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LYRIC POETRY AS SOCIETY

Michael Clune

Infidel Poetics: Riddles, Nightlife, Substance, by Daniel Tiffany. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. Pp. 254. $66.00 cloth, $24.00 paper.

Critics have recently renewed the assault on the lyric, this time in the name of restoring poetic texts to social contexts. In the most accomplished work to emerge from this latest assault—Virginia Jackson's *Dickinson's Misery*—the poem is prized from its lyric isolation and read as a communication between members of a historical community.[1] From its exile as the overheard speech of a vaguely ideological solitude, the poem is led out into a robust sociability. This kind of criticism is beyond plausible; it fairly glows with hearty good sense. Poems do not exist in vacuums; they exist in communities! And the idea of community on which critics such as Jackson rely is hardly eccentric. We all know what a community looks like before we ever read a lyric.

Daniel Tiffany's *Infidel Poetics* demolishes this common sense by showing us what a community looks like from the lyric's perspective. For Tiffany, this perspective is shaped by lyric's basic feature: obscurity. Lyric obscurity is not obscure. The central paradox of the lyric is that obscurity is its most obvious feature, its "open secret." Obscurity is the first thing that the student exposed to lyric notices. This seems to supply a ready role for the professor. He or she is the person who will lead us from darkness to illumination; the professor will decipher the symbol and show us the human face, the trace of real relationship, hidden behind the curtain of a line.

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The enigma of poetic language is of course precisely what the new commonsense critic seeks to dispel by placing the works in the historical loam of letters, conversations, newspapers, advertisements, speeches, and preaching from which they arise. For Tiffany, by contrast, obscurity is the key to lyric's distinctive modes of community. He asks us to linger with the obvious mystery of the poem, to remain, in the phrase from Milton that Tiffany repeatedly quotes, before the "darkness visible" of lyric language.

Two models of community emerge from this reading practice. The first is a collective mode constituted by "obscurity effects . . . generated by the poetic enigma" (9). In his exposition of this model, Tiffany develops Georg Simmel's and Eve Sedgwick's theories in order to read examples of the lyric incorporation of subcultural speech from early English canting songs to contemporary rap. Simmel's sense that secretive speech is a "communicative event" apart from its decodable content (4) and Sedgwick's analysis of the way the "spectacle" of the closet constitutes a source of social fascination (15) furnish Tiffany with a flexible frame for showing how lyrical patois or cant draws us in. The collectives maintained by such lyrics "remind us of the possibility of communities that defy the seemingly inexorable logic of transparency and continuity implicit in the social imaginary of the internet" (11).

As a preliminary model of the communal being of the lyric reader, then, Tiffany offers us the initiate whose relation with another is routed through shared contact with a dense sociologically subterranean language. *Infidel Poetics* would have been an important book had it done nothing more than to trace this figure's surprising centrality across literary and vernacular poetries. But the book's true urgency for contemporary criticism lies in Tiffany's exploration of the second mode of lyric collectivity, which he defines, somewhat forbiddingly, at the book's outset as "A constellation, or mass, of expressive relations between entities which are essentially solipsistic" (9).

As we shall soon follow Tiffany's criticism into the dark heart of philosophical counterintuition, it is worth stressing that his argument starts with, is founded on, and never loses contact with obvious features of poems recognizable to any reader. He begins his delineation of the second model of community projected by the lyric with a description of riddles, classic exempla of poetic enigma. Viktor Shklovksy's comments on riddles provide an instructively contrasting preparation for Tiffany's approach. Shklovsky, like Tiffany, rejects the cryptographic method of reading riddles. When Boccaccio calls sex "scraping out the barrel," the point is not to get the reader to substitute in the correct term but instead to

defamiliarize the image, to make one see it anew.[2] In showing how the poem stimulates perceptual intensity, Shklovsky argues that the riddle's indirection has a psychological payoff.[3]

Tiffany, in search of ontological rather than psychological insight, focuses on a different, if equally common, feature: the tendency of the riddle, in impersonating an object such as a cross or a sword, to disown its speaking voice. He shows how riddles traditionally contain lines such as "Alefred ordered me to be made." "Although these objects speak and thus appear to occupy, at a linguistic level, the position of a subject, their grammatical position in these statements is usually in the accusative case, 'Godric made me,' thereby preserving their status as objects that are acted upon" (35). The riddle foregrounds the curious nature of the lyric as an artifact that simultaneously manifests the expressive capacity of a subject's speech and the stubborn muteness of a made thing.

Readers of poetry will recognize the ubiquity of this simultaneity, which justifies Tiffany in taking the formal problem of the riddle to be a formal problem for lyric as such. I think, for example, of Sylvia Plath's last poem, "Edge." "The woman is perfected. / Her dead // Body wears a smile of accomplishment, . . . Her bare // Feet *seem* to be saying: / We have come so far, it is over."[4] Here the speech that properly belongs to the poem is attributed to dead feet through an as-if. This as-if, in which subjectivity is concealed in objecthood, is for Tiffany the substance of lyric speech.

Tiffany thus presents us with a concrete and characteristic feature of the riddle, abundantly illustrated by examples from the Sphinx through Dickinson. The riddle is the ancient poetic form of enigmatic speech. This speech declares at once the thing-like quality of subjectivity and the subjectivity lodged at the heart of the thing. And now Tiffany asks: Why? Why should the riddle's form compress and elide the difference between subject and object? Why should obscurity conceal *this*?

To answer this question, Tiffany invokes the imbrication of subject and object in Leibniz's metaphysics. Leibniz claims that the fundamental components of matter are monads. In one of the strangest turns in the history of philosophy, Leibniz describes these atoms of the objective world as "confused perceptions." Each monad "knows the infinite—knows all—but confusedly. It is like walking by the seashore and hearing the great noise of the sea: I hear the particular noises of each wave, of which the whole noise is composed, but without distinguishing them" (111). Tiffany finds in Leibniz's theory a compelling set of terms for preserving the fascinating obscurity of the riddle's subject-object from criticism's cryptographic impulses.

If the form of the riddle provides one instance of an obscure mixture of subject and object, Tiffany argues that the swirl of confused perception also characterizes the lyric image. The examples that Tiffany offers us range from Virgil's description "of an attempt to dislodge a beehive from a tree with a smoky torch" (49) to the "ember of [Gerard Manley Hopkins's] pied beauty, too faint to illuminate anything but itself, and therefore akin to darkness" (57).[5] Capacious as Tiffany's archive is, readers will want to test his challenging formulations against their own favorite lyric examples. For myself, I found his account to be an accurate explanation of what one would have to accept to take Keats's negative capability seriously. In Keats's account of the generation of lines such as "The murmorous haunt of flies on summer eves," he distinguishes between a poetry that aims at representation of the object's form and a poetry that aims at replication of the object's substance in language.[6] In the metaphysical frame that Tiffany sets up, the dense, quasi-objective, confused perception embodied by lyric language is not different in kind from the substance of matter.

Once again, we are brought up against the unsettling quality of poetry's common sense. From Kant through Heidegger, the attempt to be adequate to obvious facts of aesthetic phenomena has pushed philosophy to extremes. Tiffany adopts Leibniz's concept of matter as confused perception as a useful description both of the uncanny mixture of subject and object that he finds in the riddle and the lyric image and of the unusual relations that extend from these forms.

We are now in a position to assess these relations. Leibniz's "metaphysics . . . can offer critical insights into the relational power of hermetic forms" (9). The question of the kinds of relations proper to poetic speech has preoccupied aesthetics since the eighteenth century. Looking back on this history from the mid-twentieth century, Hans Gadamer isolates two options. The first is allegory, in which the poet pairs one thing with another through an association mimetic of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign. The second is symbol. According to Gadamer, the way that the latter connects things is through neither social convention nor an equivalence arbitrarily chosen by the poet. Rather, the symbol "presupposes a metaphysical connection between visible and invisible."[7] Rimbaud's "Voyelles," for example, is allegory that tries to pass itself off as symbol. Mallarme's livre and Virgil's smoky torch are the genuine articles. Lacking the clear associations of allegory or convention, the correspondences that radiate from the symbol are indefinite.

The metaphysical turn of *Infidel Poetics* develops this tradition of analyzing the lyric symbol. "Like

monads," Tiffany writes, poems "are forms—centers of reflection—which mirror all other forms" (93). Instead of the direct connection that the allegorical image forges with a single other, the withdrawal of lyric from clear limited connections is the prerequisite for the work of unlimited mimesis. The very obscurity of the symbol is the signal of its functioning, its confused mirroring of the sum total of reality. The enigma of the lyric image conceals a multiplicity of relations.

This claim will appear excessive only to readers who have not spent much time with the modern lyric. As Tiffany notes, Adorno, perhaps the most rigorous analyst of the lyric's social dimension, himself adapted the terms of Leibniz's *Monadology* to describe lyric phenomena. But it is crucial to mark Tiffany's difference from Adorno in this respect. For Adorno, the lyric withdraws from direct relations to a space apart, from which it reflects the social whole. The poem becomes, in the famous phrase from "Lyric Poetry and Society," "a philosophical sundial of history."[8] Adorno is thus interested in lyric as an optic for learning about actual social relations. Tiffany, on the other hand, is interested in poetry as an instance of and model for new relations.

Tiffany's solipsistic lyric monad does not communicate. Rather, its entire being is flooded by a total relationality unlimited by norm, convention, or rule. His innovation is to take up an aspect of Leibniz's thought that Adorno neglects. Leibniz writes of a harmony that obtains between monads, a mysterious and internal alignment that exists without interaction. In Tiffany's hands, this harmony makes the lyric's confused reflection of the whole look less like an opportunity for knowledge and more like a place to live. The lyric offers us an example of a different kind of social being. Like Bersani's "anticommunal model of connectedness," which Tiffany cites, Tiffany's lyric monadology is a powerful response to our age's deep dissatisfaction with the bitter logic of recognition, with the degraded spectacle of social communication, with the unwholesome labor of insinuating oneself across the boundaries of the other (13). By withdrawing from interaction and communication, the obscure lyric finds itself at home with the whole world. Tiffany thus enables us to see in Dickinson's select lyric society a capaciousness exceeding the wildest claims of Whitman's rhetoric.

I want to close by suggesting that the choice between Adorno and Tiffany is a good way of posing the options faced by contemporary social poetics. It is a choice between a poetics oriented to the generation of knowledge about actual societies and a poetics oriented to the exploration of the virtual societies generated by lyric. At first glance, Adorno's

path will probably strike most readers as more plausible, less outlandish. But this perception is superficial. Tiffany wants to do no more than to explain obvious features of lyric, and he adopts Leibniz's metaphysics as a tool useful for this task. Tiffany makes no claim that Leibniz is right about the structure of reality, only that Leibniz's theory turns out to be a good way of explaining certain key features of lyric.

Adorno's relentless translation of lyric into social optic, on the other hand, conceals a Hegelian social metaphysics, one that he assumes to be an accurate description of reality without presenting any evidence.[9] Perhaps the accumulation of a half century of readings by his progeny provide all the evidence we need. How do things stand? Does anyone today think Adorno-style social poetics have meaningfully increased our knowledge of actual societies? What could be more outlandish than that?

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NOTES

1. Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). Jackson wants to replace the "alienated lyric image of the human" with "the exchange between historical persons between whom the barriers of space and time had not fallen" (117).
2. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" (1917), in *Russian Formalist Critics,* edited by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 21.
3. In his treatment of Burke's analysis of the obscurity proper to the sublime, Tiffany similarly de-emphasizes the psychological reading of Burke. For a recent example of the latter, see Alan Richardson, *The Neural Sublime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).
4. Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper, 1992), 272, emphasis added.
5. While the *Aeneid* is of course an epic, Tiffany relies on R. W. Johnson's classic study of Virgil's influence on the European lyric tradition in arguing that this image becomes foundational for post-Renaissance lyric.
6. John Keats, *Keats' Poetry and Prose,* edited by Jeffrey N. Cox (New York: Norton, 2009), 458.
7. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* translated and revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 60.
8. Theodor Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," in *The Adorno Reader,* edited by Brian O'Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 221.
9. Perhaps in response to a felt weakening of the persuasiveness of Adorno's Hegelianism, Robert Kaufman, in a brilliant series of essays, has recently attempted to give us a Kantian Adorno. For Kaufman's Adorno, the lyric provides the critic with an opportunity to generate new social scientific concepts out of the encounter with the poem's quasi-conceptual form. This has the potential to rescue Adorno from the great weakness of social criticism: knowing

in advance what the work will tell you about society. See "Red Kant," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 682–724; and "Adorno's Social Lyric and Literary Criticism Today," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno,* edited by Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Adorno's thinking on the transformational capacity of the work of art, especially in *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), offers another promising alternative to his influential view of art's critical power.