

B R I A N M. R E E D

In Other Words: Postmillennial Poetry and Redirected Language

W

hen a poet affixes her name to a poem, is she claiming ownership? What if the words are demonstrably not hers, that is, wholly borrowed from someone else? In the July/August 2009 issue of *Poetry*, Vanessa Place published a poem titled “Miss Scarlett” whose opening lines are liable to provoke both recognition and queasiness:

Miss Scarlett, effen we kain git de doctah
w'en Miss Melly's time come, doan you bodder
Ah kin manage. Ah knows all 'bout birthin.
Ain' mah ma a midwife? Ain' she raise me
ter be a midwife, too?

(339)

The names Miss Scarlett and Miss Melly are of course indelibly associated with the movie *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and the line “Ah knows all 'bout birthin” recalls a famous but unsettling scene when the black servant Prissy (Butterfly McQueen) proves unable to care for Melanie Wilkes (Olivia de Havilland) while she is in labor. Why would Place want to attract renewed attention to a role and a moment that are shaped through and through by crude stereotypes about African Americans? After playing a series of comparably demeaning parts in films such as *The Women* (1939), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), and *Duel in the Sun* (1946), McQueen decided that she would rather end her film career altogether than experience further insults to her intelligence and talents. Without an explanatory frame or accompanying critical

commentary, “Miss Scarlett” risks being read as an exercise in minstrelsy, a white poet donning blackface.

Place walks this precipice knowingly. She intends to disconcert her audience and prompt worries about the relationship here between persona and poet. She is also well aware of what today’s readers are apt to do when confused by a text—turn for help and clarification to an Internet search engine. Sure enough, a few seconds with Google will reveal that the passage is neither a transcription of the film version of *Gone with the Wind* nor a free imitation in the manner of Donald McCaig’s *Rhett Butler’s People* (2007).¹ Something much stranger is afoot. The poet has copied a passage word for word from Margaret Mitchell’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 1936 novel, including every orthographic peculiarity, every “Ahm” for “I am,” “w’en” for “when,” “ter” for “to,” and so forth (456). All Place has added are line breaks.

The rest of “Miss Scarlett” consists of borrowed language, too. A few more minutes with Google Books will illustrate that, with the exception of the occasional interjection, Place has lifted every utterance Mitchell credits to Prissy over a fifty-page stretch and strung them together sequentially without transitions:

“Some day, I’m going to take a strap to that little wench,” thought Scarlett savagely, hurrying down the stairs to meet her.

“Miss Elsing ober at de horsepittle. Dey Cookie ’lows a whole lot of wounded sojers come in on de early train. Cookie fixin’ soup ter tek o’er dar. She say—”

“Never mind what she said,” interrupted Scarlett, her heart sinking. “Put on a clean apron because I want you to go over to the hospital. I’m going to give you a note to Dr. Meade, and if he isn’t there, give it to Dr. Jones or any of the other doctors. And if you don’t hurry back this time, I’ll skin you alive.”

“Yas’m.”

“And ask any of the gentlemen for news of the fighting. If they don’t know, go by the depot and ask the engineers who brought the wounded in. Ask if they are fighting at Jonesboro or near there.”

1. An endnote that accompanies the poem claims that Place has “phonetically transcribe[d]” lines from the film version of *Gone with the Wind*, but this turns out to be untrue (342n5).

"Gawdlmighty, Miss Scarlett!" And sudden fright was in Prissy's black face. "De Yankees ain' at Tara, is dey?"

"I don't know. I'm telling you to ask for news."

"Gawdlmighty, Miss Scarlett! Whut'll dey do ter Maw?"

(Mitchell 492)

* * * * *

Miss Elsing ober at de horsepittle.
 Dey Cookie 'lows a whole lot of wounded
 sojers come in on de early train. Cookie fixin'
 soup ter tek over dar. She say — Yas'm
 Gawdlmighty, Miss Scarlett! De Yankees
 ain' at Tara, [i]s dey? Gawdlmighty,
 Miss Scarlett! Whut'll dey do ter Maw?

(Place 339)

Reading the poem alongside the original text is a curious experience. Here, for instance, by omitting Scarlett O'Hara's thoughts and words, Place prevents readers from encountering her slave-owner's mind-set, the zero to sixty speed with which her anger escalates to threats of flogging and flaying. Also gone is the book's exaggerated distinction between Scarlett's proper and Prissy's dialectical English. By giving us a minor character's unadorned words, Place refocuses attention on *her* agency, not on the protagonist's. Prissy thereby ceases to be merely a mysterious, troublesome "black face" peered or glared at by Scarlett (and by extension Mitchell and her presumed-white audience). She steps into the spotlight and has her own say. As a consequence, her emotions, such as her anxiety about her mother, suddenly seem not hysterical and obstructive, as they do in the novel, but credible and situation-appropriate. Long ago in "Slovo v romane" ("Discourse in the Novel") (1934–35), Mikhail Bakhtin argued that novels are characterized by *raznorechie*, a plurality of dialects, social registers, professional discourses, and other community-specific varieties of speech, each expressive of a different ideology; it is still, however, more than a little surprising to discover that Mitchell's Prissy, notorious as a racist caricature, might have been giving voice to a different and oppositional perspective all along.

Significantly, in reaching such a conclusion, one has to forgo reading “Miss Scarlett” as a conventional lyric poem, that is, as “feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude” (Mill 71). It does not offer unmediated access to a persona giving voice to her innermost passions. Instead, it excerpts and relinesates passages from a well-known novel. It is also a highly self-conscious act of recontextualization that relies on its readers’ cultural literacy and technological competency for maximal effect. Exercising careful control over a source text while remaining aware of its sociohistorical and literary associations, Place lays bare the devices used to create a fictional character and highlights how changes in the presentation of reported speech can subtly alter the outcome of that process.

In the new millennium, poems like Place’s have multiplied. Instead of striving to compose well-crafted verse that conveys their unique insights, emotions, and experiences, many poets have resorted to redirecting language: appropriating others’ words, redacting them, and presenting them as their own. They write—if one can call it writing—what look like lyrics and long poems yet, when compared to canonical verse from Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784) to Louise Glück’s *The Wild Iris* (1992), appear to pursue different ends. They limit the range of their vocabulary and the variability of their stylistic level, making it highly unlikely that they will be able to treat a topic by putting “the best words in their best order” (Coleridge 46). Unless they happen to ventriloquize or plagiarize a particularly talented or eloquent source, they rarely provide audiences with opportunities to admire “the current language heightened, to any degree heightened and unlike itself” (Hopkins 89). Instead, they invite readers to think about the relationship among authorship, medium, genre, context, and meaning. They reward, even require, seeking out and scrutinizing other texts. Above all, they tend to downplay self-expression in favor of documentation, especially of the demotic, vernacular, and popular.

What explains the current popularity of the poetics of redirected language? Although these writers often defy common post-Romantic expectations about the nature and the function of the lyric, I will suggest that their fundamental shared motivation

is not avant-garde provocation. Rather, poems like Place's tell us something profound about psychology and sociality in the new millennium. Even in fantasy it might no longer be tenable to separate our sense of ourselves from the information that we take in—or the manner in which we do so.

• 1 •

The contemporary vogue for poems using nothing but other people's words has abundant twentieth-century precedent. From Ezra Pound's *Draft of XXX Cantos* (1930) to Susan Howe's *Pierce-Arrow* (1999), one can trace an unbroken lineage of collage-inspired poetics that incorporate literary quotations, extracts from letters, photographs, and many other verbal and visual materials, both fragmentary and whole. There have been *centi*, too, constructed entirely out of preexisting texts, from Hart Crane's "Emblems of Conduct" (1926) to Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony: the United States, 1885 to 1915: recitative* (1978–79), and for half a century, Jackson Mac Low and John Cage tested systematic ways of "writing through" others' writings to produce new ones. If one looks beyond literature to the visual arts and experimental music, the number of examples could be increased almost endlessly, including everything from Hannah Höch's photomontages to Sherrie Levine's rephotography, and from Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète* to Laibach's cover versions of the Beatles, Rolling Stones, and Queen.

Marjorie Perloff is the most eminent critic to have pondered why so many twenty-first-century poets appear perversely intent on redirecting language, and in defending the practice, she has chosen to emphasize the phenomenon's roots in more than a hundred years of modernist and avant-garde experimentation. In *Unoriginal Genius* (2010), Perloff constructs a genealogy extending from Walter Benjamin's encyclopedic, archival *Arcades Project* (1927–40) to Susan Howe's *The Midnight* (2003). Her argument culminates in an analysis of Kenneth Goldsmith's *Traffic* (2007), which, as she puts it, "records a twenty-four-hour period of WINS's 'Panasonic Jam Cam [Camera]' New York traffic reports at ten-minute intervals on the first day of a holiday week-

end" (147). She describes his publication of a day's worth of traffic reports as if it were the latest stage in a long story that began with Marcel Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* (1914). Goldsmith gives us "poetry that doesn't look like any poetry we've seen, presented as 'unreadable' so as to challenge us to read it." She credits his particular achievement to his recognition that "in a digital environment, language, once 'locked onto a page,' has become 'completely fluid'" (164). Transposing information from one medium to another, he prompts his audience to ask, What is lost, gained, concealed, revealed?

Perloff's sensitivity to shifts in available communications technologies is exemplary. And Goldsmith clearly is a trickster in the lineage of Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons. If an unsuspecting person wanders into the poetry section of an independent bookstore and randomly opens a book such as *Sports* (2008)—a transcription of the longest nine-inning game of major league baseball in history—he will surely recognize that Goldsmith is engaging in a game of bait and switch, replacing verse-as-usual with something that logically belongs under another heading altogether:

—Here's the 1-2. Swung on and lined toward center. Crisp is there to make the catch. Abreu hit it right on the nose. Yankees no runs, one hit, no one left. And at the end of a half inning, Yankees nothing, Boston coming to bat on the New York Yankees Radio Network.

You've got a lot of choices when it comes to gasoline and usually you base your decision on two factors: location and price. Maybe that's why so many people choose CITGO. Over ten million people stop into one of the more than 13,000 CITGO locations every day to fill up. They come to rely on CITGO for a good deal on good fuel and everything else they need to keep moving.

(6-7)

Is this really poetry? Isn't it just ephemeral baseball blather and empty-headed ad-speak? Who wouldn't rather read a baseball poem such as Ernest Thayer's "Casey at the Bat" (1888), which, although it might be patently middle- to lowbrow entertainment, at least has rhyme, meter, and a dramatic, concise plot? And so forth. In the manner of Duchamp and his heirs, Goldsmith challenges received notions about what does and does not constitute a poem, presumably in an effort to make readers rethink their

assumptions about what the art form can and cannot accomplish.² In the case of *Sports*, he is calling into question, among much else, the relation between poetry, heroism, and masculinity. Is *Sports* a mock epic, a measure of how far Western culture has degraded since the days of the *Iliad*? Or does it perhaps capture and preserve the underappreciated artistry of today's Pindars, everyday wordsmiths charged with honoring the feats of our greatest athletes?

While Goldsmith clearly participates in today's proclivity to compose poetry solely out of recycled language, *Traffic* and *Sports* are not representative of the trend as a whole. As Craig Dworkin has noted, a sizable number of long poems and poetry collections have appeared over the last decade that engage in "wholesale textual appropriation and reframing" as well as "a degree of transcription unprecedented in poetry" ("Poetry" 170). These include such diverse publications as Sally Alatalo's *Unforeseen Alliances* (2001), Nathan Austin's *Survey Says!* (2009), Derek Beaulieu's *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (2007), Katie Degentesh's *The Anger Scale* (2006), Dan Farrell's *The Inkblot Record* (2000), Robert Fitterman's *Rob the Plagiarist* (2009), Drew Gardner's *Petroleum Hat* (2005), Larissa Lai's *Welcome to asian women in business/a one stop shop for entrepreneurs* (2004), Tan Lin's *Heath (Plagiarism/Outsource)* (2009), Peter Manson's *Adjunct: an Undigest* (2005), Michael Magee's *My Angie Dickinson* (2007), Yedda Morrison's *Girl Scout Nation* (2008), K. Silem Mohammad's *Deer Head Nation* (2003), Mark Nowak's *Shut Up Shut Down* (2004), M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008), Ariana Reines's *The Cow* (2006), Danny Snelson's *my Dear coUntess* (2007), Nicholas Thurston's *Historia Abscondita: An Index of Joy* (2007), and Darren Wershler-Henry's *The Tapeworm Foundry* (2000). The tasks that these writers set themselves vary greatly, too. Judith Goldman's "Diktée" (2001), for example, presents every word beginning with the prefix *un-* in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) in their original order of occurrence. Brian Kim Stefans's *Star Wars, one letter a time* (2005) is an e-poem that spells out, letter-

2. See Reed, "Grammar Trouble," esp. 149–54, for more about Goldsmith's avant-gardism.

by-letter, the entire screenplay for George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977). Noah Eli Gordon's *Inbox* (2006) reprints as a continuous column the body text of over two hundred e-mails that were, yes, sitting in his inbox at the time. Some of these works share with Goldsmith's *Traffic* and *Sports* the radical modernist aesthetics that Perloff outlines in *Twenty-First-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics* (2002) and in *Unoriginal Genius*. Others, significantly, do not.

A good example of the latter is Rachel Zolf's poem "Mixed Crowd," from her collection *Neighbour Procedure* (2010). It opens:

And We said unto the Children of Israel after him: Dwell in the land; but when the promise of the Hereafter cometh to pass We shall bring you as a crowd gathered out of various nations.

And we said thereafter to the Children of Israel, 'Dwell **securely** in the land (of promise)': but when the **second** of the **warnings** came to pass, We gathered you **together** in a **mingled** crowd.

And We said to the Children of Israel after him: 'Dwell in the land, **then**, when the **final** and the last promise **comes near** (i.e., the Day of Resurrection or the descent of **Christ, son of Mary on the earth**) We shall bring you altogether as a mixed crowd (gathered out of various nations).

(69)

The poem goes on to provide what appear to be seven further variations on the first sentence, with occasional words placed in boldface. Like Place's "Miss Scarlett," Zolf provides no apparatus, framing, or commentary internal to the poem itself that could help a mystified reader understand what exactly is going on. Again like "Miss Scarlett," however, a few minutes spent with an Internet search engine proves useful. Zolf, one quickly learns, has assembled ten translations of Qur'an 17:104, a passage from the sura Al-Isra, also known as the Night Journey, or the Children of Israel. The three versions that appear above have been taken from Marmaduke Pickthall's *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (1930), Abdullah Yusuf Ali's *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (1934), and Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali's *Translation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in English* (1995). Is Zolf committing

a Goldsmith-like category error, giving readers scripture instead of poetry, so as to unsettle their bourgeois complacency?

The tone is all wrong. The poem doesn't come off as cheeky or disrespectful. If anything, it evokes centuries of eminent English-language poets introducing biblical quotations into the weave of their verse, from George Herbert to Edward Taylor to Geoffrey Hill. The title, "Mixed Crowd," is witty but apt. It lifts two words from one translation and uses them as a self-reflexive way to describe the poem's contents, a miscellany of Qur'anic quotations. The remainder of the poem is decorous, too. In most cases, the words that have been boldfaced point to subtle differences between the renderings of Qur'an 17.104. Pickthall, for instance, mentions a "promise of the Hereafter" that has yet to happen (it "cometh" in the future), whereas Yusuf Ali renames the "promise" a "warning," notes that it is the "second" such message, and places its arrival in the past (it "came to pass"). And Zolf hardly needs to vary the emphasis to make the parenthetical additions in the Khan-Hilali translation stand out: Jesus and Mary appear out of nowhere. One might not be able to imagine a speaker for "Mixed Crowd," but there is certainly an implied author, or better yet implied scholar, juxtaposing translations and seeking, perhaps, to synthesize them, or to judge the extent of their divergence.

Read in its original context, in *Neighbour Procedure*, "Mixed Crowd" proves even more revealing. From poem to poem, the collection's constant themes are Middle Eastern history, politics, and religion. A short, reflective piece titled "Afterthought" at the end of the collection confesses that although Zolf's "first visit to Israel-Palestine" informs and inspires many of the poems, she could not write straightforwardly autobiographical verse about her experiences: "I'm not sure if I ever can or want to put into words what happened during my time in Israel-Palestine. Instead, I have inserted some of the journey's mad affects into this book" (81). While she does not mention "Mixed Crowd" in "Afterthought," she does make a key observation about the section of the book in which it appears: "Comment sections to blogs and online articles can be fascinating and disturbing, and this can be the case on Jewlicious.com, Haaretz.com, [and]

Boston.com (the *Boston Globe* online)" (83). Coming after "Talk-back" and "Grounds for deletion," poems that satirize sophomoric Internet chatter about politically sensitive topics, "Mixed Crowd," one might conjecture, somehow continues in the same vein. But how?

Back to Firefox we go. Using the Yusuf Ali translation of Qur'an 17.104 as a search string, Google will return as one of its top hits a page on a site that Zolf mentions, *Jewlicious* ("THE Jewish blog!"). The main post, dated June 1, 2010, is a link to a video of pro-Palestinian activists singing "Khaybar ya Yahood," which the blogger describes as "a call to attack and defeat the Jews" ("Flotilla").³ The first comment afterward is by someone who calls herself Maria. She writes, "Even the Quran says that Israel is for Israelis." In support, she quotes several translations of Qur'an 17.104. She then concludes, "In the Quran it says that Israel is for Moses and the Israslis [*sic*] and that they should NEVER give it up . . . so apparently many Muslims have never read their own Quran."

As one might expect, this is not a universally accepted interpretation. There is, in fact, a Yahoo! page devoted to answering the question, "Muslims: What are your thoughts when a person says to you these things . . . 'As per Quran Israel belongs to Jews : 17:104 !!!'" Answers include "the person is liar and heretic" and "I would walk away. No need to waste my time on a person like that!" One reply might confuse non-Muslims: "the return of Jews are allowed only: in time of return of Isa as / Jesus Christ son of Mary." Here are Jesus and Mary again—just as in the *Noble Qur'an*, quoted above. It would require more extensive explanation than is possible here to account for why "the final and last promise" is interpreted in this (wholly orthodox) manner. For present purposes, it is sufficient to note that the Khan-Hilali translation was sponsored by the Saudi government, is certified by the University of Medina, and is often handed out for free to

3. The chant "Khaybar Khaybar ya Yahūd, jaysh Muhammad sayā'ūd" (Khaybar, Khaybar o Jews, the army of Muhammad will return) refers to the Battle of Khaybar in 629 CE, in which Mohammad and his followers defeated the Jews of Khaybar, an oasis in northwestern Arabia.

Hajj pilgrims. It regularly interjects parenthetical material so as to clarify ambiguities and, arguably, so as to promote one strict version of Islam, Saudi Wahhabism. Its interpolated mention of “the descent of Christ” places the ingathering of the Children of Israel firmly in the apocalyptic future. It will occur just before Isa’s (Jesus’s) Second Coming, when, according to Islamic tradition, he will descend from heaven to help the Mahdi, the rightly guided one, defeat the forces of the Masih ad-Dajjal, the false messiah. One can imagine Rachel Zolf returning from her first trip to the Middle East in 2007–8, spending hours online trying to sort through wildly divergent opinions and arguments about God, nation, and real estate, and slowly compiling the versions of Qur’an 17:104 that appear in her poem.

The ten translators that Zolf spotlights make for quite a “mixed crowd” in their own right. They include E. H. Palmer, a professor and adventurer, whose translation dates to 1880, when it appeared in the most Orientalist of all Orientalist endeavors, Max Müller’s fifty-volume series *Sacred Books of the East*. Another is M. H. Shakir, known for his Shi’ite leanings, and yet another, Maulawi Sher Ali, is associated with the Ahmadis, an oft-persecuted conservative Islamic movement founded in the late nineteenth century. Most colorful is Rashad Khalifa, an Egyptian immigrant to the U.S. who lived in Tucson, worked as a chemist, argued that the Qur’an is structured throughout according to the number nineteen, and declared himself a *rasul*, a messenger from God. (He was assassinated in 1990 while at his local mosque.) Confronted with this global menagerie, one can appreciate why most Muslims believe that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a translation of the Qur’an, only more or less accurate interpretations written in different languages. The book itself exists only in Arabic. A “mixed crowd” of English-language readers, interpreters, and scholars from “various nations” have been unable to achieve consensus; Zolf encourages us to ask whether there might be value in recognizing the failure of—to cherry-pick two further words from the poem—this “rabble” to reach “judgment” (70–71). She ends “Mixed Crowd” with a transliteration of the Arabic original of Qur’an 17:104. Declining to take a definite stand, she passes along to her readers the bur-

den of continuing to sift through the proliferating possible readings of a text that, doctrinally, is the unquestionable, univocal *Kalam Allah*, the Word of God.

Avant-garde? Not especially. Once its backstory begins to emerge, Zolf's poem becomes surprisingly personal. Her removal of herself from the work—no "I," no direct statements about herself, only words lifted from elsewhere—indexes her own sense of humility and exclusion when discovering a set of conversations built on what to her appears to be conflicting, or at the very least perplexing, evidence. One can, however, sense the "mad affects," as she calls them, kept just offstage, just out of view, while she punctiliously strives to be Joe Friday and stick just to the facts (81). A critic could label "Mixed Crowd" anti-lyrical insofar as it only suggests affect through negation, by shoving it to the side, but that is not the same thing as, Goldsmith-like, seeking to undermine poetry as an art form and institution. Albeit in a twenty-first-century manner, Zolf illustrates T. S. Eliot's precept: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (43). The poetics of redirected language, as practiced by a range of different poets since the turn of the millennium, cannot simply be explained (or dismissed or contained) as another move in a Duchampian chess game.

• 2 •

If, instead of trying to position Place, Goldsmith, and Zolf diachronically—that is, in relation to the long history of the avant-garde practices of collage and appropriation—one tried to understand them in relation to the present moment, how might one proceed? A number of critics have proposed contemporary popular music as a starting point.⁴ And when analyzing poems

4. For critics who have connected the popularity of appropriation poetry to trends in popular music, see, for example, Christie; Fredman; Nowak, "Interview" 457 and 463; and Place and Fitterman 45.

such as “Miss Scarlett” it is tempting to turn to hip-hop and electronica, musical genres that feature sampling, mash-ups, remixes, mixsets, and other kinds of *second-order composition*, that is, the artful selection, alteration, and rearrangement of preexisting materials. Bands such as the Boards of Canada, Radiohead, and the Gorillaz and deejays such as Freelance Hellraiser and Danger Mouse could provide poetry scholars with instructive parallels.⁵

This argument obviously has merit. It can also mislead, however, since it assumes, not demonstrates, that song and lyric poetry remain intimately related in the new millennium. And Place’s, Zolf’s, and Goldsmith’s poems simply do not place a priority on the sensuous apprehension of sound and rhythm. Listening to them might be fascinating or informative, but they also present obstacles to being treated as scripts for performance. When read aloud, *Sports* makes a person sound like, well, a bored sportscaster, not a bard or minstrel. “Mixed Crowd” makes one sound like a confused prophet who can’t quite transcribe properly what God is saying. And who would want to give voice to “Miss Scarlett”? The part of Prissy poses a messy tangle of problems, practical and political. The materiality of language is important to these poets, yes. They are deeply invested in thinking about the substrates, the particular media, that people use to communicate different kinds of information. Much less central for them, though, is the perceptible manifestation, the obduracy, of the word as mark and breath and beat. Scanning their free verse, for instance, seems largely beside the point, hardly worth pursuing. Their writings tend to appeal to the intellect more than the senses, which is why critics and poets alike have been apt to assign them the label “conceptual.”⁶

5. See Nicholas Bourriaud’s *Postproduction* (2002) for what Marcus Boon has called an influential attempt to reorient the study of contemporary visual arts by placing at its center “the culture of the DJ as curator, selector, and sequencer of a vast historical and geographical archive” (143).

6. The term “conceptual” was first associated with conceptual writing, a literary movement of the 1990s and 2000s. Founding figures include Goldsmith, Dworkin, and Christian Bök. See Dworkin, Introduction; Goldsmith, “Conceptual Poetics.” By the middle of the past decade, the term had come to refer to a broad range of constraint-based and procedural compositional practices, of which redirected language is only a subset. See

Instead of the deejay at her turntable, I would like to propose a different scene of writing to envision when reading contemporary poetry. On August 29, 2008 the poet Stanislav L'vovskii posted a long poem titled "Chuzhimi slovami" (In Somebody Else's Words) on the popular Russian-language website *Open-Space.ru*. It responded tentatively to a recently concluded war. On August 8, Georgian troops had entered the autonomous region of South Ossetia to reassert central authority. Russia had answered by sending troops across the border to help the South Ossetians drive back the Georgians. Fighting formally ended on August 16. American and Western European news outlets uniformly portrayed Russia as the aggressor, whereas the Russian media depicted Georgia as the villain. Politics in the Caucasus are enormously complex; there is no need here to rehearse further the details of the South Ossetian conflict, let alone assign blame. What matters is the situation in which L'vovskii found himself. He was faced with an international conflict in a very tense part of the world, and he wanted to understand it better. "Chuzhimi slovami" records the results. It begins:

est' veshchi, ot kotorykh nel'zia otstupit'sia.

komitet po nevmeshatel'stvu v ispanskie dela
iz uchebnika noveishei istorii dlia desiatogo klassa srednei shkoly, kogda
ia.

tsitata iz Giote v uchebnike po obshchestvovedeniiu:
Sukha, moi drug, teoriia, vezde, / no drevo zhizni pyshno zeleneet
(perevod N. Kholodkovskogo)

zachem eto bylo sdelano?
takoe ob''iasnenie,—govorit Mitia,—ia gotov priniat',
v niom est' khot' kakaia-to logika.

Buenos-Aires—tot zhe Parizh, tol'ko luchshe.

no sbrasyvat' toplivnye bomby, posle kotoryhkh sgorela bol'shaia chast' Borzhomsko-Kharagaul'skogo zapovednika. . . —pishet v svoiem bloge Inna Kuli-shova.

*vot chort,—govorit berlinskii galerist Fol'ker Dil',
tol'ko chto otkryvshii filial svoei galerei v Moskve—tol'ko etogo mne
seichas ne khvatalo.*

* * *

there are things that cannot be denied.

*the committee on non-intervention into Spanish affairs
from a textbook on contemporary history, when I.*

a quotation from Goethe in a social science textbook:
All theory, my friend, is grey. / Life's golden tree is green.
(translation by N. Kholodkovskii)

why was this done?
*I'm prepared to accept such an explanation, Mitia says,
there's even a certain logic to it.*

Buenos Aires is the same as Paris, only better.

but they dropped incendiary bombs, after which the greater part of the Borjomi-Kharagauli national park burned . . . writes Nina Kulishova in her blog.

*damn it, the Berlin gallery owner Volker Diehl says,
who has just opened a branch of his gallery in Moscow, I didn't need this
right now.⁷*

At first, L'vovskii consults a couple of textbooks in search of enlightenment, and he cites a literary authority, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In contrast, his friend Mitia, it appears, is willing to accept "such an explanation," almost certainly a reference to the Russian government's position on current events, as promoted in the nationalist press. Unwilling to settle for this "logic,"

7. All translations from the Russian are mine. I have followed the Library of Congress system of transliteration with the exception of transliterating /ë/ as "io" or "o."

L'vovskii continues to hunt for information—and turns to the Internet. He finds there irrelevant inanities (“Buenos Aires is the same as Paris, only better”), firsthand reportage (Nina Kuli-shova’s blog), and damning statements (a gallery owner who is so egocentric that he interprets the war as a personal insult). From here, the poem becomes ravenous, incorporating a stream of comments, press releases, and observations. Certain themes do begin to emerge and recur. Most prominent is a comparison between Russia’s intervention in Georgia and Britain’s role in the 1982 Falklands crisis. The poem closes inconclusively, quoting three poets—Osip Mandelstam, Friedrich Hölderlin, and the Georgian writer Zviad Ratiani—and stating that “evakuatsiia nachinaetsia s pervogo oktriabria” (evacuation begins on the first of October), which is promised to proceed “bez provedeniia liu-brykh razrusheniï” (without any destruction).

Why is “Chuzhimi slovami” a useful poem in the present context? If an analogous work had been written in English, one would probably talk about it as a Poundian attempt to grapple with momentous but disputed events, perhaps akin to Vietnam War-era “notebook” poems such as Denise Levertov’s “To Stay Alive” (1971). In Russia, however, there is no equivalent of the Eliot-Pound-Olson tradition. Although avant-gardists from the cubo-futurists of the 1910s to the Moscow conceptualists of the 1980s did sporadically experiment with redirected language, these techniques never became generally accepted, and there is no twentieth-century Russian-language, collage-based poem with the prestige or fame of Pound’s *Cantos* (1964), William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* (1963), or Allen Ginsberg’s “Wichita Vortex Sutra” (1966).

L'vovskii’s “Chuzhimi slovami” is an example of a new, largely unprecedented post-Soviet literary phenomenon, what Ilya Kukulín has christened *documentalism*, the “use in poetry of ‘life-like material’—the mention of real people and institutions, the appeal to facts from contemporary history, and so on” (586). Such poetry, Kukulín argues, might superficially take the form of reportage, but its underlying motivation is to dramatize a poet’s efforts to make sense of a “collision of facts belonging to different orders and of initially unrelated images and psycholog-

ical states" (585). "Chuzhimi slovami" itself further suggests that the documentalist poet navigates a veritable sea of facts that arrive via many channels, some analog (books) and others digital (the Internet). Such a poem records its author's decisions regarding what to read, whom to trust, and what to record.

Virginia Jackson has traced in English-language literary critics from J. S. Mill to Northrop Frye to Herbert Tucker a consistent emphasis on the lyric as a special kind of fictive utterance, a persona speaking in isolation whom an audience somehow happens to "overhear" (129–32). She dwells on the oddity of this scenario, especially its assumption that lyric speakers are like prisoners in cells or hermits in the wilderness, barred from any possible direct interaction with others. As Theodor Adorno's "Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft" ("On Lyric Poetry and Society") (1951; 1957) illustrates, this Romantic fantasy of escaping the corruption and bustle of modern urban life can have political value by opening up a space for reflection and critique, but Jackson rightly questions the process of "lyricization" that has, since the eighteenth century, effectively narrowed down the possible configurations of address in English-language poetics (8). Why shouldn't personae inhabit a range of different speaking roles? Why not imagine language behaving entirely otherwise than stageable in the theater? L'vovskii's "Chuzhimi slovami" is not an overheard soliloquy. It captures a poet actively seeking words capable of adequately, accurately describing a horrific series of events. He becomes the "eyewitness" and "reporter" of what kinds of language are in circulation, and he appoints himself as a "political thinker and orator" who shares his discoveries with his readers (Kukulin 585). Presumably, those readers then have to assess his poem's value as they, too, struggle to manage information overload.

As a scene of writing, L'vovskii's dispenses with the myth of the lone, autonomous individual, able to express her private, uncontaminated thoughts and feelings. "Chuzhimi slovami" depicts an individual bound up in, inseparable from, circuits of communication, circuits, moreover, that tightly bind poet and reader. The words that he speaks are not uniquely "his." They belonged first to "others." He borrows them, tinkers with them,

and passes them on. He retains the power to act and to speak, but he cannot do so at a remove or free from the influence of the words that he takes in. He models, in short, what Cary Wolfe describes as “posthuman” subjectivity, that is, the “embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but its technological world,” such that it is “impossible to ignore” its “imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks.” The label “posthuman” can sound threatening or off-putting—are we talking about the end of the human race?—but Wolfe clarifies that the “post-” in “posthuman” serves the purpose of “decentering,” that is, making us think more carefully about how personal agency in the twenty-first century is increasingly shaped by a process of “coevolution” between bodies and technologies. We create computers and other digital devices that then extend and transform our capacities to act. One can, for instance, use a netbook, iPad, or BlackBerry to assemble and vet vast amounts of information from around the globe. Especially in the developed world, it becomes harder and harder to imagine daily life without our digital “tools and external archival mechanisms” (xv).

L’vovskii, choosing how to divide his attention and where to devote his labor, is a useful figure to keep in mind when trying to understand contemporary poetry. He does not attempt to affiliate himself with an avant-garde tradition that polemically advocates appropriation, citation, and collage as means of challenging artificial divisions between art and life. “Chuzhimi slovami” might be experimental, in the sense that its form has few precedents in Russian literature, but that form is at base mimetic, genuinely reflecting the texture and character of the author’s interior life. For modernists, impressionism and stream of consciousness were strategies for conveying how the world’s concrete facts impinged on one’s consciousness. In today’s posthuman poetics, what impinges is data, the 24/7 press of who-says-what delivered via TV, telephone, MP3 player, e-book, and computer screen. A poem that emerges from this media surround is likely to operate differently from the “overheard” lyric privileged by Mill and Frye. Like the poetries discussed in this

article, its hallmark is not self-expression but redirection, selectively choosing and passing along others' words.

Herein lies the weakness of the popular music analogy. Deejays, although working within the same information economy as today's poets, remain fundamentally committed to an aesthetics of expression, insofar as their primary goals are musical, namely, to create rhythm, melody, harmony, and a compelling sequence of sounds. As Joseph G. Schloss puts it in his 2004 ethnographic study of hip-hop sampling, the technique is practiced only when it supports "the role of the DJ: the music must be responsive to the needs of the listeners, the dancers, and head-nodders. It has to rock the crowd" (196). In addition, as Simon Frith argues in *Performing Rites* (1996), most popular music audibly inscribes traces of its ideal locations of production and consumption, whether it be the dance hall, the jazz club, the pub back room, the street, or the stadium (6–7). L'vovskii, Place, and Zolf might also choose to excerpt particular texts on account of their aural qualities, but in general the poetry of redirected language deemphasizes prosody and figurative language, and both its authors and readers are assumed to be online, networked, and actively switching among content-streams. Instead of swaying on a dance floor, they stare at flat screens and restlessly type away on keyboards.⁸

• 3 •

The variety of poetics written over the last decade that employ redirected language is impressive. There are *list poems*, such as John Ashbery's "They Knew What They Wanted" (2009), which

8. In a longer essay, this scene of writing could provide a starting point for comparing present-day conceptions of authorship to premodern ones, in which to be an author (*auctor*) usually meant compiling, repeating, and commenting on what authorities (*auctoritates*) had said in the past. See Lerer 7–9. L'vovskii also offers a model of deliberative agency ("I the author choose to put *these* excerpts in *this* order") that could help one distinguish contemporary appropriation poetics from late-twentieth-century poetics such as John Ashbery's *Three Poems* (1972) and Susan Howe's *Defenestration of Prague* (1983) that more generally highlight what Julia Kristeva terms "intertextuality," the fact that any text can be read as a "mosaic of quotations," an array of words and phrases always-already written or spoken by someone else (qtd. in Orr 21).

consists solely of a string of movie names; Tan Lin's *BIB* (2007), which records the titles of everything that the poet read between January 10, 2006 and October 31, 2007; and Robert Fitterman's "National Laureate" (2009), which quotes each of the current state poets laureate, from Alaska to Wyoming, in alphabetical order. Then there are *poems-by-erasure*, such as Jen Bervin's *Nets* (2004), which grays out most of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and leaves only certain words legible, and Srikanth Reddy's *Voyager* (2011), which creates three long poems by deleting most of *In the Eye of the Storm* (1986), a memoir by Kurt Waldheim, the former United Nations Secretary General and Nazi S.S. officer. Mark Nowak's *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009) is an anticapitalist *muckraking poem* in the tradition of Muriel Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead* (1938). It alternates four kinds of material: creepy grade-school lesson plans recommended by the American Coal Foundation; "verbatim excerpts from over 6,300 pages of testimony transcripts housed at the West Virginia Office of Miners' Health and Safety website"; extracts from newspaper articles detailing deaths and mining disasters in the People's Republic of China; and Ian Teh's color photographs of miners and mining communities in West Virginia and China (179). Zolf's "Mixed Crowd" could be called a *comparison poem*; another similar work, Caroline Bergvall's "Via" (2005), juxtaposes translations of the opening lines of Dante's *Inferno*.

One particularly intriguing new genre has been poems composed with *controlled vocabularies*, that is, by limiting the words used to those that appear in one or more preexisting texts.⁹ Depending on the number and range of words that are permissible, works of this kind can grant somewhat greater latitude for authors to express themselves than does the copying of phrases and complete sentences, but the generative constraint (only these words, no others) also inclines such poems toward a pronounced self-reflexivity. They meditate on what the language deployed in

9. I have borrowed the term "controlled vocabulary" from information science, where it refers to a set of predefined, authorized terms preselected by an author. Controlled vocabularies are fundamental to many indexing and tagging schemes.

a particular situation, genre, or text renders possible or impossible to say.

When writing "The Last Dream of Light Released from Seaports" (2010), for example, Timothy Donnelly limited himself to two sources, "successive pages" from the USA Patriot Act and the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen's 1975 song "Born to Run" (*Cloud* 149).¹⁰ The first of these, signed into law by George W. Bush in October 2001, is a provocative choice. A direct response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the USA Patriot Act expanded the ability of American law-enforcement agencies to search telephone, e-mail, medical, financial, and other records; increased the Treasury Department's authority to regulate financial transactions; and gave law-enforcement and immigration agencies new latitude when deciding when to detain or deport immigrants. From the beginning, it has been controversial, accused by progressives of representing, as Judith Butler has put it, "an effort to suspend civil liberties in the name of security" and to "overrid[e] longstanding claims to intellectual freedom and freedom of association that have been central to conceptions of democratic political life" (xvi). In allowing himself only the legal vocabulary used by Congress, Donnelly presents himself with a weighty challenge. Can he take a document whose inelegant, euphemistic official "short title" is the "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001" and somehow redeem it?

Presumably, Donnelly's second source should play an important role in this quest. Bruce Springsteen's mid-1970s guitar anthem, however, would seem a somewhat fanciful and inadequate choice. "Born to Run" is a love song for a girl named Wendy and a plea for escape from small-town life. Where can you "run"—indeed, how can you flee—when the U.S. government can electronically track you down, forcibly detain you, and

10. Donnelly credits the idea for this poem to his friend Geoffrey G. O'Brien. See Donnelly, "I Digress." His poem should be compared to O'Brien's "They Met Only in the Evenings" (2007), which "was composed using only language from the USA PATRIOT Act: subsequently, one word per line was replaced with a word from a translation of Jean Genet's *Querelle*" (ix).

send you abroad to torture you, without having to seek court approval or tell you or anyone why? Rock music might be credited with playing a role in the undermining and eventual collapse of the Communist East, and it had close historical ties with the anti-Vietnam War movement, but does it still have any magic left now that so many baby boomers have been reborn as tea partiers?

The poem begins *in medias res*, announcing a sweeping set of newly criminalized “proceedings” and then specifying a peculiar list of things that the speaker credits with “hav[ing] everlasting vision”:

And such proceedings shall be considered criminal:
amusement amendments, two or more individuals,
any dream proceedings which engage in the activities

indicating intention, love, or other things of value;
a safe house, a biological boulevard, communications
that demonstrate the actor plans to commit rips

in new material, transfer funds, have everlasting vision.

(*Cloud 53*)

Most of these words have been lifted from the USA Patriot Act, as one might expect given the preponderance of vague abstractions and Latinity. Donnelly, significantly, borrows only one or two words at a time from that source and then reorders them however he wishes, as this extract from “Subtitle B—Enhanced Immigration Provisions” shows:

To commit an act that *the actor* knows, or reasonably should know, affords *material* support, including a *safe house*, transportation, *communications*, funds, *transfer of funds* or other material financial benefit, false documentation or identification, weapons (including chemical, *biological*, or radiological weapons), explosives, or training.

(emphasis added)

He takes only the italicized words and ignores the rest. How does “Born to Run” fit in? After one performs numerous searches on a PDF version of the Patriot Act and carefully scrutinizes a printout of Springsteen’s lyrics, it becomes possible to say that

Donnelly has chosen one word per line from the song, here “And,” “amusement,” “dream,” “love,” “boulevard,” “rips,” and “everlasting.” He has injected a small amount of seventies rock in every line of his poem, as if by diluting or leavening the legalese he might also deflect it in a new direction. He succeeds, too, in a sense, by introducing an *Alice in Wonderland*-ish surrealism. What is an “amusement amendment,” and who would or could outlaw a “dream proceeding”? He also renders the underlying stakes of this strange legalistic process more momentous (specifying “love” as something of “value” that people can “engage in” that has been declared “criminal”). “Born to Run” also allows him to romanticize the opposition, that is, to evoke Ginsberg and Blake: “communications / that demonstrate the actor plans . . . to have *everlasting* vision.” While not exactly proving that the language of governance can be made more humane, Donnelly does show that, if one introduces a smidgen of the language of adolescent “dreams” and “amusement,” bureaucratic jargon can be twisted into telling a more dramatic and memorable story.

If poems with controlled vocabularies are often about trying to escape from the constraints of a particular discourse—one can compare Donnelly’s experiment, for instance, to M. NourbeSe Philip’s book-length effort in *Zong!* (2008) “to cut to pieces” the text of the court case *Gregson v. Gilbert* and through reassembly recover the lost voices of African slaves drowned in the Middle Passage (193)—another popular variety of appropriation poetry, *Google-sculpting*, seeks, as Rita Dahl has put it, to splice “different language registers, sublime and low, everyday speech, curse words—the discourse human beings use in their everyday communication” (34).¹¹ A poet typically enters a word or phrase into an Internet search engine, sees what pages or links come up, and judiciously singles out, pares down, and sutures together phrases, sentences, and whole passages. The results are fre-

11. The term “Google-sculpting” was first popularized during early discussions of the post-9/11, New York City-based avant-garde movement Flarf, but the meaning has expanded and loosened over time. For representative early discussions of Google-sculpting, see Hoy and Tost.

quently bizarre, humorous, or aggravating. Search engines, after all, are indifferent to decorum, taste, and politics as they troll for information, and they pretty much ignore, too, the racial, ethnic, confessional, national, class, age, and gender boundaries that normally keep online communities insulated from one another.

The compositional procedures that Ara Shirinyan followed when writing his book *Your Country Is Great* (2008) are typical for the genre:

I stuck to the list of countries and territories listed in the CIA's *The World Facebook* (2006 version). . . . Using Google, I would type "[country] is great" and search. The quotes ensured that I would get any instance of those three words on the internet. If there are pages where nothing but the title exists, it's because nothing came up for those countries. . . . That is, no one who could write in English and had access to the web thought to say anything great about those countries. Sometimes I would get very few results, at other times I would get dozens and dozens of pages. . . .

All the misspellings, irregular capitalization, and punctuation inconsistencies are as I found them. As I read through the rough collected material, I occasionally deleted results that did not fit whatever idea I had about the piece. The line breaks are mostly rhythmic.

His search strings became the individual titles: "Burma Is Great," "Cape Verde Is Great," "Côte d'Ivoire Is Great," and so forth. In the published portion of the project, covering Afghanistan to Guyana, there are five poems that consist solely of a title and a blank page, including "Antigua and Barbuda Is Great," "Burundi Is Great," and "Central African Republic Is Great." (These are strangely sad moments in the book. It feels like a gallery of the unloved. In reality, it is a set of countries so marginal to the global economy that they have attracted few tourists and have not been able to generate much of an online presence in late-capitalism's *lingua franca*, English.) The bulk of the poems consist of unsophisticated, ungrammatical praise of *x* or *y* country by visitors, patriots, and economists, the sort of language one finds in chat rooms, travel blogs, hotel reviews, pop-up ads, and Facebook status updates:

Barbados is great for doing nothing at all
and relaxing
or being a tourist

in every since [*sic*] of the word,
if you so desire.

Barbados is great for families and couples,
with a lot of waterspouts [*sic*] activities and beaches
to choose from.

Barbados is great for what you want.
Check out Coral Reef Club.
Family-owned for 50 years,
and the caring shows.

(26)

The awfulness of the writing is patent: one encounters typos, misspellings, redundancies, solecisms, and more. Lineation accentuates these flaws insofar as it invites unfavorable comparisons. What self-respecting, Norton-anthologized poet, for instance, would go on and on like this, trying everyone's patience? At times the book conveys a Swiftian scorn for humanity's antics. Yes, Literate Reader, this is in fact how people communicate and conduct business around the world. They do talk *ad nauseam* about snorkeling, boating, team sports, prostitution, and which countries and cultures produce the most hotties.

Shirinyan is in control throughout *Your Country Is Great*, however. He makes use of anaphora, parallelism, repetition, self-interruption, enjambment, asyndeton, and other devices to control the pacing and impact of his unruly voices. His exposé of inanity can, at times, take a calculated turn toward the serious. "Belarus Is Great," for example, starts predictably:

Belarus is great and amazing
and fun and sweet and just
awesome. I go there every summer.
The chicks there are absolutely gorgeous!

(28)

Belarus is not, however, a country with a rosy recent history. Alexander Lukashenko has served as president of the former Soviet republic since 1994, and his regime has been regularly accused of gross violations of human rights. The next-to-last

verse paragraph in Shirinyan's poem introduces a dissident voice who talks back to the previously sunny ones:

You say Belarus is
great and democratic.
Here is my report,
and you decide.
Our car was stopped
at least three times a day
without any explanation.

(28)

The poem then ends with a truncated expression of hope: "What's going on in Belarus is great. / From what I understand the 3rd night / had more supporters than the 2nd night" (28). Given when the book was written, this snippet of text probably refers to events surrounding the 2006 Belarusian presidential election. That particular moment of populist agitation was quickly quashed. Western observers accused Lukashenko of vote-rigging and threats of violence, but no matter, he was returned to power in a landslide. He made certain that Belarus would not go the way of the Orange Revolution (Ukraine 2004–5), the Rose Revolution (Georgia 2003), and the Tulip Revolution (Kyrgyzstan 2005). The title "Belarus Is Great" is sadly ironic. The long-suffering people of Minsk, Hrodna, and Homiel deserve to live in a better, more just nation.

These sober moments are interspersed with instances of odd humor. By using Google to supply his material, Shirinyan introduces an anarchic, wayward dimension to his information-gathering. Internet search engines, after all, are still blunt instruments. They typically point users to one or more irrelevant pages. A Google-sculptor could ignore these hits or repeatedly cut and splice whatever turns up until it sounds pertinent. Shirinyan, though, has no objection to permitting a few off-topic passages to slip through. In "Chad Is Great," for instance, the following quatrain appears: "Every chad is sacred, / every chad is great, / If a chad is wasted, / God gets quite irate" (60). The word "chad" here has nothing to do with a landlocked Central African nation. It refers, of course, to "hanging chads," incompletely punched paper ballots that were the subject of intense

scrutiny during the Florida recount after the disputed U.S. presidential election of 2000. Some anonymous comedian has taken a song from the movie *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* (1983) that pokes fun at Catholic doctrine concerning birth control and substituted "chad" for "sperm," concisely conveying his or her scorn toward the rituals and pieties played out during the interminable weeks of waiting to learn who would be president, George W. Bush or Al Gore. Running across these lines in the middle of *Your Country Is Great* is like discovering a fly in amber. It is unexpected, uncanny, yet also reassuring. Who would ever have expected something so ephemeral to be preserved?

Perhaps future readers will feel similarly about all of the Google-sculpted, appropriative, documentary, and found-text poetics of the past decade. More than a period style, they might reflect a period ethos. Almost a century and a half ago, but also in wartime, Herman Melville began his book *Battle-Pieces* with an *echt* Romantic declaration: "I seem, in most of these verses, to have but placed a harp in a window, and noted the contrasted airs which wayward winds have played upon the strings" (v). Today's poet, one might say, stands outside in a data-storm, and she clings to the few language scraps she is able to rescue as they blow by.

• 4 •

What lies in the future for the poetics of redirected language? It could be rendered moribund by a swing of the pendulum back toward a more "humanist" understanding of poetic composition and reception. Stephen Burt's *Boston Review* essay "The New Thing" (2009) has directed attention to a late-in-the-decade, widespread revival of interest in objectivist-style free verse, that is, poetry written in the style of Robert Creeley, Lorine Niedecker, and George Oppen that features short lines, frequent enjambment, heavy stresses, and a variety of devices calculated to call attention to the look and sound of the physical word. This spare variety of lyric poetry positively exudes sincerity. It evokes Rae Armantrout's precision, Charles Reznikoff's restraint, and William Carlos Williams's rough honesty. "New Thing" poets such

as Joseph Massey, Pam Rehm, and Shannon Tharp seem strikingly disinterested in the shove and tug of digital technologies. They are intent instead on establishing direct, unmediated contact with the world around them. Massey's "Noon" is a good example:

Sun's thud
 between
 overhead
 leaves
 obscures
 these bees
 probing
 a shadowed
 plot's white
 flowers
 thumbed
 out from
 threshed
 shrubs piled
 beside a
 sheet of
 rusted metal.

(8)

The "thud" of these one- and two-syllable words descends the page in imitation of the "Sun's" filtered rays, which fall "between / overhead / leaves" into a shadowy garden "plot." The clotted, heavy sound play—for example, "threshed / shrubs piled / beside"—causes a reader to slow down, even lose track of where she is in this ladderlike sentence. It takes an effort to concentrate on the content and discern the underlying scene—the "bees," "flowers," and "sheet of / rusted metal"—that the semidark "obscures." Harkening back to Williams's "Between Walls" (1934) and Niedecker's "My Life by Water" (1968), Massey's "Noon" settles for naming what a speaker sees and intimating how he feels while seeing it. One hundred years after Ezra Pound and H.D. challenged poets to boil lyricism down to a concentrated act of perceiving and describing, Massey proposes a return to that same scene of composition. Now, however, that scenario

serves as an escape from, or position in opposition to, the wired-and-networked vision of authorship that L'vovskii's "Chuzhimi slovami" exemplifies.

Cellphones, however, are not going away any time soon. Neither are iPads, social networking sites, Google Books, or e-mail. Insofar as the poetics of redirected language is well-suited to this media ecology, it is probably here to stay, too. It could change, of course. It could become more performative, or more musical. In 2008, for instance, Gregory Laynor recorded himself reading aloud the whole of Gertrude Stein's gargantuan *The Making of Americans* (1925). Each of the novel's nine 913 pages is available as a separate "poem"/MP3 file on Ubu.com. Such a project redirects language, certainly, but it also shifts the emphasis away from the conceptual to the corporeal. Indeed, as Laynor sings, recites, and chants, he increasingly begins to recall twentieth-century poets such as Helen Adam and Kenward Elmslie whose works deliberately straddle the lines between lyric poetry and lyrics-for-a-Broadway-musical.

Lenka Clayton's "Qaeda, Quality, Question, Quickly, Quiet" (2010) also puts questions of performance front and center, but Clayton concentrates more on the role that technology plays in the production, distribution, and consumption of discourse in the public sphere. Published under the heading "Poetry" in the seventh issue of the online journal *Wag's Revue*, "Qaeda, Quality" takes a video recording of the 2003 State of the Union Address and reorders it so that George W. Bush delivers every word in the speech alphabetically. Hearing the president say "America," "country," and "terrorist" over and over accurately recaptures the numbing, unceasing drumbeat of patriotic rhetoric that all too often substituted for rational argument whenever his administration sought to justify the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Clayton's "Qaeda, Quality" eliminates any ambiguity concerning whether she owns or speaks her redirected language. She intervenes in and reconfigures politicized speech. Disregarding the lyric as a frame or touchstone, she manipulates the raw stuff of the multimedia archive, blurring the boundaries between poet, editor, and producer.

In the coming years, appropriation-based poetics will almost certainly continue in print-based forms, too, although there is no reason to suspect that they will strictly maintain their purity (“no words by me at all!”). There will probably be more hybrid poems like James Thomas Stevens’s “Alphabets of Letters” (2007), which, although it starts with extracts from colonial textbooks such as *A Primer for Mohawk Children* (1786) and interpolates quotations from other sources, interjects newly composed verses as well. At one point, for example, Stevens takes an abecedary from *The New England Primer* (ca. 1690)—which begins “In ADAM’s fall, / We sinned All. // Heaven to find, / the BIBLE mind”—and scrambles the order of the couplets. He then replaces several with new ones written from his own point of view (as an enrolled member of the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation, he has strong opinions about the European colonization of North America):

X	Old XERXES did die, and fo muft I.
T	We are Full of Glory all, when we Want to TAKE, ethics Fall.
L	LOT fled to <i>Zoar</i> ; Saw fiery <i>Shower</i> ; on Sodom pour.
Z	ZACCHEUS he, did Climb the tree, Our Lord to See.

(96–97)

Reordering the alphabet, Stevens wants readers to think carefully about how and when one masters it. What would it have been like for Mohawk children in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to learn to read using these rhymes as prompts? They presume familiarity with the Bible and require the students to name themselves as Christian (“Our Lord”). They teach that sodomy and sodomites are punished by God. They also remind the children that they will die someday. For descendants of European settlers, this kind of *memento mori* might have served to reinforce proper behavior: Remember, be good, or else when you’re dead you won’t go to heaven! Things would have been different for children of an indigenous people threatened with extinction. Murder, disease, starvation: no wonder Stevens emends the rhyme for “T” (“Young TIMOTHY / Learnt Sin to

fly”) to read instead “We are Full of Glory all, / when we Want to TAKE, ethics Fall.”¹² To survive this New World, to “TAKE” back what they have lost, must the Mohawks adopt the same ruthless amorality as the primer’s English “We”?

In addition to poems such as Laynor’s, Clayton’s and Stevens’s, there is one last strain within contemporary poetry that might reward scrutiny if a critic is seeking portents concerning possible new developments in the 2010s. Writers in this final camp pursue more or less old-fashioned lyrical ends but also make use of devices favored by Google-sculptors such as Ara Shirinyan. Ben Lerner’s *Mean Free Path* (2010) is probably the highest-profile example. It repeatedly interrupts itself and then restarts, threading together fragments spoken by different people or perhaps by the same person on different occasions:

There are three hundred sixty-two thousand	A
And that’s love. There are flecks of hope	B
Eight hundred eighty ways to read each stanza	A
Deep in traditional forms like flaws	B
Visible when held against the light	B
I did not walk here all the way from prose	C
To make corrections in red pencil	C
I came here tonight to open you up	C
To interference heard as music	C

(43; letters added)

This stanza, for instance, threads together three distinct statements. A and B alternate in the first four lines, B rounds to a close, and then C takes over. Lerner holds his own words at a curious distance, cutting them apart and recombining them to create effects of deferral, recurrence, and breakthrough. Momentary confusions—such as a reader’s initial uncertainty whether “And that’s love” in the second line completes the sentence begun in the first or represents a new departure—are followed by passages of unexpected clarity, such as the run of lines

12. See Ford 58–67 for a discussion of the many variants of the illustrated abecedarium published in different editions of the *New England Primer* and associated textbooks. I have quoted the version of the “T” mnemonic that appears in the earliest editions. It refers to 2 Tim. 2:22.

marked *C. Mean Free Path* revolves around the love of “Ben” for “Ariana,” and it meditates, in a zigzag way, on a familiar poetic dilemma, whether contemporary English has been so marred, so damaged by warfare and bureaucracy and weaselly politicians that it can no longer serve as a meaningful or reliable vehicle to express one’s most cherished thoughts and feelings. The strangely sutured results convey Lerner’s alienation from his own words—they are material to be manipulated, not upwellings from the soul—even as the peculiar stop-on-a-dime, to-and-fro movement generates a music out of “interference” that one quickly begins to recognize as his aural signature, a way of marking these words, however clichéd, as having passed through his mind and hands.¹³ For once, the deejay analogy might be apt. *Mean Free Path* seduces via its sound play and its string of striking phrases, whether or not a reader is able to reconstruct which phrases connect up or to follow any underlying argument. Skill and timing are of the essence here, not conceptual games or patterns that entice the intellect.

What will happen during the second decade of the twenty-first century? As smartphones and tablet PCs acquire more and more functions, and as other unforeseen digital technologies become widely available, people in the developed world are liable to find their lives and livelihoods increasingly enmeshed in cybernetic circuits and globalized information-flows. The distinction between “my” words and “someone else’s” might, as a consequence, gradually stop mattering much at all. In Lerner’s *Mean Free Path*, we see one possible outcome. He has begun treating his own words *as if they were a data stream like any other*, subject to the same operations of copying, editing, and reordering.¹⁴ If, as Cary Wolfe has argued, the “coevolution” of people and digital technologies is initiating a new phase in human history and

13. See Perloff, “Language Poetry” 414 on this expanded use of “signature.”

14. Compare Lyn Hejinian’s manner of composing *The Fatalist* (2003): for one year she saved copies of all her computer-based correspondence and compiled them into a single, extra-long document. She then reshaped this personal archive through selective deletion, which she compares to a sculptor chiseling away stone to reveal a human figure. See Hejinian. This process falls somewhere between Shirinyan’s, in which the material is entirely “other,” and Lerner’s, in which the words are all marked as “his.”

subjectivity, then Lerner's indifference to authoring versus borrowing language might in fact represent true novelty (xv). On or about December 2010, human character changed . . . ?

University of Washington, Seattle

WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor. "Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft" [On Lyric Poetry and Society]. *Noten zur Literatur* [Notes on Literature]. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974. 49–68.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Slovo v romane" [Discourse in the Novel]. *Voprosy literatury i estetiki. Issledovaniia raznykh let* [Questions on Literature and Aesthetics: Studies from Different Years]. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1975. 72–233.
- Bök, Christian. "A Silly Key: Some Notes on *Soliloquy* by Kenneth Goldsmith." *Open Letter* 12.7 (2005): 65–76.
- Boon, Marcus. *In Praise of Copying*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010.
- Bourriaud, Nicholas. *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*. Trans. Jeanine Herman. New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2002.
- Burt, Stephen. "The New Thing: The Object Lessons of Recent American Poetry." *Boston Review* May–June 2009.
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.
- Christie, Jason. "Sampling the Culture: 4 Notes toward a Poetics of Plundergraphia and on Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day*." *Open Letter* 12.7 (Fall 2005): 77–83.
- Clayton, Lenka. "Qaeda, Quality, Question, Quickly, Quickly, Quiet." *Wag's Revue* 7 (Fall 2010). Web. 2 Apr. 2011.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Coleridge's Table Talk*. London: Gay, 1899.
- Dahl, Rita. "Poet Under the Nationalist Hill or Over the Network?" *Nuestra voz, Our voice, Notre voix*, vol. 4. Ed. Iride M. Rossi de Fiori. Salta, Arg.: Biblioteca de Textos Universarios, 2008. 33–34.
- Donnelly, Timothy. "And I Digress: PW Talks with Timothy Donnelly." Interview. Conducted by Craig Morgan Teicher. *Publishers Weekly* 16 Aug. 2010. Web. 31 Mar. 2011.
- . *The Cloud Corporation*. Seattle: Wave, 2010.
- Dworkin, Craig. Introduction. *The UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. Ubu.com. Web. 2 Apr. 2011.
- . "Poetry without Organs." *Complicities: British Poetry, 1945–2007*. Ed. Robin Purves and Sam Ladkin. Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2007. 168–93.
- Dworkin, Craig, and Kenneth Goldsmith, eds. *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. Chicago: Northwestern UP, 2011.
- Eliot, T. S. *Selected Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode. New York: Farrar, 1975.

- "Flotilla Death to Jews Chant." *Jewlicious*. N.p., 1 June 2010. Web. 27 Nov. 2011.
- Ford, Paul Leicester. Introduction. *The New England Primer: A Reprint of the Earliest Known Edition*. Ed. Paul Leicester Ford. New York: Dodd, 1899. 1–113.
- Fredman, Stephen. "The Mix." *Conceptual Poetry and Its Others*. U of Arizona Poetry Center. 31 May 2008. Roundtable talk. Web. 1 Apr. 2011.
- Frith, Simon. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996.
- Goldsmith, Kenneth. "Conceptual Poetics: Kenneth Goldsmith." *Poetryfoundation.org*. 9 June 2008. Web. 2 Apr. 2011.
- . *Sports*. Los Angeles: Make Now, 2008.
- Hejninian, Lyn. "On 'The Fatalist.'" Kelly Writers House Fellows Reading. 21 Feb. 2005. PennSound. Web. 3 Apr. 2011.
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *Letters to Robert Bridges*. New York: Oxford UP, 1955.
- Hoy, Dan. "The Virtual Dependency of the Post-Avant and the Problematics of Flarf: What Happens When Poets Spend Too Much Time Fucking Around on the Internet." *Jacket* 29 (Apr. 2006). Web. 1 Apr. 2011.
- Jackson, Virginia Walker. *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005.
- Kukulin, Ilya. "Documentalist Strategies in Contemporary Russian Poetry." *Russian Review* 69 (Oct. 2010): 585–614.
- Laynor, Gregory. *The Making of the Americans by Gertrude Stein*. *UbuWeb*. Kenneth Goldsmith, 2008. Web. 27 Nov. 2011.
- Lerer, Seth. Introduction. *La Vita Nuova*, by Dante Alighieri. Trans. David R. Slavitt. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010. 1–23.
- Lerner, Ben. *Mean Free Path*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2010.
- L'vovskii, Stanislav. "Chuzhimi slovami" (In Someone Else's Words). *OpenSpace.ru*. 29 Aug. 2008. Web. 2 Apr. 2011.
- Massey, Joseph. *Areas of Fog*. Exeter, UK: Shearsman, 2009.
- McCaig, Donald. *Rhett Butler's People*. New York, St. Martin's, 2007.
- Melville, Herman. *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*. New York: Harper, 1866.
- Mill, John Stuart. "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties." *Dissertations and Discussions Political, Philosophical, and Historical*. Vol. 1. London: Parker, 1859. 63–94.
- Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone with the Wind*. 1936. New York: Simon, 2008.
- "Muslims: What are your thoughts when a person says to you these things (as shown below)?" *Yahoo! Singapore Answers*. Yahoo! Singapore, 2009. Web. 27 Nov. 2011.
- Nowak, Mark. *Coal Mountain Elementary*. Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House, 2009.
- . "An Interview with Mark Nowak." Conducted by Steel Wagstaff. *Contemporary Literature* 51.3 (2010): 453–76.
- O'Brien, Geoffrey G. *Green and Gray*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2007.
- Orr, Mary. *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003.

- Perloff, Marjorie. "Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman's Albany, Susan Howe's Buffalo." *Critical Inquiry* 25.3 (1999): 405–34.
- . *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010.
- Philip, M. NourbeSe. *Zong!* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2008.
- Place, Vanessa. "Miss Scarlett." *Poetry* 194.4 (July-Aug. 2009): 339–40.
- Place, Vanessa, and Robert Fitterman. *Notes on Conceptualisms*. New York: Ugly Duckling, 2009.
- Reed, Brian M. "Grammar Trouble." *Boundary 2* 36.3 (2009): 133–58.
- Schloss, Joseph G. *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-hop*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2004.
- Shirinyan, Ara. *Your Country Is Great*. New York: Futurepoem, 2008.
- Stevens, James Thomas. *A Bridge Dead in the Water*. Cambridge, UK: Salt, 2007.
- Tost, Tony. "Blowing Up Just to Say Something to Us: K. Silem Mohammad and the Sub-Poetics of Flarf." *Fascicle* 1.1 (Summer 2005). Web. 1 Apr. 2011.
- Wolfe, Cary. *What Is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010.
- Zolf, Rachel. *Neighbour Procedure*. Toronto: Coach House, 2010.