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Original Research Article

Repetition, Negation, and Disrupted Syntax in Contemporary Poetry: A Kohutian Critical Investigation

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Abstract: Repetition, negation and the sentence that will not finish keep turning up in contemporary poetry, and they are usually read as style. This paper asks what they do for the selves that speak through them. Using Heinz Kohut's self psychology as an interpretive lens, it reads six texts closely: poems by Suheir Hammad, Louis Armand, Julia Cimafiejeva, Norman Dubie and Caroline Bergvall, and Shane McCrae's Songs and Sonnets. Kohutian concepts such as self-boundary, self-soothing, fragmentation and failed mirroring were turned into textual indicators and coded across the corpus, so the readings can be compared and contested. The devices rarely work alone. Repetition can defend a boundary, soothe, or record a self coming apart, sometimes within a single poem. Negation divides between defence and witness. Disrupted syntax tends to appear where the other devices have run out of room, as a trace of failed mirroring, a failed repair, or a staged performance. The more recent parts of the theory, the negative selfobject and the leading edge, served the poems better than its founding concepts. The study argues that these devices are best understood as self-work, ways of holding a self together or showing that it has come apart, and it offers a typology of formal strategies that others can test on a larger corpus.

Keywords: Kohut; self psychology; contemporary poetry; repetition; negation; disrupted syntax; fragmentation; selfobject.

1. Introduction:

Suheir Hammad's "What I Will" begins as a refusal and ends up sounding like a spell. Each "I will not" lands on top of the last, and by the close the speaker seems to exist only in the act of saying no (Alaghbary, 2019). Louis Armand turns the same grammar inward in "A House for Hanne Darboven," where the refusal swings round and lands on the speaker, a stutter of "I'm not" that never settles (Armand, 2017, 2021). In Caroline Bergvall's "About Face," it is the page itself that seems to hesitate (Bergvall, 2011).

None of this is a one-off. Across American, Irish-Australian, Belarusian and British poetry, repetition, negation and broken syntax have stopped behaving like ornaments and started

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behaving like load-bearing walls. Poem after poem returns to the same few moves: the loop, the refusal, the sentence that will not finish.

Critics have described these moves well. We know how Hammad's anaphora builds a political identity (Alaghbary, 2019), how Cimafiejeva's fragments register historical rupture (Davidson, 2023; Poetry Foundation, 2022), and how Bergvall's stammer unsettles the visual field (Bergvall, 2011; PennSound, n.d.). What we lack is a way to ask what these forms do for the selves that speak through them. Repetition is a rhetorical figure, certainly, but it is also what a person does when the ground feels unsteady. Negation is a logical operator, and it is also what someone says when "yes" has become too expensive. A broken sentence is an aesthetic choice, and it is also what a sentence looks like when the speaker cannot finish it. Asking this shifts the question from what the poems mean to what they are holding together, and at what price.

That is where Heinz Kohut's self psychology earns its place, and not as decoration. Kohut spent a career describing how selves cohere and what happens when they do not. His vocabulary is exact: self-boundary, narcissistic injury, fragmentation, selfobject failure, the grandiose and idealised poles of the self (Kohut, 1971, 1977). The self, for him, is an achievement, kept up by the responsiveness of other people and exposed to their failures (Kohut, 1984, 1985; Wolfe, 1989; Butzer, 2026). Literary criticism has been slower. Psychoanalytic readings of poetry gravitate toward content, biography and the repressed (Alfandary et al., 2024; Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review, 2023), and say little about why a poem repeats, refuses or breaks.

This paper takes up that question through six cases: Hammad's "What I Will" (2005); Armand's "A House for Hanne Darboven" (2017/2021); poems from Shane McCrae's *Songs and Sonnets* (2025); Julia Cimafiejeva's "Negative Linguistic Capability" and "MSCRRDG" from *Motherfield* (2022); Norman Dubie's "The Carceral"; and Bergvall's "About Face" (2011). The corpus is small on purpose and varied on purpose. It is not representative in any statistical sense; it is diagnostic. Each text foregrounds at least one of the devices and puts a self under pressure of some kind, whether political, historical, linguistic or carceral. The method is empirical only in the modest way criticism can be: close reading, a transparent coding scheme that turns Kohutian concepts into textual indicators, and comparison across cases. The aim is not to diagnose poems or poets. It is to see whether a Kohutian vocabulary can describe formal patterns that other frameworks leave undescribed.

Three questions organise the study. How do repetition, negation and disrupted syntax function across the six texts, and how do they interact? Which Kohutian mechanisms do they make legible: boundary defence, rhythmic self-soothing, grandiose control, fragmentation after

selfobject failure, the trace of failed mirroring? And what do the patterns suggest about the link between poetic form and psychic cohesion?

The contribution is twofold. Methodologically, the paper offers an operationalised Kohutian reading, a way of moving between self-psychological concepts and the grain of the line, which other critics can adapt or contest. Substantively, it argues that these devices are best read as self-work: formal strategies for holding a self together, or for showing that it has come apart. Recent work on repetition and subjectivity (Kolenc, 2026), on negation and thought (Dioguardi, 2022), and on the psycholinguistics of poetry (Fokin et al., 2025) suggests the moment is right for the crossing. What follows tries to make it carefully, case by case, with the poems kept in view.

2. Literature Review:

These devices have been noticed, but mostly one at a time and mostly in descriptive terms. Repetition has drawn the most attention, and for good reason: it sits right on the border between rhetoric and psychology. Kolenc (2026) follows it through Kierkegaard, Freud and Lacan and shows it to be less about sameness than about a subject trying to return to, or master, something it cannot leave. That is a useful starting point for poems that loop, though Kolenc's interest is philosophical rather than formal. Closer to the line, Alaghbary (2019) gives a detailed account of anaphora in Hammad, showing how repeated frames build a resistant identity. His analysis is persuasive on the politics of the poem, and it does not ask what the repeated "I will not" might also be doing for the speaker's sense of self. Work on negation runs along similar lines. Dioguardi (2022) writes suggestively about negation as the birthplace of thinking, and Al-Shamrani (2025) catalogues syntactic deviation in classical Arabic poetry with real care, yet neither turns to the contemporary lyric or to the psychic work that refusal might perform. The psycholinguistic turn, exemplified by Fokin et al. (2025), promises a bridge, but its pilot battery is built to test reader response rather than to read form closely.

Psychoanalytic criticism of poetry has been richer in content than in form. The "co-implications" debate (Alfandary et al., 2024) asks generously how psychoanalysis, literature and philosophy might inform one another, but it stays at the level of disciplinary method. Hook (2023) revisits Lacan on speech and shows how much the theory has to say about the texture of language, and Rabaté (2023) digs into the Lacan–Derrida archive to ask about writing itself. What these essays share is a habit of treating the poem as a site of meaning, symptom or philosophical event, and not as a site of formal self-maintenance. The question of what a repeated line holds together, or what a broken syntax fails to complete, falls between the chairs.

Self psychology has been slower than Lacanian or Freudian frameworks to enter literary study, though that is changing. Kohut wrote about the humanities himself (Kohut, 1985), and his clinical trilogy (1971, 1977, 1984) remains the foundation. Wolfe (1989) offers a clear conceptual map, and Butzer (2026) places narcissism and selfobject relations within the wider object-relations tradition. Terman (2021) and Stern (2024) add the negative and the complex selfobject, both of which complicate any easy account of what sustains or erodes a self, and Riker (2024a, 2024b) has done more than most to make Kohut usable for cultural analysis, arguing that self psychology helps us understand selves under social and political strain, although Cher's (2024) review notes how hard it is to move from clinical concepts to cultural ones. The editors of *Psychoanalysis, Self and Context* (2024) signal a similar widening, and Reininger et al. (2024) test narcissistic injury experimentally, in a lab rather than a poem.

Where Kohutian ideas have reached poetry, the results are suggestive rather than systematic. Rustad (2025) reads Norwegian war poetry through national identity and nomadic subjectivity, and Patalano (2025) follows movement and the watery imaginary in North American feminist poetics; both brush against self-cohesion without making it central. Jacobs (2024), Musgrave (2024) and Vaknin and Dunsky (2026) come at delight, creative practice and bibliotherapy from adjacent angles. Tisch's (2025) thesis on *Salt Circle* is among the few sustained self-psychological readings of a contemporary collection, and it shows how much interpretive labour it takes to get from Kohutian concepts to the particulars of a poem. In most of these studies, self psychology is a thematic resource, a way of talking about vulnerability, loss or repair. It is rarely asked what repetition, negation or broken syntax do for the self that produces them.

That is the gap. We have sophisticated accounts of single devices, of psychoanalytic reading in general, and of Kohutian theory in clinical and cultural settings. We do not have a way of operationalising Kohutian concepts at the level of the line, a route from "fragmentation" or "selfobject failure" to the textual features that might register them. Nor do we have the cross-case comparison that could tell us whether a looping repetition in Armand and an anaphoric refusal in Hammad do the same psychic work. The six texts assembled here are few enough to read closely and different enough to test whether the vocabulary travels.

3. Theoretical Framework:

Kohut's self psychology is usually summed up as a theory of narcissism, which is true but a little narrow. What he actually gives us is a vocabulary for how a self holds together and what it feels like when it does not. His central claim, built across the clinical trilogy, is that the self is not given but achieved (Kohut, 1971, 1977, 1984). It coheres because other people respond

to it in particular ways: they mirror its display, they offer themselves as calm, strong figures to lean on, and over time those responses are absorbed and become the self's own structure. Kohut called these responsive others selfobjects and the absorbing process transmuting internalisation. The terms are clinical, but the intuition is not. A self is built, and it can be built badly, or too little, or in conditions that make building nearly impossible.

When selfobjects fail, through mirroring that is absent, misattuned or withdrawn, the self does not simply feel sad. It loses cohesion. Kohut's word is fragmentation, and it is a strong one: a felt disintegration, a sense that the pieces will not stay put. Beside it sits narcissistic injury, the wound left by a failure of responsiveness, and the defences that gather around the wound. He described two poles of the self, the grandiose self that wants admiration and perfection, and the idealised parent imago that wants to merge with something calm and flawless. Neither is pathological in itself; trouble starts when responsive care does not gradually temper them.

The theory has moved on. Terman's (2021) negative selfobject is a figure whose responsiveness is not merely missing but corrosive. Stern's (2024) complex selfobjects sustain a self precisely by not being perfectly attuned. Paul's (2025) leading edge names the forward-moving side of self-experience that can be nurtured even under decline. These refinements matter for reading because they block any simple equation of failure with fragmentation: a self can be sustained by imperfect responsiveness, and a poem can register injury without collapsing into it.

Three clusters of concepts do most of the work here. The first is the self-boundary and its upkeep: not a wall, but a sense of where one ends and the world begins, which repeated refusal can shore up. The second is self-soothing, the rhythmic, repetitive behaviour through which a self calms itself when nobody outside is responding. The third is fragmentation and its traces: the broken sentence, the stalled clause, the line that cannot complete itself. Repetition, whether anaphora or looping, can then be read as boundary-keeping or soothing; negation as a defence against injury; disrupted syntax as a formal analogue of fragmentation or as the textual trace of failed mirroring. These are hypotheses to be tested against the grain of the line, not automatic translations.

The risks are real. The first is diagnostic: it is far too easy to slide from "this poem repeats" to "this poet is fragmented," and that slide has to be resisted every time. A poem is not a patient, and a speaker is not an author. The second is over-reading, finding fragmentation everywhere because the theory predicts it. The third is the reverse, flattening a poem into an illustration so that the Kohutian label swallows the text. Kohut himself was cautious about applying clinical concepts to art even as he wrote warmly about the humanities (Kohut, 1985). The framework here is therefore modest. Kohutian concepts serve as interpretive tools, not diagnostic

categories, and any claim about psychic function has to rest on formal evidence that another reader could check.

4. Methodology:

This is a qualitative study, though "qualitative" can mean nearly anything, so here is what was actually done. The design is a multiple-case textual analysis: each poem or sequence is a case, read on its own and against the others. It is inductive in spirit and deductive in structure. Kohut supplies the categories, and the poems pushed back, so the categories were revised. It is not hypothesis testing in the strict sense. It is close reading, which is what critics have always done, organised around a coding scheme that someone else could apply, contest or revise.

The corpus was assembled purposively. Six texts is a small number, and that is the point: depth over coverage. Each text foregrounds at least one of the three devices and stages a self under pressure. Hammad's "What I Will" (2005) and Armand's poem (2017/2021) are the most repetitive; Cimafiejeva's two poems from *Motherfield* (2022) are the most negative; McCrae's *Songs and Sonnets* (2025) and Bergvall's "About Face" (2011) are the most syntactically disrupted. Dubie's "The Carceral" sits across all three, which is why it is there: it tests whether the scheme can handle a text that will not stay in one box. The settings vary, American, Irish-Australian, Belarusian, British, without any pretence of standing for contemporary poetry as a whole.

The poems themselves are the data, with context used only where it bore on formal features: Alaghbary's (2019) account of Hammad, a comparison of Armand's two published versions (2017, 2021) for differences in lineation and repetition, Davidson (2023) and the Poetry Foundation (2022) on the protest context of Cimafiejeva, the publisher's description of McCrae (Broken Sleep Books, 2025), and PennSound's (n.d.) author page for Bergvall. Dubie was read on his own terms, with nothing supplementary.

The analysis had three stages. The first was operationalisation: each Kohutian concept became a set of textual indicators, features one can point to on the page (Table 1). They are starting points, not a checklist. The second was close reading, with the scheme in view but not in charge. In practice that meant reading each poem several times and marking the passages where a device seemed to be doing something, where repetition felt insistent rather than ornamental, where a negation carried weight, where syntax broke in a way that felt meant. Those passages were coded against the definitions, and the definitions were revised whenever a poem resisted them. The third stage was cross-case comparison, which produced the matrices and the typology reported below.

Table 1

Kohutian Concepts and Their Textual Indicators

Kohutian concept	Operational definition	Primary textual indicators
Self-boundary defence	Repeated acts of refusal that mark the edge between speaker and addressee	Repeated first-person negations; anaphoric "I will not"
Self-soothing	Rhythmic recurrence that calms the self when outside responsiveness is unavailable	Looping repetition; refrain; incantation
Grandiose control	Obsessive ordering, cataloguing and correction	Self-correction; list-making; compulsive return
Fragmentation	Felt disintegration registered in form	Syntactic incompletion; abrupt breaks; stutter
Failed mirroring	Absence of responsive reflection	Pixelated or broken reflection; stammer as trace
Narcissistic injury	Wound after a failure of responsiveness, defended against or witnessed	Negation as refusal of consolation; broken form as register of damage

Note. Concepts overlap in practice, and one textual feature may serve more than one function..

Trustworthiness rests on three things. An audit trail recorded coding decisions, revisions to the scheme and the passages that prompted them. The coding is laid out in the tables, so another reader can see what was identified and where. And the interpretations were checked against existing scholarship where possible, Alaghbary (2019) on Hammad, Davidson (2023) on Cimafiejeva, the publisher's account of McCrae, not to validate the Kohutian reading but to make sure the formal descriptions were not idiosyncratic. No psychometric reliability is claimed. What can be claimed is that the readings are anchored in textual evidence, that the scheme is open to inspection, and that a scholar working with the same materials could argue back.

The limits should be stated plainly. The corpus is small and nothing generalises from it. The scheme is interpretive, and another reader might code differently. And the study reads speakers, not poets, a distinction easier to declare than to keep; where it blurs, the analysis says so.

Corpus and Case Descriptions

Six texts are few enough to describe one by one before the analysis begins. They are not a sample. Each was picked because it foregrounds at least one device and puts a self under strain, and the strains differ: political, historical, linguistic, carceral. If a Kohutian vocabulary works across all six, it will be because it bends enough to accommodate variation, not because the cases were chosen to fit it. Table 2 gives the overview.

Table 2

The Corpus at a Glance

Text	Author	Year	Foregrounded devices
"What I Will"	Suheir Hammad	2005	Anaphora, repeated negation
"A House for Hanne Darboven"	Louis Armand	2017/2021	Extreme repetition, negation, self-correction
Songs and Sonnets (selected poems)	Shane McCrae	2025	Disrupted syntax, looping repetition, broken sonnet form
"Negative Linguistic Capability" and "MSCRRDG"	Julia Cimafiejeva	2022	Negation, staccato line breaks, fragmentation
"The Carceral"	Norman Dubie	—	Numinous repetition, dissolving syntax and imagery
"About Face"	Caroline Bergvall	2011	Disruptive syntax, stammer, vocal hesitation on the page

Note. Dubie's poem was read in its original publication context, without supplementary material, so no year is given.

Hammad's "What I Will" is the most plainly repetitive poem in the set. It builds by anaphora, and the negations pile up until refusal becomes identity. The title sets an affirmation against the litany of refusals, and that tension is where a Kohutian reading begins. The title points toward an idealised self, someone who knows what she will do and not only what she will not, and that self is glimpsed but never quite arrives.

Armand pushes repetition into the compulsive. The "I'm not" stutters across the line, and the poem keeps circling the same phrases, the same corrections, the same denials (Armand, 2017,

2021). A running self-correction reads less like revision than like a speaker trying to get something right and failing.

McCrae's *Songs and Sonnets* is the most formally ambitious text here. The poems loop and break the sonnet, soothing and unsettling at once. The publisher speaks of a "fractured sonnet form" (Broken Sleep Books, 2025), and the phrase fits: the looping works as rhythmic self-soothing, while the broken form carries psychic and political wreckage. McCrae shows repetition and disrupted syntax working together instead of apart.

Cimafiejeva's "Negative Linguistic Capability" and "MSCRRDG" foreground negation more than any other text in the corpus. The poems turn down consoling narratives, and the refusal is built into the syntax. Davidson (2023) and the Poetry Foundation (2022) place the collection in the context of Belarusian protest and repression.

Dubie's "The Carceral" is the outlier, and that is why it is included. Its repetitions are numinous rather than insistent, and its imagery dissolves a lawful face into pixels. Under surveillance, repetitive incantation tries to hold the self together beneath the gaze. The pixelated reflection withholds exactly the mirroring Kohut thought essential, and the poem gives us narcissistic wounding without ever naming it.

Bergvall's "About Face" is the most visual text. It renders stammers and vocal hesitations on the page, so the reader sees the disruption as well as hearing it. Her work has long been preoccupied with the materiality of language (PennSound, n.d.), and here the stammer is less a metaphor for failed mirroring than its textual trace. The poem is also a score for the voice, a performative dimension that complicates any straight mapping of text onto psyche, and one the analysis returns to.

Figure 1 shows how strongly each case foregrounds each device. It records a judgement about salience, not a frequency count, and it is offered as a map rather than a measurement. Clusters are visible: Hammad and Cimafiejeva around negation; Armand and McCrae around looping and fragmented syntax; Bergvall around stutter; Dubie somewhat apart, with numinous repetition and imagistic dissolution rather than syntactic breakage. Figure 2 turns the same cases toward Kohut, marking where each mechanism from Table 1 was most salient.

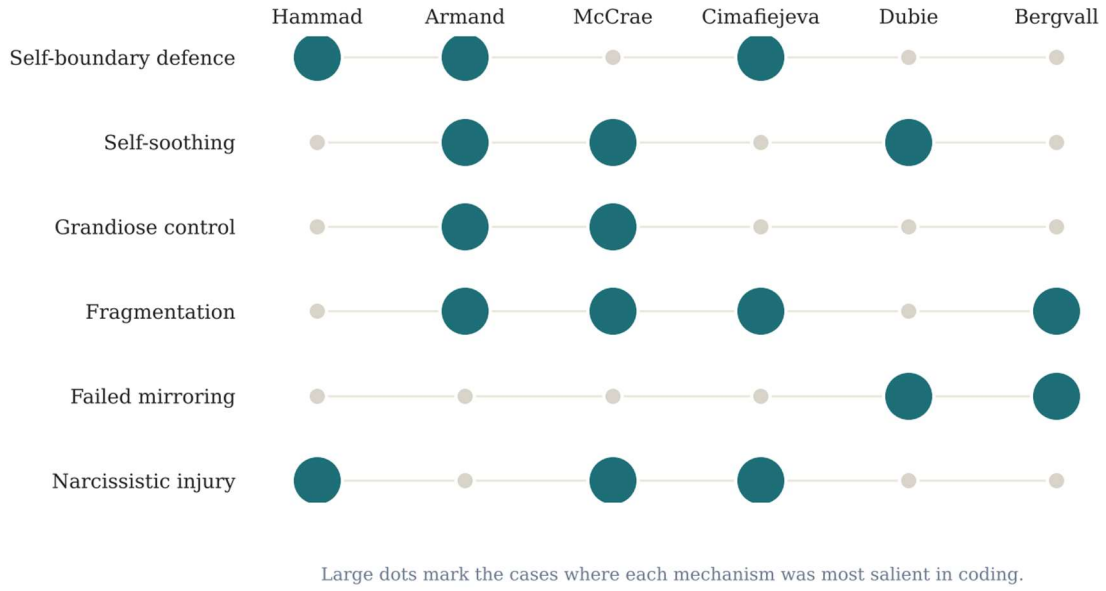
Figure 1

Device Intensity Across the Six Cases



Figure 2

Where Each Kohutian Mechanism Was Most Salient



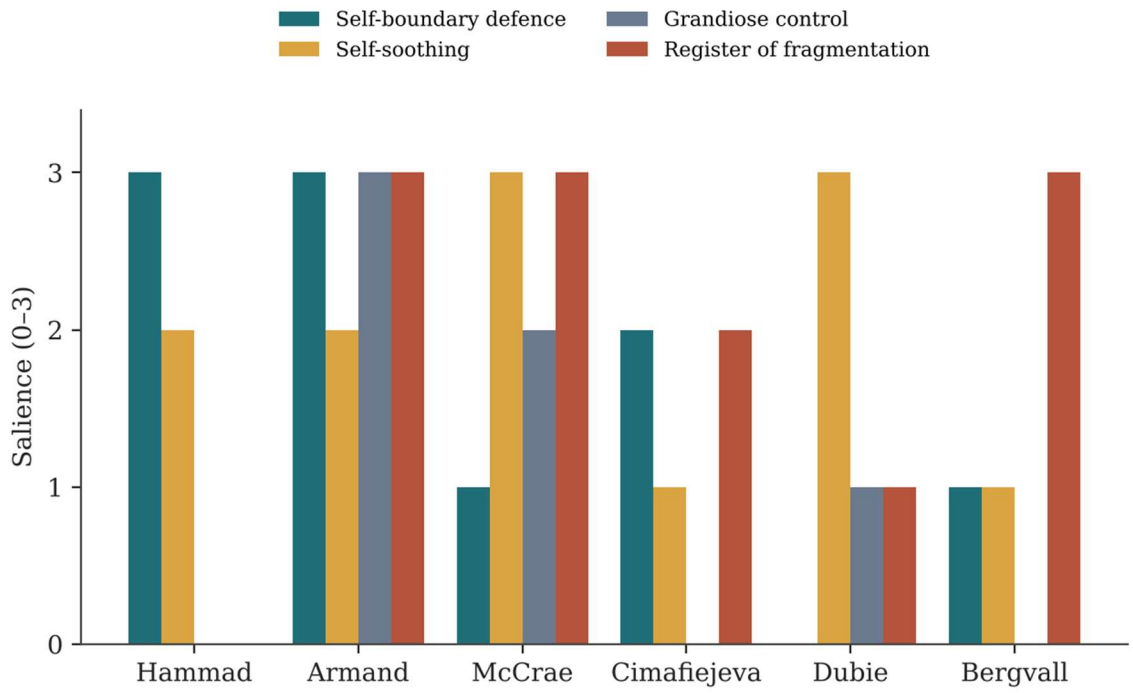
5. Findings I: Repetition:

Repetition is the most conspicuous device in the corpus and the easiest to misread. A repeated line can look like emphasis, or insistence, or mere style, and criticism has long treated it as a rhetorical figure. The question here is what repetition does for the self that produces it. Three answers recur: boundary defence, self-soothing and grandiose control. A fourth appears where

repetition fails to hold, and then it becomes a register of fragmentation. Figure 3 shows how these functions distribute, and the first thing it shows is that no case relies on a single one.

Figure 3

Kohutian Functions of Repetition by Case



Hammad: Boundary Defence

"What I Will" hangs on one syntactic frame. "I will not" returns and returns, and the negations accumulate until refusal organises the poem (Alaghbary, 2019). It feels ritual, as if the speaker needed the repetition, as if a single no could not establish where she ends and the addressee begins. For Kohut a boundary is not a wall but a sense of where one ends and the world begins, and it can be shored up by repeated acts of refusal (Kohut, 1971, 1977). Each "I will not" marks the edge again.

Something a purely rhetorical reading misses sits in the title. "What I Will" is an affirmation, and it hovers over the litany of refusals like a promise the poem cannot keep. The grandiose self, the version of the speaker who knows what she will do, stays out of reach. The repetition keeps the boundary but does not build the positive self behind it, and that gap is where much of the poem's force lives. The repetition is less insistence than scaffolding around a self not yet built.

Armand: Control and Fragmentation

Armand's repetition serves control and fragmentation at once. The grandiose self wants to be perfect and to govern the conditions of its own recognition (Kohut, 1971; Wolfe, 1989),

and the poem's obsessive ordering reads as exactly that bid. But the ordering never holds. The same device that tries to keep the self together records the self coming apart. The repetition tries to master a loss, the attempt fails, and the failure is the poem. The self-correction is the telling detail. The poem cannot leave its own words alone, and the revising is a form of self-soothing that never soothes. The loop is closed, and the closure is the problem.

McCrae: Soothing and Broken Form

McCrae's loops are the most explicitly rhythmic in the corpus. When outside responsiveness is unavailable, Kohut suggests, the self calms itself through rhythmic, repetitive behaviour (Kohut, 1984; Terman, 2021), and the loops do that work. They are a way of breathing, formally speaking, and the breath is what keeps the poem going. The broken form tells a different story, though. The sonnet's traditional coherence is unavailable, the loops circle without resolving, and the repetition insists while the form breaks. Soothing and fragmentation are held in tension in the same poem. The self that emerges is not repaired but held together by rhythm, precariously. The repetition is the thread, and the thread is fraying.

Dubie: Repetition Without a Mirror

Dubie's repetition is the hardest to classify. It is an atmosphere of recurrence more than a litany of refusals. Kohut's self coheres because responsive others mirror it, and when mirroring fails the self fragments (Kohut, 1971, 1977; Butzer, 2026). Dubie's pixelated reflection figures that failure, and the incantation is the self's attempt to compensate. It is a substitute for the mirror, and a poor one. It is more like a ritual that has lost its object. The poem repeats because repetition is what is left when mirroring has failed, and the numinous quality, the sense of invoking someone, is the trace of a selfobject that is not there. The self is talking to itself because nobody else is.

Cross-Case Patterns

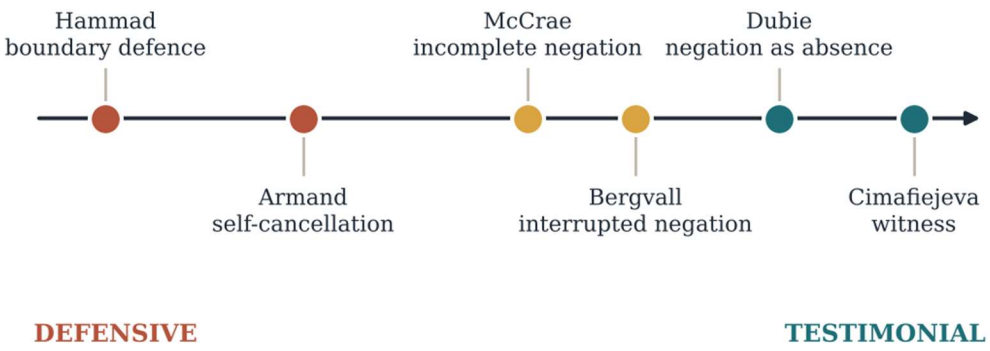
Three patterns stand out. Repetition is rarely doing one thing: wherever it is foregrounded it serves at least two functions, often three. The most insistent cases, Hammad, Armand and McCrae, are also those where the self is most visibly under pressure, which fits Kohut's view that repetition answers injury or threat (Kohut, 1977; Terman, 2021). And where repetition fails to hold, in Armand, McCrae and Bergvall, fragmentation is most salient. Repetition is not a cure. It is a holding operation, and holding can fail. These poems matter because they stage both the attempt and the failure; they repeat because they have to, and the necessity is what moves us.

6. Findings II: Negation:

Repetition asks the self to hold. Negation asks it to refuse. They are close relatives, and Hammad's poem is built on both, but a repeated line can soothe while a repeated no draws a line. To say "not this" is to say "not me," and to say it again and again is to keep saying it. The corpus complicates that equation. In some poems negation defends against narcissistic injury. In others it works as witness, refusing consoling narratives in order to testify to what happened. In a third group it turns round, and the self becomes the thing negated. The framework did not predict the split between defensive and testimonial negation, and it deserves to be taken seriously. Figure 4 lays the cases along that continuum.

Figure 4

Negation on a Continuum From Defence to Witness



Note. The continuum is a heuristic, not a scale. Hammad contains moments that anticipate witness, and Cimafiejeva's negations keep a defensive edge.

Hammad: The Refusal That Holds

"What I Will" is the clearest case of negation as boundary defence. The repeated "I will not" is not just a rhetorical stance but the mechanism by which the speaker separates herself from the addressee (Alaghbary, 2019), and each refusal redraws the edge. What the poem registers less obviously is the injury that makes the labour necessary. Kohut argued that narcissistic injury follows a failure of responsiveness and that the wounded self may answer with defensive insistence (Kohut, 1977; Reininger et al., 2024). Hammad's speaker insists. The insistence is dignified, and it is also a symptom, a sign that the addressee's terms were felt as a demand. The refusals are secure, the affirmation is not: the poem holds the boundary but does not build the house behind it.

Armand: Negation Turned Against the Self

Armand takes negation somewhere harder. The "I'm not" does not refuse an addressee; it refuses the speaker (Armand, 2017, 2021). The negation is self-cancelling, and repetition makes the cancelling compulsive. The boundary being drawn is not between self and world but between the self and its own existence. The poem's "I" asserts itself only to deny itself, until the denial becomes its rhythm. Terman's (2021) negative selfobject helps describe what the poem seems to answer to: not merely an absence of responsiveness but a responsiveness that corrodes. The self that says "I'm not" has learned to negate itself, and the poem stages that learning as a loop. It is armour and injury in the same syntactic move.

Cimafiejeva: Negation as Witness

Cimafiejeva is where the framework stretched most productively. The poems refuse not a single addressee but the whole apparatus of available narratives, and Davidson (2023) and the Poetry Foundation (2022) tie that refusal to Belarusian protest and repression. The Kohutian question is what the negations do for the speaking self, and the answer is not quite defence. They refuse consolation. They will not let the poem settle into a redemptive frame, and they will not let the reader settle either. This looks less like a threatened boundary being guarded than like a self that has already been fractured and declines to pretend otherwise. The staccato breaks and unfinished clauses carry an unrepresentable loss. It is not the restoration of cohesion. It is the insistence that the loss be named even if naming costs the poem its smoothness, which is close to what Paul (2025) calls the leading edge, a forward movement that does not deny damage but will not be reduced to it.

McCrae, Bergvall and Dubie: Incompletion and Absence

McCrae uses negation sparingly, but the broken sonnet is itself a negation, a refusal of the resolution the form promises. The poems do not say no so much as fail to say yes. Bergvall is the limit case. Her stammer renders negation as interruption, the sentence that cannot get to its "not," or gets there only by breaking. The stammer is the trace of a responsiveness that did not arrive in time, a mirror that flickered, and PennSound's (n.d.) portrait of her work makes the material, audible side of that plain. The negation is not a statement but a failure of statement, and the failure is the subject. Dubie sits at the opposite pole. The poem rarely says "not," but it negates through absence: the pixelated face, the withheld reflection. The surveillance gaze works as a negative selfobject in Terman's (2021) sense, responsive and corrosive at once. The poem does not say no. It shows what it is like to live in a world that has already said no to you.

Cross-Case Patterns

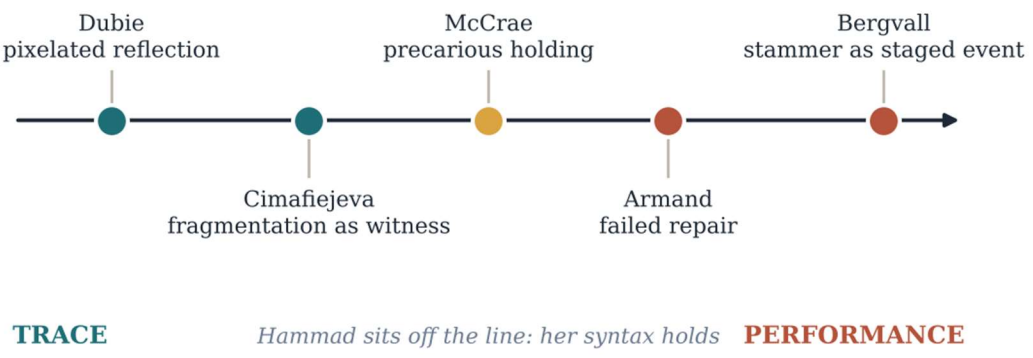
Two patterns emerge. Negation is the device most closely tied to the self-boundary, but it is not exhausted by that role. In Hammad and Armand it defends; in Cimafiejeva and Dubie it witnesses or registers absence. A defensive negation says "this is not me." A testimonial negation says "this is what happened, and I will not pretend otherwise." Both are Kohutian, but they draw on different parts of the theory. Second, where negation turns against the self, in Armand and Bergvall, fragmentation is most acute, which agrees with Kohut's claim that self-directed hostility marks severe narcissistic disturbance (Kohut, 1971, 1977; Wolfe, 1989). Yet the poems complicate the theory as well as illustrating it: Armand's self-cancellation is also a form of control, and Bergvall's stammer is also a kind of music.

7. Findings III: Disrupted Syntax:

Disrupted syntax is the hardest device to handle. A repeated line is visible and a "not" is a "not," but a broken syntax can be a stalled clause, a misplaced line break, a word out of order, a matter of grammar, lineation or typography, or all three at once. Al-Shamrani (2025) shows how syntactic deviation works in classical Arabic poetry, and stylistics has long had the category. The Kohutian question is different: what does the disruption do for the self that produces it? Four answers recur. Syntax can be the trace of failed mirroring, the register of fragmentation, a site of failed repair, and, in Bergvall, a performance staged for the reader as much as for the speaker. Figure 5 places the cases between trace and performance.

Figure 5

Disrupted Syntax on a Continuum From Trace to Performance



Note. The continuum is a heuristic. McCrae contains moments closer to trace and moments closer to performance.

Bergvall: The Stammer as Trace

"About Face" is the limit case, and the one that most directly invites a Kohutian reading. Because the stammer is rendered on the page, the disruption is not a metaphor for failed mirroring but its textual trace. The stammering self is one whose speech has not reliably been received, and the poem stages that failure at the level of the syllable (Kohut, 1971, 1977; Butzer, 2026). The stammer is the point where the sentence cannot proceed, and the inability to proceed is the inability to be recognised. The poem does not say this. It enacts it, as a formal analogue of fragmentation close enough to be unsettling.

There is a complication. The stammer is also a performance, since the poem is meant to be read aloud and the disruption is partly a score for the voice. Is the reading too literal, then? Is the stammer a trace of failed mirroring or a theatrical effect? I think it is both, and that the both-ness is the point. A self that can perform its own fragmentation is not simply a fragmented self; it has found a way to stage it, and the staging is a kind of mastery. The poem controls the terms on which it is heard even as it stages the failure of being heard, a sophisticated manoeuvre that stretches the framework.

Armand: Syntax That Cannot Mend

In Armand the failed repair is most insistent. The self-corrections try to fix the sentence and the fixes fail (Armand, 2017, 2021), so the syntax breaks and then breaks again in the attempt to mend the break. The difference from Bergvall matters. Her stammer is a disruption that cannot proceed; Armand's self-correction is a disruption that tries to proceed and cannot. It is the most direct formal analogue of fragmentation in the corpus, and also the most ambivalent, because the correction is not only a failure but a labour. The self is working, and the work shows on the page.

McCrae: The Broken Sonnet

McCrae's disruption is tied most closely to form. The sonnet is a traditional container, and the poems break it. The line breaks cut across syntax and strand words, and the loops never resolve into the closure the sonnet promises (Broken Sleep Books, 2025). The disruption is not random but structured, and the structure is the point. The more useful Kohutian concept here may be the leading edge (Paul, 2025). The broken sonnet records damage, and it is also an attempt to find a form that can hold the damage. The self that emerges is held by the poem's rhythm, precariously, but it is held. The syntax breaks, and the break is where the poem lives.

Cimafiejeva: Fragmentation as Witness

In Cimafiejeva disrupted syntax is tied most directly to historical pressure. The staccato breaks and unfinished clauses are formal responses to repression and loss (Davidson, 2023; Poetry Foundation, 2022). The syntax does not break because the speaker is fragmented in some abstract sense; it breaks because the world the speaker inhabits has been broken, and the poem will not pretend otherwise. The Kohutian reading has to be careful here, because the fragmentation is not primarily intrapsychic. It is historical, and the poem registers history in its grammar. It is also a form of witness. The syntax is disrupted because the poem will not be repaired on false terms.

Dubie and Hammad: Dissolution and the Syntax That Holds

Dubie's syntax does not break the way Armand's or Bergvall's does; it dissolves. The lawful face becomes pixels, and the syntax that describes it comes apart with it. The grammar is intact, in a sense, but what it describes has fallen to pieces. That is a useful limit case, because it shows that disrupted syntax need not mean broken grammar. It can mean a syntax that describes a broken world, and fragmentation can be registered in the image as well as the clause.

Hammad is the negative case, and worth including for that reason. Her lines are complete, her clauses resolve, and her anaphora is regular. This is not a failure but a strategy: the self is defended by repetition and negation, the syntax is the ground on which the defence takes place, and the syntax holds because the devices hold. Disrupted syntax appears where the other devices have reached their limits. It is the device of last resort, the place where the self's attempts at cohesion become visible as attempts.

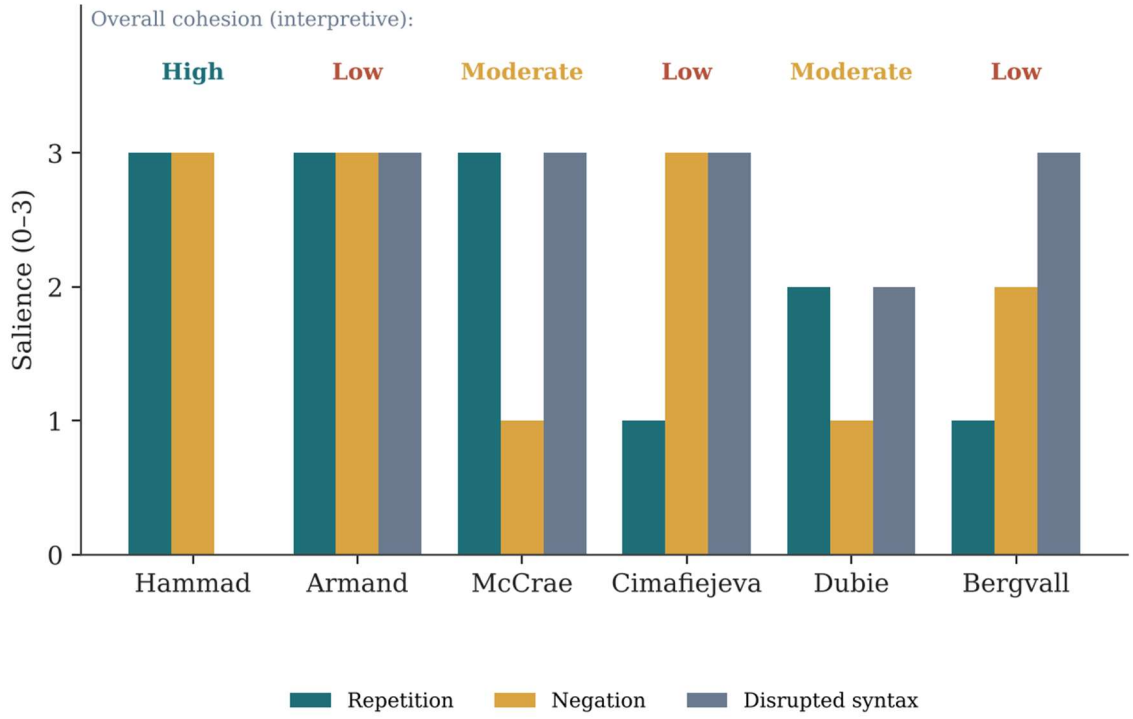
Cross-Case Synthesis

The findings sections took the devices one at a time, which was necessary for clarity but not quite honest to the poems. In practice repetition, negation and disrupted syntax arrive together, in the same stanza, sometimes the same line. Read together, the cases show two things. They fall into a rough typology, not a rigid one but a clustering that holds across cases. And the typology is not a hierarchy. The poems where the self appears most intact are not necessarily the ones that matter most. Where the devices fail, the formal work is most visible, and the visibility is its own kind of achievement.

Figure 6 sets the three devices beside an interpretive judgement of overall cohesion, meaning how well the devices appear to hold the speaking self together. It is not a diagnosis, and another reader might judge differently. The pattern is still clear: where the devices cooperate, as in Hammad, cohesion is highest; where they fail or turn on themselves, as in Armand, Cimafiejeva and Bergvall, it is lowest; McCrae and Dubie sit between.

Figure 6

Devices and Overall Cohesion Across the Six Cases



Note. Cohesion is an interpretive judgement about how well the devices hold the speaking self together, not a measurement.

Table 3 and Figure 7 give the typology. Two clusters deserve a closer word.

Table 3

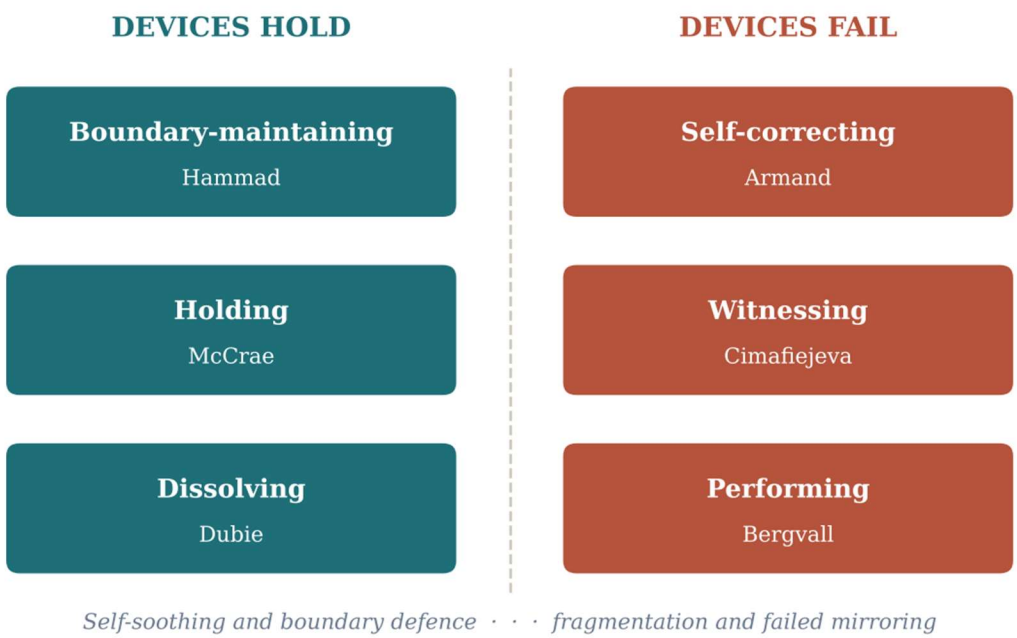
Typology of Formal Strategies

Type	Defining feature	Case	Kohutian register
Boundary-maintaining	Devices work together to hold the edge of the self	Hammad	Self-boundary defence; grandiose assertion
Self-correcting	Devices attempt repair and the repair fails	Armand	Grandiose control; fragmentation
Holding	Devices soothe the self while registering damage	McCrae	Self-soothing; leading edge
Witnessing	Devices refuse consolation and register historical loss	Cimafiejeva	Fragmentation; negative selfobject trace
Dissolving	Devices register the absence of a mirror	Dubie	Failed mirroring; narcissistic wounding
Performing	Devices stage fragmentation as event	Bergvall	Trace of failed mirroring; mastery through staging

Note. The types overlap. Hammad's poem contains moments of witnessing; Bergvall's contains moments of dissolution.

Figure 7

Typology of Formal Strategies: A Visual Summary



Note. The columns separate cases where the devices appear to hold the self together from those where they register its coming apart.

The first cluster is Hammad and Armand, where repetition and negation defend the boundary in plain view. They diverge in what follows. Hammad's syntax holds, and the boundary is secure but incomplete. Armand's syntax breaks, and the boundary is under siege. Kohut tends to treat the grandiose self as a pole that is either healthy or pathological (Kohut, 1971, 1977; Wolfe, 1989). Armand suggests something messier: the grandiose attempt at control can be the vehicle of fragmentation as well as the defence against it. The self-correction is the voice of the corrosive other, and the poem repeats it because it cannot stop hearing it (Terman, 2021).

The second cluster is McCrae and Cimafiejeva, both of whom use disrupted syntax to register fragmentation, to different ends. McCrae's broken sonnet holds: the loops soothe, the form contains. Cimafiejeva's fragments testify: they refuse consolation, and the refusal is the point. The difference maps onto a distinction the theory has been developing between self-soothing and the leading edge (Paul, 2025; Stern, 2024). McCrae's poems soothe. Cimafiejeva's move forward without settling for the comfort that would falsify the loss.

One reading remains speculative. Dubie's fragmentation is passive, the self dissolved by the gaze, while Bergvall's is active, the self staging its own dissolution, and the claim that her performance amounts to mastery is an interpretation, not something the coding delivers. Another reader might see only the trace of failure.

Beyond the types, the devices cooperate or fail together, and the concepts that proved most useful were not the ones expected: the negative selfobject (Terman, 2021) and the leading edge (Paul, 2025) became indispensable for Armand and Cimafiejeva, which suggests that the theory's recent developments serve literary analysis better than its founding concepts. The cases under the heaviest historical pressure, Cimafiejeva and Dubie, stretched the framework furthest, a finding about how the psychic and the historical meet (Riker, 2024a, 2024b). Six cases are few, individual readings are contestable, and the line between speaker and poet blurs here and there.

8. Discussion:

The findings are not what I expected, and the surprise is worth stating. I began with a fairly straightforward hypothesis: repetition would defend the self-boundary, negation would refuse narcissistic injury, and disrupted syntax would register fragmentation. That hypothesis is not wrong. Hammad's refusals do defend a boundary, Armand's stutter does register a wound, and Bergvall's stammer does trace a failure of mirroring. But the cases resisted the neat mapping at almost every turn. Repetition soothed as often as it defended, negation witnessed as often as it armed, and disrupted syntax was a site of mastery as well as a trace of damage. The framework held, but it held by stretching, and the stretches are the most interesting part of the study.

What the Findings Do to Kohut

Kohut's theory is clinical, and it was not designed for literary analysis, though Kohut himself wrote about the humanities (Kohut, 1985) and Riker (2024a, 2024b) argues persuasively for its cultural reach. The translation has seams, and the corpus exposes three. Repetition is a family of mechanisms, not one: Hammad repeats to hold a boundary, Armand to hold a self that will not hold, McCrae to soothe a self coming apart, which fits Kolenc's (2026) point that repetition is never simple sameness. Negation has at least two functions, defensive in Hammad and Armand and testimonial in Cimafiejeva, and Terman's (2021) negative selfobject describes the world of the second without quite capturing the active, witnessing quality of its negation (Dioguardi, 2022; Paul, 2025). And "fragmentation" is doing too much work: Armand's break is trace and attempted repair, Bergvall's stammer trace and performance, Dubie's dissolution a matter of image rather than clause. The distinction between fragmentation as trace and as performance seems especially worth developing, perhaps with performance theory and work on speech in psychoanalysis (Hook, 2023).

Implications for Criticism

For criticism the implications are threefold. First, the formal devices of contemporary poetry are best understood as self-work, not as ornaments or rhetorical figures. Second, the distinction

between defensive and testimonial negation is worth developing. Dioguardi (2022), who treats negation as the birthplace of thinking, sits nearer the testimonial mode, and Alaghbary (2019), who treats it as identity construction, nearer the defensive. Third, the relationship between psychic and historical registers deserves more attention than it has had. The selfobject failures in these poems are not only interpersonal, and the vocabulary has to be widened to take that in. Riker's work is the most promising resource, though it remains programmatic, and this study has only shown where the difficulty lies.

9. Conclusion

This study began with a simple question: what are repetition, negation and disrupted syntax doing for the selves that speak them? The answer is more complicated than the question suggested, and the complication is the contribution. Across six cases the devices proved to be neither ornaments nor symptoms but forms of self-work, strategies through which a speaking self tries to hold itself together or registers that it has come apart. They do not always succeed, and the failures matter as much as the successes. What counts is less whether the self coheres than how the poem stages the attempt.

Three findings stand out. The devices are not independent: they cooperate, and when they fail they fail together. Hammad's syntax holds because her repetition and negation do the work; Armand's breaks because his cannot; Bergvall's stammer is the point where negation cannot complete itself. Second, the relation between device and Kohutian mechanism is not one to one. Repetition defended Hammad's boundary and soothed McCrae's self; negation armed Hammad and witnessed Cimafiejeva's loss; disrupted syntax traced Dubie's failed mirroring and staged Bergvall's fragmentation. Third, the theory's recent developments proved more useful than its founding concepts, with Terman's (2021) negative selfobject indispensable for Armand and Paul's (2025) leading edge for Cimafiejeva. Future Kohutian criticism may do well to start there.

The contribution is threefold. The operationalised reading, with its coding scheme and typology, is open to inspection and disagreement. The substantive argument is that these devices are self-work rather than style effects. And the theoretical suggestion is that the Kohutian vocabulary needs widening to take in the historical and political side of selfobject failure, as Cimafiejeva and Dubie show, with Riker's (2024a, 2024b) work the likeliest resource.

The limits stand. Six cases cannot settle a typology, the scheme is interpretive, and the reading of Bergvall's stammer as mastery is an argument, not a finding. Four directions seem most promising. A larger corpus across traditions, periods and languages could test the typology,

perhaps on the model of Fokin et al.'s (2025) psycholinguistic design. The concept of performative fragmentation needs development, with performance theory and Hook's (2023) work on speech as likely help. A self-psychological reading of political repression could take *Motherfield* as its test case. And the most ambitious direction is to ask what the poems have to teach the theory: Armand's self-correction complicates grandiosity, Cimafiejeva's witnessing complicates negation, Bergvall's performance complicates fragmentation. A poetry-informed self psychology would honour the poems as something more than case studies.

Because they are not case studies. They are poems, and they are worth reading for reasons that have nothing to do with Kohut. Hammad's refusals move us because they are refusals. Armand's stutter unsettles because it stutters. Bergvall's stammer is beautiful because it is a stammer. The Kohutian reading is an overlay and should not be mistaken for the poem. What it offers is a way of asking what the formal devices are holding together, and at what cost. The poems remain their own kind of evidence, and the theory is only as good as the readings it makes possible.

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