessness... the humiliating lack of much control."

> No single word of this
> is any more than decoration of an old self-magnifying wish
> to throw the self away so violently and widely that interrogation
> has to pause since its chief suspect's sloped off to be cloud, to be
> wavery colour bands: no "release from service to a hard master" (*Mop* 64)

In one of her recent poems, "Outside from the Start" (2000), she raises crucial questions about the viability of a political speech in its inception, on the threshold of becoming, but soon aborted:

> And then my ears get full of someone's teeth again
> As someone's tongue
> As brown and flexible as a young giraffe's
> Rasps all round someone else's story—
> A glow of light that wavers and collapses
> In a phttt of forgiving what's indifferent to it...

To conclude, Riley's poetry seems to be constantly interrogating the classical topoi of poetry and poetics: issues of language, experimentation, readership, engagement with the world, ideology and poetic form. Her work deals with perceptual multiplicity through experiential reflection, which allows her in her poetry to assert subjective identity, and to proclaim a willingness to meet the challenges to stable lyric form and self-identity. Riley's poetry contributes effectively to understand the discursive constitution of human beings and meditates upon the subject and the social processes of subjectification and coercion. Her deconstructive endeavours lead her to scrutinize the complex alliances between language experimentation, forms of address and an urgent reconsideration of the role and the avatars of the speaking "I" in the post-identitarian climate of our times.

WORKS CITED

BUNTING, Basil. *Briggflats: An Autobiography*. London: Fulcrum, 1966.

CROZIER, Andrew. "Thrills and Frills: Poetry as Figures of Empyrical Lyricism." *Society and Literature, 1945-1970*. Ed. Alan Sinfield. London: Methuen, 1983. 199-233.

DUPLESSIS, Rachel Blau. "Knowing in the Real World." A Review of Denise Riley's *Mop Mop Georgette*. *Parataxis* 8-9 (1996): 63-69.

FISHER, Allen, and Drew MILNE. "Exchange in Process: Part 2" *Parataxis* 8 (1996): 47-48.

HASLAM, Michael. "Of Lyric Flight: Is Ode and Answer? Stair Spirit by Denise Riley." *Angel Exhaust* 20 (1993): 99-101.

HILL, Geoffrey. "Poetry as Menace and Atonement." *The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas*. 1978. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. 1-18.

KEERY, James. "Well, There Was and Wasn't, and There Is: The Third Cambridge Conference on Contemporary Poetry." *PN Review* 20.3 (1994): 11-15.

KINNAHAN, Linda. "Experimental Poetics and the Lyric in British Women's Poetry: Geraldine Monk, Wendy Mulford, and Denise Riley." *Contemporary Literature* 37.4 (Winter 1996): 620-670.

—— "Feminist Experimentalism, Literary History, and Subjectivity." *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetics Transnationally*. Ed. Romana Huk. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2003. 275-283.

LEVINAS, Emanuel. *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. A. Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981.

MIDDLETON, Peter. "Imagined Readerships and Poetic Innovation in U.K. Poetry." *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetics Transnationally*. Ed. Romana Huk. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2003. 128-142.

MILNE, Drew, and Allen FISHER. "Exchange in Process: Part 1" *Parataxis* 6 (Spring-Summer 1994): 28-36.

MUCKLE, John. "Denise Riley." *PN Review* 33.2 (November-December 2006): 46-47.

RILEY, Denise. "Denise Riley in Conversation with Romana Huk." *PN Review* 21.5 (1995): 17-22.

—— *Dry Air*. London: Virago, 1985.

—— *Mop Mop Georgette: New and Selected Poems 1986-1993*. London: Reality Street, 1993.

—— ed. *Poets on Writing: Britain 1970-91*. London: Macmillan, 1992.

—— *Selected Poems*. London: Reality Street, 2000.

—— "A Short History with Some Preoccupations." *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Ed. Judith Butler and Joan Scott. New York: Routledge, 1992. 121-129.

RILEY, Peter. *Lines on the Liver*. London: Ferry, 1981.

TUMA, Keith. *Fishing by Obstinate Isles: Modern and Postmodern British Poetry and American Readers*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1998.

WHEALE, Nigel. "Colours-Ethics-Lyric, Voice: Recent Poetry by Denise Riley." *Parataxis* 4 (Summer 1993): 70-77.

WILKINSON, Jon. "'Illyrian Places.' A Review of Denise Riley's *Mop, Mop Georgette: New and Selected Poems*, *1986-1993*. *Parataxis* 6 (Spring-Summer 1994): 58-69.

WILLS, Claire. "Contemporary Women's Poetry: Experimentation and the Expressive Voice." *Critical Quarterly* 36.4 (1994): 34-52.