



Rethinking Lyric Communities, ed. by Irene Fantappiè, Francesco Giusti, and Laura Scuriatti, *Cultural Inquiry*, 30 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2024), pp. 71–96

FRANCESCO GIUSTI 

Gestural Communities

Lyric and the Suspension of Action

CITE AS:

Francesco Giusti, 'Gestural Communities: Lyric and the Suspension of Action', in *Rethinking Lyric Communities*, ed. by Irene Fantappiè, Francesco Giusti, and Laura Scuriatti, *Cultural Inquiry*, 30 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2024), pp. 71–96 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-30_03>

RIGHTS STATEMENT:

© by the author(s)

Except for images or otherwise noted, this publication is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

ABSTRACT: Memorability, shareability, and repeatability are inter-related characteristics often ascribed to lyric poetry in current theory, sometimes with an emphasis on the transnational potential of its circulation. This article approaches this question of shareability not in terms of diction or form, as is usually the case, but of *gesture*. Drawing on Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and Giorgio Agamben, gesture is defined as both historically situated and transferable to different contexts, but whether or not to re-enact a particular gesture in one's own context is a political decision. After examining how a sonnet by Andrea Zanzotto addresses the lyric gesture of exhortation offered by a Petrarch sonnet, the article goes on to explore the potentiality opened up for the formation of *gestural communities* by the suspension of action in the lyric.

KEYWORDS: lyric; gesture; community; shareability; deixis; suspension; vocative

Gestural Communities

Lyric and the Suspension of Action

FRANCESCO GIUSTI

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a variety of parameters for defining lyric poetry and its workings have been proposed from different perspectives. Lyric is often considered as a particularly memorable, repeatable, and shareable language that makes itself available for reperformance in various contexts, sometimes with an emphasis on the transnational potential of its circulation.¹ Moving away from approaches based on the circulation of diction and form, I argue that a notion of *gesture* developed from the reflections of Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and Giorgio Agamben is helpful in elucidating the language and discourse structures that make the re-enactment of lyric possible across time, contexts, and languages.² A return to the exchange between Brecht and Benjamin

1 Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). On 'poetic kitsch', see Daniel Tiffany, *My Silver Planet: A Secret History of Poetry and Kitsch* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014). On transnational circulation, see Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry in a Global Age* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

2 Francesco Giusti, 'Transcontextual Gestures: A Lyric Approach to the World of Literature', in *The Work of World Literature*, ed. by Francesco Giusti and Benjamin Lewis Robinson (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 75–103.

in the 1930s is crucial for restoring the historicity of gestures and the political nature of their re-enactment, which are partially obscured in Agamben's reconsideration of the concept. The notion of gesture has been widely discussed in theatre, dance, and performance studies, but this article begins by tracing the specific connections of gesture with lyric poetry in Brecht's and Benjamin's writings in order to refine the notion and offer it as a critical tool.³

Certain lyric gestures, recurrent through the centuries, come to mind: exhortation, prayer, praise, and lament, among others. All of them, moreover, are predicated on and made possible by deixis: the linguistic gesture of *pointing to* something external to the utterance or text. Indeed, scholars have argued that, in lyric poetry, readers are invited to assume the position of the speaking 'I', or sometimes of the addressed 'you', in each 'here' and 'now' of reading.⁴ As Jonathan Culler maintains, the dissemination of lyric is based on the re-enactment of its language by individuals in different contexts, with diverse meanings and to a variety of ends. Lyric poetry therefore emerges as closely intertwined with community formation and its politics, from the choral lyric of Ancient Greece to the exchange of sonnets in the Middle Ages, to the dissemination of poems through social media in recent years. Here, an exploration of how both linguistic gestures and cultural gestures work in lyric poetry will lead to the development of an idea of *gestural community* based not on pre-existing identities, as is often the case in explanations of community formation, but rather on the shareability and repeatability of gestures.

3 See *Migrations of Gesture*, ed. by Carrie Noland and Sally Ann Ness (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). See also Vadim Keylin, *Participatory Sound Art: Technologies, Aesthetics, Politics* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan Singapore, 2023), pp. 115–35.

4 Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 187. Tied to actual subjects, the idea can also be found in Helen Vendler, *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1997), pp. xl–xli.

WHAT IS A GESTURE?

To clarify the notion of gesture, it is helpful to go back to Brecht's words as reported by Benjamin in his *Notes from Svendborg, Summer 1934*. Conversing about Benjamin's essay 'The Author as Producer' with its author, Brecht brings poetry into the discussion to 'improve' Benjamin's 'criticism of proletarian writers of the Becher type'. Brecht does this by comparing Johannes R. Becher's poem 'Ich sage ganz offen' (1933) with, on the one hand, a didactic poem he himself had written for the actress Carola Neher and, on the other hand, with 'Le Bateau ivre' (1871) by Arthur Rimbaud. Reporting Brecht's words, Benjamin writes:

'I have taught Carola Neher a variety of things', he explained. 'She has not only learned to act, but, for example, she has learned how to wash herself. Up to then, she had washed so as not to be dirty. That was completely beside the point. I taught her how to wash her face. She acquired such skill in this that I wanted to make a film of her doing it. But nothing came of it because I was not making a picture at the time, and she did not want to be filmed by anyone else. That didactic poem was a model. Every learner was expected to take the place of his "self". When Becher says "I", he regards himself (since he's president of the Union of the Proletarian Revolutionary Writers of Germany) as exemplary. The only thing is that no one wants to emulate him. They simply conclude that he's pleased with himself.'⁵

In order to teach Neher how to wash her face in the sense of performing a gesture, not just a goal-oriented action whose purpose is 'not to be dirty', Brecht writes a didactic poem that could work as a model for the actress. A basic definition of gesture is provided here: *gesture* is what is left of an *action* when it is freed from the purpose usually attached to it in ordinary social life. Gesture, moreover, seems to have an interart and intermedial character: Brecht writes a didactic lyric poem to teach the actress how to turn a private action into a theatrical gesture, and the

5 Walter Benjamin, 'Notes from Svendborg, Summer 1934', trans. by Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings*, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), II, part 2: 1931–1934, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (2005), pp. 783–91 (pp. 783–84).

actress reaches such a level of perfection in performing it that it can be filmed. This gesture can be embodied in a poem, such that the poem itself becomes a model for people who want to perform the gesture in their own contexts. Brecht adds something more, however: in order to work as a model, the poem should not present an exemplary individual to be emulated by the reader, as in the case of Becher's poem; instead, it has to make room for every 'learner' so that each learner can 'take the place of his "self"':

The following comparison with Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau ivre' presents a different, but related, problem:

On the other hand, Brecht compared Becher's poem with Rimbaud's. In the latter, he maintained that Marx and Lenin — if they had read it — would have detected the great historical movement of which it is an expression. They would have realized very clearly that it describes not just the eccentric stroll of an individual but the flight, the vagabondage, of a human being who can no longer bear to be confined within the limits of a class which — with the Crimean War and the Mexican adventure — has started to open up exotic parts of the globe to its own commercial interests. It was completely impossible to import into the model of the proletarian fighter the gesture of the footloose vagabond who leaves his own concerns to chance and turns his back on society.⁶

What Rimbaud's famous poem offers readers and future poets is not just 'the eccentric stroll of an individual' but the gesture of 'the flight, the vagabondage'. What the poem is about, according to Brecht, is not just the transcription of the experience of a particular individual (which, one might assume, might be irrelevant to others) but a gesture that was shareable in a certain epoch and representative of that epoch. Lyric poems, or at least good lyric poems, for Brecht, seem to have a singular capacity to isolate a gesture by freeing it from the meaning and purpose the corresponding action would have in its social context, to give that gesture an exemplary value by detaching it from the author or subject as a particular individual, and to offer it to present and future readers. Yet Rimbaud's case also allows Brecht to comment upon the historical and political viability of gestures. The

6 Ibid., p. 784.

flight Rimbaud describes was practicable for the French poet and other members of his class in their sociohistorical situation — where such a gesture reflected the position of a human being in the production process of the time — but would be ‘impossible to import into the model of the proletarian fighter’. Gestures, as embodied in poems, are historically situated. Rimbaud’s poem presents readers with a gesture that was valid in its context, but according to Brecht, it is impracticable in the current circumstances. In 1934, the poetic gesture of flight has lost its historical viability to the extent that it cannot be considered as functional for the human being to whose definition Brecht intends his work to contribute. Although they cannot be erased but are preserved in their potency and transmitted to future generations by the poetic tradition, gestures can be challenged and even rejected by those subsequent readers. Therefore, choosing to re-enact or not to re-enact a certain gesture in one’s own context is a political decision.

Let us return to the poem Brecht gives as an example in his conversation with Benjamin and use it to explore how history intervenes by altering the conditions of possibility of gesture. The dynamic can be observed in its evolution in the three poems Brecht composed for Carola Neher: the two versions of ‘Rat an die Schauspielerin C. N.’ (probably 1930 and 1956) and ‘Das Waschen’ (1937). In this triad, Joyce Crick traces a progressive change related to poetic authority and the relationship between poetry and action: from the intimate situation in which the poet displays his authority observable in the 1930 text; to a return to the instructions given years earlier, in a moment of powerlessness in the face of forces acting in the world outside the poem; to a retreat in the 1956 text, which can only repropose the gesture of 1930 with substantial modifications.⁷

According to Crick’s reconstruction, the first version of ‘Rat an die Schauspielerin C. N.’, to which Brecht refers in the conversation with Benjamin, was written around 1930 ‘following the height of Brecht’s short-lived success in the Berlin theatre, particularly as the dramatist of *Die Dreigroschenoper*’, a success shared by the actress.⁸ The six-line

7 Joyce Crick, ‘Power and Powerlessness: Brecht’s Poems to Carola Neher’, *German Life and Letters*, 53.3 (2000), pp. 314–24.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 317.

poem opens with the imperative ‘Erfrische dich, Freundin’ (Refresh yourself, my friend) and, from what seems to be a position of authority, goes on to give its addressee instructions on how to perform the act of washing her face both for herself and in an exemplary manner.⁹ The theatrical context is clearly evoked, and the addressee of the instructions is associated with her role as an actress: while washing her face, she should read the difficult lines of her part from a page hanging on the wall. The actress, however, is not identified as a particular individual being elevated as a model to be imitated. Her initials appear in the title, but, as Crick observes, ‘the poem is thus poised between the personal-referential of the title and the exemplary of the last line.’¹⁰ This didactic poem (*Lehrgedicht*)¹¹ aims to teach the actress, whom it addresses with ‘Freundin’, thereby establishing a relationship of relative intimacy, how to turn a private action into a theatrical gesture. Washing one’s face is presented as a gesture to be performed before going onstage — the actress, after all, has to rehearse her part — but there must also be theatricality offstage. Such an everyday gesture is autonomized in its isolation from a more complex action, thus assuming value in itself and not as part of a goal-oriented sequence with a contextual meaning; it is also subjected to estrangement by being positioned on a threshold of indistinction between real life and theatrical performance, which the reference to the lines highlights.¹² The poem gives the actress directions on how to wash her face in such a way that, as Brecht notes in his conversation with Benjamin, it could be filmed. The gesture that the actress performs for herself thus takes on exemplary value, and, to achieve this condition, as Brecht explains in the same conversation, the action must be detached from its immediate purpose, be removed from the circumstantial needs of the person called Carola Neher (‘not to be dirty’), in order to become a gesture that finds its purpose and pleasure

9 Bertolt Brecht, *Werke: Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. by Werner Hecht and others, 30 vols (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag; Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988–97), xiv: *Gedichte* 4 (1993), p. 361; my translation.

10 Crick, ‘Power and Powerlessness’, p. 317.

11 See Klaus Schuhmann, *Der Lyriker Bertolt Brecht 1913–1933* (Munich: dtv, 1971), pp. 330–42.

12 On gesture and estrangement in Brecht and Benjamin, see Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1999); Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 85–114.

in its own performance. Only in this way can it become historically shareable. When Brecht reread ‘Rat an die Schauspielerin C. N.’ in the conversation in Svendborg, ‘history intruded upon the poem.’¹³ As Crick explains, after Hitler’s rise to power, both were in exile — the poet in Denmark and the actress in Moscow — and the poem is reread in terms of didactic function, and the comparison with the model offered by Becher is situated in the context of the directives on social realism promulgated at the first Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934.

In the 1937 poem ‘Das Waschen’, history intrudes again and the verses of 1930 return as a memory in a context which, despite the few years separating them, is radically changed. Neher is imprisoned, and ‘the authoritative poet’s voice of the “Lehrgedicht” gives way to an “Ich” without a role.’¹⁴ The poem is structured around the gap between the past, ‘Als ich dir vor Jahren zeigte | Wie du dich waschen solltest in der Frühe’ (When I showed you years ago | how you should wash in the morning), and the present, ‘Jetzt, höre ich, du sollst im Gefängnis sein’ (Now, I hear, you must be in prison).¹⁵ The self-quotation exhibits all the precariousness of both gestures — that of face-washing as well as the exhortation enacted in the poem — in the new context. The intrusion of history moulds the poem: if ‘years ago’ it was possible to show the actress how to wash her face in the morning, ‘now’ communication has been interrupted. The letters the ‘I’ wrote for her have gone unanswered, and the friends he asked about her remained silent. The ‘I’, unable to do anything for her, can only wonder whether there might be other good and exemplary gestures that the woman is performing for herself now:

[...] Wie
Mag dein Morgen sein? Wirst du noch etwas tun für dich?
Hoffnungsvoll und verantwortlich
Mit guten Bewegungen, vorbildlichen?

13 Crick, ‘Power and Powerlessness’, p. 318.

14 Ibid., p. 321.

15 Brecht, *Werke*, xiv, p. 360; my translation.

([...] How
 Will your tomorrow be? Will you still do something for yourself?
 Hopeful and responsible
 With good gestures, exemplary?)¹⁶

As Crick observes, in this situation of helplessness, the poem evokes the memory of more human circumstances and the poetic gesture changes: it is no longer direct exhortation and teaching, but the sending of a message to a distant addressee.¹⁷ Preserving the memory of gestures, their historical circumstances, and their political value is a crucial function of poetry.

According to Crick, it was when revisiting the 1930 poem for publication in the first volume of his verse published in Germany after his return from exile, the selection *Bertolt Brechts Gedichte und Lieder*, edited by Peter Suhrkamp (1956), that Brecht composed the variant of 'Rat an die Schauspielerin C. N.' that would be published for the first time in the edition of his *Gedichte* edited by Elisabeth Hauptmann in 1961.¹⁸ In the 1956 variant, 'Freundin' becomes 'Schwester', which is 'the name Brecht habitually gave his former lovers.'¹⁹ The gesture of washing one's face remains, along with the objects it requires (the copper bowl, the bits of ice, the rough towel), but the addressee is no longer identified as an actress: the exhortation to read the lines of her part is replaced by a more generic one to glance at a loved book. Theatre has now disappeared, and the gesture is more private than professional: the Brechtian association of beauty and usefulness is retained, but from a perspective of resignation. The gesture seems to have an effect only on the daily life of the woman, not on a wider public, and the poem ends with the words 'So beginne | Einen schönen und nützlichen Tag' ('May you thus begin | A beautiful and useful day').²⁰ The twenty-six years that separate the first 'Rat an die Schauspielerin C. N.' from its 1956 version show how the gesture of washing one's face can be cited in the later poem, detached from its initial historical context, and repurposed

16 Ibid.; my translation.

17 Crick, 'Power and Powerlessness', pp. 322–23.

18 Bertolt Brecht, *Gedichte*, ed. by Elisabeth Hauptmann, 10 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1960–76; Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1961–78), III: 1930–1933 (1961), p. 159; my translation.

19 Crick, 'Power and Powerlessness', p. 323.

20 Brecht, *Gedichte*, III, p. 159; my translation.

in the new context. Gesture, indeed, needs to be *quotable*, and, as Benjamin affirms, ‘quoting a text entails interrupting its context.’²¹ As Samuel Weber explains, gesture gives form because, while interrupting an ‘ongoing sequence’, it

fixes it by enclosing it in a relatively determined space, one with a discernible ‘beginning’ and ‘end’. But at the same time, the closure brought about by gesture remains caught up in that from which it has partially extricated itself: in the ‘living flux’ of a certain temporality.²²

Benjamin ascribes a dialectical dimension to the tension embodied in gesture, and, Weber comments, ‘the “fixation” it establishes through its interruption of an intentional, goal-directed movement toward meaning and totality remains singularly *ex-tended*, defined by and as the tension of separation and suspension.’²³

This notion of gesture bears similarities with Giorgio Agamben’s idea of gesture, in which ‘nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported.’²⁴ Gesture, once again, is not a means to an end. The exploration of its conception in Brecht and Benjamin, however, should have clarified an aspect that is not always clear in Agamben, namely that gestures are not ahistorical and that those transmitted by poems from the past — even one’s own poems, as in Brecht’s case — need to be recognized and evaluated in the light of the conditions of the present in order to assess their viability in the new context. It is precisely insofar as gesture is both historically situated and transhistorically, or transcontextually,²⁵ transferable that it is useful for considering the dialectic between historicity and transhistoricity that characterizes a lyric poem as language that happens as an event in each ‘now’ of reading, as Culler argues.²⁶

21 Walter Benjamin, ‘What Is Epic Theatre? (II)’, trans. by Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings, IV: 1938–1940*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (2003), pp. 302–09 (p. 305).

22 Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities*, p. 100.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

24 Giorgio Agamben, ‘Notes on Gesture’, in *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 49–61 (p. 56).

25 Giusti, ‘Transcontextual Gestures.’

26 Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 283–95.

THE SUSPENSION OF ACTION

Lyric poetry has quite a significant presence in contemporary philosophy, especially in the context of reflections on community formation. Yet, unlike other philosophers, Agamben does not seem to be particularly concerned with the polysemy and supposed opacity of language in modern poetry when it comes to thought on community. He more often turns his attention to medieval poetry (Dante Alighieri, Guido Cavalcanti, and the troubadours) and to the poets of his own time, such as Giorgio Caproni, who at the peak of his grief for the death of his mother retrieves the medieval form of the Cavalcantian *ballata* to voice his mourning in poetry.²⁷ Opposing psychological readings of the cycle Caproni devoted to his mother, ‘Versi livornesi’, published in *Il seme del piangere* (1959), Agamben writes in a piece significantly titled ‘Expropriated Manner’:

One cannot, however, grasp the poetic task that is fulfilled here as long as one considers this poetry in the context of the psychological and biographical question of the incestuous sublimation of the mother–son relationship — which is to say, as long as one does not recognize the anthropological change that takes place in these verses. For here there are neither figures of memory nor even *amor de lonh*. Rather, love, in a kind of temporal (and hence not merely spatial, as in the Dolce Stil Novo poets) shamanism, encounters *for the first time* its love object in another time.²⁸

Caproni performs what Agamben calls an ‘anthropological gesture’, which entails some sort of expropriation and somehow contributes to the endless ‘anthropogenesis’ of the human. Poetry both makes this expropriation or disappropriation possible and exposes it.

27 Francesco Giusti, ‘Mourning Over her Image: The Re-enactment of Lyric Gestures in Giorgio Caproni’s “Versi livornesi”’, in *A Gaping Wound: Mourning in Italian Poetry*, ed. by Adele Bardazzi, Francesco Giusti, and Emanuela Tandello (Cambridge: Legenda, 2022), pp. 47–70.

28 Giorgio Agamben, ‘Expropriated Manner’, in *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 87–101 (pp. 94–95; emphasis in original).

Agamben detects two different ontologies in the Western philosophical tradition: the ontology of the indicative, or apophantic assertion, which governs philosophy and science, and the ontology of the imperative, or non-apophantic speech, which governs religion, law, and magic.²⁹ According to the Aristotelian distinction in *De interpretatione* (17a 1–7) to which Agamben refers, non-apophantic speech is speech that cannot be said to be true or false, because it does not manifest the being or not being of something in this world. Command, prayer, and exhortation, which are so widespread in lyric poetry, belong to this type of speech. As Jahan Ramazani remarks,

as speech acts directed to an other, yet an other more veiled than a human interlocutor, poetry and prayer function simultaneously as acts of address, albeit partly suspended (hence address modulating into apostrophe), and as forms of meta-address, or images of voicing, because of the decontextualization of address from normal lines of human communication.³⁰

In her influential essay ‘Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion’, Barbara Johnson mobilizes an understanding of apostrophe that emphasizes its powers of animation: ‘The fact that apostrophe allows one to animate the inanimate, the dead, or the absent implies that whenever a being is apostrophized, it is thereby automatically animated, anthropomorphized, “person-ified”’.³¹ Discussing the final rhetorical question in Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’, however, she acknowledges the suspension of the animating power ascribed to apostrophe:

29 Giorgio Agamben, ‘What Is a Command?’, in *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*, trans. by Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), pp. 51–65.

30 Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 128–29.

31 Barbara Johnson, ‘Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion’, *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), pp. 28–47 (p. 34). Following Culler and de Man, Johnson’s essay begins with the association of apostrophe and lyric voice; cf. Jonathan Culler, ‘Apostrophe’, in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 149–71; Paul de Man, ‘Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory’, in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. by Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 55–72. See also Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 211–43; William Waters, *Poetry’s Touch: On Lyric Address* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

Yet because this clincher is expressed in the form of a rhetorical question, it expresses natural certainty by means of a linguistic device that mimics no natural structure and has no stable one-to-one correspondence with a meaning. The rhetorical question, in a sense, leaves the poem in a state of suspended animation. But that, according to the poem, is the state of maximum potential.³²

Ramazani's definition of apostrophe as a 'partly suspended' act of address is related to the state of 'suspended animation' in which, according to Johnson, Shelley's poem is left. More than animating the inanimate by an act of address, lyric poetry can suspend that act and leave it in its potential. Discussing Johnson's work on apostrophe and free indirect discourse, Lauren Berlant writes:

In her poetics of indirection, each of these two rhetorical modes is shaped by the ways a writing subjectivity conjures other ones so that, in a performance of fantasmatic intersubjectivity, the writer gains superhuman observational authority, enabling a performance of being that is made possible by the proximity of the object.³³

Yet Berlant links 'this aesthetic process' to 'the optimism of attachment':

Apostrophe is thus an indirect, unstable, physically impossible but phenomenologically vitalizing movement of rhetorical animation that permits subjects to suspend themselves in the optimism of a potential occupation of the same psychic space of others, the objects of desire who make you possible (by having some promising qualities, but also by not being there).³⁴

If apostrophe is vitalizing, for Berlant, it is not because it enacts the power of poetry to animate the inanimate but rather because it 'permits subjects to suspend themselves', a suspension that is optimistic because it in turn leaves subjects in a potential intersubjectivity. Referring to the work of Tim Dean and Leo Bersani, Berlant adds: 'Like Johnson's work on projection, their focus is on the optimism of attachment, and

32 Johnson, 'Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion', pp. 31–32.

33 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 25.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

is often itself optimistic about the negations and extensions of personhood that forms of suspended intersubjectivity demand from the lover/reader.³⁵ Animation and attribution of personhood are actions that apostrophe can potentially perform, but in the poem, apostrophe is suspended in a gesture. Within the poem, apostrophe can only *gesture toward* its addressee.

When Virginia Jackson discusses Johnson's and Berlant's approaches to apostrophe, the crucial effects of this suspension appear to be lost. She does so against the backdrop of Culler's and Paul de Man's equation of apostrophe with lyric, or more precisely, with what, according to her, is the 'lyricized idea of poetry' that Culler and de Man have endorsed. In this context, Jackson asks a key question: 'what happens when the rhetorical questions that apostrophe poses are literalized?' — that is to say, when they are read as 'lyric' in her sense of replacing 'the genre of the poem with the genre of the person', thus constructing the 'lyricized poetics of universal personal representation.'³⁶ The question, however, is relevant only insofar as the apostrophe is literalized, in other words, if the poem is 'lyricized' by reading it as the expression of a personal voice representative of a gendered and racialized identity, or, one might say, when the poem is performed and thus actualized in a particular context. Jackson points out that 'by creating an illusion of intersubjectivity (what Tucker calls "the intersubjective confirmation of the self"), apostrophic address facilitates the metapragmatic subsumption of a variety of poetic speech genres into a lyricized genre identified with and by the two-in-one apostrophic speaker.'³⁷ Yet, according to her understanding of 'lyricization', this is only true if the 'illusion of intersubjectivity' is taken for real, or, more precisely, for the illusion of a person. If taken in its suspension, apostrophe only offers a gesture to which readers are exposed. According to Brecht's observations on Rimbaud, turning that gesture into an action, giving a particular context to the poem and an identity to the speaker, is a political choice.

35 Ibid., p. 27.

36 Virginia Jackson, *Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), pp. 66–71, 20.

37 Ibid., p. 71. The reference is to Herbert Tucker, 'Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric', in *Lyric Poetry*, ed. by Hošek and Parker, pp. 226–46.

ZANZOTTO SUSPENDS PETRARCH

Sonnet 11 of Andrea Zanzotto's sequence 'Ipersonetto', published in *Il Galateo in Bosco* (1978), opens with a quotation from Petrarch that addresses the suspension of apostrophe and deixis that the fourteenth-century poem affords.³⁸ Petrarch's sonnet, number 273 in his *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, reads:

Che fai? che pensi? che pur dietro guardi
nel tempo, che tornar non pote omai?
Anima sconsolata, che pur vai
giugnendo legne al foco ove tu ardi?

Le soavi parole e i dolci sguardi
ch'ad un ad un descritti et depinti ài,
son levati de terra; et è, ben sai,
qui cercarli intempestivo et tardi.

Deh non rinovellar quel che n'ancide
non seguir più penser vago, fallace,
ma saldo et certo, ch'a buon fin ne guide.

Cerchiamo 'l ciel, se qui nulla ne piace:
ché mal per noi quella beltà si vide,
se viva et morta ne devea tór pace.

(What do you do? What do you think? Why do you keep looking
back at that time that cannot return?

Disconsolate soul, why do you keep adding
wood to the fire in which you burn?

The gentle words and the sweet glances,
which you have described and painted one by one,
have been raised from the Earth; and you know well
it's too late and untimely to search for them here.

Ah, do not renew what kills us,
don't follow the errant, fallacious thought,
but the steady and certain one that leads us to the good end.

Let's look for the heavens, if we like nothing here:
because we saw that beauty for our misfortune,
if, dead or alive, it had to take our peace away.)³⁹

38 On Petrarch's presence in Zanzotto's poetry, see John P. Welle, 'Il Galateo in bosco and the Petrarchism of Andrea Zanzotto', *Italica*, 62.1 (1985), pp. 41–53; Nicola Gardini, 'Zanzotto petrarchista barbaro: saggio sull'"Ipersonetto"', *Studi Novecenteschi*, 19.43/44 (1992), pp. 223–34; Raffaele Manica, 'Petarca e Zanzotto', in *Qualcosa del passato: Saggi di lettura del Ventesimo Secolo* (Rome: Gaffi, 2008), pp. 383–98.

39 Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. by Marco Santagata (Milan: Mondadori, 1996), p. 1113; my translation.

The sonnet opens with a series of questions addressed to a 'you' that the apostrophe in line 3 reveals to be the speaker's disconsolate soul, which keeps looking back at the past when its beloved Laura was alive. It is too late now to look for her pleasing words and sweet looks, and remembrance only rekindles the pain. The soul is therefore exhorted to desist from following such a fallacious thought and to replace it with a more stable and certain thought that will lead to a good end. If nothing can please the speaker and the soul on Earth, they should look for it in heaven. Seeing the beauty of Laura was harmful for them because, dead or alive, she has deprived them of peace. Lines 5 and 6 add a crucial piece of information: it is the addressed soul that has painstakingly described and portrayed the pleasing words and sweet looks of the beloved. The moral exhortation to find a more stable object of desire is thus combined with an implicit poetic exhortation to the poet-soul to give up its elegiac effort to find its object of desire on earth: Laura is no longer here.

Beginning with a direct quotation, Zanzotto's reading emphasizes the open referentiality of Petrarch's sonnet, turning it toward language itself:

Che fai? Che pensi? Ed a chi mai chi parla?
 Chi e che cerececè d'augèl distinguo,
 con che stillii di rivi il vacuo impinguo
 del paese che intorno a me s'intarla?

A chi porgo, a quale ago per riattarla
 quella logica ai cui fili m'estinguo,
 a che e per chi di nota in nota illinguo
 questo che non fu canto, eloquio, ciarla?

Che pensi tu, che mai non fosti, mai
 né pur in segno, in sogno di fantasma,
 sogno di segno, mah di mah, che fai?

Voci d'augei, di rii, di selve, intensi
 moti del niente che sé a niente plasma,
 pensier di non pensier, pensa: che pensi?

('What do you do? What do you think? And to whom is who speaking?
 Who and what bird's *cerececè* do I discern,
 with what dripping of streams do I fatten
 the vacuity of the wood-wormed country around me?)

To whom, to what needle do I give to refashion
 that logic in whose threads I die out,
 to what and for whom do I make language,
 note by note, of this that was not song, eloquence, chatter?

What do you think, you who never were, ever
 not even in a sign, in a dream of a ghost,
 dream of a sign, who knows of who knows, what do you do?

Voices of birds, of streams, of woods, intense
 motion of nothing that moulds itself into nothing,
 thought of a non-thought, think: what do you think?)⁴⁰

Whereas lines 3–4 in Petrarch's sonnet identify the addressee as the externalized soul, here the first line proceeds to question the identity and the very possibility of identifying not only the addressee ('a chi') but also the speaker ('chi'). Who are those words addressed to? By whom? Deixis emerges as an intralinguistic phenomenon in the twentieth-century poem: pronouns refer to previous occurrences within the text rather than to any identifiable person or entity outside it.⁴¹ In Petrarch, the speaker and the addressee, as well as the pleasing words and sweet looks of the beloved, point to entities outside of the single sonnet and find some degree of identity only within the macrostructure of the *canzoniere*. Zanzotto suspends Petrarch's act of address by making the linguistic nature of this gesture manifest, thus emphasizing the illusory nature of lyric intersubjectivity in Petrarch's sonnet.

Zanzotto's sonnet, moreover, reuses Petrarch's language ('augèl', 'rivi') to disclose its intrapoetic, non-referential nature. Those words/sounds ('stillii di rivi') are used to fill and flesh out the emptiness of the surrounding country, just as they are used to fill the emptiness of a language that does not refer to anything outside itself.⁴² In lines 12–13, the voices of natural elements (birds, streams, woods), which characterize the soundscape of Petrarch's poetry and correspond to the surging emotions of the troubled soul, are equated

40 Andrea Zanzotto, *Tutte le poesie*, ed. by Stefano Dal Bianco (Milan: Mondadori, 2011), p. 570; my translation.

41 For a commentary on the sonnet, see Andrea Zanzotto, *Ipersonetto: Guida alla lettura*, ed. by Luigi Tassoni (Rome: Carocci, 2021), pp. 110–17. See also Luigi Tassoni, *Caosmos: La poesia di Andrea Zanzotto* (Rome: Carocci, 2002), pp. 67–85, 107–26; Niva Lorenzini, *Dire il silenzio: La poesia di Andrea Zanzotto* (Rome: Carocci, 2014), pp. 13–29.

42 See Welle, 'Il Galateo in bosco', pp. 47–48.

with the surging ‘motion’ of a nothing that models itself on nothing: both the soul and the landscape have no reality. It is this ‘pensier di non pensier’ that thinks: ‘Che pensi?’ As the first tercet makes clear, the ‘you’ has never been, neither as a sign nor as a dream. This lyric ‘you’ has a fantasmatic nature: if a sign represents or refers to an entity, however abstract or concrete, here ‘you’ is only the dream of a sign, an interjection expressing the uncertainty of an uncertainty (‘mah di mah’). Therefore, in the second quatrain, the sonnet asks to whom that logic is being handed out, for what or for whom this poem is being put into language note by note. While reusing the form and diction of his illustrious predecessor as a poetic code inherited from the lyric tradition, Zanzotto reveals the purely potential nature of the gesture that Petrarch’s sonnet performs: the exhortation to the soul is not actualized within the poem, just as the speaking ‘I’ and the addressed ‘you’ do not find a stable referent.

Zanzotto’s sonnet raises questions of deixis, diction, form, and gesture. As a form, the sonnet is the same in Petrarch’s fourteenth century as it is in Zanzotto’s twentieth century.⁴³ However, as Benjamin observes in his ‘Commentary on Poems by Brecht’, it is significant that gestures received from the lyric tradition are negotiated, critiqued, or rejected in the most emblematic lyric form.⁴⁴ Zanzotto’s reuse of the sonnet, made canonical in the Western tradition by Petrarch himself, contributes to the articulation of the dialectics of nature and culture, reality and poetic code, or, in Zanzotto’s words, *bosco* (woods) and *galateo* (etiquette). As Stefano Dal Bianco writes, poetry finds itself

in a position of double ‘connivance’: on the one hand, it turns parasitically to the woods [the real] as its only source of sustenance and hope for an authentic life; on the other hand, it cannot but recognize itself in the rationalizing demands (for better or for worse) of the *Galateo* [the norm] as a memory stratified in the literary code.⁴⁵

43 On the sonnet in the Italian poetic tradition, see Raffaella Scarpa, *Forme del sonetto: La tradizione italiana e il Novecento* (Rome: Carocci, 2012); Fabio Magro and Arnaldo Soldani, *Il sonetto italiano: Dalle origini a oggi* (Rome: Carocci, 2017).

44 Walter Benjamin, ‘Commentary on Poems by Brecht’, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, iv, pp. 215–50 (pp. 237–38).

45 Andrea Zanzotto, *Le poesie e prose scelte*, ed. by Stefano Dal Bianco and Gian Mario Villalta (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), p. 1575, quoted in Magro and Soldani, *Il sonetto*

And Fabio Magro and Arnaldo Soldani conclude: “This is why [...] “Ipersonetto” is essentially — to extend Zanzotto’s metaphor — a sort of house in the woods, built “by the book” (or the code) but made of the scattered materials collected in the woods themselves.⁴⁶ In other words, Zanzotto delves into that dialectic at the core of the lyric tradition which the notion of gesture can help to pinpoint. The reuse of an inherited form and the emphasis on words that refer more to Petrarch’s diction than to any external reality contribute to questioning the open referentiality that turns the moral exhortation enacted in Petrarch’s poem into a gesture. If Petrarch’s exhortation was historically situated as representative of the individual’s moral tension between the transience of earthly desires and the stability of the spiritual good, Zanzotto’s sonnet retrospectively exposes the nature of that exhortation as a repeatable and shareable gesture as it is presented and offered to readers by Petrarchan poetry. Gesture operates at a level between form, which, as Daniel Tiffany remarks, cannot be forged, and diction, ‘which possesses specific personal and social characteristics’ and can be faked.⁴⁷ Gesture makes it possible to identify what, in a poem, is both historically situated and transhistorically shareable.

Agamben seems to identify his notion of command with John L. Austin’s performative.⁴⁸ This identification, however, is not self-evident: to say ‘I swear’ is not the same thing as to say ‘Swear!’ In the first case, the enunciation realizes the enunciated: in saying ‘I swear’, the oath happens and has consequences in the world in which it happens.⁴⁹ In the second case, the enunciation does not realize anything

italiano, p. 214; my translation. See also Andrea Cortellessa, *Andrea Zanzotto: Il canto della terra* (Bari: Laterza, 2021), pp. 235–40.

46 Magro and Soldani, *Il sonetto italiano*, p. 214; my translation.

47 Daniel Tiffany, ‘Lyric Poetry and Poetics’, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2020) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1111>>.

48 Agamben, ‘What Is a Command?’, p. 60; John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975). For a reading of *deixis* and *paradeigma* in opposition to performativity in Agamben, see Justin Clemens, ‘The Role of the Shifter and the Problem of Reference in Giorgio Agamben’, in *The Work of Giorgio Agamben: Law, Literature, Life*, ed. by Justin Clemens, Nicholas Heron, and Alex Murray (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 43–65.

49 See also Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, trans. by Lorenzo Chiesa with Matteo Mandarini, in *The Omnibus Homo Sacer* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 361–641 (pp. 535–36).

but itself. There is no way of knowing from the utterance itself whether the command will be heard, obeyed, and executed. The imperative can only ask for a response from the external world; it establishes a relation between language and world that is held in suspension in its potentiality. Petrarch's case is emblematic: the gesture of exhortation, which is never fulfilled within the poem, enacts the moral dilemma and irresolution that characterize Petrarch's 'I'. The sonnet does not offer readers a model to be imitated, but rather a gesture that embodies such dilemma and a language that articulates it. More than to Austin's performative, exhortation belongs to Culler's category of performance and finds a central rhetorical device in apostrophe.⁵⁰ This suspended relationship, which presupposes an external world and whose performance can be repeated in attempts to bring the world forth, seems to underlie lyric discourse. In other words, a lyric use of language may entail, and rest on, a suspension of the usual relationship between speaker and addressee, between words and world. To suspend the immediate referentiality of language means to make of language not merely a place of negativity — the word will never be the thing — but a place of potentiality — the word can be many things. This is why the lyric can function, as Culler remarks, as a memorable language available for repetition in different contexts and as a potential vehicle for a variety of meanings.⁵¹

If we stick to Austin's notion of performativity, Agamben's ontology of command, or of the Greek *esti*, what *could be*, resembles an ontology of possible (fictional) worlds. This is not what I would call *suspended ontology*, which is an ontology of the potential, not of the possible. Lyric can contain fictional elements, but the way in which a lyric utterance is framed is not inherently fictional. In reading a poem, we do not know whether the world will ever respond to being summoned, and not even whether there is a world that could respond. Abstracting poems from the residue of circumstantial functionality that exhortation still carries, lyric gestures are based on the basic linguistic gesture of deixis. Indeed, exhortation, like prayer and praise, deploys the deictic power of language. Its main effect is what might,

50 Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 125–31.

51 *Ibid.*, pp. 336–48.

with Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, be called the ‘production of presence.’⁵² If the main effect of lyric deixis is to produce presence, the presence of the utterance itself, then this utterance is not performative in Austin’s sense but rather a performance in Culler’s sense.

Agamben’s critique of teleology is not based on temporality; it rather addresses the traditional potency/act scheme. For him, indeed, the act of creation (*poiesis*) resists full actualization, its complete passage from potency to act, and the work of art retains some potentiality in its actuality.⁵³ In Agamben’s account, the act of creation is the one performed by the human creator; I want to focus here on the act of creation performed by language itself in a poem and argue that the lyric as a mode of discourse is the use of language that most exposes the limits of actualization. In its performance, the lyric brings to the fore the very limits of performativity, of the capability of language to bring forth what it speaks about and refers to. Lyric language never attains a stable referent and never fully accomplishes an action in this world — not in the sense of a fault, a lack of potentiality, but rather as a *potentiality-not-to*, as Agamben would say. Lyric language gestures toward its referent but never exhausts its reference by producing its own world. It retains some potentiality in each of its actualizations. In this way, on the one hand, it needs a larger world in which to happen in each of its performances (the act-events of reading, as Derek Attridge dubs them);⁵⁴ on the other, it allows for its own re-enactment in different situations. Neither pointing to a stable referent (a real object in our world) nor creating its own fictional world (with fictional objects), the lyric poem evokes a world only to suspend it on the verge of actualization.

52 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

53 Giorgio Agamben, ‘What Is the Act of Creation?’, in *Creation and Anarchy*, pp. 14–28.

54 Derek Attridge uses ‘act-event’ to refer to the reader’s encounter with a text when the text is put to work as literature, highlighting the fact that it is both active and passive, in *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 26 and n. 16; *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 59–60.

THE PARADIGM OF THE VOCATIVE

Conceptions of community are usually based on reciprocal identification among individuals as members of a group; communal systems of knowledge, values, and beliefs; shared interpretive strategies and responses to culturally selected objects; joint goals or interests; or collective affects and moods. What I call *gestural communities*, instead, are not based on pre-established identities, but rather on the shareability and repeatability of gestures. Members of such a community can re-enact historically available gestures as independent actors in their own contexts. Gestures are actualized in social actions when performed in a context in which they acquire a meaning and a goal. Reading Petrarch's sonnet 273, 'I am called to inhabit the open position of the poem's speaker and address the disconsolate soul, thereby making the poem 'my own'. In doing so, however, 'I am also re-enacting the old gesture of exhortation to relinquish earthly attachments and reorientate my desire toward higher goals. Zanzotto's sonnet calls attention to the purely linguistic and thus repeatable nature of such gestures, as well as to the open referentiality that makes such iterability possible.

This dialectical movement between individuation and disindividuation, historicity and trans-historicity, can be linked to the tension Agamben discerns between style, the appropriation of language pursued by the poet, and manner, a need for 'disappropriation' and 'non-belonging':

They are the two poles in the tension of which the gesture of the poet lives: style is disappropriating appropriation (a sublime negligence, a forgetting oneself in the proper), manner an appropriating disappropriation (a presenting oneself or remembering oneself in the improper).⁵⁵

This tension, in turn, is not so far from the dialectical tension between 'fixation' and 'living flux' operative in Benjamin's gesture that we encountered earlier.⁵⁶ According to Agamben, 'the poetic act appears as a bipolar gesture, which each time renders external what it must

55 Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. by Adam Kotsko, in *Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 1011–1288 (pp. 1105–06).

56 Unlike Attridge (for whom, in line with Derrida, singularity coincides with individual uniqueness, or at least tends to that pole), and somewhat closer to Deleuze and

unfailingly appropriate.⁵⁷ The lyric seems to embody, to the highest degree, that ‘point at which language, having deactivated its utilitarian functions, rests in itself and contemplates its potential to say.’⁵⁸

Mention of Brecht is nowhere to be found in Agamben’s nine-volume project *Homo Sacer*. However, although undisclosed, it is evident how relevant Benjamin’s reflections on Brecht’s gesture are for Agamben’s thinking on the topic. If the connections between the notion of gesture and the idea of lyric that I have been tracing so far are of even some relevance, then it is difficult to fully agree with the final objection that Christian Haines raises to Agamben’s politics in his review of the *Homo Sacer* project, which appeared before the publication of its complete English edition in 2017. According to Haines, ‘Agamben’s project to re-found ontology, ethics, and politics can be described as a poetry of thought, because it not only generates a certain lyric intensity but also depends on it.’ This ‘lyric intensity’, for Haines, does not allow for a proper thinking of community — and thus does not lead to a proper social and political dimension — because ‘this is the other face of lyric intensity in Agamben’s immanent method, namely, absolute subtraction. Immanence comes to be measured in relation to a horizon of complete withdrawal from relation.’ Therefore, such ‘lyric intensity’ remains enclosed in an ascetic ‘solitude’ that Haines connects with ‘a Romantic tradition of thinking poetry.’⁵⁹

What is problematic, for Haines, is Agamben’s ‘break from relationality’:

Agamben, I would describe as ‘singularity’ this dynamic space or unstable position in which the individual effaces their own particularity, at least partially, to access the trans-individual in language. In this sense, the open position of the lyric speaker would be a space of singularity. On singularity, see Derek Attridge, ‘Singularity’, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2020) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1092>>.

57 Agamben, *Use of Bodies*, p. 1106; see also Giorgio Agamben, ‘The Inappropriate’, in *Creation and Anarchy*, pp. 29–50.

58 Agamben, ‘What Is the Act of Creation?’, in *Creation and Anarchy*, pp. 14–28 (p. 27).

59 Christian Haines, ‘A Lyric Intensity of Thought: On the Potentiality and Limits of Giorgio Agamben’s “Homo Sacer” Project’, *Boundary2*, 29 August 2016 <<https://www.boundary2.org/2016/08/christian-haines-a-lyric-intensity-of-thought-on-the-potentiality-and-limits-of-giorgio-agambens-homo-sacer-project/>> [accessed 11 February 2024].

The break with a politics of representation or recognition (the pillars of the hegemonic politics of our time: liberal democracy), as well as the break with the state of exception (the tyrannical supplement to that same liberal democracy), thus comes to be predicated upon a break from relationality as such. There is perhaps no better figure for this break from relationality than the lyric poem, at least in Agamben's formulation of that genre, in which sound finds its truth in silence, relation its truth in the solitude of the apostrophe.⁶⁰

If there is a break with a politics of representation, this does not necessarily imply a 'break from relationality as such' in order to embrace the 'solitude of the apostrophe.' There is 'solitude' in apostrophe only as long as one adheres to a message-based paradigm of communication, in which a message goes from a sender to an attentive receiver. It is indeed true that the latter may not be found at the other end of apostrophic address in Romantic poetry. Yet, if one switches to what could be called a paradigm of inscription, or paradigm of the vocative, to use a grammatical case dear to Agamben (and Zanzotto),⁶¹ what matters is that the utterance itself makes room for its own iterability, the potentiality for other speakers to re-enact the utterance. In this case, apostrophe is anything but solitary. Indeed, it does not seem entirely warranted to detect a Romantic conception of poetry (and even less a Romantic idea of apostrophe) as the basis of Agamben's approach to lyric poetry. After all, in the *inoperative*, as becomes clear from Haines's reconstruction, the 'deactivation of the scheme potential/act' entails 'the abandonment of the apparatus subject/object.'⁶² In other words, in the suspension of action advocated by Agamben, there is no individuated subject who could embrace the alleged solitude and send an individual message into the void.

At the end of the review, after having articulated his dissatisfaction, Haines formulates his desire:

60 Ibid.

61 For Agamben, the vocative does not properly fit into the regular syntax of language; it even disrupts that syntax. See the first chapter, 'Vocativo', in Giorgio Agamben, *La voce umana* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2023). *Vocativo* is also the title of a 1957 collection of poetry by Zanzotto. See also Gian Mario Villalta, *La costanza del vocativo: Lettura della 'trilogia' di Andrea Zanzotto: 'Il Galateo in Bosco', 'Fosfeni', 'Idioma'* (Milan: Guerini, 1992).

62 Agamben, 'What Is the Act of Creation?', pp. 23–24.

I would suggest that the object of my critical desire can be summed up in a phrase: a poetics of potentiality. I write 'poetics', not 'poetry', in order to distance myself from the valorization of aesthetic experience as a source of reconciliation and redemption — the trap to which Agamben falls prey. This poetics can be understood as a means without end, or a pure mediality in which form is not pure semblance or style but constitutive of social form.⁶³

However, if one recovers the historicity that lyric gestures had for Brecht and Benjamin, a 'poetics of potentiality' can be found in gestures as 'social forms' suspended in their potentiality. Haines's final proposal — 'let us socialize Agamben, let us communize his thought, let us liberate it from unworldliness and solitude by drawing on what is so powerful in it — not the esoteric but the relational, not redemption but friendship in struggle, not the saint but the comrade'⁶⁴ — is already embedded in the shareability of those gestures and what I have called the paradigm of the vocative.

Two different types of community formation could be derived from the two different uses of language explored by Agamben, apophantic and non-apophantic. Apophantic speech would tend to form a community whose members agree upon a certain truth-statement and the state of things in the world it denotes. Non-apophantic speech would tend to form a community whose members perform the same gesture, without necessarily sharing any knowledge about the world. The suspension of non-apophantic speech in its potentiality would keep open the very potentiality of a gestural community. Lyric discourse allows for the historical re-enactment, or rejection, of certain gestures while at the same time preserving them in their potentiality. This is one possible way to envisage the 'coming community' made of 'whatever singularities', which for Agamben is 'what the State cannot tolerate in any way'⁶⁵ — a community that is 'coming' not because it will be fully realized at some point in the future, but rather because it never ceases to come:

63 Haines, 'Intensity of Thought'.

64 Ibid.

65 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 85–86.

Because if instead of continuing to search for a proper identity in the already improper and senseless form of individuality, humans were to succeed in belonging to this impropriety as such, in making of the proper being-thus not an identity and an individual property but a singularity without identity, a common and absolutely exposed singularity — if humans could, that is, not be-thus in this or that particular biography, but be only *the* thus, their singular exteriority and their face, then they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects, into a communication without the incommunicable.⁶⁶

Such a community is always caught up in the process of coming, in other words as *how it is*, not as *what it is*, as a manner, not an identity, to use the terminology of Agamben's modal ontology.

If, as Culler maintains, the dissemination of lyric is based on the re-enactment of its language by individuals with diverse meanings and to a variety of ends, the notion of gesture is helpful for understanding how lyric can be both historically situated and shareable in different contexts. Lyric poetry, as a repertoire of gestures (in the Brechtian sense of actions freed from their historical contexts and contextual meanings), becomes a vehicle for the transmission of those gestures across time and space and an incubator from which social action (which implies the implementation of a gesture in the social world) can emerge. This is how Agamben's notion of language as 'pure mediality' is understood here, as a language that has suspended its utilitarian use as a means to an end and that shows its own potentiality of saying and can thus enable the formation of gestural communities. Commenting on the way of being together in the events of May '68, Maurice Blanchot wrote in his *La Communauté inavouable* (1983; *The Unavowable Community*): 'Everybody had something to say, and, at times, to write (on the walls); what exactly, mattered little. Saying it was more important than what was said. Poetry was an everyday affair.'⁶⁷ Poetry is more about saying than what is being said. Poems do not bring to completion the performance of functions as instrumental objects or actions do; but they may enable that functionality, or at least preserve it in its potentiality. As far

66 Ibid., p. 65; emphasis in original.

67 Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. by Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988), p. 30.

as language is concerned, Agamben remarks that ‘the gesture is, in this sense, communication of a communicability’; it shows ‘the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality’; and, he adds, ‘the gesture is essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language.’⁶⁸ If, as Agamben summarizes, ‘*the gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: [...] the process of making a means visible as such*’, the lyric could be considered the exhibition of the ‘pure and endless’ mediality of language.⁶⁹

68 Agamben, ‘Notes on Gesture’, p. 58.

69 Ibid., p. 57; emphasis in original.

Francesco Giusti, 'Gestural Communities: Lyric and the Suspension of Action', in *Rethinking Lyric Communities*, ed. by Irene Fantappiè, Francesco Giusti, and Laura Scuriatti, *Cultural Inquiry*, 30 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2024), pp. 71–96 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-30_03>

REFERENCES

- Agamben, Giorgio, *The Coming Community*, trans. by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993)
- 'Expropriated Manner', in *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 87–101 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804763912-008>>
- 'The Inappropriate', in *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*, trans. by Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), pp. 29–50 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503609273-004>>
- *The Kingdom and the Glory*, trans. by Lorenzo Chiesa with Matteo Mandarinini, in *The Omnibus Homo Sacer* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 361–641
- 'Notes on Gesture', in *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 49–61
- *The Use of Bodies*, trans. by Adam Kotsko, in *The Omnibus Homo Sacer* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 1011–1288
- *La voce umana* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2023)
- 'What Is a Command?', in *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*, trans. by Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), pp. 51–65 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503609273-005>>
- 'What Is the Act of Creation?', in *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*, trans. by Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), pp. 14–28 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503609273-003>>
- Attridge, Derek, 'Singularity', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2020) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1092>>
- *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004) <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203420447>>
- *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198733195.001.0001>>
- Austin, John L., *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198245537.001.0001>>
- Benjamin, Walter, 'Commentary on Poems by Brecht', trans. by Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), *iv*: 1938–1940, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (2003), pp. 215–50
- 'Notes from Svendborg, Summer 1934', trans. by Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings*, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), *ii, part 2*: 1931–1934, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (2005), pp. 783–91

- ‘What Is Epic Theatre? (II)’, trans. by Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), iv: 1938–1940, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (2003), pp. 302–09
- Berlant, Lauren, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822394716>>
- Blanchot, Maurice, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. by Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988)
- Brecht, Bertolt, *Gedichte*, ed. by Elisabeth Hauptmann, 10 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1960–76; Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1961–78), III: 1930–1933 (1961)
- *Werke: Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. by Werner Hecht and others, 30 vols (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag; Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988–97), xiv: *Gedichte 4* (1993)
- Clemens, Justin, ‘The Role of the Shifter and the Problem of Reference in Giorgio Agamben’, in *The Work of Giorgio Agamben: Law, Literature, Life*, ed. by Justin Clemens, Nicholas Heron, and Alex Murray (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 43–65 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748634637-006>>
- Cortellessa, Andrea, *Andrea Zanzotto: Il canto della terra* (Bari: Laterza, 2021)
- Crick, Joyce, ‘Power and Powerlessness: Brecht’s Poems to Carola Neher’, *German Life and Letters*, 53.3 (2000), pp. 314–24 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0483.00168>>
- Culler, Jonathan, ‘Apostrophe’, in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 149–71
- *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) <<https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674425781>>
- de Man, Paul, ‘Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory’, in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. by Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 55–72
- Gardini, Nicola, ‘Zanzotto petrarchista barbaro: saggio sull’“Ipersonetto”’, *Studi Novecenteschi*, 19.43/44 (1992), pp. 223–34
- Giusti, Francesco, ‘Mourning Over her Image: The Re-enactment of Lyric Gestures in Giorgio Caproni’s “Versi livornesi”’, in *A Gaping Wound: Mourning in Italian Poetry*, ed. by Adele Bardazzi, Francesco Giusti, and Emanuela Tandello (Cambridge: Legenda, 2022), pp. 47–70 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv33b9pwp.7>>
- ‘Transcontextual Gestures: A Lyric Approach to the World of Literature’, in *The Work of World Literature*, ed. by Francesco Giusti and Benjamin Lewis Robinson (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 75–103 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-19_04>
- Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804767149>>
- Haines, Christian, ‘A Lyric Intensity of Thought: On the Potentiality and Limits of Giorgio Agamben’s “Homo Sacer” Project’, *Boundary2*, 29 August 2016 <<https://www.boundary2.org/2016/08/christian-haines-a-lyric-intensity-of-thought-on-the-potentiality-and-limits-of-georgio-agambens-homo-sacer-project/>> [accessed 11 February 2024]
- Jackson, Virginia, *Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023) <<https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691232805.001.0001>>
- Jameson, Fredric, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1999)
- Johnson, Barbara, ‘Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion’, *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), pp. 28–47 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/464649>>
- Keylin, Vadim, *Participatory Sound Art: Technologies, Aesthetics, Politics* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan Singapore, 2023) <<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-6357-7>>
- Lorenzini, Niva, *Dire il silenzio: La poesia di Andrea Zanzotto* (Rome: Carocci, 2014)

- Magro, Fabio, and Arnaldo Soldani, *Il sonetto italiano: Dalle origini a oggi* (Rome: Carocci, 2017)
- Manica, Raffaele, 'Petrarca e Zanzotto', in *Qualcosa del passato: Saggi di lettura del Ventesimo Secolo* (Rome: Gaffi, 2008), pp. 383–98
- Noland, Carrie, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009) <<https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674054387>>
- Noland, Carrie, and Sally Ann Ness, eds, *Migrations of Gesture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008)
- Petrarca, Francesco, *Canzoniere*, ed. by Marco Santagata (Milan: Mondadori, 1996)
- Ramazani, Jahan, *Poetry and its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014) <<https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226083421.001.0001>>
- *Poetry in a Global Age* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020) <<https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226730288.001.0001>>
- *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009) <<https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226703374.001.0001>>
- Scarpa, Raffaella, *Forme del sonetto: La tradizione italiana e il Novecento* (Rome: Carocci, 2012)
- Schuhmann, Klaus, *Der Lyriker Bertolt Brecht 1913–1933* (Munich: dtv, 1971)
- Tassoni, Luigi, *Caosmos: La poesia di Andrea Zanzotto* (Rome: Carocci, 2002)
- Tiffany, Daniel, 'Lyric Poetry and Poetics', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2020) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1111>>
- *My Silver Planet: A Secret History of Poetry and Kitsch* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/book.28577>>
- Tucker, Herbert, 'Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric', in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. by Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 226–46
- Vendler, Helen, *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1997)
- Villalta, Gian Mario, *La costanza del vocativo. Lettura della 'trilogia' di Andrea Zanzotto: 'Il Galateo in Bosco', 'Fosfeni', 'Idioma'* (Milan: Guerini, 1992)
- Waters, William, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003) <<https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501717062>>
- Weber, Samuel, *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) <<https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674033955>>
- Welle, John P., 'Il Galateo in bosco and the Petrarchism of Andrea Zanzotto', *Italica*, 62.1 (1985), pp. 41–53 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/478679>>
- Zanzotto, Andrea, *Ipersonetto: Guida alla lettura*, ed. by Luigi Tassoni (Rome: Carocci, 2021)
- *Le poesie e prose scelte*, ed. by Stefano Dal Bianco and Gian Mario Villalta (Milan: Mondadori, 1999)
- *Tutte le poesie*, ed. by Stefano Dal Bianco (Milan: Mondadori, 2011)