apostrophe
Bill Kennedy and Darren Wershler-Henry
Toronto: ECW Press, 2006.
293 pages, paper, $15.95, eBook, $9.95.

The poems of the *apostrophe* project by Bill Kennedy and Darren Wershler-Henry interrogate the idea of "machine writing" at every stage of their composition. Kennedy wrote the print *apostrophe*, a 1993 poem of "you are" declarations; he and Wershler-Henry put it online as an "interface, with each of the lines as a hyperlink". Click on one and their program drafts a fresh poetic roster from present Web texts, having "hijack[ed]" or "parasitize[d] a commercial search engine" ("Apostrophe: Working Notes"). The secondary poem's own apostrophe-citations then act as further hyperlinks. Donna Haraway might call this "Cyborg writing," since *apostrophe*'s human artistry and computer text-generation show the cross-contamination of each source in a language that is never "innocent" and yet never fully co-opted by "the informatics of domination" it parodies (Haraway 175, 161)[1] By re-describing poetry as systemic inefficiency, *apostrophe* carves out new niches for cyborg writing in even the most rapidly developing technologies.

Scholars note that the original *apostrophe*, with its tangled allusions and Madison Avenue-style pitches, already resembles the format and diction of online searches.[2] In particular, the declarations foreground inefficiency and decay, comparing "you" to dilapidated buildings and failing bodies: "you are a distress property" and "a case of halitosis, gingivitis, dandruff and split ends all rolled up into one". They model verbal inefficiency, giving over-lengthy descriptions for sparse data, with remarks on machine method at times crowding out explanatory context and

content: "you are a compilation of more than 60 samples overlaid on top of a digitally synthesized '70s funk groove". Indeed, antiquated technology transforms delay and erasure into new forms of attention and definition: "you are the message on a cassette tape long after it has been recorded over · you are, as such, the eraser head's self-validating ideal of order".

The cyborg form of *apostrophe*'s online stage is also well-discussed; when Kennedy and Wershler-Henry issued a paperback book in 2006 of their search yields, they warned readers looking for "procedural purity" in computer poetry "that *apostrophe* is a tainted text, with none of Racter's dubious innocence," as they had "meddled" willfully with the computer lists. [3] "[P]arasitizes," "tainted," and "meddled" reconceive images of contamination and disease as cyborg art methods. Kennedy and Wershler-Henry's language of repudiating "innocence" recalls Haraway, and their image of "pleasure and responsibility" echoes her own "argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries" in cyborg writing "and for *responsibility* in their construction" (Haraway 150). What special boundaries define *apostrophe,* especially for the online text's links?

The project does not "go on…Forever," as *apostrophe*'s afterword first suggests. The "hopeful monster[]" gradually becomes "a self-consuming artifact":

> We speculated from the outset that once sections of the book began to appear online, the engine would begin to cannibalize itself, returning its own results before other, less likely matches…This process has been accelerated by the increasing sophistication of engine technologies; after all, the results of the apostrophe engine only work as poetry to the extent that search engines don't succeed at their job. Play with it while you can; childhood is almost over.

Does this machine writing undermine novelty, either in straight repetition or textual mimicry where each reader's "Play" with the program, however thoughtfully arrayed, is "going to create something of this ilk", its topic switches and repurposed addresses becoming rote techniques? The dictum that "childhood is almost over" sounds apocalyptic in an Arthur C. Clarke sense, but the "almost" is telling. Kennedy and Wersher-Henry explicitly keep "open[]" other "possibilities" for their cyborg writing by linking poetry to technological inefficiency, the "engines" that "don't succeed at their job". There are theoretical precursors for that move—Wershler-Henry's interest in Georges Bataille's *general economy*, the tropes "of useless[ness]" and "imminent obsolescence" in 'pataphysical experiments, as Craig Dworkin notes, as well as Haraway's idea of "[im]perfect communication". But the abiding "pleasure" in *apostrophe*'s lists is to watch the cross-plays, frictions, and urgent redirections prompted by that inefficiency at each juncture. Specific search engines might become more efficient across *apostrophe*'s stages, but this is only one type of technology, as the book's catalogues remind us; future systems and users will have their own inefficiencies and blind spots from which to mesh new compositions. The text's notes emphasize how much technical iteration the poem has already had, working in AltaVista or Google at different intervals and for different purposes. Lines from the secondary poems mock the reader as "someone who enjoys using buggy software to access filtered, mass-market content" in "a country rampant with the soft bigotry of low expectations", but "enjoys" also makes us think about the multiple forms a deliberate poetics "of unnecessary work", "categorical error", and "abeyance" might take. The "you" of *apostrophe* is a subject always suspended between evolving technologies, whether mechanical or literary, "at the limits of your knowledge" as you challenge and revise your own processes. Long before you finalize a poetic method, the text predicts, you will be sidetracked by "addictive diversion[s]", pulling away from

a system's "end" goals toward "middle" spaces of "procrastinating" "cross-compiling", and

"coming second" that fuel further questions. If "you are not quite sure how to respond"—if

neither the current programmers nor users can spell out criteria for the next level of meddling—

"you" may at least be "ready to let someone else read it", inviting the next dismantling and re-

dissemination of your cyborg practice.

Notes

All *apostrophe* quotations are from the 2006 print book. Wershler-Henry now goes by the name of Wershler.

1. Haraway famously defined cyborg subjects as "theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" (150) and their "politics" as "the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly" (176). While her essay cites novels with cyborg themes but more traditionally linear writing, Craig Dworkin, emphasizes the politics of both procedural texts in print and the electronic poetry they presaged (30), arguing that "the 'pataphysical power of exceptions—singularities, anomalies, perversions, swerves" (39) can "highlight the limits of schemes like 'total information awareness'" (57). Karl Jirgens describes *apostrophe* as a "'cyber-text[],'" paraphrasing Espen Aarseth's idea of a work having "multiple paths, with too many branches or points of divergence for any individual to follow," in addition to its "'ergodic'" emphasis on "*direct* audience engagement" (Jirgens 139); see, too, Aarseth's own discussion of the politics of Haraway's "responsibility"/"pleasures" with recharting literary "boundaries" or questions about "'cyborg literacy'" versus "'perfect communication'" (Aarseth 54, 57, 183). Kenneth Goldsmith notes that the stages of *apostrophe* "embrace[] both the machine and the printed book; the raw text and the manipulated; the infinite and the known" (185). Adam Seelig analyzes *apostrophe*'s "human/mechanical dichotomy" as it crosses the Romantic apostrophe with "catalogue" literature and "its digitized offspring" (41-3), noting, too, its conflict between system and rule-breaking: "Hyperspecific poetics set limits for a text to transcend" (33). Holly Dupej, who foregrounds the text's "split character of" machinic "experimentalism and lyricism" (99), also examines the reworking of the apostrophe form (108-113) as the book's lists reinterpret "identity" through "multiple connections with others" (103). Jennifer Ashton emphasizes the lyric impact of the project's apostrophes as well (220).

2. Seelig argues that "Kennedy anticipated the multiplicity of voices and perspectives, random groupings, peripeteia, and textual polyphony and cacophony" in Internet use (41), as well as its "clichés" (43). Dworkin describes Kennedy's text as "stylistically indistinguishable from" the later computer sections (50), and notes that the whole *apostrophe* project replicates the "intimate personal address" at Internet sites (48).

3. Discussing this "meddled" comment, Goldsmith notes significant dissimilarities between the codex text and a sample list generated at the site (183-185).

4. See, for example, Wershler-Henry on Bataille in *free as in speech and beer* (8-13). See, too, Dupej on *apostrophe*'s "excess," "entropic loss of intensity and effect" (105, 112), and "exhaustibility" in repeating Kennedy's words cited online (107). Where Dupej emphasizes how

the text "Constrain[s] Entropy" (104-6), however, Seelig valorizes the "point(point (lessness)" (33), "*un*necessari[ness]" (36) and "uselessness of poetry" in procedural texts that "call the whole 'procedure' into doubt" (37). Cf. Goldsmith's comments on "noise" (184) or on Flarf poets taking "the *worst*" Web texts they can find, "reframing all that trash into poetry" (185).

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