

I Object: Writing Against the Contemporary

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I am become an object
the man I love
uses me
he eats me like breakfast
and then he shits

Dorothy Livesay
"The Stoned Woman"

THIS PAPER ADDRESSES both Giorgio Agamben's notion of the contemporary and Slavoj Žižek's defence of lost causes as a means of developing a more contemporary response to Foucault's old but still startling question, "What is an author?" But before I do, I would like to start with a poem, perhaps my best poem, in order to illustrate how I navigate critical writing as a poet and poetic practice as a critic.

I say this is my best poem but I use *best* here not in the superlative sense of it being *better* than most of my usual work, which is to say that I am not using *best* as the realization and culmination of the good in poetry. Plato found no good in poetry, but Aristotle noted the ethical implications and imperatives of art and life and happiness. And indeed,

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Aristotle's notion of the good¹ accords with the ethical insinuation of that annual anthology called *The Best Canadian Poetry in English*, in which I have never published a poem nor been so invited. It seems worth noting that this use of *best* stems from the Old English word *betst*, suggesting that maybe there might be more of me in that anthology than I believed. In fact, though, when I say *my best poem* my use of *best* returns to the earlier sense of *betst* that was at one time, in Old English, the superlative of *bot*, which referred to *remedy* and *atonement*. I introduce this poem, then, as the *best* remedy and atonement for the flaws in my other works that have all been judged lacking by my contemporary Aristotelian anthologists and that which leads me beyond my namesake, beyond the best in poetry, and beyond the *betst* in poetry.

Sunshine

Like a prospicient set
Your long sunshine
Sicing
Prospicenter than a set

To hesitate
Swinging heat

Reach
Becoming
Like an exposure

Gregory Betts

Why did I include my name in this short, strange poem? To let you know that there is a difference between the named author and myself. It is an easy and obvious point to make, but in this case, the name is arguably the most noteworthy part of the poem: it was first published in the now rather infamous anthology *Issue 1* from the fall of 2008, conceived and edited by Stephen McLaughlin and Jim Carpenter. *Issue 1* is an enormous, unwieldy 3,785-page anthology of poems purportedly by poets both living and dead (including new poems by Chaucer!), but in fact all of the poems were created by the computer-generator named Erica T. Carter. My name,

¹ He begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* discourse, for instance, with the claim that "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action as well as choice, is held to aim at some good. Hence people have nobly declared that the good is that at which all things aim" (1).

alongside the names of 3,164 other poets, was harvested from the internet and randomly placed at the end of the poems generated by the program.

This displacement from a poem that bears my name, this alienation from my own author-function, affords me the rare opportunity of approaching my poetry—in name at least—as a critic without reifying the self behind the poem. While I am proud of this poem that bears my name, any analysis of my poem has to acknowledge that the poem has nothing to do with me except through our shared relationship to an abstract author-function. My first-year English textbook has a chapter devoted to the idea that the speaker of a poem is different from the author, but in practice I have yet to encounter the scholar (or poet) who obeys this familiar dictum. Even Christian Bök begins his discussion of Canadian 'pataphysics by situating the work historically and geographically as part of a nationalist dialectic (*Pataphysics* 81). Poems are written by people in the world, we all implicitly understand, *except this poem*. Close reading a poem written by a computer is my first engagement with what has become of authorship since Foucault asked his question so many decades ago.

Approaching this poem, then, with the liberty of a practising literary critic, I begin a close reading free from the biocritical soft-humanist interest that so often tells the human story behind and surrounding the poem without attending to the inhuman poem unto itself. By setting aside the production of the anthology and the creation of the computer program, all I have left, in this case, is the inhuman artifice—the meaning-making machine that is poetic language. Some people will find the idea of analyzing the content of a computer-generated poem perverse (Old French for “unnatural,” which is not so far off the mark), just as others will fear a slide into New Critical autotelism (which relies upon a notion of balance and unity anathema to my project), but I am as drawn to the possibility of artificial agency, even chance agency, as to the psychological “pattern of unconscious selections that draws a poet to a certain idea” that illuminates the humanist mandate of *The Best Canadian Poetry in English* anthology series (Peacock prologue ix). The poem invites us to consider the centre of our solar system, the sun, the great revealer, the source of clarity, and the central symbol in the poem, so let us begin there and fall into the loose orbit of its linguistic gravity.

“There are no shadows in our sun,” wrote Wallace Stevens (“The Blue Guitar” 92), but in this case, however, the idea of clarity and centrality is immediately contradicted by the eccentric vocabulary of words such as prospicient (which is to oversee), sicing, and then somehow prospicienter. Despite cultural habit, the metaphor in this poem of the long sunshine

blazing through these neologisms introduces an error into the equation: it transforms the editorial acknowledgement of error or solecism in a text, the familiar “sic,” Latin for “so, thus,” into a gerund form of the verb “to be sic” and so acknowledges ongoing deviation as a state of being. The sunshine is *sicing* the world, exposing its error. And this error is without horizon, without sunset as it were, and now unavoidably acknowledged. It suggests an ontological displacement from the rationality of the world, a revelation that leads to overseeing the problem, separating the addressee of the poem from the set that defines that problem: thus, both inside the problem, which is defined by error, and outside the problem, which is nowhere. In reversing the ancient Greek significance of the sun, and the Aristotelian link between imitation and ethics, the poem presents a metaphor of alienation by revelation, literally a linguistic editorial problem that introduces hesitation and an awareness of overreach, exposure, and failure.

Having woken up thrown into this difference, suddenly in difference, the generated “heat” of what—life? of nondirectional light?—swings wildly, blindly, going nowhere. While Aristotle in *Poetics* uses the sun as a metaphor for the good, literally that which makes everything visible and the world orderly, and the idea of philosophy meaningful,² the sun in this poem reveals systemic error, the overreach of self, and the failure of language (and linguistic arts) to correct the problem. My poem echoes a line from bpNichol’s poem “The Room”: “sunlight / s’s unlight / darkness” (43). It is the idea of a language that discloses that which it conceals, a language that speaks absence and thereby abandons the possibility of (human) truth and imitation. This is a poignant confession for a machine. In a poem in which the I behind human names has been abandoned, cast off, is it not remarkable that the inhuman agent orchestrating the poem has also unmoored the possibility that I could ever possibly reclaim my name?

What is an author in a transhuman³ moment? The author has become a problem of overlapping borders, overdetermined by too many factors

2 Thus, he explains that the sun has need of “no special name” for being a “god-created flame” (22). Derrida addresses the significance of this “nonmetaphorical prime mover” in *Margins of Philosophy* in which he identifies this nonmetaphorical image as foundational to Aristotle’s philosophy (see 242–44).

3 For the duration of this paper, I use the term transhuman not in dialogue with the transhumanist movement (also known as H+) that trumpets the integration of machines into the biology of humans (see Nick Bostrom 1) but in the more etymological sense of the trans prefix, cognate from the Latin for “across” and the verb “to cross.” In this sense, the transhuman is a dynamic instability, a movement between the various borders that constitute humanity with which this paper is principally concerned. In this way, although this paper is invested

that contradict one another. In saying that, I could be talking about the questions of editorial impact, or the difference between versions of texts and the quagmire of authorial intention; I could be talking about the question of what is a text? What is a language? And on and on down all the frail borders that make our trade in contemporary literary criticism rather shapeless and shifty and hopelessly amorphous. In this case, I am interested in considering where and how the borders of objectivity and subjectivity begin to blur incomprehensibly; more precisely, of locating where and how the human remains a viable category in the act of producing artifice. So much of contemporary authorship revolves around this crisis point, from questions of genre to gender to inside and outside to environments and animal consciousness. With *Gilgamesh*, the oldest human story inscribed, recently translated into Ape-Esperanto by Wilfried Hou Je Bek such that apes and gorillas can now read the origins of human narrative, it is insistently clear, finally, that narrative, plot, and even literature are not ours alone.

Without recourse to any terminal point or notion of final truth or absolute category, the question of humanity becomes deeply troubling, just as over the past century and a half asking the question “What is art?” has primarily served only to dissipate that category. But this sicing revelation in my poem, this inhuman creative language that makes the error of human truth visible and offers no remedy, is precisely what Peter Bürger argues has been the principle contribution of the historical avant-garde: not solving the problems of the West with their grandly vague, utopian proclamations of liberation and redemption but revealing the nature of our predicament (19). For Bürger, the avant-garde was instrumental in revealing the ideological function of art as an institution within society and was, hence, tragically caught within the social imaginarium despite the desire to break free. “Shipwrecked on the cliffs of political antagonism,” to borrow a phrase from Bruno Bosteels (xvii), the avant-garde’s failure to achieve an outside to culture or ideology or history has yet helped to expose the boundaries and the boundedness of each of those categories. Accordingly, my poem in *Issue 1* is a poem, in fact a metonymy, of the anthology that makes one boundary of contemporary writing visible. It gleefully wrenches each author’s I from her sole control and uses it as an object, consumes it, digests it, and then shits it outside of all commodity

in exploring the bifurcation of the human and the machine, it is conceptually incompatible with the ambitions of the posthuman movements, especially, for instance, as articulated by Robert Pepperell in *The Post-Human Condition*.

exchange: the anthology was literally given away to any with the bandwidth to download it, but like Sianne Ngai says of excrement and the indigestible in literature in general, it produced waves of horror and disgust for its abuse of real author names.

While committed Marxists like Badiou, Eagleton, and Jameson concede that contemporaries cannot credibly imagine overcoming capitalism,⁴ artists know that you can still jolt its inhabitants into a disgusted, horrified paranoia for a moment and that this jolt can be useful and instructive in creating momentary counter-environments and interventions. In this late-capitalist moment, vertigo and nausea has replaced the avant-garde faith in liberation. I count *Issue 1* as just such an important intervention, even if its initial jolt too quickly passed. Indeed, many of the authors implicated in the anthology quickly welcomed and celebrated the appropriation of their names and author-functions; for instance, as Canadian poet Erin Moure responded, “as someone else who has written the names of poets into my own work [...] and has worked with mechanical text creation (Pillage Laud), i find this project immensely enjoyable (tho my name wasn’t used as a line of poetry!), and the responses to it hilarious” (*Issue 2* 256). It is instructive, in light of all of that, to go back to the original comments that first greeted *Issue 1* when it crashed headlong into cyberspace, which were collected as a follow-up 419-page anthology called, naturally, *Issue 2*. While conceptual poets like Kenneth Goldsmith and Christian Bök celebrated the prank, scores of writers—even avant-garde writers—reacted with nausea and vertigo at the project when it first appeared: “Rats” hissed Ed Baker at the editors (5); “definitely not cool” quipped Jonathan Ball (7). In a coy twist, the anthology turned avant-garde provocation against contemporary experimental authors, prompting even Ron Silliman—the poet who coined the delightfully oxymoronic phrase “post-avant”—to famously threaten to “sue” the editors to protect his name from the smear of “forgery” (147, 161). He was not alone in this reaction. Calls for class actions lawsuits and lawyer-penned cease-and-desist letters circulated the blogosphere. They worried about the integrity of their names and control over their own identities. It was like “identity theft” wrote one poet (10). It was “illegal” wrote another (29). The anthology, as an exercise in contem-

4 Eagleton concedes that “Socialism has lost out to sado-masochism” (2), and Badiou echoes that with the overwhelming loss of revolution in the imaginations of the young, “nothing new can occur” (*Philosophy* 43). Jameson, for his part, in a review of Žižek’s *The Parallax View*, notes that even the idea of epochal change is now circumscribed within the contemporary imagination by the boundaries of capitalism: “something with which I imagine everyone will nowadays be prepared to agree.”

porary conceptual writing, thus perfectly highlights the complicity Badiou and Jameson acknowledge, of the circumscription of writing to the social order it performs within: authorial names are legally sanctioned property. It is a marvelous coincidence that my poem explores that same theme explicitly. There is no outside to that glaring, revealing sunshine—only error. Furthermore, it objects to the error embedded in my “I” even as it objectifies my I, my author function, in a way that transcends all of my own writing, however experimental.

The poets who taught me how to be a poet, my peers, began with the lesson of the troubled lyric self, of the need to defeat authorial mastery (and majesty) and to rethink consensual notions of individuality. It was when I read in bpNichol’s *The Martyrology* of the “mockery of speech / artifice,” though, that I began to realize the penetration of the expressive crisis in contemporary poetry. This problem reverberates across Nichol’s writing as so many of his lyric poems themetize the inadequacy of language’s ability to say the truth. Written words,

as they are
 objects in the world we live in
 carry us far
 way
 from
 each
 other
 than
 they
 should
 (“For Steve” 60)

Poems contain a destructive, anti-expressive force, an anti-poem within, that situates between the author outside of the work and his/her page an abyss of inarticulation. Language by extending out in a complex cultural web well beyond any author’s control obscures the expressive self rather than revealing or presenting it—just as it also obscures itself as a thing made. Literary theory, especially the Derrida, Baudrillard, Kristeva, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger that I glommed on to back then, affirmed the crisis without recourse. The symbolic order envelopes us and then permits us to become subjects but only within its fold. How to escape such

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 property.

a trap? My first conference paper, at a graduate conference at the University of Calgary, was on the theme of disillusionment in *The Martyrology*, responding to Frank Davey's faux horror that this "text may (naively) be attempting to present the 'real' bpNichol" (236). But I remember discovering the breach between real self and literary self in a few lines in Nichol's life-poem: "began this poem in sureness / now the truth's obscure behind the body's veil // it is that sense impossible becomes the poetry / shields me from the i within the lie." Is this not a declaration of the end of poetry? How does one recover oneself from the lie that is all of language? That is oneself in language?

One does not recover oneself, and, of course, it was not the end of poetry for Nichol. It does mark the end of the kind of innocent mode of poetic life writing that Davey fretted about, as well as presenting a metaphysical challenge to the affective aesthetics trumpeted by the likes of critic and editor Carmine Starnino: "Good poets," he writes, "generat[e] memorable insights" (xi). But Nichol uncovered a kind of poetry that obliterates the coherence of such a collection of empty abstract nouns, and critics applying such innocent terms to disjunctive poetries achieve an elemental incomprehensibility and irrelevance. Such a criticism demands amusement (which stems from the French military for tactics that divert attention) from poets seeking to escape the court, and their attempt to exit is perfectly inexplicable and incomprehensible to such courtesan critics. Although Nichol of course never stopped writing lyrics, those lines broke for me the possibility of innocent lyric poetry. What do you write if not yourself? It almost seems unfathomable.

There was a moment in the discussions in Vancouver during the famous poetry workshop in 1963 when Robert Duncan declares the goal of poetry as being "to deliver up the life you have lived"; Robert Creeley answers that "The only I of the cosmos you know is yourself" ("Vancouver"). But they still had confidence that language could convey truths and transport audiences into a coherent, meaningful, objective knowledge and thereby offer memorable insights to patient readers. Behind claims of these sorts lurks a Big Other that could orient discourse, authorizing poetry, selves, and position in space and time. Claim history as your own, *maximize yourself*, exhorted Olson, as if from another galaxy. The mid-century new American poets, now sometimes called late modernists,⁵ spent a lot of time debating the difference between authentic and inauthentic poetry, as if truth remained a possible referent in language. In contrast, Alden

5 See Robert Genter's *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America*.

Nowlan's "Fair Warning" turns the collapse of their thinking into a great gothic joke:

I keep a lunatic chained
to a beam in the attic. He
is my twin brother whom
I'm trying to cheat
out of his inheritance.
It's all right for me
to tell you this because
you won't believe it.
Nobody believes anything
that's put in a poem. (74)

Žižek arrives in all this as a kind of incredulous Lacanian, sweeping away any dust residue of the modernists and jumping headlong into that abyss and its crisis point. It turns out that language is not just nothing but is (as McLuhan predicted) a giant vortex of overlapping semiotics. Žižek points to Lacan's most radical philosophical intervention, which was to steer psychoanalysis and psychotherapy away from any acceptance of a Big Other as anything other than psychological construct. The human subject is literally unmoored in this swirling universe, creating all of the foundations of our knowledge out of our needs—not our need to arrive at the truth but truth itself as contingent desire.

How do you write from that? It was in encountering Darren Wershler's *the tapeworm foundry*—a text where quite literally "impossible becomes the poetry"—that I began to recover from the shock of my unmooring. The book is just a list starting from "or," an accumulating series of commands that could each serve as the foundational idea for a cool book of poetry: "place a completed manuscript into a cage and then let a gerbil do the final edit and/or [...] remove all the verbs from a book and then replace them with verbs from another book and/or make a huge paper boat from all your correspondence and then climb aboard to sail away"—has there been a better image of the language crisis since Bartleby's Dead Letter Office than this boat built out of correspondence?—"and/or object to the subject and/or" (np). It is an astonishing display of both generosity and aggression: a poet gives away all of his best ideas and by doing so takes them away from other writers. It obfuscates the bounty of contemporary poetry books: maybe we are publishing too much; henceforth, a book has to be better than every idea in *the tapeworm foundry* (which adds the

This
is
language!

blistering subtitle, *and/or, the dangerous prevalence of imagination*) if it is to survive its terrible paraphrase.

Another response is metapoetry, turning the text into a meditation upon the forces that enable and disable it. Once you start looking for textual self-consciousness, all metaphors in contemporary writing seem to warp around and betray a dominant concern about language. Consider Daphne Marlatt's *Steveston*, for instance, writing of the waters in Steveston:

its cool waters glide (over us), erase, with vast
space elide the code we've managed to forget: this urge to
return, & returning, thresh, in those shallows, death, leaving
what slips by, the spore, the spawn, the mark that carries on
... like a germ, like violence in the flesh (48)

This is language! The cool waters glide over us, erase the code we've managed to internalize and forget. Poets like Marlatt, and Marlatt is perhaps the most artful contemporary Canadian for interlacing sensuous semiotic poetry with lyric and erotic and ecopoetry and more, evoke both the urge to return and the returning (which are different drives). We use language to try to uncover something that language itself has erased. Language, and the mark that carries on, is a kind of death. Writers since at least Shakespeare have marveled at its inhuman supplanting of its human source.⁶ But was this ever our best chance at immortality? It is only more recently that writers have begun to imagine the more despairing possibility that language was closer to "a germ, like violence in the flesh." Christopher Dewdney, Steve McCaffery, William Burroughs, Tony Burgess, and Laurie Anderson all write about language as virus or a parasite,⁷ and their comparisons were never meant to be treated allegorically. As Dewdney writes, "language controls not just the way we think, but the way we *are*" (80).

Christian Bök's Xenotext project combines the two themes, using the genetic parallel between language and genetic code to actually achieve the immortality of verse. What his project inevitably struggles with is finding or rather keeping something human in such a mix. No wonder his exquisite poem "The Extremophile" resoundingly concludes of superbugs:

It is totally inhuman. It does not love you. It does not need
you. It does not even know that you exist. It is invincible. It
is unkillable. It has lived through five mass extinctions. It is

6 For instance, in Sonnet 81: "You still shall live—such virtue hath my pen."

7 In contrast, Florian Cramer tells the history of language as virus in relation to the development of computer viruses: www.digitalcraft.org/?artikel_id=294.

the only known organism to have ever lived on the Moon. It awaits your experiments. (23)

This too is language, sort of. The final image seems a letdown, an anthropomorphism that tackily reasserts the human in spite of the inhuman agent that does not need you or know that you exist. While the work is still very much in progress, Bök's project⁸ is already attracting enormous international attention right now precisely because he has devised a shockingly original means of inserting the human into the inhuman hardwiring being revealed by contemporary science. As the story goes, one hundred million years in the future, long after all trace of human intelligence has disappeared from the planet, there will be three artifacts attesting to our species' presence and impact: the mass extinction of animals on the planet, known as the anthropocene, the residue of our nuclear waste which will still be polluting the planet, and now Christian Bök's genetically encoded poetry. Long live CanLit and all: but is this not a quintessentially Romantic attempt to redeem humanity despite its inevitable and devastating failure? Is this invitation to experiment upon a passively rendered, awaiting, nature not the Promethean mark of humanity's hubris? Instead of escaping the symbolic, it extends it, asserts it, impresses it into the genetic code of the microscopic worlds suddenly revealed to us by new technologies, claiming that space for our use and our narcissism.⁹ In Kristevan terms, it chooses the symbolic over the more eruptive and nebulous semiotic, which is the subject as object, or in Vanessa Place's joke "the subject," the subject that cries.¹⁰

The failures and limitations of humanity seem particularly abundant in the contemporary moment, as we awaken to the scale of the universe and

8 In the Xenotext project, Bök encodes poetry into the DNA of a hearty bacterium. Once the poem has been inserted into the genetic code of one of the hardiest bacteria on the planet, it will remain a part of its biology into the indefinite future—hence its potential for immortality. The experiment is coupled with poems, such as "The Extromphile," that expand on the premise and map out significant links between poetry and science. It is worth acknowledging that Bök's poem is encoded anonymously into the superbug, even if every living poet knows its origin.

9 One aspect that complicates the humanism of Bök's project is that its virtue accrues from its appeal to longevity and a projected/implied alien audience. This nonhuman orientation invents a chronological boundary to the human category by addressing and presuming sentience beyond us. While Bök himself clearly claims authorship of the project within the context of his contemporary readership (see "The Xenotext Works"), the poem is published/stored anonymously within the bug and conceptualized beyond its mortal relevance.

10 See her manifesto with Rob Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms*.

the complexity of the human organism that determines so much of who we are in the most absolutist terms. It has fallen to contemporary literature and arts in general to rehabilitate the human in light of these conceptual and environmental barrages against our sense of ourselves. Cyborgs, it has been pointed out by many, serve the function in our imaginarium of precisely establishing the boundaries of our category. They are the examples that establish our limit. Thus, Larissa Lai's replicant wonders about the possibility of being "more human than human" (13) and writes loving letters to "mother" in binary code (41). Thus, Jason Christie's robots debate their difference from humans and deliberately blur the lines: "I still maintain that I am not a robot" ("Organoptropy" np). The humour of the cyborg earnestly wanting to transcend this boundary and become human is actually a rather nervous humour, not unlike the sexually aggressive humour theorized by Freud that defuses threats to male sexual identity posed by women. The terrifying threat of cyborgs that underlies this humour is not the moment when they as objects breach the boundaries of our subjectivity but quite the opposite. Just as it is far more terrifying if Christian Bök's extremophile bugs do not await our experiments, it would be a far greater threat to the category of the human if our machines turned away from their human origins and committed to themselves and us as nothing more than matter, as we do of our own bacterial ancestry. (And one could make the argument that posthumanists fetishize this particular terror.¹¹) The now corny Cyborgian jokes of the machine wanting to become human reaffirms the centrality of the category of the human and affirms the heuristic value of subjectivity, because the implications of cyborgs turning away from humanity would obliterate the basis of our morality and metaphysics, and, in fact, this should not be seen as a Ludditic or technophobic response but a recurrence of that more fundamentally Cartesian resistance to the human as essentially and spiritually a material being.

The question of humanity's relationship to an inhumanity within and surrounding us leads back, tangentially, to Foucault's question, "What is an author?" This circuitry is not because he too offers reclamation of

¹¹ It might be useful to reassert that my engagement with transhumanism differs from the posthumanist movement in general by exploring the categories of human and inhuman as mutually and indelibly permeated. Žižek writes in *The Parallax View* that "The difference between beings and their Being is simultaneously a difference within beings themselves" (24). In a similar way, robots, cyborgs, and other machinery participate in Being by embodying in the human imagination the infinity that frames our finitude. Žižek's Möbius strip metaphor that links being to Being (4), and consequently humanity to its inhumanity (5), is a far more appropriate model to my project.

the human inside art but, rather, because Foucault's model of authorship highlights the constructedness, the arbitrariness, and the structural systematicity of authorship. Authorship is not a natural thing from us, of our humanity, but a thing done to us by what Foucault in a different context would describe through the concept of *positivité* which "defines a field in which formal identities, thematic continuities, translations of concepts, and polemic interchanges may be deployed" (*Archeology* 143). Agamben develops the historical element of Foucault's *positivité* to note that it works by contradicting "individuals as living beings" (6) and by seeking to limit radical liberty. It signals "a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being. This is the reason why apparatuses must always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, they must produce their subject" (11). This difference and antagonism helps to explain why in "What Is an Author?" Foucault admits no division between authorship and the interpolation of subjects to governance, with the result that "literary anonymity is not tolerable" (213). Foucault's point about anonymity stems from the legal framework of authorship as the sign of the permission of the state to write. You are authorized, which means, of course, the state gives you permission to write until you express radical opinions, at which point it will intervene and persecute. The great lie of the genius author obscures the fact that authorship is actually done to you, branding you a subject of the state. Great authors, then, are the best mirrors of the machine's own dreams of itself. That is one side of things: the other intolerability of anonymity in late capitalism is that it goes nowhere; it just disappears. It is in fact the same parable of the cyborg and the human: the authorized self and the anonymous self. Through Foucault's model of authorship, we encounter the inhuman machine even within the boundaries of the category of human culture and social organization. Apparatus is the lurking soldiers in the Trojan horse of the humanities.

Not surprisingly, anonymity is a boundary that the avant-garde has consistently acknowledged but resisted crossing. Here is bpNichol in the afterword to *The Cosmic Chef*, the most important anthology of Canadian concrete poetry, on his decision to separate author names from their contributions: "here is a book still in flux we've left out names (in most cases) in order to force you into a confrontation with what people are trying to say THRU this particular medium of expression but don't worry for you keenos & to set the record straight an amazingly annotated list follows" ("some afterwords" np). I read this odd ironic tone, and its uncharacteristic snarkiness, as a uniquely confessional moment. Nichol is comfortable with pseudonyms, such as his djNichol who begat the Captain Poetry poems

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humanities.

in the anthology, but reveals much more ambivalent feelings about anonymity. He follows his concession to the dictum against anonymity with a rather aggressive plea: “LIBERATE A POEM TODAY THROW IT OUT / the language revolution is happening all round you” (np). The awkward transition between these two moments is intriguing: why the need for such a forceful (and forced) declaration of radicalism? Obviously, it serves to declare his commitment to avant-garde border-smashing despite the boundary he has just acknowledged, but it also reveals his awareness of the apparatus at work behind authorship. Nichol wants to but cannot reject the pre-revolutionary authorial model and so calls forth this commitment to his preferred revolution to acknowledge his frustration at the semantic trap. The language revolution functions as a vestige of hope for the reclamation of the human, the liberated human, from the machinic apparatus of authorship, his *objet petit a*. This desire shares in the spirit of Badiou’s notion of the Event, which Žižek nicely defines as “an enactment of the eternal Idea of egalitarian justice” (207). This is the lost cause worth defending.

The history of avant-gardism is littered with similar moments of articulated desire to move beyond the social order that governs and defines humanity coupled with the blatant failure to do so. I, as a critic and perhaps more as a poet, am deeply interested in the ways that such an ideological and aesthetical hypocrisy circumscribes the liberating impulses of the avant-garde and demonstrates compulsory integration or participation in the ideological state apparatus. I too aspire to contribute to an Event in Badiou’s sense and seek the chance it unfolds, and, accordingly, I sympathize with Nichol’s frustration. So let us remember what Hans Arp, the great Dadaist poet and painter, had to say on the question of author names: “Works of concrete art should not be signed by artists. These paintings, sculptures—these objects—should remain anonymous in the huge studio of nature, like clouds, mountains, seas, animals, men. Yes! Men should go back to nature!” (524–25). The rejection of the name might well be the most radical act of antagonism to the contemporary moment left to the author and helps to explain the rise of interest in issues of plagiarism and appropriation in contemporary writing. But the fact that avant-garde authors back away from the radical implications of anonymity suggests a dual compromise in the name of humanism: on the one hand, wanting to break free of names and language represents a retreat from the inhuman apparatus of society toward a potentially redeemed and liberated humanity; on the other hand, keeping the record straight for all the keenos represents a retreat from the inhuman abyss outside of

human society, here figured as anonymous nature. Authorship as itself a contrived mechanism to articulate the society into being, and perpetuate the production of subjects, is perfectly caught and perfectly compromised between these two boundaries, between the heartless government in all its discursive manifestations and the meaninglessness of unselfconscious data and matter. Thus, Erin Moure recovers random computer generated phrases from the abyss of meaninglessness in *Pillage Laud* (1999) and reinscribes them within the boundary of human culture. She sculpts them into even more personalized, biographically consistent expressions by building lesbian erotica through her selections. Conversely, a decade later, Helen Hajnoczky's *Poets and Killers* (2010) uses found poetry from magazine advertising to tell her protagonist's biography. His authentic self is completely evacuated by capitalist slogans and corporate copy text that replace and displace him from his own story. *Poets and Killers* offers no mechanism or hope for his recovery. "He" is produced and therefore lost and anonymous inside the human cultural machine.

Because the category of author is thus constrained on both sides by these inhuman elements, while its function has been singularly bound up in establishing the human against both of those elements, contemporary criticism has taken on the task of redeeming the human behind the poem, outside of the ideological machine. We write biographies, analyze texts through biography, extol the politics, the psychology, and increasingly retreat from negative criticism and commentary in fear or guilt of serving the ideological state apparatus or else advocating a temporal style or posture. Darren Wershler's latest poetic project satirizes this impulse: *update* (2010) steals Facebook status updates via automated spiders and attributes them to famous dead authors, re-animating and re-humanizing them, hence Charles Baudelaire celebrates Canada Day parties (13) while Jack Kerouac disses Miley Cyrus (41). In terms of interpersonal (and/or market-driven) relations, using literary criticism to humanize the authors behind the literature makes a great deal of sense. You want to encourage the things you want to encourage. Time is short, fashions change quickly, so why bother identifying inhuman elements in contemporary literature? All of this, however, leaves the apparatus in place, untouched, and unseen in the literature. For a field already overdetermined by human singularity, this marks a regrettable retreat from engaging with all of the inhuman dimensions of our trade, from compulsory complicity in bad ideological projects to the agency of inhuman machines we deploy in our work. A criticism that only tries to salvage and celebrate the human conceals the inhumanity that surrounds and permeates. Wershler's project implies

that great authors (our culture's *best*) return in innocent social writing as uncanny parodies of authenticity. Nothing is innocent or harmonious in capitalism (or any ideology, for that matter).

In fact, criticism in this transhuman moment is ripe to engage with a more nuanced sense of the human and inhuman elements of writing. I take direction from Žižek's notion of the "parallax Real" which reconstitutes reality from a thing-in-itself into "a gap between two points of perspective," which for him is Totality and the individual.¹² The parallax Real is "perceptible only in the shift from the one to the other" (127). In writing, the use of the first person by an author, however, overwrites and obscures this kind of dynamic instability, replacing it with a hardened, illusionary fixity, a deadness that encases our dynamic nature; hence Arp's vitalist peal above to give up the illusion of our names and run back to the woods. I have argued in other contexts something very similar for poetry: that by its irrelevance, experimental poetry has earned the radical freedom from apparatus that Arp hails. Less idealistically, however, the proposition of a parallax author, or the author as parallax, serves an important function of reconstituting the speaking subject to appearing only within a parallax gap, oscillating in overlapping measure between the Totality of the apparatus and the liberation of the individual, the inhuman and the human, and so on. It is in this movement within a parallax gap that writing intersects with "the death drive, the 'inhuman' core of the human, which reach over the horizon of the collective *praxis* of humanity; the gap is thus asserted as inherent to humanity itself, as the gap between humanity and *its own* inhuman excess" (*The Parallax View* 5).

These apparatuses surround us and make us subjects. Indeed, Agamben defines apparatus as "first of all a machine that produces subjectifications, and only as such is it also a machine of governance" (20). To disrupt

12 In *The Parallax View*, Žižek's extended engagement with the concept, he explains the link between parallax perspectivism and his use of it in philosophy: it is

the illusion of being able to use the same language for phenomena which are mutually untranslatable and can be grasped only in a kind of parallax view, constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible. Thus there is no rapport between the two levels, no shared space—although they are closely connected, even identical in a way, they are, as it were, on the opposed sides of a Moebius strip (4).

The parallax view, and the parallax Real, draw together opposing elements for which there can be no neutral common ground, all while asserting—through the notion of the parallax gap—the impossibility of their identity.

such a machine requires dislodging oneself from the present, which is, ironically, as Agamben outlines, the only means to become a contemporary. He traces the philosophical roots of this concept to Nietzsche, who defines contemporariness as an untimeliness, as the characteristic of one who sees their age as much as lives within it, thus is caught both within and without its living impulse. It is precisely this opposition of seeing and living that gives rise to the special experience of the contemporary, for it is to recognize the conflict of apparatus and life as intrinsic to the experience of place. To be a contemporary, then, is to reject the contemporary: a parallax paradox. Agamben divides this dynamic tension into three classes: living beings, apparatus, and the subject who emerges between them. But since Agamben (and Bourdieu and Foucault) define humanity as living beings who operate within apparatus as subjects, I have simplified the dynamic somewhat by speaking of humanity (human as subject *as such*) in relation to both inhuman materiality and inhuman apparatus. Agamben, however, is a rather famous technophobe, eschewing cellphones and credit cards as evidence of humanity's progressive animalization; this parallax approach manages to contest what he contests, the *homo sacer*, "the sacred man," while yet affording artificial sentience and animal intelligence biopolitical agency. One further advantage of approaching agency and authorship through the rubric of human-inhumanity is that it implicitly links governance to materiality¹³ and acknowledges that the state only authorizes those to speak who do not disrupt the means of production. Claiming authorship, and using the author-function, becomes a sign of that subject's interpolation into a particular society: "Knowledge is membership," wrote Dewdney (*Fovea* 89). In other words, Chomsky, the most cited author in history, is permitted to critique so long as he only sells books attacking capitalism without changing its mode of production. (In this way, Chief Theresa Spence of the Attawapiskat nation and the Idle No More movement is a more radical revolutionary figure for her part in disrupting the status quo, including quite literally stopping the train lines laden with material goods extracted from the earth, but also for interrupting the Canadian government's agenda and rhetoric.)

As a scholar and a critic, my focus has been singularly oriented around the means by which writers have become themselves contemporaries by writing against their contemporary world. This untimeliness can be measured by the incorporation of revolutionary politics into their art,

¹³ This is a strategic use of homophone, which accords with Žižek's definition of the parallax view as the illusion produced by using the same language for phenomena that are mutually untranslatable (*Parallax* 4).

and I work to analyze the extent to which their writing interrogates and displaces the machinic ideological apparatus in pursuit of some more liberated alternative. At a certain level, I do not care how vaguely conceived or blatantly absurd is their notion of liberation, for I start my criticism by recognizing the essentially vital importance of writing against the contemporary. Historically, this earnest socio-political orientation constitutes the defining characteristic of the avant-garde, but as noted above by Badiou, Jameson, and Eagleton contemporary writers are not invested in the old Arendt-style revolution of beginning “something new, ‘out of nothing,’ not reducible to a calculated strategic reaction to a given situation” (quoted in Žižek, *Defence* 122). Instead, as Žižek notes, we are caught in “a moment of the vast cultural counter-revolution whose political mark is the withdrawal from radical emancipatory politics, and the refocusing on human rights and the prevention of suffering” (246). Writing against the contemporary includes writing against this withdrawal, in defence of lost causes, but let us begin with a *prospicenter* sense of criticism’s position vis-à-vis the inhuman apparatus of government and abyss of matter.

It is an error to imagine that literary criticism is ever untouched by either, by both, hence the need for a parallax model of criticism. With regards to contemporary materialist poetics, as focalized by such devices as anagrams, plunderverse, creative misreadings, uncreative writing, and other appropriations, which demonstrate how language can mean differently when seen in a different context but which borrow from more overtly subversive enterprises of sampling culture, pirating, and copleftism, which recycle to bring out the non-realized potentials of previous art. These are parallax forms that simultaneously reveal the apparatus, stand as material presence, and speak the lyric subject moving (or, more punfully, being produced) somewhere in-between. It is through such parallax practices that we encounter the constant oscillation between totality and individuality, between abstract and actual, and by extension author-function and bioauthor. Such a mode of literary production is distinctly analogous to Žižek’s pursuit of the “inhuman core of humanity” (166) and takes us beyond the scolding tones of Frank Davey or Stephen Scobie who protest the humanist regression in bpNichol’s lyrical moments. Lyricism is not the problem here, but neither is the investigation of purely inhuman textual models. Writing against the contemporary rejects the good and it rejects the finality of a literary canon in exchange for the pursuit of writings and criticisms that serve to enact the eternal idea of egalitarian justice against the contemporary.

A central part of this endeavour toward a parallax author involves eradicating the category of the human as an unpermeated space. This is, by Žižek's estimation, "constitutive of a radical revolutionary position" (170) in that "in my loneliness, I am free to do whatever I want, nobody has any hold over me" (171). In a similar way, the human subject is always situated dynamically between the individual and an arbitrary social structure, within and between the body and the mind, which is to say within and between inhuman spaces. We are stuck writing through this parallax I, shift-wrecked [sic] on the cliffs of political antagonism; so this is a tenuous liberation at best. It does, however, open up new demands of literature.

As critics, we can recognize this oscillation in the retreat from genre-purity: noting for instance, the lyric expressive tendencies in Christian Bök's constraint-based poetics or the inherent constraints that structure H. D.'s free verse ("No verse is free," wrote T. S. Eliot, stealing the line from William Carlos Williams). But acknowledging hybridity is not enough. We must push harder in order to approach the radical revolutionary position that accepts the eradication of the human as an attainable station and that accepts the inhuman as inherent to human ontology. Thus Badiou writes, "It is in the element of inhumanity that human creation makes appear that part of human 'nature' which does not yet exist but must become" (42) and the creative imperative this must give rise to: "We must create a symbolic representation of this humanity that exists beyond itself, in the fearsome and fertile element of the inhuman [...]. We are bound to uphold the new truths in the context of their local affirmation, encircled by endless conflicts. We must find a new sun—in other words, a new mental country" (42, 59). Ideally, idealistically, we will find a sun, and a model of literary criticism, that does more than just expose error or shine upon great authors.

Judging by the reactions to *Issue 1*,¹⁴ the anthology with which I began this article, contemporary writers and critics are not very good at writing about the inhuman in literature, which proves that our writing remains entirely too warped by specifically humanistic, anthropocentric concerns. As Žižek says, the problem is that we have not been radical enough in defence of our lost causes; we hesitate, halt, before realizing something

14 It is worth noting that in the follow-up project, *Issue 2*, in which all of the internet comments and reactions to the anthology were collected and pieced together as a new book, the San Francisco poet David Buuck predicted the potential response-anthology as it was unfolding: "in effect you have a second (para?)anthology consisting of many of the same authors complaining about inclusion in the first—and whose complaints (I was not asked permission, that's not my work, etc) cannot apply to the status of the complaints themselves."

Everybody
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truly new and disruptive. The hesitation was apparent in the critical response to *Issue 1*. Most stopped their engagement with the performance of their own names within it. Others, however, spent an extra moment trying to imagine who wrote the falsely attributed poems. These commentators quickly recognized the stylistic consistency across the book and concluded that they had to have been written by one person. The meaning of the anthology shifted into a recognition of the Herculean effort involved in writing 3,754 poems. Once it was clear that the poems were computer-generated, however, a very curious thing happened. Everybody stopped reading and analyzing the poetry as poetry. The conceptual writers marveled at the work as an extension of the constraints set in motion, where the content was never more than an extension, or application, of the form. The digital writers shifted their focus to the programming decisions, noting eventually that Erica's vocabulary was harvested from the complete works of Emily Dickinson and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.¹⁵ From this vantage, the resulting text was read like Pierre Menard's *Don Quixote*, a text entirely and predictively derived from its literary precedents. What stopped happening, and what I have tried to correct in this essay, is thinking about the writing in the anthology as a transhuman exercise that broke through some of our essentialisms by pointedly including even here the hands of chance and change.

The last thing that I must mention is the irony of the name given to the computer program that produced the anthology: Erica T. Carter, named after the programmer's sister. Choosing such a name insists upon the human circuitry of the anthology, and, indeed, the book is now listed on Goodreads.com with Erica as sole author. Such a naming insists upon the human, even in the context of a project that draws attention to the programmability of the author-function, the author, the subject, the I. Increasingly, in a digital world, we will be forced to recognize the programmability of the I, and I think of this through the intersection of cyborgian theories that dispute the integrity of the human, animal studies that dispute the exclusivity of the human, and contemporary Marxisms that insist upon the ongoing impact of cultural and political superstructures in shaping individual experience and consciousness. We know from so many directions that human experience involves the constant infiltration of inhuman elements, just as we know that the agents of Empire insist on putting a human face to their desecration of the planet. Against all of this: I object.

¹⁵ For an example, see Mikael Hvidtfeldt Christensen's discussion at <http://blog.hvidtfeldts.net/index.php/2009/01/grammars-for-generative-art-part-iii>.

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