

Lyric Self-Expression

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“Poems aren’t trees. But they do contain phrases, sentences, paragraphs, verses which readers can, if they wish, use themselves. The words are there ripe for picking, no matter what the poet was doing in writing them down, and no matter what the reader takes her to have been doing.”

—Kendall L. Walton²

1. Introduction

It is part of the very idea of modern lyric poetry that it foregrounds a poetic speaker—the “lyric I”—whose formally articulated thoughts, feelings, and experiences are presented as the primary objects of artistic interest and aesthetic regard. Lyric poetry is not merely an expressive artform but, evidently, an intensely and intentionally *self*-expressive one, concerned with conjuring up a sense of a subject who is attempting to make itself known through poetic means. Yet ever since the zenith of anti-intentionalist and anti-authorial accounts of artistic meaning, the philosopher of poetry has worked against a backdrop of theory that makes it appear at best naïve and at worst a logical error to endorse even a modest literalism regarding lyric self-expression, where “literal” indicates that the self is actual and is thus fit to express the psychological states of a real subject. Hence the default view in poetics is the same as it is nearly anywhere philosophers write about artistic expression: the lyric I speaks on behalf of a fictional persona and the “poetic discourse” it generates is therefore a variety of fictional discourse.

Kendall Walton has recently shown something remarkable. We can be entirely literal about lyric self-expression, and we can do so by locating the relevant self not in the body of the poet but of the reader. Put crudely at first mention, by identifying in a particular manner with the content and expressive form of a lyric—with what the poem says and how it says it—the reader, if you will, puts her self on loan to a poem and thereby makes its language expressive, in fact literally and genuinely self-expressive. Walton’s claim is surprising. He has given us the most influential theory of fiction in contemporary philosophy, and it is striking that he is unwilling to apply it to a phenomenon that it would seem so naturally suited to explain. That is: why doesn’t Walton treat a poem as a prop that prompts games of make-believe? Walton has applied his theory of fiction to many fundamental questions in aesthetics and the theory of representation, and understanding his reluctance in the case of poetry reveals a complexity to his work that is often overlooked.

Our interest is in exploring and expanding the Waltonian model of lyric self-expression. The critical dimension of our chapter concerns the limitations of Walton’s model given the nature of voice in poetry and common features of the semantic and expressive behavior of the lyric I. We argue that after a few revisions of the small to medium sort, Walton’s model can accommodate the worries we raise. It can do so by enlisting a more expansive notion of the subject of lyric poetry than Walton—along with the vast majority of contemporary theories of the lyric—will countenance. What we will say about the subject of lyric self-expression will be every bit as surprising as Walton’s own views are: the “I” of lyric poetry often has an implicitly plural grammatical function. Poets often intend the lyric I to “contain multitudes,”³ as Walt Whitman had it, and thus to stand for and speak on behalf of the experiences of more than one mere subject, fictional or otherwise. Seeing how this works, we argue, reveals something important about the nature of readers’ affective and cognitive identification with the lyric I, the kind of imagination central to lyric poetry, and what, if anything, hangs on ontological questions regarding the source of poetic expression.

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² Walton, 2015, p. 62.

³ The line occurs in *Song of Myself*, 51.

II

Walton's model aligns with the work of a small but influential group of philosophers and critics who break with the widespread habit of producing theories that do to poems what we are much happier to do with novels: cast them as intuitively, basically, and perhaps necessarily in the business of projecting fictions.⁴ Lyric poems commonly elaborate a first-personal exploration of the nature of experience, selfhood, memory, and similar aspects of the ways in which the I encounters both itself and the world in which it is situated. Yet very often these poetic investigations are not presented in narrative form⁵ and, absent the telling of a story, we have nothing amounting to a "story world"⁶ and, to this extent, nothing that obliges us to treat a poem as generating fictional characters and an imagined world in which they reside. And even if a lyric poem *does* provide a narrative, the anti-fictionalist about lyric poetry will argue that *that* dimension of the poem is unlikely to be the site of proper poetic activity or the focus of our attention as readers of poetry. Aesthetic immersion in lyric contexts makes central the rhythmic, imagistic, figurative, formal, and expressive quality of poetic language itself.⁷ This, in short, is what it means to appreciate a lyric poem *as* a lyric poem. And while the imagination might be harnessed in both the creation and appreciation of these dimensions of a poem, the point anti-fictionalists will insist on is that it is not of the sort that requires us to see a poem as projecting fictions, even in the Waltonian sense of regarding propositions in poetic contexts as functioning as props in a game of make-believe.⁸

Yet the more serious reasons for refusing to model poetic discourse on fictional discourse are essentially cognitive and ethical. To abandon this model would seem to be to permit the poet to speak on the worldly side of the divide between the fictional and the real, and thus to allow the philosopher of poetry to assert that there is a categorical difference between fictional utterances and poetic ones. As the eminent literary theorist Jonathan Culler has it, the lyric poem is not to be modeled on a "world-projecting fiction,"⁹ since the lyric poet is typically in the business of making "real statements about this world."¹⁰ Culler calls the language of lyric poetry *epideictic discourse*: "public poetic discourse about values in this world rather than a fictional world." Anti-fictionalism in respect to lyric poetry is best seen as an attempt to get the lyric I and the reader to inhabit the same ontological space: to show that poets typically speak from a position within the world so that they can address our experiences and values directly. Poetic discourse may be oblique in any number of respects, but, according to theories like

⁴ For an excellent overview, see Culler (2015), Chapter Three. For recent work in a broadly analytic register, see Claudia Hillebrand (2017) and Anna Cristina Ribeiro (unpublished) for arguments in favor of seeing the language (of much, all, or some) lyric poetry as nonfictional. Jenefer Robinson is perhaps the foremost proponent of positing (fictional) persona to account for works' expressivity (2005, Chapter Nine).

⁵ Lyric poetry is of course standardly contrasted with narrative poetry (epic poems, ballads, etc.). Simicek (2015) for an excellent discussion of the anti-narrative conception of lyric poetry.

⁶ Even if some importation of worldly facts is typically required to fill out all the implicit truths that obtain in the story. See Currie (2010), Matravers (2014), Voltolini (2016), Stock (2017), and Friend (2017) for discussion of contemporary theories of fiction and their stance on such issues.

⁷ Of course, some prose works highlight their rhythmic, imagistic, figurative, formal, and expressive qualities as well—but we would say much more readily that a lyric poem loses something essential or distinctive to it when it fails to highlight those qualities than to say the same of a prose work that fails to highlight those qualities.

⁸ If the poem contains a metaphor, Walton might partly analyze a poem in terms of make-believe where the focus is on the "prop"—the metaphor—that serves as an invitation to a make-believe certain things about the target (see his "Metaphor and Prop-Oriented Make-Believe"). However, this is an analysis of a particular figurative language in a poem, and insofar as the focus is on the metaphor-constituting word choices, it is not a wholesale fictionalizing treatment of the poem that posits a fictional world from which the poem (ostensibly) speaks.

⁹ Culler, 2015, p. 119.

¹⁰ Ibid, 107. Of course, fiction *can* make statements about the real world (e.g. thought experiments, models). And some philosophers, notably Derek Matravers and Stacie Friend, question the fundamentality of the fiction/non-fiction divide in these contexts. But note that such statements are not "real" at least in the sense that they are cast as spoken *from* a different world (such that we would import some content into our world by, for instance, recognizing suitable parallels between the fictional world and the real world). Our aim in this chapter is to explore the possibility of an anti-fictionalist and literalist model, i.e. whether the speaker can be seen as originating from, and directly addressing features of, this world.

Culler's, not in the sense that it is constitutionally bound to speak indirectly and *across* worlds—from the imagined world a poem projects over to ours—when it wishes to make features of actual human predicament the focus of poetic activity.

To see what the philosophical problem amounts to, consider one way of thinking about a term that is clearly relevant to this debate (though sadly largely ignored in the philosophical literature): *voice*. As Kukla and Lance have it, voiced expressions are inherently “personal.”¹¹ Idiomatically, when one “gives voice” to a set of concerns, feelings, or beliefs, one calls on the hearer to entertain a conception of a subject who is the bearer of these psychological states (perhaps in a particular historical and social context). In this respect, utterances in which voice plays a vital role have essential reference to a self who is represented as hanging together in a particular way. When we experience a use of language as voiced, we take it to be an attempt to speak *on behalf* of a self and its thoughts, passions, and experiences. We can give voice to the states of others—I might speak on behalf of the plight of my neighbor or the hypocrisy of my generation—in which case our utterances are expressive but not, or not exclusively, *self*-expressive. But in properly self-expressive utterances, the concerns, interests, and beliefs of the utterer are made the objects of attention. This is why Kukla and Lance claim that our grasp of a voiced expression typically culminates in an act of recognition or acknowledgement.¹² The immediate point is that our responses to voiced expressions indicate that we grasp that the speaker has revealed something about herself, which is to say, has engaged in an act of self-expression, properly so-called.

To motivate our presentation of Walton's view, note that we undoubtedly experience the presence of voice, understood in this light, in lyric poetry; this is inseparable from our experience of a poem as self-expressive. Thus one way of putting the philosophical issue is to ask: whose voice is it? This is not merely to wonder about the identity, or the ontological status, of the speaker. Our experience of lyric utterances *as voiced*, poetic content *as expressed*, obliges us to give a philosophical account of what so much as entitles us to apply the concept of voice and the category of expressive language use to a poem. The particular minefield the anti-fictionalist has to traverse is that nearly all of the standard responses to questions of this sort reintroduce fictionalizing tendencies to our understanding of poetic discourse, just now through expressive instead of narratological avenues. For if one wishes to embrace positions such as Culler's—and on the whole we do—a story is owed as to how the possessor of this voice, if it is not the actual poet, can speak to us so directly and epideictically about our worldly values, experiences, and circumstances. If we say that this voice belongs to an *imagined* speaker, we appear to invoke a non-actual speaker and so ultimately a fictional speaker (below we return to this idea). And if we are tempted by the Heideggerian move, as Culler and his allies are, of arguing that the poetic text itself—or the language of a culture, or *Dasein*, etc.—“speaks,”¹³ we have to explain how we can regard an inanimate object or abstraction as capable of such loquaciousness if it is not because we are imagining it to be so. This hardly seems to make good on the promise of literalism regarding the subject of poetic self-expression. So how can we explain how a poem gives voice to the concerns, anxieties, and predicaments of an actual or otherwise real subject?

At first blush, these anti-fictionalist arguments sound remarkably unWaltonian, certainly to anyone who has read *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. Yet Walton embraces much of this. In fact, Walton offers a theory of poetic expression that echoes central features of Culler's epideictic model, though with one crucial difference. Whereas Culler wants to establish that the lyric I makes “statements about the real world,” Walton claims that it does not make genuine statements at all. Walton argues that poets can often be seen as “thoughtwriters,” and that thoughtwriters, like speechwriters, compose a body of text not for the sake of expressing themselves but “for others to use in expressing their thoughts (feelings, attitudes).”¹⁴ Just as a speechwriter may not “believe in “anything she writes, a thoughtwriter may not “seriously mean” or assert anything she writes because she doesn't use the words she inscribes; she only mentions them. Walton is thus happy to say that a poet's only contribution

¹¹ Kukla and Lance, 2009, p. 59.

¹² *Ibid*, pp. 134-152.

¹³ This tradition originates in the work of Käte Hamburger (1993, originally published in German in 1957). Her manner of distinguishing fictional and lyric discourse is crucial here. For discussion, see Culler (2016).

¹⁴ Walton, 2015, p. 54.

“might consist just in making words available for readers to use.”¹⁵ This line of thought is condensed nicely in the following passage:

Rather than understanding a poem on the model of an ordinary assertive or expressive utterance, addressed to or overheard by a listener, we might understand it on the model of a speech written by a speech-writer, for use by another person. Speechwriters don’t use the words they inscribe (not insofar as they are simply speechwriters); they mention them. They produce a text for use by someone else. The speechwriter doesn’t assert the declarative sentences he comes up with; his client asserts them when she delivers the speech.¹⁶

And it culminates in the following claim about the lyric poem:

Is it nonfiction? Yes, if that just means that it is not fiction. But it isn’t a typical work of nonfiction, an ordinary instance of nonfictional literature. The poet, the author of the work, didn’t use the words in the usual manner, but only mentioned them. She didn’t assert its declarative sentences. The reader alone uses the words (the word types)—if he chooses to do so. The poem doesn’t serve as an actual vehicle of communication, not the usual kind at least—not even a pretended or attempted one.¹⁷

One way of understanding Walton’s gambit is in the following terms. The broader debate in poetics concerns how we should provide a principle of animation for the lyric I: how can we conceptualize the poetic speaker as endowed with sufficient subjective life such that we can justify our ascription of psychological and expressive predicates to it? Walton is not interested in solving this puzzle so much as showing that the thoughtwriting model allows us to demystify it, certainly in many cases. *When* readers treat poems in the manner he describes, we have an elegant and earthbound way of explaining how poetic content gets expressed and so poetic language itself becomes properly *expressive*, since the reader provides us with the figure of a speaker who is using this language to reveal or otherwise manifest features of a self. Through an act of first-personal lyric identification, the content of a lyric poem now becomes *about* a subject. It is given a subject of whom its declarations and descriptions can be seen as true.

Walton finds support for his argument in the fact that language acquisition is itself a social endeavor and works largely on the inheritance of expressive phrases that went well before us. For Walton, poets supply readers with nuanced and rich tools for engaging in successful acts of self-expression; they are great instructors in how to give voice to our experiences and inner lives, much as an artist might aid an art student by providing the right color shade of paint. According to the thoughtwriting model, a “successful” or “good” poem would, in Keats’s words, “strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance.”¹⁸ The point is, when we experience a poem as properly self-expressive, it is because we, the readers, give voice to the thoughts and sentiments elaborated within it. Indeed, they become asserted thoughts and expressed feelings *through us*: it is by virtue of an act of readerly identification that they are made expressive of the mental states and experiences of an actual subject. True, the actual poet may think and feel them, too. But when this happens, it is because the poet, like the reader, puts a lyric to a particular kind of expressive *use*.

On a Waltonian model, then, to experience a poem as voiced and so literally self-expressive is to experience it as expressing features of my personhood, though presumably with much more elegance and aesthetic success than I can if left to my own devices. In this respect, we, the readers of a lyric, furnish the self to whose thought, feelings, and experiences the poem “gives voice.” Walton is careful not to overgeneralize his claim, and his arguments are full of responsible qualifications to the effect that “sometimes”, “often”, and “it is possible that” poems can function this way, all of which makes it challenging for the critic to find the right level at which to pitch complaints. Nonetheless, his argument is the only one of which we are aware that purports to show us how

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 54.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 61.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 63.

¹⁸ See Ribeiro (2014) for an especially detailed account of the value of this in respect to our experience of poetry that traffics in negative emotions such as sadness, despair, and grief.

to be *both* literalist about lyric self-expression and anti-fictionalist about poetic discourse, and, for the moment at least, we will treat the Waltonian model as issuing a bold claim about lyric self-expression in general, even if Walton himself would take umbrage. Walton is surely right to acknowledge that the vast history of lyric poetry will readily provide counterexamples to most sweeping claims we make about its nature. What is at stake, however, is showing that the *default* model of lyric self-expression shouldn't be thoroughly fictionalist, and this is a point on which Walton, Culler, and we agree. The disagreement concerns just what a literalist model should look like, and whose self it should make central to lyric self-expression.

III

If read in a perversely verbatim spirit, Walton's model raises obvious concerns. Our arguments in this section will perhaps just provide reasons for not taking his model in this spirit, and in the next section we will offer suggestions for how the model might be revised to avoid the worries raised here. The problem is the particular manner in which Walton's model has readers identify with the content of a poem. It is no doubt true that readers can use poems for the declaration of personal thought and feeling. But we fear that, on its face, Walton's model demands entirely too much of the reader's person, and in a manner that will obscure basic features of poetic experience. Even if our arguments are an exercise in philosophical pickiness, they will point up cases to which Walton's model does not comfortably apply and thus motivate the philosopher of poetry to try to account for them. The overarching lesson will be that the thoughtwriting model applies well to *some* poems, and often to *parts* of poems, but not to entire poems themselves. The class of poems that especially resist a wholesale thoughtwriting treatment will include those with particular social or political settings, those which require a strong self-other distinction, or those with expressions that should not be disassociated from the subjects whose experience they draw from.

Take a notion that is central to poetics: *poetic address*, and think of it as the mode of imaginative speech that grants the lyric I its bewildering liberty in respect to the range of things momentous and ordinary, abstract and concrete, to which it can address itself (eternity, a red wheelbarrow, one's unborn child, and so on).¹⁹ As J.S. Mill famously wrote, we experience poetry as "*overheard*...The peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener." That is, readers typically experience themselves as indirect auditors, listening in on an intimate exchange between the poetic speaker and the state of affairs its speech targets. It is immensely difficult to see how we can respect the integrity of our experience of poetic address if we do not treat the lyric I as an *independent* expressive subject. As Monique Roelofs has it, "*we direct* modes of address at people, nonhuman animals, and things,"²⁰ and thus if we experience address in a poem, it would seem that the lyric I is quite capable of directing and animating its own speech, quite autonomous of the reader and the expressive use to which she puts its language. Put simply, if the words of a lyric poem are, as Walton argues, "*mentioned but not used*" prior to readerly identification, how could poetic address be experienced as a form of *address* at all?

Moreover, a great many of the emotions readers experience in respect to lyric poetry are *other-directed*: pity, sympathy, curiosity, admiration, and scorn are all at times perfectly legitimate responses to the "discourse" the poetic speaker generates. These emotions imply clear self-other differentiation and call on the listener to feel something about the state of *another* expressive subject, which would strongly suggest that in poetic contexts there is at least one subject acknowledged to be expressive who is not identical to the reader. Or consider empathy, which is arguably the most common and basic form of emotional bond between readers' experience with the lyric I. True, empathy is a first-person emotion, but it is *another's* first-person perspective that one tries, always with varying degrees of success, to assume. In Rae Langton's words, empathy is marked by a "shift in self-location," and this requires a conception of the other as already subjectively animated, lest there be no other self whose thoughts, feelings, and subject position I imagine myself to be experiencing.

¹⁹ See Waters (2003) for a discussion of address to which we are indebted.

²⁰ Roelofs, 2020, p. 2.

Sometimes, much of the cultural, critical, and political work of a poem will be undone when it is the reader who gives voice to the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes the poem elaborates. More specifically, the meaning of some claims that look like assertions in a lyric poem are obscured when the reader is seen as providing the grounds for their expressivity. As an example, take Langston Hughes' "Dinner Guest: Me," (1965) which begins with an "I"-statement:

I know I am
The Negro Problem
Being wined and dined,
Answering the usual questions

When the "I" here is being identified with "The Negro Problem," surely not just any reader can supply the self-substantiating "I." In many instances, this would entail making the poem issue a false claim. In one sense, the claim is trivially false since an individual cannot literally be "The Negro Problem," an abstract phenomenon that manifests differently across time, place, and cultural context. But the opening line is not a simple metaphor; individuals in certain social standings—usually the non-dominant ones—often experience the phenomenon of answering for or "standing in" for their social group. The claim "I know I am / The Negro Problem / Being wined and dined, / Answering the usual questions", then, invokes a lived experience, and, without the requisite life experience supplying the truth conditions of the "I know I am / The ____ Problem" (where ____ might be filled in with "Negro", "Genderqueer", "Immigrant", take your pick), the expressive "I" is empty, or worse still, presumptuously and oppressively usurped.

Is it possible to think that the reader is being asked to *try on* the African-American identity so as to be able to embody the "I" here? This is the self-projecting fictionalizing move that we might have expected Walton to make with poems. But, as we noted, he does not take this stance with poems, and we agree that one should not. Regarding a lyric poem such as Hughes's as a work of fiction that invites games of make-believe risks trivializing the poem and the forms of experience it strives to give voice to. It does so for the obvious reason that it makes its utterances about, and articulated from a position within, a fictional world, to that extent diminishing the poem's ability to speak directly about our world and the forms of alienation and oppression in effect there.²¹ In this respect, we should be strongly inclined to ensure that our theories of lyric poetry explain how we can see works such as "Dinner Guest: Me" as making *genuine* claims and as creating a reading experience that readers must take up and consider in relation to the shared actual world in which we live.

Though Walton does not endorse treating lyric poetry as fiction—"the poem isn't a work of fiction, any more than a speech written by a speechwriter is"²²—the thoughtwriting model itself still might be seen to be ill at ease lyric poetry's ability to speak in an epideictic register about the real world. This is because it risks rendering the subjective seat of the lyric I a kind of mask that virtually anyone can try on and adapt. As noted above, Walton is careful not to overstate the thoughtwriting model's capacity to account for lyric poetry, but he does think the experience of reading a poem often involves treating the poem as a piece of thoughtwriting.²³ Walton thinks that lyric poems, though nonfictional, often invite the usual activities prescribed by a work of fiction, especially when a poem's claims are not easily adoptable:

If the ideas or attitudes expressed in a poem are ones the reader doesn't accept, she may be unwilling to think or utter them assertively, and unable to do so sincerely... Does the reader, in these cases, have no choice but to read the poem either as another person's serious utterance, or as the unusable and perhaps inappropriate handiwork of a thoughtwriter? Enter the imagination, pretense, role-playing.²⁴

²¹ Culler, 2017, p. 33.

²² *Ibid*, p. 63.

²³ Walton, 2015, p. 57.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 64.

If I disagree with the sentiments expressed in a poem, I may try them on, imagining uttering the words “seriously” to see what it feels like to express such thoughts or attitudes—and probably what it feels like to endorse or accept or adopt them.²⁵

However, the kinds of poems where the thoughtwriting model runs up against its limits concerns not those where the reader finds herself confronting ideas or attitudes with which she disagrees. They are ones where the flexible transferring of the “I” is unauthorized, inappropriate, or impossible. It is not a matter of differing opinions, desires, and attitudes, nor even cases of imaginative resistance. It is rather that the reader sometimes, in fact often, lacks the requisite authority or experience to stand behind a poem’s voice. Certain points of views are simply not the kind of thing that can be, nor should be, taken up and inhabited; there are limitations to the kinds of perspectives we can responsibly “pick up and try out”, and “Dinner Guest: Me” provides one good example of such a perspective. The politicization of much art in the twentieth century—and the explicit attention to issues of subject-position and identity politics in contemporary lyric poetry in particular—ensures that the question we raise of Hughes will apply widely.

Perhaps all we are saying is that sometimes subjective expressions created for others’ use—whether in a poem or on a bumper sticker—come with limits or suggestions for who may and may not use them as modes of self-expression. “Dinner Guest: Me” shows that sometimes role-playing, even first-person identification itself, is decidedly problematic and risks undercutting a poem’s point, which, for white American readers, is presumably to get them to *acknowledge* the experience of others, not to self-identify with them. In this particular instance, if the non-black reader locates herself in the I of the poem, this will lead her to miss what Hughes in fact wishes such a reader to identify with, a contrasting “white mind” also present in the poem:

Murmuring gently / Over fraises du bois, / “I’m so ashamed of being white.”

The second “I” here appears in a sentence in quotations; distance is created, and it is clear that the speaker merely mentions the indexical (as well as the sentence) without using it. There’s also the genteel demeanor and the irony of only admitting one’s shame in the context of delicacies and comfortable black company (a dinner party guest capable of answering the usual questions, and an unmistakable nod to W.E.B. Dubois), all pointing to the limited circumstances in which this other “I” is capable of expressing herself. Note that it would be a mistake to regard Hughes’ poem as a special case because it gives the reader *two* “I”s yet invites the reader, depending on features of her personhood, to take up and try only one. And this serves as a foil for other lyric poems which include only one instance of the “I” that do not straightforwardly invite the reader to take up and try on. In fact, “I, too” is another poem from Hughes that features a poetic speaker that resists being used by any old reader, beginning with the lines “I, too, sing America. / I am the darker brother” and ending with the line “I, too, am America.” This is in part a poetic response to Walt Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing,” and its indirect point is that the “I” of Whitman’s lyric poetry, which often conducts itself in a universal voice, simply cannot speak on behalf of such a copious range of subjects.

For these reasons, we maintain that much lyric poetry does not function as speeches do: most are not produced for others’ use, and treating the semantic grounds of the lyric “I” as shifting is often problematic. This finding is not surprising once we revisit the poet-speechwriter analogy. After all, most speeches are hardly written for *everyone*; if a political speechwriter produces a text for the State of the Union, a professor would be misusing the artifact were she to read it as a class lecture. Both speech writers and poets have intended speakers in mind (even if the poet aims to speak to most humanity), and veering beyond the realm of appropriate usage would amount to misusing the artifact. Again, Walton did not intend his thoughtwriting model to explain all of our engagement with all poetry.

But then the question becomes, what kinds of poems are best captured by his model? We might answer that *some* poems, especially poems that wish to speak on behalf of “general human experience”, would be appropriate for the thoughtwriting model. But here we need to consider the distinction between first reading vs. repeated recitation in poetry engagement. Walton insightfully points to repeatability as an important feature that

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 65.

the thoughtwriting model accounts for. Invoking an example of someone lost in the desert and reciting a Psalm to soothe himself, Walton writes:

The words are there in the adventurer's memory. He deems them appropriate in his situation, and uses them. Notice that the Psalm is in the first person. ("Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. . . .") But the adventurer needn't take its first-person pronouns to refer to David or to a fictional narrator. "I," in his recitation of the Psalm, refers to himself.²⁶

Of course, the example works because the adventurer has the requisite circumstances to embody the voice. But also notice that this is not the first time that the reciter is encountering the poem; this is what he does *long after* he has read the poem because the poem is familiar to him. So thoughtwriting, it seems, works as a model for explaining how poems are engaged with after the reader is well acquainted with it.²⁷ Poems, especially of the lyric variety, encourage repetition. After reading a poem, we might add it to a repertoire of future expressions, but when we *first* read a poem, we do not "try out" the words. We have to first accept it as is, perhaps positing a speaker and/or a voice who is making use of the words involved. Without such a first-pass engagement, we could not even understand what is being expressed. This suggests a further point. We can grant that the thoughtwriting model captures what readers do with expressively apt *phrases* from poems. But insofar as most readers don't use the entire poem as a thoughtwriting piece—that is, we don't recite the whole work to express our own thoughts and feelings but usually just a handful of particularly apt lines—thoughtwriting look to yield just a partial account of our experience of a poem. Indeed, it appears to offer an account not of our experience of *a poem* but rather of just various of its lines.

As a final concern, consider another idea that is widespread in poetics: that lyric poetry often intends to produce, and to be experienced, as an "event" and that this matters to our understanding of the kind of immediacy it seeks with the reader. Culler defends the idea that poetry is not a representation of an event—a mimesis—because it "attempt[s] to be itself an event."²⁸ Again as Mill put it, we take ourselves to *overhear* a poem, as though the lyrical exchange occurs *here and now*, enacted at the moment of audition. Many of poetry's formal and rhetorical devices serve this purpose, not the least the manipulation of the present tense to produce impressions of contemporaneity. This is taken to contrast strongly with how we encounter the content of literary narratives. A representation of a narrative event in a novel, for instance, is experienced as *reported* to us²⁹; the lyric poem typically presents an event as happening *before* us, or at least within earshot. There is a cognitive element to this as well. It suggests that we should not regard a poem as a mere depository of tools to be used for thinking and communicating but a more dynamic event in which we bear witness to a mind actively consuming, working through, and producing thoughts and feelings. Our more memorable reading experiences are built on experiencing poems as an event, a happening and not a mere object or a cache of already-there thoughts.

This modification helps us recover an important aspect of poetry that is underemphasized in the thoughtwriting model: somatic pleasure. Much of what produces the event-like quality in a poem is its rhythm and rhyme: the poetic present that is felt and experienced. Sometimes, or most of the time, reading a poem is not simply, or even primarily, an experience of "thought" but an exploration of sensory experience that foregrounds the material, imagistic, and prosodic features poetic language. Take a well-known example of Romantic poetry:

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 67.

²⁷ Kivy writes that a notable kind of contribution literature is capable of making has to do with what the reader does after reading—the analysis that occurs in the reader's head during the postpartum period of contemplating—which is in itself an integral part of the literary experience. "Serious literary works," he writes, "have a sloppy outer boundary/" (Kivy, 1998, p. 23)

²⁸ Culler, 2015, p. 35.

²⁹ David Lewis (1978) and Gregory Currie (1990) argue that fictional truth is what the storyteller pretends to share as known fact. Free indirect discourse in novels might challenge this quick gloss that fictional narratives report some content since it blurs the boundaries between omniscient and character perspectives, undermining a sense of an objective storyworld or "what's known as fact." However, we maintain that a subjective presentation of the storyworld is still a representation (akin to a "report") and that lyric poetry, in that vein, is often not in the business of *reporting* anything, subjective or otherwise.

William Blake's "Tyger." What makes the poem so mesmerizing is not its content but its trochaic unfolding. The rhythm of the trochaic heptameter and the repetition of the opening stanza create the sense that there is a specific happening that we participate in, a distinct event that we experience. There is a playful sense of temporality, and this itself is a source of our pleasure, even of affective identification. Regarding the poem as a piece of thoughtwriting risks collapsing the moving and patterned temporality and thereby turning the poem into a timeless receptacle containing nuggets of adoptable thoughts and expression.³⁰ Even the "iterability" of a poem is made mysterious if we approach a lyric just for content, representation, or cognitive activity; if I came to a poem looking for a thought, I would lack reasons to reread it once I grasped and "tried on" the thought. But we find ourselves returning to our favorite poems over and over again, and this only makes sense once we conceive of the reading experience as an iterable event that we find value in.

We have argued that Walton's thought-writing model for poetry is an elegant explanation of a poem's expressive power that does not rely on a fictional persona nor require a subject whose expression we are hearing. However, in some instances, it does violence to a poem by disassociating the expression from the subject whose expression the poem contains. Walton's presentation of the thought-writing model leaves room to discuss which poems would be appropriate and inappropriate candidates for such a treatment. We've shown one example, "Dinner Guest: Me", which shows the limits of thought-writing as a poetic mode of engagement. We've also shown that thought-writing may be more appropriate for capturing what readers tend to do *after* she has become familiar with a work of poem, and most of the time, with *parts* of the poem.

IV

We will conclude by outlining a strategy for addressing these concerns that makes use of many of the core elements of Walton's thoughtwriting model. The arguments of the previous section functioned to keep alive the question of who expresses the "I" in a lyric poem. As we saw, much philosophy of poetry gives us two options for answering this, both singular and decidedly individual: the owner of this I is the author or a fictional persona. Our suggestion, put crudely at first mention, is that this ownership is often, in crucial respects, collective and so, plural. The lyric I often "gives voice" to experiences that are manifestly not those of one mere subject. They are often *shared* forms of experience, and the implied subject of the lyric I is thus a creature not of fiction but of culture: it organizes and gives expression to thoughts, desires, anxieties, and feelings of a constellation of selves.

If this idea sounds extravagant, note immediately that it is implicit in Walton's theory. The thoughtwriting model offers one way of thinking about how the lyric I can "contain multitudes," to quote again Whitman's apt phrase, since its central idea is that readers find themselves expressed in a poem. For Walton, the range of subjects that can provide the self for poetic self-expression is thoroughly plural, indeed potentially limitless. What we find especially promising about his theory is how effectively this pluralizing move demystifies literalism about lyric self-expression. It provides an altogether ordinary sense of how this self can be seen as real and so capable of generating "epideictic discourse," that is, of speaking on *this* side of the line that separates the fictional and the real. The various concerns we raised are ultimately variations on a single theme: in certain cases, lyric poetry demands from the reader clear forms of self-other differentiation in a manner that obliges us to see the lyric I as expressive of a subjecthood that is very much in the business of using, and not merely mentioning, words. Our suggestion is really an application of ideas already present in Walton's model, tweaked so that these cases can be accommodated.

We need some recourse to the imagination in order to account for how we encounter this potentially plural subject of lyric self-expression. And we need to think of the imagination in a way that does not risk reintroducing the fictionalizing tendencies discussed above (surely certain poems welcome these tendencies; the idea is that theories of the lyric should not introduce them, or even require them, from the get-go). Consider a simple example

³⁰ Eileen John (2013) challenges the idea that poems are in the business of offering a thought and argues that poems should not be seen as depositories that encourage simple uptake of nuggets of thought. Her argument is important, and we unfortunately do not have the space to engage with it here. We trust that arguments in the next section keeps us from running afoul of the skeptical arguments she raises.

that suggests an intuitive distinction between two ways we can employ the imagination when thinking about others. Say that you have just heard a report on the news about a tragic event that has happened very much elsewhere in the world. You find yourself captivated and feeling deeply for the afflicted. You know nothing about the people, apart from the description of the tragedy provided by the news report. As you are thinking about their plight, you begin to imagine, in an ordinary sense of the term, what their experience was like. Depending on your interests and mood, you might shape an image of *someone* undergoing the harrowing events as they were described to you. And you might do so in a manner that this someone plays the role of a *character* in how you think about the event. You imagine a person who functions as a fiction in your employment of the imagination. But you might also—we suspect more naturally—not imagine a particular person at all and certainly nothing like a character. The image you form might just involve a broad-stroke picturing of the class of people, very much real, denoted by the description, say an image of *those of whom the tragic descriptions are true*, where this image pictures subjects generally, not individually. In this case, our imaginative activity does not culminate in an image of a particular suffering person but of a kind of experience that certain kinds of people had, a general and impersonal “they”, if you will.

This employment of the imagination is typical not of fantasy but of our attempts to enrich our understanding of large segments of cultural life. In its most pedestrian and potentially risky form, it is a matter of relying on “received ideas” and the varieties of conceptual typecasting they invite. In more nuanced employments, it is an imaginative “filling out” of *the view from there*, where “there” indicates a shared form of social and cultural experience that is not my own. We often use the imagination this way when we try to put a human face on abstract understandings of collective identity and shared experience. The point here is that it need not be a *particular* human we imagine. If so, the imagination can’t be said to generate a fictional persona or anything character-like. Its goal is to track features of real experiences and to put us imaginatively in touch with the real people, general and plural, who are the subjects of these experiences.

So our suggestion: while the lyric I surely represents a first-person mode of poetic expression, what it articulates calls us to engage in an act of imagining roughly of the sort just described. This, in turn, often explains how we animate the figure of the poetic speaker. What gives credibility to this view is a feature of the function of voice in lyric-poetic contexts. As we noted above, and as the Hughes example makes very clear, the lyric I often does not just “speak,” it speaks *on behalf of*. It represents not just a voiced subject but a poetic speaker who is attempting to *give voice* to forms of experience broader than her own. Our sense of both what the lyric I is speaking about *and* whose experiences it is giving voice to are thus often plural in nature. The business of lyric I is to “contain multitudes” in this sense³¹, and it is a move that preserves literalism about lyric self-expression roughly along the lines Walton’s model does.

The feature of poetry that makes the lyric I so fit to travel on Walton’s model also supports our suggestion. In realist novels, selves are standardly presented as subjects of experiences in a biographic sense, certainly when the self is playing the role of protagonist or villain. Their inner lives, relationships, and basic events of their life-stories are often presented with great determinacy. They are experienced as more or less fully articulated individuals, and the reader is granted intimate insight into who they are, where they come from, and how their lives unfold. Lyric poetry, however, tends to present selves in a radically and intentionally diminished manner, and rarely is the I presented in a biographic sense. In fact, the I of lyric poetry is often nothing more than a center of perceptual, cognitive, and affective *attention*: the subject of *an* experience. It is a self effectively reduced to a perspective. The economy of expression, condensation of thought and feeling, and “semantic finegrainedness”³² characteristic of lyric poetry serve this ability to elaborate highly particularized scenes of thought and feeling that often do not appear to belong to any *particular* person at all. Apart from the elaborated perspective, little else is given about this person. This explains why Walton’s model can cast the lyric I as so transferable, an easy object of readerly self-identification. The suggestion we are offering is that for the kinds of cases Walton’s model cannot accommodate, this same feature explains why we so easily and readily experience the lyric I as a generalized subject with an effectively plural expressive function.

³¹ Note that “multitude” can refer to a plurality of individuals and also a plurality of groups (i.e. the lyric “I” may also speak on behalf of different groups of people).

³² See Peter Lamarque (2015).

There are two ways to interpret our suggestion, one modest and the other less so, and what matters here is that each leads to the same destination: an affirmation of an epideictic and literalist account of lyric self-expression. The less modest suggestion would be that we can see much lyric poetry as distilling into a solitary I—the poetic speaker—a collective subject. That is, the claim concerns the ownership of the I and casts it belonging to many. The more modest suggestion would be that our argument has shown that *regardless* of how we conceive of the subject lyric I, what it functions to give voice to is plural in nature and so that the content, if not the vehicle, of lyric utterances betokens “multitudes.” Little hangs on the ontological questions since our conception of poetic voice furnishes real, existent, and often plural subjects whose experiences are picked out in poetic self-expression. The kind of imaginative engagement a lyric poem makes central to appreciation *constructs* the link to actual subjects and very real regions of cultural life, and in a manner that allows us to affirm, with Culler, that it is a form of “public poetic discourse about values in this world rather than a fictional world.”³³ So, constructing a fictional persona might be fine, too, as long as it does not replace or obscure the real and plural this-worldly subjects whose experiences are voiced. Fictions, after all, can be mouthpieces of the real, a claim no one involved in these debates would deny.

V

Our work in this chapter has been expansionary and exploratory. Though Walton has made great contributions to nearly every area in the philosophy of art, it is perhaps unsurprising that his contribution to the philosophy of poetry has not received as much attention: philosophers of art themselves are on the whole happy to ignore poetry. This is a shame for many reasons. One reason we have tried to make visible here is that the debate between literalists and fictionalists regarding lyric self-expression is especially deserving of more philosophical attention, and that Walton’s thoughtwriting model has given it its most novel and provocative position.

³³ Culler, 2015, 115.

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