

Copy That

A Chorus of Ears: On 'the voice of the poem', **Denise Riley**, Picador, 2026, pp. 144, £12.99

When I could step into the shockingly open world
I wasn't sure where I ended, or where someone else began.
This was a joyous state.
– Denise Riley, '1948'

At the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, John Milton appeals to a 'Heav'nly Muse', urging it to sing the story of 'Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit / Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste / Brought Death into the World'. Milton is calling upon the same Muse, he explains, that 'didst inspire / That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed' – the people of Israel – 'how the Heav'ns and Earth / Rose out of Chaos', referring to the first five books of the Old Testament, traditionally believed to have been written down by Moses. Milton uses the word 'inspire' to describe the act of Moses receiving the Word of God, a verb whose meaning, at the turn of the seventeenth century, conveyed a greater sense of *animation* than it does today – *to infuse some thought or feeling into (a person, etc.), as if by breathing*, according to the *OED*. This definition summons an image of Moses being literally *inspired*, his human lungs breathed into and expanded by the spirit.

These lines occurred to me towards the end of *A Chorus of Ears: on 'the voice of the poem'*, an inspirational collection of essays from the British poet and philosopher Denise Riley, drawn from her recent Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 2024. (Established in the 1880s, the Clark Lectures focus on works of English literature and have been given by a wide roster of writers and academics, from Helen Vendler and Tom Stoppard to Seamus Heaney, Alice Oswald, Geoffrey Hill and T. S. Eliot.) In her final essay, Riley wonders where, exactly, the 'voice' of the poem resides. 'Dispersed as it is through the ears of its readers, the whereabouts

of the poem's voice are puzzling', she writes: 'does it only hang in the air lightly, like a transient music? If so, the printed poem, as its transcript, would more resemble a score.' 'But then what internal air bouys up the poem[?]' she asks, alluding to a number of technological advancements that appear to give the once-imagined 'inner voice' of lyric poetry 'observable spatiality', including MRI scanning, 'which can capture internal speech, including irony, as neural tracings', made visible to the human eye. I'm reminded of Duncan MacDougall's famous experiment of 1907, which attempted to prove the existence of the soul by measuring the mass lost by a human being at the point of death; working with a modest sample size of just six patients, MacDougall's results noted that one body lost 'three fourths of an ounce', an indication that the soul might weigh somewhere in the region of twenty-one grams.

Unlike MacDougall's experiment, however, now cited as an example of selective data reporting, Riley's interest in the whereabouts of the voice of the poem is not based on a hunch but on a thread that seems to stitch back through the history of lyric poetry; a compelling sense that there is something other than the poet herself that animates the poem, 'A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things,' to borrow lines from Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey'. '[T]he fact you experience as a writer is this', argues Riley, 'it's the voice of language itself which is trying to speak. To state this isn't some aesthetic or philosophic mystification, but is the felt practice of lyric writing in particular.'

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At the heart of Riley's argument is her suspicion that a contemporary emphasis on the public persona of the poet is distracting – even *detracting* – from the poetry. '[T]he zeitgeist's tendency to aggrandize the poetic persona, with its platformed competitiveness', she argues, 'risks becoming the enemy of the poem', 'might even do the poems a creeping if petty violence.' Now professor emeritus at the University of East Anglia, where she taught for many years, Riley has seen the impact of this tendency first-hand. 'Many fee-paying students of creative writing worry aloud, desperately, about how to tailor their work for acceptance by favoured

journals, as they note the well-placed few, garlanded with shortlistings for annual prizes', she laments, 'as if those accidents of fortune were unassailable literary credentials, constituting serious criticism.'

While her own awards shelf is hardly empty, Riley's discomfort with a literary culture too heavily weighted towards prizes prompts at least one poem from her collection *Lurex*. In 'Prize Cultures', she describes a sequence of absurd and pointless trophies: 'Her work is hotly tipped for an award for *Flagrant Though Delicate Self-Promotion* [...] He's since been shortlisted five times for a global *Grudgingly Respected If Privately Disliked*'. The same frustration carries through the essays. 'While Miss World contests have long felt shabbily antiquated,' she suggests, 'Ms and Mr Poetry must still mince across a spotlight stage', a form of public exhibition and '[s]ynthetic competitiveness' which 'surely distracts from fuller consideration of the writing in favour of the spectacle of the writers'. 'So that's what he looks like, I like that linen jacket, pity about the stammer,' reads a passage from Riley's introduction to *Poets on Writing: Britain, 1970–1991*, sounding a note of suspicion towards the distracting nature of poetry readings more than thirty years ago.

For Riley, it is not the figure of the poet but the poem that should take centre stage. 'Arguably, if anything needs to "find its voice", it's the poem – not the poet.' Presenting, as she calls them, 'clusters of conjectures', Riley aims 'to bring out the inhuman aspect of poetry', attempting to offer up 'some older approaches which have got buried, yet which might be encouraging [...] to some contemporary poets who are disconcerted by the stress on their persons as manifesting or embodying their "careers".' This proposition not only benefits those poets – myself among them – who 'may avoid giving public readings out of a perfectly ordinary shyness', argues Riley, or those 'who'd rather duck a barrage of exposure,' but also strikes at something fundamental about lyric poetry, that it may have less to do with a sense of personal 'agency' or 'authorship' than an engagement with – surrender to? – a form, even a force of language. 'A work of art has an author', writes Simone Weil in *Gravity and Grace*, quoted by Riley in her opening pages, 'and yet, when it is perfect, it has something which is essentially anonymous about it.' It's a comment that shares something with Keats's famous image of 'the chameleon Poet' in a letter of 1818,

writing to his friend Richard Woodhouse. 'A Poet is the most unpoetical of anything thing in existence', writes Keats, 'because he has no Identity – he is continually in and filling some other Body'.

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Reflecting on the role of social media in the landscape of contemporary poetry, the American writer David Schurman Wallace notices some similar phenomena. 'For a poet, there is little hope of financial reward for one's work itself, so public performance takes on a new urgency', he argues in *The Drift*. 'It's not uncommon', he continues, 'to see an "emerging" poet with a website better manicured than that of a Silicon Valley startup'. 'Increasingly, consumers are offered the image of art-making as a subgenre of celebrity,' writes Wallace, 'and the works of art themselves are allowed to remain laudable but forgettable byproducts.' I'm reminded of a passage from James Longenbach's book *The Resistance to Poetry*, published in 2004. 'Imagine a country in which poetry is respected as never before,' he invites us. 'A country that supports almost 300,000 websites devoted to poetry. A country in which the eighth most popular term plugged into Internet and search engines is poetry (edging out football, Beanie Babies, and the Bible).' 'This country is of course the United States in the twenty first century', Longenbach reveals, and while it's 'difficult to complain about poetry's expanding audience [...] it's more difficult to ask what a culture that wants poetry to be popular wants poetry to be':

The audience has by and large been purchased at the cost of poetry's inwardness: its strangeness, its propensity to defeat its own expectations, its freedom to explore new (or old) linguistic avenues without necessarily needing to worry about economic success.

Denise Riley is not in the business of promoting an alternative economic or political model for poets seeking to make a living from their work. *A Chorus of Ears* 'won't be at all manifesto-like', she is careful to acknowledge, leaving one to wonder at the grim state of the playing field, a concern for arts bodies across the board – see the Royal Shakespeare Company's

recently diminished music department as one of several live examples – who face the challenges of dwindling government support as well as an increasingly socially and environmentally conscious citizenry rightly wary of the financial opportunities offered by international corporations. As Trinculo puts it in *The Tempest*, ‘Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows.’ Instead, Riley’s focus is the value and activity of art as its own end. ‘We are constantly told anyone can write poetry’, writes Don Paterson in his foreword to these essays, and ‘[t]oday’s poetry scene certainly gives the impression anyone does. Riley’s formulation would narrow the field to those who sought no reward but the practice of poetry itself.’

Mounting an argument encompassing a range of writers and philosophers – David Jones, John Stuart Mill, both Shiller and Schelling – Riley makes the case for lyric as a form of overhearing, an artform that has less to do with authorial responsibility than ‘the need for a quiet near-anonymity’, an attempt ‘to seize on any opportunities to become strategically opaque,’ she writes, ‘to vanish without pretext from time to time, to be amiably evasive in defence of your vital invisibility.’ Key to her early presentation is the German poet and essayist Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811), who describes – in an unfinished essay of 1805–06 – the shock of language suddenly appearing to accelerate ahead of its speaker, not ‘a brake on the mind but rather a second wheel running along parallel on the same axle.’ ‘Dwelling on this, I’ve come to think that something analogous happens in poetry’, states Riley:

For in writing lyric, you might well have a similar sensation of language forming ahead of you. The writing emerges ‘in front of’ its author, as if unspooling itself. To wait for it, to let it speak out, can take a kind of blind faith.

This, of course, returns us to the classical figure of the Muse, a non-human (or *inhuman*) capacity that – in a crucial, even *literal* sense – inspires the poet, appearing to speak out of them a language not entirely their own. The same is true of biblical representations of human transcribers receiving the Word of God, as in Caravaggio’s painting of *Saint Matthew and the Angel* – destroyed in Berlin during the Second World War – which depicts

Matthew struggling over a heavy book of papers, scrawling his Gospel, his face betraying equal parts amazement and bewilderment, the gentle angel at his side guiding his writing hand. I'm reminded, also, of certain paintings in which the Word of God is visualised, as in Simone Martini's *Annunciation* in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, in which a thin, delicate thread of gold text flows directly from the mouth of Gabriel to Mary – 'unspooling itself' – as though the words themselves existed independently of any speaker, celestial or otherwise.

While he doesn't appear in *A Chorus of Ears*, the American poet and novelist Ben Lerner considers the same capacity of language in an article of 2012 – 'Contest of Words: High school debate and the demise of public speech' – sections of which are reworked in his novel, *The Topeka School*. Reflecting on the peculiarities of competitive debate during his adolescence, Lerner describes his access to a kind of performative flow state that strongly resembles the accelerated language drawn by Kleist in Riley's essays. 'I would begin to feel less like I was delivering a speech and more that a speech was delivering me,' remembers Lerner, 'that the rhythm and intonation of my presentation were beginning to dictate its content, that I no longer had to organize my arguments so much as let them flow through me':

I became in these transportative moments an acned rhapsode, and if the song that was coursing through me was about the supposedly catastrophic risks of a single-payer health-care system or the affirmative speaker's failure to prove solvency, I was nevertheless more in the realm of poetry than of prose, my speech stretched by speed and intensity until I felt its referential meaning dissolve into pure form, until I was singing the oldest song, singing the very possibility of language.

In an unexpected turn, Lerner draws a parallel between the world of interscholastic debate and another pursuit which played a formative role during his teenage years, the highly theatrical, tongue-twisting arena of freestyle rap. While he is concerned, in part, with the ways in which each form deploys tools of aggression and suppression – the debates reward

dominance, the basement freestyles are a ‘battle’ – Lerner is also interested in how each mode enables its speakers to let go of the steering wheel. ‘I would sometimes manage to rise, I beg you to believe me, above the stupid violence of our battles’, he insists, ‘and enter a zone in which sentences unfolded at a speed I could not consciously control.’ ‘At that point’, he concludes, ‘what mattered was that language, the fundamental medium of sociality, was being displayed in its abstract capacity, and that my friends and I would catch a glimpse, however fleeting, of grammar as pure possibility.’

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For Lerner, as for Riley, there is something essential in acknowledging the purity of ‘abstract’ language. Indeed, Lerner’s own poetry has been preoccupied with questions of language and its function(s) since his 2004 debut, *The Lichtenberg Figures*, a sonnet sequence making conscious use of corporate jargon, clichés, advertising slogans and recycled (at times self-cannibalising) turns of phrase, to generate a swirling pool of language that, at times, appears to have removed its speaker altogether, flung from an ejector seat. ‘I have never been here. / Understand’, ends one poem, ‘You have never seen me’. In a discussion surrounding the use of appropriated language, poet Aaron Kunin asks Lerner the following: ‘Do you realize that we’ve just congratulated each other for poems that are essentially found objects?’ ‘Yes’, comes the reply, ‘we’re complimenting each other on disappearing from our poems. It’s like applauding a speaker for not showing up.’

In *The Hatred of Poetry*, Lerner outlines his belief in the essential failure of poems, whereby every attempt to respond to the poetic impulse – something ‘transcendent or divine’, perhaps the calling of the Muse – results in ‘the song of the infinite [being] compromised by the finitude of its terms’, exposing a gulf between the ‘virtual’ and the ‘actual’, writes Lerner, adopting terms used by the literary critic Allen Grossman. As Shelley puts it his ‘Defence of Poetry’, even ‘the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet.’ After all, writes Robert Lowell in

History, his own sequence of sonnets, ‘words are what get in the way of what they say.’

For Denise Riley, the solution to this problem is to understand that lyric has to do with listening, not speaking. ‘[F]or a lyric to materialise,’ she writes in *A Chorus of Ears*, ‘it’s more helpful to let yourself wait in a condition of listening ignorance’:

I don’t mean that the writer’s presence is a contamination – just that, to let language get close to its truest point of becoming a pure ‘speaking out’, all the accidents of your authorship need to fall away.

Like a straight-line tangent meeting the circumference of a circle, Riley’s argument comes close, at this point, to the writing of John Ashbery, whose work not only influences Lerner’s but seems routinely to perform a kind of lyric disappearing act. At the very least, Riley’s ‘condition of listening ignorance’ – what she later terms ‘a hapless yet alert not-knowing’ – is reminiscent of a phrase by Elizabeth Bishop, reflecting on the writing of Charles Darwin, a phrase which Ashbery draws significant attention to. ‘What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it,’ suggests Bishop, ‘is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.’ ‘Only out of such “perfectly useless concentration”’, Ashbery continues, ‘can emerge the one thing that is useful for us: our coming to know ourselves as the necessarily inaccurate transcribers of the life that is always on the point of coming into being.’

In an article of 2010, Lerner writes that ‘the bizarre power of Ashbery’s best poetry’, comes from its ability ‘to describe the time of its own reading in the time of its own reading’, a particular flow of content and language that manages to ‘keep sense from either cementing or slipping away entirely’. Lerner is interested in Ashbery’s long poem ‘Clepsydra’, from *Rivers and Mountains*, which takes its title from an ancient timekeeping device that uses water as its means of measurement. Speaking to Richard Kostelanetz in 1976, Ashbery describes the poem as ‘a meditation on how time feels as it is passing’, ‘all of a piece, like a stream’. After all, there’s ‘something about time / That only a clock can tell you’, reads a poem in *Houseboat Days*, ‘how it feels, not what it means’ (‘Saying It to Keep It from Happening’).

For Lerner, Ashbery's poem generates a powerful self-consciousness in the reader of their own experience of time, the content of the poem collapsing perfectly into its form, what Lerner refers to as its 'lyric mediacy'. '[T]he particular occasion is of lesser interest to me than the way a happening or experience filters through me', said Ashbery of his poetry in 1972, 'a generalized transcript of what's really going on in our minds all day long.' A few years later, the poet would articulate a famous statement about his writing to Peter Stitt of *The Paris Review*. 'I've conditioned myself to write at almost any time', he suggests:

Sometimes it doesn't work, but on the whole I feel that poetry is going on all the time inside, an underground stream. One can let down one's bucket and bring the poem back up. [...] It will not be dissimilar to what I have produced before because it is coming from the same source, but it will be dissimilar because of the different circumstances of the particular moment.

It is as though, for Ashbery, the poetry were happening somewhere independently of the poet – within, without, beyond, perhaps even *beneath* him – like a frequency to be tuned into or an endless stream from which to drink. Indeed, Peter Stitt describes his three-hour conversation with Ashbery in telling terms. 'Ashbery's answers to my questions required little editing', he notes. 'He did, however, [...] give the impression of distraction, as though he wasn't quite sure just what was going on or what his role in the proceedings might be', as if the poetry under review had nothing very much to do with him. 'Yet if we chase after this thought,' asks Riley in *A Chorus of Ears*, 'aren't we on the verge of wanting the poem without the poet? I often feel that would be perfectly defensible, and a good corrective.'

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Riley's own poetry reveals her dedication to this principle. 'Denise's enthusiasm for a semi-monastic commitment to the art isn't an affectation', confirms Don Paterson, her former editor at Picador: 'I have never met

a poet so allergic to publicity that she would rather lose an award just to avoid the attention it would bring her.’ In part, Riley’s reluctance to involve herself in the public business of poetry seems related to ‘a perfectly ordinary shyness’ of her own. Nevertheless, she also seems to practise (at least a form of) what she preaches. While her poems are frequently invested in – and *investigate* – ideas of personhood, identity and what it means to be a user of language, they tend to occlude any obvious autobiographical details. What’s more, she even seems suspicious of the very notion that one might be able to describe oneself and one’s experience in language. ‘This / representing yourself, desperate to get it right, / as if you could,’ asks the speaker of ‘A shortened set’, ‘is that the aim of writing?’ Perhaps the same is true of one’s attempts to write *about* her. In the words of critic Helen Charman, the problem with ‘writing about Riley, a thinker so intensely committed to interrogating and destabilising the relationship between language and identity, is that you immediately feel yourself to be misrepresenting her if you try and say something plainly, if you try and deal in absolutes.’

To attempt a simple observation: the more of Riley’s poetry one reads, the less certain one feels that the identity of her speakers is crystallising into view, a quality familiar to the work of that other ‘vaguely admirable but unapproachable doyenne of the avant-garde’ (as Paterson characterises Riley’s former reputation), Gertrude Stein. From time to time, we discover that Riley’s poems are uttered from non-human perspectives, narrating ‘what the petals saw / from their quiet harmless rosette of leaves’ (‘Unlike’) or written from the microscopic viewpoint of the headlouse in a 1786 poem by Robert Burns. More often, Riley’s speakers seem to float somewhere in abstract space, creatures void of form, as though seeking a place to land or ‘some other Body’ to occupy – to recall a phrase from Keats’s letter – a form of temporary possession. ‘Is my name “skeleton” / or only “cup”?’ asks the voice of ‘What I do’, as though unsure where it has ended up. ‘There was and there is a life, I swim in it,’ ends ‘Pythian’, from *Say Something Back*, ‘but I wouldn’t say that it’s exactly “mine”.’ More than anything, Riley’s disembodied speakers remind me of Soviet director Dziga Vertov’s concept of the ‘kino-eye’ (*cinema-eye*), which he uses to describe his practice as a filmmaker, able to transcend both time and space. ‘I am a kino-eye, I am

a mechanical eye', he suggests, depicting the world 'as only I can see it':

Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects, I crawl under, I climb onto them. I move apace with the muzzle of a galloping horse, I plunge full speed into a crowd, I outstrip running soldiers, I fall on my back, I ascend with an airplane, I plunge and soar together with plunging and soaring bodies.

Even Riley's most ostensibly autobiographical poem, 'A Part Song', the work for which she is most celebrated, doesn't seem to be straightforwardly 'about' her. First published in its entirety in *The London Review of Books* in 2012 – later collected in *Say Something Back* – 'A Part Song' presents a twenty-section meditation on the loss of Riley's adult son, Jacob, who died of undiagnosed cardiomyopathy during a trip to Spain. A chorus of many voices and registers singing a variety of poetic forms, 'A Part Song' hovers over 'the puzzle of what it ever truly meant / For someone to be here then, just like that, / To not'. It is a painful, at times archaeological, excavation of the Self in all its partiality. The poem's title, after all, puns on the nature of apartness – as in separation, certainly, but also the many-sided parts that make up what we like to call an individual consciousness, the different voices speaking and competing from within. Jaques's speech on the 'seven ages' of man in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* seems close to hand – 'one man in his time plays many parts,' et cetera – as does Eliot's *The Waste Land*. 'She do the bereaved in different voices', begins the penultimate section of Riley's poem, echoing a line from Dicken's *Our Mutual Friend*, in which Sloppy delivers energetic readings from a newspaper, and which Eliot had earmarked as the working title for his poem.

Riley expresses hesitation towards the poetic trope that would see departed loved ones ever-present in the world around us. 'I can't get sold on reincarnating you / As those bloody "gentle showers of rain" / Or in "fields of ripening grain"', she writes, quoting from Clare Harner's famous bereavement poem, 'Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep', first published in the 1930s. Instead, Riley advances an alternative belief system, that the dead return to a vast repository of disembodied language, that the practice

of lyric might enable us to ‘shepherd [them] back within range / Of [our] strained ears’. Riley’s collection lifts its title from a teasing, paradoxical stanza by W. S. Graham, used as an epigraph:

Do not think you have to say
Anything back. But you do
Say something back which I
Hear by the way I speak to you.

It is as though the language of lyric poetry – overheard by the poet – might allow us to hear, again, the voices of the dead, muffled and crackling, as if through heavy static: *Do you copy? Can you read me?*

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Returning to *A Chorus of Ears*, Riley moves to argue that the disappearance of the Self from lyric poetry – what T. S. Eliot once called the ‘continual extinction of personality’ – enables something more than anonymity. Rather, by listening intently, by ‘self-overhearing’, tuning into the abstract language of lyric – Ben Lerner’s ‘grammar [of] pure possibility’ – we achieve what Riley refers to as a mode of ‘transpersonality’, accessing a language that belongs to everyone, everywhere, all at once. ‘I am working in a language that’s haunted’, suggests the poet Peter Gizzi: ‘It’s bigger than me. It’s older than me. It doesn’t live in me. I live in it, we all do.’

I am reminded, again, of Ashbery’s image of an ‘underground stream’, eternally available, but also of his massive, double-columned poem ‘Litany’, beginning *As We Know*. Over a hundred pages in length, ‘Litany’ consists of two pillars of text, what Ashbery describes – in the poem’s introductory note – as ‘*simultaneous but independent monologues*’. As in ‘Clepsydra’, Ashbery himself appears to vanish from the poem; neither column belongs, conclusively, to the voice of the poet, the two sides speaking independently, as though Ashbery had simply entered to set them in motion before leaving the room. Though delivered by two voices, the poem allows for infinite potential speakers, indicated by the central absence at its centre, the white space in between the columns, waiting

to be occupied. At times, this absence even seems to offer us a place within the poem ourselves, anticipating the title of Ashbery's nineteenth collection, published in 2000, *Your Name Here*. Reflecting on his slippery use of pronouns, the poet compared them to 'variables in an equation':

'You' can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I'm addressing' [...] my point is that it doesn't really matter very much, that we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is what's the important thing at that particular moment rather than the particular person involved.

'What I'm trying to get at is a general, all-purpose experience', Ashbery put it in an interview of 1981, 'like those stretch socks that fit all sizes.'

In the light of Ashbery's comments, Riley's poems, too, appear to aim at something like 'a general, all-purpose experience'. If and when they *have* a body, her speakers seem to possess a form not for the purpose of asserting individuality but for the sake of singing what they have to sing 'at that particular moment'. At times, the poems even appear to speak in the voice of language itself, like a collective utterance. Fittingly enough, given his comments on the 'extinction of personality', one of the only other poems I can think of that comes close to performing this is Eliot's 'The Hollow Men', whose voice seems not to be an individual, authorial 'I', nor even a spokesperson singing on *behalf* of a group, but a paradoxically singular, collective 'we': one voice, many voicers, their single 'Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!' 'What is your name?' asks Jesus of the demon-possessed man in the Gospel of Mark. 'My name is Legion,' he replies, 'for we are many.'

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'*A Chorus of Ears* is too rich a book to adequately précis', writes Don Paterson, '[o]ne can only say what one has taken away.' In one sense, Riley's new essays exist as a companion, an extension – perhaps even a resolution – to her earlier publication, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony*, which begins as follows:

‘Who do you think you are?’, whether solicitous inquiry or derisive chant, is a familiar enough interrogation; but this essay is, in part, a defence of having nothing to say for oneself.

When it comes to lyric poetry, perhaps we have ‘nothing to say’ for ourselves because nothing that we have to say has anything specifically to do with us. Where this leaves Riley’s thoughts about the cultural over-emphasis on the poet’s public persona remains to be seen. After all, she writes, ‘poetry has [a] long reach.’ In the end, what is reassuring about these essays is the sense of seriousness with which Riley advocates for language as a resource we all share, a collective way of measuring ‘the sheer accidents / of a life’, to borrow from *Say Something Back*. In the words of Helen Charman, Riley’s work models ‘a way of embracing the subjectivity of knowledge – the difficulty of language – as something that can create a space for genuine communality: a way of sharing experience that cannot be shared.’ Once again, she proves the assertion of the great twentieth-century poet Czesław Miłosz that ‘The purpose of poetry is to remind us / how difficult it is to remain just one person’.