Affect in the Writing of Denise Riley

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Abstract

The subject of this article is the philosophical concept of affect as it comes into focus in major work in different genres by the British writer, Denise Riley (born 1948). Riley, who teaches at the University of East Anglia, UK, and currently holds the title of A. D. White Professor-at-Large at Cornell University (as does Hélène Cixous), is the author of important contributions to the philosophy of language and several volumes of poetry, including her first book, Marxism for Infants (1977) and Selected Poems (2000). Her name is sometimes associated with the Cambridge poets’ syntactic experimentation and materialist critique, but her protean poetic “voice” more often recalls the complicatedly self-dramatizing poetics of Frank O’Hara (though this comparison perhaps risks obscuring her work’s markedly feminist discursive character).

This essay begins by considering the way the word “affect” functions in some works by Nietzsche and Deleuze and Guattari, since this has important implications for Riley’s own use of the term. A unifying concern in her most recent collections of essays, The Words of Selves (2000) and Impersonal Passion (2005), is with what she calls “the forcible affect of language,” by which is meant the relatively autonomous emotionality that dwells in the words which we use and which, with often disastrous psychosocial consequences, use us. In the poems, too, we find a determination to acknowledge the extent to which the mutable self is an “inrush of others’ voices.” A final section of the essay lingers with the long poem, “Outside from the Start,” and its phenomenological treatment of the perilous and affirmative process of becoming to which our language exposes us.

Keywords

Denise Riley, affect, lyric poetry, Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari, feminism, Auden
There is a forcible affect of language which courses like blood through its speakers. Language is impersonal; its working through and across us is indifferent to us, yet in the same blow it constitutes the fiber of the personal.

—Denise Riley, *IP*

So begins the Introduction to Denise Riley’s 2005 collection of essays, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect*. These “bold-sounding propositions,” as she calls them in the very next paragraph, announce with a calculating emotionalism the preoccupations of this philosophical and very political book, but they also adumbrate some of the most powerful and, in some ways, troubling tones of her insufficiently examined but increasingly influential poetic work. In her critical-philosophical and poetic idioms alike Riley manifests an informed concern with the variously *performative* matter of “how language as the voice of its occasion can . . . inflect its speakers” (*IP* 2) and, more compellingly, “that tension, unease, or feeling of dispossession [which] can result from the gulf between the ostensible content of what’s said, and the affect which seeps from the very form of the words” (2).

The particular contours of her argument in *Impersonal Passion* come into focus a little later in the Introduction when, with an unrepentant return to high rhetoric, she asks, “If the affective quality of music can be granted to exist irrespective of its hearers’ sensibilities and their quirks, then why not accord a similar relative independence to language’s emotionality?” and offers, as one of her demonstrations, the fact that “The magical thought of linguistic voodoo has been recorded to work. I will die simply because the bone of sorcery was pointed at me . . . my belief is necessary, but what I believe is the animated word’s power” (*IP* 5). This essentially pragmatic approach (with “only a slight amplification of the notion of the performative” [*IP* 4]) is already at work in Riley’s earlier book, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (2000), where she suggests: “language does not so much ‘express’ feeling, but (to use American English) in itself it ‘does’ feeling” (*WS* 36). As a further point of clarification she adds, “It’s neither that affect may be ‘conveyed in’ words nor that in a coldly reductive manner it is ‘really only words’”; rather: “feeling, articulated, is words and is also *in* the words” (*WS* 36).

If, in both of these books, Riley’s critical-philosophical intention seems to be the responsible one of adding to debates begun by Longinus, Marx, Nietzsche,

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1 I have abbreviated the titles of the texts to which I refer most often in this article.
Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and others, while developing “a descriptive vocabulary to characterize this relative autonomy of language” (WS 2), her poetry very often places us right in the middle, as it were, of the human feeling of dispossession, and with no helpful map (enabling our escape) marked “You are here.” And yet there is also a crucial overlap between the two idioms, critical-philosophical and poetic, both of which may properly be thought of as affective in her handling of them. Riley’s are writings of and about affect; in the intensity of their focus as well as in the fruitful disorientation with which they make us confront the problem of affect they set up new relations between poetry and critical thinking, thereby extending the resources of each.

Before we properly pursue the workings of “affect” as they are explored in Riley’s work we must recognize the fact that this word has, in its earlier movements across poetic and philosophical discourses, acquired connotations that necessarily complement and complicate her use of it. Probably the most influential recent annotations in this context occur in the work of Félix Guattari and (especially) Gilles Deleuze, beginning with their responses to and appropriations of the notion of affect (“Affectus”) as they find it in Spinoza’s Ethics.2 “Memories of a Spinozist, II,” a short section of Deleuze and Guattari’s collaborative work of 1980, A Thousand Plateaus (the second volume of Capitalism and Schizophrenia), contains the following evocation of affect:

To every relation of movement and rest, speed and slowness grouping together an infinity of parts, there corresponds a degree of power. To the relations composing, decomposing, or modifying an individual there correspond intensities that affect it, augmenting or diminishing its power to act; these intensities come from external parts or from the individual’s own parts. Affects are becomings. Spinoza asks: What can a body do? . . . We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects. . . . (TP 283-84)

2 “[W]hen I use the word ‘affect’ it refers to Spinoza’s affectus, and when I say the word ‘affection,’ it refers to affectio” (Deleuze, Continental 1). Roger Scruton, for one, takes a very different approach to Spinoza’s Latin terminology, effectively translating both affectio and affectus as “affect” and glossing the former as “a condition of a thing which is brought about by external circumstances” and the latter as “emotion, that is an ‘affect’ of a human being which is also a passio” (123).
Later in the book the authors state: “Affect is the active discharge of emotion” (TP 441). But whatever lingering sense this last definition leaves of the more common understanding of affect—the 1990 Chambers English Dictionary has “the emotion that lies behind action”—evaporates when “affect” becomes the word used to designate “the incredible feeling of an unknown Nature” supposedly experienced by the German proto-Romantic writer Karl Philipp Moritz before a herd of calves. In this context affect is, we are told, “not a personal feeling” (TP 265). Rather, it is “the effectuation of a power of the pack that throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel” (TP 265); it is the uncanny process Deleuze and Guattari call “becoming-animal” or, sometimes, “becoming-other” and which they locate in the operations of metamorphic texts by Melville, Kafka and others. A rhetorically less eccentric version of this apparent redefinition of affect occurs in a 1988 interview Deleuze gave, in which he stated: “Affects aren’t feelings, they’re becomings that spill over beyond whoever lives through them (thereby becoming someone else)” (Negotiations 137).

It is not difficult to see some family resemblance between this ontological conception and Riley’s “relative autonomy” of impersonal linguistic affect. “Affect,” it would appear, is the word we use in preference to “emotion” or “feeling” when we want to stress the decentered receptivity of the subject-body to forces (culturally articulated as well as natural) with a kind of life of their own. This is the notion of affect that comes to the fore in the penultimate chapter of Deleuze and Guattari’s last collaborative work What is Philosophy? (1991), “Percept, Affect, and Concept”: “The affect is not the passage from one lived state to another but man’s nonhuman becoming” (Deleuze and Guattari, Continental 470). Becoming is most intensely felt, they suggest, in the creation of the work of art, which they see as consisting in the raising of the lived affection to the level of “beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived” (465). The great novelist is thus “above all an artist who invents unknown or unrecognized affects and brings them to light as the becoming of his characters” (471).

In this philosophy of the autonomous artwork, the affect is to the affection what the percept is to the perception; in fact, Deleuze and Guattari indicate an overlap between the two forms of sensation when they additionally define percept as “to make perceptible the imperceptible forces that populate the world, affect us, and make us become” (475). If there is more than a hint here of the dialectical relations of the pictorial, individuating the Apollonian and the continuously becoming Dionysian in these formulations, then this is because Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of affect is, from the beginning, a thoroughly Nietzschean
The terms “Affekt” and “Affekte” occur throughout Nietzsche’s major work, and figure prominently in his deconstructive demonstration (or assertion) of the non-rational, decentered origins of beliefs; most, though not all, of his English translators retain the Spinozist terminology. The particularly Deleuzian-Guattarian association of autonomous affect and becoming is most clearly established in a notebook entry of Nietzsche’s from the mid-1880s, in which he suggests that one should not, in general, ask who interprets (not seek for a Cartesian cogito or subject, that is), but, instead, see interpreting as a form of “the will to power,” one which “itself has existence (but not as a ‘being’; rather as a process, as a becoming) as an affect” (Writings from the Late Notebooks 91). The Nietzschean provenance of Riley’s use of the word “affect” is confirmed when, in the first chapter of The Words of Selves, entitled “Who, Me?” Self-Description’s Linguistic Affect,” she writes, “The self is a bundle of results, a cluster of effects and outcomes” and then provides Nietzsche’s own formulation: “L’effet, c’est moi” (WS 53). She chooses not to comment on the fact that in the same section of Beyond Good and Evil from which that slogan comes Nietzsche defines will as “above all an affect; and in fact the affect of command. What is called ‘freedom of will’ is essentially the affect of superiority over him who must obey: ‘I am free, “he” must obey’” (Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil 48).

Related to this language of domination is the fact that in their crediting of the artist, in What is Philosophy?, with the discovery of forms of affective becoming that are not merely independent but, in some way, permanent forms of being, Deleuze and Guattari do not reverse Nietzsche’s radical ontology; rather, they take the very Nietzschean step of effectually creating a hierarchy within the human race according to which some “users” of affect are not only able to take more but also better able to shape it to their own ends, which are also the ends of that stronger form of affectivity. For Nietzsche, “‘the great man’ is great through the free play he gives his desires and the even greater power that is capable of taking these magnificent monsters into its service” (Writings from the Late Notebooks 163)—a passage from autumn 1887 that repeats the (for our purposes) terminologically more precise notebook entry of a few years earlier:

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3 See especially sections 4 and 5 of Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy 24-32.
4 A few examples: where Nietzsche, in Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swenson’s translation of Zur Genealogie der Moral, writes of “the truly active affects like desire to rule, greed and the like” (48), Douglas Smith’s version has “really active feelings” (55); when Clark and Swenson’s Nietzsche refers to “these slaves of momentary affect and desire” (38), Smith gives us “ephemeral slaves of emotion and desire” (43).
Overcoming the affects?—No, not if it means weakening and annihilating them. Instead, drawing them into service, which may include exercising a long tyranny over them. . . . In the end they are trustingly given back some freedom: they love us like good servants and voluntarily go where our best interest want to go. (Writings from the Late Notebooks 63)

The Nietzschean conception of affective difference is already apparent in *A Thousand Plateaus* when, after announcing their intention of avoiding defining a body either “by its organs and functions” or “by Species or Genus characteristics,” Deleuze and Guattari write: “instead we will seek to count its affects” (*TP* 283; emphasis added). Such a statement may be fruitfully read alongside the transcripts of some of Deleuze’s fascinating remarks during the “Cours Vincennes” on Spinoza in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He speaks here of affect as the exercise of power, noting that “men are not all capable of the same affects” (Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus* 7) for, as he puts it, “the Indians couldn’t stand the affect of influenza”; “It’s the same with us, in the conditions of forest life we risk not living very long” (7). In another passage, in response to an apparently unwanted intervention, he explains that because power is always “actual”—that is, realized in the world—“The affects of the reasonable man are not the same as those of the insane one” (13) so that, from the (Spinozist) point of view of the affects, the reasonable man is “better” than the “insane” one. Even if this last assessment jars with Deleuze’s career-long valorization of “schizoid” modes of thought, the overall settlement of affective difference within species and race in a condition of exposure nonetheless prepares us for his far less reluctant and far more Nietzschean declaration in the same lecture: “The most beautiful thing is to live on the edges, at the limits of her/his own power of being affected, on condition that this be the joyful limit” (11). Thus, in the performance of commingled, ventriloquized voices often required of the teacher and the poetic philosopher alike, Deleuze establishes a gay science of near-self-overcoming in the heart of Spinoza’s philosophy of affect.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* the name of Nietzsche occurs in connection with those other discontents of the Aufklärung, Friedrich Hölderlin and Heinrich von Kleist, in a long section with the general heading “1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible. . . .” As a member of this supposedly anti-canonical canon the philosopher is said to have done—to do—the same things these explicitly literary writers do, only by other means. These German writers were,
it is said, operating on what we can think of as a proto-Modernist, radically abstract “plane” (TP 295) of foregrounded speeds and slownesses (not, then, in a condition of mere fragmentation), resulting in the “mobilizing [of] a violence of affects that causes an extreme confusion of feelings” (TP 296). In the effectuation of such felicitous confusion they supposedly allowed a kind of writing to come into being which “is traversed by a war machine against the State”—where “the State” is synonymous with Hegelianism, Goethe, and the “regulated formation of the Subject, personage, or character” (TP 296). Deleuze and Guattari’s militaristic language here blends with a zanily intimate chivalric or Romance imagery when they write of Kleist as the exceptional product of his milieu, the artist who, “in his writing as in his life” (TP 295) is like the knight who “sleeps on his mount, then departs like an arrow” and is able to integrate “sudden catatonic fits, swoons, suspenses, with the utmost speeds of a war machine” (TP 441). The link between affects and violence continues into What is Philosophy?, where Deleuze and Guattari declare that “Kleist is no doubt the author who most wrote with affects, using them like stones or weapons” (Deleuze and Guattari, Continental 468). It is an association which also persists, albeit with quite different effects, in Riley’s own extremely Nietzschean work.

In the middle of a long and “transparently selective list of the dead” (IP 3) who have “done battle with the speaking of language itself” (2), Riley, in Impersonal Passion, refers with apparent admiration to “Deleuze and Guattari’s fingering of words’ organizing violence” (3), and echoes herself in order to describe her own writing’s entry into “a dark quotidian poetics of ordinary language-saturated scenarios which from their onset exert their verbal violence, and entice to submission or shame” (4). We feel, for the moment, very far from the triumphantly State-confounding velocities of Hölderlin, a few of whose poems Riley has translated, though perhaps a little closer to Kleist, whose essay “On the Gradual Production of Thoughts Whilst Speaking” she clearly refers to when she writes, in the same role-call, of his “persuasion of the understanding which,

5 The following comments by Kleist’s English translator, David Constantine, which happen to recall Riley on the linguistic affect, put some meat on the bones of Deleuze and Guattari’s admittedly memorable descriptions: “Kleist, in prose and dramatic verse, pushes hypotaxis just about as far as it can go. The strain on the nerves, the emotions, the intellect, is almost unbearable. In part these effects are due to the requirement in German grammar that verbs and their auxiliaries be sent to the end of subordinate clauses. . . . [C]ompletion is deferred. . . . Syntactic structures are themselves expressive, almost without the words (if you can imagine that), almost without semantic sense” (Constantine 10).
6 See Riley, Dry Air 34-41.
beginning in blindness, builds itself up through voiced exchange” (2). If Riley’s concern throughout these essays is with “How Words Do Things with Us” (to repeat her careful corruption of Austin’s “How to Do Things with Words”) (3)—or, to put it another way, with how language, as a result of its immanent historicity and emotionality, “exerts a torsion on its users” (3)—then her starting-point is more often than not the “unhappy obsessive reiteration” (4)—the eternal recurrence, we might say—to which language subjects its users.

So, for example, we find Riley in the first essay, “Malediction,” marveling at the tendency of malignant (i.e. hate) speech “to grow like a toenail, embedding itself in its hearer until it’s no longer felt to come ‘from the outside’” (IP 11). Bad words have the peculiarly “seductive” power to incite “me to slip toward self-scrutiny, because another’s angry interpellation so readily slides into becoming my own self-interpellation” (22). The valence of the linguistic affect immanent in these words lies, then, in its trick of making us identify with what the word says we are without our knowing that it has done so.

But “the gripping power of predatory speech,” as she puts it (IP 13), does not only operate at the level of stubbornly persistent lexical units; Riley’s intensified pragmatic approach also emphasizes other structures. “[T]he unconscious guilt of language—of the language of the excuse” (91)—is the subject-matter of the virtuosic sixth chapter, “‘Lying’ When You Aren’t.” This seems to invent a new genre of writing within materialist criticism—we might call it psycholinguistic observational tragicomedy—in order to reflect on “that feeling of emitting an aura of lying, and the corresponding fear of not being believed” when actually telling the truth (85). In Riley’s hauntingly familiar example, a woman agonizes about conveying to her would-be host her illness, the actual reason for her not attending a party. The woman is bound by “the dominating presence of a linguistic formula”—the excuse as “an accepted social lie”—which means “The truer the excuse she uttered, the more acute her own bad conscience” (92).

Such meticulous narrations of our hyper-sensitive existence contrast—and are surely meant to contrast—with what, later in Impersonal Passion, Riley suggests might be thought of as a “lowering of affect” in some contemporary dictions (IP 97). The poet explains in The Words of Selves that the forms of language which enact affect “in themselves” (WS 36) can also enact it “on autopilot,” so that we find, for example, “a remorseless scaffolding to a sentence of oafish pornography, with the upshot that its shape of ‘he x’d her y’ is so de rigueur that it will infect, say, ‘he

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7 See Kleist, Selected Writings 405-09.
parked his car in her garage” (WS 37). That harshly ironic “de rigueur” coolly transmits what might be thought of as Riley’s principle injunctions: feel more, articulate more—even when the effects are disorientating. To those who “underwent the process once known as sexual liberation” (IP 100) but who now, in public life, hesitate before the “widespread resorting to a cozy talk of sexual behavior” (99), she offers what she calls “a short defense of their embarrassment” (100). There is, in particular, she suggests, great value in the emotional-linguistic hybrid (that is, the not merely ideological) condition of finding yourself pausing before society’s “naming [of] sexual activity in reductive terms” (100), “mildly vexed with yourself for not just being able to join in, while you thrash silently around for an alternative” (101). Such linguistic embarrassment—in this case a certain sort of “reification embarrassment”—results from the “will to give the linguistic formula the slip” (101), and is the (linguistically-driven) emotion “that seeps forward when you find yourself shepherded in the direction of saying what you don’t want to say” (102).

In other words, despite the agitated, Marxian and Modernist nervousness so often holding her immaculate sentences together (rather like, as Kleist saw, the arch is held together because “all of its constituent stones are striving to collapse”8), Riley is not siding with any straightforwardly Jamesonian perception of a general “waning of affect”; nor is she necessarily opting for the view put forward by the post-Deleuzian philosopher, Brian Massumi, that what seems in “postmodern” late capitalist culture to be a loss of affect is actually a surfeit and that affect as such is fundamentally immune to critique.9 She is, above all, taking the more classically Nietzschean line and exploring the particular ways in which the process of interpretation always will be activated by or through affect. The dimly perceived but throbbing affect of linguistic unease contains or produces what we might wish to call a truth-content because of the way the discomfited interlocutor is made to confront not only her own values but, more significantly, the “exact and exacting pressure of some highly local demand of language exerting its delicate and peculiar force” (IP 104)—which is to say that she is made to confront the particularity of her “own sheer contingency as a linguistic subject” (27). And for Riley, it would appear, this radical contingency is the supreme truth of our (linguistic) being.

In fact there are, Riley suggests, practical therapeutic benefits to be had from the realization that all speakers are acted upon by very specific linguistic-affective

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8 This is Constantine’s English paraphrase of a section of a letter that Kleist wrote to his fiancée, Wilhelmine von Zenge. See Constantine’s Introduction to Heinrich von Kleist: Selected Writings xxi.

9 See Massumi 27-28.
forces. A person’s survival when coping with the lingering harm of hate speech, for instance, could take the following form:

. . . to concede that “yes, this person really wanted me dead then”; yet in the same breath to see that the hostile wish is not identical with the excessive hostility of the lingering word, which has its own slow-burning temporality. . . . We’d need to try out some art of seeing the denouncer as separate from the denunciation, while also at its mercy himself. . . . It’s the very thinglike nature of the bad word which may, in fact, enable its target to find release from its insistent reverb. (IP 12)

In this way—“The stoic’s route to consolation,” Riley calls it near the end of “Malediction” (IP 27)—the erstwhile victim of malediction may reverse the apparently inevitable process of (self-)interpellation to which she had been subjected. Though we cannot master language “before it masters us,” we can choose, she tells us, “to suffer our subjugation moodily and darkly, or we can treat it more lightly and indifferently, as a by-product of the disinterested machinations of language” (27; emphasis added). Her plumping for this second course as the “sounder” one (27) then blossoms into one of the most memorably aphoristic passages of her work in prose:

I am a walker in language. It’s only through my meanders and slow detours, perhaps across many decades, toward recognizing language’s powerful impersonality—which is always operating despite and within its air of a communicative “intersubjectivity”—that I can “become myself.” Yet I become myself only by way of fully accepting my own impersonality, too—as someone who is herself accidentally spoken, not only by violent language, but by any language whatsoever—and who, by means of her own relieved recognition of this very contingency, is in significant part released from the powers of the secretive and unspeakable workings of linguistic harm. (IP 27)

This comes very close to reaffirming Nietzsche’s *amor fati*, especially the version of this determined love of necessity that treats the “arbitrary laws” (Beyond Good and Evil 110-12) constituting our “second” (cultural) nature as the conditions
of rather than the impediments to effective action or freedom. And it is a passage that allows us, furthermore, to see the Nietzschean poetics of maturing and becoming through “living experimentally” (Human, All Too Human, vol. 1, sect. 4), a poetics that has lain all along underneath Riley’s psycholinguistic acuities. The goal for both writers on the projected path of life-long becoming can be defined as that state of (linguistic) “health” in which the “free spirit . . . has only to do with things . . . with which he is no longer concerned . . .” (Human, All Too Human 8). It is difficult to say whether the tenor Riley achieves with words like “accepting,” “relieved,” and “in significant part” (not to mention those prickly scare-quotes) produces a resistance to any full-blown Nietzschean celebration of becoming oneself or, instead, attests to the more subtly heroic nature of the “I” in her Wanderjahre, her years of what Nietzsche, with his own complex temporality of “will,” called “dangerous perhapses” (Beyond Good and Evil 34, 47-49).

Riley’s story of affective being/becoming is, arguably, made more dizzyingly didactic than Nietzsche’s or Deleuze’s as a result of her more determined refusal of the hierarchical passive-active opposition. Whatever her precise relation to these rhetorically restless forbears, the intention in Riley’s darkly affirmative account of language usage is neither to automatically affirm the notion of a thoughtful speaker’s agency nor to give up altogether on it. It is rather to complicate it—to “fray at the edges . . . that usual antithesis (crudely, in ‘continental’ versus analytic philosophy) between language as speaking us, and our status as freely choosing users of language,” as she puts it in the Introduction to Impersonal Passion (3).

It is precisely into this active-passive state of involvement with linguistic affect that Riley’s poetry would have us enter, or in which she would have us “become.” This is especially clear when our initial response to individual poems is to find ourselves overwhelmed by a poetic persona who is herself “accidentally spoken . . . by any language whatsoever” (IP 27). There is very often, we might say, the self-aware performance of a mind afflicted by what the Germans call ein Ohrworm—the phrase, cadence or melody that has crawled into one’s ear and won’t crawl out. In “Well All Right,” a breathlessly hypotactic, self-reproaching erotics of yielding and not yielding to certain late Romantic projections of the self cuts bathetically to the final sentence, which transmits a plainer sort of agitation: “Who sang / ‘you don’t have to die before you live’—well who” (SP 67). The suitably

10 This merely repeats Ridley’s paraphrase xiii-iv.
11 “Jean-Jacques Lecercle’s electrifying The Violence of Language (1990) may have laid the foundations for that desirable third path between a sheer hegemony of Language on the one hand and the controlling Writer on the other” (WS 71).
ambiguous answer, a note at the back of the Selected Poems informs us, is “Sylvester Stewart, recording as Sly Stone” (110). Another poem, “A Misremembered Lyric,” tackles the problem of our radically spoken contingency right from its opening. The lyric, in its original form, is from the 1967 Gene Pitney song, “Something’s Gotten Hold of My Heart [emphasis added],” which Pitney sang again with Marc Almond in 1989:

A misremembered lyric: a soft catch of its song
whirrs in my throat. “Something’s gotta hold of my heart
tearing my” soul and my conscience part, long after
presence is clean gone and leaves unfurnished no
shadow. Rain lyrics. Yes, then the rain lyrics fall.
I don’t want absence to be this beautiful.
It shouldn’t be; in fact I know it wasn’t, while
“everything that consoles is false” is off the point—
you get no consolation anyway until your memory’s
dead; or something never had gotten hold of
your heart in the first place, and that’s the fear thought.
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”. (51)

This is a high art/low art poem that hovers around what Riley in Impersonal Passion calls the “unholly coincidence between beauty and cruelty in their verbal mannerisms” (13), in the way that the wound-touching pleasure after the “presence” of love has gone is further felt through the hearkening, nostalgic “what I see”/“what I hear” structure. The latter certainly comes from the end of W. H. Auden’s hymn to mineral constancy and human mutability, “In Praise of Limestone,” but also

12 The passages in Auden’s poem to which Riley’s poem might be thought to bear some conscious or unconscious relation include the very Rilkean opening (“If it form the one landscape that we, the inconstant ones, / Are consistently homesick for . . . ”); “Each [spring] filling a private pool . . . ”; “What could be more like Mother . . . ?”; “How evasive is your humour, how
suggests Philip Larkin in its shifting around between quotidian despair and partial transcendence. The irresistible stab of the lyric into the guts of the living is already given musical form in the graceful rhyming of “fall”/“beautiful”/“while.” But Riley cancels out her own lyric’s expansive movements with a more persistent version of the earlier poets’ discursivity: the poem fades out rapidly through jerkily prosaic notes-to-self from somewhere or other and what is perhaps a sullen echo of Van Morrison’s “Listen to the Lion” (“Looking for a brand-new start”), as if it were embarrassed by how deep in the self-admiring postures of Poetry it had sunk.

The overall effect is akin to the phenomenon that Riley, in her prose writing, calls “linguistic love”; that is, “a love sparked and sustained by the appeal of another’s spoken or written words” but which can turn to hatred when “old fragments of once-voiced . . . endearment . . . resentfully or soulfully lodge” (IP 13). (This, despite the possibility that the verbal-musical fragments summoned in this poem are actually there to compensate for the “fear thought” that love was never a real presence in the first place.) Such a semi-improvisatory, ambivalently lyrical modern lyric can try to press back against the inherited language that wells up in it, but only by means of another force, another onslaught of emotion-soaked language, another affect coming from the outside.

Riley captures a sharper version of this predicament, this hesitation between poetic and erotic event, in her verse rewriting of the Ovidian tale of Narcissus and Echo, “Affections of the Ear,” which is reprinted in a mixed-genre chapter of The Words of Selves with Riley’s own annotations following the poem. Of the poem’s ambiguously passive main female character she writes: “Echo might be taken as a figure or trope for the troubled nature of lyric poetry, driven on by rhyme, and condemned to hapless repetition of the cadences and sound associations in others’ utterances” (WS 111). This paraphrases and slightly extends the poem and/or Echo herself speaking in the third person: “Echo’s a trope for lyric poetry’s endemic barely hidden bother” (SP 96), where the word “bother” seems, in this context, sheepishly aware of its dependency on the barely concealed otherness of a rhyme which is already in the process of forging a relation of meaning between itself and the no less compromised “smother,” “mother,” “other,” and—to really emphasize the point—“another” (96).

Riley claims to have rescued Narcissus from his Freudian after-life and reinstated him in the “original” Ovidian dilemma of having to wither in the isolating accidental / Your kindest kiss, how permanent is death”; and, most obviously, “when I try to imagine a faultless love / Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur / Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape” (Auden, Collected Poems 540-42).
“knowledge of the true nature of what he loved” (*WS* 110), but her language-loving, Narcissus-loving Echo partakes of or even supplants his tragic impenetrability, imprisoned as she is in a verse form whose lines are so long, the commentary confesses, “that any listening ears will not catch its structure of rhymed alternating couplets” (*WS* 111). Echo is, then, Riley asserts paratextually, “the master of irony” but of a sort that is, paradoxically, “outside her control” (*WS* 160-61), a point that is made with memorable gusto earlier in the poem though in a tone that suggests it is already on or at the point of transition:

If he’d cried “I’d die before I’d fuck you,” at least I could have echoed back that “Fuck you.”
Sorry—I have to bounce back each last phrase. Half-petrified, I voice dead gorges. Dearer
My daughter Iyinx, a wryneck, torticollis, twisted neck, barred and secretive as any cuckoo,
A writher in the woods—as a mother I am, and am merely, responsive;
still, I keep near her. (95)

There is a pathos in this shift from exasperated comic mockery to a somewhat unpredictable enlargement of self-narration, but a more uneasy feeling may accompany it. Is there here the implication that Echo must, in whatever role she imagines for herself and however exotic her language, resort to certain predigested formulae for her self-description? Certainly there is, if we read the last quoted long line beside Theodor Adorno’s characteristically astute fingering of the sympathy for authority and authoritarianism programmed into transcendent critique and exemplified in the very form of the expression “‘as a . . . , I . . . ,’ in which one can insert any orientation, from dialectical materialism to Protestantism” (qtd. in *WS* 187). Riley quotes this passage in *The Words of Selves* as part of her engagement with the ways in which syntax can be the reinforcement and anticipatory reminder of particular forms of (internalized) aggression. For a woman to identify herself straightforwardly “as a mother,” as Echo seems to do and as Sarah Palin has recently done, may be for her to participate, to her own ultimate or even immediate detriment, in a culture that extends a patronizing and debilitating admiration/pity to “empowered” victim-mothers. The strength and breadth of Riley’s feeling on this subject, as well as her perception of the necessity for continuing forms of oppositional collectivity, may be gauged by her parenthetical comment: “while I can’t think why I’d want to utter that chilling phrase, ‘speaking as a woman,’ I can
think of situations in which it could be my lot to cough pointedly from the back row, ‘But what about women here?’” (WS 167).

These discursive interventions are clearly helpful in elucidating “Affections of the Ear,” and yet they do not (re)tell the whole story. If Echo is imprisoned in her own succumbing to the affect of an aurally distant but still materially powerful rhyme and to the supposedly far more insidious pressure from within language itself to adopt a simplifying self-description, then we should not be deaf to the sounds of whatever scope for redefinition remains within her confinement. There is, for instance, an understated absurdist humor in the juxtaposition of the modern “as a mother” discourse and Echo’s mythological characterization. Tacking in a different direction, we might say that Echo’s faltering, inverted syntax at that point, though in no sense liberating her from her fate, does register a powerful unease in the language she is made to speak and thus represents what could, in a less predetermined narrative, be the first step toward escaping the effects of linguistic harm. Even the rhyme structure that partly defines her predicament has its consolations, recovering intensity in the way it participates in a contagious form of irony as “one manifestation of speech which notices itself out loud” (SP 14). It is a strangely pleasurable, if nonetheless tragic, irony that the very rhyme which shows us her contingency does not function properly according to its own special mode of contingency. There is, then, the appearance of a minor felicitous breakdown in the usual workings of the first of what Riley calls the “conspicuous kinds of affect,” (SP 2)—namely, involuntary self-presentation—at the hands of the second: irony; even if it is only a heart-murmur in the greater scheme of things, and if, as we have already suggested, it serves to underline her isolation in the unwanted state of linguistic love.

In other poems, Riley takes a more obviously critical stance against restrictive ideology as she finds it in the reiterated “affective habit[s]” of speech (WS 14). “Curmudgeonly,” which gallops stylishly out of the same discursive stable as the already-quoted prose essay on sexual language, and signals its debt to Auden’s later, late-Goethean, bucolic style with a warm allusion to his “married” life with Chester Kallman, is one such poem. It begins in a tone we could easily mistake for archness:

A partner is a social-democratic thing to have; so much so that you’ll come across couples, long
Solidly-married, yet who’ll introduce each other as “my partner,” not “my wife” or “husband.”
OK, it’s sociologically neat, its journalese copes usefully with mass
But the spread of the intimate sense of the word puzzles me. . . . (SP 92)

In fact this poem, despite its wry jauntiness, would place us bang in the middle of the existential, affective perplexity, the state of sad remembering, that descends when we try to cope with the options available to us in the language we have. Conceding that “of course just what to call them makes you slither (like ‘the father of my youngest child,’ ‘a person / I once lived with?’)” (SP 92), our confessedly “sour” speaker nonetheless wonders, “What happened to / Unsettling love? Or to calmly-conducted if unimpassioned marriages, still exuding / Some generosity?” (92-3). “[P]artner” strikes this speaker as “so virtuously unlicensed by the state” that not to possess one “sounds worse / Than not being trusted in business, not being picked for even the weakest school netball team” (92). In the “pseudo-public speech” which this word exemplifies for her—and which we might fruitfully interpret according to Adorno and Horkheimer’s more coruscating term, “pseudo-individuality”—she hears, not a slouching Yeatsian beast of thrilling subjectivity being born, but “a bloodless future come / In which we’ll sidle as usual through attachments whose truthful varieties are beaten flat . . . ” (SP 93).

“When It’s Time to Go” returns to the scene of the complicity with authority which Adorno detected in ostensibly anti-authoritarian language, and in a way that might be thought to accuse Riley herself of being the author of so many hypersensitive accounts of her own socio-political situation:

When an aggressively uncontrolled schadenfreude
reads a personal threat in everywhere
and so animatedly takes this as “the political”
that the very kitchen colander shells out a neat
wehrmacht helmet of brown rice
das schmeckt nach mehr!
or when an inverse brand of professional unhappiness
taps on its wristwatch “as a realist I . . . ”—then

set this boy free. . . . (59)

“Dark Looks” takes place no less close to home, pre-echoing the post-Ovidian story of passive-active performativity with its presentation of a poet’s “reification embarrassment” at the scene of her own public poetry reading:
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 . . .

……………………………………………………………

. . . To be sheer air, and mousseline!
and as she frets the minute wars scorch on through paranoias of the unreviewed
herded against a cold that drives us in together [ . . . ]
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 the 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 front foot of a page and then get up to go—(SP 74)

The influential poet and critic John Wilkinson has praised this poem for nicely expressing “the dilemma of the contemporary lyric poet, conscious of the familial, gendered, racial and class construction of that place from which her lyric need arises . . . deprecating the reference of what is recited to her physical presence; but trapped in her poetic practice” (151). Though it is not referred to explicitly, the telling performance of poetic anxiety in “Dark Looks” also seems to be on Wilkinson’s mind in his much more ambivalent and extended appraisal of Riley’s poetry in an essay called “Illyrian Places,” which was originally published in 1994 in Parataxis. This repeats what he calls “the question Narcissism asks” as he finds it in the psychoanalytical literature, before posing his own rhetorical question:

“What strength has a self based on the internalization of others—indeed, to what should we ascribe the sense of selfhood which each of us seems to have? These are repetitive queries of
contemporary experience: behind the mirror which the self needs to persuade us of its own existence, is there anything real? ‘Look, you can love me too—I am so like the object’; possibly, I am so like everything that I am nothing at all.’

Could any formula better describe the claims Riley’s poetry makes on its readers? (Wilkinson 66)

If there is something rather presumptuous or needy-sounding about the echoic and narcissistic “claims” Riley’s poetry is said to make on its readers’ time, this may be because of the way in which Wilkinson’s quotation and gloss joins up with the later part of his essay’s fairly negative treatment of the self-referentiality of her work. Though he praises a long poem of Riley’s, “Laibach Lyrik: Slovenia, 1991” for its direct treatment “of the struggle in others to assert and maintain a working identity” (Wilkinson 71), this is partly so that he can reject all the more strongly those other, less “overtly social and political” poems that he considers to be written “under the narcissistic spell” (70). For Wilkinson, the characteristic technique of quotation in Riley’s poems can be a merely rage-driven “matter of arbitrary excerpt, every pause or transition being but a blank wall at which the helter-skelter car jerks ninety degrees with a sickening shock to swoop down further” (75). (He singles out “Cruelty Without Beauty” and “So is it?”) Faced with what he reads as an unproductive presentation of “borderline personality disturbance” and reflexive knowingness in her writing, Wilkinson decides “one is right to demand a revolt against narcissism as such” (75).

As Sarah Broom points out in her survey of contemporary British and Irish poetry, Riley has responded to Wilkinson’s comments by suggesting, in an interview, that “Narcissism is a condition of being fragmented, but it’s through that fragmentation and that lack of a boundary that you become aware of and respond to other people’s differences” (qtd. in Broom 216-17). Perhaps this is the condition that Riley evokes in “Rayon” (the title of which means either artificial silk or, in Edmund Spenser’s continental early modern vocabulary, ray or beam):

The day is nervous buff—the shakiness, is it inside the day or me?
Perhaps the passions that we feel don’t quite belong to anyone
But hang outside us in the light like hoverflies, aping wasps and swiveling
And lashing up one storm of stripes. In tiny cones of air.

13 Wilkinson is quoting the psychoanalyst Stephen Frosh.
Yet you enact that feeling, as you usually bzzzzzzzzz get to do it, while I, I do this. If it takes me all night and day. Oh Carol. (SP 61)

Riley quotes this poem (minus its final two sentences) in *The Words of Selves* to reinforce what her prose expresses with a characteristic hesitation between declarative and conditional moods: “Perhaps emotionality, too, has its own external quality. It can arrive from the outside. This speculation repeats, oddly, the drift of astrology, where affect is beamed down, though the influencing machine of language is less starry, and noisier” (WS 49). The I/you encounter near the end of “Rayon” can be seen to illustrate what she suggests is the eventual reclaiming of this “ethereal” affective field “by one claimant or other” (WS 49). A Wilkinsonian reading would presumably decide that this poem only disingenuously defers the enactment of afflictvity by a single (lyric) “I” which loves and hates the garish fibers of its own baby boomer autobiography too much not to sing of a distressing vulnerability in the smooth violence of Neil Sedaka overcoming Chuck Berry. A reading of Riley that does not fully accept the sociability of the linguistic affect so central to her work cannot appreciate the sense, in “Rayon,” of a speaker returned to a nervily echoic and, if the etymology of “Carol” is to be believed, chorific—that is, shared—indeterminacy or outside which is also the zone from which some experience of “inner” self-differentiation might come forth again. In this way, the poem can be seen to make a bid for autonomy by returning to the “buff” of its own beginning, reasserting its own most confidently self-referential statement (“I do this”) in the teeth of self-negation but, in doing so, also pointing further into the world in which we, too, are hailed and take on forms.

Such a reading is perhaps more dependent than most upon the paratextual corroboration it receives in Riley’s critical prose. Wilkinson’s essay was written after “Rayon” but before the two philosophical works of Riley’s with which we have been concerned. Since he is attuned to the ways in which, in his own disappointed reading of 1990s Riley, “doubts start to accumulate and to play back across the surface of the earlier poems” (74-75), it is conceivable that his experience of Riley’s supposedly self-centered poems has, in the meantime, been more happily modified by her later work’s increasingly transparent attempts to socialize the notions of selfhood and of affect. We could, after all, reinterpret his comments about her poetry’s narcissistic internalization of others in the light of the passage from Deleuze’s *Logic of Sense* which Riley makes the finale to her own *The Words of Selves*:
That everything is so “complicated,” that I may be an other, that something else thinks in us in an aggression which is the aggression of thought, in a multiplication which is the multiplication of the body, or in a violence which is the violence of language—this is the joyful message. For we are so sure of living again (without resurrection) only because so many beings and things think in us: because “we still do not know exactly if it is not others who continue to think within us (but who are these others who form the outside in relation to this inside which we believe ourselves to be?)—everything is brought back to a single discourse, to fluctuations of intensity, for instance, which correspond to the thought of everyone and no one.” (qtd. in WS 184)

Riley calls this “a fine passage . . . which itself, with Klossowski’s counterpoint, performs the polyphony that it values.” In the context of The Words of Selves, the doubly delegated hymn to porous selfhood comes into a relation with the dialectical thinking of “those now bundled together as ‘German idealists’” (SP 54), to whom Riley turns in order to fill in some of the background for the version of selfhood represented in “Rayon.” We find her lingering over Hegel on the struggle for self-awareness to see itself in another and on how “Speech and work are outer expressions in which the individual no longer keeps and possesses himself within himself,” to which she remarks, “The inner, though, was always constitutively shaky” (SP 54). Again we hear something of the narcissist’s “‘I am so like the object’; possibly, I am so like everything that I am nothing at all” in her apparently approving restatement of the “idea of a necessary self-objectification, a readiness ‘to be seen as’” as a first step toward self-discovery (SP 54-5).

In what is here the more patriotically Hegelian context Riley’s rhetoric must keep company, albeit briefly, with Schelling’s initially disturbing view that individuals are mere phantoms before finding their true embodiment in the State. Yet as she points out, in partly quoted language that leaves the German nationalist moral by the wayside in her anticipation of the memorable “I am a walker” passage in Impersonal Passion, “Schelling’s conception of absence was determinedly optimistic, marking that first vital movement of nothing out towards something, through a twist of inhibition; ‘Whatever wants to grow, must first curtail itself’. . . . To become, I must move out of myself, and I start from my zero, the precursor to my mobility. My own cancellation is what kick-starts me” (55). It is this constantly

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14 Deleuze has quoted from Pierre Klossowski’s Nietzsche. See Riley, WS 211.
restarting movement out from the position of objectification and self-cancellation, blended with more Deleuzian and Nietzschean notions of ontological openness, that provides a major part of the structure of Riley’s important long poem, “Outside from the Start,” a work which we can say, with some confidence, represents her most sustained poetic thinking about affect published to date.

This poem, which was first published in the *Selected Poems* of 2000 (where it follows “Affections of the Ear”), begins with a pair of questions that extends the worrying, in “Rayon,” over ownership of the affects to a more general enquiry into subject-object relations: “What does the hard look do to what it sees? / Pull beauty out of it, or stare it in? . . .” (SP 97). We should not be surprised by the speculative mood. A note indicates that the poem’s title is a compression of a sentence of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s from *Phenomenology of Perception*—that pleasure-trove for readers desirous of memorable evocations of the interrelatedness of our object-positing bodily subjectivity and the world in which we take our being. Riley quotes the cherished sentence in full in her note and also uses it as an epigraph to a section of *The Words of Selves*: “Nothing determines me from outside, not because nothing acts upon me, but on the contrary because I am, from the start, outside myself and open to the world” (Merleau-Ponty 530).

In her critical prose work, Riley allows this formulation from near the very end of Merleau-Ponty’s book to nestle alongside what she quotes of Nietzsche’s deconstructions of Cartesian innerness. In the long poem it becomes the spur—perhaps also the textually authoritative guarantor—to a movement in the direction of self-dispersal which, though it may be implied in the opening’s interrogatives, begins in earnest on the leap between the first and second stanzas:

... slippery
heart on legs clops into the boiling swirl as
a pale calm page shoots up, opening rapidly
to say I know—something unskinned me, so
now it bites into me—it has skinned me alive,

I get dried from dark red to dark windspun
withered jerky, to shape handy flyports out
of my lattice, or pulled out am membranes
arched bluish, webby, staked out to twang
or am mouthslick of chewed gum, dragged
in a tearing tent, flopped soft sag.

Yet none have hard real edges, since each one
is rightly spilled over, from the start of her life.

How long do I pretend to be all of us.
Will you come in out of that air now. (SP 97)

Something, once again, has gotten hold of a “heart,” which we find here quite
violently (re)objectified, first in its being attached to some grotesquely exposed legs
and then in its apparent assuming of a “voice” saying “something unskinned me. . . .” But this active-passive, spoken-speaking position is also occupied by the
calmly ejaculating “page,” whose “I know” is able, in such grammatically emergent
circumstances, to provide the basis for the pronominally continuous, existentially
impossible first-person experiencer we follow for most of this first section on its
metamorphic circuits away from anything resembling the knowledge of a serenely
detached cogito.

It is the materiality of writing itself, then, the page—but somehow
superimposed on a decidedly non-aligned bodily subjectivity—that is shown to be
both the motor of change and the fabricator of identity. When, at the end of the
section, the poem can be heard both to marvel and to accuse itself, “How long do I
pretend to be all of us,” we are invited to look back on a process hinging on the
passive construction, “I get xed.” The characteristically over-determined
corporeality of Riley’s adjectives and rhythmically stressed past participles follow
from this grammatical basis, though they, too, seem to take on an affective life of
their own. “[I]t’s the very syntax of the sentence of identification which is enacting me,” Riley writes in The Words of Selves, in her discussion of the passive structure
of psychic identification responsible for the “sadomasochistic” incitement in the
sentence, “A child is being beaten” (WS 13). That observation supplies Riley with
the theme of her earlier poem “Song,” which ends with a simple rhetorical swerve
away from inhabited linguistic harm: “A warm disturbing wind cruises the high road // where in curtained rooms children / are being beaten then so am I again but
no-one’s / asking for it, I’m asking for something different now” (SP 58). In the
more baroquely swelling mental architecture of “Outside from the Start,” however,
the writing’s intense awareness of its own fleshly openness to the affect of grammar
merely represents the beginning of an interrogation of the problem of how on earth (as well as in the warm air) an interminably vanishing subject might take on an identity for itself—and without imposing an identity on someone else in the process.

The poem’s reprimanding of itself at the end of the first section for its Whitmanesque pretensions to speak for everyone in the ecstasy of its becoming-other marks an integral aspect of its overall structure. Almost every Riley poem is its own guilty conscience. But while “Will you come in out of that air now” pops up and lingers in the instantly recognizable tones of the demonstrative parent to remind this language how far into exhibitionism the affect of identification has taken it, on other occasions the self-generated unease is more fully integrated with the exploratory textures around it. The second section of the poem offers itself as a short experiment in exposure to the cadences of lyrical isolation (as if having banished itself to the garden after the ticking-off just before). There is a sudden slowing down to enumerate the external things of the world, to make them come toward the eyes in hypnotically regular pulses: “Black shadows, sharp scattered green / sunlit in lime, in acid leaves. // Hot leaves, veined with the sun / draining the watcher’s look of all colour” (SP 98). But the reward for such virtuously self-negating receptiveness—a statement of near-epiphanic immanence in “Then the trees glow with inside light”—cannot but collapse into the usual mortal workings of public clock-time at the very moment that it is felt as a reward, perhaps hastened on its way by the hints of technical commercialalese already there in “inside light”:

Hold to the thought if it can shine
straight through a dream of failed eyes sliding
to the wristwatch’s face, wet under its glass
a thickening red meniscus tilting across its dial. (SP 98)

In the next section we are back to speed—for Riley can be seen to be writing according to Deleuze and Guattari’s alternating tempi—and back also to the hubbub of human society and the helplessly proliferating, threatening interpolations that come attached to the by now familiar “I get this, I get that” structure.15

15 The phrase may seem to summon the specter of Frank O’Hara, whose hymn to affective becoming, “In Memory of My Feelings” (O’Hara 252-57)—more than his so-called “I do this, I do that” poems—must count as an important inspiration for “Outside from the Start.” But for readers familiar with O’Hara’s 1960 poem “Poem,” with its opening line (“So many echoes in my
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 around someone else’s story—

a glow of light that wavers and collapses
in a phttt of forgiving what’s indifferent to it. . . . (SP 98)

Riley intensifies the sense of such invasions of personal narrative space as violations of the body in the stanzas which follow. An absence of coordinating conjunctions and any obvious causality allows us to conjure with the affective shape of passivity that is created *between* the violator and violated: “not the being worked mechanically but the stare / to catch just what it’s doing to you— // there’s the revulsion point, puffs up a screen / tacks cushiony lips on a face-shaped gap // a-fuzz with a hair corona, its mouth a navel / not quiet, and disappointing as adult chocolate . . .” (99).

This reaching of “the revulsion point” in social interaction can be seen as an extreme example of what Riley, echoing Nietzsche’s phrase, “reactions of the will” (*Writings from the Late Notebook* 211), calls “these instants of the will” (*WS* 45), which corresponds to what she sees as the likely complications involved in any attempt to take on an identity: “There’s a flash of consent where I let myself into a category of social being, or there’s a jarring reluctance when I demur” (45). This is how her improvisatory lyric “does” reification embarrassment. Once again, Riley wants to show us the way of subjection or objectification as the necessary prelude to a fuller bodily subjecthood. Here at rock bottom, the phantomatic “I” of “Outside from the Start” rears up again in another high-spirited redrafting in the Deleuzian-Guattarian mode of becoming-nonhuman. From an initial point of departure—“I’d rather stalk as upright as a gang of arrows”—this new energy carries over into exhilaratingly depersonalized mineral and avian habitats and then back toward a lover’s disappointments and allowed deferral of those disappointments through the experienced natural world’s own marshy suggestions of the idea of an inner self. It is a passage that seems determined to reflect what

head”) and its illustration of the difficulty of speaking without being overcome by other people’s lines of poetry, clichés, interpretations and symbolic languages of depth (O’Hara 352), Riley’s sassy post-Romantic precursor will have been already summoned.
Riley says is the difficulty in not inheriting a sense of innerness in the language we use in our self-descriptions—even when we know it’s misleading—since “it’s impossible to move clear away from all this imagined topography . . . its deeps and shallows. . . . This metaphoricity so saturates thought that it’s not a matter of isolating it but of plumbing its presence” (45):

- petticoat brine, bladderwrack-brown
- coppice rustlers, always a one to fall for—Cut it, blank pennywort charm, or
- punch of now that rips the tireless air
- or gorgeous finger-stroke of grime (SP 100)

After another section’s complex mood-swinging reflection on temporal and other sorts of desired presences, the poem comes to a close in a fifth and final section’s performance of a strangely clipped, rhyming ceremoniousness. Its opening image (“The muscled waves reared up . . .”) could be of the language that has used and been used by the poem and which “is its own foundation, or which, like a wave, gathers itself to hurtle beyond its own limits,” as Merleau-Ponty puts it (229). And yet the past tense in which this section is written, as well as the poem’s taunting of its own virtuous claims to impersonality (“. . . and scrupulously no hints of mock neutrality were lost” [SP 101]), imply that such quasi-autonomous affective power is no longer available, if it ever really was. This criticism of faux-disinterestedness introduces a more overtly political language with which to attack the forms of collectivization lurking underneath our liberal expansionism and passive aggressive oppositional resentment alike. It would appear that the waves rearing up, fresh and stale, are (also) the more gravely affective “Waves of anger and fear / [. . . ] // Obsessing our private lives” in Auden’s bloodshot meditation, in “September I, 1939,” on the rhetoric of democracy in “a low dishonest decade” from the vantage point of what he called “this neutral air / Where blind skyscrapers use / Their full height to proclaim / The strength of Collective Man” (Auden, The English Auden (1986)):

- Containment-led indifference, or conspiracy
- accounts of generals’ pensions, cost
- no setback for the partners of democracy
who portioned barnyards out to each volost

while florid in the twilight, Nation stood
alight above the low dismembered good. (Riley, SP 101)

And so the poem ends by returning us to the historical frame of reference in which the always already linguistic and allocated self is born and becomes—except that in this unsettling, already-past twilight of the idols it is the supremely collectivizing word “Nation” that is burning. It is telling that Riley, whose poetic language hovers between avant-garde New York, lyrical British and European Modernist registers, should turn to the self-exiled wartime Auden at this climactically “post-national” moment in her poem.

16 Perhaps Riley holds out her own version of Auden’s “affirming flame” here at the “Negation and despair” (Auden, The English Auden 247) of nineteenth-century liberalism or what, with “dismembered,” sounds like it could be a phallogocentric metaphysics deconstructed by the interpretation of decentered bodily affects. That is to say, perhaps here at the torched sepia of the poem’s ending we are allowed a very brief glimpse of the true ethics that might come forth when the thinking that has been done for us is gone, if only we could come down out of the temptingly warm air, the “buff” of speculative selfhood in which we can forget (or disremember) the knowledge of our contingency.

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We have traveled a long way from the initial account of affects in the work of Nietzsche and Deleuze and Guattari, for Riley offers her own very complex and very different, more feminist and in some ways more self-deprecating version of “becoming” at the hands of language and (its) affects. And yet hers is undoubtedly also a poetics of exposure, of uneasily joyful limits, within which a poetic persona must always survive the humiliation of being “accidentally spoken . . . by any language whatsoever” in order to bring those linguistic affects into service (as Nietzsche puts it). This is, we might say, a poetics of inoculation, one in which writing puts us intensely, for a time, in psycholinguistic harm’s way—in the way of the affects—for the sake of our continuing liveliness. The threats may come from love, hate, the sadomasochistic temptations of identification and all the simplifying forms of self-description: always in language, our great hope.

As Riley constantly acknowledges in her critical texts, her accounts of
psycholinguistic harm and resistance draw on a great deal of conceptually more original work that preceded her. But in her scrupulous marking out of the particular linguistic structures the affects assume, and in the variety of her poetry’s discursive and lyric encounters with troubling material, she proves herself an errant reconfigurer at work with “the tireless air / or gorgeous finger-stroke of grime”; she, too, is a discoverer of previously unrecognized affects through the uneasy becoming of her own thinking, echoing selves.

Works Cited
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