

## *Intimations of a Lyricism sans Subject: On the Poetics of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe*

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*The lyric is a form or genre of poetry often intimately related to subjectivity. But is a lyricism divested of the subject possible? By examining the philosophical reflections of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe upon lyricism, poetry, and their relation to subjectivity, this article explicates how an impersonal lyricism is not only possible, but perhaps necessary. If we wish to do justice to the phrasing or saying of poetic language, then we must endeavour to think the displacement of the subject in and by the very language that the poem expresses. Following Lacoue-Labarthe, this article explores the paradoxical turn of lyricism—that it is bound to the subject, but not to its personal expression; rather, to its disappearance, its displacement, in the expression of language itself. By tracing a sketch of Lacoue-Labarthe’s poetics, relating this thought to the lyrical theories of Hamburger and Culler, and providing a brief explication of one of Lacoue-Labarthe’s “poetic” writings, lyricism is shown to be the testament to the disappearance of the subject, the remainder of a disappearance already passed insofar as the poem remains. What remains is that the lyrical subject would be no “subject” at all—only language itself, intimating its own diction.*

**Keywords:** Lyricism; poetry; subject; phrase; Lacoue-Labarthe.

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“Who could say ‘I am a poet,’ as if the ‘I’ could attribute poetry to itself, [...] without this subject being, rather than elevated, immediately disqualified and desubjectified [*désassujetti*] by this inappropriate attribution?”

Maurice Blanchot (2009 [2010]: 171 [153])<sup>1</sup>

What is lyricism? As a poetic form or genre, the lyric has transformed throughout history: the Ancient Greek lyric (as Aristotle notes in the *Poetics*) is the combination of language and music or rhythm (spoken or sung in accompaniment by the lyre, which gives the genre its name and rhythmically marks its figuration), while the modern lyric is demarcated by its being centered upon the poetic subject, as personal expression (often of passions, emotions or feelings, of the most internal or intimate; the *Innigkeit* of the subject, though not necessarily that of the poet themselves), most often under the insignia of the first person, the “I”. But here lyricism<sup>2</sup> would already appear to bear a paradox within its very possibility or determination—for how can language, an impersonal medium not proper to any singular subject, adequately express or convey such an *Innigkeit*? Would lyricism not, by definition, demand a pure idiom, a singular language, which would be, qua language, a pure non-sense, *saying* nothing? As expression of subjectivity, lyricism is therefore already unstable; the binding between its form and its content, we might say, is already unmoored. Of course, this problem of lyricism as the language of the subject is not new to philosophy—it is present in the works of Friedrich Schlegel and Hegel, for example, and bears relation to the impossibility of a private language as presented by Wittgenstein.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All references to French texts that have been translated into English are given in the following manner in the text: the French publication date, followed by that of the English translation between brackets; and then the page reference in the French volume, followed by that in the translation, within brackets. Where references to French texts that have not been translated into English are given, all translations are my own.

The text of Blanchot from which this citation is taken was originally published in 1984, as the postface to the Russian poet Vadim Kozovoi’s *Hors de la Colline*.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to distinguish between the lyric as poetic genre (as in the French *lyrique*) and the lyrical as a means of saying or expression, as lyricism (as in the French *lyrisme*). The former is the concern of literary criticism, while it is to the latter, the lyrical saying or lyricism, that we shall here be interested. For it is not a question of what defines a poetic genre, or its proper contents (what is said in the poem, *le dit*) that is of philosophical interest; rather, it is the saying (*le dire*), the expression—or statement (*Aussage*), in Käte Hamburger’s terms (see Hamburger 1973: 23–31)—of lyrical language which shall concern us here, as well as its work or effect, its *ergon*.

<sup>3</sup> The tradition of the lyric, its composition and study, from the side of poetry as well as from that of philosophy, is far longer and more complex than this all too simple introduction can account for. The story is further complicated by the differing of traditions concerning the lyric upon national bases—that is, between the English, French, and German conceptions (to speak to only a few). For a review of the English tradition, see Culler (2015: 49–77). For the French tradition, see Rodriguez (2003: 17–30). For a recent review which touches on all three traditions, see Antić (2022).

The possibility of lyricism as language of the subject bears upon, or bears within it, an intimation of a deeper problem. For how has the lyric come to be translated, across the divide without strict determination between the ancient and the modern, from a musical or rhythmic expression to the intimate expression of the subject? Or rather, why has the subject interjected the lyrical, introjecting it with the problematic of the “rhythmic knot” (Mallarmé 1945 [2009]: 644 [184]) of the subject? The introjection of the subject into lyricism: that is to say, the throwing of the subject into lyricism, but also the unconscious incorporation of the subject into the form or figure of lyrical saying. However it is heard, this introjection bears questioning, insofar as it bears within it a question still unresolved—why the subject? Must the subject, subjectivity, be the subject (or, in other terms, the object) of lyricism? If lyricism bears, as Kim and Gibson note, “a subject which is attempting to make itself known through poetic means” (2021: 94), then who or what is this subject?<sup>4</sup>

What I hope to convey here is not necessarily an answer regarding this question. Rather, my intention is but to suggest an intimation born out of this question of the relation between lyricism and the subject—namely, that lyricism does not express the fullness nor the effulgence of the subject, but rather its loss, its divestiture and destitution, in terms of what is proper to it: its place, its position, *itself*.<sup>5</sup> Said otherwise, that the subject of lyricism (in all the manifold senses of this phrase) might be *sans* subject—without subject, subjectless, and thus (re)inscribing lyricism as an intimation of a devoiced or hollowed out intimacy or *Innigkeit*, the expression of an impersonality and externality displacing the status of the subject by way of the very language which was to express and establish it. To attempt this intimation, the first section of this article looks to the thought of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe concerning this question of lyricism. Lacoue-Labarthe remains an under-regarded figure in terms of lyrical studies, and so this article aims to intimate an entry into his poetics. The second section will then seek to compare Lacoue-Labarthe’s poetics to the expressivist theories of the lyric held by Käte Hamburger and Jonathan Culler. Finally, the third section shall attempt a brief explication of one of Lacoue-Labarthe’s poetic “phrases” in order to give evidence to his poetics. It is to this poetics, then, which I now turn.

## 1.

I have chosen Lacoue-Labarthe due to the intimacy that this question of poetry and lyricism had in both his life and his thought, cutting across philosophy and literature, through which he traced the ques-

<sup>4</sup> Kim and Gibson alternatively formulate this question as one of voice and expression: “whose voice is it?” (2021: 97).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Maulpoix (2000: 14), who notes that lyricism “does not represent the plenary expression of the subject, but its devoration.”

tion and questioning of subjectivity and language, as well as the loss of subjectivity that language effectuates and attests by way of intimation. “Intimation”—this word has been repeated many times already, yet what does it say? “Intimation,” and its multiple threads of sense, are woven for us here into the very saying and questioning of lyrical poetry.<sup>6</sup> The word “intimation” bears the trace of a homographic sense of “intimate,” which as an adjective entails a sense of closeness or proximity and invokes a sense of familiarity (the *Innigkeit*, again). As a verb, “to intimate” means to disclose something to someone discreetly. But “intimation” can also entail an announcement or declaration as such—thus without the intimacy as proximity and discretion—and often entails an obscure or ambiguous suggestion or reference. Finally, we might consider that the word is derived from the Latin “*intimatio*,” which speaks to a demonstration or exposition, and can also bear the sense of an accusation.<sup>7</sup> In the intimation of lyricism we might hear, then, an exposure which requires discretion, and thus a certain diverted or detoured manner of expression, announcing and enouncing the subject while accusing it, exposing it, calling it to account for its abdication which lyricism presents—the ex-posing or de-posing of the subject, its (dis)appropriation. The intimation of lyrical language expressing the renunciation of the subject (in both the objective and subjective genitive)...

But I have perhaps been indiscreet, moving too quickly in explicating the intimation of lyricism as implicated in the word “intimation” itself. Let us return to the intrication of lyricism and the question of the subject, and how the former expresses the intimacy of the latter. The intimacy of the subject is bound up with language—the language which constitutes and establishes the subject in providing it the power to say “I,” to speak (of) itself, to render its passions graspable by the word. But language, as “the possibility of poetry,” Lacoue-Labarthe claims, exposes in lyricism a “vertigynity that comes, not from the subject’s exaltation, as the reductive interpretation of lyricism always maintains, but from its loss, or rather from the ‘forgetting of the self’” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1986 [1999]: 46 [30]; translation modified).<sup>8</sup> What is forgotten, or unacknowledged, of the self in the “reverie” of lyrical language (the word is Lacoue-Labarthe’s) is the double movement or double inscrip-

<sup>6</sup> I would note that “*L’Intimation*” was the title of an anonymized dialogue between Lacoue-Labarthe and the poet Mathieu Bénézet concerning poetry, the object of its saying, and the “hatred of poetry” expressed by George Bataille, which also furnished them with the title of the volume (*Haine de la poésie*) to which “*L’Intimation*” acted as introduction. See Lacoue-Labarthe and Bénézet (1979).

<sup>7</sup> This might be related, by way of lyricism, to *deixis* and the gestural monstration (a public showing or exposing) as apophantic expression. On *deixis* as gesture of diction, see Rodriguez (2003: 181). Cf. the discussion of speech act and *epideixis* in Culler (2015: 109–25; 125–31).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Maulpoix (2000: 17, italics in original), who speaks of lyricism as “the passion or the *ravishing* of the subject in language.”

tion which language marks—for the “I” of lyricism is not proper to the poetic subject, to the poet.<sup>9</sup> The “I” marks the empty form or figure of the subject while also, in the same instant, divesting them of what would be their own, what they dream and invest under the sign of this “I.”<sup>10</sup> The paradox of lyricism is that the intimacy that it expresses is only that of an “ecstasy”—which Lacoue-Labarthe views at the heart of the above mentioned “possibility of poetry”—or an “extimacy” (a term for the interior being nothing but the outside, coined by Lacan and employed by Lacoue-Labarthe in a number of instances).<sup>11</sup> Lyrical language thus marks an *écart*, a gap or an interval, internal to the constitution of the subject, expressing what Lacoue-Labarthe calls (dis)appropriation. The parentheses around the negative prefix are meant to denote that in the very act of the appropriation of “itself,” the subject is also refused the status of what would be its own or proper to it—it inherits a loss, a lack, a void in the place of “itself.”

There is thus, as Jérôme Lèbre notes in his own essay on Lacoue-Labarthe and lyricism, an “*écart*, this beating [that is, of the ‘heart’ of the subject, but also of the rhythm of lyricism], scanned by an I [or a ‘me’, an ‘ego,’ the ‘moi’], or rather, by these different Is [the ‘I’ never properly singular in its neutrality, neither properly me nor you, nor any other], [which] has always been the rhythm of the lyrical subject” (Lèbre 2010: 211). The gap or interval, the void of the *écart*, is thus marked in the very rhythm of lyricism, marked upon its subject. It is important to note here the relation between the *rhuthmos* and the *skhema* (by way of the Latin *gestus*, the gesture), for the rhythm exposes the inscription of the schematism, the figuration which gives figure and form to the presentation of the subject, in this case, in the marking of the void, the *écart*, in the place of the figure of the subject.<sup>12</sup> Lyricism does not figure and present the subject, therefore, except as in its most intimate exposure—in the intimation of its absence, its faltering and its default.

<sup>9</sup> The severance of the identity of the lyrical subject from that of the poet has long been commonplace in the tradition of lyrical study—especially so in the French tradition and its “Romanticism,” as opposed to those of the German and English Romantic traditions. On this French tradition, see Rabaté (1996), and in particular, Vadé (1996).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Jenny (1996: 110), where the lyrical “subject” (of which Jenny denotes the suspension by its maintenance within guillemets) “appears not as a form or a substance, but as an activity of exteriorization and rejection.”

<sup>11</sup> For the term “extimacy,” see Lacan (1986 [1999]). For a prime example of Lacoue-Labarthe’s employment of this term, see Lacoue-Labarthe (2009a: 251–252). For a critical study around the term as contextualized in Lacoue-Labarthe’s thought, see Tatari (2010).

<sup>12</sup> The intricacies of this relation between *rhuthmos* and *skhema* greatly exceed the limits of this article. For an entry into the relation and its role in the constitution of subjectivity, see Lacoue-Labarthe (1979 [1998]: 289 [199–200]), and Fynsk (1994: 65). Cf. Antić (2022: 143–146; 238–239), who follows Meschonnic (2009) in viewing rhythm as “the constitution and organization of the subject with discourse and within discourse” (Antić 2022: 238).

Lacoue-Labarthe is thus concerned with lyricism, rather than with the poetic genre of lyric, a *type* of poetry or poesy—for this would already assume the rhythm and its inscription of the schema, a *tupos* which would collectively constitute the character of a certain kind of (poetic) presentation and figuration. It is instead, as Lèbre phrases it, a rhythmic form, “a mode of scansion” or “a rhythm of the subject” (2010: 211) which interests Lacoue-Labarthe. Lyricism is thus considered as a (con)figuration, a schema, for the inscription and thus the rendering present, of the subject.<sup>13</sup> But because the figure of the lyrical subject remains “without content and without character,” insofar as “the lyrical rhythm is an empty form” (Lèbre 2010: 212), this emptiness or void “itself” (insofar as one can think *nothing* “in itself”) is reflexively doubled, mimetically doubled and divided (in the sense of the French “*dédoublement*”), in the figuration of the lyrical subject “itself.” That is, lyricism can only effectuate “a ‘default of lyricism’” (Lèbre 2010: 212–213)<sup>14</sup> which ex-presses and ex-poses the subject under the mark of the originary default of “itself”—the displacement of the “origin” and of the “proper”—in a “*défaillance* without solution of the subject itself” (Lèbre 2010: 213).

This French word, “*défaillance*,” is central to the thought of Lacoue-Labarthe (on lyricism and otherwise) as it concerns the displacement of the center, thus marking the paradox of centrality and propriety in relation to the margins and the improper. The basic meaning of this word is the expression of a weakness or a dizziness (recalling the vertiginously exposed in lyricism), a falling faint or a failing, marking an absence or a loss of power, the interruption of the subject’s habitual mode of functioning, of possibility. There is thus a homophonic echoing in “*défaillance*” resonating and reverberating between “*défaillie*” and “*défaite*” which echoes the intricately senses of “failing”, “weakening”, “defeating”, and “undoing” (not to mention the echo of the “*défaut*,” defaulting). Though the poetic saying of its intimacy in lyricism should mark the affirmation of the subject, all it can affirm, paradoxically, is its powerlessness, its absence, its hollow figure in the inscription and saying of the “I” which marks the subject as *personne* (that is, as a person, but equally as no-one in particular). In expressing “itself,” lyricism only accomplishes the interminable expression of the *default* of the subject—that it never was *anything* “itself” aside from this empty

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Rodriguez (2003), on the lyric as “discursive structuration” (32–37), and as “discursive configuration” “constituting a coherent *form* or *figure* (*Gestalt*)” by way of a “configuring act” of discursivity (72, italics in original). Cf. Antić (2022), who speaks of “*the subject configuration of the poem*” (44, italics in original).

<sup>14</sup> Lèbre notes that this phrase, “*défaut de lyrisme*,” is taken from Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1978 [1988]: 287 [99]). The translators of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s book have translated the phrase as “lack of lyricism.” This paradox of effectuating “itself” by means of (auto-)default, which turns around the double genitive of the phrase, give figure and expression to Lacoue-Labarthe’s thought on the lyrical subject, (de)constituted in the contradictory double movement of lyricism.

placeholder intimating an anterior disappearance of what never could be presented as present in any present. Lacoue-Labarthe will refer to this attestation of its intimate default, the default of its intimacy, as the *douleur*, the *pain*, of the subject.

“A poetry of pain [...] that,” says Lacoue-Labarthe, “is lyricism” (1986 [1999]: 139 [99])—the ex-posure of the default of the subject (in the double genitive), as marked in the tear or rupture of the rhythmic *écart*. But why this lyrical expression, this attempt at saying itself, if lyricism is only bound to reiterate, to reinscribe and repeat, the experience of rupture and pain, in the default and disappearance of the subject, exposed in its void absence-in-presence? As Lacoue-Labarthe explains, it is because this experience of pain—as traversal at the limits of traversal, traversal of a (mortal) peril, in the sense of the Latin *ex-periri*<sup>15</sup>—entails what he calls an “*émoi*.” This word expresses an emotion, but one of turmoil or turbulence, of a troubling or disquieting of the subject.<sup>16</sup> In *émoi*, the subject is displaced, the I or me, the ego or *moi*, is effaced (taking the prefix “*é-*” in its sense of a negation or privation, akin to the Greek alpha-privative). The subject experiences the loss or disappearance of “itself,” the *é-moi*.<sup>17</sup> And yet, paradoxically, at the limit which is exposed in this experience of default and *défaillance*, there is an affirmation amidst the void negativity of the nothing which appears in the place, the innermost interior, of the subject. For in the ex-posure of the subject to this exteriority of its *Innigkeit*, lyricism poses the subject as outside “itself” in the exposure which language effectuates. In its pain, lyrical saying not only exposes the subject as other than “itself” in being “itself”—but in this “being other” as “itself,” the subject is placed in an intimate relation with what is other,

<sup>15</sup> On the explication of this Latin root of the word “experience,” and its relation to poetry, see Lacoue-Labarthe (1986 [1999]: 30 [18]). This is derived from Roger Munier’s etymological explication in “Expérience,” published in *Mise en page* 1 (May, 1972).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Collot (1996), who speaks of “lyric emotion” as “this transport and this deporting which bears [*porte*] the subject to the encounter of that which overflows it of the inside as outside” (114), which relates this emotion or *émoi* (Collot will refer to it as “*é-motion*” (115)) to the internal exteriority of extimacy (see note 11, above). Vadé (1996: 17) refers to this “alterity” within the intimacy of the subject by way of Augustine’s famous “*intimius intimo*,” the most intimate intimacy which lapses into exteriority. Lacoue-Labarthe (re)cites Augustine’s “*interior intimo meo*” in a similar manner. See Lacoue-Labarthe (2009c: 197, 2009a: 251), where he relates this phrase explicitly to extimacy. Finally, Rodriguez (2003: 116) writes that “the dynamic of emotion [*émotion*], as ‘setting outside of oneself’ [*«mise hors de soi»*], corresponds to the movement of destabilization of the reflexivity of the *ego*, and it plunges the subject into the pathic abyss.”

<sup>17</sup> I would note that this term denoting the impossible experience of the subject’s loss of “itself,” its “own” ungrounding, becomes all the more prevalent in the writings of Lacoue-Labarthe in his later years, including in his *Écrits sur l’art* (*Writings on Art*), his posthumously published, incomplete study of Maurice Blanchot (Lacoue-Labarthe 2011 [2015]), as well as in his “literary” works, such as “Phrase V,” of which the subtitle is “(*L’Émoi*)”; see Lacoue-Labarthe (2000 [2018]: 43–48 [29–32]).

and thus with the other (though never the other person as atomized subject—only ever the other person, *autrui*, as the neutral figuration of the other, *l'autre*; that is, as no-one, as the other of every identity, as *personne*).<sup>18</sup>

“Pain, which is not exactly suffering,” writes Lacoue-Labarthe, “attains and touches the ‘heart’, the most intimate of the human [*l’homme*], this extreme interior where, in its nearly absolute singularity (its absoluteness)<sup>19</sup> the human [*l’homme*—and not for an instant the subject—is pure waiting-for-another, hope of a dialogue, of a way out of solitude” (1986 [1999]: 48 [31], translation modified). It is important to note that this linking of pain to the exposure to the other in lyrical language eschews and effaces the subject in its instantiation (“not for an instant the subject”)—we are thus in the distance opened by this *écart*, which is also a proximity (an *é-loignement* or *Ent-fuhrnung*, a de-distancing), opened to a saying which suspends the metaphysics and philosophy of the subject. We are in the caesural suspension—the “tragic transport,” to recite Hölderlin’s phrase (1952 [2009]: 196 [318])—of *écriture*; of *writing* or of *literature*.

Literature is the echo or double, then, of philosophy—though it must be stressed that these terms, as well as that of *mimesis* which is bound up with them, do not entail a temporal secondarity, but rather displace the binary hierarchization of this relation. That is to say, both literature and philosophy are exposed as echoes of an anterior absence, (re)inscribed and (re)iterated as though each “for the first time” or “in the first instance.” Thus Nicolas Murena, in his recently published monograph on Lacoue-Labarthe as a writer of literature as opposed to a philosopher, claims that “the question of lyricism” is “an echo, in the poetic domain, of the philosophical question of the subject” (Murena 2022: 12)—that is, the double formulation or figuration of the question turning between lyricism and the subject which we have been intimating.

The origin is always already doubled, insofar as it is absent in and of “itself”—all that remains, all that appears, is the intimation of a reiteration, a refiguration, founded as though upon the abyss. And whereas the philosophical response lapses in its desire to think this originary default, to appropriate it and thus “itself” (by means of the

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Kim and Gibson (2021: 106–108), who refer to the lyrical subject as a “generalized subject” (108) which expresses and exposes a perspective of no-one (in particular), which “do[es] not appear to belong to any *particular* person at all” (108, italics in original). This appears to be a figuration of the lyrical subject as neutral *personne*—the someone who is no-one in particular. Cf. Collot (1996: 114), on the lyrical subject as belonging to the other rather than “itself.”

<sup>19</sup> That is, its radical distancing or severance from everything else, including “itself” (as un-conditioned or dissolved-away, *ab-solutus*). Lacoue-Labarthe (2009a) speaks of this same “ab-soluteness” in relation to intimacy *as* extimacy (see note 11, above), as what “refuses all return to self” (251) in exposing a “liberation without remainder, its detachment, [...] always anterior, and as such inappropriable and unmasterable” (252).



*logos*), perhaps literature might renounce such an impossible task, and seek only to respond to this absence, in attempts at reiterating it, otherwise.<sup>20</sup> Literature would therefore reiterate this task (and its impossibility) *as such*, in echoing the silence of what was never said, and thus never heard—an expression, that is, of the *a-logos* (an expression which would be, as we have seen, the exposure of *algos*, of pain).<sup>21</sup>

Of course, we need the *two*, the duplication and the play of duplicity which is dissimulated between them—there can be no end, any more than there could be a beginning, an origin. Neither philosophy nor literature can avail, on its own (for each lacks what would make it, integrally, “itself”—lacking its “own” or “proper”). Dialogue is necessary, in the interplay and echo between the two, which evinces, perhaps, the intimation of something which is not “something,” yet neither is it *simply* nothing, in the very *between* of these voices, these languages, these discourses or sayings. Dialogue, which is what is hoped for in lyricism as its exposure of pain and *défaillance* addressed to the other, is of course fundamental to philosophy as well. The doubling of voices, of language—itself already doubling, neutralizing, as we saw with the neutralization or depersonalization of the lyrical I—is thus marked in the place of origin; each voice, echoing another; a phrase, perhaps, silent and unsaid. “Language is the origin,” Lacoue-Labarthe writes, in an epistolary exchange with Jean-Luc Nancy entitled “Dialogue on the Dialogue” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 2013: 98), and, he continues, “language is essentially—originarily—dialogical.” “The address is the condition of language,” he concludes—but in this originarily doubled address, who, or what, is being addressed? Lyricism, as the saying of language “itself,” is an address from no-one to no *one*, addressing everyone, bearing the exigency of response which the double movement of language inscribes, and which effectuates the intimate exposure of the subject as displaced, as *personne*, once more.

## 2.

Having addressed the poetics of Lacoue-Labarthe regarding lyricism, I now turn to two of the major figures of contemporary lyrical studies in order to disclose how Lacoue-Labarthe’s poetics might relate to and extend the discussion. I will take up the figures of Käte Hamburger and Jonathan Culler, in turn.

Both Hamburger and Culler argue against taking the lyrical I as a fictional character or persona, and instead argue for a particular form of expressivism. Both distinguish their position from that of a Romantic

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Stierle (1977), who views lyrical saying as the transgression of discursive and generic schemas, and thus problematizes the identity which would be founded upon or through them. Cf. Antić (2022: 71–3), on Stierle’s article.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Kim and Gibson (2021: 99), on the “expressive *use*” (italics in original) of lyrical language, through which the reader or poet becomes vehicle or passage, as it were, for language and what it seeks to express.

expressivism, which argues for the lyrical saying as personal expression of the poet and their *Innigkeit*. According to Hamburger, the lyrical saying is taken as “statement,” “*Aussage*” (literally, a saying-out or -away), an apophantic expression<sup>22</sup> which is to be regarded not in terms of meaning or sense of what is said, but in the sense of *apophainesthai*, of what is brought into appearance by means of its saying. It is for this reason that “the statement-subject alone, and not the statement-object, is of consequence” (Hamburger 1973: 31) in her conception of the lyrical subject. And this statement-subject, the subject which appears in and by saying, is precisely the lyrical I (234). Hamburger claims that the statement of this subject is a “reality statement [*Wirklichkeitsaussage*],” an actual and effectuating expression, not because of the reality of its object, of what is said, but because of the reality of the subject which expresses it (45). But what is meant by “real” in this sense? For Hamburger does not mean that the lyrical subject can be equated to a real, empirical speaker; the identification of the lyrical subject with the poet remains, for Hamburger, a suspended possibility. We lack the criterion for deciding and determining whether the lyrical I is or is not the I of the poet (274–275), and she remarks that the lyrical subject “is not to be understood as an individual one peculiar to this particular poet, or indeed as one which might be biographically explained, but instead solely as logico-linguistic” (244).<sup>23</sup>

The lyrical subject is thus, for Hamburger, an identity which remains suspended, neutralized as mere product and self-production of language. With this lyrical saying, “we are dealing only with *that* reality which the lyric I signifies as being *its*, that subjective, existential reality which cannot be compared with any objective reality which might form the semantic nucleus of its statements” (285, italics in original). This subjectivity is therefore of a transcendental nature, proper to no single individual and yet constitutional of every subject as speaker. This brings us into relation with the lyrical subject as *personne* which we have elaborated upon above, though while Hamburger maintains the subjectivity of this statement-subject, Lacoue-Labarthe proposes instead that we must think of this subjectivity as hollowed out, as it were, revealing the void of identity in the vacuous place of the “I.” The continuous slippage inherent within every saying, every statement, from the first-person to the third-person (from “I” to “*il*,” “he” or “it”), haunts every enunciative act—every saying affirms my existence in saying, while also displacing “me” in the work of language as neutral force proper to no single subject.<sup>24</sup> “My” words are never my own, and

<sup>22</sup> Hamburger (1973: 24) views “*Aussage*” as translating Aristotle’s *logos apophantikos*.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Culler (2015: 105), who notes that for Hamburger “this is not a return to the notion of the *Erlebnislyrik*, or ‘lyric of experience,’ in which the subject is the person of the poet. The statement-subject is not a personal ‘I’ but a linguistic function.”

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Rodriguez (2003: 164), who writes that the “I” “does not name any lexical entity and characterizes itself by a semantic void. Furthermore, it cannot be identified

the *Aussage* which is expressed exposes “me” in and to “my” reality, ever displaced and distanced from “myself,” in the paradoxical exposure of extimacy, of the intimate interior (the reality of the subject which is *its* own) being nothing other than external (improper, impersonal, the work of language).<sup>25</sup>

Jonathan Culler, in his influential *Theory of the Lyric*, also posits a particular form of lyrical expressivism. Culler views lyrical saying as an act of enunciation, as an event of language, and suspends the determination of the identity of the lyrical subject. Along similar lines as Hamburger, Culler disagrees with conceiving of lyricism as “the speech act of a fictional persona: the fictional imitation of a real-world speech act” (Culler 2015: 7). He also views lyricism as apophantic and epideictic, as “addressing and illuminating the world” (8) by means of a saying which is “fundamentally nonmimetic, nonfictional, a distinctive linguistic event” (7). “The lyric is, at bottom,” Culler claims, “a statement about this world rather than a projection of a fictional speaker and a fictional world” (350)—a claim which positions him in relation to Hamburger, as he acknowledges—and therefore “our attention should be directed to experiencing the poem itself as an event, not to discovering what the author might have experienced” (350). As an epideictic expression, lyricism is thus to be taken as an event of disclosure—to which Lacoue-Labarthe would certainly agree—not only of the world, but implicit in this the experience of the subject as well.<sup>26</sup> But whereas Culler remains concerned with the lyric as genre (cf. Culler 2017: 10), Lacoue-Labarthe is concerned rather with lyricism, taking a more philosophical approach to lyrical saying, its work and effects (its *ergon*) in relation to subjectivity and existence, rather than a literary-critical perspective focused on the poem as a work.<sup>27</sup>

with a particular individual, for it has the possibility of being enounced and assumed by all those who speak. ‘I’ constitutes itself as a blank which determines itself in every situation of communication.”

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Lacoue-Labarthe (2000 [2018]: 45 [30]), where a profound experience of language is poetically exposed as speaking from “in me outside of me [*en moi hors de moi*]” (translation modified). Cf. Lacoue-Labarthe (2009b: 160), where he refers to the “in us outside of us [*en nous hors de nous*]” as relation not to any being (or, in Hamburger’s terms, any objective reality) but rather to nothingness, to the pure and empty power of language “itself.”

<sup>26</sup> It is for this reason that Antić (2022: 99) views Culler’s thought as “crucially linked to subjectifying.”

<sup>27</sup> Rodriguez (2003: 5) focuses on lyric (*lyrique*) rather than lyricism (*lyrisme*), taking the former as a “typical structuration of discourse,” and the latter as a “notion historically situated in the Romantic tradition, which engages an imaginary something of poetic creation and renders aesthetic an existential attitude.” Rodriguez further elaborates on this distinction on pages 18–19. Antić (2022: 40n.17) affirms this distinction. But Lacoue-Labarthe engages with this Romantic tradition in attempts at disconnecting lyricism from the sense of the subject with which it is implicated. He engaged in this attempt throughout his life and works, most explicitly perhaps in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1978 [1988]).

We might therefore position Lacoue-Labarthe on the side of the particular expressivist positions espoused by Hamburger and Culler, though with a particular modification. Call it a negative expressivism, perhaps<sup>28</sup>—for the lyrical expression is of no-one, of language “itself,” the poem as an echo of the powers of language tracing the limit between the possible and the impossible. The event of language marked by lyricism, in the same suspended instance of enunciation, suffers the catastrophic down-turn in which the event is experienced “in the null form of the pure non-event” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1986 [1999]: 31 [18], translation modified), for what occurs in saying is nothing, no-thing. What appears is without appearance, suspended in the saying of language which can but withdraw in the rendering present of any(thing) said. “What occurs thus,” in the (non)event of lyrical expression, “without occurring (for such is what by definition cannot occur), is—without being—nothingness, the ‘nothing of being’ (*ne-ens*)” (32 [19]). Lyricism *says* nothing, (re)articulating the nothingness at work in and through language, in response to what remains, by the very double movement of language as drawing the limit between the possible and the impossible, ever unsaid, what would be *nothing* as sayable. “A poem has nothing to recount,” Lacoue-Labarthe claims, “nothing to say: what it recounts and says is that from which it wrenches itself away as poem” (33 [19–20], translation modified). The catastrophe of language is exposed in lyrical expression, its pain and passion as radically passive or powerless, insofar as what is expressed or said is but the echo or remarking of its own interdiction—the fault of all saying in responding to the unsayable, ever in default of all saying, yet demanding a response nonetheless. This impossible exigency is at the heart of the “expressivism” of Lacoue-Labarthe, for what seeks expression is what remains outside and yet intimately interior to lyrical language and its attempt at saying—an anterior nothingness which language traces, and which Lacoue-Labarthe has hazarded to call the phrase.

In his collection of “poems” entitled *Phrase*, Lacoue-Labarthe puts into practice his poetics. Each “phrase” contained in the work is not the expression of the *phrase* (which would be nothing in terms of language or linguistic expression); rather, each is an attempt at responding to and echoing the (non)event of language which is experienced as the exposure to the silent phrase. And each, in this exposure, aims to enunciate and effectuate an address, to establish a dialogue. Not, however, to address a reader, to dialogue with another person. Rather, these writings seek to address the anterior phrase—the silent pre-scription of what he has elsewhere called “*écriture avant la lettre*,” “*writing before the letter*” (1975 [1998]: 268 [137]), which I take to be intimation

<sup>28</sup> One might trace the genealogy of such a “negative expressivism” through the writings on writing, and the writings of, such figures as Mallarmé, Blanchot, Bataille, and Roger Laporte—all figures whose names appear throughout Lacoue-Labarthe’s writings (both literary and otherwise), impressing and expressing their indelible mark upon his poetics.

of the anterior absencing or disappearance, the default of origin, which marks language in the *diaphora*, the struggle of difference, underwriting and conditioning any possible dialogue. This phrase, however, can never be *said*, (re)iterated, for it would thus fall under the decision of a side, of a language and discourse, which would translate it and thus alter it.<sup>29</sup> The phrase, echoing the faltering and defaulting of the subject, thus exposes us in our attempt at addressing it, at saying it (however faulty or aborted such an attempt may be, necessarily)—for lyricism “encounters, at the limit of the inaccessible and forever-concealed gaping, the naked possibility of addressing” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1986 [1999]: 136 [96]). For though it remains “forever-concealed,” unspeakable *as such*, it demands the attempt at responding, at addressing, nonetheless. It demands, what Lacoue-Labarthe calls in the nineteenth “phrase” (subtitled “prose”), a “just diction” (2000 [2018]: 113 [79], translation modified)<sup>30</sup>—a response not to what there is, or that there is (that there is something and not nothing), but to the void which effaces itself prior to any being, to all being, and which exposes the very possibility of relation *as such*.

Lacoue-Labarthe, in *Poetry as Experience*, published in 1986, speaks of “the possibility of the poem as the possibility of ‘relating oneself to’ in general” (1986 [1999]: 119 [84], translation modified), which is also the possibility of “addressing oneself to”—the power, we might say, of language, which is not properly ours, however; for, as Lacoue-Labarthe here notes, “language is the other in the human [*l’homme*]” (135 [96], translation modified). And yet, in 1999-2000, with the composition of “Phrase XIX (Prose),” Lacoue-Labarthe will speak of this power in language as one of *prose* rather than of poetry (2000 [2018]: 113–15 [79–80]). Of course, this is not a naïve prosody opposed to poetry—it is rather a complex question, bound to the study of Hölderlin and his “sobriety,” as well as Benjamin concerning the Romantics. What matters to us here, however, is the justice of the address, in relation to the unpronounceable (to summarize the opening lines of this “phrase”), capable of “respecting the unpronounceable” as the closing line says (2000 [2018]: 115 [80]).

All of this to say that even these writings bear a “renunciation”—an enunciation, that is, which withdraws itself from the affirmative claim of establishing a figure in truth.<sup>31</sup> Yet if such literary works, as Antonin Wisser phrases it (in relation to Lacoue-Labarthe’s other, early prose-poetic writings collected under the suspended title of *L’«Allégorie»*), “take the place of nothing” and are thus an “allegory of a nothingness” (Wisser 2010: 208), then what remains of lyricism beyond an infinite

<sup>29</sup> On the pain and struggle of engaging with the phrase—the impossible, yet necessary, demand of language and poetry—see the “Postscriptum” to “Phrase II (Clarification),” in Lacoue-Labarthe (2000 [2018]: 19–23 [13–15]).

<sup>30</sup> On this “just diction,” see as well Bailly (2011b).

<sup>31</sup> On the relation drawn between renunciation, enunciation, and the Ancient Greek *phrasis*, see Lacoue-Labarthe (2000 [2018]: 13 [9]).

paraphrase of the unsayable? Perhaps all we can do is repeat, reiterate, and thus intimate, lyrically, the demand for an infinite justification.<sup>32</sup> It remains a question of justice, then—justice without answer, without ground. How to do justice to that which ever abdicates from the position of a “that” or a “this,” the referent, the *todé ti*—an enunciation in which the enounced (*énoncé*) withdraws in the very act of enunciation? Would this not entail the infinite reiteration of our justifications—said ever again, held in question in and by the exposure of the open question which lyricism intimates? For in the experience of lyricism is exposed not only the fault and defaulting of the subject, but of language itself. A faltering which (re)marks (upon) the demand for another saying, another experience, which might render justice to this excess of nothingness which underwrites all language.

### 3.

In the absence of closure, and not to create the illusion of an end to this endless demand which the lyric expresses, I propose a reading of the opening “phrase” of Lacoue-Labarthe’s poetic work. The hope is not to *justify* the poetics by means of an interpretation of the “poem,” but instead to attempt to explicate the *justification* which the lyrical saying seeks to attest. That is, to explicate how the lyrical expression has nothing to say but its saying, its bearing witness to what remains to be said—the poetic or lyrical exigency.

#### “Phrase I”

- 1 ... let—let come (ceding, probably,  
or welling up, though barely),  
that which will not come and cannot arrive or happen, fault  
would it only be of an infallible shore
- 5 and because it is manifest that in you, it is elsewhere,  
of no part where you trouble yourself that this streams  
or collapses (I don’t know, I think  
of an extenuated face, betrayed, covered in tears,  
etc.—in fact, of supplication);
- 10 let, yes, let grow old in you and decline  
this which has not taken place:  
we are held to it, constrained, of the same as to  
the irrevocable which, the one forever according to  
the other, separates us, the one apart from the other binding us;
- 15 for we expose that the echo, in us, were nearly  
of no voice; the things, around us

<sup>32</sup> That is, to repeat the attempt at response, to let language speak and express “itself,” insofar as “lyricism *goes towards language in language*” (Maulpoix 2000: 17, italics in original). To let language (re)iterate “itself” in the exposure of nothing giving over to all occurrence, in a saying which is “not mimesis of a voice but *voicing*” (Culler 2017: 9)—the voiceless voicing of *personne*.

(this garden, for example, there,  
 this meadow, always the same),  
 trace, of course, no passage.

- 20 And do not say: it's horrible—"do not implore,"  
 do not be frightened either.  
 It is, it is true, without appeal, and we are  
 uncontestably deserted. But accept, all the same,  
 "don't turn yourself away," accept, as  
 25 when you redress yourself, shameful, knowing nothing  
 of what you lose, this slow catastrophe  
 or this exodus, rather, which more or less we are.

(*July 20, 1976*)<sup>33</sup>

The expression of the poem folds back upon itself, calling to "let come" (l. 1) what can only come in the call of lyrical saying—that is, the event calling for language, for a saying or expression, but "which will not come and cannot arrive or happen" (l. 3). What is called for cannot arrive or happen because, as event of language, it is no event—nothing happens, strictly speaking; the absence to which only language can attest is testified to in its failure to appear, the "fault" (l. 3) necessary to this saying which responds to the impossible. This fault or non-appearance is also made to appear in the voicing of the poem itself, in neutralizing the voice of any reader—"it is manifest that in you, it is elsewhere, / of no part where you trouble yourself" (ll. 5,6). The poem thus seeks to attest to the displacement and extimacy of the subject (be they writer or reader), as linked to this lyrical voicing of *personne*, intricately with the non-appearing of the event (of being). There is thus doubly inscribed, by language, the fault and default of language and of subjective identity, equally bound to the neutrality of all saying (here given the figure of a passionate or painfully afflicted face [ll. 8,9]).

The "phrase" then affirms the breach or fault of "this which has not taken place" (l. 11), demanding that this non-event of a saying to be responded to be "let grow old in you and decline" (l. 10), further relating this exigency to our mortal existence, as the beings at once established and effaced by language. This nothing of the non-event, bound to lyrical saying, is something to which we are "constrained" (l. 12), at once separating and binding us (l. 14) to it, even as this tears us apart from "ourselves" in the double-movement of de-distancing, in the double-play of *personne*—"the echo, in us" of what is exposed as "nearly / of no voice" (ll. 15,16), which speaks in every lyrical expression as the echo of "our own" voice, and yet of which our voice is also, in displacement,

<sup>33</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe (2000 [2018]: 9–10 [5]). This translation is my own. I have consulted Leslie Hill's translation, though have opted for a slightly more "literal" translation, more syntactically near to Lacoue-Labarthe's original (in line with Lacoue-Labarthe's own tendency toward "literality" in his translation practices). Line numbers have been added for ease of locating citations in the explication that follows.

but an echo. Language, this other in us yet outside us, thus suspends the determinate positing of origin and echo, redoubled in the poem as a whole being the echo of an originary absence, silence, ever in default.

In marking and remarking itself as the event of language, attempt at saying itself in the process of addressing the loss which it incites and intimates, the second stanza of “Phrase I” (re)iterates the response of the subject to the displacing which the lyrical saying destines them. The lyrical subject speaks (to the reader? to “themselves”?) of not being frightened by this loss which is afflicted by and attested to in lyricism (ll. 20,21), and instead of affirming, by the response of poetic expression as experience undergone (as *pathos*) that “without appeal” “we are / uncontestably deserted” (ll. 22, 23). The poem thus marks a renunciation, affirming what it cannot say, affirming as well the loss of self so profound that the subject knows “nothing / of what [they] lose” (ll. 25,26). This loss which language demands and imparts, which the lyrical expression attests to and effectuates in rendering itself as the saying of a loss always already anterior to subjectification, leaves itself to appear as but the echo of a (non)event already passing, an intimate catastrophe of exposure. The lyricism of this opening “phrase,” opening the work of the same name in (re)calling the return to this loss without place and nearly without figure, intimates our mortal exigency as beings in and of language, marking and marked by (as the closing lines attest) “this slow catastrophe / or this exodus, rather, which more or less we are” (ll. 26, 27). More or less, for though this subject would be what “we are,” there remains the suspension of both identity and being which the poem attests in folding back upon itself, exposing the poetic or lyrical exigency binding the subject to an exile and exodus, an errant wandering from “itself” as the existence of “itself.”<sup>34</sup>

The event of lyrical expression thus marks the impossible exigency binding the subject to nothingness, to the void which language traverses and traces, in the experience of intimation as the intimation of an experience belonging to no-one, yet encompassing us all. Though it is true, as Blanchot writes to Vadim Kozovoï, friend and poet, that “the poetic exigency, it is another register, it is wholly in fact apart” (Blanchot 2009: 78), it is also the case that this distance and proximity of the *écart*, this apartness, is intimate to our being, and intimated by language “itself.” It is this poetic exigency, of which theory can see nothing, and which the lyrical saying can but respond to in attestation, that Lacoue-Labarthe seeks not merely to think, but to render as experience—to write, that is, to intimate.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Blanchot (1969 [1993]: 187 [128]), where the prefix “ex-” is made to resonate this ex-perience of displacement between the words “exile, exodus, existence, exteriority and strangeness [étrangeté]” (translation modified), designating “distance [*l'écart*] and separation as the origin of all ‘positive value.’”



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