

Darren Wershler-Henry's *the tapeworm foundry*, the Lyotardian Sublime, and the Ethical Importance of the Inhuman

by Andy Weaver

Over the past few decades, it has become a bit of a truism that experimental poetry seeks to make the reader more active than she has been in the past. Whether it's Barthes's notion of the writerly text, or the adoption and expansion those ideas by various Language writers, there seems to be a general consensus among many contemporary experimental poets that their works attempt to shake the reader (willingly or unwillingly) out of passive receptivity and into an active engagement with the text.¹ But why exactly is activity preferable to passivity? While it's likely impossible to offer a blanket response to that question, looking at Darren Wershler-Henry's *the tapeworm foundry*—a recent experimental poem that foregrounds its attempts to activate the reader—in relation to Jean-François Lyotard's theorizations of the sublime uncovers an interesting ethical and political underpinning to active, agential reading. The fascinating correlations between Wershler-Henry's poem and the Lyotardian sublime provide a surprisingly precise set of results for what might seem to be a rather abstract topic. Specifically, by enacting the sublime emotion in the reader and then by teaching the reader how to engage directly with the sublime, *the tapeworm foundry* challenges the habits of passive consumption that capitalist economy requires to replicate itself, while providing the reader with an individual-ness that remains beyond the reach of the social and so exists as proof of the individual's humanity. Thus, although Wershler-Henry's poem offers few political statements in its subject matter, Lyotard's theorizations of the sublime explain that the very form of *the tapeworm foundry* performs an important socio-political action of subversion and affirmation.

1. The Lyotardian Sublime and *the tapeworm foundry*

Darren Wershler-Henry's *the tapeworm foundry* is an exemplary piece of experimental poetry, one that succeeds at both challenging and entertaining the reader, all the while working hard not to become obscure or overly difficult. Playfully serious and seriously playful, the poem is a book-length text that consists entirely of, as the inside of the book's front cover states, a "list of book proposals."² Some of these proposals are rather practical ("take photos of individual letters from neon signs and then spell out texts in vast photocollages across the wall"), some are not so practical ("record everything that you say for two years and then arrange it according to degrees of insignificance"), and some are downright bizarrely absurd:

write the regulations for more equitable blood sports like the one in an oceanarium between a killer whale and a snorkel diver armed only with a staplegun or like the one in a kiddie pool between a hammerhead shark and a divorce lawyer armed with only a butter knife or like the one in a gymnasium between a white rhino and a gold caddy armed with only a pitching wedge. (*tape-worm*)

As no punctuation appears in the text, the book proposals flow as a continuous, uninterrupted stream (this sense of flow is also supported by the lack of pagination throughout the text). The only concession towards conjunction is the nonce-word "andor," which occurs between each of the book proposals: "andor write with your head between your hands andor posit a novel in which a time traveller first appears at the denouement and then proceeds backwards to the beginning through a series of non sequiturs andor smoke your manuscript page by page when you run out of rolling papers andor ride hard shoot straight and speak the truth andor..." (*tape-worm*). "andor" acts as both a conjunction and, due to its constant reappearance, as a type of refrain, providing semantic section breaks to an otherwise overwhelming list.

Before looking at how *the tapeworm foundry* enacts the sublime, it might be helpful to explain what the term means, particularly in relation to the poem. While this paper will focus on Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern conceptualizations of the sublime, since Lyotard derived his theories by adapting Immanuel Kant's work on the sublime it is important to start with Kant's ideas and work towards Lyotard's adaptations. According to Kant, the sublime emotion occurs when the imagination (the faculty of presentation) cannot present a specific example of an idea to reason (the faculty of ideas); "The feeling of the sublime," he says, "is thus a feeling of displeasure from the inadequacy of the imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude for the estimation by means of reason, and a pleasure

that is thereby aroused at the same time from the correspondence of this very judgment of the inadequacy of the greatest sensible faculty in comparison with ideas of reason, insofar as striving for them is nevertheless a law for us" (Kant 140-41). Lyotard provides a more easily digestible summary of the Kantian sublime in his essay "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," in which he states that

The aesthetics of the sublime is [...] a pleasure that comes from pain. In the event of an absolutely large object—the desert, a mountain, a pyramid—or one that is absolutely powerful—a storm at sea, an erupting volcano—which like all absolutes can only be thought, without any sensible/sensory intuition, as an Idea of reason, the faculty of presentation, the imagination, fails to provide a representation corresponding to this Idea. This failure of expression gives rise to a pain, a kind of cleavage within the subject between what can be conceived and what can be imagined or presented. But this pain in turn engenders a pleasure, in fact a double pleasure: the impotence of the imagination attests *a contrario* to an imagination striving to figure even that which cannot be figured, and that imagination thus aims to harmonize its object with that of reason—and that furthermore the inadequacy of the images is a negative sign of the immense power of ideas. This dislocation of the faculties among themselves gives rise to the extreme tension (Kant calls it agitation) that characterizes the pathos of the sublime, as opposed to the calm feeling of beauty. (98)

To briefly summarize, the sublime emotion agitates the subject; this agitation results from the subject making the psychically painful discovery of the inability of her imagination to present an example of an idea while, at the same time, the subject makes the psychically pleasurable discovery that her rational mind exceeds even her imagination. Although, as I'll explain later, Lyotard moves significantly away from Kant's theorizations in terms of why the sublime is important and what it tells us about ourselves, his conceptualization of what constitutes the sublime experience remains basically the same as Kant's; as Cornelia Klinger states, "the inadequacy of the imagination in confronting an overpowering impression is at the center of both Kant's and Lyotard's understanding of the sublime" (205).

How, then, does *the tapeworm foundry* provoke the sublime emotion? Precisely because, as the Kantian and Lyotardian sublimates require, the poem constantly foregrounds an idea for which the imagination cannot provide an example; it is impossible to imaginatively present the poem. This impossibility, however, has nothing to do with the individual proposals; in fact, the reader could easily imaginatively present many of the proposals, for example, "write even duller if you can and/or compile a detailed

concordance of all the words beginning with the letters dr in the long poem by bpnichol and then entitle it for a secular martyrology andor peddle inappropriate literary giftsets such as the collected works of sylvia plath complete with a pair of ovenmitts” (*tapeworm*). There is nothing in any of these proposals that requires the reader to have literary talent or skill (unless, perhaps, a lack of good taste in regards to the latter proposal can be considered a talent). Technically, any person with a rudimentary familiarity with language and with a modicum of effort could imaginatively present any or all of these proposals by actually writing them, either in one’s mind or on paper. Moreover, in some cases the reader can imaginatively present the proposal at the moment of reading, such as “realize your imac is just a big tamagotchi” or “regret not having sported a suit the colour of an unripe lemon nor a red paper gendarmes hat because alas one cannot think of everything” (*tapeworm*). These proposals do not ask even that the reader physically act; they are fulfilled almost instantaneously at the moment of reading (or, to be precise, they are for a fan of kitsch like myself, who can easily regret not having worn such a spiffy ensemble). There is nothing that provokes the sublime emotion at the level of the poem’s individual book proposals.

Likewise, there isn’t anything that provokes the sublime at the level of what I would call the macropoem, the poem as a whole, consisting of all of the book proposals at once. If it is theoretically possible to imaginatively present the individual book proposals, then it’s technically (though likely not practically) possible to do so for all of the proposals, given the time, talent, tools, labour force, and monomania required. It might take years, but such a complete collection of realized book proposals is definitely possible.³

Rather, the sublime aspect of this book-length poem hinges on just one word: the refrained nonce-word “andor.” “andor” provokes the sublime emotion in the reader because it makes the poem as a whole impossible to imagine—impossible because “andor” requires that the reader consider the actions (the book proposals) on either side of the conjunction simultaneously joined together *and* held apart as mutually exclusive. It is impossible for the imagination to offer an example of such an oxymoronic action, and so the imagination’s impotence emerges (pain is provoked) at the same time that reason can conceive of such an oxymoronic idea (pleasure is provoked).

In other words, the poem provokes in the reader the sublime emotion because “andor”—which is not the same as “and or” or “and/or,” both of which allow the reader to choose between the *and* and the *or*, rather than

demanding their combination—conflates all of the book proposals in the poem into a relationship that is one of *both* combination *and* a simultaneous refusal of any combination. It is this relationship of simultaneity of combination and mutual exclusivity of the book proposals that makes the poem sublime. “and/or” means that imaginatively presenting the proposals is not just a matter of mathematics, time, and perseverance (i.e., crunching the numbers and coming up with a set number of variables: if I do the first proposal but not the rest; if I do the first and second proposal and not the rest; if I do the first and third proposals and not the rest; etc.—that book could theoretically exist, and therefore, while difficult to create, doesn’t provoke the sublime). In the lexicon of the sublime, “and/or” remains unrepresentable, a term that Lyotard, again drawing on Kant, explains as

the object of an Idea, and for which one cannot show (present) an example, a case, even a symbol. The universe is unrepresentable, so is humanity, the end of history, the instant, space, the good, etc. The absolute in general, says Kant. For to present is to relativize, to place into contexts and conditions of presentation, in this case plastic contexts and conditions. So one cannot present the absolute. But one can present that there is some absolute. This is a ‘negative’ (Kant also says ‘abstract’) presentation. (“Representation, Presentation, Unrepresentable” 126)

By remaining imaginatively unrepresentable, “and/or” functions as a negative presentation, a prompt that suggests that reason exceeds the powers of imagination. Consequently, “and/or” negatively presents the poem’s unrepresentable element, or perhaps we can call it the unrepresentable poem, that uncreatable text that theoretically simultaneously contains both all of the imaginatively actualized proposals and none of those actualized proposals. The unrepresentable poem remains an untotable absolute, in that the imagination cannot present the simultaneity of inclusion and exclusion that “and/or” demands; thus “and/or” negatively presents the limits of the imagination by exceeding those limits.

All of which demands the question: why is the sublime emotion important in relation to *the tapeworm foundry*? To begin, it provides an explanation of what the text defines poetry, at its most basic level, to be, and it provides a reason for the likely reaction by a reader not familiar with experimental postmodern poetry. Lyotard argues that in response to the emergence of photography certain visual artists developed the avant-garde. He states that “The avant-gardes” (by which Lyotard specifically means the historical avant-gardes of the visual arts of the early 1900s),

facing the inanity [...] of the craft of painting in a community without prince or people, turn to the question, ‘What is painting?’ One after another, the pre-suppositions implied by the exercise of the craft are subjected to trial and contestation: local colour, linear perspective, the rendering of colour values, the frame, formats, hiding the support by covering the surface completely, the medium, the instrument, the place of exhibition, and many others beside, are plastically questioned by the various avant-gardes. (“Representation” 124)

Adapting Lyotard’s ideas from the visual to the written arts, writers of experimental postmodern poetry, of which *the tapeworm foundry* is an excellent example, peel away the traditional expectations of poetry in order to ask the question “What is poetry?” Specifically, as Lyotard explains, experimental artists raise these questions through their use of the sublime:

Avant-garde painting escapes *ex hypothesi* from the aesthetics of the beautiful, its works do not call for the ‘common sense’ of a shared pleasure. These works appear to the public of taste to be ‘monsters’, ‘formless’ objects, purely ‘negative’ entities (I’m deliberately using the terms Kant employs to characterize the occasions that provoke the sublime sentiment). When the point is to try to present that there is something that is not presentable, you have to make presentation suffer. This means among other things that painters and public do not have at their disposal established symbols, figures or plastic forms which would allow them to signify and understand that the point of the work is Ideas of reason or imagination, as was the case in Romanesque Christian painting. (“Representation” 125)

Consequently, a poem such as Wershler-Henry’s removes the conventions of poetry (lineation, rhyme, rhythm, etc., even the verse form itself) in order to highlight what provokes the sublime emotion—in this case, the impossibility of imaginatively presenting the unrepresentable poem. For example, the poem’s monotonous visual layout, with every page of the poem visually identical in terms of layout (each page features a fully-justified rectangular block of prose text, exactly 3.5 inches high by 4.5 inches wide, with no intra-linear white space), a uniformity emphasized by the odd size of the physical book (the book measures 5 inches high by 6 inches wide and so mimics the shape of the text), removes any visual appeal and, aided by the lack of both punctuation and pagination, propels the reader onwards so that the actual proposals avoid individual importance. Readers who want conventionality from poetry will likely, as Lyotard says, consider such a poem monstrous and formless, but the poem’s form is necessary to ask the question “What is poetry?” In fact, it seems that the discomfort and frustration that the sublime element in such a poem or

painting creates in the reader/viewer is essential to the piece's investigations:

The avant-gardes carry out a secret questioning of the 'technical' presuppositions of painting, which leads them to a complete neglect of the 'cultural' function of stabilization of taste and identification of a community by means of visible symbols. An avant-garde painter feels first of all responsible to the demand coming from his activity itself, i.e., 'What is painting?'. And what is essentially at stake in his work is to show that there is invisibility in the visual. [...] The current of 'abstract' painting has its source, from 1912, in this requirement for indirect and all but ungraspable allusion to the invisible in the visible. The sublime, and not the beautiful, is the sentiment called forth by these works. ("Representation" 125-26)

As Lyotard argues in relation to the avant-gardes' sublime works, a poem such as *the tapeworm foundry* investigates the fundamental basis of poetry—what makes a poem a *poem*—in order to suggest that the quintessence of poetry is the originary *idea*, not those technical elements (rhyme, rhythm, etc.) that readers often associate with poetry. In this sense, Wershler-Henry's text implicitly defines poetry, true poetry, as the unrepresentable element, the idea that the rational mind encounters and for which the imagination cannot present an example. The moment of inspiration, the "eureka" moment where the idea for a poem first develops—a moment that necessarily precedes and is therefore outside the written text itself—is, according to *the tapeworm foundry*, the only element of real poetry; everything else (in this case the actualized poem, the finished product) is merely an attempt to convey the inventor's originary idea to the reader. (And I use the term *inventor*, rather than *creator* or *author*, intentionally, because an inventor does not necessarily physically create the product she imagines or invents; in my usage, the inventor's only action is to think the originary idea, while the act of transcribing that originary idea belongs to the author or creator.) Wershler-Henry, in fact, constantly foregrounds this opinion of what is truly poetry by repeatedly including the sublime "and/or" conjunction, but the opinion is echoed in the book proposals themselves, all of which he has thought of but implicitly cannot be bothered to write because the finished, written text of any of the proposed works would be merely a delivery device that attempts to imaginatively capture—and necessarily fails to do so—the moment of true poetry.

The text's emphasis on the unrepresentable, originary moment as the only moment of true poetry has important ramifications on the agency of both the inventor and the reader of *the tapeworm foundry*. For Wershler-Henry,

as the text's inventor, the creation of the macropoem (the text of the book known as *the tapeworm foundry*) suggests success; however, the sublimity of the text attests to the inventor's failure, in that the macropoem can only gesture towards the uncreatable text, that sublimely impossible unrepresentable poem that (because of the sublime nature of "and/or") neither the inventor nor any other individual will ever be able to actually create. The text's sublimity brings to the inventor a sense of pleasure (through the ability to rationally conceive an unrepresentable text) as well as pain (through an awareness that no one's imagination—including the inventor's—can imaginatively present the unrepresentable poetic text of *the tapeworm foundry*). In this sense, the inventor experiences the tension between pain and joy that Lyotard, while discussing Kant's conception of the sublime, declares essential to the sublime emotion:

The imagination, even at its most extended, does not succeed in presenting an object that might validate or "realize" the Idea. Whence the pain of the incapacity to present. What is the joy that is nonetheless grafted onto this pain? It is the joy of discovering an affinity within this discordance: even what is presented as very great in nature (including human nature and including the natural history of man, such as in great revolution) is still and always will be "small in comparison with Ideas of reason" ([Kant] §27). What is discovered is not only the infinite import of Ideas, its incommensurability to all presentation, but also the destination of the subject, "our" destination, which is to supply a presentation for the unrepresentable, and, therefore, in regard to Ideas, to exceed everything that can be presented. (*Differend* 166)

The sublime proves that the individual's reason exceeds the imagination and also whatever the imagination can present—which means that the sublime destination is the realization that the subject exceeds the phenomenal world ("everything that can be presented"). Consequently, the sublime aspect of the poem becomes fascinating for the inventor, who repeats the sublime moment over and over again with each new book proposal and each new "and/or," thus constantly reaffirming his ability to rationally think beyond the sensible world. For Kant, the sublime is important for precisely this proof of the individual's agential subjectivity:

imagination and reason produce subjective purposiveness through their conflict: namely, a feeling that we have pure self-sufficient reason, or a faculty for estimating magnitude, whose preeminence [sic] cannot be made intuitable through anything except the inadequacy of that faculty which is itself unbounded in the presentation of magnitudes (of sensible objects). (Kant 142)

What this means is that the sublime emotion proves not only that there is thought but also that the mind is, as Kant terms it, supersensible, by which he means that it can think without having to rely on the sensible world the imagination apprehends. The supersensible mind is the mind of an autonomous subject. In Kantian terms, *the tapeworm foundry* proves the autonomy of its inventor, since Wershler-Henry experiences the sublime emotion and thus affirms the supersensible aspect of his rational, illimitable mind.

However, in his postmodern re-envisioning of Kant's sublime, Lyotard suggests that the sublime proves something very different than the autonomy of the subject. For Kant, the sublime proves the illimitable, supersensible mind precisely because he conceives of the sublime as the individual's *response* to an overwhelmingly large or powerful object. Kant's sublime, then, can only occur within the mind; he is quite blunt that "we express ourselves on the whole incorrectly if we call some object of nature sublime [...]. We can say no more than that the object serves for the presentation of a sublimity that can be found in the mind; for what is properly called sublime cannot be contained in any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason" (129). Lyotard, however, shifts the site of the sublime from the human mind to the object itself, thus re-defining the sublime as immanent. For Lyotard, there is something in presentation itself that remains unrepresentable: "Matter does not question the mind, it has no need of it, it exists, or rather *insists*, it sists 'before' questioning and answer, 'outside' them. It is presence as unrepresentable to the mind, always withdrawn from its grasp" ("After the Sublime" 142). In other words, Lyotard resituates the sublime so that "What exceeds knowledge is not therefore in a supersensible realm à la Kant [...] but is *within* the sensible *as* its incalculable, non-appropriable remainder" (Beardsworth 81). Rather than affirming the autonomy of the rational, supersensible mind, the Lyotardian sublime emphasizes the inability of the mind to rise above and meta-synthesize the sensible world. Instead, the individual experiencing the Lyotardian sublime is overwhelmed not by the power or illimitability of the sensible object but by the unknowable, unrepresentable possibilities inherent within each element of the sensible world. As Paul Crowther explains, in the Lyotardian sublime "Every familiar aspect of reality [...] now proves to be infinitely analysable and transformable into a web of microscopic and macroscopic processes and relations (i.e. 'immaterials'). Although these 'immaterials' sustain lived-reality, they have hitherto been undiscovered or ignored" (194). The result is that the sublime "arises here from a deconstruction of the familiar into that which normally functions subliminally"

(194). This overwhelming experience of the defamiliarization of the mundane means that the individual experiencing the Lyotardian sublime does not affirm an autonomous subjectivity; rather, the individual subjectivity becomes radically destabilized by encountering a “sublime indeterminacy,” by encountering, as Robert Baker explains, an experience or object “that cannot be adequately framed, appropriated, or synthesized by the subject. The indirect presentation of this unrepresentable indeterminacy, Lyotard argues, does not manifest the subject’s unfettered powers of conception and invention but rather dismantles or deposes the subject, momentarily releases consciousness from the imperatives of a coherent social identity” (78).

With the Lyotardian sublime, then, the inventor of *the tapeworm foundry* does not succeed in proving his supersensible, autonomous subjectivity. Rather, the inventor fractures his subjectivity at each moment he encounters the unrepresentable moment of creation and every time he encounters the unrepresentable “and/or.” At first, this seems hardly like a success at all; in fact, it seems to be a loss of what individual subjectivity the inventor has, since the subject is constantly dismantled and deposed, with his consciousness constantly released from the “imperatives of a coherent social identity.” More so, the subject’s consciousness is released into an area that necessarily remains unknowable, thus encountering a radical anti-consciousness that exceeds consciousness. In his essay “The General Line,” Lyotard terms this area as “no-man’s-land” (116), “the second existence” (117), and “the inhuman region” (121), all of which sound somewhat grim and depressing. However, just the opposite is true; this realm underpins humanity’s human-ness by remaining outside the knowable: “The region is secret because it is separate. The right to the second existence is the right to remain separate, not to be exposed, not to have to answer to someone else” (“General Line” 117). Going further, Lyotard connects this inhuman region with both the basic reason for individual rights and with the seat of our creativity:

If humanity does not preserve the inhuman region in which we can meet this or that which completely escapes the exercise of rights, we do not merit the rights that we have been recognized. Why would we have the right to freedom of expression if we had nothing to say but the already said? And how can we have any chance of finding how to say what we know not how to say if we do not listen at all to the silence of the other within? This silence is an exception to the reciprocity of rights, but it is its legitimation. (121-22)

It is along these lines that the inventor of *the tapeworm foundry* truly succeeds. By encountering the sublime, that which remains unknowable and unrepresentable within the individual, Wershler-Henry repeatedly encounters and proves his own humanity, his human-ness, not as a Kantian autonomous subject but as a fractured, destabilized, and thus unknowable, unfixable, unrepresentable individual. Rather than Kant's rational and supersensible monad who determines from the sublime his own agency, Lyotard's sublime underpins the postmodern individual, an individual who, in the sublime moment, undefines himself, defining himself only negatively, by what he is not: with Lyotard,

the sublime [...] is reconceived as an undoing of the synthesizing subject that [...] opens the subject toward the clearing of Being, the texture of the non-identical, the play of alterity, the call of the other, the openness of the indeterminate, or some other haunting 'place' beyond the boundaries of conventional social and discursive practice. In [Lyotard's] later philosophic meditations, in fact, any such recovery of the subject is conceived, at least implicitly, as the reassertive movement of a subject that, in this movement, would repeat the subsumptive operations of the functionalist network in which it has been programmed to operate as a productive power. The horizon of genuine freedom comes to be understood as the open drift of the negative. (Baker 40-41)

In this sense, Wershler-Henry does not prove his individuality as a subject, but rather his individual-ness—for, as Lyotard argues, the inhuman realm is explicitly in opposition to and under attack by the social, that communal drive to do away with individual-ness in the name of the group. Lyotard calls this communal drive the "general life" and argues that "It's when general life seeks to take hold of the secret life that things go bad. The human right to separation which governs our declared rights, is thus violated" ("General Line" 118). General life seeks to "invade" the inhuman realm and "annex it to general life [...] because the masters of general life [...] are thus haunted by the suspicion that there is something that escapes them, that might plot against them. They need the whole soul, and they need this soul to surrender unconditionally" (118). Lyotard is careful to say that these masters of general life exist in every society, be it totalitarian, liberal democratic, or whatever—the communal drive works against the inhuman realm. Profoundly distrustful of the communal general life, the Lyotardian sublime provides a realm completely other, completely unknowable—and consequently completely undefinable and resistant to annexation or invasion by the communal. It is this unknowable inhuman realm that Wershler-

Henry repeatedly achieves by encountering the sublime, unrepresentable moment of creation in *the tapeworm foundry*.

While this success is all well and good for the text's inventor, what does it do to or for the reader? If the inhuman realm is completely unknowable and completely against the communal, how can *the tapeworm foundry* (or any other sublime object) benefit anyone else but the one individual who directly experiences the moment of creation that negatively presents the unrepresentable? These issues will take up the remainder of the paper.

2. Learning to be Inhuman and/or What the Sublime Can Do for You

In spite of the rhetoric mentioned at the very beginning of the article about experimental poetry activating the reader, it seems obvious that the reader cannot experience the same moment of creation that the text's inventor does. The reader will never be able to think for herself ideas such as "use a laser beam to write a poem on a contact lens for Guy Debord and/or chop the text into strips and then enclose each strip in a fortune cookie shaped like genitalia as if such cookies are not already shaped like genitalia but that is another issue" (*tapeworm*). The poem tells us the ideas by suggesting the book proposals; therefore, the poem keeps the reader from the active experience of thinking of the idea, which means that the reader is necessarily barred from the negative presentation of the unrepresentable and the inhuman realm that the sublime unlocks. In this sense, *the tapeworm foundry* profoundly limits the reader's activity by barring the reader from the inventor's inhuman realm. In fact, since this inhuman realm is necessarily anti-social and negatively presentable only to the individual experiencing the moment of creation, there can be no possibility of the reader encountering the inventor's inhuman realm—the inhuman realm is only inhuman to the extent that it cannot be shared with another individual; as Lyotard says, "The region is secret because it is separate. The right to the second existence is the right to remain separate, not to be exposed, not to have to answer to someone else" ("General Line" 117). The inventor, then, affirms his individual-ness—his humanity—specifically by separating himself from the social, from the readers and all other individuals. How, then, can *the tapeworm foundry* possibly activate the reader?

The reader will never be able to gain access to the inventor's inhuman region; such access would prove that the region was not inhuman by proving that it was not private and unknowable. However, the poem offers the reader something far more important than access to the inventor's inhuman region: access to the reader's own inhuman region. *the tapeworm foundry*

constantly plays out the inventor's sublime moment of creation, and, while those specific moments are claimed only by the inventor, the overall procedure of the poem acts as a primer on how to access the sublime moment of creation and, consequently, teaches the reader how she can access her own inhuman region. In this sense, the individual book proposals are unimportant to the reader, but the poem's emphasis on the moment of sublime creation remains paramount. The text announces this educatory function before the poem begins: the epigraph from Henri Michaux that opens the text frames the entire poem as didactic:

So, reader, you're holding in your hands, as often happens, a book the author did not write, although a world participated in it. And what does that matter?

Signs, symbols, impulses, falls, departures, relations, discords, everything is there to bounce up, to seek, for further on, for something else.

Between them, without settling down, the author grew his life. Perhaps you could try, too?

The epigraph contains so many elements that suggest the need for the reader to search out the sublime that it is hard to catalogue them all: the dismissing of the book proposals and the larger world as irrelevant ("And what does that matter?"); the focus on that which remains beyond, the unrepresentable that all signs, symbols, impulses, etc., can only gesture towards in a desire for "something else"; the speaker's incessant agitation (which, notably, is situated between the signs and therefore unrepresentable) linked to the growth of the author's own life; and, most importantly, the call for the reader to follow the author/inventor's example. Rather than calling for the reader to imaginatively present the book proposals by actually writing them, the epigraph specifically calls for the reader to create her own ideas, her own creative proposals, so that the reader can attain her own inhuman individual-ness. Consequently, although ostensibly a text that seems to thrive on inclusivity and a communal drive to create texts with the reader, *the tapeworm foundry* actually works as a primer for the inhuman by prompting the reader to create her own ideas. The poem exists, then, as a call to action for the reader to affirm her own sublime inhumanity. It is for this reason that Christian Bök, in an interview with Wershler-Henry, refers to *the tapeworm foundry* as "a book-length list of *ideas* for art, accompanied by an *exhortation* to the readers to get off their asses and create" (110; my emphasis); similarly, Wershler-Henry himself, in an interview with Brian Kim Stefans, makes much the same point when he states

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that “the Michaux epigraph at the start of the book is there for a reason: ‘Perhaps you could try, too?’ ...can’t be more direct than that in terms of a call to action” (“ICQ”14).⁴ So, while the reader is necessarily barred from the poem’s inventor’s inhuman realm, she is guided by the inventor through the paths necessary to encounter her own inhuman realm.

Moreover, the poem’s subtitle—“andor the dangerous prevalence of the imagination”—is an important and serious (although perhaps unintentionally so) warning against the use of the imagination and what it offers. Since the imagination is the faculty of presentation, it is necessarily tied to the sensible, to the physical world. The imagination functions to perceive the sensible, which places it at odds with the rational mind and the inhuman realm that the rational mind encounters through the sublime. As Cornelia Klinger succinctly argues, “the delight of reason results from the defeat of imagination” (198). The reader, as the subtitle warns, must avoid the imagination in order to encounter the sublime and the inhuman realm of individual-ness that it underpins.

However, the affirmation of the reader’s inhuman realm and the individual-ness that it confirms, while important, is not merely an end in itself. Turning to a more involved discussion of the Lyotardian sublime, the remainder of this paper will focus on the significant benefits that *the tapeworm foundry*, by guiding the reader towards the inhuman, offers its readers.

The first benefit revolves around the relationship between the Lyotardian sublime and time. Specifically, Lyotard argues that while Kant focuses on the sublime in relation to space, “it is easy and interesting to carry it over to the form of time. The painful character proper to the sublime feeling proceeds notably from the aporia of the judgment it involves from a quantitative point of view.[...] Transposed into time, this aporia signifies an inability to synthesize the givens by containing them within a ‘single moment’” (*Lessons* 22). In other words, the sublime emotion occurs when the imagination cannot synthesize all of the sensible elements of an object at the same time; the relationship to *the tapeworm foundry*’s “andor” should be obvious here, in that “andor” calls for the *simultaneity* of combination and exclusion, a simultaneity for which the imagination cannot present an example. The result, then, is that the sublime emotion makes one aware of the *now*, the impossible to present, razor-thin present moment that separates the past from the future. As Lyotard states, the “now is a stranger to consciousness and cannot be constituted by it. Rather, it is what dismantles consciousness, what deposes consciousness, it is what consciousness cannot formulate, and even what consciousness forgets in order

to constitute itself" ("Sublime and the Avant-Garde" 90). At first, this deposing of consciousness might not seem to be a benefit at all; after all, if consciousness must forget the *now* in order to formulate itself, it would seem that the subject experiencing the sublime somehow loses her consciousness. However, the sublime allows the subject, by momentarily depriving her of consciousness, to become conscious of her own consciousness; the mind recognizes itself *as mind*. The sublime, therefore, exposes that the way in which one thinks is not natural, but rather is a learned system. In other words, the sublime allows the subject to contemplate both the mind and thought itself as constructs, and constructs can be critiqued, analysed, and altered.

This benefit, admittedly, is rather abstract. But Lyotard foregrounds one practical way in which the subject experiencing the sublime receives a benefit that the subject who doesn't experience it lacks: the experience of the sublime *now* works against the march of capitalism. Gary E. Aylesworth points out how capitalism constantly works to obscure the *now* in favour of a supposedly fixed future. He says that

capital insists upon the infinite extension of a particular type of phrasing: exchange. Exchange requires that the future be "as if" it were present, that is, an initial investment demands a return of commensurate and increasing value. That means the rule of linkage from one moment to another is fixed—the future must be predetermined as commensurable and exchangeable with the past and present. The present must not, therefore, be open to an indeterminable and contingent future. Instead, time is held in infinite reserve—the event, the sublime "now," is neutralized. According to Lyotard, capital thus imposes a cluster of prescriptives, all of which express the same obligation to save time: "communicate, save time and money, control and forestall the event, increase exchanges" ([*Inhuman*] 69). (97)

Capitalism, then, works to elide the sublime *now* by acting as general life, that which seeks to "invade and annex" the inhuman in order to turn the individual away from the inhuman and back towards the already determined norms of the communal ("General Line" 118); in a sense, capitalism controls the individual by keeping the individual within the realm of the status quo (the realm that exchange dominates) rather than the realm of the possible. Against this capitalist realm, "Lyotard proposes another obligation (the task of both philosophy and art)—to resist capital and bear witness to the 'now'" (Aylesworth 97). If, then, capitalism works to do away with the sublime *now*, it is because the sublime *now* exposes the artificial lack of choice that capitalism actually contains; at its base, capitalism

declares that one rule must be adhered to always: exchange. Therefore, the Lyotardian sublime has a specifically anti-capitalist aspect because it exposes that the principle of exchange that capitalism depends upon and naturalizes is neither natural nor the only possible principle. More over, as Philip Shaw comments, Lyotard “regards the artistic avant-garde” (and the avant-garde is Lyotard’s ultimate example of art that provokes the sublime) “as a vital tool in exposing the logic of late capitalism, arguing that the resistance of ‘difficult’ forms of art to public consensus marks the limit of a consumer-based society” (125). Put in other words, the avant-garde’s works are useless to capitalism because they are (at least originally) undefinable and therefore unexchangeable.

This lack of definition leads us back to the realm of the inhuman, since the inhuman realm necessarily remains undefinable—it exists only as a negative presentation. Consequently, as Robert Baker explains, the inhuman is that aspect of the individual that remains completely useless to capitalism by remaining totally undefinable:

The subject of a sublime encounter, momentarily freed from the internalized imperatives of a functionalist social system, is understood to be turned adrift in an openness to alterity that stirs no countermovement of self-assertion or awakened power. [...] [O]ur vocation, as revealed by the sublime, is to become subdued subjects open to an indeterminate alterity that can never, without violence, be comprehended by a concept. It is this drift of the deposed subject open to the indeterminate that, for the later Lyotard, signals the ethico-political promise of the sublime. (Baker 39-40)

By opening up the individual to the possibility of a subjectivity completely outside of the one defined within the exchange ideology of capitalism, the Lyotardian sublime points out the prescriptive nature of capitalism. While it is true that Lyotard does not suggest a specific alternative to capitalism as a cultural dominant, he refuses to do so only in order to keep open the limitless possibility of choice suggested by the inhuman. Thus, as Gary Browning suggests, Lyotard counterposes “the development of a successful system promoted by liberal capitalism to an aesthetic sensibility that is sensitive to what cannot be put into words neatly or be exploited easily for functional purposes” (79). The Lyotardian sublime undermines capitalism by refusing to allow the inhuman zone to be defined, thus ensuring that there is a zone that exists outside of capitalist exchange; as a result, the radical undefinable-ness of the inhuman exposes the lack of choice underpinning capitalism, and it specifically exposes this lack of choice as a communal status quo, not an unchangeable, eternal rule.

The Lyotardian sublime, then, is implicit political, in that it displays for the experiencing subject the constructions of the status quo, particularly the constructions and manipulations of capitalism. Consequently, although *the tapeworm foundry* itself engages in capitalist exchange (Anasi Press sells copies of the book for \$14.95⁵), the poem, by teaching the reader how to encounter her own inhuman realm through experiencing the sublime, actually attacks the capitalist economy from within. The poem lives up to its title through this action: as a tapeworm foundry, it creates a series of readers who can attack the capitalist economy like a series of parasites, tapeworms who can work to weaken their host from within. The result is that, although the poem never claims a political stance, Wershler-Henry resituates aesthetics as a political act. Focusing on the importance of the active creation of creative ideas rather than the imaginative apprehension of those ideas, the poem teaches the reader how to experience the sublime; consequently, *the tapeworm foundry* shows the reader how to attain her own inhuman realm and so engages the reader with the anti-capitalist awareness that Jean-François Lyotard outlines in his theories of the sublime.

For all its joyous sense of play, Wershler-Henry's text thus offers a very serious set of challenges and benefits to the reader. Although some readers will dismiss a challenging poem like *the tapeworm foundry* as monstrous or pointless, the poem anticipates that the reader will give herself over to the text's challenges and therefore experience the agitation at the centre of the Lyotardian sublime. By experiencing the failure of the imagination and the consequent victory of reason, the reader encounters the space of the inhuman, that personal zone that remains unrepresentable and so exists beyond the reach of all totalizing and normalizing gestures, including that of capitalism. The result is that, by encouraging the reader to create her own book proposals, her own creative ideas, *the tapeworm foundry* teaches the active reader how to negatively define her individual-ness and so affirm her humanity.

Notes

- 1 Barthes defines the writerly text as a text that takes as its goal "to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (*S/Z* 4). A writerly text is a limit-work that exists in a "perpetual present" and so it is "*ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages" (5). The writerly text's plu-

rality means that there is no one reading, but only possible readings, and this openness requires the active production of the text.

- 2 In typically hyperbolic fashion, the description inside the front cover of the book announces *the tapeworm foundry* as a “a brilliant list of book proposals.” Wershler-Henry himself, in his discussion of the poem at The Kelly Writers House in November, 2008, refers to the content of the poem as a series of creative “ideas,” a term he reiterates in PennSound podcast#12 (http://media.sas.upenn.edu/Pennsound/podcasts/PennSound-Podcast_12_wershler-henry.mp3). In many ways, this definition is more appropriate, but in order to avoid any confusion with Kant’s concept of the rational idea, I will follow the book’s paratextual elements and refer to the content as a list of book proposals.
- 3 In fact, there has been at least one attempt to enact a large number of *the tapeworm foundry*’s proposals. Students at the University of Pennsylvania each chose one proposal to enact and then exhibited the results as a group show at the Kelly Writers House. A webcast of the results, along with comments by Wershler-Henry, can be viewed at the “Darren Wershler-Henry” page of the PennSound website under the heading “Tapeworm at the Kelly Writers House, November 20, 2008.”
- 4 In addition, three of the relatively few written commentaries on *the tapeworm foundry*, although each is quite brief, specifically comment how the poem emphasizes the active engagement of the reader: Michael Redhill frames *the tapeworm foundry* as a corrective for writer’s block, stating that the poem proposes “a plethora of notions, some possible, some not, that the writer without an idea might take up” (Bök 106); Karl Jirgens implicitly equates the agency of the reader of *the tapeworm foundry* with that of its author, stating that the poem makes “for an engaging audience/author repast” (195); Bök states that Wershler-Henry “gives away his own creative activity as a kind of freeware that readers can utilize or improve for their own poetic agenda. ...He hopes that, upon reading his poem, we too might be bitten by his bug and become artists ourselves” (“Christian Bök reads Darren Wershler-Henry”). While my reading of the poem through the Lyotardian sublime differs significantly from all three of these commentaries in terms of both the causes and the benefits of the reader’s active engagement, it is important to acknowledge that most critics have argued that the poem actively engages the reader.
- 5 It should be noted, however, that Wershler-Henry has subsequently allowed the entirety of *the tapeworm foundry* to appear as a free .pdf book on the Ubuweb website. While the Anansi book is still available for purchase, the electronic version does exist at least directly outside of capitalist exchange (internet access itself, of course, almost always requires one to enter into capitalist exchange).

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