

2022

## Can you feel my heart beat so? I can't let it go: lyric, repetition, and the poematic subject in question

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### Recommended Citation

Tsieh, Ezekiel (2022) "Can you feel my heart beat so? I can't let it go: lyric, repetition, and the poematic subject in question," *The Woodward Review: A Creative and Critical Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 5. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/woodwardreview/vol1/iss2/5>

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Ezekiel Tsieh  
 responding to the lyric in  
 Woodward Review 1

*Can you feel my heart beat so? I can't let it go:  
 Lyric, repetition, and the poematic subject in  
 question*

Heard it all before; I want my money back!

— Bowling for Soup, "High School Never Ends"

Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I  
 am large, I contain multitudes)

— Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*.

Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres. *I repeat*: genres  
 are not to be mixed. I will not mix them.

— Jacques Derrida

It [a deciphering practice] proposes that the way we "normally" feel  
 about Self, Other, and World should not be taken as any index of  
 the "justness" or legitimacy of the ratios of distribution of power,  
 privilege, and role allocation...

— Sylvia Wynter, "Rethinking Aesthetics: Notes Towards  
 a Deciphering Practice."

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This isn't the first essay I pitched. It's not the second one, which  
 ought to have been submitted by the deadline which, at the time of  
 writing, was two days ago. Rather, this is the third time I am trying  
 to write this essay, having let a little loose on explaining myself

completely or concisely. But there is a point I would like to drive home that has run throughout every variation:

Poetry, and specifically the poetry we've decided to call "lyric poetry" today, is defined by two primary characteristics. First, that the poetic is not just an "event", "experience," or "encounter," but that the subjectivity of the poem itself is structured by a paradoxical and unresolvable tension between poematic desire for singular totality and the impossibility to answer such a call in the poetic act. Second, that the work of interpretation which both constitutes the encounter and its aftermath—or, *reading*, as we are used to calling it in contemporary criticism—contributes an equal share as the poem itself to this particular subjectivity (Derrida, *Che cos'è la poesia?*). And while it is the case that the above has been well rehearsed by other *readers* of Derrida, this essay does not seek to be a dress rehearsal; my point in this essay is somewhat ajar. For if the poem is defined by this elusive subjectivity that at once is and is not (by virtue of its own impossibility), we must beg the question:

Is there a subject in a poem?

I do not have the time—and this venue is not the outlet—to putter around psychoanalytic theory in search of a case for

subjectivity on which to rest an answer. Suffice it to say, for present purposes at least, any answer will be deconstructive and therefore somewhat unsatisfying and unpalatable: Yes, because no; and vice-versa. Just so we're clear here: I'm not talking about *the speaker of the poem*, per se, but the question of whether subjectivity requires a subject at all, or if the poem—understood as event, encounter, and experience—can serve or operate as a subject in its own right (one might further ask, Turing-test style, if simulating a subjectivity is the same as having one).

There's some critical consensus that acknowledges one of the prerequisites for subjectivity is a subject and therefore little time is spent establishing what a subject *is*, or otherwise avoiding detail on the matter, or that the subject, qua the French, is dead. Yet subjectivity persists, and how could it not when defined precisely by the impossibility to meet d/Desire? To put the question another way, in a deliberate reversal of how it has been commonly phrased: Who or what is addressing me in or from the poem?; Who or what is performing the poem's dictated enunciations, and how am I supposed to receive them?; Does a poem need a subject?

This last is another way of asking: *Does poetry need critics?*

The trick of the (lyric) poem is that it does not belong to any genre, not even to a genre called “lyric.” This sleight of hand lies not just in the acts of writing, reading, and interpretation, but in the way it relies on what is already familiar, already at-hand, and already-*ready*: the poem does not make itself available to its audience, but was available before it had arranged itself into itself. The lyric creates a tautology of language that is both impenetrable and impossible from which to escape. It does so by way of repetition in a Deleuzean sense, in which the repetition of an event (the poem) is necessarily already differentiated or otherwise dislocated and displaced from its origin(al). This is precisely what allows for “theories of reading,” which is the term literary critics have embarrassingly coined either out of a genuine earnestness to expand definitions of *the literary* or for the vain veneer of colloquialism. Perhaps both. Whichever it is, the poem (and therefore its *poematic*) relies on and necessitates at-hand sensory and affective clichés, and... I'm kind of tired of it.<sup>6</sup>

A poem has a subject not because the subject is a prerequisite of subjectivity, but only because poematic subjectivity throws a

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<sup>6</sup> Before I'm accused of being a crank or a hater (which, to be fair, I am both), my discomfiture with these clichés is not that they are ineffectual or otherwise dysfunctional; in fact quite the opposite. The lyric *works*. I *relate* to it; I *feel* it.

subject into the world. This poematic subjectivity is not inherent to the poem itself, or to be more precise, is invisible to our senses and to our aesthetic expressions. Rather, poematic subjectivity here ought to be understood as the process by which the subject of the poem emerges (or, at least, the illusion of one, such that a poem might be addressed). In this way, poematic subjectivity is the *result of the encounter* between critic and poem and renders itself distinct from subjectivity as such. The poem itself cannot be the subject, for the poem—inasmuch as it *is* an event, encounter, experience—cannot in itself have d/Desire (and therefore does not meet the standard of the *poematic*, which I would argue *does*). There exists a backwards-looking movement that has gone acknowledged but uninterrogated in contemporary theories of poetry and particularly of lyric (Jonathan Culler's recent *Theory of the Lyric*, for example, admits itself to be much more of a general outline of a theory than theory in and of itself).<sup>7</sup> This backwards-looking movement can be found in Derrida's mentions of the double-movement of the poematic function, and is supported through what he calls *apprendre par cours*.<sup>8</sup> Derrida's pun

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<sup>7</sup> Culler, Jonathan. *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> For a quick glance at what I mean by this, I am deriving it from Jacques Derrida by way of Timothy Clark's essay, "By Heart: A Reading of Derrida's 'Che cos'è la poesia?'" through Keats and Celan," 1993. *Oxford Literary Review*.

here is on *par cours*, where to learn (or, in this case, "apprehend") is also to go "by/on [a] journey."<sup>9</sup> It puns on the French *cœur*, meaning "heart," hence making it an obtusely triangulated pun between French and English. Derrida instructs that a poem is something one desires to learn "by heart" (for which we can substitute "rote," at least for the purposes of this essay), and learning both as a journey and being on one.<sup>10</sup>

Event, encounter, and experience do not collapse into each other so much as they are each mutually constitutive of the other two, so much so that the three separate terms themselves, though they signify—that is, describe—different affective (and even or interpretive) states in the acts of reading, writing, and interpretation, they do not imminently or inevitably conjure a subject even as they might operate in similar and simultaneous manners.

Yet this poetic subjectivity, because it is conjured without subject but not without referent (that is to say, without cliché), is half of the double-bind that is expressed in the linguistic tautology of the

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<sup>9</sup> Derrida, Jacques. "Che cos'è la poesia?" *Points... Interviews 1974-1994*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Ed. Elizabeth Weber. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

poem.<sup>11</sup> As both precondition and “post-condition” of the poem (I hesitate on words like “aftermath/afterlife” or “residue”), it conjures a subjectivity that is not so much obscured or obfuscated from us despite its tautology, but rather escapes prosaic language altogether to arrange words in a different system of meaning, i.e. a different language. This is, however, about as far as a poem is able to go. The work of subjectivity—which includes the work of creating a subject—lies precisely in the encounter: when the critic calculates that their attempt at interpretation is a worthy risk to violate or otherwise intrude upon the poem's subjectivity by attempting to decipher its meaning for a politics of the here-and-now.

Hence the problem with contemporary lyric poetry. Cliché is everywhere and nowhere. If cliché is one of the defining characteristics of poetry, and particularly of lyric, then what are we to make of it? This is not a question of what contemporary lyric might be hiding “between the lines” per se—it is not a program for interpretation. But as I aim to make demonstrate in the following paragraphs, contemporary lyric poetry relies on cliché for its

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<sup>11</sup> It should be clear by now that the double-movement is also a double-bind. It might even be more accurate to describe this double movement as a “doubly-binding double-movement”.

legibility, and that that aesthetic choice has political consequences that are ultimately political failures—be they expressions of or catalysts towards such failure.

I want to make clear that I do not mourn the loss of genre and in fact quite celebrate it, but my argument here is concerned with poetry and its critics, and thus I feel the need to explicate upon and justify to some reasonable degree what I mean by lyric and lyric poetry, and how exactly it “repeats itself in a Deleuzean sense,” the argument that quite obviously haunts this essay (What does the “lyric” in “lyric poetry” denote?).

To start with a return: Derrida makes a significant distinction between the poetic and the poematic. The relevant passage reads:

The poetic, let us say it, would be that which you desire to learn, but from and of the other, thanks to the other, and under dictation, by heart, *imparare a memoria*. Isn't that already it, the poem, once a token is given, the advent\* of an event, at the moment in which the traversing of the road named translation remains as improbable as an accident, one which is all the same intensely dreamed of, required there where what it promises always leaves something to be desired? ...<sup>12</sup>

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\* From Peggy Kamuf's translation: *La venue*: also “she who has come.”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Here already Derrida gives us the jargon to distinguish between what can be said (the poetic, which is the aesthetic—that is to say, language or expressive form—of the poem) and what cannot, yet desires to be said, and thus compels the imperfect utterance that results from this process. This latter is what we might decipher as the poematic impulse—the compulsion from within a poem that is indeed hidden between the lines, but hidden so that it is indecipherable. Such is the paradoxical dilemma of the poem, a dilemma that Derrida likens to that of a hedgehog (*l'hérisson*) having been thrown out onto an expressway. The tension between the poetic and the poematic is the poem itself and is what compels Derrida to urge us to learn poetry *by heart* (*l'apprendre par cœur/cours*).

But on the subject of repetition (and with its relevance towards criticism in mind), we must turn to the archive, at once historical and affective, in order to compute anything that might begin to resemble a critical response. Because the paradox of poetic criticism is that it cannot escape the poematic impulse (and thus becomes a discourse both about and within the poematic); and because poetic criticism is precisely what conjures (something like) a subjectivity, repetition becomes both the tool by which a poem can

be deciphered (and therefore learned by heart) and indecipherable to anyone or anything but itself.

An explication is in order. By "repetition" here I am referencing the concept of repetition as explicated by Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*, in which repetition is argued to be the only true form of difference, in some significant part because of its iterability along both chronological and narrative time.<sup>1314</sup> Repetition for lyric poetry functions by taking a set of available tools—the language that the lines of the poem are written in—and arranging them in a way that is simultaneously similar enough for our cultural tastes and yet different enough from prose that we might recognize it as poetry. In this way, it could be said that contemporary lyric poetry is not quite so much suffering from exhaustion; it is simply doing what each art form is designed to do—repeat itself across different contexts throughout time. Perhaps that explains my boredom with it. Without its line breaks, “lyric poetry” is simply “prose poetry,” which is to say that contemporary lyric poetry is

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<sup>13</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> My argument here—specifically the jargon on chronological time, narrative time, denaturalization, and denarrativization are all taken from Fredric Jameson's essay “Our Classicism” in *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*.

romanticism (or, romantic language) for our times. In this way it is determinately undifferentiated from prosaic language in that it shares the same available set of expressions but arranges them in a way that denaturalizes and denarrativizes the prosaic structure. Its aesthetic, in other words, provides—at least for me—a silent but looming discomfiture with being comforted by lyric. As Patricia Stuhlke has recently demonstrated in *The Ruse of Repair*, art (and for that matter, criticism) that comforts has the potential to make unethical life justifiable.<sup>1516</sup>

"Rhythmic dissymmetry" is the term Derrida uses in his essay to name a trait by which a poem expresses its desire to be learned by heart. And while I am partial to rhythm as a placeholder for what I am calling repetition (i.e. the tendency of contemporary lyric poetry to express a particular romanticism that I can't yet place), it is worth keeping in mind that rhythm is something unique to spoken language. French, for example, as an unaccented language,

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<sup>15</sup> Stuelke, Patricia. *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> For more on why an ethics of discomfort ought to guide our aesthetic principles, I reference Adorno in *Minima Moralia: Wrong life cannot be lived rightly*. If you'll take my recommendation, Matt Waggoner's *Unhoused: Adorno and the Problem of Dwelling* explicates this problem well.

relies—perhaps more so than the accented English—on idio-, topo-dialectic, and rhythmic cues so as to be intelligible.

The point I am trying to arrive at here is that contemporary lyric poetry is particularly adept at effectualizing what Nietzsche—and then Deleuze—called the Will to Power, largely in reference to artistic production. It does this through what I am tempted to call, thanks to Rebecca Mead, the [Scourge of “Relatability”](#).<sup>17</sup> While unsympathetic to Mead's rather conservative aesthetic values, the concern I have is that "relatability" (en)traps us within the false feeling of safety when we have instead been thrown—like hedgehogs, like poems—into danger. Derrida reminds us that the "gift" of the poem is a gift of subjectivity, albeit one that is instituted within its own poetic and poematic order rather than one that registers in vernacular prose:

A fable that you could recount as the gift of the poem, it is an emblematic story: someone writes *you*, to you, of you, on you. No, rather, a mark addressed to you, left and confided with you, is accompanied by an injunction, in truth it is instituted in this very order which, in its turn, constitutes you, assigning your origin or giving rise to you...<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Mead, Rebecca. “The Scourge of ‘Relatability.’” *The New Yorker*, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

With the myth of the stable subject utterly dismissed by contemporary standards (and the subject itself even considered dead by some), Derrida's hedgehog demonstrates the dilemma of the poem's articulation, rendered in his language as “movement”:

But our poem does not hold still within names, nor even within words. It is first of all thrown out on the roads and in the fields, thing beyond languages, even if it sometimes happens that it recalls itself in language, *when it gathers itself up, rolled up in a ball on itself, it is more threatened than ever in its retreat: it thinks it is defending itself, and it loses itself.* (Emphasis added)<sup>19</sup>

It is perhaps here that I admit, and not in a footnote, that I have *lost myself* to lyric before—who hasn't lost themselves to the music that reminds them of themselves? But if what is needed of poetry—and of critics—in our present times is not comfort but a constant critique of the here and now, then what good is lyric and its critics?

I'm a post-aesthete, and I'm over it.

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Too much to say, and I don't have the heart for it today.

— Jacques Derrida's opening words in his eulogy for  
Gilles Deleuze

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.