

HISTORY, LANGUAGE, TIME.

In the beginning, about eighteen months ago, two or three of us thought about suggesting that a section of *Feminist Theory* might be given over to reflections on the achievement of the British feminist, theorist of language, philosopher and poet, Denise Riley, on the occasion of her 70th birthday. Denise is known to us as a friend and colleague, and we felt this modest expression of our admiration for her writing, produced over almost forty years, would be in keeping with Denise's preference for low-key, quiet kinds of acknowledgement. Over the space of a few months the number of contributors doubled in size so that, if we include the interview with Denise undertaken by Lisa Baraitser and re-printed here as the concluding piece, we are in fact eight in number. We also, early on, thought to focus on her books and collected essays and not the poetic writing, though in fact this proved hard to sustain, particularly for those contributors who found themselves drawn by the more recent poetic works which are meditations on time following from the tragic and sudden death of Denise's oldest child, Jacob, in 2008. More than this we felt that serious engagement with key elements in this body of writing was needed in the light of renewed feminist activism and the intellectual curiosity on the part of younger scholars on the range of issues which come within the orbit of Denise Riley's work.

There is a fine economy in the work of Riley, a polite but unapologetic insistence on pincer-sharp precision in her thinking. Early on, her work stood as a counter to some strains in feminist scholarship which traded in generalities and worked within, rather than against the grain, of the disciplines they challenged. In the first of the articles the historian Joan Wallach Scott looks back to an article from 1981 published in *History Workshop Journal*. Scott sees this piece as an incisive intervention in the development of socialist-feminist history at the time. In 'The Free Mothers' Riley questions an assumption that voices from history emerge transparently, requiring that the feminist historian merely transcribe them. There is, Scott reminds us, quoting Riley, no consciousness that comes with 'absolute clarity'. Instead, attention must be paid to language and desire in the articulation of political positions. She understands Riley to be contesting well-intended but misplaced feminist attempts to uncover a kind of authentic, everyday heroics, which is simply there, dormant in the archives and waiting to be retrieved by the feminist historian. These provocations already marked out the importance of Riley's work for a feminist theorising of history, one which Joan Scott indicates was immensely influential for her own scholarship. But there are other strands Scott comes upon through her reading, for instance the place of the mother in a series of government debates over maternity in the years following the end of WW2. These debates were marked by policies of pro-natalism, arguing for the return to the home of women for whom war work had provided a measure of emancipation. Here the notion of 'free mothers' in Riley's title works ironically. As a result of pronatalist policies, she points out, not only did the actual working mother become more of an invisible category, but also the figure of the mother was mobilised as a powerful political category. At this early point in her work, we can pinpoint the knot of interests that would guide Riley's future scholarship, in particular the deployment in language of categories pertaining to 'woman'.

Barbara Taylor roams widely across works by Riley, from an early autobiographical piece published in 1985, to the hugely influential *Am I That Name* of 1988, to her essay of 2004 on 'Bad Words', and

various other essays gathered in *The Words of Selves* (2000) and later philosophical works. Taylor is most focused on Riley's idea of an inner voice and the loneliness it can bequeath to us. The 1985 essay provides an early focus on the power of cruel words and their interpellative capacity in the case of a child of adoptive parents who are shockingly aggressive with a small girl whose precocious intelligence seems to provoke a kind of unhinged fury. In this context, the youngster is subjected to a barrage of accusations and parental disapprobation and so retreats into herself where she finds some comfort in solitude while also developing an understanding of social injustice. In this autobiographical account, Riley describes her attempts to separate language from the injurious words which rained down upon her and to bring language onto her side as a tool and a resource. This would prove to be a resource with which, over time, she could defend herself and others who were similarly and unfairly punished. Taylor shows us the child gathering up words, puzzling over them, turning them over and recognising their subversive potential, as later realised in her prose and poetry.

Angela McRobbie's article shows that Riley's early work was of great value for feminist sociology and cultural studies. As a key contributor to the debates about the welfare state, Riley established a vocabulary for understanding the political valency of maternity, reproduction, citizenship and the maintenance of normative family life. In this work, she also reflects on how highly-charged vernacular language has consistently, over time, been directed towards women who appear to be failing in their duties as mothers. Drawing connections from her earliest book, *War in the Nursery*, through to a volume of collected poems published in 2004, Samuel Solomon pursues this theme of the social in Riley's writing. He picks up on the precision of her writing. Whereas other feminist scholars may be prepared to run with the urgency of getting their ideas out there to a wider audience, Riley pulls back and dissects the whole range of terms and conditions which accompany shifts which might be seen as only superficially progressive or beneficial to women. Solomon cites a number of these moments in Riley's work that demonstrate her suspicions about how of the idea of the social, in the early post-war years, became limited to woman and the family, thereby permitting the political to be represented as a masculine sphere. Solomon also reminds readers of Riley's scepticism about social democracy as well as her sharp-eyed critique of the seemingly neutral use of a word like 'partner' when referring to the life of the couple, which in turn generates its own chilly shunning of those who exist as social beings outside these domestic settings. Solomon extends his reading to her poetry where, he points out, these ideas are also evident. This suggests a blurring of the boundaries between her poetry and her lyrical prose writing.

Coming from a younger generation and attuned to post 2000 cultural politics in the US, Brian Connolly's contribution here notes a shift in Riley's work to questions of language, politics, and irony. Connolly reflects on Riley's essays in *The Words of Selves* (2000) which investigate the way in which irony's running commentaries open a space of language away from the confining of ideas of identity. Irony permits a move away from the social ideal of a unified self as a source of strength, calling it into question even as it evokes it. Here again we see Riley returning to the theme of the potency of wounding words, but also the power of irony to undo the blow and contest the accusations that they express. Understated but emphatic and poised, this attention to the operations of language has proved over time to bear such fruit. Connolly notes the link between irony and sarcasm and proposes, in Riley fashion, an agency for irony wherein a denounced or disparaged 'we' formed out of so many derogatory labels finds solidarity among its selves.

One of Riley's major contributions is her focus on the question of the subject which is something quite other than a coherent self. She reminds us that subjects are created in language and that

language carries us along, inaugurates us, calls us in and out, inflicts its blows upon us by telling us who we are and who we are expected to become. Vikki Bell's article traces Riley's questioning of this idea of a single abiding self in favour of its plurivocality. Bell extends Connolly's focus on irony demonstrating how, for Riley, irony's 'running commentary' reduces the force of the initial interpellation, and how this splintering effect can carry ethical possibilities as it opens up to more radical ideas of selfhood as multi-occupancy, a space where others also dwell. Bell develops this argument by following up some references in Riley's writing to Deleuze and then to the artist and philosopher Pierre Klossowski. She then turns to Riley's recent poetic pieces, written in the aftermath of the tragic death of her son. Here Bell evokes the scale of Riley's contribution which brings together a theory of dispossession and the loss of time with something like a slow and lonely process of recovering time. Riley, Bell shows us, writes in a way that conjures not mourning or melancholy but plurivocality. There is continuity rather than a rupture, a mode of carrying and carrying on; the child has gone, the mother is other than she was, altered, but she can offer some consolation to others who have also suffered in this way.

Judith Butler reflects on Riley's meditations on time 'without its flow'. She writes that this is neither pure philosophy nor an extended poem. It lies between the two and this hybrid form is a source of the writing's force and integrity. What can language do for a subject bereft of time? Butler sees clearly that this is not a melancholic state, nor is it a matter of overcoming mourning according to a more measured passage of time. She looks to Husserl's phenomenology of the object, the loss of which reduces our capacity to 'live in time'. Our 'sense of human existence' lies in temporality and with that gone, what remains? Time is the subject and, with the death of the much-loved other, is so diminished as to scarcely be there at all, a state which becomes indescribable since language no longer has its function. And then slowly there re-emerges language in its new time, as a strain, a refrain, and a striving for finding the terms to account for loss. Butler here sees Riley's achievement in the power of her poetic language which eventually permits her to evoke a state of almost non-being, but from a point further on in time, which renders her both altered but nevertheless a carrier of the one who is again within her.

We conclude this collection with a re-print of an interview conducted by Lisa Baraitser with Denise Riley in 2014. In it, we find some of what might be Riley's replies to questions also posed in many of our pieces. For example, Denise clarifies her idea of 'time without its flow,' saying that her feeling during that time did not accord with conventional understandings of melancholia and mourning. Instead, she was living during those years in a vividly captured sense of frozen time; her ordinary desire to use language had simply vanished and she found herself faced with the impossibility of expression. Lisa Baraitser asks her about whether other art forms shed light on this state of being without temporality and indeed Denise mentions the power of cinema in this regard, not just cinema per se but one film by the Iranian director Shirin Neshat. Denise also talks about attending groups for bereaved parents, and we can see in the words she offers in this conversation, a cautious and careful voice, judicious, consolatory and outward facing, generous and attuned to the suffering of others.

Angela McRobbie, Joan Wallach Scott, Barbara Taylor October 2019.