

Searching for the Lyric: Bill Kennedy and Darren Wershler-Henry's *Apostrophe*

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If there are a number of key characteristics associated with traditional lyric poetry, among the most primary would be a speaking subject, the feeling of overhearing a conversation, an intimacy of sincere confessions, apostrophic address, and transparent, semantically coherent language. Yet if a reader were to encounter a text comprised of an excessively long list of non sequiturs generating multiple disjointed subjectivities, and were this text constructed with the use of an automated computer program and a search engine, that reader might not immediately associate the book in hand with the lyric genre – despite the fact that all the lyric characteristics mentioned above are central to its makeup. Bill Kennedy and Darren Wershler-Henry's *Apostrophe* happens to be such a text, straddling the two divergent identities associated with experimentalism and lyricism. The book does present the kinds of emotive and intellectually charged direct expression of identifiable speaking subjects, as one would expect to find in traditional lyric poetry. Yet the text does so by amalgamating vast quantities of these and other types of utterances into a form closer in character to Ron Silliman's "new sentence" technique than any identifiably lyric structure.

The split character of *Apostrophe* is largely the result of its unorthodox construction, a construction that is essential to acknowledge from the outset of any discussion of this text. The authors wrote a Perl script creating a program, The Apostrophe Engine (www.apostropheengine.ca), which harvests Internet text. It begins with a poem entitled "apostrophe (ninety-four)," which Kennedy wrote 1993, consisting of over a hundred seemingly unrelated sentences in succession, each beginning with the phrase "you are." The first three lines exemplify the effect: "you are a deftly turned phrase, an etymological landscape, a home by the sea you are a compilation of more than 60 samples overlaid on top of a digitally synthesized '70s funk groove you are the message on a cassette tape long after it has been recorded over" (*Apostrophe* 8). The Apostrophe Engine takes each phrase following the "you are" in Kennedy's original poem, and then,

one by one, uses the phrases as search strings in a commercial search engine (the authors used Alta Vista for some of the first poems generated, and Google for the rest) (Kennedy and Wershler-Henry, *Apostrophe* 293). The program then forages the Web pages that turn up in the search results to find any sentences containing the phrase “you are.” If any are found, the program retrieves them and places them in succession in the body of the poem, with the search string (the line from the original poem) as the title. In its online version, a user can click on any one of the lines of the original “Apostrophe” poem or the subsequently generated poems, and generate results drawn from a current search. In its book form, the *Apostrophe* authors present content from their searches after some substantial editing. Due to the profusion and diversity of sources from which the text is drawn, the tone of the book is difficult to sum up; what results is sometimes eerie, sometimes intimate, sometimes hilarious, sometimes surprising, sometimes disturbing, and sometimes countless other impressions. Amid this textual and authorial excess, the lack of an identifiable “poet” who is “writing” or “composing” the language (in any traditional sense of those words, at least) challenges the very premise of the lyric genre: how can any a poem express a lyric subject without a poet actively constructing voice, thought, experience, or identity?

Critics who consider computer-assisted writing have long dismissed the question of lyric expression. Since the late 1950s when the practice began, computer-assisted writing produced material quite naturally associated with the lyric-subverting tenants of avant-garde poetics.¹ The unconventional methods and texts that digital writing produces is perhaps why Adalaide Morris, in the introduction to *New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories*, recognizes the potential for digitally constructed poetry to portray the human experience of the digital age, yet quickly dismisses the lyric as a viable option to address these concerns:

What can new media poetics tell us about thinking and writing in a world increasingly reliant on databases, algorithms, collaborative problem-solving, instant retrieval and manipulation of information, the play of cutting, pasting, morphing and sampling, and the ambient and nomadic aesthetics of a networked and programmable culture? How are these changes in the processes of thinking and knowing altering structures of subjectivity and patterns of emotion that were once the providence of the lyric poem? (15)

As Morris observes, digital poetry—the diverse category of poetry written with digital technologies like hypertext, poetry generating software, onscreen animation, databases, and search engines—creates the opportu-

nity to explore the conditions of “thinking and knowing” in contemporary digitized culture. Morris’s conclusion however, that such issues were “once the providence of the lyric poem,” insinuates digital poetry should not—or perhaps cannot—be interpreted as lyric, even though the genre forms the obvious link between poetry and the subjective experience that Morris describes.

Disconnecting digital poetry from the lyric genre neglects a substantial aspect of the lyric itself: its mutability. It is no great insight to say that throughout the lyric’s millennia-spanning lifetime, from Plato to Postmodernism, the lyric genre has undoubtedly undergone substantial transformations in both its material form and cultural function. Even as recently as the 1990s, critical approaches to lyric poetry allowed markedly experimental feminist and postmodern Language writers to enter the continuing evolution of the genre.² By accounting for the variable nature of the lyric, reading *Apostrophe* as a gesture toward the genre reveals the capacity of the lyric genre to redefine poetic representations of subjectivity, self-expression, and poetics—in this case, redefining those concepts in ways reflective of the digital age. In what seem to be mutilations of lyric conventions, *Apostrophe* asserts the inescapable realities of writing in the digital medium, including the changes to the ways in which individuals construct identities and textual material. Furthermore, far from abolishing lyric convention entirely, some of those seeming transgressions succeed in taking those underlying lyric qualities and adapting them to suit a digital environment.

Social Production and the (Lack of) Lyric Subject

Apostrophe is comprised of a myriad of voices, ranging from the emphatic expressions of informal communication (“you are sooooo coming to this show with me” [175]), to the lyrics to Ray Charles’ “You are So Beautiful to Me” (128), to a long line of “you are a redneck if” jokes (227). There are even moments of heartfelt intimacies: “you are so beautiful when you sleep you are new, but I know who you are” (184). Far from being an expression of an individual consciousness, *Apostrophe* can boast no single writing subject in the traditional sense, and offers instead what could be seen as an amalgamation of discrete lyric subjects (each sentence being the product of a different author, potentially). The traditional concept of the poet, as an individual genius working alone to construct a unique expression of the singular consciousness, is virtually eradicated.

Considering digital environments have brought about such substantial changes to conventional conceptions of subjectivity, the network of voices in *Apostrophe* is not that surprising. Instead of being a total abandonment of lyric subjectivity, what *Apostrophe* represents is a culturally specific form of subject-building and subject-expression, as a consequence of digital media's alterations to our meaning-making systems in general. To borrow from N. Katherine Hayles' convenient terminology, there is a fundamental change in the way meaning is conceptualized when it is expressed through digitized information. Essentially, as Hayles explains, the process is a matter of replacing the traditional paradigm of presence and absence (as information manifests in the physical world) with a paradigm of pattern and randomness (as information exists in a digital realm) (26-27). The material changes to our reality brought about by this paradigm shift are apparent in even the simple example of monetary transactions (Hayles 27); no longer relying on paper, coin, and banks being physically present and absent to perform exchanges, we have replaced these physical artifacts with an abstract, a notion of value contained entirely in the information stored on technology like debit and credit cards, or online banking. In the same way contemporary culture allows us to conceive of information about money in bank accounts rather than physical presence of cash, or DNA evidence rather than eyewitness accounts of a crime, information patterns, rather than the physical presence of matter, have become the means of conceptualizing meaning (Hayles 27).

Significantly, the old presence/absence paradigm is how we usually—or at least historically—conceive of the writing subject: the poet is seen as a discrete entity from the outside world, always either present or absent in physical terms; the poet acts in isolation, retreating to a place where the body and mind are isolated from the outer chaos of society. Here, the subject expresses the inner life of the mind, as though that mind were a separable entity from the exterior world in which it dwells. In contrast, the digital medium, a medium inherently fluid and less bound by the conditions of physical existence, is characterized by a malleable, unstable condition where, as Hayles notes, “striking a key can effect massive changes in the entire text” (26). Without the limitations associated with physical matter, the “self” is no longer conceivable as a self-contained entity, differentiated from the outside world by discrete bodily boundaries. Instead individuals who are made up purely of information patterns partake in fluctuating “feedback loops” between self, others, machines, and the data-flow between them (Hayles 27). Actualizing this condition of digital sub-

jectivity, *Apostrophe* accesses, and then manipulates the purely textual, purely digital information constituting speaking subjects online.

Like the fluid movement between interconnected nodes in a data network, the distant voices find themselves side by side in a single stream:

you are brothers in the same office in some banal level you are a new owner,
you may buy a house and have the kitchen remodelled before moving in you
are the funniest man I no and he hottest 2!!! sloane. you are awesome!! Hope
you like this collage!! It's the background on my MySpace page. (73)

In this example, the sober tone of the first two sentences slips unexpectedly into the informal style of the last, complete with spelling mistakes and over-enthusiastic use of exclamation points. Although they remain discrete utterances from different writers, the authors are brought together in what is sometimes a cacophony, and sometimes a harmony of subjective voicing. Unknown to each other, and perhaps separated by generations or geographies, these fragments of autonomous consciousness are able to connect within a network of digital information in ways less possible in the material world. Hence, the lyric subjects of *Apostrophe* reflect an environment where it is appropriate to think of identity in terms of multiple connections with others, rather than isolated minds in solitude.

As a result of these changes in subjectivities, the role of the poet alters considerably. The poet is less a constructor of the text than a facilitator of the environment in which multiple authors come together. In the working notes of *Apostrophe*, the authors introduce their project with a metaphor borrowed from Christopher Dewdney's "Parasite Maintenance," in which the mind of the poet is equated with a telescope (49). Envisioning the process of writing as one of receiving "signals," the poet becomes "data-harvester" of the "ambient signals that surround all of us" (49). In other words, aided by the capabilities of digital environments, the task of the poet is not so much to generate new material, as it is to manipulate the excesses of material already available to cut, paste, reorder, or perhaps just reframe as poetry.

Although the concept of "poet as telescope" may seem like an abstract aesthetic metaphor, the principles of interconnectedness and the social production of meaning have tangible connections to actual lived experiences online. In Yochai Benkler's extensive survey of information technology in contemporary networked economy, he emphasizes the role that individuals now play in the social production of knowledge and culture. Although there have been communal projects throughout history, digital technology and networked information systems have drastically increased both the

scale and complexity of social production (Benkler 68). Benkler's examples include open-source coding, peer-to-peer networks, the SETI@Home project, NASA's Clickworks, and Wikipedia, all of which are platforms that thrive on the participation of their users. Unlike a pre-digital culture, in which big media companies monopolized content creation, in a digital culture the individual is not merely a consumer in cultural exchanges, but one of many active content creators. Embracing this phenomenon of social production, *Apostrophe* surrenders the control of the individual creator to the participation of the masses. Of course, in the case of *Apostrophe* that participation is involuntary (the text is extracted unbeknownst to the author). Yet the parallel still holds: the search engine, with its ability to implicate the average Internet users into a multi-authored work, creates the kind of social production reflective of content creation in digital environments.

Although social production opens up unprecedented opportunities for average users to create and share content, at the same time much of the actual creation process is neither democratic nor free of creative impediments. The choices that programmers of these participatory platforms made in designing their sites inevitably limit the type and amount of content participants can create. Profiles on social networking sites, for example, encourage users to define identities based on conventional and sometimes inadequate parameters like gender, age, education, etc. So too in *Apostrophe*, the hand of the designer/author/programmer enters the page to significantly determine the final outcome. Simply because of the program's design, the content of an *Apostrophe* poem is limited to a specific type of text (phrases beginning with "you are") derived from limited locations (Internet text containing the search string on pages reachable by the search engine being used). Even more so in its book form, the authors shape the content significantly to create effects specific to personal tastes and interests.

Although the mutations of the lyric subject discussed thus far appear in some ways to be transgressions of the lyric genre, they actually quite unexpectedly satisfy what Adorno considers to be one of the *traditional* aspects of the lyric genre, what he calls, "the collective undercurrent" (46). Despite the seemingly insular nature of lyric poetry, Adorno argues, the genre has always had an inherent social nature. Even when the lyric subject detaches from society and slips away from the social noise in order to hear more clearly the inner workings of the mind, the very act of retreating to interiority implies a context in which that escape would be necessary (such as the reasons for the poet to feel alienated from the society to begin with, or

the privileging of the individual in an ego-centered culture) (Adorno 45-46). Brian Kim Stefans, a digital poet himself, suggests that Adorno's theory of the social lyric makes the genre particularly suitable for digital environments, where the lyric can become "an activity rather than cultural product" and "a machine that negotiates the individual with the world as represented by the references, the signifiers in language" (150). Instead of the elitist, bourgeois expression of privileged individuals with the access to the cultural capital to publish poetry (the knowledge base, skill set, personal connections), in this view, the lyric is instead a device to articulate general conditions of being, knowing, and existing in contemporary culture. As Adorno observes, a key function of the lyric is to articulate the culturally-specific relationship between individual and society (46). In the case of *Apostrophe*, the very need to destroy a discernable lyric subject in favour of a networking of voice comments on the cultural conditions warranting such an abandonment of the singular self. The transgression represents, in other words, the digital environment in which singular authorship is no longer the only viable means of producing cultural artifacts – even poetry.

Lyric Brevity: Constraining Entropy

Adorno's notion of the "cultural undercurrent" applies to other ways in which *Apostrophe* seems to transgress lyric conventions, including the lyric convention of brevity and condensation of language. Admittedly, the online version of *Apostrophe* seems to confirm the very antithesis of brevity: it epitomizes the potential excess, repetition, and sprawl made possible by digital environments. The online version is "live," meaning the text is always in flux. Each time the reader visits the site, more than likely the reader can generate a new poem, even on the same link. In each new poem that a reader generates through this method the lines of the new poem become active hyperlinks as well, which again activate the engine to generate another poem. The reader can therefore click through innumerable possible reading paths, and in each case create a new sequence of poems. The resulting expanse of "you are" sentences is undoubtedly an exercise in excess, indeed suggesting entropic loss of intensity and effect, as the text sprawls ever further.

As *Apostrophe* well testifies, the digital environment is no stranger to excesses of information. As Lev Manovich observes, the methods of assemblage, pastiche, and collage are by no means new techniques in the art world, but the functionalities of digital media do make these methods

possible on new scales (218). The functions of copy, cut, paste, and the modular nature of programming languages like HTML mean that individuals can generate vast amounts of material with minimal physical effort. Unhindered by many of the constraints of the physical world (the cost of paper, cost and time of distribution, or the physical labour of textual construction), the Internet's very nature makes excessive amounts of textual material not only easy, but economically viable as well. Consequently, these inherent qualities of digital information fail to promote the brevity and condensation of expressions that is usually associated with the lyric genre. As Stefans notes, "lyrics are usually characterized by tight, even recursive (in the case of sestinas), structures, a formal quality that is readily appreciable by the reader who would have no time for longer poems—epics and 'life-work'-scaled objects"(148). Stefans proposes this "emphasis on condensed expression" may play an important role in "putting a stop to the forces of entropy" in digital environments, which would otherwise leave a digital text to lose the intensity of its communicative effect (149).

Although "brevity" is hardly an appropriate descriptor for *Apostrophe*—even in its book form, which fills 280 with densely packed type—the nature of condensation is not entirely absent. Although *Apostrophe* resists brevity in any conventional sense, the architectures of its textual construction are suggestive of the way information is organized and structured—rendered concise and useable—in digital environments. Curiously, the authors manage to create this distinctly digital way of thinking of brevity in part by using an ancient poetic form: the catalogue poem. The catalogue poem is an extensive inventory, a listing of seemingly banal facts linked by a common category. The example the *Apostrophe* authors point to in their notes is The Catalogue of Ships in Homer's *Illiad* (*Apostrophe* 286). As the authors explain, the tradition of the catalogue poem is committed to investigating the potentials of excessive lists, yet despite its length, the form is unexpectedly one of compression (*Apostrophe* 286). The very nature of the catalogue poem is one of exclusion; the list may be long, but parameters are set to exclude more than it leaves in. Its role "is to be reductive, to squeeze all the possibilities to that a world of information has to offer into a definitive set," as Kennedy and Wershler-Henry explain (*Apostrophe* 286). In *Apostrophe* that "definitive set" is determined by a number of parameters. The content included in the catalogue must be Internet text, must be reachable by search engine, must appear on Web pages containing the search term, and must contain the phrase "you are." The number of sentences in each poem is also limited to a set number of maximum phrases (or maximum pages accessed, if that happens first) (Kennedy and Wer-

shler-Henry, *Apostrophe* 287-288). The result is a selection – a reduction – of a larger body of available material. In this light, *Apostrophe* may be considered a filtration and selection tool, a machine abbreviating and organizing a selection of the total mass of Internet text.

Similar to the interpretation of lyric subjectivity presented earlier, this distorted view of lyric “brevity” represents a larger “cultural undercurrent” of Internet communities. Particularly in those communities that aggregate vast quantities of information (Slashdot, Wikipedia, Craigslist, Digg.com), systems that organize and differentiate material are essential to making that material of any use or meaning for its users. As the authors of *Apostrophe* note in their afterword, “when faced with an infinitude of text [on the Internet], the choice of what to read—or write, for that matter—is both vital and largely arbitrary” (286-287). Determining “what to read” requires systems to determine the relevancy, accuracy, or just plain quality of information at hand. Hence, we see the architectures of information on the Internet like the peer accreditation system of Slashdot or Craigslist, or the organic networks that arise between commonly-themed blogs.³ As Benkler notes, these systems overcome a first-generation Internet criticism known as “the Babel objection,” which argued that the unprecedented “information overload” of the Web would result in a chaotic competition of voices, in which no one would get heard except for the traditional powers with the financial and cultural power to differentiate themselves (Benkler 77). In this respect, the architectures of information on the Internet and the catalogue poem fulfill similar functions. Like structures of information online, the catalogue poem succeeds in sifting through a superabundance of material to make it more useable (conveniently located in one place) and relevant (in its new poetic frame) than when the information stood on its own.

As an interesting byproduct of its own design, *Apostrophe* actually demonstrates its own exhaustibility—its own point where the sprawl ceases and the poem begins to fold back onto itself. The moment occurs when the program accesses a page containing the “Apostrophe” poem, as Kennedy wrote it in 1993, and proceeds to duplicate the original inside its own adaptation (105-09). The section where this happens, “a special refutation of relativity,” offers a vague state of déjà vu, as the original poem manifests almost, though not entirely, verbatim. The poem is there, but there are phrases missing: “you are a compilation of more than 60 samples overlaid on top of a digitally synthesized ’70s funk groove”; “you are an immediately perceptible phenomenon elevated to the level of theological unity.” As well, the words are often fractured by hyphens (“uni-versality,” “hav-ing,” “emer-gency”). For one more interruption, the authors’ names

and curious numbers interject into the copied sections: “you are being—52 Object Wershler-Henry and Kennedy page 5 plenty irrational you are a self-consum—53 Object Wershler-Henry and Kennedy page 6—ing artifact” (189). We can find the reasons for these flaws in copy at the original site from which the program lifted the poem. The Apostrophe Engine has cut the lines out of an issue of *Object*, and specifically a special issue of the journal covering digital poetics, in which Kennedy and Wershler-Henry publish their “Working Notes” to their project, including Kennedy’s original poem. Those insertions of the author’s names and the numbers occur in the original PDF at the exact moments of page breaks—where The Apostrophe Engine has captured the names of the authors and page number at the top of the page by mistake.

Clearly, the program made some flaws in “reading” the PDF document and consequently garbled some sections of the copy. The interruptions in information transfer become a type of “digital noise,” as Hayles terms this natural property of digital communications. As she explains, the unexpected interruptions in what are usually intended to be clear and transparent communications end up providing surprising content that the individual imagination would not otherwise generate. The concept sounds markedly like the unintentional creativity promised by many aleatory or procedural-based avant-garde practices that attempt to get the author’s limited consciousness out of the way in order for greater results to occur. And yet, despite the author-diminishing attempts of such a chance-based practices, the example of digital noise from *Apostrophe* comments on the inevitable *presence* of the poet in chance-based writing: even where poem seems at its most mechanically and technically constructed, even where the poem seems to be comprised of found language, the poet(s) can never completely escape a presence in the final product. In this case, even the authors’ names echo in the digital noise.

Apostrophe and the Lyric “You”: I, Thou, and the URL

M. H. Abrams defines apostrophe in his *Glossary of Literary Terms* as “a direct and explicit address either to an absent person or to an abstract or nonhuman entity. Often the effect is of high formality, or else of a sudden emotional impetus” (182). Jonathan Culler echoes the latter part of the definition, observing how the highly contrived formality of apostrophic address has caused many critics to gloss over it in their analysis of poems containing the trope, or else ignore it entirely (60). The prevailing attitude towards apostrophe assumes the device is, in Culler’s words, “an inherited

element now devoid of significance” or even “radical, embarrassing, pre-tentious, and mystificatory” (60). Indeed, when Shelley turns in his famous address—“O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being...”—apostrophe’s discord with contemporary language usage is evident, making it a form of poetic speech that now seems forced and even embarrassing to the modern ear. Yet the trope may form *some* connection to the communicative acts in the Internet age, inasmuch as, as the authors of *Apostrophe* note, “the trope of apostrophe is, like a Web URL (universal resource locator), a form of address” (“Apostrophe, Working Notes” 55). In more ways than just this, *Apostrophe* takes a lyric trope once dismissed for its obsolescence and gives it new relevance for readers in the age of the Internet.

As Barbara Johnson describes it, apostrophe is “a rhetorical device that has come to seem almost synonymous with the lyric voice” (26). Johnson’s statement derives from “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” an essay which the *Apostrophe* authors identify in their notes as the inspiration for Kennedy’s original poem (*Apostrophe* 287). Interpreting Johnson’s description of the complex, and at times contradictory, effects of the apostrophic address, the *Apostrophe* authors propose a dual function for apostrophe that motivates their own interest in using it:

Shelley’s address – “O wild West Wind” – is also addressing the reader: you are the wild West Wind. As Johnson notes, this is a complex gesture. You, the reader, are now both responsible for the poem and yet somehow being spoken for, by a poet, of all people. It is this tension between responsibility and alienation that *apostrophe* attempts to capture. (*Apostrophe* 287)

The dual sense of responsibility and alienation are appropriate for a text living in and thriving on the Internet, an environment in which those experiences are palpably felt. The crux of Benkler’s argument throughout his extensive survey of the networked information economy creates a rather optimistic outlook on the situation; Benkler suggests that, unlike a pre-digital world, an individual in the Internet age has the means necessary to create meaningful content and distribute it to the world. Yet that empowerment creates an immense sense of responsibility for the content being created. The dangers of “speaking for” or being “spoken by” generate immense dangers of misrepresenting or over-simplifying individual experience (a Wikipedia page containing false information about an author, for instance). As well, as Andrew Keen notes in his polemical *The Cult of the Amateur*, democratizing media runs certain risks of glorifying mediocrity, ignorance, and bias over the work of trained and experienced experts. Thus, as the *Apostrophe* authors suggest, when encountering text

telling you who “you are” the experience can be one of connection, sympathy, and responsibility to the text, or conversely, it can be an experience of disconnection, indignity, alienation. Or, as is often the case in *Apostrophe*, the text can arouse a contradiction between a reader’s connection to and alienation from the speakers and content of the text.

The effect of direct address varies sentence by sentence, but a reader can observe that some sentences create more of a sense of responsibility to the speaking subject and the reader’s own responsibility for the poem than others. In the following selection, the potential sympathy and engagement is evident:

you are damn right I would have done anything to have stopped the brutal carnage wrought upon innocent civilians; it may be disgusting to you, but it is a heartbreaking for me to watch a friend, with his face half-blown away, racked with pain and dying as he drowned in his own blood (49)

As W. R. Johnson argues, all instances of “you” in a poem, even those are addressed to a non-human entity, “are indirectly referring to the reader of the poem” (3). In the passage above, the “you” instigates a direct dialogue with the reader, implying a context in which a longer conversation is taking place: what could the reader have possibly said before this statement to make the author confirm he/she was “damn right”? As well, the situation clearly refers to an incident of violence of some kind, but the exact details of the event are not available for interpretation: is this speaker a soldier referring to an experience with war? Is the speaker a civilian who has experienced an act of terrorism? The interpretation will largely rely on the experience a reader brings to the text, making the connection between reader and speaking subject a highly personal one.

Although apostrophe may appear like an outward motion, an act pointing outside the self rather than in, Culler suggests the device is a means of pointing inward, affirming the identity and presence of the speaking subject (60). The reason derives from the fact that the speaker of an apostrophic line calls attention to, not the content of the message, but the communicative act itself (Culler 60). Consequently, in the passage above, the apostrophic address suggests a context of communication; it establishes a speaker and listener, and perhaps even specific details about their identities. Apostrophe affirms the presence of the *I* in the poem, even when that *I* never appears on the page, for the simple reason that someone who addresses is indeed a “someone” and not just anonymous language on the page. The assumption that there are real people living real lives behind the

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words on the page grants the mechanically constructed string utterances a considerable degree of affect.

Given the diversity of *Apostrophe*'s material, the selection above is by no means representative the entire text. The highly intimate nature of the "heartbreaking" experience related above generates a greater potential for affect than, for example, the following selection:

you are to deal with Revenue Canada by correspondence only unless you are contacted by an official or employee of Revenue Canada for a personal meeting in which case you will be permitted to go on the premises (27)

The content and form of this sentence do not suggest an identifiable human author in the same way the previous selection. Instead of an emotional human experience, the sentence is more suggestive of a faceless bureaucratic or legal authority relaying information. Considering this information might not have any actual connection to the reader's experience (the reader might not be Canadian, and might not have any connection to Revenue Canada, or even know what that is), the statement proclaiming who "you are"—who the "reader is"—might create a greater sense of alienation. Nevertheless, the sentence still indicates an *I* behind these words, even if that *I* is a nameless government authority.

The simultaneous effects of connection and distance that *Apostrophe*'s sentences generate are not unique to this text alone. The condition is, in fact, connected to a more general experience of reading the lyric. If, as Barbara Johnson suggests, apostrophe is almost "synonymous with the lyric voice" ("Apostrophe, Animation" 26), then this connection may account for some of the reason why *Apostrophe* retains an identifiably lyric "feel," despite its experimentalism. Indeed, one of the ways literary critics often conceive of the traditional lyric is through Mill's famous aphorism describing poetry as an "overheard" utterance. The second-person address in *Apostrophe* generates a similar circumstance of listening into conversations that are not necessarily intended for the reader. The "you" may indirectly refer to the reader of the poem, but when a statement appears like, "you are such a fighter and give inspiration and strength to so many" (225), the reader encounters evidence of an addressee other than himself/herself. The reader is always estranged from the original context of the utterance.

Because a reader's sense of connection to the content of these sentences is contingent upon what the reader brings to the text from personal experience, of course not all the examples I have provided here will affect all readers in the same way. The moments of self-recognition are obviously different for each person, as in any poem, yet there are some loose catego-

ries that might apply to a way readers may encounter the content. The speaker might express a statement a reader wishes to hear: “you are the one who can learn you are smarter than me” (224); “you are ready to be helped through this, I’ll be right here” (226). Or, the reader may recognize the truth in less than complimentary assertions: “you are hard to work with” (228); “you are paying for the privilege of being lied to, conned, brainwashed and deceived; kept occupied with masses of trivia that conceals much subversive material” (234). There are also moments when the text catches the reader in the act: “you are making a critical error here which is that texts somehow have meaning outside of context” (232); “you are looking for earth-shattering news, this is not the book for you” (26); “you are reading so fast” (228); “you are still reading, get in touch, and I’ll send you a fruitcake by way of appreciation” (136). Countless other experiences may apply, but as Kennedy and Wershler-Henry note, in general, “apostrophe implicates the reader in the production of excess information” (*Apostrophe* 287).

In *Three Voices of Poetry*, T. S. Eliot comments on the observable decline in the category of poetry addressing an identifiable audience (3). Eliot divides all poetic utterance into three categories: first, “the voice of the poet talking to himself-or to nobody,” second, “the voice of the poet addressing an audience,” and third, “the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking” (2). Although Eliot concedes these voices often overlap (19), he maintains the first category, the voice of the poet speaking to the self or nobody, has predominantly replaced the other two categories. As W.R. Johnson observes when concurring with the argument of *Three Voices*, this “meditative” form of poetry creates a “virtual disappearance of the lyric You” (8). If Johnson’s observations are even partially correct, and poetry after Modernism has tended to diminish the I-You (or I-Thou) relationship, then a text consisting entirely of sentences addressing “you” markedly contradicts the trend. Curiously, instead of radical departure from poetic convention, *Apostrophe*’s apostrophes signal a return, a resurrection of a once less relevant poetic form. Interestingly, the device of apostrophe itself involves “language’s capacity to give life and human form to something dead or inanimate,” demonstrating the “ineradicable tendency of language to animate whatever it addresses” (Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation” 32). Simply by calling the trope into existence, *Apostrophe* gives new life to apostrophe, making it manifest unequivocally on the page and in the discourse surrounding the book. Furthermore, apostrophe accomplishes this resurrection by granting an outmoded form of artifice a way of connecting to the contemporary reader through the para-

dox of alienation/empowerment made familiar by Internet communication. Consequently, the once “embarrassing” experience of reading apostrophe is made relevant and perhaps even familiar.

Literary tastes have certainly interpreted apostrophic address in divergent ways throughout history, demonstrating but one of the many examples of how radically the perspectives on writing shift alongside cultural perceptions, thereby necessitating revaluations of categories, labels, aesthetic choices, and even genres. As Juliana Spahr recognizes, “the lyric is not and never has been a simplistic genre, despite its seeming innocence” (1). Revaluations are indeed crucial to understand how the material conditions of digitized information, or any other cultural shift, may change the possibilities of thinking about the lyric subject, brevity, direct address, or other conventions. When Adorno describes “the poem as philosophical sundial telling the time of history” (46), he describes the potential for a poem to call attention to the specific conditions of a given culture, including conceptions of authorship, cultural production, and poetic device. *Apostrophe* may turn the sundial into a digital clock, but it still tells time.

Notes

- 1 An automated writing process, for instance, surrenders the agency of the writer with an aleatory mechanism, comparable to the chance operations of John Cage, Jackson MacLow, or their precursors in Dadaism. Procedural techniques echo back to Oulipo experiments. Replacing the author with machine extends Language writing’s project to abandon the subject.
- 2 In Marjorie Perloff’s essay “Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman’s *Albany*, Susan Howe’s *Buffalo*,” she observes a need to reevaluate “the larger poststructuralist critique of authorship and the humanist subject,” on which experimental practice has been based (406–407). Perloff revisits the major works of poststructuralist theory that have played a central role in avant-garde poetics, and proceeds to read the lyric subjectivities of both Ron Silliman and Susan Howe’s work. Similarly, Claudia Rankine and Julian Spahr’s anthology of experimental women writers, *American Woman Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*, exposes the potential for radical experimentalism to express conditions of a lyric subject altered by the post-modern condition.

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