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The Imaginary Solution

The production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal “solutions” to unresolvable social contradictions.

Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*

Quoniam mihi quidem alia adhuc via non patet istud praestandi, nisi per imaginaria procedendo, formulam $\sqrt{-1}$ littera i in posterum designabo.

[Since the only way to make any progress has been by proceeding along an imaginary path, I henceforth designate the negative square root with the letter i.]

Leonhard Euler, *Institutionum calculi integralis*

“**F**rom the modernism you want,” quipped David Antin, “you get the postmodernism you deserve.”¹ True enough, as the last quarter century has shown; Antin’s dynamic nicely encapsulates the logic of canons, in which interventions resonate both forward and backward, as lineage and precedent adjust to accommodate and account for apparent ruptures or discontinuities. But Antin’s instant proverb is also a good reminder that whatever the dominant canon might be—whatever it is that comes to mind at the thought of “modernism” or “postmod-

For opportunities to present and discuss portions of this project, I would like to thank Lou Asekoff, Benjamin Buchloh, Stuart Culver, Hal Foster, John Guillory, Yunte Huang, Alan Liu, Robert Viscusi, and especially Tania Ørum—this essay is for her.

1. I have been unable to locate the source of Antin’s adage, but it is widely quoted. See, for the earliest instance I have traced, Marjorie Perloff, “Postmodernism / Fin de siècle” 177.

ernism” or “contemporary literature”—the lack of critical consensus on the literature of the previous century means that there are still viable alternatives for our sense of the contemporary. Indeed, as this essay will show, the last few years have seen one of those alternatives making good, with interest, on the promise of a particular modernism. Or to phrase it from the other perspective, a particular modernism has finally fully arrived, about a decade behind schedule, but making up for lost time. Part of the task of this essay is to document the emergence of this return and to provide evidence of a tendency that plays out across media, indexing and exemplifying one of the defining conditions of its cultural moment. Because these works fall outside the genres and styles likely to be familiar even to many readers of avant-garde literature, this documentation will require a certain degree of descriptive cataloguing (although it is worth noting that the catalogue itself, not coincidentally, is a key component of the works I will itemize). With the series of examples that follow, I further hope to show that this particular trend in contemporary literature is uniquely hinged, not only recovering one of the dreams of its literary past but also looking forward to what may be the nightmare of our digital future. This second claim, for the history of digital poetics, starts from the premise that a poem may well have a greater affinity with works from other disciplines or in other media—in this case Internet applications, software, and digital video—than with other poems. Following Lev Manovich’s insight that certain artistic forms predate the media that best accommodate them (*Language* 248), I will argue that these poems are proleptic: their striking forms anticipate the computerized new media that would seem to be their ideal vehicle.

As Marjorie Perloff persuasively argues in *Twenty-First-Century Modernism*, there is a “special relationship between the early twentieth century and the early twenty-first,” and certain literary works from our own *fin de siècle* often have a stronger family resemblance to the avant-garde impulse of their modernist predecessors than to the more proximate writing of their so-called *postmodernist* moment—even when those earlier works are not direct models or influences (164). I want to trace a similar congruity here, where the “special relationship” in this case is the radical dilation of modernist experiments by twenty-first-century writers, who magnify and distend what were

the tentative, occasional, and local tactics of early modernism into aggressive, explicit, and comprehensive strategies of textual production. Singling out some of the novel impulses of modernism and taking them to drastic logical conclusions, these twenty-first-century works are less a belated or revised modernism than a kind of modernism *in extremis*. The works I have in mind combine several disparate traits of early modernism: first, the compositional play of rule and constraint at the heart of the recombinatory linguistics theorized by Ferdinand de Saussure in his notebooks on paragrams, a generative poetics actually put into practice with the anagrams of writers as diverse as Aleksei Kruchenykh and Unica Zürn, or with the extraordinary homophonic procedure of Raymond Roussel; second, the syntactic serialism and exhaustive permutations of writers such as Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett; and third, and the impulse I want to focus on, the perverse spin of the expected, which Alfred Jarry impishly christened “ ‘pataphysics.”² Jarry, in the guise of Doctor Faustroll, proclaims:

[L]a pataphysique sera surtout la science du particulier. . . . Elle étudiera les lois qui régissent les exceptions, et expliquera l’univers supplémentaire à celui-ci; ou moins ambitieusement décrira un univers que l’on peut voir et que peut-être l’on doit voir à la place du traditionnel. . . .

DEFINITION.—*La pataphysique est la science des solutions imaginaires, qui accorde symboliquement aux linéaments les propriétés ses objets décrits par leur virtualité.*

(30–31)

[(P)ataphysics will be, above all, the science of the particular. . . . It will investigate the laws that govern exceptions, and it will explain the universe supplementary to this one; or, less ambitiously, it will describe a universe that one might envision—and that perhaps one *should* envision—in place of the traditional one.

DEFINITION: Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes to their lineaments the properties of objects described by their virtuality.]

2. “L’orthographe réelle ‘*pataphysique*, [doit être] précédé d’une apostrophe, afin d’éviter un facile calembour [the actual spelling of ‘*pataphysics* should be preceded by an apostrophe in order to avoid an obvious pun],” as Jarry archly notes in the second book of his “neo-scientific novel” (21). The pun is not obvious (though the best ones never are).

Faustroll's mock academicism is intentionally obfuscatory, but Marcel Duchamp, who joined the Collège de 'Pataphysique in the 1950s and ascended to the rank of satrap, provides several concrete examples of imaginary solutions. In *Boîte verte* (1934), for instance, Duchamp proposes that one might "classify combs by the number of their teeth," and he puts the useless precision of that taxonomy into practice with his case of custom-made drafting tools, entitled *Trois stoppages étalon* (Three Uniform Commercial Mending Stitches). To produce the piece, Duchamp supposedly dropped three meter-long strings so that the chance curves of their shapes as they landed formed the models for precisely machined measuring sticks. The curved extensions of those rulers were thus all exactly one meter, but since none of them had the same linear extension, they could never be used to actually measure or confirm the lengths that they established (Duchamp 71).

The constructing of useless reference tools, the proposing of imaginary solutions, and the cataloguing of exceptions—activities that we might characterize as "applied 'pataphysics"—have been the goal of a number of recent books, all composed by establishing rules with which to organize large amounts of "ready-made," found material. In *No. 111: 2.7.93–10.20.96*, for one of the most notable instances, Kenneth Goldsmith compiled some six hundred pages of phrases that end in a loose *r* sound, transcribing those that caught his attention from the hum of the modern linguistic environment: television and Usenet groups, conversations and telephone calls, books and newspaper articles.³ That material was then filtered into chapters according to syllable count and further organized alphabetically within each chapter. In the early sections of the book, this procedure creates densely rhymed and rhythmic catalogues:

under erasure, under fudge packer, under her tenure, under or over,
under the veneer, under the weather, underwear drawers, undreamt of
butter, unknowable (duh), unruly wazir, Until fathead here!, until he see-
saw, until then stay pure, uphill gardeners, urethra cleaner, usa el poder,
using the structure, utterly-utta

(60)

3. The genre of the reference book apparently established the arbitrary limit at which Goldsmith stopped collecting material; he explains that he aimed for six-hundred pages after noticing "that any reference book worth its salt was at least 600 pages" long (Goldsmith, "Exchanging E-Mail" 2).

In the middle chapters, such lists give over to more subtle waves of measure and repetition; the paratactic phrases, drawn from increasingly identifiable spheres of popular culture, more openly invite assimilation into a connected, if not ever quite coherent, narrative. Consider, for example, how a passage from chapter 17 negotiates between the colloquial transcription of lyrics by the hardcore rap group Onyx and the Middle English of Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" by way of a scholarly disclaimer about nonstandard orthography, or how references to women and food, combined with initial copulative conjunctions, work to suture the subsequent sentences into an increasingly seamless text:

a justification of my seemingly haphazard procedure, a sound-based linguistic document of a person's life for __ years, Add these to your collection and be a part of the nostalgia!, ahhh I hate your fuckin' guts and I hope that you die Sticky Fingers, *all spelling and punctuation are as they appeared in the letters, allas the pitee that was ther cracchyng of chekes rentynge eek of heer, and anyway visible nipples are not quite on for a mother, and couldn't wait to dash back into the fine gardens far from "nature", and it's as if she's constantly being sprinkled with tarantulas, And then on the way home you have to carry an empty Tupperware?, and what comes up that tube is the undigested food from their dinner, And what constitutes understanding or failure to understand here?

(229)

A good question, because as the book progresses, each chapter tends to contain only one or two long passages which, in something like a reversal of the increasingly telegraphic self-citations in Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, dilate and begin to reveal the wider and wider context for earlier fragments. The final chapters are noticeably erratic, and ultimately the whole system breaks down under the weight of the last chapter, which jumps ahead to a purported 7, 228 syllables and consists of D. H. Lawrence's "The Rocking-Horse Winner," downloaded and inserted in its entirety (and ending, of course, in the requisite *r* of "winner").

With the exception of that final chapter, Goldsmith's compositional practice offers a way of organizing language that is intentional but unpredictable. As with the algorithmic "writings-through" of John Cage and Jackson Mac Low, *No. 111* takes chances without permitting chance, as such, to enter in. That is, since the procedure is transparent,

readers know precisely where a given phrase must appear, both within the book and then within the appropriate chapter. The book, in this sense, is automatically self-indexing. At the same time, for all the conscious and unconscious choice Goldsmith exercised in collecting source material and setting the rules by which to filter that material, he could neither have controlled nor predicted exactly what aesthetic form the end result would take. Moreover, the procedure leads to a work in which the specificity of its contents is at once intimately personal and statistically public. The language in the book is almost entirely appropriated and so not at all “expressive” in the traditional sense, but the result is actually quite unguardedly *confessional*: it locates a single subject at the intersection of an overwhelming mass of social discourse and triangulates him through exactly what he heard, what he was reading, what chat rooms he visited, and so on.

No. 111 evinces the hallmarks of Goldsmith’s subsequent work: arbitrary procedures facilitated by electronic recording media, and a constant tension between the threat of surveillance and the promise of celebrity. In a neat inversion of *No. 111*, for instance, Goldsmith again placed himself at the nexus of communicative social networks in his *Soliloquy* project, which transforms dialogue into a strange sort of dramatic monologue, or what one critic has called an “inverted soliloquy” (Tapper 1). Wearing a hidden microphone, he recorded everything he said for one week, omitting all of his interlocutors’ speech. He then transcribed the apparently unedited result into a seven-chapter book, with every stutter and stupidity in place:

Ubu is shit in French, right? Shit web. Yeah no no no, it is. I mean, you know Alfred Jarry, right? The great great Surrealist Dadaist wrote wrote Pere Ubu Alfred Jarry wrote Pere Ubu uh Ubu Roi and you know the band Pere Ubu they took their name from that as well. Twentieth Century French Surrealist stuff. OK. So, uh, it’s father shit Pere Ubu or King Shit. So wanna you wanna join us for a drink Alex? Let’s go. Let’s go. We’re gon you’re c’mon have a margarita, uh, a margarita with us. There you go. There you go. C’mon c’mon Alex. Join us later. At least. What an asshole. I know. He didn’t he didn’t know who Alfred Jarry was. He had he had never heard of the band Pere Ubu I mean, I was like we’re in other worlds, you know? Wait a minute we lost Cheryl and . . . Ubu’ed? Yeah it was Ubu, yeah. Oh really? That’s cool.

(247)

The passage is entirely typical in its unflattering autobiographical revelations. The book paints a portrait of the artist as a young racker, as well as a tireless raconteur: on the move, on the phone, at all the right events; obsequious and sycophantic to someone and then contemptuously ridiculing them behind their back; cajoling one moment and provoking the next; endlessly angling and self-promoting through 487 breathless pages and seven days in the life of a loquacious art-world hustler. In the end, however, the cynicism of that hustle is offset by a surprisingly candid and unguarded willingness to put the machinations on display, and by a pervasive and winningly optimistic enthusiasm not so much for artists as for the art itself. That enthusiasm both drives the speaker's machinations and transcends his self-interest, and one can see Goldsmith's good-natured acceptance of his own faults in the shrug of "that's cool," with which he stands corrected after confusing the scandalous "merdre" of Jarry's *Ubu roi* with the meaning of "ubu" itself—the name of Goldsmith's Web site, no less, and the very subject that led him to condescend to poor Alex with all of Faustroll's pedantry.

In other passages (179–80, 189–90), Goldsmith appears equally unfazed to learn that his project, halfway through its scheduled week, is replicating Andy Warhol's *A: A Novel*, a book that purported to be the transcript of one amphetamine-driven day in the life of Ondine and others in Warhol's Factory entourage (although it is in fact the result of at least four different recording sessions erratically transcribed, freely edited, and irresponsibly proofed). Almost exactly thirty years later, *Soliloquy* doubles the stakes of Warhol's *A* and replays its wager, but without the blatant cheating, and the two books have much in common. As in *A*, Manhattan itself is an important character in *Soliloquy*, with its cabs and subways not just providing transportation but also mapping discourse networks and lines of communication, and with the troublesome pay phones of Warhol's world giving way to the troublesome cell phones of the late 1990s. Both books also turn on the voyeuristic appeal of eavesdropping, pioneering a sort of "reality poetry" that balances intrusive surveillance against the reward of celebrity, the frustrations of the many indecipherable or unknowable referents against the scandal of the many intimate and uncensored disclosures. Moreover, those competing and ambivalent aspects of the books are

themselves the reflection of an interesting structural tension in their texts between the thorough documentation of the most commonplace, everyday language—with all of the authenticity and authority of “the real”—and the unedited, unmediated presentation of that colloquial language, so that the transcribed texts emphasize the distance between actual utterances and the literary conventions that we have had for representing and framing speech. In place of the mannered stylistics of stream of consciousness, and the attendant psychology of the internal monologue, these works present a stream of speech with far less manipulation. In *Soliloquy*, furthermore, the absence of dialogue leaves an almost totally externalized narrator, with practically no opportunity to register his internal consciousness, so that the surface of the narrative comes to resemble a grotesquely exaggerated version of a late James novel—or perhaps, as the case may be, a *too late* James novel.⁴

Nonetheless, the play of concealment and revelation in *Soliloquy* is surprisingly complex; the work puts obstacles in the path of the exposures it cultivates, yet at the same time, those obstructions are themselves quite revealing. On the one hand, for example, the publication of the trade edition of *Soliloquy* was preceded by a prospectus of sorts—a chapbook index of all the proper names mentioned in the book—that acknowledged and explicitly appealed to the coterie reader’s desire to hear gossip about particular people. But in the ‘pataphysical spirit of a beautifully useless reference book, that index was keyed to the original, oversized, and very-limited-edition gallery publication of the work rather than the forthcoming trade edition, which was not only unpaginated, but in which the text had been entirely rerun and reset. On the other hand, all of the jarring *ums* and *ahs* and stuttered repetitions are, paradoxically, replete

4. Marjorie Perloff makes a similar comparison to James in “Screening the Page” (155). The absence of dialogue sets *Soliloquy* apart from other works of transcribed speech, most notably Ed Friedman’s *The Telephone Book*, an endgame of New York school poetics that literalizes the basis of Frank O’Hara’s “personism” (“While I was writing I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem” [499]); but one might also compare Goldsmith’s work with more recent versions of digital wiretap that have emerged from DJ culture, such as the cell phone conversations incorporated in performances by Scanner (see Mann for documentation) or collected by “The Spacewürm” (a.k.a. DJ “V”) in *I Listen*.

with meaning. A more considered and edited text might have replaced those locutions with clearer articulation and information about the book's subjects, but in the end they actually emphasize the deeply *social* nature of Goldsmith's language. Those moments of stall and idle and blockage are instances of what Roman Jakobson, following Bronislaw Malinowski's notion of "phatic communion," termed the "phatic function" of speech—empty speech that both indicates and structures the social relations among its users, noting and establishing the possibility for linguistic exchange and keeping the channels of communication open. They are the promissory notes of discourse, worth nothing in themselves but marking the guarantee that more speech can follow, perhaps with a greater semantic return.

In stark contrast to the redundant and voluble verbal excess of *Soliloquy*, Goldsmith rigorously eliminates extraneous linguistic elements from his book *Fidget*, editing out not just stutters and hesitations but almost all syncategorematics and often even any grammatical subject at all. Not coincidentally, there is a corresponding retreat from the external public spaces that structured *No. 111* and *Soliloquy*; in place of the media appropriations and the phatic exchanges of urban social discourse, *Fidget* retreats to the private, individual, corporeal body. What does remain constant, however, is the book's dependence on the recording technologies of the microphone and the portable tape machine. Taking the root of the word "soliloquy" quite literally, Goldsmith composed the book by recording not what he said to others, but what he said to himself, as he spent the day sequestered and attempted to describe every movement his body made from the moment he awoke to the time he fell back asleep. Edited and stylized, the breviloquent result is a perfect example of what Sianne Ngai has described as the "thickening" of language when minimalist diction is rendered "syntactically dense or complex" (sections 7 and 8).⁵ *Fidget* reads like a cross between Samuel Beckett's late texts and the *nouveau roman*:

5. Much of the work I take up in this essay exhibits precisely those rhetorical "incoherencies" theorized by Ngai: "enumerations, repetitions, permutations, retractions and emendations, agglutinations, measurements and taxonomic classifications, and rudimentary arithmetical and algebraic operations (grouping, subdividing, multiplying)" (section 9).

Lips part. Purse. Hand tips. Inhale. Tongue and saliva roll in mouth. Swallow. Tongue emerges through teeth and lips. Tongue lies on lower lip. Teeth click tongue. Lower jaw drops from upper. Flesh folds beneath chin. Repeats. Upper lip sucks. Rubs against bottom. Swallow. Saliva gathers under tongue. Teeth tuck inside jaw. Gather saliva. Swallow. Left hand, grasping with three fingers, moves toward mouth. Swallow. Arm drops. Arm lifts. Swallow. Arm drops. Swallow. Arm lifts. Arm drops. Eyes move to left. Left hand hits. Arm lifts. Swallow. Arm drops. Right leg crosses left.

(18–19)

It takes him an hour to dictate about a thousand words, only enough time, in all of the first chapter, from 10:00 to 11:00 a.m., to describe opening his eyes, sitting up in bed, and blowing his nose. There is much that one could say about the work, but I want to emphasize that the project is once again an imaginary solution: precise and impossible, recording only the exceptions to the thousands of other bodily activities taking place at the same time, so that its smallest accuracies are bought only at the cost of its larger failures, on which they are entirely dependent.

Although presented at the local level of lips and eyelids, this corporeal dilemma is an analogue of the much larger structures implicitly called into question by Goldsmith's work. Like all of the books under discussion here, the patent absurdity of the project points to the inevitable discontinuity between all generalized systems and the incongruous individuals those systems are meant to account for; to the alienation of each concrete experience from the narratives of normalcy meant to absorb it; to the proscriptive inadequacy of descriptive schemes. In literary terms, these works contrast a formal rigidity, guaranteed by their preestablished rules, with the fluid interchangeability of the content structured by that form. Similarly, they highlight the inability of even the most intricate forms to predict or control the semantic context of the ready-made elements they recombine. These tensions lead to a deconstructing system in which data (the content) cannot appear, *as such*, without an interface (the formal structure), but in which that structure itself is only legible when replete with content. Those data, moreover, are repeatedly seen both to resist their smooth integration into a new whole and to escape their discrete separation into merely formal units; readers repeatedly discover the constituent parts of these

texts establishing unpredictable and rhizomatic networks across the intended sutures and articulations of their assembly. Accordingly, both the chance moments of local coherence within these texts and the preposterous molar incoherence of the texts as a whole illustrate the 'pataphysical power of exceptions—singularities, anomalies, perversions, swerves—to belie the ambitions of any general system of statistical average, whether economic, political, psychological, sociological, cultural, and so on.

These homologies are easier to see in the work of Dan Farrell, where the sources and thematic content of his material more obviously corroborate the implications of his forms. Farrell engineers imaginary solutions by torquing both scientific discourse and scientific methods with a distinctly 'pataphysical spin, producing texts that share the studied, flat tone and serial syntax cultivated in *Fidget* but through even more distanced and austere procedures, with a disquieting patience and precise control of data. One of Farrell's more recent projects, for instance, is a meticulous investigation of social linguistics and the language of popular media, all presented in the putatively scientific format of the graph. The work, titled "Graphing the News," involves charting the frequency of word use, month by month over two decades, in periodicals such as *The New York Times*. To some extent, these graphs might be read as animated translations of the poetic moment of the late 1960s, when writers such as Clark Coolidge and Aram Saroyan were reducing poems to pairs of words spaced across the page, and eventually to single words. Like those poems, Farrell's graphs illustrate how charged and animated even the smallest fragments of language can be. Less ludic, but just as provocatively ludicrous, Farrell's project plots phrases like "an abundance of" against "spring break"; "common sense" against "fraught"; and "stimulant" against "bail-out." The results are as meaningful as a Duchampian taxonomy of combs; and yet the graphs are also quite compelling and suggestive. Like the phrasal rhythms that emerge in the early chapters of *No. 111* to reveal hitherto unknown linguistic rules—who could have predicted, for instance, that five-syllable colloquial English phrases ending in an *r* had a typical metrics?—Farrell's graphs seem to reveal facts about language that one could not have predicted and for which one cannot account. Why does the use of the word

“fraught” remain constant over a decade while the phrase “common sense” fluctuates wildly? What dark humor underwrites the close correlation between the steadily increasing occurrences of “cute” in tandem with “big deal”? If the periodicity of “spring break” is expected, what accounts for the periodicity of the phrase “an abundance of,” and why do they seem to cycle in and out of phase? Moreover, if the increased usage of “bail out” seems directly stimulated by specific economic events reported in the newspaper, what could be the motor driving the spiky dips and arcs of the collective use of the word “stimulant” itself?

Answers, of course, are not forthcoming. Farrell’s pairings suspend the chosen words somewhere between raw data and information, pulling them out of their original contexts to suggest that their aggregates contain some meaning, but also isolating those patterns from the contextual background which could render that meaning legible. Such decontextualization and rearticulation is typical of Farrell’s work in general. In *The Inkblot Record*, for example, he compiled and then alphabetized thousands of responses to Hermann Rorschach’s famous “form interpretation test.” Like the graphed words, these phrases are stripped of the information they originally carried when they were printed in the half-dozen psychology textbooks from which Farrell harvested his material. Not only do they lose their pedagogic and diagnostic usefulness, but they also lose any imprint of a particular institutional politics. Because *The Inkblot Record* combines and redistributes sentences from multiple sources into a single text, it erases their role in the contentious history of associative and projective perception tests. Reversing the centrifugal spread of competing scoring systems and schools of clinical psychology that diverged from Rorschach’s initial proposals in the 1920s, *The Inkblot Record* collapses their conclusions back into a pool of primary data. Against that blank background, however, other information is thrown into better relief, and when the responses reappear collated in Farrell’s book, they are invested with new aesthetic potential. In addition to the alliteration expected in an alphabetized list, chance rhymes and phrasal rhythms lace the individual responses into a continuous prose block from which their concatenation begins to suggest new narrative possibilities—either for whatever individual consciousness might be able to reconcile the

responses or for what the aggregate might reveal about a newly glimpsed collective unconscious:

Black Sabbath. Black smoke smudges. Blackness and shape of insignia make me think of airman's death. Blah, that's an ugly thing, like some sort of creature, like a big monster with big feet and a small head, it must be dumb because the head is so small. Blood. Blood. Blood dripping down. Blowing, anyway, or breathing, could be either. Blue eyes. Blue faces, blowing into some kind of apparatus. Blue flags on a twin standard. Blue, my favorite color, looks soft, satiny and luxurious. Blue sky. Blurred man. Body, arms, hands. . . . Bottom part looks like that same sex symbol again—Jesus. . . . Bow tie in middle symbolic of party color. Boy, I'm beat, this is a hard test, I hope you don't have to do it every day. Breasts, hips, hands up, skirts cover their feet, no heads. Brontë sisters. . . . Brown spaniels; English spaniels with floppy ears.

(13)

By reaestheticizing clinical language, Farrell returns the legacy of Rorschach's forms to their origin in the arts and recalls that their diagnostic use was itself a sort of imaginary solution. Rorschach would have been familiar with the suggestive patterns of smears and splatters from the studio of his father, who was a painter, and his own fascination with the pictorial potential of those stains was foreshadowed by the publication of Justinus Kerner's *Kleksographien*, a book of poetry inspired by a series of rather terrifying inkblots. The direct inspiration, however, was Rorschach's interest in the children's game blotto, which he diverted from an idle pastime to a serious tool.

Warhol, once again, provides a precedent for investigating the artistic lineage of the inkblot, which he magnified and exhibited in two series of paintings from the mid-1980s. Warhol's canvases are a hilariously deadpan send-up of the angst-ridden psychologism that had typically been read into abstract expressionism, as well as a campy revision of Morris Louis's "veil" paintings. Echoing the tone of Warhol's straight-faced lampoon, *The Inkblot Record* also restores some of the fun to Rorschach's inkblots. The humor of Farrell's book, as the excerpt above suggests, derives from the all too obvious, and all too obviously already self-analyzed, revelations of the responses, as well as from those responses—such as "Brontë sisters"—which could fit only the most perverse diagnostic

interpretation. Indeed, the diagnostic power of Farrell's *Inkblot Record* lies in its interrogation of the reader's projective habits; rather than ask what patients see in the forms of blotted ink, his enjambed sentences prod us to perform the inverse function and imagine what image could have possibly provoked these texts: what blunt, symmetrical smear looked like "Reindeer or dogs. . . . a cigar store Indian. . . . a real person" (57)? In addition to Warhol's paintings, the psychological absurdism of *The Inkblot Record*, paired with its distinctive form, recalls Stefan Themerson's *Kardynal Pölatüo*. Themerson's 'pataphysical novel, which he variously describes as a work of "philosophical dadaism" and "historical surrealism," recounts the exploits of the eponymous and exceedingly long-lived cleric, who bases his unshakable faith on all the latest scientific trends. The Cardinal, as one chapter reveals, has such obscenely explicit and pornographic dreams that only Freudian psychology can put his mind, as it were, to rest. He reasons that if, in the Freudian dream system, the most innocuous everyday objects and events are actually ciphers for secret sexual desires, then sexual desires must themselves be signs for the repression of the quotidian. So if he dreams about biting his mother's breasts, for example, it means he was really only thinking about the two pears he had for lunch, or if he dreams about choking on his penis it reveals that he was really just worrying about wearing a necktie, and so on. Accordingly, the Cardinal commissions an unabridged reverse dictionary of Freudian symbolism to prove his purity. That dictionary, the materialization of a singular imaginary solution, actually appears as an appendix to the novel—a list of bold-faced headwords alphabetized and cross-referenced and reading very much like Farrell's *Inkblot Record*.

For all of its absurdist humor, however, *The Inkblot Record* can be unsettling, as when one respondent pairs decapitation with lifted skirts, or another envisions "a real person," and there is also a decidedly darker side to Farrell's surrealist combinations—a corpse to accompany his exquisite collage. Part of Farrell's larger project has been to chart the psychological matrix of capitalism, and the ways in which even the most scientific discourses, with all of their cultural authority and supposed objectivity, are of course socially constructed and implicated. In Farrell's five-page prose poem "Avail,"

for example, the reader finds what seems at first glance to be some sort of neurotic internal monologue, or the ravings of a dangerously irritable hypochondriac:

My feelings of anger do not interfere with my work. In order to have good health, I have to act in a pleasing way to other more powerful individuals. At times I think people are trying to annoy me. I feel more angry about myself these days than I used to. More people than usual are beginning to make me feel angry. I am so angry and hostile all the time that I can't stand it. From time to time my feelings of anger interfere with my work. I feel that others are constantly and intentionally making me angry. I feel so angry that it interferes with my capacity to work. I feel unhappy about my physical health. My feelings of anger prevent me from doing any work at all. My body needs a lot of work to be in excellent physical shape.

(27)

The sentences, one soon realizes, are diagnostic choices drawn from responses to two different mental-health questionnaires (William Snell's "Clinical Anger Scale" and his "Multidimensional Health Questionnaire," to be precise). When interwoven, however, and taken as expressive statements in their own right, they underscore the power, terror, and inadequacies of interpolation. Moreover, Farrell's rearticulation of these sentences reveals the traces of ideologies and social practices that users of the original sources might want to conceal or exclude (provoked rage and the absence of an effective system of civic health care, for instance). Or for the "last" instance, as the case may be. *Last Instance*, the title of the book in which "Avail" was published, cites, on the copyright page, Louis Althusser's melancholy observation, apropos determination: "Ni au premier, ni au dernier instant, l'heure solitaire de la 'dernière instance' ne sonne jamais [From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes]" (Althusser 113). Indeed, Farrell's work is itself explicitly Althusserian in its investigations of subjects constructed at the intersections of social and economic networks. Or to put this more generally, his work calls into question sites of linguistic production and the ways in which history moves through linguistic material. But as his frequency charts graphically illustrate, even in its most isolated state that "material" is never just a medium, in the sense of a fetishized or alienated signifier; linguistic material is something that always includes and

encodes practice and use and the relations between its users (Farrell and Inman 5–6).

With the first-person pronouns of Snell's questionnaires reterritorialized across an aggregate of anonymous and undifferentiated subjects, Farrell uses the dynamic between part and whole to suggest the social and political enmeshing of those users and to give palpable form to the extent that they are *being spoken* rather than really speaking for themselves in any unique way. The patterns and repetitions recorded by all of those implicated but absent subjects open onto an ominous sublime of forces acting on a scale far beyond our control but felt in every twitch and tic of our most intimate linguistic gestures. A version of this same dynamic between abstract forms and minute particulars, between the conceptual and the experiential, is manifest in Goldsmith's books, and that same play between the singularity of Jarry's "exceptional" and the distribution of the statistical—between the unique individual subjects posited by certain texts and the collective cultural formations that betray them—is also registered quite clearly in Douglas Huebler's conceptually elegant *Variable Piece #4: Secrets*. Enacted at the New York City Jewish Museum's 1970 Software exhibition (a title, as we shall see, that is all to the point for his project), Huebler set up what Friedrich Kittler would call an "inscriptive relay [*Aufschreibesysteme*]"; he invited museum visitors to write down and deposit a secret that they had never told anyone and which they could then exchange for one of the photocopied secrets left by a previous visitor. The library of almost two thousand responses was then arranged into a long paratactic list and published as the book *Secrets*. As in the other works I have discussed, those paratactic disjunctions play off the formal conjunction of Huebler's collage, and much of the book's pleasure comes from the way in which its found material is edited to reveal linguistic patterns of phrasal rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, and so on.

Although occasional entries capture a genuine pathos, expressing moments of intimacy or guilt (the conflation of "confession" with "secret" is almost complete and unexamined in the responses), the museum seems to have hosted at least one school trip, and so many of the entries are disaffected adolescent responses and reactions to the context: "I'm not going to tell you a secret, so there," or "I took

two secrets but only wrote one." Several are signed "Spiro Agnew." The majority of the "secrets," however, merely reveal how commonplace and collective our most private, personal, and closely guarded thoughts in fact are. Participants repeatedly admit that they have done drugs, or are afraid to, or have done drugs too often, or not enough; others repeatedly admit that they have had sex (or are afraid to, or have had sex too often, or not enough), still others that they have had an affair (or are afraid to, or would like to). Others confess that they pick their nose, or used to hit their sibling when they were little, or stole something once. One reads again and again, as though it were the ultimate secret, simply, "I love you." As these responses accumulate, reiterating not only similar sentiments but syntactically similar sentences, the book ultimately divulges not so much the content of its speakers' secrets, but the common grammar of secrecy. Secrets, as the book suggests, may be as much about the syntactic form in which we phrase something as in the nature of what we say:

I am afraid of going crazy

I smoked grass 5 times

I have narcissistic tendencies

I am more ready to have a child than I am willing to admit to my husband

Secret: I wish I had a secret

I want to be famous

An atom bomb is now being built in my basement in Brooklyn

Carl, I love You

I am a mistress

I have sex dreams all the time

God is alive & well in the Software Show

I would like to have a figure like Twiggy

I visit a shrink!

I'm neither white nor black, but pink!

I followed Jack to the top of Conway Mountain—and he hated me and it.

I love you

I think I have a kidney infection

I think that sometimes life gets very hard to bear with—However, this is
only due to my experiences this past month. However, its all past

Doris C drinks Perrier for lunch

I have never been sexually satisfied in my life

My secret is that sometimes I lie

As that last line manifests, one of the cruxes of Huebler's book is the difficulty of distinguishing a genuine secret from a lie in a context where anonymity invites a lie, but in which all lies ultimately expose their speakers by revealing their most personal psychological reflexes—what lie one tells when given such an opportunity.

By underscoring the shared strategies of these authors, and the formal similarities of their works, I want to emphasize the degree to which a text often has stronger allegiances to works outside of its putative genre (poem, novel, conceptual art) than it does with other works in the same nominal category or published and presented in the same venue. Moreover, as a careful chronological examination reveals, this is true of media and material as well. Although these works fulfill a certain modernist impulse, and have clear precedents, they are not in any sense belated. In fact, their peculiar forms and the extremity with which they implement their 'pataphysical projects gesture toward their affinity with the unique modes of inscription made available by their contemporary cultural moment. I want to posit, in short, that even in the conventional form of the printed book, works such as *No. 111* and *The Inkblot Record* might be considered to be works of "new media."

In the terms proposed by Lev Manovich, "the 'new media' avant-garde is about new ways of accessing and manipulating information" rather than the creation of new information or new styles ("Avant-Garde" 7; *Language* 35, 78n). Through the data-mining techniques of the search engine, new media are less concerned with representing the world in new ways than in structuring new ways of accessing and organizing large quantities of previously accumulated data. Examples are plentiful, but for just one illustration of the "new media avant-garde," consider the work of Jennifer and Kevin McCoy. Their *Security Desktop*, for instance, identifies the nexus we have already encountered between surveillance and voyeurism. The work conducts real-time searches for workplace Webcams and then rebroadcasts their feeds on a user's personal computer, displaying them in a bank of simulated monitors that switch randomly among hijacked cameras: deserted warehouses and high-tech assembly rooms cast in starkly overlit fluorescence;

cluttered workstations and abandoned cubicles; checkout counters seen from oddly angled bird's-eye perspectives; crowded shop floors and factory yards; the highways, tunnels, and bridges of commuter routes; anonymous faces frozen in the close-up, convex distortion of a Minicam, staring at some Medusa screen just below the monitor-mounted lens. Moreover, the *Security Desktop* overlays these images with the Internet traffic routing between the source camera, its host machine, and the user's personal computer so that the viewer's own illicit voyeurism is itself on display. *Security Desktop* thus reverses the perspective of the Institute for Applied Autonomy's Web-based *iSee*, an interactive map that also turns surveillance back on itself by attempting to record all of the private video cameras trained on public spaces in Manhattan. The map allows users to plot "paths of least surveillance" between two points, tracing 'pataphysical *dérives* through a cityscape's distorted dreams of urban anonymity. With a similarly impractical inventory, the McCoys' digital video work *Every Shot, Every Episode* presents viewers with 275 video discs cataloguing the entire library of *Starsky and Hutch* episodes, parsed into isolated records of its formal and iconic components: "every panning shot," "every zoom," "every moan of pain," "every plaid," "every yellow volkswagon," and so on.

Although digital video is the format for these "new media" projects, with their material substrates of silicone and laminated polycarbonate plastic, I want to emphasize their conceptual filiation with the printed books I have discussed. All of these works, whether read off the page or the screen, share the same "interface logic"—the sorting and sifting of databases of found material rearticulated and organized into largely arbitrary and comprehensive systems. This is obviously not to suggest that writers associated with print conventions have not begun utilizing new media. In fact, the move to a digital poetics is one of the most distinctive characteristics of contemporary writing. Books like Robert Fitterman's *This Window Makes Me Feel*, Larissa Lai's *Welcome to Asian Women in Business*, K. Silem Mohammed's *Deer Head Nation*, and Drew Gardener's *Petroleum Hat*, for a handful of examples, make essential use of the Google Internet search engine, which not only helps to generate the source material for their books but also inflects their

styles, which echo the fragmented new language of the interface's ranked and summarized results.⁶

The complexity of the relationship between analog and digital literature is nicely illustrated by Darren S. Wershler-Henry and Bill Kennedy's *Apostrophe Engine*, which again relies on the algorithms of the search engine and the rhetoric of the Internet. Against the assumed anonymity and mass audience that have been a hallmark of discussions about the Internet, *The Apostrophe Engine* draws attention to the extent to which Web pages in fact attempt to interpellate readers with a direct and intimate personal address. The apostrophe, of course, is the orthographic mark of Jarry's 'pataphysics, and *The Apostrophe Engine* is one realization of the "pataphysical software" Wershler-Henry mentions in *The Tapeworm Foundry* (with a nod to Neil Hennessy's eponymous corporation). But it is also an investigation of the apostrophe in its rhetorical sense. Recognizing that the querying address protocols of hyperlinks are a technical version of apostrophe—hailing absent and abstracted documents through the formality of the uniform resource locator (URL) as if they were in fact present—the eponymous *Apostrophe Engine* takes that figure of speech as the governing principle of its texts. Apostrophe, that is, both generates and structures those texts, in which it establishes something like a new meter. Although the engine makes use of various subroutines and filters, the essence of the project is a Perl script that hijacks and reengineers the Google search engine to create a text of concatenated phrases, each of which begins with the apostrophic "you" and each of which is a hyperlink:

... you are trying to impress the audience with the density of something, or otherwise make a point that specifically requires dense and unreadable text • you are republishing what you are posting and why you couldn't have just rewritten it in your own words • you are helping the copyright holder; often it's not that hard to ask permission • you are better prepared to take affirmative actions of mechanical and cultural control—building

6. The rhetoric of the Internet search result—a collage of unpredictably discontinuous and truncated quotations, with certain words repeated and emphasized—is also a key component of two minor tendencies in early twenty-first-century poetry, at each end of the popularity spectrum: the coterie "flarf" and the fad "googlism." For more on these coeval developments, see, respectively, the somewhat exercised essay by Dan Hoy and (as of August 2006) the entry at <googlism.com/about.htm>.

and starving them out of your collection • you are documenting current efforts • you are prepared • you are getting the word out to others • you are not doing it right, you damn well know you are doing it wrong, but you carry on anyway because you are too lazy to set it up to do it right after you've realized that there is a potential problem? I conclude that it must have been the mould spores • you are near a platform . . .

(151)

When one of the phrases in a page such as this one is selected, the engine searches the Internet for other pages containing that phrase—"you are near a platform," say—and then searches within those eligible pages for the string "you are," extracting the phrases and dynamically assembling them into a new text. Each generated page thus becomes the interface with which to generate a new text, so that the work extends itself in a protean and expanding, but not unlimited, series. *The Apostrophe Engine* thus provides a very concrete answer to Johanna Drucker's speculative query, made just as Kennedy and Wershler-Henry were generating the majority of the texts that would appear in the book version of their project: "What would it mean to create a work programmed to string search its vocabulary into a constantly expanding hyperlinked environment, demonstrating the embedded condition of authorial production within a constantly shifting sea of linguistic references?" (689).⁷ *The Apostrophe Engine*, in fact, is a perfect example of what Drucker terms the "algorithmic imagination," a perspective that allows one to reconceptualize "the field of textuality as a realm of porous, multivalent, nodal and intertextual speculation" (Drucker 689).

The Apostrophe Engine is certainly not the first Internet work to take "programming code as a poetic device, [as] a generative mode of writing production," in order to create a "self-documenting and proliferating work of imaginative association" (Drucker 689), and the project is obviously related to other new-media works such as Maciej Wisniewski's Web-based *Turnstile II*, which searches the

7. Drucker's question was published in 2002. *The Apostrophe Engine* was first used in April 2001; the majority of the texts that would appear in the book version were generated in fall 2002. Until 2006, the *Engine* existed only on a private server, although Drucker would have been aware of the general scope of the project through an e-mail discussion list to which both she and Wershler-Henry subscribed.

Internet for pages containing both the words “love” and “loneliness” and then randomly selects a line from the discovered page, displaying it in an ephemeral and scrolling collage poem on the reader’s screen. But rather than emphasize its filiation with Internet art, I want to stress the origins of *The Apostrophe Engine* in a conventionally “analog” poem written by Kennedy in 1993 and stylistically indistinguishable from one of the pages generated by his subsequent program:

you are a quote within a quote desperately trying to escape • you are a most noble swain • you are in absentia • you are engaging in self-nullifying behaviour • you are a vague sense of alienation masked by a friendly, conversational atmosphere • you are a dentist, you take delight in causing great pain • you are the kind of apathy that can only be generated by the “spoken-” vs. “written-” word debate • you are a self-consuming artifact • you are an unimportant stanza in an unimportant Bob Southey epic • you are the neurochemical dopamine bridging the gap between the tail of one synapse and the head of another during a bout of particularly raunchy sex with a not-quite-loved one • you are an instance of pre-emptory teleology • you are living in a post-theory, post-language writing, post-sound-poetry, post-literate age, so let’s stop writing crap that pretends that you aren’t • you are a reference to the small font size of this poem • you are going to sell out the first chance you get • you are yawning—stop it! • you are a persnickety line removed at the friendly request of an editor who thinks its potential offensiveness is enhanced by the mere fact of its referential obscurity • you are all out to get me, damn you! • you are mixing memory with desire

(11–12)

Kennedy’s original poem served as the initial hyperlinked seed from which to generate the series of poems in the printed book version of the project (*Apostrophe*, published in 2006)—essentially a printout documenting one series of clicks through the dynamic hypertext field of the online engine at particular moments in time—and the similarities between the analog source and the digital output are instructive. Kennedy’s original poem frames a snapshot of stylistic history: a brief moment in which the language of innovative poetry anticipates the rhetorical modes that the language of the then nascent Internet would soon come to assume, before almost immediately beginning to inflect the language of innovative poetry in

turn. “You are a nested loop” (9), the poem seems to address itself at one point, and the analog source of the engine’s digital recursions needs to be kept in mind. Precisely because poetic practice seems to be on the verge of becoming a largely digital practice, we should remember—before a digital poetics has been domesticated and naturalized—that its forms do not necessarily derive *from* technology, even as they are permitted and facilitated *by* technology.⁸

Several recent works illustrate that distinction as they plot points along the continuum from analog to digital literature. In addition to Wisniewski’s *Turnstile*, the Dia Art Foundation’s now defunct StadiumWeb hosted a version of Gerald Ferguson’s *The Standard Corpus of Present Day English Language Usage, Arranged by Word Length and Alphabetized within Word Length*, a self-describing classic of conceptual art originally written in 1970. A perfect example of the interface logic of new media, both versions of Ferguson’s corpora sort the million words of the *Brown Corpus of Standard American English*, edited by W. Nelson Francis and Henry Kucera, but the manual “analog” form of the original typewritten document transforms its simple procedure into an absurdly heroic physical feat. The manual production of such a work is a mental feat as well, requiring perseverance, planning, and the willingness to risk error and tedium; the predigital production of such a work involved a measure of time that would not be registered were the same project to be attempted today, in a world of digitized text, optical character-recognition software, and scripts that can alphabetize a million words in a matter of minutes. Indeed, the conceptual spark of this work of “conceptual art” is less its period style of sanitized mental procedure than the fact that Ferguson ever thought to undertake such a task in the first place, when the means for accomplishing it were not readily available. Ferguson’s *Corpus*, paradoxically, is thus a project that seems to call for a genuinely new media, for tools to which it originally had no recourse, yet at the same time is a project which would no longer really make sense, as art, if those tools had in fact been used.

8. Jerome McGann’s consideration of “literature after the World Wide Web” in *Radiant Textuality* proceeds from the same proposition, and with a nod to ‘pataphysics (137–65, 79, 86, 222).

The central premise of Christian Bök's *Eunoia* poses a similar conundrum. Like the other works I have discussed, *Eunoia* is an analog text that nonetheless displays a keen algorithmic imagination and embodies the essence of the interface logic of new media. Unlike Ferguson's *Corpus*, however, *Eunoia* could not have been produced with the computational tools that best exemplify its procedures. Bök, who not coincidentally is a leading scholar of 'pata-physics, wrote the book under a number of constraints, but the primary rule is vocalic: each chapter is a lipogram which permits only one of the vowels. Moreover, the project attempts to use all of the eligible univocalic words (although it falls short of this archival ambition, managing closer to 98 percent of the potential words). Chapter "E," for example, opens:

Enfettered, these sentences repress free speech. The text deletes selected letters. We see the revered exegete reject metered verse: the sestet, the tercet—even *les scènes élevées en grec*. He rebels. He sets new precedents. He lets cleverness exceed decent levels. He eschews the esteemed genres, the expected themes—even *les belles-lettres en vers*.

(31)

Eunoia is thus essentially an interface to the database of entries in the three volumes of the 1976 edition of *Webster's Third International Dictionary*, which it mines for all of those words that contain only a single vowel. The resulting book, however, could not have been written by a computer program; the subsequent rules and constraints imposed on the composition of the book—including requirements for repeated themes and descriptive tableaux, parallel syntactic structures, and sentence lengths defined by a strict typography—ensure that even if the vocabulary were automatically generated, digital automation alone could never complete the requirements for the text built from that lexicon.⁹ At the other end of the spectrum, well past the poetic breakdowns and travesties produced by primitive text-editing programs, one finds fully digital

9. For more on the impossibility of a computer-generated *Eunoia*, see Perloff, "Oulipo." One should note that Goldsmith's *No. 111* is also a work composed *as if* by digital automation, but for which the actual technology required to automate the process does not exist; at the time of its composition, there were no computer programs that could reliably count syllables in English.

works such as Brian Kim Stefans's *Dream Life of Letters*.¹⁰ Once again, the text of Stefans's piece, significantly, originated in an analog poem, which Stefans had written by alphabetizing a found source (in this case, a mannered homophonic statement on feminist poetics by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, to which Stefans had been asked to respond). Far from taking the form of a predictable list, however, it unfolds over the course of eleven minutes as an animated kinetic movie in which Stefans's sequence of words and their promiscuous letters collide with bouncy Newtonian reverberations and dissolve in a witty and carefully choreographed carnival rhythm of cuts and fades. Although *Dream Life* is presented in Macromedia Flash, its linear and noninteractive sequences bear a closer resemblance to cinema and filmstrip animation than to most Web art, and the work displays an overall typographic design palette referencing the mid-century aesthetic of concrete poetry. Its once cutting-edge technology, in short, gestures away from both the very future it defines and the moment its imminent obsolescence will soon mark.

For one final example of the complex play of the digital and analog modalities of the "algorithmic imagination," consider Judith Goldman's "Dicktée," which opens "under, unite, unless, unpleasant, universal, uncomfortable, unaccountable" and proceeds—with an uncomfortably and unaccountably undivided attention—through some eight-hundred similar words to an "uncommonly, unpitying, . . . unsundered, uncracked, unconquering" end. Taking a hint from several of the more unusual words (such as "unicornism," "unseamanlike," and "untattooed"), the curious reader can confirm that the poem records, in the order of their original appearance, a subset of the vocabulary of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. As we have seen before,

10. There are many text-processing or text-generating programs; for one of the more influential, see the UNIX program described by Hugh Kenner and Joseph P. O'Rourke, as well as its several popular adaptations for personal computer, including Neil Rubeuking's "Brekdown" [sic] and Jim Korenthal's "Babble!" One of the better results from such programs is Daniel Davidson's *Product*. Other common programs have resulted from Charles O. Hartman's *The Virtual Muse*, where the relation between the digital and analog is again tellingly complex: Hartman's DIASTEX program is based on one of Jackson Mac Low's procedures but has subsequently been used by the poet, and Hartman's program MACPROSE produces texts often all but indistinguishable from passages in Ron Silliman's *Tjanting*.

such seemingly meaningless procedures can yield unexpected information; the imaginary solution is a perfectly concrete answer to a question no one had thought to ask. Accordingly, by isolating that particular lexicon from its original context, "Dicktée" highlights one interesting aspect of Melville's diction and style: the frequency with which he employs double negatives and litotes to effectively cancel the negative force of what appear to be a high frequency of negative words (the average rate of this rhetorical maneuver, Goldman's poem reveals, is almost exactly once per page). In one respect, then, "Dicktée" enacts the dusting of "old lexicons and grammars" with which Melville's novel itself opens, but the new context of Goldman's inventory also suggests a 'pataphysical grammar in the tradition of Velimir Khlebnikov's "internal declensions." The presentation of the words *en masse* begins to imply not just a shared typography but some conceptual relationship between the adjectival privative (negations and oppositions), the verbal corruptions from the prefix *and-* (a whole host of reversals, removals, and releases), and the singularities indicated by contractions from *unus*—as if "undressed," "unassimilated," "unctuous," and "united" all followed the same etymology. Although "Dicktée" aspires to be a record of all the words in *Moby-Dick* beginning with *un-*, that "new-media" ambition is separate from the digital media that betray it: a computer would either have unerringly included other words (although they are omitted from "Dicktée," a strict accounting of Melville's text would register "ungraspable" and "unless" as the fourth and fifth words, for instance) or else excluded precisely those words because of its unchecked algorithmic particulars (such as not recording words at the beginning of a line). As it happens, the work—like others we have seen—was originally written in longhand, but the reader's inability to determine the poem's exact mode of production from the text itself is another way of putting the point I have tried to stress.

I want to conclude by briefly noting three areas for further consideration. First, it should be clear that I have not attempted to provide anything like a complete genealogy for these books. Although they have been executed during something of a revival—the turn of the millennium saw the founding of the London Institute of 'Pataphysics, the resumption of activities by the French Collège de 'Pataphysique, and the emergence of the Argentine Ubuenos from a similar period

of occultation—my emphasis on the ‘pataphysical is not meant to deny or discount any of the many other more obvious and proximate precedents: conceptual art, with its combination of minimal parameters and maximal permutations; Ron Silliman’s structured prose; the procedural diastics of John Cage and Jackson Mac Low; Lautréamont’s appropriative imagination; the manic and obsessive writing of “outsiders” like Robert Shields, Christopher Knowles, and John Barton Wolgamot; and, closer to home for many of these writers, the remarkably vibrant tradition of Canadian “pataphysics” (distinguished by the orthographic wink of a doubled apostrophe) sustained by Steve McCaffery and Christopher Dewdney.¹¹ Above all, these works complement and complicate the library of constraint-based writing from the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (OuLiPo), with its own direct origins in a committee of the *Collège de ‘Pataphysique*.

More interestingly, the complex taxonomies of “new media” should also prompt us to reevaluate the relation between literature and other technologies. What, for instance, might be the essentially filmic books of the 1880s and 1890s—books that we could expect to make no mention of moving pictures, and which may well have nothing explicitly or thematically to do with that once new media? André Bazin has posed a version of this question for the visual arts, as part of his argument that the essential idea of cinema predated its technological emergence, but the books I have described here suggest that we might look for answers in literature as well (21–27).

Finally, the works I have discussed here may be imaginary solutions, but they are also the shadows cast by very real problems. The recurrence of surveillance, interrogation, and institutional interpellation in these works, both in method and motif, along with their open publication of private material and their totalizing aspirations (everything said, every move, every response, every result, every shot, every eligible word), is far from adventitious, and the coincidence is worth considering. Whether or not they avail themselves of the specific technologies, these works come at a moment of

11. For an introduction to Canadian “pataphysics,” see the relevant chapter in Bök’s *‘Pataphysics* (81–97); the special issue of *Open Letter* edited by The Toronto Research Group; and Steve McCaffery’s *Rational Geomancy*.

increasingly capacious and inexpensive digital storage media, as well as increasingly sophisticated data-processing software, all of which have in turn abetted the ever more thorough surveillance of everyday life. From corporate data-warehousing and consumer-data-mining to the United States government's explicit and unembarrassed goal of "total information awareness," with its subsequent programs for the secret and unchecked mass surveillance of personal communication and banking transactions, the traces of our lived experience are recorded, archived, and harvested on an unprecedented scale.¹² Far worse, the ability to retain and sort unprecedented amounts of information has led to changes not just in the scale of such operations but in the way such activities—as both means and ends—are imagined and conducted, with repercussions we have yet to register. This is obviously not the place for an analysis of such far-reaching paradigm shifts, but my point is that the mode of poetic production in the books described above is indistinguishable from the database logic at the core of other, far more ominous, activities. How we read these seemingly whimsical compilations, therefore, is a much more pressing question than it might at first seem, or than it might have been a century ago. Now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, these works are litmus tests of the reader's belief in the relation of literature to its environment. Or better yet, inkblot tests. Do you see playful alternatives or sinister portraits? Sites of resistance or signs of complacent collaboration? The

12. For technical information on data mining, see Hand et al. For a sly repurposing of commercial data mining results, see Waller. As evidence of corporate practice, note that in August 2006, the Internet service provider America On Line publicly disclosed the archived data for some twenty million searches by 658,000 subscribers (Hansell). For just one indication of the congruity between corporate and government surveillance interests, the Associated Press reported on January 18, 2005, that the Federal Bureau of Investigation had abandoned its Carnivore program (renamed DCS-1000), an Internet and intranet data packet detection and collection system for the automated surveillance of digital networks, in favor of commercially available software. For disclosure of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency's initiatives for "information awareness" and "total information awareness" (renamed "Terrorist Information Awareness" in an apparent attempt to propitiate the public and conserve acronyms), see Markoff. For disclosure of the National Security Agency's warrantless wiretapping program, see Risen and Lichtblau. For disclosure of the plan to spy on banking transactions, a program run by the Central Intelligence Agency and overseen by the Treasury Department, see Lichtblau and Risen.

possible or the inevitable? *Détournements* or *memento mori*? Earlier, I made the optimistic claim that these literary works highlight the limits of schemes like “total information awareness,” but the difference between recognizing those limits and overcoming them, between perception and action, vigilance and evasion, will depend on how well we understand and manipulate the particular particulate swerves of their exceptional details—swerves that approximate the curved path of an apostrophe. “You are near a platform,” *Apostrophe* announces (151). The line, it turns out, originally comes from an online guide to an obsolete computer game with its roots in the hacker culture of the 1970s (Futtrup and Lintermans). But “platform,” as it happens, is also the name of the National Security Administration’s central computer system, the heart of a network of massive global surveillance. “You are near a platform”: a computer operating system, a support for weaponry, a plan of action, a scheme. Or as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, “a basis on which people unitedly take their stand and make a public appeal.” Everything, right now, is closer than you think.

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