



'Always another breath in my breath': on Denise Riley, the polyvocality of the subject and poetry

Feminist Theory

0(0) 1–13

© The Author(s) 2020



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1464700120928318

journals.sagepub.com/home/fty**Vikki Bell**

Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

Abstract

This article explores Denise Riley's argument in *Words of Selves* (2000), that the self is multiply constituted, since many speak through and 'as' us. This polyvocality means that there is 'always another breath in my breath', she argues, citing Deleuze who is, in turn, citing Pierre Klossowski. Here, I trace the quotation back through Deleuze's (1969) *Logic of Sense* to Klossowski's peculiar *Roberte Ce Soir* (1953). In that work Klossowski elaborates the notion of the simulacra, a discussion which for him is intertwined with the exploration of how affect repeatedly attempts, and repeatedly fails, to produce adequate representations in the world. His exploration of inhabiting a world of simulacra, however, takes place on a terrain that is problematic for a feminist reading, not to say with an 'aggression of thought', to use Deleuze's phrase. Returning to Denise Riley's work, the article finds a preferable – and very beautiful – exploration of the notion of the multiply refracted self through Riley's extraordinary poem 'A Part Song' and her *Time Lived Without its Flow* (2012).

Keywords

Subjectivity, simulacra, loss, polyvocality, Denise Riley, Gilles Deleuze, Pierre Klossowski, Sophie Calle

Corresponding author:

Vikki Bell, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London, SE14 6NW, UK.

Email: v.bell@gold.ac.uk

Recently, I had the opportunity to see French artist Sophie Calle's exhibition *Take Care of Yourself*, which was first created for the French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2007, and was being re-shown across several rooms at the MAC (*Museo de Arte Contemporáneo*) in Santiago, Chile, in January 2019. The show gathers responses to Calle's lover's email – in which he broke off their relationship – by over a hundred of her women friends from a myriad of professions, including a copyeditor, a human rights expert, a criminologist, a composer, a dancer and a clairvoyant. I found myself drawn to one particular response by Micheline Renard, a lexicographer, who with a wry humour – and not without a little mischievous spitefulness – plundered the text in order to show where in the canonical texts of literature Calle's lover's phrases had previously appeared. The results of this exercise are framed and displayed as part of Calle's exhibition. Thus the phrase 'it has been months now' she finds in Francis Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*, the phrase 'I have never lied to you' in Beroul's *The Romance of the Times* and 'What happened between us' in Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. A Lennon-McCartney song *And I Love Her* also sneaks in. Calle highlights all the phrases in her lover's message that could be said to be citations, and displays them side by side with quotations from the literary texts. Across these she writes 'Intertextuality'. A risky strategy perhaps, if the intention is to build resentment for the lover, since it is quite possibly a widely shared experience to reach for another's words in order that your heartfelt communiqués are just a tad more beautiful. But at some point, this contribution implies, this pilfering risks becoming *mere* citation, a remix of prior literary moments of romantic love. Whether unconscious, careless or a result of trying too hard, he becomes insincere, existing somewhere between a mimic and a liar. Alternatively, perhaps the suggestion is that Sophie's lover has committed the error of seeking to remain sincere when he could have adopted the solution of his 'postmodern' time suggested by Umberto Eco: add a little irony, a little self-awareness. Eco's much-quoted solution is as follows:

The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her 'I love you madly', because he knows that she knows (and that she knows he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say 'As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly' (1994: 67–68).

That Sophie's ex-lover 'fails' to deploy irony grants us permission to dismiss him as engaged in a plagiarism not so much shocking as pitiful.

I imagine that Calle's friend meant to offer her a path out of heartbreak. Once one realises that the words of the lover are a mere conglomerate of citations, one will be able to allow his very singularity to be dispersed into the whirling discursive universe. Her friend's analysis suggests that ultimately Sophie can no longer be

sure what he himself wrote, and the sting is thereby taken out of his words. Moreover, there is no longer any firm basis on which to be certain what it is about him, particularly, that she liked, given that his expressed self was quite possibly always a series of such blended borrowings.

Indeed, this strategy of dispersal may also be true in relation to the exhibition as a whole, which dissects the letter multiple times and in multiple modes, deconstructing its composition, its meaning, its effect. The meaning, resonances and possible reactions are multiplied over and over. In the midst of everything that one could think about this email, and in the midst of all these clever talented friends, what is one small letter and one short-lived relationship? By the same token, I would suggest, by so displaying the multiple possible responses one could have to the message, the show performs a series of reflections and refractions of Calle herself, as the 107 women performatively put themselves in the position of Sophie Calle, receiving a letter addressed to her name and exploring their responses instead of her, for her, and *as* her. By performatively enacting her in this way, they both become and refract 'Sophie Calle', multiplying versions of her through their performed variations on what a response – by them-as-her – might be.

A faint rustle within a broad murmur

When I visited the exhibition, and contemplating Renard's contribution in particular, I felt a resonance with Denise Riley's arguments on 'polyvocality' that appear towards the end of her theoretically nuanced *The Words of Selves* (2000). Arguably, although her motivation is on a more overtly political terrain than Calle's, since Riley is writing about the solidifying of nationalist and racist sentiment in modes of identification that constitute and sustain separatist agendas and conflicts, her argument contains a similar contention. We are condemned to live within the weaves of language that are not of our making, and our life journeys consist of negotiating this complex inescapable tapestry. Riley writes, 'It's rare for the self, in an untrammelled agony of exquisite choice, to invent its own names. The daily fact of societal description "from the outside" – how I'm reported by others, what's expectantly in place, already chatting about me before I appear on stage – is integral to the dialectic of self-description' (2000: 7). Whatever unease this may produce in us, language names us nonetheless; it works on us as we are 'spoken across by words' (Riley, 2000: 2). As so often in her work, Riley attends to the movements in language, listening to its complexities and exploring its possibilities. If identities can become solidified – 'monuments of selves' as she puts it – that sustain selves constituted hierarchically and in opposition to each other, then, she argues, it behoves us to consider a route out of these objectionable discourses and agendas by finding a way to prise open the hold of language. Riley explores irony's 'running commentary' (2000: 3) on language as one key mechanism, one that holds just such a potential to open up and thereby allow the more pernicious aspects of language's ability to name to be disrupted.

In the workings of irony Riley sees some relief, therefore; a hope that language's 'self-curing possibilities eat into its own perpetuation of the damage that elsewhere it pronounces' (2000: 183). Not least, if language can be ironic, and used ironically, there is some optimism in the face of those forms of self-identification – especially nationalist, racist, xenophobic modes – that perpetuate the worst forms of categorisation. Riley argues that irony can prompt a series of revelations, those that flow from isolating a category. Irony's interrogation is such a mode of isolating in the sense that it operates through picking up on the contingencies of things; it is 'always poised to wrench a phrase out of its context' (Riley, 2000: 183). Interrupting the chronological flow of events and words, it 'dismembers', pausing the moment so that it may be contemplated out of time if only for a moment. And by the same token, by exposing the contingency of that context, Riley suggests, irony simultaneously 'restores . . . history' to the phrase, an optimistic action insofar as it may succeed in 'deflating' a category. Where successful, irony works so that a category can even become 'bizarre to itself' and then, potentially, it can no longer 'endure its own repetitions' (Riley, 2000: 183).

Insofar as this pausing and simultaneous restoration of historical context to a term chimes with the work that many a humanities scholar attempts, irony becomes an ally that may provoke a vertiginous moment in the speaker or listener, revealing the 'conditions of possibility' of a remark. This may even be considered *ethical* work insofar as it reveals the sense in which human speakers both have and do not have 'agency', prompting a series of questions that would begin: 'how should we respond to the linguistic inheritance within which we communicate? How can we question while necessarily moving within these inherited terms?'. Irony suggests that we can look to the mechanisms of language, even to utterances, to provoke change – or at least reflection – at the level of the relationship, as Riley describes it, 'between language and its own unconscious' (2000: 184). But we can do so only as long as we also understand that the 'I' which speaks is a 'faint rustle within a broad murmur among anonymous voices' (Riley, 2000: 184); there are no heroic escapes or triumphant ironists.

This is where Riley refers to the polyphony of the 'I' who speaks and, to elaborate the point, she cites Deleuze: 'There is always another breath in my breath, another thought in my thought, another possession in what I possess, a thousand things and a thousand beings implicated in my complications' (2000: 184, citing Deleuze [1969] 2013).

One cannot 'own' language, which is made and only makes sense as something to be shared and as always already received; more than that, one can only understand oneself, constitute one's sense of self, through the discursive world that relies upon and implicates others at each utterance. To welcome this is to 'hear' the polyphonic and this, Riley suggests, 'can be taken in good heart' (2000: 184). Here she ends the book with a quotation from Deleuze within which he himself cites the French theorist and artist Pierre Klossowski, illustrating as she does this the point that others speak 'through' us – and each of us through, via and 'with' them. That is, she recognises that to quote others and others quoting others in a

merry circle of citation is the prerogative not only of lovers à la Calle's ex-partner, but also of philosophers. Aware of this gesture, Denise Riley offers the extended quotation from Deleuze which, she notes, encapsulates its own point:

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 the 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 else' (2000: 184, citing Deleuze [1969] 2013).

More profound than merely citing others, which is associated with the conscious practice of scholarship, the polyvocality of the subject is about the very constitution of a sense of a self. In order to pursue how Deleuze himself inherited the somewhat spooky idea that 'others . . . continue to think within us' in part through Klossowski's writings, some further elaboration of the latter's argument is called for. With this chasing of the citation, however, one unfurls further the folds of a genealogy that are in this case and in my estimation also illustrations, precisely as Deleuze indicated – though I suspect not intended as a feminist analysis – of how the 'aggression of thought' and the 'violence of language' wend themselves into our inheritances.

The 'shining trophy'

Pierre Klossowski (1905–2001) wrote philosophy as well as novels that were peculiar and somewhat questionable explorations of his concepts, as we will see. They turn especially on the notion of simulacra, which in the English language means 'to have the form without the substance of a material object', but also retains in the French, Taylor usefully reminds us, the additional original Latin sense of the statue (especially one of a pagan god), and of 'phantom', as well as the notion that a gesture may also be regarded as a 'simulacra'. As McGinnis (2017) argues, Klossowski's philosophical explorations of Sade, Bataille and Nietzsche develop his insistence that one must respond to the event of the death of God by recognising the dissolution of the self and the role that affect, selecting from and responding to the material world has in producing images that through their repeated attempts at representation – which will always fail – become the simulacra by which we live. These images are not false, or copies of the true (as with Plato), but they are the route by which affects, which are simply unable to be communicated in signs, emerge (McGinnis, 2017: 2).¹ One can hear the connection to Deleuze's oeuvre insofar as this means, in McGinnis' words, an 'insistence on

the dissolution of the self in favour of a theory of the intensity of affects' (2017: 8). Moreover, Klossowski's novels, which formed a trilogy – *Roberte Ce Soir* (1953), *The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes* (1959) and *Le Souffleur* (1965) – were an erotic exploration of these ideas, including the notions of reflection and refraction that are of particular interest to our present exploration. The trilogy was based around the multiple perspectives and ruminations of the central characters, Octave and Roberte, with each volume approaching the same story from different perspectives and via different literary techniques; I will mention only the first.

In *Roberte Ce Soir* (1953), which also carried Klossowski's own paintings to illustrate the original text, the ethically dubious central focus is on Octave's wish to explore the consequences of sharing his wife, applying what he calls the 'rule of hospitality' to his marriage, inviting (male) visitors and guests to 'share' her, sexually. In the first pages of this peculiar novel, we are told that Octave displayed in their house his 'rule of hospitality' for guests to read. In it he states that the essence of being a host is to make the guest at home in the house, but – he explains in the displayed text – the mistress of the house, the wife, is thereby placed in a compromised position. She has, the narrator suggests, a choice: either to be unfaithful to her husband (in order to allow the guest to be absolutely 'at home') or to betray the rule of hospitality, and effectively not be a hostess. If the host wishes to be host, however, she *must* be the hostess, and, moreover, the host will have a 'curiosity' in attempting to know her *as* hostess, although he can never really know her in this way (since he is her husband, the master to her as mistress of the house, he can never become the guest and approach her as hostess). In order to catch a glimpse of how she is as 'hostess', so the logic of Octave's rule continues, the host has to catch her on the threshold (between 'wife/mistress' and 'hostess'). To bring this about, he sets the guest a task, one which will also be trying for Octave whose own positionality will likewise be on a threshold between host (who should seek to fulfil his guest's desire) and husband or master (who would jealousy guard his wife and protect his power and status in his own home). Klossowski/Octave writes:

Let the guest understand his role well: let him then fearlessly excite the host's curiosity by that jealousy and that suspicion, worthy in the master of the house but unworthy of a host; the latter enjoins the guest loyally to do his utmost; in this competition let them surpass one another in subtlety: let the host put the guest's discretion to the test, the guest make proof of the host's curiosity: the term generosity has no place here . . . since everything is generous and everything is also greed; but let the guest take all due care lest this jealousy or this suspicion grow to such proportions in the host that no room is left for his curiosity ([1953] 1988: 15).

As this beginning suggests, the novel – much of it written in the format of a play – continues with scenes in which, at Octave's invitation, Roberte has sexual encounters with men who visit the house, interspersed with complex passages in which Octave interprets the on-going relationships and events.

So much is assumed here that one hardly knows where to begin. According to the commentaries, the novel is an exploration of economy of the ‘gift’,² explored within the supreme example of an institution in which gifting is supposedly barred: marriage. According to Taylor, the ‘host’, Octave, wants to experience the risk of losing Roberte so that he can love her all the more strongly. For him, ‘voyeuristic tension engenders an amorous exaltation restoring, for him, the initial purity of his love’ (Taylor, 2009). This seems to be a very sympathetic reading. Deleuze proffers a less tender analysis, if no less uncritical, focusing on the multiplication of Roberte. In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze writes: ‘[Octave] attempts to multiply Roberte’s essence, to create as many simulacra and reflections of Roberte as there are persons establishing relations with her, and to encourage Roberte to emulate somehow her own doubles, thanks to which Octave, the voyeur, possesses and is able to know her better than if he had kept her, quite simply, for himself’ ([1969] 2013: 323).

Alternatively it may be that, as Klossowski wrote in his essays, the creation of a simulacrum – Roberte’s performances of infidelity – is the way Octave brings to presence a phantom constituted in his mind (this fear of being cheated upon, the image of his wife with another man). In other words, ‘in order to exorcize the obsession’ (a quotation from Klossowski’s essays, cited by Taylor, 2009), Octave forces Roberte to enact his fears, to engage in the performance of ‘infidelities’. Whatever Klossowski’s ‘intention’ with the novel, Deleuze certainly finds in Klossowski the argument that the dissolution of self – a multiplication of selves as ‘the self’ is multiply refracted – is not a pathological loss; it is, rather, in Deleuze’s words, a ‘shining trophy’ that his characters bring back from a voyage to the edge of madness. Moreover, Deleuze wishes to emphasise, this dissolution happens both to the one who is gazed upon in their series of refractions *and* to the one who gazes – to both Roberte and Octave (Deleuze, [1969] 2013: 323). According to Deleuze, Octave loses his own identity, ‘sets himself outside himself and is multiplied in the gaze as much as the other is multiplied under the gaze’ ([1969] 2013: 324).

As feminists quoting Deleuze quoting Klossowski, we find ourselves compromised, not for the first time, by a distasteful inheritance. Given this novel’s choice of terrain to illustrate the ‘joyous message’ of multiply constituted selves, one feels trapped in a chain of citations that contains, precisely, the aggression of thought and the violence of language. Warily, we can at least agree when Deleuze echoes Klossowski arguing that language is itself a double, a simulacra, indeed the ‘highest of simulacra’ ([1969] 2013: 324). Indeed, following Denise Riley’s quotation ‘back’ to these sources and arguments does more than illustrate the arguments around refraction as a highly unstable, even paradoxical, multiplication of images; it also becomes another lesson in negotiating the terrain on which a theorist chooses to explore the ‘perpetual metamorphosis of desire into the images called “simulacra”’ ([1969] 2013: 324).

According to Taylor, Klossowski’s literary characters are created precisely in order to produce affective responses in us because they themselves are explorations

of the ancient theory that creative works contain – as do all simulacra – the potential to release affect, whether positive or negative. Taylor explains that Klossowski was influenced in this argument by, inter alia, theories of antique statuary: '[B]ecause it was considered impossible to create a soul to animate the simulacra of gods, the souls of intermediaries—that is, demons and angels—would be invoked and locked inside holy or sacred images so that these “idols” would thereafter have the power to perform good or evil deeds' (Taylor, 2009).

What Klossowski termed the 'emotion' that is released from a work of art – registered in the one who sees or reads it – is a correlative to this 'demonic movement'. So, works of art are explorations of their role as idols in this ancient sense, and presumably characters work in this manner in Klossowski's novels too (Taylor, 2009, discussing Klossowski's 2001 *Tableaux vivants: essais critiques 1936–1983*).

Still, knowing one is being provoked is not much comfort. If Klossowski's deployment of literature is his attempt at provoking our comprehension with – and acceptance of – his philosophical argument, it is a fraught strategy limned in this instance with aggression.

What Riley's work does, to my mind, is move the arguments around refracted selves and polyvocality far beyond this masculinist inheritance, and offer them to a feminist and an anti-racist agenda that is all the more impressive for the distance it takes from those who gather behind the shield of strategic provocation. Moreover, as I will argue below, in her more recent work she displays a profound sensibility, a generosity and honesty, that takes such explorations to a different level. While the work I am referring to here might also be understood as maintaining a continuity with the line of argument, now closely associated with Deleuze, that posits affects as creative and, relatedly, that understands that affects create images that serve as simulacra, I do not sense that Denise Riley had any Klossowskian inheritance in mind. In her poetry and her long essay *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (2012), her poetic exploration of her own experience of continuing to live after the death of her adult son offers us a remarkable, deeply affecting account of a multiply refracted subject. It is a precious and beautiful gift that is at times truly breathtaking. Here, the 'polyvocality' of existence and what might be understood as a refraction of the self, a 'falling into images', combine within her account of an existence in which one's co-ordinates, especially temporal, fall away.

One 'glum mum'

I remember the first time I read Denise Riley's poem 'A Part Song'; I was at home in my kitchen, our usual Saturday morning scene at the table, breakfast plates and teapots and papers scattered around. My own son, then twelve years old, was having a cello lesson in the other room and his dad and I were taking the opportunity to drink tea and read the papers, including the *London Review of Books*. Into this scene of a morning stretching itself into the day came Denise's quite astonishing poem. Its effect was powerful, producing a wave of shock and of admiration. I was deeply moved by it. In fact, I was positively bursting with admiration

for how she had been able to write this poem that concerns the experience of suddenly losing her son, that conveys so intimately the crowded head full of voices that is the experience of her loss, and that simultaneously, so cleverly and honestly and yes, humorously, concerns the very notion of poetry, both of writing poems and of finding things 'poetic'.

When Judith Butler wrote, in relation to the experience of loss, that in its interruptive force grief shows us how during calmer times our sense of an individuated self survives only because we are constituted by, with and in a certain sense for others – we are somehow 'held' by them – she meant to convey something of the way in which we tend to operate as if we are individuals without acknowledging the multiple ways in which others sustain our sense of identity. Others 'carry' us insofar as they enable a sense of our own individuated self to survive. By reiterating – by reflecting back – that we are who and what we 'are', these webs enable us to pursue our lives. In grief, Butler argued, this intimate dependency is especially clear. But it is not only in grief that we should understand that the self is vulnerable due to its relationally constituted nature: 'Let's face it. We're undone by each other ... This seems so clearly the case with grief, but it can be so only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact' (Butler, 2004: 23). To be a subject is to be constituted through various modes of being dispossessed, of being for and by virtue of another. Butler speaks of gender and sexuality too as such modes of dispossession.

In her remarkable poem, Denise Riley conveys her own profound experience of being 'undone', of vulnerability and dispossession. The poem offers a sense of what an unraveling feels, or perhaps 'sounds' like, giving us an intimate sense of what 'polyvocality' might mean in times of mourning one's own child, as the sustaining relations that enable quotidian survival are jolted and sorely tested. The self refracts. The poem vividly conveys the sense of the many voices that arise, crowding into the space of a mother whose child has died. The voices of the whirling discursive universe within which we always move, that make suggestions, give encouragement, question, accuse and undermine, here become a painful cacophony, within and without, as they seem to vie not only for the mother's attentions but for her self-understanding.

In Riley's poem, reproduced in her collection *Say Something Back* (2016), the voice of the son himself is one of these voices; but crucially, he can only be voiced by the mother through her imaginative capacities. She is quick to berate herself whenever she hopes otherwise and catches herself waiting. She teases herself for being the 'glum mum' (Riley, 2016: 6) who vainly demands her son's return, while addressing herself to him nonetheless: 'Won't you be summoned up once more/By my prancing and writhing in a dozen/Mawkish modes of reedy piping to you/- Still no?' (Riley, 2016: 14). She has no truck with the platitudes that are meted out for the bereaved who seek their loved ones, that offer a mere general sense of presence when his specific presence is all that will do: 'I can't get sold on reincarnating you/As those bloody "gentle showers of rain"' (Riley, 2016: 8). He cannot 'say something back' and it is foolish to try to believe otherwise. Yet, as the epigraph to the collection,

taken from W. S. Graham, suggests, there is always the attempt to hear a response ‘by the way I speak to you’ (Riley, 2016: v). She speaks to him in many guises, trying on different versions of herself as grieving mother just as she watches herself trying on different clothes, ‘her several styles of howling-guise’ (Riley, 2016: 5).

She is grappling, drowning, stunned, but she is also strong, clever, even sassy, as the verses of this song try on these different ways of speaking to him, speaking about him and the experience of living on without him, using different poetic techniques, taking on her different attitudes, angles, accents and tones. ‘She do the bereaved in different voices’. Within the same verse some voices are damning – not only of herself, the mother (‘what’s the first duty of a mother to a child?/At least to keep the wretched thing alive’, Riley, 2016: 3) but also of language. Indeed the voice of this second verse conveys not only a doubting of self but also a doubting of language, of its relationship to events, of the whole business of producing critique of and through language. We hear her doubt that clichés, simply by virtue of being clichéd, are always false – does lightning truly never strike twice? she asks, as she worries about whether her daughter will similarly fail to return home – while also doubting the power of words and critical writing to achieve anything at all. ‘Neither my note nor my critique of it/Will save us one iota’ (Riley, 2016: 3). She has not forgotten the power of irony about which she wrote in *The Words of Selves*, but language itself is in danger of becoming pointless, as she asks in multiple ways: just what is the point of words, of poems and songs – what are they for, now? What is the point if, for all the beauty and care poured into these profoundly moving verses, the dead remain dead?

The experience of living on after the loss of a child – an experience Denise Riley is quick to point out is not an uncommon one – is one for which, in English, we have no specific term. In her book-length essay *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, Riley tries to bear witness to her own experience as a ‘forceful, but not disconcerting, sensation of living outside time’ (2012: 45). She writes: ‘his sudden death has dropped like a guillotine blade to slice right through my old expectation that my days would stream onwards into my coming life. Instead I continue to sense daily life as paper-thin. As it is. But this cut through any usual feeling of chronology leaves a great blankness ahead’ (Riley, 2012: 25).

It was a time that she describes as an ‘arrested’ or ‘crystalline time, which was not really time but a suspension of time’, a vivid sensation that lasted, she explains in an interview with Lisa Baraitser, for two and a half years (Baraitser and Riley, 2016: 5). It was a ‘private non-time of pure stasis’, not a melancholic time but a lucidly calm period (Riley, 2012: 28).

In her exploration of existing in this state in which she found herself, a ‘physically raw’ state that ‘thuds’ into you, Riley (2012: 21) wonders about the specificity of losing a child; perhaps ‘with the death of a child, your own time may be especially prone to disturbance, because the lost life had, so to speak, previously unfurled itself inside your own life’ (2012: 43). As with a set of Russian dolls, where one doll shields many smaller ones within, the time of a child’s life proceeds ‘within’ the parent’s time. Moreover, because the child’s life is a constitutive

aspect of the parent's own sense of temporal flow, it forms a privileged part of the constitution of her self. With the devastation of the child's death, one of the inner nested dolls falls away, and if 'in the past you had sensed your living child's time, including the physically interior time of its gestation as well as its early growing and independent life, as if it were internal to your own... now the time of the vanished child has been cut away from your impression of your interior time' (Riley, 2012: 72).

Riley considers this by evoking an image from Merleau-Ponty: that of the dehiscence, which is indeed especially apt in this context. Dehiscence is a botanical term which refers to the bursting forth along a line of intentional weakness, a weakness by design, as happens with the fruiting of some plants. For Merleau-Ponty, the flow of time – forwards into the future – constitutes a sense of self only insofar as there is simultaneously an awareness of that flow, a self-to-self relationship that constitutes an interiority (ipseity) through its tracing of an interiority as it moves forward in time. As Riley explains through her quotation of Merleau-Ponty, this is like a dehiscence: 'It is of the essence of time to be not only actual time, or time which flows, but also time which is aware of itself, for the explosion or dehiscence of the present towards a future is the arche-type of the *relationship of self to self*, and it traces out an interiority or an ipseity' (2012: 60, quoting Merleau-Ponty, [1945] 2013: 426). (emphasis in original)

Where previously the child's time would have been part of that relation of the parent to its self, as 'your purchase on your own lifetime would always have included that child's time as well as yours however brief or however long its life' (Riley, 2012: 72), when the child disappears, 'your temporal intuition becomes violently altered by the scooping away of that particular doubled sense of time that you'd lived in before' (Riley, 2012: 72). Thus the feeling of suspension, of time without flow. 'Both time and your own being in their mutual implication, had formerly leant out and forward to the world', writes Riley (2012: 60), but now your 'impression of your own interiority has utterly drained away, and you are pure skin stretched tightly out over vacancy. You abide' (2012: 60).

In her attempt to render it into words, Riley's writing is an extraordinary attempt to put into language an – if not uncommon then under-articulated – experience of being in time. It is reminiscent of how Deleuze describes the aim of all arts, i.e. to capture the force of time. As Elizabeth Grosz has written of Deleuze, it involves an aim of 'opening up sensation to the force of the future, of making time able to be sensed not in order to control or understand duration... but to live it as one can, even if that means becoming different: "To render Time sensible is itself the task common to the painter, the musician, and sometimes the writer"' (2008: 87, quoting Deleuze, 2003: 54). Riley's work seems to echo Deleuze's description of what may happen in this task, although here he is speaking of the visual arts, specifically of the paintings of Francis Bacon: 'When the visual sensation confronts the invisible force that conditions it, it releases a force that is capable of vanquishing the invisible force, or even befriending it. Life screams *at* death, but death is no longer this all-too-visible thing that makes us

faint; it is this invisible force that life detects, flushes out, and makes visible through the scream' (2003: 52).

Riley's poem is not a memorialisation project or an attempt to provide a generalised account of 'losing a child'. It is a 'scream at death'. And the wonder is in her ability to give form to the forceful and formless complex of shifting percepts and affects, gifting through words a bundle of sensations so that we, the readers, may attempt to travel with them awhile. Only towards the very end of the essay *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* does Riley articulate the somewhat reassuring idea that her being in time will not descend into a chaos of endless refractions, holding up the possibility that it will be transformed, even 'augmented'. Through the conjoining and containing of the 'incorporated presence' and the temporality of the dead child alongside the still living children (Riley, 2012: 73), she suggests the possibility of living with multiple temporalities: '[Y]our being in time has now become demarcated differently yet again. Its boundaries are extended by and after the death, as they had once been by and after the birth. Half bitten away by the child's disappearance, your time is nevertheless augmented – for the time of the dead is, from now on, contained within your own' (Riley, 2012: 73).

With her poem and essay Riley offers a raw, but carefully and beautifully wrought, attempt to convey an experience that was, and is, particular and personal. There is no necessity to make it more than this. Yet to my mind it is also true that in these writings Riley offers a thoroughly feminist exploration of the 'joyous message' with which we began, one that offers to this reader at least a preferred mode to explore the constitutive and embodied multiplicities and intensities of our lives. We live – and sometimes we must find a way to live *again* – as 'beings in time' who layer and connect to others, living and dead, and must negotiate our sense of self also in relation to other temporalities, a task that will both challenge and sustain us.

Notes

1. 'A simulacrum, he holds, is a nonrational and changeable attempt at representation that must first be produced by the affects in order for those representations or signs to be taken as self-identical in a system of representation. The apparent unity of reason and the apparent unity of the expressive self are both products of the interactions of these simulacra' (McGinnis, 2017: 2).
2. Klossowski knew Georges Bataille and was influenced by his thought, including his analysis and critique of notions of economy. They were both part of the *Collège de Sociologie* in Paris 1937–1939 in which they explored notions of the sacred as a central sociological concept.

References

- Baraitser, Lisa and Denise Riley (2016) 'Lisa Baraitser in Conversation with Denise Riley'. *Studies in the Maternal*, 8(1): 5. Available at: <https://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/12/volume/8/issue/1/>
- Butler, Judith (2004) *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

- Deleuze, Gilles ([1969] 2013) *The Logic of Sense*. Trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale. London: Bloomsbury.
- Deleuze, Gilles ([1981] 2003) *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith. London: Continuum.
- Eco, Umberto (1994) *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*. Trans. William Weaver. London: Minerva.
- Grosz, Elizabeth (2008) *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Klossowski, Pierre ([1953] 1988) *Roberte Ce Soir*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.
- McGinnis, Darin S (2017) 'Klossowski and His Simulcra'. *Philosophy Compass*, 12: e12462.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice ([1945] 2013) *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Donald A. Landes. London: Routledge.
- Riley, Denise (2000) *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Riley, Denise (2012) *Time Lived Without its Flow*. London: Picador.
- Riley, Denise (2016) *Say Something Back*. London: Picador.
- Taylor, John (2009) 'Reading Pierre Klossowski'. *Context 14*. Available at: <https://lectiosinemora.blogspot.com/2009/03/context-no-22-reading-pierre-klossowski.html> (accessed 16 July 2019).