Sincerity and the Second Person: Lyric after Language Poetry

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This paper began as an effort to understand the simultaneous emergence of two striking trends in U.S. poetry during the past decade: 1) the popularity of appropriative techniques (e.g., collage, cross-outs, or—particularly relevant to this context—transcription) and 2) new imperatives to construct poems that appear to resist artifice, whether in the form of a commitment to sincerity, a lack of irony, a childlike innocence or wonder, artlessness, etc. Most of these projects as well as the statements created to explain and promote them are delivered to some degree with tongue in cheek (in the case of Kenneth Goldsmith, whom I'll discuss at greater length below, quite literally), but at the same time, I will argue, they are serving to make visible a particular set of problems that have dominated Western poetry over (at least) the past two centuries, persisting across movements and forms (the Romantic lyric and Language poetry alike) that would otherwise seem diametrically opposed. The problem set recurs in a number of guises: in the efforts to differentiate, for example, between poems that emphasize the "personal" and those that announce their "impersonality"; between a speaker's sincerity or authenticity, or between either of these and their imagined impossibility; between denying and asserting the poem's relation to a reader/ listener/audience. In short, a set of problems that epitomize the kinds of projects we commonly identify either with lyric as such or with its critique.[1]

As examples of what I am calling (admittedly very roughly speaking) appropriative projects, I have in mind the practice of "Flarf," in which poets

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[1] For critical arguments that have explicitly asserted or otherwise helped to secure the idea of lyric's domination, see (among others): Helen Vendler, W.R. Johnson, Sharon Cameron, Allen Grossman, and most recently, William Waters. Mark Jeffreys reverses the idea of lyric domination in "Ideologies of Lyric: A Problem of Genre in Contemporary Anglophone Poetics," claiming that "lyric did not conquer poetry; poetry was reduced to lyric" (*PMLA* 100.2 [March 1995], 200). Jeffreys's larger purpose is to show how an ongoing identification of lyric with New Critical interpretive practices, alongside a general critique of those practices—staged most vividly in Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker's edited volume, *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985)—has had the effect of suggesting that "a reactionary ideology inheres in the genre, and that any text identifiable as an instance of that genre [can] be assumed to participate in its ideology" (198). Virginia Jackson makes further adjustments to Jeffreys's claim, proposing that "lyric became a metaphor for the New Criticism [and its reactionary ideology]" (*Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005], 93). Indeed, Jackson proposes an even stronger version of Jeffreys's argument in the principle project of her book, namely to track "the century and a half that spans the circulation of Dickinson's work as poetry" in order to expose what she calls a "modern lyric logic" that renders lyrical poems that she argues were never intended to be (6).

stitch texts together out of fragments of Google search results (e.g., K. Selim Mohammad's *Deer Head Nation* [Oakland: Tougher Disguises, 2003], Drew Gardner's *Petroleum Hat* [New York: Roof Books, 2005], Michael Magee's *My Angie Dickinson* [Canary Islands, Spain: Zasterle, 2006], Katie Degentesh's *The Anger Scale* [Cumberland, RI: Combo Books, 2006]); a recent vogue for centos (poems made out of lines from other poets' poems); poems made by crossing out parts of other texts (e.g. Srikanth Reddy's cross-outs using Kurt Waldheim's journals in his *Voyager* poems); and, in their most extreme form, works created by transcribing more or less faithfully an entire text or group of texts, a media broadcast, a conversation, etc. (e.g. Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day* [Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 2003], a complete transcription of a single day's issue of *The New York Times*; Noah Eli Gordon's *Inbox: A Reverse Memoir* [Kenmore, NY: BlazeVOX, 2006], a slightly redacted compilation of the text of all the email in the poet's inbox on a given day; or for that matter *Conversations Over Stolen Food* by the editors of this *Interval(le)s* issue).[2]

In the second vein, I would point first to a group of poets who refer to themselves as "New Sincerists," making an aesthetic program out of what was initially intended as a joke, namely Joseph Massey's blog entry, "Eat Shit and Die: A Manifesto for the New Sincerity."[3] And in what surely needs to be understood as an extension of that development, there's the more recent flurry of poems written in the mode of a certain childlike artlessness or undefendedness, exemplified in books like Tao Lin's *you are a little bit happier than I am* (Notre Dame, IN: Action Books, 2006), Dorothea Lasky's *Awe* (Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2007), and Jillian Clark's *if i am in a room full of people i am not having any fun* (Blurb Books, 2008) whose titles alone already tell part of the story.[4] As an instance of some overlap between the appropriative and what we may as well call the "sincerist," Michael Magee's "Mainstream Movement" should also be seen as a relevant development here. Effectively a restaging of Flarf in the form of a blog (and with the requisite manifesto), the movement's imperative to embrace the "mainstream" as a source of poetry is explicitly cast as a means of avoiding "censoring yourself."[5]

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[2] Parts of the project are available online at UbuWeb, accessed 21 August 2008, http://www.ubu.com/ubu/unpub/Unpub_021_CotnerFitch_Conversations.pdf; *Paper Monument,* accessed 21 August 2008, http://www.papermonument.com/cotner_fitch.html; and *Cross-Cultural Poetics: Streetnotes*, accessed 17 August 2008, http://xcp.bfn.org/cotner1.html.

[3] Joseph Massey, "Eat Shit and Die: A Manifesto for The New Sincerity," *rootedfool*, 4 July 2005. Accessed 17 August 2008. http://rootedfool.livejournal.com/236409.html.

[4] I'm indebted to two graduate students from the UIC Program for Writers for introducing me to these texts: Mackenzie Carignan first called my attention to the New Sincerists in early 2006. And after a seminar the following fall, in which I taught Massey's manifesto alongside some of the other texts that I discuss in this paper, Jennifer Moore alerted me to the work of Lin and Lasky as variations on the "New Sincerist" imperatives.

[5] I haven't said anything so far about the place of the internet in these recent movements. Certainly both of the developments I'm tracking have coincided with a dramatic increase in the internet's presence in virtually all matters related to poetry—as a medium

One obvious point to make about these simultaneous commitments—to appropriation on the one hand, and to sincerity on the other—has to do with the extent to which they are explicitly positioned as responses to the preceding generation's poetry—more precisely, as responses to Language poetry. I want to turn back to a moment just before the turn of the current century, to begin to establish how ubiquitous these responses have been over the past decade. We'll start with Stephen Burt's much discussed 1999 essay, "The Elliptical Poets," which opens with the question "where have younger poets found themselves?" and goes on to argue for the commonalities among a diverse group of writers and give those shared features the label "ellipticism."[6] Burt's initial answer to the question is to offer an eclectic list of influences, poets who "matter" to his generation—from James Merrill and Elizabeth Bishop to John Ashbery and Gertrude Stein, from the Language poets to Jorie Graham. Part of the point of that collection, of course, is to make clear that it spans both sides of the notorious divide that characterized the previous generation: avant-garde versus mainstream; "Language" poets versus "workshop" poets; Marjorie Perloff's canon versus Helen Vendler's. But while Burt goes on to downplay the current stature of the Language movement, suggesting that it has come to matter more as a convenient grab bag of diverse forms than as a coherent set of aesthetic and political commitments—"less," as he puts it, "phalanx than *resource*" (46)—his rhetoric belies the apparent irrelevance of Language movement ideals. For what the "elliptical" poets turn out to have common is only legible in reference to a fairly consistent critique of lyric—or more specifically, of the "posited self" or "speaker" of lyric—a critique that is readily identified with some of the major statements of Language movement.[7] And as we shall see when we move on to accounts of more recent poetic projects, new work continues to be situated in some relation

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both for the publication of poems (ezines, electronic books, digital archives) and for its theory, criticism and general discussion (the archives already mentioned, but even more important, the ever expanding blogosphere). I hope it will become clear as this argument unfolds that making a place for the role of technology may bring certain features of the poetry into sharper relief, but won't make for a better account of the particular problems to do with lyric that I will argue are its most important artistic stakes.

[6] Burt, "The Elliptical Poets," *American Letters and Commentary* 11 (1999), 45.

[7] Lee Bartlett's "What Is 'Language Poetry'?" (*Critical Inquiry* 12.4 [Summer 1986], 741-752) gathers in a short space a number of ways Language poetry had of repudiating the idea of an authoritative voice in the poem. The vilified example of such voice in Bartlett's account is the conclusion of the much-anthologized William Stafford poem, "Travelling Though the Dark": "Travelling through the dark I found a deer/ dead on the edge of the Wilson Road./...I thought hard for us all-my only swerving—/ then pushed her over the edge into the river." Bartlett then invokes Bob Perelman to deliver the terms for denouncing that poem: "this is a 'voice' poem," explains Perelman. "William Stafford has 'found his voice'.... It's all realistic, but all it leads up to is the pathetic fallacy of 'I could hear the wilderness listen'. A typical neo-academic dirge for nature. The poet is firmly in the driver's seat, 'I could hear the wilderness', and firmly in control of all the meaning, 'I thought hard for us all'.... Here, the I is in a privileged position unaffected by the word" (Bartlett 743-744). See also Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman, and Barrett Watten, "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto," *Social Text* 19/20 (Fall 1988): 261-275.

to Language poetry, implicitly or explicitly, and with attitudes that range from nervously revisionary to rabidly antagonistic.

When the "elliptical" poets, for example, are said to want "poems as volatile as real life, they want to remake the self, to pick up their pieces after its (supposed) dissolution" (Burt 54). It's hard not see this semi-violent aftermath as the implied consequence of Language poetry's shattering of the traditional lyric voice. But this anti-lyric legacy is not altogether refused, either. The particular form this "remaking of the self" takes in Burt's argument is one he is careful to distinguish from the forms of self-expression that the Language movement sought to debunk: "the most exciting younger poets treat voice and self and identity neither as givens nor as illusions but as problems" (46). And later, "[they] do not represent speech, or stream-of-consciousness, or a program for breaking up subjects and systems; instead it's performance and demonstration—if you can hear me through all this noise, I *must* be real" (50).

Even as the "ellipticist" poem's "I" somehow compels our conviction in the reality of its referent ("if you can hear me…I *must* be real"), at the same time these poems are made to appear wary of completely abandoning Language poetry's skepticism about the "posited selves" of lyric. "Elliptical" poetry is a "remaking of the self," not a "restoring" of it. But Joseph Massey's "East Shit and Die: A Manifesto for The New Sincerity" shows no hesitation in attacking what are clearly intended as identifying features of Language poetry: "FUCK YOU, to the linguistic synthesizers droning all heart way from the art!… FUCK YOU, and your THEORY GOGGLES!"[8] And what emerges from the smoke of battle is nothing if not the figure of a self being heard through all the noise:

> *IN THE YEAR 2001…*
> In a Greyhound station, in Philly. Security guards ran toward the bathroom and cleared everyone out. A few minutes later they walked out of the bathroom, surrounding an old man, without touching him; his pants were down at his ankles. An over-sized white dress shirt shielded his nether regions, reached below his knees. As he walked past the modest food court, headed toward the exit, he pulled his shirt up and exposed his pale thighs and ass smeared with dark green fecal matter. In the hand not hiking his shirt and pants up, he held a little boombox. He kept shouting at the boombox, "LISTEN TO THIS! LISTEN TO THIS!"

It's as if rejecting Language poetry and its critique of the traditional lyric speaker means reinstalling a new and quite literal speaker—in this scenario an impersonal, mechanical one—in order that a real person can make his voice heard over it and expose himself in the process. In other words, it's as if rejecting Language poetry for a "new sincerity" gives us the familiar lyric conventions of an old Romanticism: a discernible voice, unfettered self-expression, and the address to a "you" (if merely implied in the imperative to "LISTEN").

The poets creating Google-based poetry under the auspices of Flarf evince nothing like the antipathy of the New Sincerists toward their Language poet

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[8] See note 3.

predecessors.[9] Yet the labor of operating in their wake seems to produce a similar effect, an imperative to self-expression, if not exactly self-exposure: "Maybe all your friends think poetry should contain an expletive every two words. That's fine," writes Michael Magee in his manifesto for the Mainstream Movement, "but if it keeps you from writing that mushy poem about fuzzy rabbits then you are censoring yourself."[10] The poets who invented the New Sincerity—Massey, Anthony Robinson, and Andrew Mister—often deploy in their work an "I" that does precisely the kinds of things a good old-fashioned lyric speaker does (praising the beloved, reflecting on an experience, lamenting a personal loss, etc.). So it looks in their case as though Language poetry has been doing the censoring, and not censoring yourself just means saying yes to a certain depiction of self-expression that Language poetry repudiated. While nothing about the "I" in a New Sincerist poem requires that we think it refers to the "real" self of the poet, nevertheless the force of making these first-person poems in the context of the New Sincerist manifesto is to give us an opportunity to believe that they do.

In the case of Flarf, however, it's much harder to see first-person lines like these from Magee: "…I'm wicked thankful that Snoop Dogg is in this Bergmanesque tale, my life" as expressions of the poet's self.[11] Or at least, not in the same way that we might read, say, these lines from Massey's *November Graph*:

> Power lines
> dent the dawn.
>
> What words I
> woke with
>
> dissolve.[12]

[9]This is hardly surprising, given that many of the disjunctive syntactical formations that occur in Flarf poetry are virtually indistinguishable from the hallmark features of Language poetry. For an example, these lines from K. Selim Mohammad's "Mars Needs Terrorists": ":.:.:.:.: the of and to a in that is was he for it/:.:.:.:.: with as his on be at by/:.:.:.:.: spite soil runs republican/:.:.:.:.: attend absence windows wet" (*Deerhead Nation* 29). And the "formal affinities" would seem to coincide with professional and personal connections as well—a quick survey of jacket blurbs from the books of the Flarf poets I've mentioned so far turns up some familiar names from the movement: Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, Harryette Mullen, Bob Perelman, Carla Harryman, Juliana Spahr.

[10] Michael Magee, "The Mainstream Movement," *FLARF: Mainstream Poetry for a Mainstream World*, posted 31 January 2003, accessed 17 August 2008 http://mainstreampoetry.blogspot.com/2003_01_01_archive.html.

[11] Michael Magee, *Mainstream* (Buffalo, NY: BlazeVOX, 2006), 79.

[12] Joseph Massey, "Four Poems from *November Graph*," *Big Bridge* 3&4, accessed 17 August 2008, http://www.bigbridge.org/bigjmassey.htm.

In the context of the New Sincerity this does just look like the attempt to construct an elegant, compact image of a personal experience of waking—an experience it isn't hard to imagine the poet himself having. But if we were told that these lines were a composite of Google search results, we might think *someone* had an experience that these lines or some part of them might have been intended to represent, but we wouldn't think we were reading about the *poet's* experience.

So what would be required to follow Magee and think of Flarf as the uncensored expression of the poet's self? Clearly the poems are in some foundational sense the direct consequences of the poet's desires and interests at the moment of choosing terms to feed into Google, and at the moment of selecting from and manipulating the array of speech act fragments that the engine spits back out. But if it's the poem's status as a kind of trace of the poet's various subjective states during composition that makes the poem count as an uncensored expression of the self, then what we are talking about is something like an *index* of that self.[13]

For Magee, it's what gives one poet's Flarf a personality completely different from another's: "Given the relative stability of the method" writes Magee in another online post, "the variety produced and dare I say uniqueness which each poet brings to these compositions is to me quite remarkable."[14] And Tony Tost makes a nearly identical claim in his review of K. Selim Mohammad's *Deer Head Nation*: "…[B]y fixing his general process (Google) and source (the Internet), Mohammad presents as variables not his own emotions, thoughts, and imaginings, but those of his sources (if only as a reader imagines them). Mohammad does allow himself to be a present variable in these poems, but solely at a linguistic and conceptual level."[15] Thus for both Magee and Tost, something that we could only call the subject-position of the poet is at once importantly "present" in the poem and at the same time irrelevant to it with respect to any of its particularities such as its thoughts or emotions. What's striking about Flarf, in other words, is just how impersonal the personal presence in the poem is.

When Tost says the poet is present "solely at a linguistic and conceptual level," we may detect once again in that "solely" the general post-Language-poetry unease with any inkling of a lyric speaker (the same unease that makes

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[13] My recognition of these recent movements as techniques for indexing a subject is thoroughly indebted to Oren Izenberg's analysis of the Language movement and his understanding of its poetry as exemplifying the linguistic in order to index human presence. That argument is presented in "Language Poetry and Collective Life," *Critical Inquiry* 30.1 (Fall 2003), 132-159.

[14] Michael Magee, letter to Charles Bernstein in "The Flarf Files," *Electronic Poetry Center*, August 2003, accessed 17 August 2008,
http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/syllabi/readings/flarf.html.

[15] Michael Magee, letter to Charles Bernstein in "The Flarf Files," *Electronic Poetry Center*, August 2003, accessed 17 August 2008,
http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/syllabi/readings/flarf.html.

the New Sincerists think what they're doing counts as rebellion). And the value of the Google-based technique—namely the appropriation and manipulation of speech acts other than the poet's own—is precisely what mitigates that danger and saves the poetry from the risk of simply "restoring" the "posited selves" of traditional lyric. Through the poem's capacity to index rather than depict or represent the self, the subjective contents of that self—whether we're thinking of the poet or of the people whose speech acts are deposited on the Google servers—are effectively disconnected from everything that does reside within the representational registers of the poem.

We can begin to see why it might be useful to think about the more radically appropriative technique of transcription in this context, particularly in the example of Kenneth Goldsmith's "uncreative" work. By Goldsmith's own account, his use of transcription is designed to make creative or innovative acts indistinguishable from the most mechanical and commonplace. "On Friday, September 1, 2000," writes Goldsmith in a blog entry for the online arts journal *Drunken Boat*, "I began retyping the day's New York Times, word for word, letter for letter, from the upper left hand corner to the lower right hand corner, page by page. Today, November 10, 2000, I am approximately half way through the project. I intend to finish by New Year's Day" (Goldsmith, "Uncreativity"). The point of the project, says Goldsmith, as with his other efforts at what he calls "extreme process writing," such as "recording every move my body has made in a day, recording every word I spoke over the course of a week, recording every sound I heard ending in the sound of 'r' for almost four years," is, he continues, "to be as uncreative in the process as possible." By removing the last vestiges of creativity (in Flarf it's the manipulation of the source material), word-for-word transcription and the boredom it produces begin to look like a much more powerful means of achieving the same effects as Flarf. That is, of achieving a kind of "presence" of the self in the work, even as the emotional and experiential particularities of that self—everything that makes it a self—are rendered completely irrelevant to the work.

Of course, one might also be tempted to argue that works like Goldsmith's *Fidget* or *Day*, and for that matter the poems of the Flarf movement, are really just a fine tuning of what I have identified elsewhere as the "literalist" commitments of the Language movement.[16] And certainly if part of what Language poetry's disjunctive forms were designed to do was to emphasize both the material conditions under which the poem was produced—including the poet's own subjectivity—and the vast array of possible responses that the materiality of the text itself might produce in the readers of that poem, then we might see Goldsmith's "extreme process writing" as a radical extension of the same project. After all, nothing could seem more crucial to the text's production than Goldsmith's own bodily presence, whether serving as the basis for the sentences that would become *Fidget* or as the mechanism by which every word of *Day* came to be transcribed. And with respect to the receiving end of the project, one might be tempted to interpret Goldsmith's claim to be making books that "are not intended to be read" as a radicalized version of Language poetry's celebrated

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[16] See Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005).

"open text," with its "invitation" to the reader to "participate" in the composition of the poem by experiencing it in all its materiality.[17] In the case of Flarf, the material situation that produces the sources for Flarf would appear to be nothing if not dependent upon the poet's physical presence, in that the Google results are a direct and unique function (in a crucial sense, the evidence) of the specific moment in which the poet sat before the computer and entered the keywords for the search. Moreover, precisely because the language in Flarf poems doesn't issue from some single, authoritative speaker whose intentions are at stake—or insofar as it ever did, those intentions are no longer at stake—we might think part of the poems' point is to show how indeterminate and open to resignification (to borrow a term from Judith Butler) any speech act essentially is. We might be tempted, in short, to say that in these two instances, writing after Language poetry is still writing Language poetry.

In the pages that remain of this essay I'm going to show why that's a mistake. And as we'll see, it's a mistake partly because these movements really do involve a commitment to much of what Language poetry repudiated in its critique of traditional lyric. But in recognizing that mistake we also begin to bump up against the limitations of reading these recent projects entirely in the context of their "post-Language" or "post-avant" situation. For as I tried to suggest at the start of this essay, thinking that what matters about these "post-Langpo" or "post-avant" works is a question of whether they really do or really don't move on from Language poetry is to mistake their place in a much longer history of poetry and art.

I want to turn now to a passing remark in a recent review of a book of Flarf poetry by Katie Degentesh. Clues to the composition of Degentesh's book, *The Anger Scale*, are contained in the titles of the poems, all phrases taken from a psychological evaluation tool known as the MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory). The content of the poems, as Degentesh explains, is produced "by feeding phrases from the [MMPI] into internet search engines and piecing the poems together from the results pages."[18] It won't be surprising that the reviewer is Stephen Burt, since his description of Degentesh's project recalls his claim in "The Elliptical Poets" of "hearing" the poet "through [the] noise," but here we are seeing a much older version of that overhearing, suggesting an analogy between Flarf poetry's collection and arrangement of the words from Google search results, and John Stuart Mill's late Romantic idea that poetry is not heard but "overheard": "Googling in [Degentesh's] hands," writes Burt, "…and its low-tech analogue, overhearing—become not just procedures but scary

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[17] See, for example, Lyn Hejinian's "Rejection of Closure": "The 'open text', by definition is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies.… The 'open text' often emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers." *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: U of California P, 2000), 43.

[18] Katie Degentesh, *The Anger Scale*, 75.

symbols."[19] I don't think there's much to be gained in trying to make sense of the grammatical lapse that turns "Googling" and "overhearing" alike into "scary symbols," and Burt himself doesn't elaborate on what he might mean by "scary symbols" or explore the implications of these analogies. But it's worth pursuing the implications of identifying the practice of Googling with overhearing, because this invocation of overhearing matches up with a very specific and long-standing fantasy of poetic creation, one that concerns not only the nature of the material that constitutes the poem itself, but even more important, the poet's relation to that material and the reader's relation to what the poet has done with it.

If we pursue the allusion to Mill, Burt seems to be asking us to imagine the Flarf poet's relation to those lines on the computer screen displaying her Google search results just as Mill imagined the relation of the reader to, say, Wordsworth's "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey." Burt's analogy in short, is a way of insisting that Flarf is operating within the structure, at least, of a familiar Romantic framework of self-expression, one present-day readers would be likely to identify specifically with some notion or other of a "lyric tradition." If we put this together with Burt's suggestion (again, mostly unelaborated) that "[t]he MMPI makes an ideal Flarfist starting point, because it plays against the (supposedly) impersonal technique," we find ourselves in the midst of a poetic project that would seem to be hitting all the lyric keys at once.

The Google computer server operations that yield Degentesh's raw material, the search results, are nothing if not "impersonal," which is surely what Burt has in mind for "the impersonal technique" of Flarf. The MMPI sentences "fed" into Google by the poet, meanwhile, form parts of an "inventory" of "personality" (presumably what Burt thinks "plays against…the impersonal technique"), but of course the "personality" associated with the MMPI source material precisely belongs to no existing person. Meanwhile, the allusion to Mill in the suggestion that Flarf consists fundamentally of what is "overheard" also encompasses Mill's assertion that "[a]ll poetry is of the nature of soliloquy"—i.e., unimaginable without a speaker. But laying Mill's Romantic framework over Flarf in this way also rotates the Romantic configuration of speaker and reader. The soliloquizing speaker of the lyric poem is no longer the poet; that position is taken up by the Google results, fragments of a massive, virtual repository of recorded language and speech acts that are, in turn, scarcely imaginable as *having* an identifiable speaker. At the same time, Mill's original reader, who is distinct from the poet in his formulation, is now no longer to be found, or at least is no longer a separate entity, having been merged with or altogether replaced by the poet confronted with and compelled to read those Google-generated fragments—"But I read," writes Degentesh in *The Anger Scale's* last poem, "and make such memorandum as I can" (73).

[19] Stephen Burt, "A Review of *The Anger Scale*," *The Believer* (online version), April 2007, http://www.believermag.com/issues/200704/?read=review_degentesh. John Stuart Mill's "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties" (1833) is available at the Classic Utilitarianism Web Site: http://www.la.utexas.edu/research/poltheory/jsmill/diss-disc/poetry/poetry.html. All further references to Mill's essay are to the version on this site.

Mill's formulation of the poetic situation clearly imagines an audience for the poem (someone does the overhearing), but insofar as poetry is distinguished from "eloquence" by the fact not just that it is "overheard" while "eloquence is heard," but by the fact that "eloquence supposes an audience," poetry also seems to require, in Mill's account, some means of excluding that overhearing audience. The exclusion appears to exist on the part of the poet: thus for Mill "the peculiarity of poetry lie[s] in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener." But the "unconsciousness of a listener" imagined for the poet in the making of the poem quickly becomes inscribed in the ontology of the poem itself: "What we have said to ourselves we may tell to others afterwards; what we have said or done in solitude we may voluntarily reproduce when we know that other eyes are upon us. But no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us, must be visible in the work itself." The consciousness that the poem depicts, in other words, is importantly not a "self-consciousness" (Mill "Thoughts"). And at its most extreme, this ontology of unselfconsciousness will serve to obliterate the reader altogether. Hence Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day*, the achievement of "a book," he says, "that is written with the intention not to be read. The book as object: conceptual writing; we're happy that the idea exists without ever having to open the book."[20] Here it's not that poet (or in effect, the poem) is oblivious to the reader's presence; it's that there is no reader.[21]

The logic operating here is perhaps nowhere more vivid than in the American Romantic poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson's reworking of Mill's lyric situation for the purposes of defining friendship. In an 1841 essay by that title, Emerson (one of the old sincerists) starts with an ideal of friendship that looks as though it involves a speaker and a listener who are present to one another: "A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud." But once the speaker thinking aloud comes to resemble Mill's poet soliloquizing, the sincere communication that defines friendship paradoxically seems to preclude communication by excluding any listener. Hence the often quoted line from Emerson's essay: "Every man alone is sincere. At the entrance of a second person, hypocrisy begins."[22] For Mill, of course, there's no obstacle to overhearing the poet in her acts of self-expression, that's what Mill thinks it takes for her speech to count as poetry. But what it also takes (and what also makes it count as unselfconscious and hence sincere) is no consciousness of a listener. For Emerson, by contrast, the possibility of sincere self-expression requires more than just our lack of any consciousness of a listener; it requires the impossibility of a listener.

Making Degentesh's *The Anger Scale* into something akin to Romantic "overhearing" isn't to ascribe or deny anything like sincerity to her poems or to

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[20] Kenneth Goldsmith, "Uncreativity as Creative Practice," *Electronic Poetry Center*, accessed 17 August 2008, http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/uncreativity.html.

[21] Of course, the fact that the book is not intended to be read doesn't keep it from being read. My husband, for example, likes to read pages from *Day*, sometimes aloud, to me.

[22] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Friendship," *Essays: First Series* (1841), in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 207.

Flarfist poems more generally. But by treating the Google results as analogous to overheard speech, and by merging the poet and reader into the one doing the overhearing, the restaging of Degentesh's post-Language-poetry—and Flarf more generally—as a Romantic production reveals a different kind of new sincerity than the one proposed by Massey and his fellow New Sincerists. For putting Flarf in the framework of Mill makes Googling look like a technique for achieving a familiar Romantic lyric ideal, insofar as it looks like a technique for guaranteeing a maximally unselfconscious poetry. That is, it constructs the conditions for a Millian eavesdropping, but the speech that is overheard issues from a source that is nothing like a self and that cannot possibly mean anything by its utterances.

Here, as in the Language poetry that came before it, there is no question of self-expression because there is no self and there is nothing being expressed. But while there may no self-expression in Language poetry, there is never no expressive subject—the reader's fullest experience of the text, her own irreducibly distinct subjectivity, composes the poem. With Flarf, meanwhile, there is no such commitment to the text's relation to that subject—whatever it means to think of the Google results as being "overheard," the eavesdropper's (the poet's or our) experience of them is never at issue. Obviously the Flarf poet actively and consciously shapes the Google material. Poems such as "I am Easily Downed in an Argument" and "Life is a Strain for Me Much of the Time" resemble nothing like the Google search results that Degentesh would need to have "overheard" in order to make them. The deliberate manipulation that goes into Flarf poetry is all the more palpable in Michael Magee's 2006 collection, *My Angie Dickinson*, where Google search term combinations using "Angie Dickinson" are rearranged to match the hallmarks of Emily Dickinson's short lyrics and presented in a numbered sequence that recalls the 1955 Thomas Johnson edition of her work.[23] But part of the force of the suggestion that Flarf poems are essentially in the mode of "overhearing" is to render all manipulation incidental—indeed, in some sense subordinate—to the material. And the logic of this subordination has had radical consequences for the way we think about the poet's relation to the poem, and in turn about the poem's relation to its overhearing reader.

In a recent blog entry, Simon DeDeo complains, in the context of a comparison with Flarf, that Kimberly Truitt's poem "Female Cento" foregrounds too strongly the control of the composition. The main difference between the cento and a Flarf poem—both are collage forms—is the material used in the collage. A cento is composed entirely of lines written by other poets. The result in Truitt, DeDeo says, is "a controlled composition, but more than that"—this he intends as a complaint—"it's a composition *about* control."[24] Both the cento and the Flarf poem are obviously "controlled compositions," but what apparently makes the cento different from Flarf—what makes it "a composition *about* control," in DeDeo's words—seems to lie in the difference between their raw

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[23] Michael Magee, *My Angie Dickinson* (Canary Islands, Spain: Zasterle Press, 2000).

[24] Simon DeDeo, *rhubarb is susan*, February 27, 2007,
http://rhubarbissusan.blogspot.com/2007/02/kimberly-truitt-female-cento.html.
Truitt's poem was published in *listenlight poetry journal* 7 (2007),
http://listenlight.net/07/contents/.

materials, between Google results and lines of existing poems. And at issue for DeDeo, apparently, is the difference between the origins of those materials. Complaining about another cento in an earlier blog entry, DeDeo makes explicit that it's the difference between the raw material being generated by humans and that being generated by a computer: "When I see stunts like this, and I really do consider them mostly stunts, given the extreme constraints on any kind of authorial self-expression—I always feel that the software version would be better."[25]

The software version is better, it seems, because it's less self-conscious—or better, it can't be self-conscious because it isn't conscious. Burt may think we overhear a "real" self through the noise in Elliptical poems, but what Burt and DeDeo think we overhear through the noise in Flarf is Google. At this point it's worth a quick return to Goldsmith, to mention the fact that his account of making *Day* includes admitting that he began scanning the newspaper pages at a certain stage and using computer software to assist in the transcription. That in the end it doesn't matter for Goldsmith whether he is doing the transcription or a computer is doing it suddenly renders the literal subject position of the poet irrelevant. And as we have already seen, it makes the reader irrelevant, too ("imagine a book that is written with the intention not to be read").[26] Hence the mistake in seeing these works as extensions of Language poetry. As poetic techniques, Googling and software-assisted transcription would appear to be the 21st century's means to the purest form of Romantic unselfconsciousness, what would count on the Romantic model as true poetry (for Mill) and true sincerity (for Emerson). Or rather, the new generation's technique is not so much a test of a man's sincerity (recalling Ezra Pound famous claim), but—in replacing the person with a mechanical agent—a means of eliminating the possibility of insincerity.[27]

In this regard we might think of the unselfconsciousness indexed by these texts as a version of the figures of mid-18th-century French painting—depicted as reading, drawing, playing an instrument—that Michael Fried argues in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painter and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* served to establish the "supreme fiction that the beholder did not exist."[28] The unselfconsciousness of these figures—what Fried calls their "absorption"—arrives at its apotheosis in the sleeping figure, a subject whose unselfconsciousness is

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[25] DeDeo, *rubarb is susan*, May 24, 2006, http://rhubarbissusan.blogspot.com/2006/05/remarks-on-flarf.html. I do wonder what DeDeo would make of a cento composed entirely of lines from Flarf poems.

[26] Kenneth Goldsmith, "Uncreativity as Creative Practice" (see note 20.) See also "Being Boring": "My books are impossible to read straight through. In fact, every time I have to proofread them before sending them off to the publisher, I fall asleep repeatedly. You really don't need to read my books to get the idea of what they're like; you just need to know the general concept. (*Electronic Poetry Center*, accessed 17 August 2008, http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith_boring.html)

[27]Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect" (1918), *in Early Writings* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 259.

[28] Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painter and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1980), 103. Subsequent references will be cited in parentheses in the text.

achieved by way of a more radical unconsciousness. As the absorbed subject in Flarf, or the agent of transcription in *Day*, the computer is certainly nothing if not unconscious—and by virtue of having no self—nothing if not unselfconscious. If the German and French Romantic antecedents to Mill's poetics of unself-consciousness follow about 50 years on the heels of absorption and anti-theatricality in French painting; and if what Fried has more recently argued is a return to absorption and theatricality through the technologies of the camera in, for example, the photography of Bernd and Hilla Becher, Jeff Wall, Thomas Struth, Thomas Demand, began to occur some 50 years before the development of the absorptive and antitheatrical technologies for poetry that I have been discussing in this essay; then we might want to think about what it would mean to fill in what is meant by Brion Gysin's famous claim that "writing is fifty years behind painting."[29]

In the case of Goldsmith, who loves to repeat Gysin's claim in his own essays and interviews, it might be more accurate (and not at all pejorative) to say that *Day* is almost 200 years (181 to be precise) behind *The Raft of the Medusa*. For both manage, albeit by very different means, to obliviate the reader/beholder. In Théodore Géricault's great masterpiece of absorption, the pathos of the scene depicted in it, namely the desperation of the stranded figures to get the attention of a distant ship, is deployed precisely as a mechanism for denying the beholder in front of the painting. Even as the figures with their backs turned to us gesture frantically at the distance (crucially, at something that cannot see them and that at the same time lies beyond our own view), their desperation for the attention of the distant ship magnifies their complete obliviousness to what stands in closest proximity to them. Moreover, the attempt to get the attention of the implied rescuers—what would resolve the dramatic crisis of the painting—is really an attempt, insofar as it also requires ignoring the attention of the beholder, to resolve something like the crisis of the painting as such. As Michael Fried says, "to put an end to being beheld by us" would "rescue them from the ineluctable fact of a presence that threatens to theatricalize even their sufferings" (154).

Théodore Géricault, The Raft of the Medusa *(1818-1819), Musée du Louvre, Paris.*

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[29] See Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2008).

But *Day* can't keep the reader out of poetry any more than *The Raft of the Medusa* could keep the beholder out of painting. Thus part of the point of a painting like *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* is to confront the beholder directly, a different strategy but still a strategy for contending with "ineluctable fact [of that] presence."[30]

Édouard Manet, Le déjeuner sur l'herbe *(1862-1863), Musée d'Orsee, Paris.*

As the photographer Jeff Wall has claimed (and indeed, as the 18th century painters of absorption certainly understood as well), absorption itself can be a "mode of performance."[31] And while *Conversations Over Stolen Food* isn't a poem, Jon Cotner and Andy Fitch's "project in transcribed transgression" takes advantage of this possibility, adopting the same appropriative measures that produce radical absorption in Goldsmith's projects, and turning them into theatre: a "public performance of introspective practice."[32] The text they appropriate is their own—recorded conversations (unscripted) they have while eating shoplifted food—which they turn into a script that they then perform. Noah Eli Gordon's *Inbox*—a seamless transcription of the email in the poet's inbox—on a given day (September 11, 2004)—gives us a text entirely addressed to a you, but where the "you" is the poet himself and the voices addressing him are a chorus of his readers. These recent projects no longer seem to choose between unselfconsciousness and self-consciousness, between absorption and theatricality. But the option not to choose makes all the more vivid what the choices have continued to

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[30] See Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or, the Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996).

[31] "Michael Fried identified an 'absorptive mode', exemplified by painters like Chardin, in which figures are immersed in their own world and activities and display no awareness of the construct of the picture and the necessary presence of the viewer. Obviously, the 'theatrical mode' was just the opposite. In absorptive pictures, we are looking at figures who appear not to be 'acting out' their world, only 'being in' it. Both, of course, are modes of performance." Jeff Wall, "Restoration: Interview with Martin Schwander," *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 230.

[32] Jon Cotner and Andy Fitch, "'American Surfaces': A Visual Ethnography," *Cross-Cultural Poetics: Streetnotes* (Summer 2008). For link see note 2.

be for the last two centuries (and more) of the history of poetry and painting. And in the case of poetry, to explain that fact is to explain the history of lyric.[33]

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[33] Readers in the Poetry and Poetics Working Group at the University of Michigan (thanks to Yopie Prins and Gillian White in particular) very usefully understood me to be committed in this argument to a transhistorical, thoroughly essentialized concept of lyric, and thereby risking ignoring the historical specificity of the term in its discursive formation, as well as all the social, political, and material facts of poetic production that "lyric" has so often served to occlude. But in drawing an analogy between the history of poetry and the history of painting, and in offering this analogy as the prospect of a history of lyric at the end of this essay, I mean to suggest a very different line of argument. For my point isn't that certain recurring criteria for what might constitute lyric now reveal to us something essential to poetry that persists across times and cultures; rather, the conventions that emerge at certain moments as the most powerful means of convincing us of the value of the poetic enterprise—right now, the idealization of sincerity and unselfconsciousness—are themselves responses to conventions that previously held that office, and that at a certain moment no longer served to convince. The history of painting is full of these discoveries of new (and often old) conventions in the interest of (as Fried might put it) compelling such conviction. While these conventions also change from one moment to another in the history of poetry, they inevitably revolve around something that is structurally fundamental to the enterprise, and here the analogy with painting is also pertinent: poems are made to be heard or read, just as paintings are made to be beheld. So, for example, certain questions of address, or of the obliteration of address, not surprisingly make their way into the kinds of conventions that compel at one moment and cease to compel in the next.

That we have made a habit of identifying those and other conventions with lyric, and that we have been doing so ever more persistently, seems to me to make it possible to construct a history of lyric. Such a history would track the shifts in what at any given moment enables us to believe that a present poem or poetic project can sustain comparison with the poetries of the past; or to put this a little differently, to believe that a particular poetic project bears value now as others have borne value in the past. And it's only by thinking about the responses of poets like Goldsmith and the Flarfists to the ideas of the previous generation (specifically, the Language movement) in terms of a critique of lyric and the attempt to restore it, that we can begin to trace that history. If in the 80s and 90s it looked as though Language poetry had killed lyric, we can begin to see now, with the help of the projects I've been discussing here, the ways in which Language poetry was not a killing of lyric but another way of dealing with a set of problems that constitute the history of lyric. Moreover, as I hope I have shown, the newest attempts at instantiating the value of the poetic enterprise importantly follow the structure of a set of poetic ideals traceable to Mill's formulations and their subsequent influence on the discourse of lyric. In short, what I'm interested in is not a history of something called lyric that persists across time, but rather a history of the conventions that have in recent years compelled our belief in the value of the poetic enterprise, conventions that have been articulated in terms of lyric.