

It's complicated

On the responsibility of literature and literary criticism using the poem "Gentle Now, Don't Add To Heartache" as an example

Anna S. Reuter

Bachelor's degree in Comparative Literature and Philosophy at Goethe University Frankfurt a. M.; since 2019 pursuing Master's degree in Philosophy at Goethe University Frankfurt a. M.; since 2019 scholarship holder of Cusanuswerk.

Abstract

What kind of critical approach do literary texts require that portray environmental misdeeds and display an ethos ostensibly calling into question the practices responsible for those misdeeds? Novels and poetry that address guilt and responsibility in the Anthropocene often aestheticize supposedly natural conditions, evoke nostalgic settings, and imagine a return to better times. Thus, they require literary criticism to focus on human responsibility and culpability toward the environment. However, the notion of responsibility is not only to be found in the text as a topic but might also be a necessary stance toward the text. Then, literary criticism would be a matter of responding and making responsibility productive. That means making intelligible the potential of being (speaking) with one another inherent in the structures of language. Drawing on the concept of interpellation and analyzing Juliana Spahr's poem "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache", this article examines the relevance of the notion of responsibility for literary criticism.

Keywords: Anthropocene, lyric, literary criticism, responsibility, language theory

The Anthropocene demands collective responsibility for the damage that humans inflict on their environment, and literature, at its best, can help create attention to the urgency to take action against the environmental destruction. But if literary texts (re-)present things that concern a collective responsibility, then it is necessary for literary criticism to question the notion of responsibility and how it is implicated in novels and poetry as well as in the way literary criticism responds to those texts, since they require the same medium: language. On the basis of the assumption that literature that takes up the situatedness of humans in the Anthropocene is the effect of a discursive practice in which the reading of literature is just as involved as its object of analysis, I will discuss how notions of responsibility, guilt and complicity can be implicated in language – and how this, in turn, complicates literary analyses.

In order to illustrate the nexus of literature, implication, and responsibility, my argumentation will proceed in three steps. In the first section I will analyze Juliana Spahr's poem *Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache* (hereafter referred to as *Gentle Now*). The poem, which is about human's relationship to nature and processes of transformation, and its reception, serves as an example to trace the potential of responsibility that language may hold. In the second part I will take a cursory look on Judith Butler's understanding of Althusser's term of interpellation. Althusser introduces in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* interpellation to describe the process by which the individual is addressed by the institutions of power and thereby constituted, made (into a) subject. But more relevant in this context is how Judith Butler draws on Althusser's term. She understands interpellation more comprehensively as the fundamental possibility of discourse to grant or deny the subject agency. Essential for my analysis is the observation that the "subject comes into being after language" (Butler 1995, 1). To explore how responsibility is related to language, I will also refer to an essay by Juliane Prade-Weiss, in which she proposes "language as a model for comprehending implication in a pre-formed structure that [...] prompts and demands individual responsibility" (Prade Weiss 2020, 1). In the third and last part I will conclude that for today's literary criticism a conception of language is necessary that allows to emphasize one's responsibility toward that which is expressed.

Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache

Juliana Spahr's *Gentle Now* fulfills the usual parameters of contemporary lyric dealing with the loss of nature and human culpability: the status of the lyrical subject is ambiguous; the structure of the poem, at first glance, does not follow any fixed scheme; topoi already found in Whitman and Emerson are cleverly continued; the image of a pristine nature is evoked in order to lament that it has long been gone and humans are responsible. Finally, in the trenches of the lines, a pedagogical impetus can be identified that reading must transform the reader in order to counteract the misery that corresponds to real conditions outside the poem. Published in 2011, the poem is composed of 249 verses unevenly distributed over five stanzas, and addresses the clash of subject and environment from the perspective of a lyrical "We", who transforms into a lyrical "I" over the course of the poem. As the plurality of the "We" atrophies into a singular "I", the multiplicity of nature also undergoes a lamentable decay, caused by the practices of the human collective.

Spahr understands her own writing, as well as reading poetry in general, as a collaborative practice. She states that reading is "a communal, not individual, act" (Spahr 2001, 3). Unfortunately, the reception of her own work is proof that such a conception of reading can prevent critical analysis. For example, when Dianne Chisholm's essay examines the poetics of refrain in Spahr's work and describes in a rather one-sided way the supposedly positive effects of her poems (Chisholm 2014). Chisholm plausibly identifies repetition as an elemental stylistic device of Spahr's but overlooks that texts such as *Gentle Now* could as well be read as anesthetic rather than thought-provoking due to their aestheticization of humanity's entanglement with its environment. Rather than allowing the complexity and ambiguity, the co-implications of human existence, to persist, such readings unify temporality, contexts, and subject constellations. What remains is an optimistic interpretation that stands in astonishing contrast to the poem itself. That the constant repetitions suggest not only chaos and entropy, as Chisholm notes, but despair, is overlooked.

In Spahr, "We" is an initially unspecified entity that acquires its contours by listing natural things such as the sun, fish, human characteristics, and bodily functions, and by placing "We" in the midst of those. More and more plants and animals are named, with which

“We” seems to be connected: “The stream was a part of us and we were a part of the stream and we / were thus part of the rivers and thus part of the gulfs and the oceans” (Spahr 2011, 125). “We” cannot be clearly classified as human or non-human animal, questioning the dichotomy of nature and culture. Only in the last stanza, with the introduction of “I”, can it be deduced that it is human, since the “I” takes up human work (Spahr 2011, 132). However, the evoked multiplicity of an untouched nature, which stands in contrast to the polluted world demands critical consideration. Thus, Oliver Völker points out that the emergence of a concept of nature that takes shape as a counterspace to human culture and labor in parallel with an increasing mastery and utilization of nature in step with technological innovations was already a topos among German Romanticism as well as the authors of American Nature Writing (Völker 2021, 13). What is romantically idealized as pristine natural space offering refuge from a technocratic civilization turns out, on closer examination, to be a cultural product of that very civilization. Postnaturalist philosophers such as Steven Vogel therefore outline a holistic world-view, which, contrary to the assumption of a dualism of culture vs. nature, is based on the idea that the world surrounding humans is always already socially constructed. Vogel argues for abandoning the concept of nature altogether in order to focus instead on the social practices that produce what is perceived as natural:

[B]ecause ‘nature’ in the sense of a world unaffected by human action doesn’t exist any longer (and arguably never did), and because the very idea of distinguishing the natural from the human or the social involves a metaphysical dualism that treats human beings as somehow outside the world instead of acknowledging them as simply another organism within the world (Vogel 2015, 65).

The topos of a nature untouched by humans must resignedly also be given up by Spahr’s poem, after it initially evoked it. The resistance is made emphatic by the repetitive, almost prayer-like passages and sprawling lists that make up most of the poem. With regard to enumeration as an art form, Sabine Mainberger notes that an excess of details in description makes the described object disappear. She highlights that even a colorful variety reaches a point

where it tips over into uniformity (Mainberger 2011, 8f). Spahr's poem reaches that point where what is described can be read as diverse due to the sheer quantity of things listed, but is no longer imaginable in this diversity. Thus, the listing of animals, plants, insects, etc. can be read more as a last desperate inventory of what threatens to disappear than as "evocative assemblages, that reactivate local-global connections, and potentially, a cosmic bodies politic" (Chisholm 2014, 144).

While in the first stanzas "We" seems to be part of a single natural organism, and a harmonious connectedness of everything is evoked, in the fourth stanza inorganic remains, mountains of civilizational garbage and chemicals appear, which dissolve the idyll, because: "[i]t was not all long lines of connection and utopia" (Spahr 2011, 130). Partly "knowingly", partly "unknowingly" (Ibid, 131) changes take place that retrospectively turn out to be lamentable:

We were born at the beginning of these things, at the time
of chemicals combining, at the time of stream run off.

These things were a part of us and would become more a
part of us but we did not know it yet.

Still we noticed enough to sing a lament (Ibid).

Lament takes a prominent role and gains intensity in the course of the poem: first, the object of mourning (the loss of the harmonious connectedness) is portrayed, before lament itself is named as such and finally culminates performatively in lamentations ("otototoi" (Ibid, 133)). This vocal intelligibility represents the tipping point between "We" and "I", between so-called nature and culture. In stanza four, the indeterminate, undifferentiated "We" affirmatively laments the loss, while the "I" of the last stanza is entangled in a *double bind* of lamentation: lamentations can be read on the surface of the text, but within the framework of negation: "I did not sing" (Ibid). The lyrical subject's non-lamentation illustrates the contrast to the plurality of the "We", which is not aware of any guilt (yet), and evokes questions regarding the responsibility for the loss of what is lamented.

By the lyrical subject's turning towards civilization and away from nature, the poem implements a chiasmic structure and thus complicates the scope of meaning. The participation in the world is

differentiated into a communal and an individual part: on the basis of the personal pronouns, a change from the plural to the singular takes place; at the same time, the multiplicity of nature is subsumed under the other, stranger. With the appearance of "I", the plurality of the human community becomes manifest. Finally, it is said:

I just turned to each other and the body parts of the other suddenly
glowed with the beauty and detail that I had found in the stream (Ibid, 133).

The dualisms that Spahr's poem initially offers (present - past, nature - culture, plural - singular, non-human - human, own - strange) are not tenable as either/or categories, but point to the division of a common situation. Being with each other changes the contours of togetherness and the question of guilt for the loss of nature finds no addressee. The co-implication of being with each other includes sharing the guilt for destructive cultural practices, suggests *Gentle Now*. The awareness of this guilt is most clearly expressed in reference to another cultural product that is usually predicated as valuable: poetry. Spahr alludes to a rich cultural history of poetry with the final lines, uniting in the singular "I" the plurality of voices emerging from the depths of history:

I put my head together on a narrow pillow and talked
with each other
all night long.
And I did not sing.
I did not sing otototoi; dark, all merged together, oi.
I did not sing groaning words.
I did not sing otototoi; dark, all merged together, oi.
I did not sing groaning words.
I did not sing o wo, wo, wo!
I did not sing I see, I see.
I did not sing wo, wo! (Ibid)

Otototoi: the lament of Cassandra, taken up by Virginia Woolf in her essay "On Not Knowing Greek" and developed further by Heather McHugh in her poem "Three To's and an Oi," end *Gentle Now* and

leave the apocalyptic impression: “We’re all about to die” (McHugh 1999, 28). *Tertium comparationis* of Woolf’s essay and McHugh’s poem, which Spahr uses for *Gentle Now*’s scope of meaning, is what Yopie Prins calls “the creation of an interlingual space that allows us to read in multiple directions” (Prins 2006, 165). Cassandra, tragic heroine whose prediction of coming doom was not taken seriously, functions as an intertextual reference for transgressions of time and language, illustrating the impossibility of finding an adequate addressee for the lament over the loss of nature. Language as an essential distinguishing feature vis-à-vis everything non-human loses its significance when, in the face of a real impending catastrophe, nothing remains but infantile babble (“o wo, wo, wo”). The aesthetic achievements of human culture stand in clear contrast to the blind destructiveness of the same culture. The latter can only be overlooked with the former, suggests Spahr’s poem with its titular imperative: *Gentle Now, Don’t Add to Heartache!* The confrontation with destructive social practices is aestheticized and thus presented in an anesthetizing way. But the anesthetizing moment of the aesthetic makes every reader of the poem an accomplice of both social practices: destruction and creation.

Responding to responsibility

Can literature, by virtue of its linguistic character, compel beings who – in Judith Butler’s words – “require language in order to be” (Butler 1997, 1), to take responsibility for what is portrayed? As beings who experience their constitution through language, we are always in a language community in which we are addressed and can respond. However, literature does not demand a response in the sense that the other might demand; and yet it is often classified as resistant, relating, implicitly or explicitly, to something other than itself. Literature is thus situated in, interwoven with, a space and time. What form of responsibility then can literature evoke? With the title of her monograph *Excitable Speech*, Butler refers to the capacity of speech to not only excite, but arouse, or upset, in short, to give substance to the deontological status of the other and to make relations visible – whether by addressing (*name calling* in the literal sense) or whether by violating (*name calling* in the pejorative sense up to hate speech). Moreover, *excitable* alludes to the *citationality* of discourse that transcends every utterance. Both a speaker

and a literary text are involved in a social system in which they manifest themselves on the basis of a language that is already there. Language is repetition of what was and anticipation of what will be. In this space between past and future, it is necessary to elicit the accountability of speech. In order to grasp the subjectification of the one being addressed Butler refers to Althusser's concept of interpellation:

[Interpellation] seeks to introduce a reality rather than report on an existing one; it accomplishes this introduction through a citation of existing convention. [...] Its purpose is to indicate and establish a subject in subjection, to produce its social contours in space and time. Its reiterative operation has the effect of sedimenting its "positionality" over time (Butler 1997, 33f).

The interpellative function that she describes here applies to verbal acts of speaking as well as to literature. She makes clear that conventions are produced by discursive practices and consolidated through repetition. The linguistic operations necessary for this, such as interpellation, determine the mode of literary texts beyond verbal utterances, insofar as they introduce a reality. Without claiming to explicate what is true or false, literature accordingly produces *a* reality – based on pre-existing conventions; even if literature can articulate resistance to them. Thus, when Butler writes, "[t]he speaker assumes responsibility precisely through the citational character of speech" (Butler 1997, 39), this possibility of assuming responsibility must apply equally to literature. For not only the speaker, but literature, too, "renews the linguistic tokens of a community [...]. Responsibility is thus linked with speech as repetition, not as origination" (Ibid).

The ambiguous structure of literature consists in that very moment of repetition, which is always accompanied by recollection. Repetition and recollection represent the same movement, only in opposite directions. They are constitutive elements of language, so that it is characterized by the possibility of either cementing what exists in a backward-looking way or varying it in a forward-looking way. Literature as a specific manifestation of language outlines this potential and requires a stance in the form of responsibility for what

is represented. Implicit in the structures of language is a movement that binds the individual to something other than itself. This means for the critical analysis of literature that it is necessary to make conscious one's own implication and complicity.

But *Excitable Speech* is not the only text with which Butler makes use of Althusser's interpellation. In the essay "Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All", published two years earlier, she examines the "the acceptance of guilt" (Butler 1995, 2f), which seems to be inherent to the subject formation. This is an interesting aspect of interpellation in this context, because it makes it possible to build a bridge between a literary text that depicts environmental damages, such as *Gentle Now*, and its analysis. Guilt, then, is not just a topic of the poem, but that, which makes the implication of both the poem and the analysis intelligible. The hailing of the poem infuses guilt; the poem reenacts the interpellative function of language on a different level, since the subject of the analysis is already existent before reading the poem. It changes the status of guilt. No longer the guilt invoked by the allegorical authority of language that *makes subjects of us all*, it is rather a more conscious version expressed through a specific variant of language: literature.

The notion of guilt finds resonance in Juliane Prade-Weiss account of "language as presented in literature" (Prade-Weiss 2020, 1). Based on the observation of a contemporary democratic crisis regarding participation and implication, Prade-Weiss critically examines the idea of resistant literature. Her thoughts on Herta Müller's novel *The Hunger Angel* prove to be analytically relevant not only for contemporary literature depicting totalitarian systems, but also for literary text portraying ecological damage. "[U]nderstanding implication in terms of language" (Prade-Weiss 2020, 17), as she states, is necessary for understanding (the literary representation) of guilt as well as of responsibility. Prade-Weiss elucidates that the "implicated-ness in the pre-established forms of language is a basic condition of human life" (Prade-Weiss 2020, 23), thereby rendering it possible to make visible the involvement of a "reader in a dilemma of complicated guilt and impossible agency" (Ibid.). As beings endowed with language every reader of a text is inevitably complicit in the guilt the text might articulate. Thus, making every reading complicated – which is precisely the dilemma *Gentle Now* postulates, as I discussed earlier.

Making visible the implications

Texts like Spahr's poem pose two difficulties for literary criticism. First, they challenge dualisms of nature and human and of individual and collective. However, it cannot be sufficient for literary criticism to just explicate and repeat the challenges a literary text portrays. It can only be the starting point for the second, real difficulty: to make visible the consequences, meanings, entanglements – in short, the implications – of the representation of a changing human environment and to put a stop to the repetition of the same old thing, to take a stance. If a critical literary analysis falls into the same lamentations as literature, if it merely repeats what has already been written it runs the risk of being complicit in what the object of the analysis, the text, implicates. Instead, literary criticism is a matter of responding and making responsibility productive. That means making intelligible the potential of being (speaking) with one another inherent in the structures of language, insofar as, even in the absence of a clear addressee who has to assume responsibility, the address or interpellation finds resonance. Interpellation in this case means the ability of an environmentally conscious literary discourse to constitute a subject that responds, but without naming an addressee. This subject, however, is a "subject in subjection" (Butler 1997, 34), when it merely affirms the discourse. Not to relate to the discourse affirmatively but differently, would be the first step in order to reflect on one's own entanglement and to dissolve its unity. This thought seems all the more urgent the more difficult it becomes to think individual and collective responsibility. If any form of responsibility has its origin in speech, in language, it would be the task of literary criticism to answer it, perhaps first with a question peculiar to it: *Qui parle?*

References

Butler, Judith. 1995. "Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All." *Yale French Studies* 88: 6–26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930099>.

- Butler, Judith. 1997. *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge.
- Chisholm, Dianne. 2014. "Juliana Spahr's Eco-poetics: Ecologies and Politics of the Refrain." *Contemporary Literature* 55 (1 Spring): 118-147. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cli.2014.0002>
- Mainberger, Sabine. 2011. *Die Kunst des Aufzählens. Elemente zu einer Poetik des Enumerativen*. Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter.
- McHugh, Heather. 1999. "Three To's and an Oi." In *The Father of the Predicaments*, 28-29. Hanover, New England: University Press of New England.
- Prade-Weiss, Juliane. 2020. "Guilt-tripping the 'Implicated Subject': Widening Rothberg's Concept of Implication in Reading Müller's *The Hunger Angel*." *Journal of Perpetrator Research* 3 (1): 42-66. <https://doi.org/10.21039/jpr.3.1.64>
- Prins, Yopie. 2006. "OTOTOTOI: Virginia Woolf and 'The Naked Cry' of Cassandra." In *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD*, edited by Fiona Macintosh, Pantelis Michelakis, Edith Hall and Oliver Taplin, 163-185. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spahr, Juliana. 2001. *Everybody's Autonomy. Connecting Reading and Collective Identity*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press.
- Spahr, Juliana. 2011. "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache." In *Well Then There Now*, 123-133. Boston: Black Sparrow Press.
- Völker, Oliver. 2021. *Langsame Katastrophen. Eine Poetik der Erdgeschichte*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag.
- Vogel, Steven. 2015. *Thinking like a Mall. Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press Ltd.

