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Post literacy*

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ABSTRACT

Educators and pundits have declared this a ‘post-literate’ age. On social media, and especially Twitter, the effects of increased illiteracy are exacerbated by context collapse: the further a post gets from its target audience, the more likely its intended meaning will be misinterpreted. But another aspect of tweets, especially joke tweets, makes them difficult to read well: their lyric quality. Whether they appear on a user’s page as monologic utterances, in algorithmic feeds that serve as fleeting anthologies, or embedded in a quote-tweet, even tweets framed as direct address are, as J. S. Mill said of poetry, ‘overheard.’ We can’t understand each other on Twitter because, when we’re shitposting or subtweeting or ‘pleased to announce,’ we’re performing a poetic speech act—tweeting into the void—that we often pretend is a purely locutionary one. Literary critics have objected to J. L. Austin’s opposition of ‘serious’ speech acts to those in a poem, which do not sincerely express intention and so cannot be meant ‘seriously.’ Tweets are often, understandably, taken even less seriously than poetry. This essay argues that the rhetorical power of lyric poetry and tweets alike derives from their unseriousness: their refusal to commit to anything but a bit.

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Every day, I read about how we live in a post-literate age. No one can discern irony, deduce context, or even parse sentences grammatically. No one can recognise allusions, because that would require having read anything before. No one can digest blocks of text larger than a phone screen. It seems like no one wants to read anymore, and even if they did, no one knows how.

In the classroom, the effects of this post-literacy are depressing. Students not only don’t do the reading, but they also fail to retain what little they do read. They forget a sentence as soon as it’s displaced from their brain-space by a new one, as if they were condemned to the mythical punishment of the

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Danaids, words pouring through their heads like water through a sieve, an allusion Montaigne made in reference to how bad his own reading retention was, an allusion that, if you made it in a classroom today, would go in one ear and out the other. We blame Covid. We blame the Common Core curriculum. Most of all, we blame the phones. When I encounter discourse like this, it's usually on my phone, on the app formerly known as Twitter.

In the corner of Twitter I tend to inhabit, Academic Twitter, this discourse is usually explicitly about pedagogy. How can we meet our students where they are when our students are out to lunch? Should we stop assigning reading? Should we give up on papers? Is ChatGPT the future? Is our children learning? In a slightly broader swath of Twitter, what we might call Culture Twitter – where debates rage over whether certain films are feminist, whether it's ableist to expect writers to read, whether sex scenes constitute assault on the viewer, whether MasterCard is a queer ally and this pop star is my friend – the crisis of post-literacy is a matter of more local urgency, or at least it feels that way to those of us constantly posting about it.

The general societal etiolation of attention and hermeneutic care, against which we in the academic humanities heroically fight every day in the classroom, is exacerbated on the internet and perhaps especially on Twitter by context collapse, where screenshotting and retweeting can take a post far from its original target audience or intended interpretive community. This is a particular problem with jokes. 'Turns out that jokes are WAY less funny if people don't know the context and the delivery is plain text,' Elon Musk tweeted in September 2024, after tweeting and deleting an attempt at a joke about assassinating Joe Biden.¹ Twitter post-literacy can be alternately understood as a crisis of 'post *ill*iteracy', in the sense that no one knows how to read posts. I once tweeted a joke about this – 'some say we live in a post-literate society. if only that were true. you don't have to spend much time on this site to see that people misread posts at an alarmingly high rate'² – that did not receive very many likes, doomed as I am to an audience of illiterates, a fate I share with Elon Musk.

The experience of being misread on Twitter is so common that there's a stock response for it, a screenshot of a tweet: 'You can say "I like pancakes" and somebody will say "So you hate waffles?"', which, the tweet goes on to clarify, is 'a whole new sentence'.³ Often, an accusation of illiteracy is itself the product of misreading. Users often quote-reply 'OPEN THE SCHOOLS' – a phrase whose origin can be traced back to Donald Trump, in reference to pandemic-induced closures⁴ – to a tweet that was clearly only feigning ignorance for laughs; often, in such cases, the original poster is a woman. As the cartoonist Gabrielle Drolet tweeted, 'one of the biggest problems plaguing joke literacy right now is that people would rather believe a woman is stupid than kidding'.⁵ There's an incentive to such willed illiteracy: on the internet as in academia, calling someone an idiot

who doesn't know what they're talking about can be a path to clout. Assuming that everyone plainly means what they say allows for plentiful opportunities to be just plain mean.

But what *are* we saying when we – we who tweet – tweet? One of the biggest problems plaguing online media literacy in general is that, often, we really don't know if the speaker is stupid, kidding, or a secret third thing. Despite the tendency to attribute all misinterpretation to the contemporary literacy crisis and, ultimately, the phones, an inherent resistance to judgments of seriousness is not unique to tweets, or to internet speech. The threat this resistance poses to reading comprehension is best understood, this essay will argue, in the context of the lyric tradition. The reason why it's hard to see what's been done with a tweet is the same reason it's hard to see what's been done with a lyric poem: we can never be sure how 'serious' it is.

I. Are you being serious right now?

By putting 'serious' in scare quotes, I'm alluding to J. L. Austin, who does the same on multiple occasions when he explains that a poem – like a joke, and also like an utterance performed by an actor on stage – simply can't be serious, by which he means a sincere expression of the speaker's intent. Christopher Ricks calls these quotation marks 'prophylactic', like a bubble around seriousness to protect it from the malignant unseriousness of poetry that threatens to infect and invalidate all of our speech acts.⁶ At the same time, the quotation marks suggest a lack of seriousness, a distancing of the author from his speech, as if he doesn't quite mean 'seriously' seriously. In Lecture I of *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin defines the performative utterance with a rhetorical – that is, not serious – question: 'Surely the words must be spoken "seriously" and so as to be taken "seriously"? [...] I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem.'⁷

Another reason to question Austin's seriousness here is that he immediately cites, as an authority on seriousness, Euripides: someone who in fact was 'writing a poem', a tragedy in verse. A serious utterance must be the sign of 'an inward and spiritual act', and 'the classic expression of this idea' is found in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Quoting the Greek lines, Austin translates them as: 'my tongue swore to, but my heart (or mind or other backstage artiste) did not'. 'Other backstage artiste' is not a standard translation of 'ἑρῆν'; nor is it usually annotated in critical editions with a footnote, as we find in Austin, that distinguishes between 'the lights men, the stage manager, even the prompter' – the technical crew behind speech acts – and 'certain officious understudies, who would duplicate the play', the cast members taking the part of the heart, who contradict the outer utterance.⁸

If the utterance Hippolytus is describing is unserious because insincere, so too is this description, written by Euripides and performed by an actor, neither of whom was expressing ‘an inward and spiritual act’.

In Lecture II of *How to Do Things with Words*, where Austin explicitly appends dramatic performance to jokes and poems as a site of unseriousness, he appears to take his own claims about seriousness even less seriously. In his reiteration of the unseriousness of poetry (and drama), he allows dramatic language – language from a play *about* theatricality blurring with reality – to roam freely within the body of his prose, without any prophylactic barrier:

... a performative utterance will, for example, be hollow and void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance – a sea-change in special circumstances.⁹

The phrase ‘sea-change’ changes when it is not said by an actor playing Ariel in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, when it is used not to describe a man’s bones and eyes becoming hollowed out and replaced with coral and pearl but to describe a performative utterance becoming hollow and void, signifying nothing – but whether it undergoes a sea-change, its original theatrical unseriousness replaced by philosophical seriousness, is a question Austin leaves in what we might call a kind of lyric suspension, giving readers an opportunity to exercise our negative capability. Later, in Lecture VIII, Austin again role-plays as unserious precisely in his redefinition of the difference between serious, efficacious speech acts and ‘not serious’ utterances, such as ‘joking’, ‘acting a part’, or ‘writing poetry’:

For example, if I say ‘Go and catch a falling star,’ it may be quite clear what both the meaning and the force of my utterance is, but still wholly unresolved which of these other kinds of things I may be doing. There are aetiologies, parasitic uses, etc., various ‘not serious’ and ‘not full normal’ uses. The normal conditions of reference may be suspended, or no attempt made at a standard perlocutionary act, no attempt to make you do anything, as Walt Whitman does not seriously incite the eagle of liberty to soar.¹⁰

The ‘I’ in Austin’s first sentence is better known as John Donne.¹¹ Partly because it’s unattributed, it doesn’t look like a serious quotation. It sounds made up, the kind of thing a philosopher would say when coming up with the kind of thing a philosopher would say (‘For example, if I say ...’). That preface works a bit like the parenthetical (‘poet voice’) at the beginning of a parodic tweet mocking poets’ melodramatic tendencies, or like a deflationary ‘Poets be like’ quote-tweet of an earnest exhortation from an amateur astronomer to ‘Go look at the moon right now.’ One thing Austin has in common with Twitter posters is that when he uses someone else’s line without attribution, he *is* attempting to make the reader ‘go and catch’ something: the reference. And like a poster who is not necessarily the speaker of

his tweets, or a poet who is not necessarily the speaker of his poem, he distances the philosophical authority of his 'I' from the speaker of the utterance with a hypotheticalal 'if'.

Barbara Johnson, in her discussion of Austin's dismissal of poetry, drama, and jokes as not 'serious', points out how surprisingly silly his 'Go and catch a falling star' example is, because even within the poem, the speaker is so obviously not being serious. The command is self-consciously infelicitous: as the poem goes on, it becomes clear he's saying that catching a falling star is as impossible as finding a chaste woman, and if you know as much about that as Donne (or, perhaps, Donne's speaker) does, you know it's quite impossible. As Johnson puts it, 'The very non-seriousness of the order is in fact what constitutes its fundamental seriousness,' because it's sounding the alarm about a national emergency of female sexual promiscuity.¹² To Donne, though, female sexual promiscuity is itself a joke, one he reiterated across his poems in such various ways that the punchline of a given poem might be less that all women are false than that he has somehow found a way to reach that conclusion yet again, and from such an improbable opening as 'Go and catch a falling star.' As a character in a Billy Wilder movie puts it, nervously inverting his scripted line, 'The situation is hopeless, but not serious!'¹³

Johnson quotes a different usage by Austin of this example from the one I quoted above. Hers is drawn from 'Performative Utterances,' a talk delivered in 1956, the year after Austin delivered the lectures that would become *How to Do Things with Words*. There, Austin still doesn't name Donne, but it is no longer he himself who is hypothetically speaking: 'If the *poet* says "Go and catch a falling star" or whatever it may be, he doesn't seriously issue an order' (my italics).¹⁴ Austin substitutes the poet for himself as if to make clearer than in the previous version that he, a philosopher, would never say something so stupid, although of course a poet would. Ricks, who also cites this version, finds the 'whatever' particularly funny: 'the effect [...] is to intimate, wearily, that not only does the poet not seriously issue an order, the poet does not seriously issue anything'.¹⁵ Austin's stated goal in passages like these is to police the border of seriousness, but he can't seem to do it with a straight face.

II. Lyric unseriousness

One way to understand Austin's winking dismissal of poetic utterances is to admit that poetry, especially the witty, conceit-driven lyric poetry Donne wrote, just isn't that serious: unserious not only in its lack of fidelity of speaker to intent, but also in its cultural value relative to philosophy, which is useful primarily for its instructively casual relationship to what any serious person ought to value above all: the truth. But lyric poetry used to

be so serious; for much of the twentieth century, it was arguably the only genre to be taken seriously in academic literary criticism. A line of Donne's verse inspired the title of Cleanth Brooks's 1947 *The Well Wrought Urn*, a phrase that became a synecdoche for the object of literary study and so oft-cited as to risk becoming overwrought or, like love's pinnace in Donne's 'Air and Angels', overfraught. For the New Critics, lyric's seriousness derived from its refusal to equate, as Austin does, seriousness with sincerity. Such literary critical scriptures as 'The Intentional Fallacy', where 'author' and 'poet' are used interchangeably, take as an article of faith that lyric is the only literature worth taking seriously, so seriously as to utterly eclipse its ultimately frivolous author.¹⁶ For other readers, academic and otherwise, what makes lyric so serious is precisely the poet's intention, a sincerity a philosopher could only dream of, as famously articulated by Mill: 'Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind.'¹⁷

Lyric's seriousness, then, is at once a self-seriousness – based on the identity between poet and speaker and the sincerity of the poet-speaker's expression – and a selfless seriousness. The lyric 'I' is a generic subjectivity, a pronoun taken on by the reader who recites the poem, a persona that speaks in the present tense across time, or a writer who is, in Helen Vendler's words, 'so unconscious of his reader that we have only the choice of becoming him [...] and losing our own identity'.¹⁸ Lyric's depersonalised timelessness, some argue, is what has made it untimely. In *Professing Criticism*, his historical survey of academic English literary studies in the US, John Guillory claims that, with the recent emphasis on topicality in university curricula, the lyric has been discarded for lacking the novel's novelty, for not speaking to the present the way prose narrative does.¹⁹ The flip side of the lyric's supposed transcendence of its moment is its irrelevance.

And yet despite or perhaps because of this deinstitutionalisation of lyric, more people are reading and publishing poetry today than ever before, most often online. The critic Ryan Ruby, referring to this fact in his recent *Context Collapse: A Poem Containing the History of Poetry*, frames the situation as 'a basic law of economics / That makes poetry seem *irrelevant* / At the *peak of its popularity* / And causes its cultural stock to crash'.²⁰ Gillian White has observed, with reference to late-aughts online poetry forums, that reading on the internet can feel like how Mill described overhearing the speech of poetry: 'the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen, in the next', all of us atomised and yet connected in virtual community.²¹ Virginia Jackson has argued that the New Critics and their ilk redefined 'poetry' as 'lyric' and 'lyric' as whatever you could fit on a handout, slide in front of an undergraduate, and ask them to close read.²² Now it's whatever you can fit in a screenshot, whether you're an Instapoet

formatting an original composition, a content curator hoping to go viral by posting Maggie Smith's 'Good Bones', or a shitposter cropping a lineated legal document to look like a Rupi Kaur poem, as many on Twitter delighted in doing with dialogue from the September 2024 indictment of New York City Mayor Eric Adams ('Why does he care? / He is not going to pay / His name / will not be on anything / either'²³). Modernist American poetry is disappearing as an academic field, but William Carlos Williams's 1934 poem 'This Is Just to Say' is perhaps the longest-running meme template on Twitter. 'Short, compact texts, preoccupied with small, easy-to-handle things,' as Sianne Ngai describes a common tendency in twentieth-century poetry, appeal to modern readers through their participation in 'the commodity aesthetic of cuteness'.²⁴ Keats's urn contains timeless beauty and truth; Williams's icebox contains plums.

Poetry's cultural stock, then, is crashing into unseriousness. As Kaur's status as a Twitter punchline suggests, lyric – or something like it – is often posted on the site for laughs, as if in affirmation of Austin's yoking of poems with jokes as unserious utterances, a yoke that is itself a joke. Even the most apparently serious poetic enterprises are sometimes presented as jokes. In the introduction to *Context Collapse*, which recounts the history of poetry (and human communication more generally) from its origins in oral performance to the internet's interpretive chaos, Ruby assures the reader who may dismiss his verse essay as ploddingly pretentious that the poem is merely 'mock-academic', was written in large part for his own 'personal amusement', and 'started off as a lark'; 'like any good joke, it is meant to be taken seriously'.²⁵

The relative commercial success of *Context Collapse* may be due in part to how it, unlike most other books of contemporary poetry, has captured the feel of online information overload: it is zany yet dull, gimmicky yet hermetic, accessible in theory but unreadable in practice, and frustrating to interpretation. In this *Context Collapse* recalls less the didactic poetry of Lucretius or Alexander Pope than the internet-inspired, early- to mid-2010s, anti-lyric conceptual poetry of writers like Vanessa Place and Kenneth Goldsmith, who argue, as Goldsmith ventriloquises Place, that

the poet today resembles a zombie more than an inspired bard, gathering and shovelling hoards of inert linguistic matter into programs, flipping switches, and letting it rip, producing poetry on the scale of WikiLeaks cables. Imagine the writer as a meme machine, writing works with the intention for them to ripple rapidly across networks only to evaporate just as quickly as they appeared. Imagine a poetry that is vast, instantaneous, horizontal, globally distributed, paper thin, and, ultimately, disposable.²⁶

This, for Goldsmith, is proof that 'poetry escaped out the backdoor and onto the Internet, where it is taking on new forms that look nothing like poetry',

or, as he says of the poet Sam Riviere, who in one book wove Google search results together in the style of a cento, that the Internet can produce ‘poems that are at once organic and mechanical, personal and, in a sense, objective’.²⁷ This feels at once like a rebuke and a vindication of theorists of lyric like Helen Vendler, who expressed the conviction that ‘the very characteristic of lyric [is] to incorporate all of reality into a single speaking voice’.²⁸ In 2015, Goldsmith sparked outrage with his deadpan reading of ‘The Body of Michael Brown’, ending his rendition of the autopsy report of the 18-year-old with a description of Brown’s penis and rather too nakedly exposing the inadequacy of a single speaking voice to incorporate all of reality. Insisting on the moral seriousness of his endeavour – ‘Perhaps people feel uncomfortable with my uncreative writing, but for me, this is the writing that is able to tell the truth in the strongest and clearest way possible,’ he wrote in a Facebook post that is no longer publicly accessible²⁹ – only made his critics more convinced that he was trolling.

Perhaps in part because Goldsmith’s stunt cost conceptual poetry any claim to being a good joke meant to be taken seriously, the poetic has not, in recent years, been the primary framework used to analyse online speech acts. Instead, scholars have proposed the aphorism and the novel as generic shorthands for the production and consumption of language online. In *A Theory of the Aphorism: From Confucius to Twitter*, Andrew Hui seems embarrassed by his subtitle, admitting that taking Twitter as an endpoint to his wide-ranging study ‘might seem too predictable, too overdetermined’, and yet, like the internet itself, all but unavoidable.³⁰ Despite the fact that the microblogging format of Twitter would seem the ultimate instantiation of Schlegel’s famous meta-fragment – ‘Many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written’ – Hui ultimately concludes that tweets are just too stupid and lacking in ‘hermeneutic density’ to warrant serious attention, quoting an $n + 1$ editorial – collectively written in that voice-y yet impersonal voice of the internet – that called Twitter ‘this scrolling suicide note of Western civilization’, even while expressing optimism about ‘a revaluation of the literary virtues of terseness and impersonality’.³¹

The fact that we seldom linger on a tweet the way we would an enigmatic aphorism means that critics more often understand tweets in that aggregated and at least ironically serious form of scrolling suicide note, the timeline or feed feeling more comfortably similar to what Guillory calls that ‘topical’ genre of narrative fiction. What Goldsmith called the ‘post-internet poetry’ (‘post-’ functioning as an indicator of critical distance from, or even indifference to, the medium) of Riviere, Tan Lin, and others seems to have gone the way of MySpace, while the 2020s have seen the rise of the ‘internet novel’, examples of which include Lauren Oyler’s *Fake Accounts* (2021), Patricia Lockwood’s *No One Is Talking about This* (2021), and Honor Levy’s *My*

First Book (2024). The last decade's excitement about the infinite possibilities of the endless scroll has for the most part dead-ended into bleak assessments of online speech's flat affect and homogenising blur: context collapse further collapsing into text collapse. 'The internet scoops out the mind and mashes it into wet pulp, which is to say that it is the opposite of a novel, at least when the novel is working,' the critic Becca Rothfeld said in a review of *No One Is Talking about This*.³² Anna Shechtman, also writing on Lockwood's novel, had a more subtle assessment of the 'extremely online' voice of the 'meme-stream-of-consciousness' text, comparing it to free indirect discourse in novels: 'sometimes depersonalized' but 'just as often hyperpersonal'.³³

While free indirect discourse is one technique of the novel among many, the lyric voice is arguably both depersonalised and hyperpersonal by definition, shoring fragments of unnamed provenance against its ruins, cunningly making worlds out of pretty rooms. Like an online persona, the poet often both is and is not the speaker of their utterances, a conceit some personae on Poetry Twitter have dramatised in memes: a deranged-looking live hedgehog ('me') splays out next to a polished ceramic hedgehog ('the speaker of my poems'); Midge from *Vertigo* ('me') sits sheepishly next to her self-portrait as Carlotta ('the speaker of my poems'); a kitten ('me') is juxtaposed with a tiger ('the speaker of my poems'). Thomas Hardy's wife, jealous that he wrote a poem that referred to its subject's deceased cat, bearing a strong similarity to Hardy's deceased cat, as 'his only friend', was hardly cured of her pet peeve when her husband 'said smilingly, that he was not exactly writing about himself but about some imaginary man in a similar situation'.³⁴ A Twitter user posting a joke about what 'women be like' might face a similar confrontation if his girlfriend came across the tweet on her 'for you' page. The tongue may swear, but the heart (or mind or other backstage artiste) may not; the speaker may say 'Go catch a falling star', but the poet may not, not really; the poet's words may have come from a sort of "'delusional girl" persona I often inhabit', as Lena Dunham once said by way of apologising for a joke, a persona also known as, for many of us online, 'the speaker of my tweets'.

Lyric poems like Donne's 'Go and catch a falling star' are like jokes in their unseriousness, in their refusal of sincerity, and in their decoupling of speaker and intention. But some lyric poems explicitly announce themselves as jokes – though perhaps not in a way that we are meant to take seriously. Before she became known, with the publication of *No One Is Talking about This*, as a novelist, and even before she went viral with her now-canonical 2019 tweet about her cat Miette, Patricia Lockwood went viral with a poem. 'Rape Joke', published in *The Awl* in 2013, proceeds in the fragmented, aphoristic format of a social media feed. The conceit is a kind of joke illiteracy: the failures of the 'you' to whom the poem is addressed, which (despite this explicitly grammatical decoupling) we're invited to read as a figure for

Lockwood herself, to recognise the signs that her rapist was a walking rapist cliché are presented as laughably obvious in retrospect:

The rape joke wore a goatee. A goatee.

Imagine the rape joke looking in the mirror, perfectly reflecting back itself, and grooming itself to look more like a rape joke. ‘Ahhhh,’ it thinks. ‘Yes. A *goatee*.’

[...]

The rape joke is that you had been drinking wine coolers. Wine coolers! Who drinks wine coolers? People who get raped, according to the rape joke.

[...]

The rape joke is that his bookshelf was just a row of paperbacks about serial killers. You mistook this for an interest in history, and laboring under this misapprehension you once gave him a copy of Günter Grass’s *My Century*, which he never even tried to read.

[...]

The rape joke is that *come on*, you should have seen it coming. This rape joke is practically writing itself.

[...]

The rape joke is that this is just how it happened.³⁵

The ‘rape joke’, in other words, is precisely that this ‘you’ is at once depersonalised and hyperpersonal: a stand-in for both the poet and for countless people who have been raped in ways that feel at once painfully generic (‘This rape joke is practically writing itself’) and painfully particular (‘The rape joke is that this is just how it happened’). To take the poem seriously is to acknowledge that something as serious as sexual violence has the structure of a joke, as well as that of a poem.

III. Lyric literacy

How seriously we should take tweets has been a pressingly practical question for some: for employees facing termination for posts they may or may not have meant seriously, for example, or for politicians facing legal consequences for posts inciting violence. Even in less charged situations, the formal conventions of Twitter, like those of lyric, both establish and undermine an authoritative persona, making it deceptively difficult to establish intention, to determine the precise relationship between the delusional girl persona and the person behind the tweets, or between a lyric ‘I’ and a lyric ‘you’. The site is overrun with allusion and silent quotation of viral posts, celebrity soundbites, and sometimes, as in the case of Williams’s ‘This Is

Just to Say', poems, so that authorship often means taking on the authority of another. The phrase 'There are cathedrals everywhere for those with eyes to see' – a caption often applied to images where, for example, a bar graph resembles the silhouette of Saddam Hussein in his hiding place in a much-memed newspaper graphic, or an ear of corn with rust-colored silk cascading over its husk resembles Chappell Roan – has been assumed to derive from a source such as William Blake or Marcel Proust; it is in fact a Twitter-native utterance, an observation made by Jordan Peterson about the light hitting the embossed plastic of his Evian bottle.³⁶

here are 'There are cathedrals everywhere for those with eyes to see,' everywhere for those with eyes to see, textual templates that have drifted from their original context and taken on new meaning through reuse. In addition to the journalists, politicians, activists, sexbots, and Nazis, Twitter is populated by amateur textual and visual formalists. As Michael Dango observed in a 2019 essay on the site's heavy traffic in memes, meme-makers display the kind of reading skills, the facility with pattern and allusion, that we often lament our literature students lack, even though many of them may in fact be sitting in our literature classes, ignoring our lectures and making memes instead.³⁷ They recognise formal outlines that can be manipulated and filled; they take on other voices; they identify with images. When inhabiting the purely conventional authority of a meme template, or even the more ordinary and less marked phrasal templates of Twitter discourse (every academic's least favourite of these is 'pleased to announce ...'), we never speak as ourselves. We must mean only what 'the poet' might mean: nothing serious.

The rhetorical power of tweets, as Barbara Johnson says of lyric, derives from their unseriousness: their slightness, their instantaneity, their refusal to commit to anything but a bit. As one of the masters of the form, Joyce Carol Oates, has said when asked how she managed to write novels while apparently on Twitter all day, 'It takes 20 seconds to tweet. If you tweet five times a day, that's just a few minutes, but it might seem to the observer like much more, like most illusions.'³⁸ The poet Eileen Myles, in a 2015 interview with the *Paris Review*, suggested an almost opposite view: the unseriousness of Twitter, like that of most illusions, means that you can't even tell when it's taken over your language, when it's become a parasite living inside you. 'You may not use social media,' Myles warns, 'but it's using you. You're writing in tweets, like it or not'. Later in the interview, they compare social media to 'walking down the street in your connected notebook' – the solipsistic poet's pad hooked up by a series of tubes to the street and to the world. While notebook-walking,

maybe a line comes to you – and it's really hard to figure out what's poetry and what's a tweet at this time – but the line comes and [...] you make the joke,

Here's the thing I saw and here's the line that came to me and I'm sending this out to seven thousand people right now and I'm gleeful that I'm not alone in this particular way.³⁹

It may be really hard to figure out what's poetry and what's a tweet, but one thing Myles seems sure of in 2015 is that they're both jokes, and that 'the line that came' to them can also come to us: something that, unlike a falling star, we can really go and catch.

Something we can all be sure of is that it's not 2015. Twitter, currently known as X, no longer feels like the connected notebook it once was. For users of Bluesky, an app initially developed in 2019 as internal research by Twitter that, following Musk's purchase of the site, broke off as a competitor, Twitter is not the public square or the neighbourhood hangout but 'the Nazi bar', or more specifically, 'permanent open mic night at the Nazi bar'. Since Donald Trump's most recent election, which Musk helped engineer, and from which he has reportedly already earned massive profits, a familiar microgenre of tweet has re-emerged: the tweet of resignation. 'I don't know how much longer I can stay on this site.' 'I'll be deactivating. Find me on Bluesky.' 'I'll be posting at the other place. Goodbye.' At this time, too, it's hard to figure out what's poetry and what's a tweet, in part because these declarations are often soon proven unserious, followed up by more tweets, implicit repudiations of repudiation. 'I never wish to sing again as I used to,' Petrarch sings 105 poems into his *Canzoniere* (he would go on to sing 261 more times). On 7 November 2024, someone posted an edited photo of a page of *Waiting for Godot* that read: 'ESTRAGON: Shall we log off? VLADIMIR: Yes, let's log off. [*They do not log off.*]' The situation is hopeless, but not serious.

Notes

1. <https://x.com/MargBarAmerica/status/1835588875101544823>.
2. <https://x.com/kukukadoo/status/1678242871957417985>.
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