This Is Only Delay: The Celebratory Epideictic and the Act-Like in Mary Szybist's *Annunciations*

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Abstract

This article close reads two of Mary Szybist's poems that engage with the scene of the biblical annunciation, and complicate the conventional celebratory perception of that event. It analyzes how Szybist's poems leverage the performative aspect of lyric poetry to challenge and suspend the foreclosed, fatalistic outcome typically associated with the annunciation. Through readdressing the annunciation's narrative through lyrical performativity, this reading of the poems prompts readers to reconsider the distribution and attribution of agency in the annunciation scene. Additionally, it thereby allows for the reader to consider how predetermined and celebratory declarations may be inappropriate or unwarranted.

In *Incarnadine* (2013), the second collection of poetry by the American poet Mary Szybist, the term *annunciation* is used in many of the poems in the book. The annunciation typically refers to the archangel Gabriel telling the Virgin Mary about her imminent virgin birth via immaculate conception. The frontispiece of the collection features an artwork depicting the scene of the annunciation by Sandro Botticelli (1444-1510), entitled *Cestello Annunciation* (1489) (see Fig. 1).[1]

Figure 1. - Botticelli

In the image, Gabriel is kneeling on his right leg, with his right arm extended toward Mary. Meanwhile, Mary appears to withdraw from the Archangel: her body is slightly slanted away, and her arms and hands are held up toward Gabriel as if to suggest a distancing from the message he bears. The exchange between Gabriel and Mary is depicted in the Bible as follows: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!" (Luke 1: 29). But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. "And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus" (Luke 1: 28-32).

[1] Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3d/Botticelli%2C_annunciazione_di_cestello_02.jpg

Mary replies to this: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1: 34b), to which Gabriel answers: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1: 35).

Mary ultimately accepts Gabriel's message and consequently her fate. In her poetry, Szybist is particularly interested in God's overshadowing power and Mary's retreating posture as shown in Botticelli's artwork, signaling a retreat from the celebratory announcement. Most poems indirectly reference the annunciation, focusing on its structure—an announcer and a recipient—rather than detailing the individuals involved.[2]

While many of the poems in *Incarnadine* bear the term annunciation in their title, I examine two in this paper: *Conversion Figure* (which does not have annunciation in its title, but engages with the annunciation scene nonetheless), and *Annunciation in Play*. While the poems I analyze do not explicitly refer to either Gabriel or Mary, they both reiterate the structure of the annunciation scene by employing a male messenger who approaches a female recipient. My analysis argues that the annunciations in Szybist's poems seek to suspend the celebration heralded in their message. Jonathan Culler has argued that the lyric poem is "itself an event rather than the representation of an event" (35). He goes on to state that, for Aristotle, lyric poetry was not included in his conception of *mimesis*, because it was "considered a speech event, *epideixis*, rather than a representation of action" (35).

If a lyric poem is itself considered a speech event, the question thus arises how Szybist's lyric poems can suspend the celebratory annunciation, since *something* must happen. Consequently, such suspension can never fully succeed, and actions must take place. This fatalistic emphasis is crucial, as it underscores the annunciation's stakes: Mary must bear the son of God. Consequently, Szybist's poems also engage with the predeterminate nature of the annunciation scene, which involves the temporal mode of the future anterior, i.e. a future that must occur. What Szybist's poetry explores are the limits through which lyrical

[2] Katherine Snow Nelson has remarked on *Incarnadine* that, as metaphor, the annunciation scene points to the inadequacy of how one can sense encounters with the divine. Adjacently, through being overwhelmed by such an encounter, one can "wrongfully circumscribe female behavior" (39), reading Szybist's poems as feminist resistance to Marian theology.

suspension may upend the annunciation's predetermined celebration. This suspension is founded on the tension between the lyric itself being a performative speech act (because it is enunciated), and the represented depiction *of* action in the poem as semantic object. Through this lyrical suspension, the poems adjacently allow the reader to question to whom the annunciation is in fact celebratory, and through questioning this, challenge its celebratory stature.

The first poem, *Conversion Figure*, echoes the annunciation scene by evoking the speaker of the poem as a figure that falls out of the sky toward a person at a lawn party. The poem's opening stanzas detail the fall as follows:

> I spent a long time falling
> toward your slender, tremulous face—
>
> a long time slipping through stars
> as they shattered, through sticky clouds
> with no confetti in them.
>
> I fell toward earth's stony colors
> until they brightened, until I could see
> the green and white stripes of party umbrellas
> propped on your daisied lawn. (6)

These opening stanzas set up a series of contrasts. First, the speaker's fall narrates a comical juxtaposition: falling through the sky through sticky clouds without confetti toward the recipient's "daisied lawn" with the green and white stripes of party umbrellas. By emphasizing that the clouds do not hold confetti, the stanza implicitly suggests that the clouds perhaps *should* hold confetti, and that the "sticky clouds" the speaker falls through are contrasted with the seemingly idyllic setting of the daisied lawn of the recipient. This juxtaposition is supplemented by another: the speaker's fall toward the recipient's "slender, tremulous face" takes a long time (mentioned twice), thus evoking a sense of suspension of the fall and its actualized arrival. Finally, the speaker is falling

toward "earth's stony colors," slipping through the stars and suggesting a fall from above toward earth, where the recipient of the message resides.

Clearly, then, the poem's humorous opening echoes certain details of the Biblical annunciation scene, suggesting that the speaker is, in fact, Gabriel, who falls from heaven toward Mary's "slender, tremulous face." But these opening stanzas reconfigure the annunciation's composition, for whereas in most depictions of the annunciation Gabriel is the active messenger of God, in this poem the emphasis is on Gabriel's *fall*, and moreover, falling *toward* Mary. The figure of the fall here is crucial in that it sets up a temporal tension different from the annunciation's original composition, in that Gabriel still needs to arrive to present Mary with the annunciation. In the original, the tension lies in Mary's seeming reluctance to accept Gabriel's message. Szybist's poem, meanwhile, recasts one figure falling toward another, emphasizing the fatalistic nature of the annunciation scene. Moreover, the figure of the fall recasts Gabriel from being an *active* messenger (moving toward Mary) to one who necessarily needs to fall *from* some place (presumably heaven). Though never overtly explicated, Gabriel's fall thus emphasizes that he is sent from somewhere else.

The narratability of the predetermination of events has been elucidated by Mark Currie, in his study *The Unexpected* (2013). In that book, Currie delineates the future anterior, or a fatalistic mode of narrative wherein the future is already foreclosed: "If we accept the reading of a narrative as a model of temporal experience it seems to represent human action in its most passive mode in relation to a future that is not open, the arrival of which we simply await" (66). The original annunciation scene, then, can best be understood as cast within the mode of the future anterior; what, in other words 'will have happened': a determined future whose outcome is preemptively foreclosed.

Consequently, Szybist's poem does not refute the fatalistic nature of the event of annunciation, but, instead, seeks to dramatize it as an event. For while the poem involves a narration by the speaker of his fall toward earth, the suspension generated through the fall is pivotal: the speaker falls toward the recipient, just as the recipient must ultimately receive the speaker. Here, Jonathan Culler's notion that the

lyric poem itself constitutes an event is relevant. Culler builds on the work done by Barbara Cassin,[3] and argues that "Despite the plurivocity of the term performance in both English and French, 'performance' is doubtless the best translation of *epideixis*: discourse conceived as an act, aiming to persuade, move and innovate" (130). This notion of lyric poems being performative may be connected to J.L. Austin's work on performative speech acts, which suggests that the perlocutionary force of these acts brings about an effect in the world through them *being an act* (101-102), i.e. their utterance changes the world.

While *Conversion Figure* involves a narration (the recounting of the speaker's fall), and is consequently representational in these opening stanzas, its final stanzas switch to imperative statements uttered by the speaker toward the recipient:

> Girl on the lawn without sleeves, knees bare even of lotion,
> time now to strip away everything
> you try to think about yourself.
>
> Put down your little dog.
> Stop licking the cake from your fingers.
>
> Before today, what darkness
> did you let into your flesh? What stillness
> did you cast into the soil?
>
> Lift up your head.
> Time to enter yourself.
> Time to make your own sorrow.
>
> Time to unbrighten and discard
> even your slenderness.

[3] See "La performance avant le performative, ou la troisième dimension du langage," in *Genèse de l'acte de parole*, ed. Cassin and Carlos. Levy Turnhout: Brepols, 2011, pp. 122–128.

These stanzas mark a shift in both grammatical tense (from past to present) and grammatical mood, from the subjunctive to the imperative. This ties into Culler's notion of the lyric as performative, rupturing the fall's suspension to impose apostrophic demands on the recipient. The addressed girl needs to be stripped from her thoughts, her slenderness, as well as the festive scene she was part of. The darkness that will enter her flesh, referred to metonymically, echoes the shadow of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the original annunciation of Luke 1:29-35, since both evoke the entering of a force that is immaterial. By asking to discard her slenderness and to allow this darkness to enter her body (as though to suggest the foreboding of pregnancy), these stanzas explicate the tension between the female body being subjected to this while never explicating forceful penetration, i.e. rape of the body, which would also require a materialized body rather than darkness or shadow. In both texts, however, the female figure becomes cast as a powerless recipient to a greater, outside force.

I read this transition as apostrophic, because, as Barbara Johnson explains, "Apostrophe is […] both direct and indirect: based etymologically on the notion of turning aside, of digressing from straight speech, it manipulates the I/Thou structure of direct address in an indirect, fictionalized way. The absent, dead, or inanimate entity addressed is thereby made present, animate, and anthropomorphic" ("Apostrophe" 30). But in this poem, Johnson's formulation is inverted: what was animate (the girl, holding her dog, licking her fingers, celebrating something undisclosed) is instead told to become a passive, inanimate recipient of the darkness the speaker alludes to. A state of affairs is willed, then, but rather the apostrophic power of the lyric is employed to render the animate inanimate. As Culler elucidates: "Apostrophes invoke elements of the universe as potentially responsive forces, which can be asked to act, or refrain from acting, or even to continue behaving as they usually behave. The key is not passionate intensity, but rather the ritual invocation of elements of the universe, the attempt, even, to evoke the possibility of a magical transformation" (215-216).

Apostrophes, as Culler states, can also be used to incant animate objects to *refrain* from acting. The "magical transformation" that occurs

in these final stanzas occurs precisely through the conversion that the speaker invokes the recipient to undergo. The poem's title, *Conversion Figure*, may thus be read as the transformation the girl must undergo on behalf of the speaker's words, but it is important to note that the title can equally bear on the poem's form itself, the shift from its subjunctive mood to the imperative mood. Johnson notes on this that "The poetic performance suggests not that the poet is more intense than other people, but actually that he says less. The complete thought he utters is not 'X is Y', but 'I invoke X'" (Persons 8-9). This emphasis on invocative performance stresses that through the lyric, speakers will a state of affairs into being, rather than just describe them.

This understanding of the lyric as having a performative aspect (since it *does* something as a speech act) is different from the notion that poems are (only) representational. As is shown in *Conversion Figure*, the poem shifts from a first-person narration to the imperative mode, manifesting its performative power as speech act as the speaker's words direct the addressee. The fact that the poem is both representational (for it depicts a narration) *and* performative is made possible through a shift in the poem as formal object (through the shift in grammatical moods) and representational object.

Literary scholar Lucy Alford, in her book *Forms of Poetic Attention* (2020), proposes that "Poetry's dual nature as both formal and figurative object creates an intersection between imagined and direct perception, requiring the simultaneous practice of both modes" (26), which she later further elucidates as follows:

> In poetic contemplation, the object of attention is composed as present before us by the formal object that is the poem. Here the formal and semantic objects are perhaps the most in sync, as the one act of attention runs parallel to the other. The mirroring of direct (formal) and imagined (representational) perception causes the gap between the two to narrow nearly to the point of immediacy. (57)

Alford remarks how the reader's attention to the formal composition of the poem must run parallel to the apprehension of the poem as a semantic object.

Conversion Figure may thus be read as the conversion of the celebrating girl from her joyous lawn party into a recipient of a shadow that will enter her flesh, but this conversion can only commence via the shift from a narrative account of the speaker's fall to an imperative demand on the girl to receive this shadow. The parallel shift within the poem as representational object (from a festive lawn party that is interrupted by the speaker's incantation) *must* coincide with the poem's formal shift (from the subjunctive to the imperative) for the poem to become an epideictic event, to will a state of affairs. Furthermore, it is through this parallel shift that the poem simultaneously inverts the logic of events. As Culler notes, poems are primarily epideictic in nature, i.e. performative. But *Conversion Figure*, in fact, starts out as narration, with an emphasis on representation, only to then switch to the imperative. It is this switch, and not only the imperative mode itself, which allows the poem to posit the lawn party as a passive event, only merely described, and the actual annunciation as active, as what the speaker (Gabriel) *wills* from the girl addressed.

In this annunciation, then, the poem manages to sever the celebratory nature of the annunciation precisely by emphasizing the annunciation as an incursion of a celebration that was already underway. This is further emphasized in the opening stanzas, in which the speaker's fall through the clouds toward earth came without confetti, signaling the ominous nature of the annunciation. Through marking a shift from the representational to the manifestly epideictic, Szybist's poem explores why the annunciation is not merely a festive moment: it suggests an imposition and intrusion of a "darkness" into the girl's body. This further delineates my reading of the original annunciation scene as a preemptively determined event, because the only leeway Mary has, and can have, regarding the annunciation, is to offer questions to Gabriel; not to refuse God's will. Ultimately, the outcome is necessarily the same. The fact that this is posed as a celebratory *given*, then, is precisely what my reading of Szybist's poem problematizes.

This problematic of the celebration becomes emphasized through the poem's treatment of the girl on the daisied lawn. In the first (narrated) half, the girl is depicted as having a lawn party and eating cake (as though it were itself an image with a minimum of action). In the second half, the girl is made an object of a series of imperative commands, without any retort to the speaker whatsoever, diminishing Mary's agency even further compared to the Biblical depiction of the annunciation (where she poses a question to Gabriel). The poem effectively strips the celebratory nature implied in the original Biblical annunciation scene through the hyperbolic auxesis of the girl's inaction, rendering her only as representational image (in the poem's first half) or as recipient object of imperative statements (in the second half). This reading of *Conversion Figure* consequently poses a contrast concerning the nature of speech acts as actions. On the one hand, the poem is an excellent example of how and why a poem can be considered an event in itself, as Culler suggests. On the other, it is deeply interested in the way in which actions are distributed in the annunciation itself, exaggerating this distribution of action in its own reiteration, and consequently allowing the reader to question how the annunciation could be understood as a celebratory event.

The fact that *Conversion Figure* is itself a reiteration of the Biblical annunciation may be connected to Judith Butler's *definition* of performativity, who suggests that performativity is not a singular act (like the telling of the Biblical annunciation), but rather a reiteration of a set of norms, which conceal the conventions of which it is a repetition. Subsequently, Butler states that it "acquires an *act-like* status in the present" (112-113, my emphasis). Butler goes on to state that the performative is not primarily theatrical, since the performative instance's historicity remains dissimulated (113).

On a first reading, *Conversion Figure's* opening seems explicitly theatrical: the messenger who falls through the confetti-less clouds only to interrupt a lawn party with seemingly bad news exaggerates the elements present in the original annunciation scene. In this way, its reference to the historicity of the original Biblical annunciation scene seems obvious. Following Butler's theory of performativity, however, one must ask what remains dissimulated in this rendition. In my reading,

I locate this dissimulation in the very notion of the *act-like* itself. This notion, which Butler does not explicate in their work, poses many questions, such as how something can be act-like (that is, different from an actual act) in the first place.[4] What the notion suggests, given its formulation, is that the act-like should be thought of as 'not fully' an act, i.e., a mode of behavior that would *resemble* an act. As such, the act-like is not a non-act.

While *Conversion Figure* succeeds as a performative or epideictic speech act (emphasizing its imperative grammatical mood in its second half), it is through this emphasis in the performative formal aspect that our attention also becomes drawn to the representational nature of the depicted actions in the poem, the status of which is much less certain. For in both the Biblical annunciation and *Conversion Figure*, the notion of the act-like is pivotal, because while it is suggested that God will overshadow Mary, the question remains in what sense this overshadowing can be considered a performative act. Mary's pregnancy is referred to as the immaculate conception, specifically emphasizing the absence of any act of conception, in other words, that God forcefully penetrated Mary's body. Szybist's poem reiterates this when the speaker of the poem asks the girl: "Before today, what darkness did you let into your flesh?" The phrasing "let into" is crucial here, since the speaker casts the addressee not as agent, but only as recipient of the darkness referred to. Simultaneously, however, the darkness entering the girl's body is also not fully an act, but rather what we may think of as the act-like, because of the absence of the forceful entering of Mary's body.

But this is but one half of the equation of the act-like. The other half concerns to what extent Mary's responses to Gabriel's celebratory message can be considered acts. In the original annunciation scene, Mary asks Gabriel how she will come to bear the son of God, since she is a virgin. But such questioning changes nothing about what will happen. In another poem, titled *Annunciation in Play*, Szybist therefore

[4] I have briefly elaborated previously on the notion of the act-like in relation to the agency of non-human holographic agents in my article "Semblances […] of 2049," *Journal of Posthuman Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2021, pp. 19-38. In that article, I argue that the film complicates the notion that acts necessarily need to have material and agentive referents.

dramatizes the seconds right before Gabriel and Mary (who are not mentioned by name) engage in eye contact:

> —into the 3rd second, the girl
> holds on, determined not to meet his gaze—
>
> she swerves her blue sleeve,
> closes down the space,
> while his eyes are intent, unwilling
> to relent and
> late into the 5th second they are still
> fighting on, their feet sinking into
> the slippery grass—
>
> Approaching the 6th second
> he can't repeat the sweeping in
> and each time he tries to clear
> the way to her thorn-brown eyes by the gesture of a hand
> it is easily blocked by the turn
> of her cheek.

This poem begins with the first and second seconds omitted through em-dashes. I read this as a form of aposiopesis, to be evocative as to what ensued before the poem's actual opening. These first two opening lines also demarcate what is at stake in this poem—Mary's unwillingness to meet Gabriel's gaze—after which a series of actions unfold. Mary swerves her blue sleeve, closes down the space, and turns her cheek to avoid Gabriel's gaze. Gabriel, meanwhile, tries to meet her gaze, sweeping in, and clears the way. All of Mary's actions signify refusal: to not meet with Gabriel's gaze by the swerving of her sleeve, to block the locking of the eyes by turning her cheek.

As semantic object, the poem describes an interchange of actions between Gabriel and Mary, describing this interchange as a fight, where the outcome is focused on whether their gazes meet. As formal object, many of the lines of the poem's stanzas break on a verb ("sweeping

in," "tries to clear," "swerves her blue sleeve"), but by breaking the lines, emphasize the possibility that each action that occurs could be the action that determines whether or not their gazes meet and determine the scene's outcome. The line break in the second stanza ("late into the fifth second they are still / fighting on their feet sinking into / the slippery grass—") plays with the break precisely by simultaneously opening the reading that they are "still" (as though a pause in the fight), while it could also be read as "still fighting." The poem concludes as follows:

> By the 8th second she is still repelling
> every attempt, still deflecting (you can see
> the speed, the skillful knee action)
> his gaze. And she must know (she has to think
> every second, there's no letting up)
> this is only
> delay, but the delay
>
> is what she has
> before his expert touch
> swings in, before
> she loses her light, clean edges, before she
> loses possession—
>
> before they look at each other.

The poem skips the 7th second entirely to definitively ascertain that Mary is "still repelling" and "still deflecting," indicating her resistance to meeting Gabriel's gaze, and presenting the only possibility available to Mary: to delay. The final stanza concurrently shows the reader what is at stake in this fight: to lose her light (indirectly referring to the overshadowing occurring in Luke 1: 35), clean edges, and ultimately possession, evoking the possession of Mary's body by God. *Annunciation in Play* recasts Mary not as passive recipient to Gabriel's upcoming celebratory message, but as an agentive figure who actively seeks to resist what is to come. In contrast to *Conversion Figure*, then, in which Mary

is cast as fully inert, here Mary is reimagined as a dynamic and deliberate figure, suggesting resistance to the divine decree that awaits her.

Above, I referred to the interchange between Mary and Gabriel as actions, but the question arises whether these are more akin to the act-like, since a (hi)story is repeated (the story of the annunciation), but what is it that remains dissimulated? On the one hand, the poem offers that it "is only delay." This ostensibly affirms the poem's futility, since it will not actually change the outcome of the annunciation story: it ends with Mary and Gabriel looking at each other. However, even if the actions performed by Mary in the poem make no difference, the event of telling the poem drastically reforms the annunciation scene: as one concerning a woman resisting in the face of inevitability rather than the announcement of a celebratory message. Consequently, a strange paradox occurs. On the one hand, the poem's rich interchange of actions changes nothing of the annunciation's outcome. Yet simultaneously, through enacting this delay as poem, through the instantiation of the lyrical epideictic, the reader is confronted with the question of what counts as an act in the first place. For even though the fatalistic nature of the annunciation is reified in *Annunciation in Play*, the lyrical suspension evoked via the poem queries how to read the many act-like gestures Mary performs, or more precisely formulated, poses the question of whether there is value to be attributed to acts that do not alter a predetermined outcome.

In the Gospel of Luke, the annunciation's celebratory nature rests on the fact that Gabriel's message heralds an apparently joyous event, namely the announcement of the coming birth of Christ. But the text offers a limited account of Mary's reception of this news. Comparing *Conversion Figure* with *Annunciation in Play*, both poems disrupt the givenness of the annunciation as a celebratory event by employing the lyric poem to reconfigure its celebratory nature. In *Conversion Figure*, Mary is cast as an inert recipient who is in the middle of a lawn party when Gabriel crashes said party to address her directly. *Annunciation in Play*, meanwhile, readapts the moments directly before the annunciation as constituting a fight, with Mary resisting the message: the opposite of a celebration.

The two poems I have read show how the lyric can undo the givenness of this celebratory character precisely through the dramatization of the action in the scene itself. Culler and Johnson maintain that lyric poems, via the figure of apostrophe, can do things in the world through their performative or epideictic nature—to change a state of affairs. Szybist recomposes this assertion, then, by offering the reader an alternative query: what can a lyric poem do when a story's future is preemptively foreclosed? Szybist's lyric poems do not defy the annunciation's certitude, then, but through recomposing the scene, manage to draw the reader's attention to the tension that occurs when an event is simultaneously celebratory in nature while also foreclosing that event's outcome, curtailing Mary's agency. Yet it is through this tension that Szybist's poems allow the reader to probe the question: how is agency distributed and constituted?

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Biography

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