

## Gender and the Speaking “I” in Denise Riley's Work: Examining how Riley navigates gender identity through her poetic voice.

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### Abstract

The analysis of the relevance of this imperative starts in this essay with an understanding of the essential and urgent need to handle problems of identity and the lyric "I" in modern British poetry. The argument starts from this awareness. Among the issues the younger generation of poets cover, these ones are very dear to them. The corpus of work Denise Riley has created on the dialectical relationship between the "I" and the "other," as well as between the poet and the community, has a great degree of tension unmet. One may find a fight of this kind all over the body of work. By means of her poems, she aims to provide a coherent atmosphere emphasising the relevance of gender within the many modalities of poetic practice, authority, and tradition. She establishes a cohesive space to achieve this. We shall investigate the current situation of things on the topic of the speech holistically during the course of this project. The subject of this research is a philosophical analysis stressing on the nature of the self and the ongoing dialogue between the "I" and its "others". The focus of the research is on the nature of the self. Riley's seminal works, *Mop Mop Georgette: New and Selected Poems 1986-1993*, as well as her *Selected Poems* (2000), will form the basis of this study in addition to other works pertinent to the topic under current discussion.

**Keywords:** Denise Riley, gender, identity, conceptualisation, criticism.

### Introduction:

Critics and poets have become quite divided over the past thirty years regarding the functions of subjectivity and formal completeness in British poetry. One frequently noted observation emphasizes the significant variations between Cambridge and London writers. While such labels are intrinsically limited, Keith Tuma aptly captures a common perspective: "one stereotype suggests that London poets are more urban, outward-looking, and engaged with everyday life, whereas Cambridge poets are seen as more self-consciously literary, sentimental, romantic, and reflective, with their urbanity contrasting the London group's rudeness and their radical pastoral utopianism opposing a nonviolent anarchist" (Tuma 203). Tuma further underscores a fundamental difference in how Cambridge poets perceive the poem as a resolved and "finished" entity (205). In contrast, London poets emphasize the fluidity and unpredictability of perception in their work, whereas Cambridge poets focus on this finality. This issue, published in the journal *Parataxis* in 1994, is central to a dispute between London poet Allen Fisher and Cambridge poet Drew Milne. Milne voices his concerns in a public letter to Fisher, stating, "The patterning and sequencing implied by the names and bigger initiatives make me believe that the overall relationship is too fractured. Though it's deliberate, I also notice that many of your poems have an unresolved quality" (Milne 29). Fisher responds with a crisp, precise accuracy. As Sánchez-Pardo notes, such debates illustrate the complex interplay between poetic identity and form, emphasizing the need for ongoing engagement with these themes (47-59).

[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 study illustrates that Fisher advocates for a conception of perception that necessitates a poetry reflective of its own fractured and incomplete nature. Conversely, Milne posits that "poetry needs to be able to reflect on the power of its refusal to be more, or less, than play," thus promoting a poetic form that captures a moment of reflection amidst the continuous flow of perspective (Sánchez-Pardo 54). This subjectivity within poetry encourages contemplation in this manner. Rather than serving as an objectifying force that dictates perspective, the poetic subject should embody a unique way of life that distinguishes human experience from mere flux. Drawing on Adorno's perspective, Milne contends that such introspection allows art to transcend the mundane aspects of daily life. A poem that successfully embodies this reflective quality and rises above the chaos of perception asserts its own formal coherence—a claim Fisher argues is at odds with both the nature of perception and the complexities inherent in human experience (Sánchez-Pardo 49).

These conflicting assertions encapsulate fundamental debates within modern poetry and resist easy reconciliation. Rather than attempting to resolve these issues in this study, my aim is to illustrate how subjectivity can operate in tension with formal systems (Sánchez-Pardo 47).

Geoffrey Hill, in his notable 1977 inauguration speech at the University of Leeds titled "Poetry as Menace and Atonement," asserts that a poem's subject matter can undermine the coherence of its form, thus functioning as a "menace." However, Hill's perspective delineates a broad boundary, suggesting that any subjectivity that may coexist with a technically complete structure must inherently be disconnected from experience. In contrast, Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts* (1966) demonstrates that formal completeness is essential for the presence of an experiential subjectivity. To grasp Milne's defense of the poem's finished quality—a hallmark of Cambridge poetry—it is necessary to examine Bunting's dual commitment to both subjectivity and form in light of Hill's portrayal of their inherent conflict. Bunting's work illustrates that formal completeness does not necessarily obstruct the dynamic and open subjectivity that Fisher advocates, particularly when analyzed through an aesthetic framework. This interpretation of Bunting offers a crucial—and often overlooked—perspective on a significant literary movement at Cambridge during the 1960s and 1970s (Sánchez-Pardo 48).

Lyric subjectivity, as conceptualized by the Cambridge poets, presents the subject as open to experience. Their recent works investigate expressive potential within a dynamic framework, moving away from the traditional confessional approach that relies on figurative language. This evolution highlights a dialectical tension between the internal and external, which warrants further exploration from various perspectives (Sánchez-Pardo 48).

### **The Influence of Other Cambridge Poets on Denise Riley**

The lyric poets of the Cambridge group portray a subject who is not merely passive but actively engaged with their surroundings. Their work constitutes a significant intervention in contemporary European discussions surrounding ethics, language, and subjectivity. Notable poets representative of "Cambridge poetry" include Denise Riley (1948–), Andrew Crozier (1943–), Peter Riley (1940–), Douglas Oliver (1937–2000), and J.H. Prynne (1936–). Among these, Prynne stands out as the most experienced and well-regarded, having served as a librarian and educator at Gonville and Caius College since 1960, following his graduation from Jesus College, Cambridge University (Sánchez-Pardo 47-49).

Experience plays a crucial role in shaping these poets' understanding of subjectivity, as illustrated by Denise Riley's body of work. A Cambridge poet who began her career in the late 1960s, Riley was influenced by the New York School and collaborated with figures such as John James and Wendy Mulford. She draws considerable inspiration from American feminist writers, particularly Diane Wakoski, whose rhythmic versatility and sardonic

take on social issues resonate with Riley's own thematic concerns. Additionally, Riley acknowledges her debt to Frank O'Hara, especially regarding the principles laid out in "Personism: A Manifesto" and his innovative poetic approach. Both poets share an affinity for works that exhibit a diversity of tones and styles, often incorporating painterly and art-historical references derived from both art history and philosophy (Sánchez-Pardo 48-50).

Riley's scholarly contributions, particularly *War in the Nursery* (1983), which investigates ideologies surrounding motherhood, and *Am I That Name?* (1988), which focuses on feminist self-representations, are grounded in a Marxist sociological perspective. The latter work theorizes "reflexivity" and examines the political implications of prevailing notions of femininity. As a Marxist poet and philosopher who raised three children on her own, Riley offers a unique understanding of the challenges faced by working women. In her poetry, she skillfully navigates these demands, blending lyrical elements with sharp irony to articulate collective feminine experiences while also distancing herself from idealized portrayals of motherhood. Her dual role as a participant-observer sheds light on the diverse challenges women face as both workers and caregivers. Throughout her career, Riley has persistently explored the domestic issues tied to "love and economics," which have become central themes in her work (Sánchez-Pardo 50-52):

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 illustrates that lyric subjectivity, perceived as a boundary between internal and external experiences, can assist women in navigating the complexities of self-identification and female identity. As one of the most prominent British women poets, she is often categorized as "experimental" or "postmodern." Her recognition significantly grew with the publication of *Mop Mop Georgette* (1993), a collection that features some of her most celebrated poems. Notably, the poem "A Misremembered Lyric" is a sophisticated sonnet that reflects on the experience of listening to vintage pop music on the radio while contemplating one's identity as a mother. Other works, such as "Wherever You Are, Be Somewhere Else" and "Poem Beginning with a Line from Proverbs," are appreciated for their dark humor and irony regarding everyday situations (Sánchez-Pardo 50-52).

Denise Riley's work encourages contemplation on the themes of language and identity, highlighting the ongoing struggle for "authenticity," which is repeatedly challenged and redefined. This endeavor emerges from the recognition that the process of creating poetry is inherently tied to failure and entails a delicate cycle of re/deconstruction. Critics note that Riley consistently scrutinizes her voice, reinterpreting the spoken "I" alongside themes of "interiority and emotional inwardness" within the frameworks of mass media and cultural influences (Wills 50). In her poem "Dark Looks," the opening line, "Who anyone is or I am is nothing to the job," critiques the tendency to view the speaking "I" as an authentic self, despite the poet's assertions to the contrary. By the end of the poem, she expresses a sense of confusion, grappling with the complexities and deceptions that language inherently presents (Sánchez-Pardo 50-52):

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 interrogate the viability of the lyric by attempting to "translate" it into discursive discourse. This stanza illustrates how Riley's poems delve into the volatile and precarious nature of the lyric "I," seeking to reconstruct and rearticulate it in innovative ways. "Dark Looks" scrutinizes contemporary notions of subjectivity and writing through the frameworks of textuality, gender, and power. While the opening lines overtly dismiss the authorial presence, the poem gradually unveils a predicament that is deeply influenced by gender dynamics (Sánchez-Pardo 50-52):

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  
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 concluding lines of the poem reinforce the initial definitive assertion regarding the author's absence, as the speaker calls for the reintroduction of the "I" in a particular way: "So take me or leave me. No, wait, I did not intend for you to depart; please, just refrain from flicking through and skimming to the bottom of the page before rising to leave—" (Sánchez-Pardo 55). Here, the speaker grapples with the uncertainty of the "I"'s existence both within and outside the text, while the text serves as a conduit connecting that "I" to the reader.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis interprets this conflicting lyricism as an "internal debate among subjectivities," where the "social subject" engages with the attractions and delights of the individual, lyric "I" and its emphasis on diction (65). The lyric persona is central to analyses of Riley's poetry, particularly in her response to Romana Huk's inquiry about her retention of the lyric form despite its contemporary dismissal as a conventional vehicle for the "private voice." Riley asserts, "I do not have the option to 'abandon' it. You are shaped in a specific manner" (Riley, "Conversation" 19). Critics have noted that her approach to the lyric may be seen as "at best politically regressive and at worst overtly narcissistic," as Huk points out in the context of the discourse between Keery and Wilkinson regarding Riley's use of the "I" (Riley, "Conversation" 20). Keery questions her constant self-consciousness (Riley, "Conversation" 23), while Wilkinson characterizes her reflective tendencies as akin to a narcissistic writer's looking-glass (61; 69). Nigel Wheale argues that her poetry "dislocates" the subject by maintaining a keen awareness of the "responsibilities of the pronoun," which influences identity and agency in writing, thereby implicating the reader's subject position within the poems (73-74). DuPlessis regards Riley's work as embodying "a serious and forceful resistance to the lyric" (65), whereas Willis identifies a "practice of deviant reading," contending that "Riley appropriates the lyric, repurposing it by fragmenting and distorting it" (45). In contrast, Michael Haslam praises Riley's ability to "vindicate the profound high lyric; and this from a more elevated or profound vantage point of cautious knowledge on topics of, for instance, I, who likewise aspire to lyrical transcendence, would venture... She yearns for lyricism. She interrogates the criteria for lyricism" (100).

Riley deftly addresses the cultural anchoring of the lyric within an existing social framework that defines the "I" in her poem "A Shortened Set": "I've 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). Similarly, in her aptly titled poem "Lyric," the "I" navigates conventional lyric forms, articulating a complex relationship with the conventions to which it is drawn—characterizing them as possessing a "sweet music"—while simultaneously grappling with the forces that compel it, described as "whatever motors it swells/to hammer itself out on me" (*Mop* 36). Riley's inquiry into "What's lyric poetry?" and her subsequent reflections are informed by a rich tapestry of political and intellectual engagement (Sánchez-Pardo 47-59).

Born in 1948 in Carlisle, Denise Riley was later adopted by a working-class couple who raised her in Gloucester. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, she studied moral sciences and fine arts at Cambridge, subsequently earning a

PhD in philosophy from Sussex University. Identifying as a "socialist feminist," she engaged in a "counter education," reading significant works by Marx, Hegel, Engels, Althusser, Freud, and other prominent European socialists and thinkers. Among the poststructuralist theorists she encountered, Michel Foucault is notable for his insights into discourses and discursivity, while Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the inherent tension between collectivity and individuality. Additionally, Ludwig Wittgenstein's poetry informs her views on the intelligibility of words, which she believes is contingent upon their contextual environment (Sánchez-Pardo 47-59).

Riley's "counter education" incorporated psychoanalysis and developmental psychology, which were crucial in her feminist-materialist analysis of childcare and the state, culminating in her work *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother* (1983). Her significant book, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women"* (1988), further exemplifies her exploration of historical discursivity. In this latter work, Riley interrogates identity politics and its proponents, thereby challenging the notion of a shared identity among women. She posits, "one may reinterpret the issue of the politics of identity as a rhetorical one. Not so much of whether there was for a specific time any honest underlying rendering of 'women's,' but of what the proliferations of addresses, descriptions, and attributions were doing" (Sánchez-Pardo 47-59).

Riley has made "various pointed contributions to many debates over social history and policy, gender and identity, and the definition and development of feminist studies in academic discourse," as a professor, researcher, historian, and philosopher (Sánchez-Pardo 47-59). These contributions enrich her work with multiple theoretical perspectives and ideas, thereby promoting a cross-disciplinary intertextuality within her poetry.

### **The Influence of Historical Context on Personal Experience in Cambridge Poetry**

The Cambridge poets' conception of subjectivity is rooted in experience, inherently containing an element that undermines intellectual certainty. In his article "Thrills and Frills: Poetry as Figures of Empirical Lyricism," Andrew Crozier argues that the poets of the 1950s Movement—particularly Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis—developed a technique that effectively combines a speaking subject with external reality. Crozier highlights various poems that exemplify the Movement's aesthetic, illustrating how this blend of personal voice and context creates a nuanced understanding of subjectivity (Sánchez-Pardo 47-59).

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)

Along with metaphorical language, traditional forms essentially replace the need for the subject to interact with experience within a poem. Crozier argues that figures, which might not withstand careful scrutiny, are fundamental to his poetry, stating: "the energy of the figures, the rewriting of the world as it is, is made to guarantee the authenticity of the person, the subject" (Sánchez-Pardo 52). This perspective emphasizes the tension between form and authentic expression in the works of Cambridge poets.

Larkin and other Movement poets, Crozier argues, stress the persona that ties the language of the poem together as a response to the poetry of the 1940s, thereby liberating language from the constraints of a speaking subject. He particularly mentions writers inspired by Dylan Thomas, such as W.S. Graham and J.F. Hendry. Crozier expresses a preference for the poetry of the 1940s, noting that it fosters a dynamic interaction between subjectivity and unstable language, which he believes more accurately captures the essence of experience (Sánchez-Pardo 53).

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's emphasis transcends the methodologies of specific poets from the 1940s; he endeavours to elucidate the aspirations of the most distinguished poetry since that era. This perspective explores the distinctiveness of material items without reducing them to abstract representations. Moreover, the poet cannot adopt a detached position from their work; instead, they must remain open to the variances of experience. Thus, the poem documents a human subject's interaction with otherness—comprising language, things, and individuals—in their fundamental, non-representational core. This notion of poetry compels the Cambridge poets to create works that meticulously contemplate such uniqueness through a prism of personal introspection (Sánchez-Pardo 54).

The Cambridge poets have emerged in an academic environment where the nature of subjectivity is fiercely debated. Within the framework of Larkin's influence, they examine how a lyrical subject may transcend the limitations of a carefully crafted persona. They contend that maintaining a consistent identity is impractical when confronting the profound experience of the subject's interaction with externality. Modern European philosophers have sought to articulate the kind of experience that fundamentally alters a subject's self-perception. Since the 1940s, Emmanuel Levinas has asserted that the subject is intrinsically susceptible to the demands of exteriority, contending that otherness fundamentally characterizes the subject, thereby preventing any attempts to objectify it. Consequently, the subject pertains to externality through sensibility rather than cognition. Levinas defines this situation as "ethical," depicting a state in which an individual becomes attuned to encounters with distinct otherness. This perspective enables a conceptualization of subjectivity that sidesteps the objectifying inclinations prevalent in representational consciousness (Sánchez-Pardo 49).

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Levinas posits that subjectivity arises exclusively through sensitivity, manifesting "on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves" (15). Peter Riley articulates this notion in *Lines on the Liver* (1981), asserting that love resides "at the edge of the person, which is where writing, among other things, occurs" (11). My contention is that the work of the Cambridge poets transpires at the intersection of subjectivity and exteriority. This position is unstable, as it lacks the notions that may unequivocally define our identities. The act of writing, marked by distinctive, lyrical language, separates the subject from certainty when confronting events that inherently involve the non-identical or undermine all cognitive attempts to comprehend them. Nevertheless, the poets perceive this as an optimistic pursuit, since it highlights the profundity of human experience and accentuates the patience and perseverance necessary to cultivate a tentative comprehension of people and the surrounding universe (Sánchez-Pardo 54).

### **The Impact of Postmodernism on Riley's Work**

Many articles that analyze women's writing as a cultural intervention have recently focused on poetry's role as a tool of social and cultural critique. In a theoretically informed community of writers and readers who are frequently critical of the self, the framework for understanding and reinterpreting the "I" or "self" is provided by

the emphasis placed on articulating the past and present in relation to female creativity and productivity by contemporary women poets and critics (Sánchez-Pardo 48).

Linda Kinnahan argues that many 1980s female-authored works suffer from what she calls "the 'I' accompanied by a fear of being accused of self-expression, emotionalism, and self-absorption—qualities that have traditionally been linked to femininity in our culture—because there was a lack of a welcoming reading community of poets and critics who were willing to embrace a gendered 'I' in experimental settings" (Sánchez-Pardo 48). Bringing a female identity into the experimental community makes presenting the "I" a risky proposition, as it might lead to erasure or censure (Kinnahan 277).

*Mop, Mop Georgette*, Denise Riley's most comprehensive book of new poems to date, was published in 1993 after a prolific career in the 1970s and 1980s. Riley emphasizes the importance of building a strong reading community that values gender-sensitive poetry and acknowledges its role in poetic practice, authority, and tradition. Furthermore, she aims to address the gender bias that exists in the field of linguistically inventive poetry (Sánchez-Pardo 49).

"The work is/ e.g. to write'she'..." was the opening sentence of a 1996 article by critic Linda Kinnahan, referencing the work of British poet Denise Riley. Kinnahan highlights the polarized argument around language and its roles, pushing us to examine the challenging feminist endeavor within modern women's poetry (Kinnahan, "Experimental" 620). During that period, Kinnahan observed the rise of a female poetry collective whose members sought to reflect women's lived experiences through more approachable language. This collection of poems underscores the significance of women's perspectives, experiences, and modes of expression in poetry, reflecting the politically significant contributions of women influenced by the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In contrast, the use of "she" compels poets to question their own sincerity and expressiveness when engaging with the materiality of language as a medium. Here, language raises the question of whether poetry can ever truly capture the essence of an individual. If so, cultural and linguistic norms may confine the pronoun "she" to the realm of quotation marks. Instead of promoting an essentialized concept of femininity, experimental women poets aim to understand how these codes operate, aligning with contemporary theories of language and subjectivity as their artistic and political objective (Sánchez-Pardo 52).

Our analysis of Denise Riley's oeuvre allows us to situate her contributions at the confluence of avant-garde poetry—frequently disseminated via independent presses and niche periodicals in Britain—and experimental poetics shaped by feminist ideology. Riley's body of work represents what Wendy Mulford characterizes as a critical examination of the individual voice, a defining feature of many women's literature. Claire Wills asserts that this necessitates a re-evaluation of the speaking "I" and associated concerns of "interiority and emotional inwardness," influenced by the particular historical circumstances of mass media and culture (Sánchez-Pardo 50). Wills claims that Riley's poetry examines the difficulties of expressing inner experiences and emotions while evaluating the "authenticity" of sensations, thereby contemplating the function of the lyric form. Both Wills and Rachel Blau DuPlessis acknowledge Riley's work as a textual interaction with the lyric tradition. In her 1993 collection, *Mop Mop Georgette*, Riley explores the linguistic and discursive formation of identity while pursuing a means of expressivity for the gendered "I." A poem presents the inquiries: "I intended to enquire, what constitutes lyric poetry? Its buzzing commences prior to my ability to respond. You do that, love me, perish in solitude" (Sánchez-Pardo 22). This volume's poems establish a "I" while critically analyzing the discursive frameworks that construct subjectivity, addressing themes of female subjectivity that have significantly influenced Riley's intellectual endeavors, particularly her seminal book, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Concept of "Women" in Historical Context* (1988).

Denise Riley's poetry has seen much criticism over the representation of the "I," particularly as female subjectivity is frequently linked to traditionally feminized attributes such as seclusion, emotion, and interiority. In an interview, Romana Huk states, "Your designation as experimental by experimental poets may lead to criticism of your intense focus on the personal voice" (Sánchez-Pardo 20). This persistent discourse is reflected in the writings of critics like Nigel Wheale (1993), James Keery (1994), and Jon Wilkinson (1994), and is contextualized within a

historical framework that often characterizes women's expressions—and their exploration of a lyrical identity—as negatively gendered. In her poem “A Shortened Set,” Riley explores several themes: (Sánchez-Pardo 47-59).

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 opposes any attempt to separate language from its material environment. In her poem “Disintegrate Me” (*Mop* 62-63), she examines the fragmentation of the ego through words and subsequently contemplates this phenomenon. This poem is included in a collection entitled “Seven Strangely Exciting Lies” and begins with a speaker who functions as both a transcriber and a medium for external voices—specifically, “radio voices” obtained from “my post as zealous secretary, as/transmitter of messages from the dead.” The speaker explores an alternate kind of subjectivity and interrogates the potential for agency within this framework: “all the while a slow hot cut spreads/to baste me now with questions of my own complicity in harm” (Sánchez-Pardo 55). The initial image in the poem asserts:

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)

Shortly thereafter, the poem's speaker shifts from a self-influenced by other voices to an almost solipsistic narrative, allowing for an exploration of the intricacies of agency: “the edges of language, I mean / are where I start / writing again, / thinking through” (Sánchez-Pardo 55). This transition highlights the complex interplay between external influences and the speaker's internal landscape, illustrating Riley's engagement with the themes of identity and self-perception within the broader context of language and subjectivity.

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 unresolved inquiry about whether the disintegration of the self, seen as a renunciation of responsibility, signifies a denial of agency (“if I understood / my own extent of blame then that would prove me agent”), or if it culminates in an acceptance of the “likely truth of helplessness... the humiliating lack of much control” (Sánchez-Pardo 55). This tension underscores the complexities of agency within Riley's exploration of identity, revealing the delicate balance between self-awareness and the external forces that shape one's existence.

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 her recent poem “Outside from the Start” (2000), Riley raises critical enquiries about the feasibility of political discourse from its genesis, positioned on the brink of emerging yet ultimately suppressed (Sánchez-Pardo 55). This exploration reflects her ongoing interrogation of how identity and language intersect within the political landscape, suggesting that the articulation of such discourse is fraught with challenges from the outset.

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...

**Conclusion:**

Finally, language, experimentation, readers, involvement with the world, ideology, and poetic form are some of the traditional issues that Riley's poetry and poetics repeatedly examine. By reflecting on her own experiences, her music manages to traverse perceptual plurality, allowing her to claim a subjective identity even as she welcomes the challenges to fixed lyric patterns and ideas of self-identification. Reflecting on the subject and societal processes of subjectification and compulsion, Riley's poetry greatly enriches our comprehension of the discursive constitution of humans. She urgently reevaluates the function and expressions of the speaking "I" in today's post-identitarian setting through her deconstructive endeavours, which critically analyse the subtle links between language experimentation, modes of address, and more.

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