

Daniel Tiffany's rich essay undertakes the rehabilitation of the venerable but lately slighted term, poetic "diction," understood as "an elemental verbal platform" (3) and "a vivid index of real-world identity shaping the verbal matrix of a text" (4). Not reducible to word choice alone, diction, in this broad but concrete sense, encompasses all aspects of what Philip Sidney, in the *Defence of Poesie* (1595), called "wordish consideration" and "the material point of Poesie." In particular, Tiffany as poet-scholar seeks ways to connect materialist poetics' attention to textual, cultural, political, rhetorical and technological mediation, with the affordances of diction as a bedrock category of formal (and formalist) poetic invention and matter: "diction 'touches' the world, and vice-versa" (15). Aligning his argument with "the indexical turn now reshaping the horizons of Anglophone poetry (and even some literary criticism)" (20), Tiffany offers diction's evidentiary *copia* and its longstanding association with both "speech, or saying" and "conceit" ("Diction. Fr." *A Dictionary of the French and English Tongues*, Randle Cotgrave, 1611) as a way to reorient a "disagreement between poetry and scholarship" over "*how* a poem records and engages with the external world" (1).<sup>1</sup> Viewed as a new version of the "fight over the nature of poetic language" and the "poetic vernacular" (27), inseparable from the literary history of "diction," recent controversies over the relation between individual and collective expression, and "close," "too close," "surface" and "distant" writing/reading, index, in deconstructive fashion, different expressions of what Tiffany calls the "deixis/diction axis" (16). Each implicates the other in the "complex sedimentation of diction" (12). It is no accident, then, that Tiffany finds diction's fitness to "provid[e] a vigorous historical template for transactions today between indexical surveillance and verbal immediacy, distance and proximity" (23), "hiding in plain sight": another purloined letter destined to reach its destination.

Poems are in the world and of the world. So is writing about poetry. No writing without diction, no unmediated world. The weighing of poetic diction, in Tiffany's sense, opens a recursive space of exchange and shared presence between singularity and generality, writing and saying, that can be finessed or equilibrated but cannot be closed off. Kin to Barthesian textuality, D.A. Miller's "close writing," Hejiniian's "rejection of closure," and the project of the "new

philology” (Patricia Parker, Jeff Masten), Tiffany’s commitment to diction as an instantiation of the “real” seems especially fruitful: “whether diction is authentic or fabricated, it always expresses real social relations and transactions occurring in society” (26). Moving diction into the foreground from its role as “unheard, or at least unacknowledged, background music to a poem’s form, style, and possible meanings” (Tiffany 3), is one way to foster what Matt Kilbane calls “a different site of lyric activity” or “*lyric by other means*.”<sup>2</sup> I’m all for it. Sidney’s *Defence* compared “abuse” of the “excelling parts of Poesie” to the way “an unmannerly daughter, shewing a bad education, causeth her mother Poesies honestie to be called in question.” I’m all for that too.

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<sup>1</sup> *Lexicons of Early Modern English*, ed. Ian Lancashire. <https://leme.library.utoronto.ca/>

<sup>2</sup> Matt Kilbane, “An Indexical Lyric”, *Jacket2*, December 9, 2016 <https://jacket2.org/article/indexical-lyric>