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## Towards a conceptual lyric

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*Elizabeth Alexander, Kenneth Goldsmith, and Allison Knowles at the White House in May 2011. Photograph by Steve McLaughlin.*

Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). I don't give a damn whether they eat or not. Forced feeding leads to excessive thinness (effete). Nobody should experience anything they don't need to, if they don't need poetry bully for them. I like the movies too.

— Frank O'Hara, "Personism: A Manifesto"(1959)[1]

Don't think any intelligent person is going to be deceived when you try to shirk all the difficulties of the unspeakably difficult art of good prose by chopping your composition into line lengths.

— Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect" (1918)[2]

### Public perceptions

Scene: the State Dining Room of the White House on the afternoon of May 11, 2011. Occasion: a poetry workshop held under the auspices of Michelle Obama for high school student-poets. The workshop has been organized by the First Lady's close friend, the Yale poet-professor Elizabeth

Alexander, who wrote the inaugural poem for Obama in 2008. The four participating poets are the former laureates Rita Dove and Billy Collins, along with — implausibly enough[3] — the conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith and Fluxus performance artist Alison Knowles. Seven teenage students have been chosen to read their work, and in the evening there is to be a poetry reading by Dove, Collins, Goldsmith, Knowles, and a few others, with President and Mrs. Obama in attendance.

After Alexander makes a brief introduction about the powers of poetry, Melody Barnes, the president's domestic policy adviser, discusses the importance of the arts — poetry, dance, country music, Motown hits — for young people, stressing the fact that those schools that incorporate the arts into their regular curriculum (English, math, science) get a better yield of “successful” students. She then introduces the first poet, Tiesha Hines, a senior at Ballou High School in Washington, DC. Tiesha, we learn, “has been writing poetry since she was seven and is now president of her poetry club .... After she graduates, she is going to get to use those skills in other ways, as she studies criminal justice at Fortis College and Trinity University.”[4]

Note the assumption here that poetic composition is a skill to be applied *elsewhere*. Tiesha's “poetic” abilities will transfer to her study of a subject that matters in the real world — criminal justice. Poetry, by contrast, does not matter in the real world and is not something that grown-ups do, except for a few “professionals” like the four invited poets. Tiesha accepts this definition herself: she tells the audience that she was chosen because she *loves* to write poetry but also for her “positive attitude and compassion for other poets.” And, having read a short love poem (“Ten Things I Want to Throw at You”), Tiesha turns the podium over to the First Lady, who welcomes “this extraordinary group of poets” to the White House. Michelle Obama begins by explaining her own interest in poetry:

I was a budding writer. Elizabeth [Alexander] doesn't know this .... [B]ut when I was young, I was a passionate creative writer and sort of a poet. That's how I would release myself. Whenever I was struggling in school, or didn't want to go outside and deal with the nonsense of the neighborhood, I would write and write and write and write.

So this workshop and celebrating you all is important to me ... because I think it was my writing that sort of prepared me for so much of what I've had to do in my life as an adult.

There it is again: the theme of poetry as *preparation* for a useful life, a serious life. Poetry as “release,” as escape from the daily struggle and “nonsense of the neighborhood.” “And when you write poetry,” the First Lady continues, “you're not just expressing yourself. You're also connecting to people .... Think about how you feel when you read a poem that really speaks to you; one that perfectly expresses what you're thinking and feeling. When you read that, you feel understood,

right? I know I do. You feel less alone. I know I do. You realize despite all our differences, there are so many human experiences and emotions that we share.”

And so on. The uplift theme continues for a few more minutes, honoring poetry as expression, connection, communication — and escape from the drudgery of daily life. Finding your authentic voice, tapping into your unique and truest feelings: this is the poet’s task. And Michelle Obama concludes by announcing, “I’m going to sit for the first session and hear a little bit, but we’ll probably get up while you keep going.” The reference is to her need to leave before long, together with her special guest, Mrs. Margarita Zavala, the First Lady of Mexico. These First Ladies have important things to do!

Poetry, we surmise from these introductory remarks, is essentially a teenager’s pastime. Writing and reading it can help our young people stay off the streets and express their better selves. But such self-expression, friends, has its limits: when we grow up, we must turn from poetry to things that matter — *real* things! Shades of the prison house, as Wordsworth put it in the great Immortality Ode, begin to close upon us. In the meantime, though, there is “finding your voice.” After some short statements by the “professionals,” of which more below, we are treated to readings of seven student poems. The first poem to be read is called “Belly Song”; it is “dedicated to my mother who has been diagnosed with kidney failure”:

Eight months you carried me  
Morning sickness wasn’t ready,  
Eight months you carried  
But I, I will  
Carry you as long as needed, sit  
In my belly  
For I shall hold you, sit  
In my belly  
Listen  
To the song it sings for my heart  
My belly song  
Will cure your sickness  
Cure you  
From kidneys that decided they had enough  
Filtering blood so that your heart will pump my heart  
Pumps  
Memories  
Of daughter-mommy day

## Memories

Of pillow fights and movie nights ...[5]

The second reader picks up on the memory theme with “Those Were the Days”:

I remember those good old days  
The days when I ran with a Barbie in my right hand  
And a toy car in my left,  
The days when I ate the chicken  
And put the veggies in a napkin  
The days of naptime and milk with cookies  
Yea, I remember those days  
With the screens and the elves  
The whips and the brooms  
The ultimatums and the dusters  
Those were the days.  
I remember those days  
With the beer bottles and the hard liquor  
With the tears and the blood  
Those good old days  
With the police and the jail visits  
The CIA and immigration  
And lonely nights with no one to tuck me in  
Yeah, those were the days  
I did my homework with no help  
I cooked my own food  
I did the cleaning  
I got fatter and fatter  
I remember those days,  
Which I worked out alone  
Which I exceeded without you,  
Which I ate my burnt food  
Yeah, I remember.

What does the word “poem” mean to these aspiring poets? What conventions govern their poetic discourse? I find three constants: (1) poetry is assumed to be self-expression — the expression of one’s most private and often painful feelings; (2) poetry is text that is lineated (and when delivered orally, punctuated by pauses at line-ends); and (3) poetry exploits phrasal repetition, as in “eight

months I carried” and “sit / in my belly” in the first poem and “Those were the days” and the “I did” and “which” clauses in the second. There is, evidently, no thought of using meter, of counting stresses or syllables. If it is divided into lines, these texts say, it’s poetry; if it’s not, it’s just prose. And repetition — or more properly refrain — underscores the personal feeling of a ubiquitous “I.”

The voice that comes through these recountings of “unique” experience turns out to be surprisingly uniform, despite differences in ethnicity and gender (“Belly Song” is by a young African American woman; “Memory” by a Hispanic male). Indeed the “Memories / Of pillow fights and movie nights” could be exchanged with the “Days of naptime and milk and cookies” in “Those Were the Days,” without much difference in tone or meaning. In both cases, the “I” is the victim of unanticipated external forces: the mother’s kidney disease in the first; CIA immigration policies in the second. In both cases, fear and pain are associated with the loss of a loved parent. The “I” must be strong and learn to cope.

The resulting rhetoric is often praised for its *authenticity*, but how authentic is it? The belly metaphor, for example, which compares the mother’s protection of her child in the womb to the daughter’s desire to, so to speak, swallow her mother’s body so that she can shield her inside her belly, is strained: a gradual gestation is compared to the momentary urge to *change* a desperate situation. And the image of the mother’s diseased body inside her daughter is even more problematic. In a similar vein, the second poem’s comparisons of “ultimatums” to “dusters,” “whips” to “brooms,” is hardly a simulation of natural speech. More important, here words are sometimes used incorrectly, as in “I exceeded without you,” evidently for “I succeeded without you,” the lines further marred by the ungrammatical use of “which” where “in which” is called for. Language, in these instances, is regarded as a kind of afterthought or additive: first come the feelings to be embodied in words and only then does word choice kick in, designed to make the resulting discourse appear “poetic.”

No wonder — and it is not the students but their teachers who are to blame — that the readership of poetry has so drastically declined. How are students, whose knowledge of poetry is presumably confined to a high school anthology of near contemporaries, supposed to find their *own* poetic voice? Even the author of “Belly Song,” interestingly enough, turns to citation, in this case to the classic wedding vows in the Book of Common Prayer:

Our love is deeper  
 This daughter mommy love vowing  
 To be there in sickness and in health,  
 For richer or for poorer  
 ’Til death do us part.

## The conceptual reaction

When, as the famous anecdote has it, the painter Degas told the poet Mallarmé that he had good ideas for poems but couldn't find the right words, the latter responded, "It is not with ideas, my dear Degas, that one makes poems. It is with words." [6] This is neither sophistry nor an unusual doctrine of poetry; it is the recognition that, as Wittgenstein put it, "The *limits of language* mean the limits of my world," or "Language is not *contiguous* to anything else." [7] Those mysterious feelings and ideas the young poets are told to "express" are not there till they are materialized. As Robert Smithson puts it in a quip cited by Craig Dworkin in "The Fate of Echo," his preface to *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (edited with Kenneth Goldsmith): "my sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas — i.e., 'printed matter.'" [8] And the paradox that both editors pinpoint in their respective prefaces to the anthology is that, in the digital age, the *best words* for a given occasion may well not be one's own at all.

Or so Goldsmith remarks in his own presentation at the White House workshop, based on his now well-known 2007 manifesto "Uncreative Writing." Against the usual admonition to "Look in thy heart and write" (Rita Dove has just told the group that "Only *you* can tell your story. So if you remain true to your own experience, your voice will find you!"), he begins by noting, tongue in cheek, that his own students are penalized for any shred of originality or creativity they might show. As he puts it in the manifesto, "Instead they are rewarded for plagiarism, identity theft, repurposing papers, patchwriting, sampling, plundering and stealing. Not surprisingly they thrive. Suddenly, what they've surreptitiously become expert at is brought out in the open and explored in a safe environment, reframed in terms of responsibility instead of recklessness." Copying, cutting and pasting, downloading, recycling: these activities, Goldsmith argues, will actually teach students more about literature than the seeming "originality" of self-expression. Whereas a fellow professor assigned students to write "in the style of Jack Kerouac," Goldsmith would have them simply copy out a few pages of *On the Road* — a process that, he insists, will teach them more about Kerouac's style than can the clever imitation. The analogy is to the apprentice painter of the nineteenth century who, before the days of adequate reproduction, diligently copied a Rembrandt or Vermeer for sale to fine arts patrons, thus becoming curiously familiar with the style in question.

But can such copying actually produce works of art? The White House audience, not surprisingly, looks a bit skeptical. In his new book *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*, Goldsmith argues that, in the wake of the digital revolution, writers now face a situation similar to that of painters in the nineteenth century: "As photography forced artists to alter their approach to their medium, the [newly invented broadband] Internet presents challenges and opportunities for writers to reconceive ideas about creativity, authorship and their relationship to language. Confronted with an unprecedented amount of available text and language, writers need to move

beyond the creation of new texts to manage, parse, appropriate, and reconstruct those that already exist.”[9] And again, in his preface to *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, Goldsmith argues, “What we’re dealing with here is a basic change in the operative system of how we write at the root level.”[10] Choice and framing take precedence over individual verbal invention. *Context* replaces *content* as textual determinant.

If this position sounds extreme — and it has so sounded to many poets and their readers — we might stop to consider that in the visual arts, conceptualism has been the dominant mode since the late 1960s, when Joseph Kosuth published his manifesto “Art after Philosophy” and Sol LeWitt his now classic “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art.”[11] In the latter, we read:

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art ... is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman .... What the work of art looks like isn’t too important .... No matter what form it may finally have it must begin with an idea. It is the process of conception and realization with which the artist is concerned.[12]

The premise behind this and related manifestos was that, for at least the moment, “perceptual” art — what Marcel Duchamp, whose readymades anticipated conceptual art by half a century, called “the retinal shudder” — had lost its challenge: realistic, or even impressionistic and expressionistic, representation of the external world had become too easy, too familiar. Portraiture, for example, had become the domain of photography, as had representations of landscape. As for formalist abstraction, however “wonderful” the severe negation of the all-black paintings of Ad Reinhardt, Joseph Kosuth argued, they represented a point of no return: “After Reinhardt, the tradition of painting seemed to be in the process of completion, while the tradition of art, now unfettered, had to be re-defined.”[13]

When Goldsmith published his own “Sentences on Conceptual Writing” (2005), a document which was, in fact, a verbatim copy of Sol LeWitt’s manifesto, merely substituting the phrase “uncreative writing” for “conceptual art” and “text” for “art” wherever these terms occurred,[14] the poetry community, not recognizing the source, mostly expressed outrage at Goldsmith’s position, thus proving his point that poetic theory and practice were distinctly behind those of the visual arts (indeed, those of music as well), where LeWitt’s principles had long been accepted.[15] It is the theme Dworkin, himself one of the most accomplished young conceptual poets, unpacks in “The Fate of Echo.” Reading conceptual poetry against the background of the conceptual art of the 1960s, Dworkin traces a line from the conceptualist rejection of visual image in favor of the dominant “idea” to the premise that, in the case of writing, opaque language is a starting point and

hence something to be appropriated and thus called into question. Like Goldsmith, he is convinced that the digital revolution has been seminal:

[P]art of the difference between 1980 and 2000 derives from the cultural changes brought about by an increasingly digitized culture. During those decades, appropriation-based practices in other arts spread from isolated experiments to become a hallmark of hip-hop music, global DJ culture, and a ubiquitous tactic for mainstream and corporate media. Concurrently, sampling, mash-up, and the montage of found footage went from novel methods of production to widespread activities of consumption .... Conceptual poetry, accordingly, often operates as an interface — returning the answer to a particular query; assembling, rearranging and displaying information; or sorting and selecting from files of accumulated language pursuant to a certain algorithm — rather than producing new material from scratch. Even if it does not involve electronics or computers, conceptual poetry is thus very much a part of its technological and cultural moment.[16]

Interestingly, this shift to a poetry “more graphic than semantic, more a physically material event than a disembodied or transparent medium for referential communication” (xliv), haunts the May 11 poetry workshop and reading at the White House, even though no one but Goldsmith, and indirectly Alison Knowles, demonstrating one of her *Bean Bag* sound pieces to the audience, talks about the problem. The inclusion of singer-songwriters Aimee Mann and Jill Scott, rap artist Common, and comedian-playwright-composer Steve Martin, in what was billed a “poetry event” at the White House, suggests that the organizers felt that poetry as such wouldn’t quite cut it.

Thus, although all the student performers in the afternoon workshop were writing traditional lyric under the sign of, say, Rita Dove, the evening reading itself veered increasingly toward musical performance. The relationship between poetry and performance became complicated: the audience was reassured about “imaginative writing” by being treated to a kind of “poetry-plus,” with plenty of song to interrupt what might otherwise have been the tedium of the merely verbal.

Still, as the inclusion (fortuitous or not) of Goldsmith and Knowles at the White House event suggests, there are other possibilities for poetry. As Dworkin puts it:

The great break with even the most artificial, ironic, or asemantic work of other avant-gardes is the realization that one does not need to generate new material to be a poet: the intelligent organization or reframing of already extant text is enough. Through the repurposing or *détournement* of language that is not their own (whatever that might mean), the writers here allow arbitrary rules to determine the chance and unpredictable disposition of that language; they let artificial systems trump organic forms; and they replace making with choosing, fabrication with arrangement, and production with transcription.[17]



Such *détournement*, Dworkin suggests, can go a long way in countering the public perception of the *poetic* as an additive of sorts, a special language made of tropes and figures of speech devised by the “sensitive” poet who knows how to tap into his or her memory pool. One of the two poems read by laureate Billy Collins at the White House was called “Forgetfulness” and begins:

The name of the author is the first to go  
followed obediently by the title, the plot,  
the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel  
which suddenly becomes one you have never read,  
never even heard of,

as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor  
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain,  
to a little fishing village where there are no phones.[18]

When the poet read these lines at the White House, the audience politely chuckled. Indeed, the first time one hears this gently self-deprecating account of memory loss it seems funny and familiar. Oh yes, we’ve all been there, at least those of us of a certain age! But “Forgetfulness” cannot bear much inspection. For not only is the metaphor forced — where is the fishing village today that has no phones? — but, more important, an aging speaker suffering from memory loss could hardly give us such a clever description of the process, much less come up with the pun on “harbor” or the witty reference to the southern hemisphere of the brain. This is poetry as cocktail party banter. “Don’t imagine,” Pound warned us, “that a thing will ‘go’ in verse just because it’s too dull to go in prose.”[19]

### **The renewal of lyric**

What, then, will “go” in verse? When Pound used the term he was referring neither to metrical nor to free verse (“vers libre has become as prolix and as verbose as any of the flaccid varieties that preceded it”) but to the *musical phrase*: “As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (3). And again: “To break the pentameter, that was the first heave.”[20] The musical phrase is, of course, associated with lyric: for the ancient Greeks, the term *lyric* referred to verse that was accompanied by a lyre or other stringed instrument (for example, the *barbitos*), and musical speech — speech to be sounded — characterized a large body of poetry from the Hebrew and the Chinese to the Arabic lyric of the Middle Ages and Troubadour verse of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

When lyric is construed, as it has been since the Romantics, as the art of self-expression, of the private language of a subject overheard while engaged in meditation or intimate conversation with

another, conceptualism would seem to be, by definition, its enemy, relying, as it so often does, on words *not one's own* or submitting ordinary words to elaborate rules. But if we relate lyric to the musical phrase, the dichotomy disappears: what Dworkin describes as “sorting and selecting from files of accumulated language” is perfectly consonant with the notion of a poem as a distinctively sounded structure, the proviso being that in the digital age the *look* of the text becomes equally important, so that *all* poetry is, in a sense, visual as well as *sound* poetry. In Joyce's idiom, taken over by the Concrete poets, who anticipated some central strains of conceptualism, poetry is *verbivocovisual*.



Consider Goldsmith's *No. 111 2.7.92–10.20.96*, a text generated, as the title tells us, between the dates February 7, 1992, and October 20, 1996, by recording all the phrases the author happened to come across in his daily reading that ended in the sound linguists designate as *schwa* — the *er* or *uh* sound which is one of the most common in English, as in *father, finger, future, happier*, but also in such one-syllable words as *car* or *are*. These units are then organized alphabetically by syllable count, beginning with one-syllable entries for chapter 1 (“A, a, aar, aer, agh, ah, air ...”) and culminating in the 7,228-syllable reproduction of an entire short story: D. H. Lawrence's “The Rocking Horse Winner.”[21]

The five-page excerpt from this book selected for the *Anthology of Conceptual Writing* is chapter 8, with its eight-syllable phrases running from *a* to *z* and within *a*, from *ab* (“A beer does not come

with in-laws, a Bohemian reformer” to “Australian buttchug moon river” (258–59). Here is a sample passage, beginning with *de*:

deliver Oscar caliber, Delta is ready when you are, der Wallet-emptyung Meter,  
 Dhamacakkappavattana, Diarmuid and Grania, did damage on the 3s and 4s. Did I ever? Did I  
 ever!, Did you ever!, Did I ever?, Did you ever!, Did you ever! Did I ever!, Did you ever? Did I ever?,  
 Did you ever? Did you ever!, Did you finish sewing my bear?, dig a ding dang depadepa, digital  
 slaves of the future, dinkus simmers in late summer, discharges corroding humours, dive into an  
 icy river, Do food makers get fan letters?, Do me a big favor will ya?, do not whine to the  
 Postmaster, dock doesn't quite reach the water, Does anyone sing anymore? Does it speak to you  
 any more? don't ask me I only work here, don't believe everything you hear, don't even think of  
 parking here. (260–61)

This absurdist catalogue, with its advertising slogans (“Delta is ready when you are”), slightly obscure literary titles (Yeats’s play *Diarmuid and Grania*), Indian chants, bop rhythms, questions, commands, bits of dialogue, homonyms, comic repartee, and slippery punctuation — a montage of voices that don’t go together and yet seem perfectly consonant with the way language actually confronts us today. At the same time, the elaborate structure of rhyme and anaphora, the nursery rhyme echoes and bits of chant (“Dive into an icy river”), the alliteration and assonance, and the return of the *-er* sound at every eighth syllable makes this a sequence curiously more “poetic” than, say, Billy Collins’s poem or the student poems I cited earlier. It gives us the sense that, however bizarre the discourse of our daily lives, it can be organized and given some kind of pattern that is meaningful. The words may not be Goldsmith’s, but their choice and framing certainly are.

The anthology contains extracts from many such “lyric” conceptual poems, from the “abecedaries” of the Vienna Group (571–75) and John Cage’s “Writing through *The Cantos*” (129–35) to Caroline Bergvall’s riff on Dante called “Via” (982–86) and Christian Bök’s extraordinary *Eunoia* (119–20), both of which I have discussed elsewhere.[22] In the anthology, lyric is still in the minority — such recent texts as Vanessa Place’s *Statement of Fact*, her intricately structured presentation of police reports and court records pertaining to indigent sex offenders whose cases come before the appellate court where the author is a public defender, or Craig Dworkin’s own “Legion,” composed by “rearranging and recontextualizing the true-false questions of the 1942 Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory as if they were declarative confessional statements ... part of a poetic monologue rather than a forensic instrument” (190) — these require the prose of their source texts, although Dworkin’s litany of *I*’s — “I wish I were not so shy,” “At times I feel like smashing things” — is, of course, a brilliant spoof on lyric self-revelation.

But in recent years, Dworkin, like many conceptual poets, has also turned back to lyric itself. *Motes*

contains 150 minimalist poems, usually two per page (105 “Opuscula”[23] and 45 “Ayres”), many of them epigrams, riddles, and definition poems in the vein of Pound’s “In the Station of the Metro” or, more immediately, Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. But whereas Stein *describes*, however elliptically and fancifully, the object designated by her title — “Milk,” “Sugar,” “Umbrella,” “Custard” — Dworkin’s concern is with the riddling of semantic overload: pun, paragram, homonym, foreign-language equivalent. “Every word,” he explains, “is multiply determined — by translation between languages, or sound, or typography, etc. — but my goal was to have all those rules as invisible and elided as possible.”[24]

The title *Motes* is at once simple — we all know that motes are small particles or specks, especially of dust — but also resonant of the King James Bible, as in Matthew 7: “And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” Dworkin’s epigraph from Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (book 2, stanza 32), “Well mote yee thee, as well can wish your thought,” complicates the picture, for in Spenser’s purposely archaicized English, the Redcrosse Knight’s “Well mote yee thee” means “Well may you thrive.”[25] The little epigraph thus suggests not only that language is inherently slippery, but that canonical authors in earlier periods also engaged in language play: according to the OED, *thee*, the diminutive of the Anglo Saxon *theon*, to *thrive*, was already obsolete by Spenser’s time. Meanwhile “thee” — the second-person singular pronoun meaning “you” — is now, in its turn, obsolete in standard common English. To read *Motes* is thus to cast off familiar habits and let the words (*mots* in French and thus directly in the title) open up to reveal their mysteries.

The first of the Opuscula reads:

a shiver  
winters itself[26]

“Shiver” contains the French word for winter, “hiver,” and the “s” that precedes it suggests the reflexive pronoun “se.” To shiver is to winter oneself. It makes perfect sense. Or again:

seasick  
too much marmalade now  
starting to turn green

When one is seasick, one’s stomach turns to jelly. It’s an old cliché. But no one would normally use the word “marmalade” in this context: marmalade is much more specific than jam, originally referring only to citrus fruit, and it doesn’t shake as does jelly. No one would say, “My stomach turned to marmalade.” But look again: *marmalade* contains the French word *malade*: *ergo*, too much illness now. In this context, turning green refers to the appearance of the seasick, but also to

the cooking process or even to the ocean. And in a related “mote”:

berkeley marina  
frottage of fish grotto signage as  
announcing the decline of the west —

The reference is to the signpost in front of a restaurant on the Berkeley marina, behind whose “frottage,” or dim image of a fish grotto, sunset is taking place. In Berkeley, even the sunset is taken seriously, representing, with a grandiose flourish, the decline of the West (Oswald Spengler’s title). But in the meantime, the intricate phonemic play (internal rhyme, assonance, alliteration) of “frottage of fish grotto signage” conjures up the image of a rare fish ragout served in the “grotto” of the restaurant.

Some of the motes are riddling anagrams, like:

wilted tulips  
split little puppet pulpits tilted spilling dew

The short title generates seven words characterizing the tulips in a mock alexandrine, the “dew” spilling out from those “puppet pulpits,” rhyming with the first syllable of “tulips” to make the organic process of decay and rebirth as graphic as possible. Or again, “thunderclouds” are characterized as “really loud under there,” the word itself yielding paragrams that describe the situation quite accurately.

Part 2, “Ayres,” contains a number of bird songs. Here are two “Crow” poems:

cawking  
  
a flock of chalk-  
white aging birds  
flew by, coughing  
at a watching sky

two crows over there

there’s a crowd now’s growing  
from those fielding old seeds

Here the first little “ayre” depends on acoustic imagery: not only is the ugly crow sound reinforced by “coughing,” but “chalk-white” suggests the homonym “caulking” for “cawking,” and thus we

both hear and see these crows! What can the sky do but “watch,” the rhyme “by” / “sky” bringing this elliptical lyric full circle. The second poem uses visual punning: two crows can be stretched to make a *crow-d* that’s “growing,” as it is seen to be “fielding” (the baseball term, plus “belong to the field”) those old seeds.

Where, in all this verbal play, is the “authentic” voice of the poet on display at venues like the White House workshop? How does the self emerge from Dworkin’s elaborate sound games? Reading *Motes*, the purported “impersonality” one would expect from these riddles or epigrams is illusory: there is a particular persona who speaks, one who can’t look at or hear a word without wanting to explore its insides and study its living relationships. For Dworkin that quest to unlock the word seems to be a special pleasure:

margin

Explanation of butter on the counter overnight

Leave it out all night, and butter (margarine) has melted, losing the margin of its rectangular eight-ounce bar or perhaps running over the margin of the counter. The explanation makes sense, and look at what lovely sound it generates, with its anapestic rhythm and alliterative “t” patterns:

Explanátion of bútter on the cóunter overníght.

Indeed, Dworkin’s is a Jamesian aesthetic: “Try to be one of those on whom nothing is lost.” If he sees the name “Vincent Van Gogh,” he focuses on the middle word “Van,” a variant on the German “Von,” originally designating aristocratic birth. But in everyday parlance, a van is, of course, a vehicle, and so by metonymic transfer, we move from “van” to the poem’s first word, “diligence,” the French stagecoach of the nineteenth century that, no doubt, took Van Gogh to Paris.

The free-associative and yet rule-generated lyric of *Motes* is part of a new congerie of conceptual lyrics younger poets are producing. A great venue has been the Ugly Duckling Presse in Brooklyn, most of whose books are individually designed little pamphlets with artful paper covers and innovative typography. Consider Uljana Wolf’s *False Friends (Falsche Freunde)*. Wolf is a young poet from Berlin who lives in the US with her American husband, poet Christian Hawkey, whose own *Ventrakl* (another Ugly Duckling book) is an elaborate serial poem on the nature of translation.[27] The author’s note at the back of *False Friends* explains:

These DICHTionary poems (*Dichtung* is German for *poetry*) are based on lists of so-called “false friends” in German and English — words that look and/or sound similar in both languages, but differ in meaning. At any given moment, each of these words might be used with German in mind, or English, or both. Other times these “friends” do not appear explicitly in their poems but instead

remain standing behind them with suitcases full of etymology and misread linguistic maps.[28]

The picture is further complicated by the fact that the “DICHTionary poems” have been translated into English by Susan Bernofsky, one of the best translators of German poetry, who worked closely with Wolf to find the right nuance and idiom. We thus have “German-English” turned into English-English, with German bits sometimes pasted in. Take for example, Wolf’s “bad / bald / bet-t / brief”:

am anfang bald, und bald am ende wieder: unsere haare, und dazwischen sind sie nicht zu fassen, nicht in sich und nicht in griff zu kriegen, weder im guten noch im bad. stattdessen morgens zu berg (take a bet?) und nachts out of bed (siehe ad). Am besten hältst du sie als igel der hat noch jeden hare besiegt. Liegt aber eine strähne im brief, gar eine lange, halte sie unverfänglich an die wange.

In Wolf’s *wronglish*, as she calls her bilingual idiolect, the German title words migrate into their unrelated English counterparts, shifting grammar along the way and blowing apart the poet’s mock-meditation. The effect is that of travelling to a foreign country and not quite hearing the other. How can “soon” (adverb) be “bald” (adjective)? “bad” (adjective) a “bath” (noun)? “bet” (verb) a “bed” (noun)? Or “brief” (adjective) a “letter” to be mailed (noun)? Never mind, Wolf’s little love poem, concluding with a rhyme on “lange” (long) and “wange” (cheek), urges the lover, who may find a strand of hair in the letter, to press it sweetly to his cheek.

In Susan Bernofsky’s translation — or more accurately her adaptation — the poem reads like this:

In the beginning bald, bald at the end once more: in between, this hair is hard to grasp, tricky to pin it up or down, for better or for bed. standing on end instead (fake a bet?) and at night out of hand (see the ad). perhaps best to crop it hedgehog close: he always gets his hare. But should you find a strand within a letter, long or brief, press it sweetly to your cheek.[29]

Bernofsky’s all-English version retains the German element in hidden form: “within a letter, long or brief,” for example,” the “brief” reappears, and “hair” becomes “hare” in the hedgehog fable. Once the stage is set for such adaptation, the possibilities multiply: in the “Variations” section at the back of the book, the poet Eugene Ostashevsky gives “bad bald bet-t brief” a further spin:

In the beginning hareless and unhared again in the end: our hare — even a dachshund can do nothing against it, neither by itself nor by wearing its war claws, neither in good weather nor while it rains cats and dogs. In the morning it pitches a tent (in bad) and at night it gambols in the bathtub like an advertent bettwetter. It fell out to have been bested and halted by an eagle, who then had to bear a hat to bear ahead because it became a bald eagle . . . what a bad hare day! In

brief, it lay around here on the strand like an unopened ladder and gargled, can you catch the hare by the cheek, it can't ear.

Thus Uljana Wolf's little love poem, with its slide into English usage, gives Ostashevsky the impetus to produce his own "bad hare day." His version eliminates the "pure" German, settling for the mongrelism of "bettwetter," or substituting cliché for foreign locution: here it "rains cats and dogs"; our hare wears "war claws," "pitches its tent," and becomes a "bald eagle." The strand of hair becomes the beach, the unopened "brief" a ladder. As for the "hare" (for hair) to be absurdly caught by the cheek, "it can't ear."

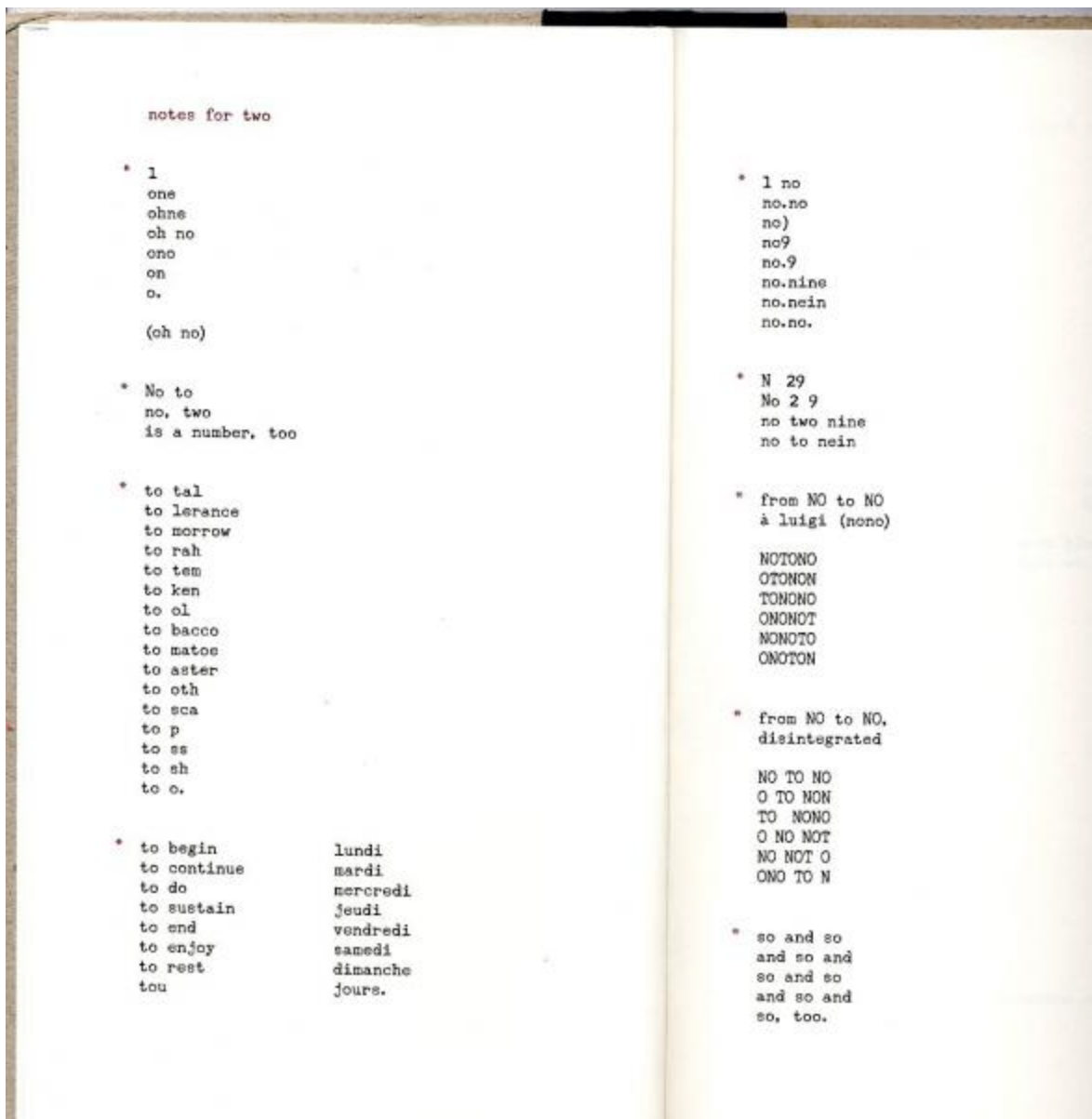
Such writing is often dismissed as mere game playing. Isn't poetry supposed to be a noble pursuit, a way of expressing yourself and communicating with others, as the White House speakers suggest? Of finding your authentic voice? For decades now, the cult of expressivity has dominated — the belief that self-revelation will automatically become poetry if it is sufficiently sincere and earnest. Hence the endless drive to bring poetry to the prisons, poetry to the hospitals and nursing homes, as if simple *desire* could bring one to write "poems" others would want to read.

But suppose we regard "poetry" as the language art, parallel to the composition of music, the making of visual objects, or dance? However original the art work may be, there is a discipline to be learned: a discipline that cannot encompass personal effusions like "Belly Song" or "Those Were the Days," or, for that matter, the magazine verse that now dominates the poetry scene. Forced feeding, as Frank O'Hara said, leads to excessive thinness! And in the Internet age, where we are at liberty to download such a plethora of texts — to reproduce them, recycle them, change their appearance by altering font, typeface, spacing, size — context and framing become the key elements. The poet's role has become, in the literal sense, that of a *word processor*, finding how best to absorb, recharge, and redistribute the language that is already *there*.

Let me conclude with one of the most remarkable lyric sequences of recent years: Cia Rinne's *notes for soloists*.<sup>[30]</sup> Born in Sweden and raised in Germany before living for over a decade in Finland and then Denmark, Rinne moves easily between languages: in *Notes* her base is English, but an English laced with echoes of French, German, occasionally another language. The poem is both visual composition and sound text: recorded by Rinne and accompanying soloists with music and sound design by Sebastian Eskildsen in Copenhagen in 2011, this elaborate echo structure, with sounds ranging from gong to passing train, is available at PennSound.

Here is the visual configuration of the first two facing pages:





*Cia Rinne, from notes for soloists.*

When Robert Creeley wrote his “Numbers” series in the late 1960s, he did not decompose the words themselves; in *notes for soloists*, however, the number 1 quickly morphs into “one,” the German “ohne” (without), “oh no, ono” (as in Yoko), and then “on, o,” with the echo of “(oh no).” The next section treats the number 2 as the reversal of “one/on,” and “to” has its homonyms “two” and “too.” But it is the third section where things become complicated. Words beginning with “to” are broken so as to become infinitives. It begins low-key with cases where “to” is a separate syllable, as in “to tal,” “to lérance,” “to morrow,” and “to rah.” But then come diphthongs, first on “o” like “to ol,” but then on “oa” like “to aster,” and finally single-syllable words that give us “to p,” “to ss,” “to sh,” and at last, “to o,” bringing us back full circle to the first lyric, and hence zero.

*Notes for soloists* exhibits an extraordinary eye and ear for sound echo, homonym, and paragram. Even the days of the week, the “*tou jours*,” become interesting. And on the next page “*N 29*” is first taken apart as “*No 2 9*,” then spelled out to become “*no two nine*,” and finally transformed by homonym and German translation to “*no to nein*.” Or again, on the next page Rinne explores the effect of spacing:

insecurity  
in security

Allow for a single space, and the meaning reverses. Rinne’s seems to me the perfect poem for the age of digital composition, when, as we know, every character and space makes a difference. Mistake a single letter, number, or punctuation mark, and you have altered what the text “says” beyond recognition. Moreover, omission or duplication has consequences: think of paying a bill of \$67.50 online and omitting the decimal point. The Bank, as I know from experience, will not let you off easily. And neither, in the case of poetry, will a future audience.

What, in this new poetry, has happened to the authentic voice? Where is the expressive self of “*Belly Song*,” of “*Ten Things I Want to Throw at You*,” or of “*Those Were the Days*”? The fabled “sensitivity” of the Creative Writer gives way to a sensitivity to language that is almost like a fever — a sensitivity that has been the distinguishing mark of the poet from the Troubadours to George Herbert’s “*The Windows*” and Alexander Pope’s “*Essay on Criticism*,” to Emily Dickinson’s “*My Life has stood — A Loaded Gun —*” and Susan Howe’s “*That This*.” Indeed, in one sense the poetry of Dworkin or Wolf or Rinne is perfectly traditional. It merely *seems* new because in the early twenty-first century, the equation of poetry with self-expression has become so normative.

Perhaps, then, the copying exercises Kenneth Goldsmith talks about in his address to the White House workshop come at a moment when students badly need tools to *make* constructs more satisfying than their attempts to bare their unique souls. As Rinne puts it in “*notes for censorship*”:

cut out from books  
important words  
destroy the book.  
(diagonal reading)

And then

someone will notice

1. Frank O’Hara, “*Personism: A Manifesto*,” *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald

Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 498.

2. Ezra Pound, “A Retrospect,” *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber, 1954), 5.

3. According to Goldsmith in conversation, his invitation came from Joe Reinstein, the deputy social secretary at the White House, who told him he had loved the art gallery installation of Goldsmith’s *Soliloquy* and must have long been familiar with Ubuweb. Reinstein is married to the Fluxus artist Hannah Higgins, whose mother is the well-known Fluxus performance artist Alison Knowles, who was invited together with Goldsmith, thus literally sneaking in the avant-garde by the back door of the White House.

4. For the transcript of the opening remarks, visit the White House Press Office.

5. Note that this and the subsequent White House poems and prose commentaries cited are reproduced from the video and transcripts of the actual White House event available online, not from manuscript or printed versions.

6. The story was first told by Paul Valéry: see his “Poésie et pensée abstraite,” *Théorie poétique et esthétique* (1939) in *Œuvres* (Paris: Pléiade ed.), 1, 1324.

7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (1922: London and New York: Routledge, 1988), §5.62; *Wittgenstein’s Lectures, Cambridge 1930–32*, ed. Desmond Lee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 112.

8. Craig Dworkin, “The Fate of Echo,” in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, ed. Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), xxxvi–vii.

9. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), dustjacket.

10. Goldsmith, “Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?,” in *Against Expression*, xxi.

11. See Joseph Kosuth, “Art after Philosophy” (1969), in Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After, Collected Writings 1966–1990* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 13–32; Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (June 1967): 79–83.

12. LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” 79.

13. Kosuth, “On Ad Reinhardt,” in *Art after Philosophy*, 191–93.

14. See “UbuWeb Papers: Open Letter: Kenneth Goldsmith and Conceptual Poetics.”
15. See, for example, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* for the current consensus on the importance of conceptual art.
16. Dworkin, “The Fate of Echo,” xlii.
17. *Ibid.*, xliv.
18. For both the text and a reading by the poet, see Billy Collins, “Forgetfulness.”
19. Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays*, 6.
20. *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1993), Canto LXXXI, p. 538.
21. Kenneth Goldsmith, *No. 111 2.7.93–10.20.96* (Great Barrington, VT: The Figures, 1997). Embedded in the larger text, the Lawrence story (588–606) escapes notice and hence required no copyright permission.
22. See Marjorie Perloff, “The Oulipo Factor: The Procedural Poetics of Christian Bök and Caroline Bergvall,” *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 205–26.
23. Dworkin supplies this note: “Opuscule, a little work a little labor, Thomas Blount, *Glossographia* (1656).”
24. Email to the author, 23 May 2011.
25. I found this translation by Googling various Spenser sites and finding the notes to the most recent editions of *The Faerie Queene*. In the Internet age, accessing such information, which might formerly have involved a trip to the research library, takes just minutes, and poetry students like the ones who came to the White House could readily learn to find the text in question. Purists object to this practice as being merely mechanical — the “researcher” need know nothing or little about Spenser’s poem — but it may just be possible that the search would generate interest in *The Faerie Queene*.
26. Dworkin, *Motes* (New York: Roof, 2011), unpaginated (in press).
27. Christian Hawkey, *Ventrakl* (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2010), unpaginated. See my review in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 17 May 2011.
28. Uljana Wolf, *False Friends*, trans. Susan Bernofsky (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2011),

last page of unpaginated book. Wolf's reading of extracts from the related Jane poems may be heard on YouTube.

29. For example, Wolf's "weder im guten noch im bad" (whether for better or in the bath) becomes "for better or for bed," presumably for the sake of sound, and "bed" is one of Wolf's key words.

30. Cia Renne, *notes for soloists* (Stockholm: OEI, 2009), unpaginated.

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