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Dedramatising ideology: style, interpellation and impersonality in Denise Riley

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the interrelationship of style, interpellation and impersonality in the writings of Denise Riley. Part one performs a detailed reading of Riley's essay 'Malediction', focussing on her theory of interpellation and her visceral sense of the materiality of language. It articulates the philosophical stakes of the essay by taking seriously its sustained, playful engagement with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and by emphasising the intrinsically Spinozist and dramaturgical elements of Althusser's theory of interpellation. It also seeks to elucidate the philosophical and political import of Riley's own critical style, which combines Stoicism (an 'ethics' in the broad sense), a materialist philosophy of language, and a distinctive poetics. The second part explores Riley's theory of style and literary composition. It engages with Riley's notions of ventriloquy and autoventriloquy, suggesting that her approach to style tends to stress the writer's guilty susceptibility to words. The final part considers Riley's elegy 'A Part Song' and the fraught manner in which grief accentuates contradictions endemic to style and authenticity alike. It argues that Riley harnesses the tensions of echo and interpellation to produce a poem that functions as much on the level of semi-conscious poetic association as via the interpellative mode of apostrophe.

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Introduction

Style arises at the fault-line of the personal and the impersonal. The modern conception of style, as a structurally autonomous and personally unique mode of linguistic shaping, was twinned at birth with the modernist practice of impersonality: 'Flaubert' is shorthand for this discursive event. 'There are in me, literarily speaking, two distinct persons', wrote Flaubert to his lover Louise Colet in January 1852,

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> one who is infatuated with bombast, lyricism, eagle flights, sonorities of phrase and the high points of ideas; and another who digs and burrows into the truth as deeply as he can, one who likes to treat a humble fact as respectfully as a big one.[1]

Style is the sublation of these two distinct tendencies, which were soon to part ways in *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism and naturalism respectively.[2] It was also the locus of a dual sublimation: of matter into form and the personal into the austere impersonality of the phrase. 'Passion does not make poetry', wrote Flaubert, 'and the more personal you are the weaker. […] That is why I detest so-called poetic language. […] Soulful effusions, lyricisms, descriptions – I want all these embodied in Style. To put them elsewhere is to prostitute art and feeling'.[3] Flaubertian stylistic impersonality is less a negation of the passionately personal than its rigorous formalisation.

It was a rigour that cost Flaubert dearly, or so he never stopped complaining: 'One arrives at style only through an atrocious labour, a fanatical and devoted stubbornness' that demands an 'irrevocable farewell to life'.[4] 'Four pages in a week', 'five days for one page', 'two days to find two lines': such is the martyrdom of style![5] But in what, precisely, did Flaubert's maniacal quest for *le mot juste* consist? When he locked himself away, what was he actually doing? In a remarkable article from 1968, Roland Barthes provides a structuralist account of Flaubert's stylistic labours. The agony, it seems, is less a matter of writing from scratch than of *corrections*, which can be grasped along paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes: the former comprise substitutions of words ('erasures' and 'hesitations'), the latter the removal or addition of syntagms ('reworkings' of sentences).[6] In principle, paradigmatic substitutions are limited by the constraints of distribution and meaning – only words of the same class, function and sense can be substituted. In seeking to eliminate all repetition, however, Flaubert managed to introduce a vertiginous, nigh-on infinite quality to this seemingly simple operation:

> the difficulty for him is not correction itself (which is effectively limited), but locating the place in which it is necessary: repetitions appear that one hadn't noticed the night before, such that nothing can guarantee that the next day new 'errors' might not be discovered; there thus develops an anxious insecurity, because it always seems possible to hear new repetitions.[7]

It is as if language becomes haunted with its own echo, and the writer turns frantic exorcist, driven on by 'hearing a language [*un langage*] in language [*le langage*]'.[8] At the same time, corrections on the syntagmatic axis are no less worrisome. Flaubert is concerned above all with transitions or articulations of discourse ('Atrociously difficult is the succession of ideas, and [ensuring] that they flow naturally from one another').[9] 'The succession of ideas is not felt directly as a logical constraint but must be defined in terms of the signifier', writes Barthes, 'what it aims to obtain is fluidity,

optimal rhythm in the flow of speech, "succession" [*le "suivi"*]: in a word, that very *flumen orationis* already demanded by classical rhetoricians'.[10] Flaubert is constantly torn between syntagmatic diminution and augmentation, each alteration generating further repercussions for the articulated flow of discourse. Taken together, these operations of correction are strictly infinite: they know no limits other than the writer's mental and physical exhaustion. The Flaubertian sentence [*phrase*] – his great literary innovation – is never finished; its final reified form is but the sublation of this exhausting contradiction, at once hard-earned victory and written trace of ultimate surrender.

The British poet and philosopher Denise Riley is a contemporary connoisseur of the myriad ways in which language speaks across or beyond the writer who is presumed to control it. She inherits Flaubert's concern with impersonality, the resistant materiality of language, the emphasis on writing as editing, and the oscillation between writerly activity and passivity. Flaubert's obsession with repetition is repeated in her own work as both a constitutive feature of inner speech (what she calls 'ventriloquy' or 'autoventriloquy'), and a feminist call for echo and irony as a strategy for disarming the affective force of injurious speech. With her long-time interlocutor Jean-Jacques Lecercle, she has endeavoured to think the question of style via the concept of 'interpellation', the process by which ideology transforms 'concrete individuals' into 'subjects'.[11] The concept was originally developed by Louis Althusser, in a sustained dialogue with the ideas of Marx, Spinoza and Lacan,[12] as a way of accounting for the reproduction of the social relations of production. For Riley and Lecercle, it has assumed a more general relevance. For Riley, it offers a way of conceptualising the ascription, and strategic or anxious assumption, of social and political categories (the title of her 1988 book is indicative: *'Am I That Name?' Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*), while simultaneously overcoming the idealist distinction between language (seen as external) and psychology (seen as pre- or extra-linguistic interiority). For Lecercle, interpellation generates linguistic instances for which mainstream linguistics – from structuralism through Chomsky to Anglo-American pragmatism – cannot account, thus constituting a 'condition' (in a Badiouian sense) for a critical, Marxist philosophy of language. In what follows I focus on Riley alone, but it is worth recalling at the outset that many of her ideas have been developed in tandem with Lecercle's work, and vice versa.

The article is divided into three sections. In part one, I perform a detailed reading of Riley's essay 'Malediction', which offers a clear elaboration of her theory of interpellation and her visceral sense of the materiality of language. In particular, I try to articulate the philosophical stakes of the essay by taking seriously its sustained, playful engagement with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and by emphasising the intrinsically Spinozist and dramaturgical elements of Althusser's theory of interpellation. Inspired by the expanded

definition of style as 'the dialectic of interpellation and counter-interpellation' recently proposed by Jean-Jacques Lecercle,[13] I try to elucidate what I take to be the philosophical and political import of Riley's own critical style, which combines Stoicism (an 'ethics' in the broad sense), a materialist philosophy of language, and a distinctive poetics. Ultimately, the first part argues that Riley's counter-interpellative style serves to dedramatise ideology and, in so doing, to enable critical traction in the rejection of certain harmful interpellations. The second part explores Riley's own theory of style and literary composition. It explicates Riley's notions of ventriloquy and autoventriloquy, suggesting that her approach to style tends to stress the writer's guilty susceptibility to words. In doing so, it provides a critical counterpart to dominant, liberal ideologies of style premised upon an opposition between a supposedly rich individual interiority and a drab social exteriority. In the final part, I consider Riley's elegy 'A Part Song' and the fraught manner in which grief accentuates contradictions endemic to style and authenticity alike. I argue that Riley harnesses the variegated tensions of echo and interpellation to produce a poem that functions as much on the level of semi-conscious poetic association as via the interpellative mode of apostrophe. Taken as a whole, Riley's work offers a uniquely powerful contemporary theory and practice of style.

Dedramatising ideology; or, counter-interpellative style

One might assume an essay on verbal abuse and linguistic violence would focus on the perpetrator or target, being the subject and object respectively of the scene that we inevitably, reluctantly, call to mind. Language would then be the instrument, weaponised but subordinated to the accuser's will. Riley's essay 'Malediction' wrongfoots us from the start:

> The worst words revivify themselves within us, vampirically. Injurious speech echoes relentlessly, years after the occasion of its utterance, in the mind of the one at whom it was aimed: the bad word, splinterlike, pierces to lodge. In its violently emotional materiality, the word is indeed made flesh and dwells amongst us – often long outstaying its welcome.[14]

The subject of this opening passage is the 'bad word' itself, which 'revivifies' and 'echoes relentlessly'. The accuser, presumed source of the 'injurious speech', is nowhere in sight. The bad word, unexpected agent, has a stark materiality: it is 'splinterlike', sharp enough to pierce and lodge in the flesh, yet also (in a dark parody of the New Testament) 'made flesh' itself. This is a shape-shifting materiality that hovers between literalness and a metonymic chain of associations (splinterlike > flesh-piercer > flesh); flesh and stone are never far from Riley's linguistic imagination.[15] Malediction's temporality is also strange: the event of verbal abuse might

be imagined as a one-off scene (albeit tending to demonic seriality) but its violent force reverberates long after. Unlike the beneficent 'Echo' which elsewhere in Riley's work offers possibilities of ironic recuperation, the reverberation of the bad word 'will only resound, to its own limit' (*IP*, p. 12).[16] Thus, where we imagine a perpetrator as subject, Riley gives us language itself; where we imagine language as abstract and immaterial, Riley presents the violent and volatile materiality of the word; and where we might envisage a one-off scene of (violent) communication – addresser, message, and addressee in the self-contained present of the linguistics textbook – Riley gives us a traumatic *décalage* of multiple uneven durations. When it comes to interpellation, our imagination is out of kilter with the real.

Ideology, Althusser famously asserted, 'represents individuals' *imaginary* relation to their real conditions of existence'.[17] 'Imaginary' must be read here in the full Spinozist sense intended – as 'knowledge from random experience' in which singular things 'have been represented to us through the senses in a way which is mutilated, confused and without order for the intellect'.[18] Riley's essay can then be read not only as a 'quasi-therapeutic' (*IP*, p. 24) defence against malediction but as a performative reflection on the *poetics* of interpellation and counter-interpellation, whereby the latter equates, broadly, to Spinoza's second type of knowledge – reason – which clearly and distinctly grasps its object causally and conceptually, unlike the haphazard immediacy of the first, imaginary kind.[19] Riley entreats the target of malediction to adopt what she variously calls a 'tactics of indifference' or 'tactic of impersonality', to 'espouse a principled *non*engagement with the proffered scenario of (hostile) recognition' (*IP*, pp. 9, 22). The very phrase 'proffered scenario' suggests an affinity between interpellation and the dramatic. It hints at a spontaneous operation by which real, objective processes of cause and effect are represented – and lived – in the imaginary guise of a drama between seemingly autonomous 'actors' who appear as sovereign, individual subjects.[20] Étienne Balibar has convincingly argued that for Althusser '*ideology is always already a dramaturgy*', and one suspects Riley, who speaks of the 'script of rage' and the 'theatrical autopilot' of the interpellative scene (*IP*, p. 17), would agree.[21] Was it coincidental that Althusser felt compelled to present his theory of the functioning of ideology via a 'special mode of exposition' – the 'little theoretical theatre' in which was staged the infamous 'commonplace, everyday hailing, by (or not by) the police: "Hey, you there!"'?[22] If we then pursue the hypothesis that ideology is *structurally* dramatic, we might transcode Spinoza's first (inadequate) type of knowledge – the imagination – as *dramatisation*. In this light, interpellation could be reconceived as a *genre*: a discursive mode that 'imagines' or 'stages' impersonal social processes as personified or personalised dramatic scenes. What, for Riley, is an extreme instance (verbal abuse) of the

impersonality of language – of language's ultimate indifference to us – is (obviously) imagined and lived as a deeply personal experience.

It is then not by chance that Riley consistently refers throughout her work to the need to 'dedramatize',[23] a process which seems to consist of four movements: firstly, it counteracts our spontaneous tendency to self-dramatisation via a stoic technology of the self that, paradoxically, displaces the subject (i.e. the 'subject' produced by interpellation) and undoes what Riley calls the 'purely idiosyncratic psychopathology of omnipotence' (*WS*, p. 91); secondly, it disarticulates each element of the imagined drama, translating *imagined* (ideological) chains of cause and effect into (rational) sequences of actuality (e.g. 'the target sees there is only an accidental link between what was hurled and the will to hurl. She realises that the bad word is not properly "expressive" of the speaker's impulse to aggressive speech' (*IP*, p. 23)); thirdly, it effects a devitalisation and petrification of malediction's febrile materiality; and finally, it returns us to ordinary, anonymous commonality – thus countering interpellation's insistent and violent operations of individuation. Dedramatisation is a defensive and 'quasi-therapeutic' practice that calls on the (ideological) subject to imitate the impersonality and indifference of language itself. Taken in its totality it constitutes a *style*: a style of counter-interpellation comprising a technology of the self (an 'ethics' in the broad sense), a materialist philosophy of language, and an internally variable but distinctive poetics. Riley enacts this powerful style of counter-interpellation in the very development of her own counter-interpellative theory of language and style – that is, as we shall see, a theory of style and writing that deconstructs the dominant liberal ideology in which the notion of style remains ensnared.

To grasp the full philosophical import of Riley's style, however, one must be attentive to the self-conscious Hegelian and Stoic refrains of the essay. While not fully modelled on the 'Lordship and Bondage' section of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Riley openly toys with key moments of its dialectical unfolding in what she calls her 'phenomenology of cruel speaking' (*IP*, pp. 23–4). Exploiting Hegel's equation between speech and work as externalizations of interiority,[24] she splices Hegel's later comments on language with the (dialectically) earlier life-and-death struggle between master and slave.[25] The struggle through which the master achieves his pyrrhic victory of a recognition that conceals within itself the truth of his ultimate impotence is echoed in Riley's claim that 'under [the raging speaker's] onslaught, I'm apparently nothing for myself any longer […] I have no life left in me, or rather none of that combative life that he needs to secure his own continuing linguistic existence for himself' (*IP*, p. 18).[26] Language in Riley's rendition hovers between the role of Hegelian *Geist* and, more often and more suggestively, the 'independent thing' (which Andrew Cole argues should be read as feudal land)[27] through whose resistant materiality the slave encounters his

own independence in the negativity of labour, but which the master meets only *immediately* via the simple consumption of the slave's products. Riley subtly but directly compares the 'work' of the hate speech target with that of the slave, calling it 'an iniquitous toil of elucidation' (*IP*, p. 24). As the slave comes to learn his own independence through the resistant independence of the land he works, so Riley's maledictory target labours to detach the 'bad word' from the interpellative drama and return it to its petrified indifference to her. In doing so, she fuses Hegel's notion of the negativity of work with a Freudian sense of 'working through'. As for the slave, truly impersonal independence can only be achieved by 'absolute fear' in which one's 'entire self-conception must have tottered' (*IP*, p. 25). Through this devastating destitution of the (ideological) subject – nothing short of living death – combined with the toil of detachment of the bad word, I can finally 'become myself' in the very moment in which I accept the utter indifference of language towards me. In one last dialectical twist, however, my 'self' reveals itself to have been impersonal all along – a moment of 'radical dispossession from [my] supposed attributes' (*IP*, p. 38).

Particularly curious in this light is the status of stoicism in Riley's essay (and, indeed, her work more generally).[28] For it will be recalled that, for Hegel, Stoicism emerges at the stage of phenomenological unfolding immediately following the 'Lordship and Bondage' section. This is the moment in which consciousness 'withdraws from the bustle of existence' into 'the simple essentiality of thought' in a manner that is '*indifferent* to natural existence'.[29] Hegel condemns Stoicism's failure to grapple with the actuality of the 'manifold self-differentiating complexity of life'; the paradox, however, is that, for Riley, it is *this very withdrawal itself* that assures the (supremely Hegelian) tarrying with the negative of language's materiality. Riley's conception of Stoicism inverts Hegel's: it is less, for her, a matter of my indifference to language (or natural existence) than of learning to accept language's indifference to me. Once this acceptance, which knows any number of affective modalities (from rage at language's mastery of me to light-hearted ease at my own dislocation), is attained, there is no further dialectical progression, no ultimate sublation of linguistic materiality into some Absolute Knowledge of language as such.[30] It is as if the resistant, indifferent materiality of language is coextensive with a lived acceptance of a stalled or blocked dialectic – a *negative* dialectic of the word. It is this acceptance of the independent, insuperable impersonality of language and of my contingent, but not hopeless, place within it that enables, simultaneously, my own 'subjective' disalienation and the objective actualisation of language itself.

Style beyond liberalism: 'the psyche is outside from the start'

It will not have escaped the reader that Riley's account of malediction is starkly opposed to the liberal idylls of recently dominant theories of language such as Habermas's theory of communicative action.[31] Her conception of style, inseparable from her broader philosophy of language, likewise challenges the dominant stylistic ideology of the day.[32] Of what does the latter consist? Arguably it transposes into the domain of style the spontaneous assumptions of liberal humanism:

> But wherever does such a graphic style emerge from? We'd have, at least according to the usual account, little choice but to suppose that the language of the outside sifts down onto the gaily diversified inside of each solitary head, there to receive its unique colouring and thence to reissue onto the page as a highly individual and finished style. What's unsatisfying about such a description is its adherence to that old standard division which has already given us pause, in which an individual and rich interiority is the refinement of a more lacklustre and uniform outside of language. And on this kind of supposition, the writerly style is what carries the stamp of authorial authenticity. Style is the autograph.[33]

We encounter here an ideology of style whose imaginary chains of cause and effect are comparable to the interpellative scene of malediction. A richly variegated individual interiority is opposed to a 'lacklustre and uniform outside of language'. Though Riley herself does not remark upon it, this position is itself an articulation of two others: the modernist view (susceptible to multiple political valences) that 'language should be creative, as against its contemporary condition', and the still persistent Cold War logic in which anything beyond the holy confines of the individual is presumed to be of the same oppressive grey as a Soviet housing block, a view epitomised in André Glucksmann's memorable phrase: 'There where the State ends, the human begins'.[34] It is the rich interiority of the individual writer that transmits life and singularity to the otherwise dull prose of the world. Style on this view is the 'autograph' of authorial authenticity, the literary DNA of a unique individual who is at once its originator and possessor; the modern histories of style and copyright are profoundly intertwined.[35]

It bears asking, nonetheless, how a materialist theory of style can account for stylistic singularity without reproducing the methodological individualism of bourgeois ideology. My own previous work on style proposed one possible solution, largely by transposing to the arena of style Marx's maxim on history: 'Men [*Die Menschen*] make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted'.[36] Style can be seen as the artistic shaping of a common language. The latter consists of multiple linguistic practices,

structured and striated by the divisions and contradictions of the social formation. It is upon this uneven, internally contradictory linguistic material, in specific linguistic situations, that a writer goes to work. A writer from this perspective is not an original creator or *Urheber*, but a proactive *shaper* or *sculptor* of pre-existing words, tones, phrases, images, tropes and other linguistic units that come ready loaded with the past meanings and intentions of others, and which thus offer various modes of resistance. These meanings do not simply persist unadulterated into the literary work but are productively transformed, refined or parodied by the act of poetic shaping. This shaping is itself internally limited by such factors as prevailing stylistic ideologies or the gravitational pull of the various modes, types, genres and forms in and through which the author is writing. Stylistic production is thus a proactive process performed within a range of sometimes seriously debilitating objective limitations. The singularity of a given style emerges from the overdetermined encounter of these subjective and objective elements: it is not, indeed strictly speaking *cannot* be, the simple and immediate externalisation of an air-tight, monological interiority.

Reread in light of Riley's theories of writing and language, however, my own account of style comes retrospectively to assume an occasional constructivist sheen; for all its emphasis on objective linguistic limitations, it is still a poetics that frames writing as a pro-active, productive act.[37] What such an account partly overlooks are those passive elements of the writing process that certain Marxist approaches, hampered by a strain of productivism, have tended to ignore: receptivity, response and attentiveness.[38] The two most notable aspects of Riley's account of writing are the displacement of the image of the poet-craftsman fully in control of her materials with a writer who is subject to the independent materiality of language, ever destined not so much to write as *retrospectively to self-edit* 'whatever language has forcibly dictated' (*WS*, p. 91). This is accompanied by an emphasis on the *ear* as the primary sense of composition: writing as 'close listening' (*WS*, p. 72) both to the unconscious sound and semantic matrices of words, and the interpellative babble of inner speech.[39] Examining each in turn will serve to elucidate Riley's clean break with the standard account of style.

Riley's understanding of linguistic materiality is inseparable from her theory of 'retrospective knowledge': a coming to know backwards, or 'afterwardsness' (akin to Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*), that characterises the intertwined processes of self-description (or interpellation more generally), writing, and guilt.

> In those very areas where I am in theory most sharply and inimitably myself, where my originary capacities might most be held to reign – in what I freely write, in what I am, in what I will take responsibility for – there's instead a task of retrieving from the outside whatever I can for my own domain, yet

> only after the event has handed me the materials I am to work with, or against. (*WS*, p. 89)

Style is that which *comes from the outside*, not in the sense of any clear-cut inner-outer distinction (this, after all, is what Riley insistently rejects) but as the linguistic modality of *extimité*.[40] She proposes a dedramatisation of the imagined scene of writing:

> Sound runs on alone, well ahead of the writer's tactics. The aural laws of rhyme both precede and dictate its incarnation – and this is only one element of an enforced passivity within the very genre where that annoying term 'creativity' supposedly holds court most forcefully. […] There's a semblance here of craft, but craft of a strange sort, since it can only be exercised retrospectively. Held by form, I work backwards, chipping away at words, until maybe something gets uncovered which I can acknowledge as what I might have had to say. (*WS*, p. 66)

Drawing on Jakobson's notion of 'intuitive verbal latency' and Lecercle's powerful theory of the linguistic remainder,[41] Riley attributes to language an active unconscious that is coextensive with the writer's 'enforced passivity'. Sound runs on ahead of the writer's intentions, decentring the writer as individual originator, while 'writing' as commonly conceived disappears altogether: a vanishing mediator logically coextensive with the zone of indifference between linguistic agency and enforced passivity. The real *work* of writing is reconceived as retrospective editing: no longer the sovereign craftsman in charge of his tools, with a pre-formulated plan and ordered process of execution, but a retrospective 'chipping away' of the words that 'I' and language, together, have 'written'. The status of the imagined original intention is highly ambiguous. The retrospective editing continues until 'maybe something gets uncovered' (it is not certain it will), 'which I can acknowledge' (implying that what has been uncovered did not originate with me, since acknowledgement entails some minimal alterity), 'as what I might have had to say' (it may or may not have been what I intended). There are echoes here of a Hegelian retroaction through which the intention that emerges *after* the work of editing is nothing but a projection of a lost immediacy of articulation that was never the writer's to begin with.[42] Original intentions are simultaneously produced and presupposed, effects retroactively posited as causes.[43]

The metaphors of 'chipping away' and 'pruning and snipping away at the thickets of verbal foliage' (*WS*, p. 68) figure writing as the retroactive shaping of stone or vegetation, but Riley also insists on the less active image of writing as listening. As opposed to the 'gaily diversified' interiority of the ideological account of style, Riley evokes an inner speech driven by manic ventriloquism: snippets of conversation, insults, jingles, citations, song lyrics, love letters and profanities bump, mingle and redound amidst the 'densely

chaotic onrush of the speech of the outside' (*FL*, p. 21). Within this general ventriloquism, *autoventriloquism* is Riley's ingenious term for '*how interpellation works by deploying a middle voice looped through a circuit of authority*' (*FL*, p. 21; emphasis in original). The middle voice is halfway between the active and the passive; in autoventriloquy, I abrogate to myself a pre-existing self-description (or mode thereof) and assume it as my own. It is the most intimate of interpellations: intimacy *as* interpellation. Counter-interpellation is only possible on the condition of the autoventriloquy of contradictory interpellations, though as Vološinov reminds us:

> It is naive to suppose that one can assimilate as one's own an external speech that runs counter to one's inner speech, that is, runs counter to one's whole inner verbal manner of being aware of oneself and the world.[44]

He goes on to distinguish between a poet's style and the style of his inner speech; the latter is said to 'engender' the former, and is intrinsically shaped by the figure of the 'listener', an addressee who is part-superego, part-comrade, and part embodiment of the value judgements characteristic of the social group to which the poet belongs.[45] Riley gives Vološinov's dialogical theory a menacing Althusserian edge when she argues, persuasively, that the *singularity* of a style is largely the result of 'the nature of their [the poet's] characteristic attentiveness towards the world […] [and] the effect of their subjection to being overheard and to a concomitant guilt, prone to self-scrutiny' (*FL*, p. 27). Style for Riley is thus the contingent outcome of a guilty but fertile susceptibility to words and their imagined speakers.

The stoic acceptance of contingency is a constant refrain in Riley's work. The image of the individual that emerges from her writing is that of a contingent, overdetermined subject consisting of nothing but the uneasy, ironic mediation of many, mutually contradictory interpellations. 'The play of ideologies', writes Althusser, 'is superposed, criss-crossed, contradicts itself on the same subject: the same individual always-already (several times) subject'.[46] To ask a seemingly naive question, then, why is it that people still tend to see themselves as unified persons? And what might be the relationship between such unification and the individuality of a style? It was Gramsci who suggested an answer. Just as Althusser would later develop a theory of historical temporality premised upon a decentred, non-contemporaneous social totality of which overdetermined subjects are the uneven, interpellated result, so Gramsci (*pace* Althusser's later accusations) argued that the non-contemporaneity of the present was a result of ongoing class struggle and the person [*persona*] was its intrinsically anachronistic effect.[47] The mirage of a unified present 'is a function of the social and political hegemony of one social group seeking to impose its own "present" as unsurpassable horizon for all other social groups'.[48] Our spontaneous sense of personal unity is, consequently, an effect of the relative coherence

of a ruling class's hegemonic project, embodied in state apparatuses. After several years of incarceration, fearing the gradual decomposition of his own *persona*, Gramsci identified the source of its minimal endurance, through any number of 'molecular' transformations, in 'the State records office and the law'.[49] Extending this logic, I want to suggest that one of the great ideological legerdemains of the bourgeoisie has been to equate the *material singularity* of a given style, whose preconditions have just been outlined, with the *possessive individualism* of copyright law. The impersonal, fully social origins of style are privatised and commodified by the politico-juridical state apparatus. It takes a village to raise a style, but the bourgeois state encloses it and stamps it with a single name.[50]

'A mourner tries/ her several styles of howling-guise'

By way of extended conclusion, I want to consider what happens to style under the extreme emotional pressure of grief. The entire impetus of Riley's work is to do away with the author as *fons et origo* of literary production, and to stress instead the unacknowledged extent of unoriginality, passivity, echo, cliché and citation in the writing process. 'It is a linguistic humiliation', she observes of love letters, 'when the apparent rarity and singularity of feeling announces itself as, after all, condemned to verbal repetition, yet it seems cheapskate to reiterate the phrases written in all sincerity over the decades' (*WS*, p. 61). When it comes to elegy, the problem is compounded: how to commemorate the singularity of the dead when intoning words and phrases that come shop-soiled with the tears and pain of innumerable mourners past? To what extent is the original guilt of style accentuated by what Jahan Ramazani has called 'the economic problem of mourning – the guilty thought that they reap aesthetic profit from loss, that death is the fuel of poetic mourning'?[51]

These questions bear on Riley's elegy 'A Part Song', written in the wake of her son's death in 2008, and appearing in the collection *Say Something Back* (2016).[52] The poem is a highly self-conscious procession through twenty short sections composed in various 'styles of howling-guise'.[53] To grasp what is at stake here, emotionally and philosophically, one must look back to the quite remarkable essay 'Lyric Selves' which proceeds through 13 different verse forms and styles, each one wrestling with the ethico-poetic conundrums of lyric subjectivity, and accompanied by prose passages reflecting on the limitations of each instantiation. Yet again, Riley exhibits a profoundly dialectical sensibility: just as Hegel's *Phenomenology* is a progression through myriad 'shapes' of *Geist*, each of which is found to contain an internal inadequacy or contradiction which generates the necessary sublation to the 'higher' form, so Riley – albeit in a far more playful manner – works her way through many of the dominant positions of the

modern lyric (confessional, romantic, surrealist, communitarian, etc.), submitting each of them to a performative, immanent critique, locating shortcomings that drive her on to the next style. As in 'Malediction' her endpoint is not some stylistic equivalent of Absolute Knowledge, but an acceptance of the independent materiality of language to which one must ever 'attend' (*WS*, p. 111). Historical and literary self-consciousness are constitutive of the lyric; the task of the poet is to acknowledge, ironise and actively shape the reiterations of prior styles. Attendance to linguistic materiality and the ventriloquy of inner speech become the foundations of a new, constitutively ironic lyric subjectivity.

A corollary of this position is a pronounced dubiousness towards authenticity and voice. For if every inherited poetic stance effects unwitting echoes of other voices, how can elegy speak the non-repeatable singularity of my loss? Elegy redoubles the fraught status of the lyric 'I' by demanding from it an authenticity of affect as ethical seal of its relation to a unique object of mourning. 'A Part Song' becomes a testing ground for 'capacities of styles of speaking "I"' that are also, simultaneously, calls to and from the lost son.[54] It entails, in some ways, an intensification of the stakes of Riley's earlier attitudes to the lyric form, as put forth in such poems as 'Wherever you are, be somewhere else' and 'Dark Looks' from *Mop Mop Georgette* (1993).[55] These works exhibit a volatility, vulnerability and spikey anxiousness on the part of the lyric 'I': histrionic self-assertion coupled with a terror of abandonment ('So, take me or leave me. No, wait, I didn't mean leave/ me, wait, just *don't*').[56] The drag-like, performative logic of the elegiac 'styles of howling-guise' is also pre-figured in such lines as 'I can try on these gothic riffs, they do make/ a black twitchy cloak to both ham up and so/ perversely dignify my usual fear of ends' (*SP*, p. 69). The exaggerated self-consciousness of literary inheritance manifests in sardonic self-critique at the spectacle of a camp performance ('ham up') there where authenticity should be. 'I never have wanted/ "a voice" anyway, nor got it', the speaker states, before the poem concludes with a paradoxical but entirely logical sublation: 'I can't talk like any of this./ You hear me not do it' (*SP*, p. 70). The lyric 'I' in Riley is always located at the impossible site of hearing that which cannot be spoken: voice as the impossibility of voice.

'A Part Song' is not so clear an exemplification of stylistic irony as 'Lyric Selves' – certain parts perform their 'mawkish modes of reedy piping' (*SSB*, p. 14) more openly than others – yet its anxiety over voice and authenticity is, if less bitterly sardonic than Riley's earlier lyrics, nonetheless still fully present. It deploys a series of intertextual echoes to produce compelling new poetic configurations. Of course, in attributing to Riley a set of allusions one risks becoming mired in the very dynamics of writerly guilt about which she has written so convincingly: hearing only some echoes and not others, *mis*hearing, attributing to the poet an excess of allusive intention, thereby

inducing the unease of unwarranted interpellation (though, in a sense, all interpellation is simultaneously warranted and unwarranted – we are at once too little and too much for just attribution).[57] It seems fairly clear, however, that 'A Part Song', in places, strategically exploits Eliotic resonances. Part vi consists of five couplets of largely regular iambic tetrameter, creating a tension between the rather pat rhythm and the speaker's melancholy reflection on choosing the right mourning outfit ('styles of howling-guise'). The second couplet 'You'd rather not, yet you must go/ Briskly around on beaming show' (*SSB*, p. 5) reads like a fusion of Prufrock's 'Let us go then, you and I' and 'In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo'.[58] It is not simply the echoed long 'o' sounds but the way in which, as with so much of Eliot, the incantatory rhythm threatens to overpower or estrange the content. Once the connection is made, other aspects of 'Prufrock' assume a sudden new relevance: the epigraph from Dante's *Inferno*, which evokes questions of address, response and return to life ('If I thought that my reply were given to anyone who might return to the world, this flame would stand forever still … '); the line 'The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase' goes straight to the heart of the question of interpellation and style; Prufrock's constant self-conscious unease concerning his appearance, and his projections of voices judging him ('They will say: how his hair is growing thin!'), resonate with the external judgements of the mourning mother figured in 'A Part Song' ('*What is the first duty of a mother to a child?/ At least to keep the wretched thing alive*' [*SSB*, p. 3]); finally, Prufrock's mention of Hamlet ('No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be') harks back to Riley's part v, written partly in Shakespearean pastiche ('Here's a denatured thing, whose one eye rummages/ Into the mound, her other eye swivelled straight up' [*SSB*, p. 4]). Via semi-direct citation or sonorous allusion, then, Riley harnesses and reconfigures an entire affective and linguistic network which makes the surface of grief echo with the unconscious of poetic tradition.

Much of the poem consists of elegiac apostrophe to the lost son. The logic of these maternal interpellations can be glimpsed in the volume's epigraph from W. S. Graham:

> Do not think you have to say
> Anything back. But you do
> Say something back which I
> Hear by the way I speak to you.[59]

It suggests a more tragic yet more hopeful constellation of style, interpellation, and autoventriloquy than Riley's earlier work might have suggested. In the act of hailing her dead son, the poet longs to 'hear' in her own manifold interpellations echoes of his (absent) response. Different styles become different materials producing distinct echoes; it is then a question of (literally

and metaphorically) *hitting upon* the right one in the hope of conjuring some momentary vocal trace of her son. In part xi, a play on the metaphysical conceit (yet another Eliotic resonance), the speaker addresses an 'Ardent bee' 'Since my own dead, apostrophised,/ Keep mute' (*SSB*, p. 9). By the end of the poem, the speaker has *become* the bee 'banging on and on/ Against such shiny crimson unresponse' (*SSB*, p. 9). It is only in part xii that the speaker undergoes a benevolent filial interpellation in which the heteroglossic chaos of inner speech is briefly, mercifully 'orchestrated' by her dead son

> Who'd laugh at the thought
> Of me being sung in by you
> And being kindly dictated to.
> It's not like hearing you live was.
> It is what you're saying in me
> Of what is left, gaily affirming. (*SSB*, p. 10)

The strained syntax of the last two lines are productively ambiguous: 'of what is left' could mean that which remains of the mother's life without her son, or the son's vocal and memorial remnants, briefly reanimated with his beneficent dictation. 'Gaily affirming' transmutes an interpellative force so often felt to be oppressive or diminishing into a light, joyful affirmation of what remains of life.[60] It is one of several moments in which the son's 'Lighthearted presence' is fleetingly 'bodied forth/ straightforwardly', in which the anguished search for an elegaic style capable of 'shepherding' the son 'back within range/ Of my strained ears', is momentarily disintensified and the sheer lightness of the son's ways emerges in contrast to the otherwise fraught, but necessary, rhetorical invocations.

The final two stanzas move from ultimate acceptance of the failure of the mother's efforts to 'extort' (*SSB*, p. 14) a living response, to a risky representation of the son's reply itself – the latter emerging precisely at the moment the mother has ceased to invoke it. Eliot's presence is never far away. 'She do the bereaved in different voices' (*SSB*, p. 14) is Riley's sardonic summation of the previous 18 parts, a play on Eliot's provisional title for *The Waste Land* – 'He do the police in different voices' – taken from Betty Higden's description of the orphan Sloppy's reading aloud the newspaper in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*. Sloppy mimics and thereby undermines the *interpellation policière* by pluralising it through popular echo (signalled by Betty's minorisation of the standard English 'He does'); he also imitates the emotions of others as if realising his internal life by mimicking external models. Channelled through Eliot's use of this motif to designate the *personae* of *The Waste Land*, Riley hints at a certain mournful solidarity with Sloppy's tendency to reproduce others' voices and emotions. Her consistent emphasis upon echo and

ventriloquy is here repurposed to elegiac ends. *The Waste Land* also features in the final part, written in italics and, we presume, the voice of the dead son:

> *My sisters and my mother*
> *Weep dark tears for me*
> *I drift as lightest ashes*
> *Under a southern sea*
> *O let me be, my mother*
> *In no unquiet grave*
> *My bone-dust is faint coral*
> *Under the fretful wave.* (*SSB*, p. 14)

Here, at last, the absent son addresses his mother and sisters in a valedictory parting song. The reference to 'My bone-dust is faint coral' echoes Eliot's own repetition of Ariel's song in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: 'Full fathom five thy father lies./ Of his bones are coral made./ Those are pearls that were his eyes' (I.ii.). Yet even here we recall Eliot's own sardonic framing, fusing Hamlet's dying monosyllables with the lyrics of a 1912 ragtime hit: 'O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag –/ It's so elegant/ So intelligent' that follows the anxious and insistent questioning of 'Are you alive or not? Is there nothing in your head?'[61] The solemn surface of the final song is thus disturbed by the unstill depths of poetic association; indeed, the very surface-depth metaphor, which Riley elsewhere so consistently deconstructs, is itself the subject of echoic ambiguity. The same holds for the reference to 'The Unquiet Grave', an anonymous folk ballad about the risk of excessive mourning preventing the dead from resting in peace. The constant burden of Riley's prose, as we have seen, is to enable a transition from dramatic interpellation to the anonymous commonality of an undramatic, everyday language; this is her linguistic version of 'working through'. It would then be fitting for 'A Part Song' to conclude with a hopeful fusion of the anonymous ballad – linguistic embodiment of the collective – and a hint of Shakespeare's 'sea-change/ Into something rich and strange'. Yet just as, through the mother's apostrophes, we caught echoes of the son's voice, so in the son's valediction we detect the ineluctable stray notes of unreconciled loss: the final wave is *fretful*.

Notes

1. Cited in Ben Hutchinson, *Modernism and Style* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 90.
2. Cf. Hutchinson, *Modernism and Style*, p. 94 ff.
3. Cited in ibid., p. 95.
4. Cited in Roland Barthes, 'Flaubert et la phrase', *Word*, 24.1–3 (1968), p. 49, n. 5 and p. 48. Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own.
5. Cited in ibid., p. 48.
6. Ibid., p. 50.

7. Ibid., pp. 51–2.
8. In a footnote, Barthes alerts us to another famous instance of 'hearing a language [*un langage*] in language [*le langage*]': Saussure's writings on anagrams. Ibid., p. 52, n. 16.
9. Flaubert 1852, cited in Barthes ibid., p. 52, n. 17.
10. Ibid., p. 52.
11. Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014 [1995]), pp. 188–94.
12. See Warren Montag's excellent philological reconstruction of Althusser's theory of ideology in *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 103–70.
13. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *De l'interpellation: Sujet, langue, idéologie* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2019), pp. 223–51. Lecercle's approach to style is developed, in part, in critical dialogue with my own earlier work: Daniel Hartley, *The Politics of Style: Towards a Marxist Poetics* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).
14. Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 9. Henceforth cited as *IP*.
15. On stone, see Riley's remarkable essay 'On the Lapidary Style', *differences*, 28.1 (2017), pp. 17–36.
16. On echo and irony, see Denise Riley, *The Words as Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 146–84. Henceforth cited as *WS*.
17. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p. 181, emphasis added.
18. On Spinoza's three kinds of knowledge, see Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 57 (EIIP40S2). On Althusser's inheritance of Spinoza's theory of the imaginary, see Montag, *Althusser's Contemporaries*, pp. 127–31.
19. Spinoza, *Ethics* (EIIP40S2).
20. Cf. Riley's comments on identification as fantasy: 'To be in fantasy is to live "as if". Some scene is being played out; and any act of identification necessarily entails a scenario. That celebrated script, "a child is being beaten", suggests that if the structure of psychic identification invites a substitution (somewhere the hearer inserts him- or herself into the action, takes up a role in the scene), then such a substitution is so heavily engineered by syntax as to constitute a strong argument for the ordinarily fantastic nature of all identifications' (*WS*, p. 13).
21. Étienne Balibar, 'Althusser's Dramaturgy and the Critique of Ideology', *differences*, 26.5 (2015), p. 19.
22. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, pp. 190–1.
23. See, e.g. Riley, *WS*, pp. 16, 26, 91, 144, and *IP*, pp. 12, 16.
24. 'Speech and work are outer expressions in which the individual no longer keeps and possesses himself within himself, but lets the inner get completely outside of him, leaving it to the mercy of something other than himself'. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 187.
25. Though *Herrschaft und Knechtschaft* refers to the *Herr* (lord) and *Knecht* (bondsman) respectively, I here tentatively follow a tradition of referring to these figures as 'master' and 'slave' (e.g. Alexandre Kojève and Sartre). Susan Buck-Morss has made a convincing case that Hegel had in mind here the

Haitian Revolution, which was contemporary with his composition of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. See Susan Buck-Morss, 'Hegel and Haiti', *Critical Inquiry*, 26.4 (Summer, 2000), pp. 821–65. This view has been challenged by Andrew Cole, who insists on the specificity of the context of feudalism for a correct reading of the chapter. See his *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 66–85.

26. '[T]he object in which the lord has achieved his lordship has in reality turned out to be something quite different from an independent consciousness. What now really confronts him is not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one. […] The *truth* of the independent consciousness is accordingly the servile consciousness of the bondsman'. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 116–17.
27. Cole, *The Birth of Theory*, pp. 66–85.
28. For a more critical reading of Riley's stoicism (and of the politics of her work more generally), see Andrea Brady, 'Echo, Irony, and Repetition in the Writings of Denise Riley', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 7.2 (2013), pp. 138–56.
29. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 121, 122.
30. Implicit here is Lecercle's argument concerning the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of a linguistic metalanguage. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *The Violence of Language* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017 [1990]), pp. 21–2.
31. On Habermas and the historical conjuncture that led to his dominance, see Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *A Marxist Philosophy of Language* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2009 [2005]), pp. 45–72.
32. On the term 'stylistic ideology', see Hartley, *The Politics of Style*, pp. 225–8.
33. Denise Riley, '"A Voice Without a Mouth": Inner Speech', in Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Denise Riley (eds), *The Force of Language* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 26. Henceforth cited as *FL*.
34. The modernist view of language is quoted from Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 2007 [1989]), p. 69. Glucksmann quoted in Alain Badiou and François Balmès, *De l'idéologie* [1976], in Alain Badiou, *Les années rouges* (Paris: Les prairies ordinaires, 2012), p. 134.
35. See Hartley, *The Politics of Style*, pp. 39–42. See also Paul K. Saint-Amour, *The Copywrights: Intellectual Property and the Literary Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).
36. Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in *Surveys from Exile*, ed. David Fernbach, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 146. See Hartley, *The Politics of Style*.
37. Regrettably, I had not read Riley's work when writing *The Politics of Style*.
38. There is no automatic reason for this lacuna; after all, the early Marx placed great emphasis on the element of passivity said to constitute humans as 'objective sensuous' and 'suffering' beings – 'to be sensuous is to suffer [*leiden*]'. Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 390.
39. It is worth noting here the suggestive intersections between Riley's work and the question of the ambiguous, spectral status of 'voice' in narratology, on which see Andrew Gibson, '"And the Wind Wheezing Through That Organ Once in a While": Voice, Narrative, Film', *New Literary History*, 32.3 (Summer 2001), pp. 639–57. Properly to unpack the points of convergence and divergence would be beyond the scope of this essay.

40. Cf. Jacques-Alain Miller, '*Extimité*', in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society*, ed. Mark Bracher, Marshall W. Alcorn Jr., Ronald J. Corthell, and Franxcoise Massardier-Kenney (New York: NYU Press, 1994), pp. 74–87.
41. Jakobson cited in *WS*, p. 70. See Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*, pp. 7–54 and 103–43.
42. 'Reflection therefore *finds before it* an immediate which it transcends and from which it is the return. But this return is only the presupposing of what reflection finds before it. What is thus found only *comes to be* through being *left behind*; its immediacy is sublated immediacy'. Hegel quoted in Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2008 [1991]), p. 167. See also Žižek's commentary, pp. 164–71.
43. Effects being taken for causes is one of the basic structures of teleological and religious thinking criticised by Spinoza in the *Ethics* (EIApp), and was recognised by Althusser as a key structure of ideology. See Louis Althusser, 'The Only Materialist Tradition, Part 1: Spinoza', trans. Ted Stolze, in *The New Spinoza*, ed. Warren Montag and Ted Stolze (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 6.
44. Cited in *FL*, pp. 26–7.
45. The listener can, however, assume a variety of relationships to the poet and the 'hero' (or 'object' of the literary work) respectively.
46. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p. 194.
47. I am drawing here on Peter D. Thomas's *The Gramscian Moment* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2010 [2009]).
48. Ibid., pp. 285–6.
49. Cited in ibid., p. 401. I note that Lecercle is also drawn to this example in *De l'interpellation*, p. 69.
50. This minor rhetorical flourish should not be taken to deny the role of the state in language constitution itself (national standard languages, major versus minor dialects, etc.).
51. Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), p. 6; cited in Helen Charman, 'Parental Elegy: Language *In Extremis*', *King's Review* (2018). https://www.kingsreview.co.uk/new-page-4 [Last accessed: 25 November 2020].
52. It was first published in the *London Review of Books* in 2012.
53. Denise Riley, *Say Something Back* (London: Picador, 2016), p. 5. Henceforth cited as *SSB*.
54. Riley in Romana Huk, 'In Conversation with Denise Riley', *PN Review*, 103, 21.5 (May–June 1995). https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=1912 [Last accessed: 1 August 2021].
55. Brady's essay is particularly enlightening on the status of the lyric subject in Riley's poetry. See Brady, 'Echo, Irony, and Repetition in the Writings of Denise Riley'.
56. Denise Riley, *Selected Poems* (London: Picador, 2019), p. 96. Henceforth cited as *SP*.
57. See especially *WS*, pp. 75–6.
58. T. S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', in *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1980), pp. 3, 4.
59. W. S. Graham, 'Implements in their Places', in *New Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 247.

60. On interpellation as force of address, see Lecercle, *De l'interpellation*, pp. 45–73.
61. T. S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', in *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 41.

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