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# Social Collage and the Four Discourses in (some of) the Kootenay School of Writing: Part I

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*Note: This essay is from a larger work on the poetics and poetry of the Kootenay School of Writing, the body of work primarily being that published in the 1980s, the approach being a Lacanian one. I divide the poetry into three camps or tendencies: the Red Tory neopastoralism of Lisa Robertson, Christine Stewart, Peter Culley, and Catriona Strang, the concerns of procedural constraints and Blanchotesque absence in Susan Clark, Kathryn MacLeod, Dan Farrell, and Melissa Wolsak, and, here, the social collage/disjunctive form to be found in the work of Colin Smith/Dorothy Lusk (discussed in this, the first half of the essay) and Deanna Ferguson/Jeff Derksen/Gerald Creede (discussed in the second half). Thanks to Donato Mancini, whose research in 2008 greatly helped to kick-start this writing.*

SINCE THIS ESSAY IS TORN from a larger work, it may be useful to sketch out quickly why I have turned to Lacanian psychoanalysis as a way of reading the work of the Kootenay School of Writing and, in that regard, perhaps address the question of historical or ahistorical readings. I think first of all that my turn to psychoanalysis is in response to a double lack: on the one hand, in the readings of contemporary poetry there is very little to be found that engages with Lacan to any great extent; on the other hand, the great resurgence of Lacanian theory and criticism since the 1990s (owing on the one hand to Slavoj Žižek's output and on the

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the Kootenay School of  
Writing* (Arsenal Pulp)  
and *The Boundaries of  
Literature* (co-edited  
with Paul Budra, Indiana  
University Press).

other to the “clinical turn” that saw a new translation of *Écrits* as well as many of the Seminars) has tended to look at popular culture (especially film) or politics but not poetry. This double absence is curious, not least because of the importance especially of Lacanian and Lacanian-feminist readings to such important avant-garde forbears as Gertrude Stein (Marianne DeKoven’s groundbreaking *A Different Language* especially, but see also, for example, Cynthia Merrill’s use of Lacan’s mirror stage to read *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*); nonetheless, the strength of both these discourses—Lacanian theory on the one hand, and ksw and other L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E-based schools on the other—suggested that an intervention into both could be a useful new critical practice.

Evidently my designation of this absence as “curious” is not adequate as a scholarly inquiry into critical fashions,<sup>1</sup> and there may be another reason: the misconception that Lacanian or psychoanalytic readings are ahistorical and, therefore, apolitical. I think that this is a misreading of Freud and Lacan (not to mention such obviously more political and left commentators as Žižek and Jodi Dean) for a number of reasons: both Freud and Lacan have made important statements on the political and historical nature of psychoanalysis; their bodies of work and writings can and have themselves been historicized, especially in terms of “early” or “late” Freud or Lacan, and, especially with respect to Lacan’s theory of the four discourses, which arose in the late 1960s in the context of the student protests of May 1968 in Paris, these are obviously discourses that are very much based on a political intervention into late capitalist society. So I

1 More recent writings on L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and post-L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing that make some (usually cursory) references to Lacan, Žižek, and/or Kristeva include Evans, Jarraway, Kellogg, Hoy, Nickels, Miller, Sussman, Frost, and Ngai. Evan’s title is a dead giveaway for a tip to Žižek, and Jarraway’s use of an epigraph from Lacan (“When you don’t understand what you are being told, don’t immediately assume that you are to blame; say to yourselves—the fact that I don’t understand must itself have a meaning”) could apply equally to Lacan and the ksw; however, Jarraway makes more use of Barthes’s pleasure of the text and merely refers to, without expanding upon, Lacanian desire (330). Kellogg, too, foregrounds Lacanian desire, this time as lexical feature, of a range of contemporary poetry including that of Bob Perelman (411–14), whose 1998 volume, *The Future of Memory*, is the subject of Nickels’s sometimes Kristevan review essay; Watten similarly situates L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing in terms of Kristevan and Lacanian theory. Hoy references Žižek’s infamous allegorical readings of toilet design as a way of critiquing flarf, or Google-sculptured poetry, Sussman uses the psychoanalytic notion of “introjection” to discuss Charles Bernstein’s foregrounding of collage and method (11, 19, 21), and Ngai’s chapter on “Stuplimity” moves from Stein and Beckett to method in the work of Dan Farrell and Kenneth Goldsmith, with a brief foray into Lacan on repetition.

would like here just to expand quickly on these three qualifying statements, before turning to the interpretive work of this essay.

Freud's statements on politics or history can be thought of in two ways: first of all, he was very much interested, even as early as *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), in how political events made their way into the subject's dreams—even if such matter was merely content for the dreamwork (for its condensation and displacement, its translation and revision), he never saw the everyday, be it political or more mundane, as unimportant—this was the raw material with which the analyst, as much as the patient, with which he had to work. Obviously the “Rat Man” case study would be a very different piece of work if not for the military context of late nineteenth century central Europe. Too, in Freud's later period, and especially in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), the historical situation of Western society—even if viewed through a Eurocentric lens—is nothing if not in the foreground as Freud philosophizes on our compulsion for order and desire to maintain sexual proprieties. But there is another way in which both Freud and Lacan are always, unremittingly, historical, and this lies in their attention to the everyday life of the patient, to a social history (albeit one that, in Freud's case, was especially constrained by the middle-class nature of his client's demographics). Thus Lacan notes in the “Rome” discourse (“The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis”) that the “unconscious is the chapter of my history that is marked by a blank or occupied by a lie: it is the censored chapter” (*Écrits* 215/259) and goes on to speak of the “archival documents” of childhood memories: these are more than metaphors in Lacan's practice, and they remind us of how historical investigation itself over the past half-century has come to view the social in terms of a bottom-up popular history, one as derived from the archives as from official statements. Then, the historicization of Lacan or Freud (like Marx) into different intellectual periods (thus the late Freud shifts from the unconscious to the ego, the early Lacan is concerned with structure and the late Lacan with *jouissance*)<sup>2</sup> also suggests that commentators on these thinkers are interested in such a situating. Of course,

2 Žižek often either refers to such a periodization to isolate a certain historically variable concept in Lacan, as in the “early” Lacan's reading of the Oedipus myth in *The Ticklish Subject* (180), or, in *How to Read Lacan*, to discuss “a shift in Lacan's development, from the early Lacan focused on the inter-subjective dialectics of recognition, to the later Lacan who puts forward the anonymous mechanism that regulates the interaction of subjects” (41) or, at his most radical, to use the late Lacan to re-read the early Lacan, as when he reads Lacan's seminar on Poe's “The Purloined Letter” in terms of the “stain of enjoyment” in *Enjoy Your Symptom* (26–27).

as in Althusser's distinguishing of the early, "humanist" Marx (of the *1844 Manuscripts*) from the later, "scientific" (of *Capital*), where the "break" or rupture owes much more to Canguilhem than to any linear narrative of history, merely periodizing Freud or Lacan is not a guarantee of a historicist approach. But in some ways my argument for Lacanian criticism possessing a historical dimension is in danger of being disingenuous, for surely the strength in some ways of psychoanalysis lies in its isolating of features of language and structure. This is Žižek's argument, in *Organs without Bodies*, when, invoking Deleuze, he counters "historicist commonplaces" that works of art must be studied in their historical context and posits, on the contrary, that it is only by taking works out of their context that we can properly appreciate their true workings (15). And so in what follows I seek to engage in what may be a contradictory practice: a psychoanalytic reading that engages with historical and political context but without ever reducing the poetry of the Kootenay School of Writing to a mere epiphenomenon of history.

### Lacan's Four Discourses

Jacques Lacan's theory of the four discourses—promulgated in his *Seminar XVII* of 1969–70—stands slightly after the midpoint of his trajectory regarding power and its domination of the subject.<sup>3</sup> If much of his theory in the 1950s and into the early 1960s saw a move from the Hegelian and Heideggerian motifs of the mirror stage and empty and full speech (the latter in the "Rome discourse" of 1953); through the structuralist moments of "The Instance of the Letter" and the "Subversion of the Subject" essays (all of these texts in *Écrits*); with the seminars on ethics and the four fundamentals of psychoanalysis (*Seminars VII* of 1959–60 and *XI* of 1964, respectively) continuing to explore the dominating role of language and the "big Other" of the Symbolic, but also mapping a growing role for *jouissance* as first *Das Ding* and then *objet petit a* (again, *VII* and *XI*, respectively); a *jouissance* that will, in his later work in the 1970s (especially *Seminar XX*) descend into the radically unstable conception of *la langue*; *Seminar XVII* offers a unique position, a position in which larger, or extra-clinical ques-

3 References to *Seminar XVII* will feature first the French pagination and then English (both of which are included in the 2007 Grigg translation); so too, references to Lacan's *Écrits*. Useful commentary on *Seminar XVII* can be found in the following: Clemens and Grigg's, eds., *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, Fink's *The Lacanian Subject*, Dean's *Democracy and other Neoliberal Fantasies*, Žižek's *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, Mitchell and Rose's, eds., *Feminine Sexuality*, and Jameson's "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan."

tions are deliberated, in which the great shift from the master's discourse (authoritarianism in its traditional sense, up to and including modernism) to the university discourse (the production of knowledge for its own sake, the rationalized or administered or bureaucratic society, but also the demand to enjoy) is theorized. And in recent years, the university discourse has come to play a privileged role in critiques of U.S. imperialism and neo-liberalism (see, in particular, Žižek's *Iraq* and Jodi Dean's *Democracy*). In this essay, I will read the radically heterogenous formal makeup of ksw writing in terms of two of the four discourses in particular: the university discourse and the hysteric's discourse.

Lacan presented *Seminar XVII, L'envers de psychanalyse* (variously, the underside or other side or reversal of psychoanalysis) in 1969–70, or in the immediate aftermath of May 1968. And it is the turbulence of the 1960s student movement and worldwide protests against imperialism, capitalism, racism, and, indeed, the university that should be considered to be one of the central contexts for Lacan's thinking in this seminar (we will see soon enough how this institutional critique is germane to our thinking about the Kootenay School of Writing).<sup>4</sup> Concerned, as always, with the analytical situation, with the role of language, and with the representation of psychoanalytic concepts (hence the repeated turns to formulae, to mathemes, to diagrams), Lacan here theorizes the discursive positions from which one speaks and the full implications of such discourse in terms of power, comprehensibility, and, crucially, social revolution—all reasons, then, why such concerns should be useful in considering the poetry and poetics of the ksw.<sup>5</sup>

Lacan's *Seminar* theorized that there were four discourses: the master's, the hysteric's, the analyst's, and the university's. Key to understanding this system is that the first discourse is then the master's discourse—this is the discourse from which the other three stem.<sup>6</sup>

4 MacCannell has noted that for many years it has been unacceptable to read Lacan's work in a historical context (195). My situating of Lacan's work in such a way, similar to my shift in reading ksw poetry and poetics *away* from historicization, seeks to better determine the relationship between politics and form.

5 See also Johnston's *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* on the question of the shift in Lacan's work.

6 This is for the same reason, as Žižek argues in *The Sublime Object*, that "the four subjects presumed to [know, believe, enjoy, desire] are not on the same level: the subject presumed to know is their basis, their matrix, and the function of the remaining three is precisely to disguise its troubling paradox" (2008, 213); the paradox, or mystery, is that, in the process of transference, "to produce new meaning, it is necessary to *presuppose* its existence in the other" (210). In the

$$\frac{S_1}{\$} \rightarrow \frac{S_2}{a} : \text{the master's discourse}$$

So the master's discourse is the starting point, as is the subject presumed to know, because of their origin in the transferential matrix.<sup>7</sup> Too, the master is the classical holder of power. Here the master is signified by  $S_1$  or the master signifier. In the formula, then, the master faces or addresses the other, the slave, which then is knowledge, or  $S_2$ . That is, the master *steals* knowledge from the slave or proletariat—steals it to produce surplus *jouissance* or (Marx's) surplus value. This operation thus “produces,” as “excess” or loss, the *objet a*, the object of desire, the bit of the Real. This *jouissance*, Lacan argues, is what the master cannot know—at one point in *Seminar XVII* he refers to “Yahweh's ferocious ignorance” (155–60/133–40). Finally, what the master must repress, must disavow, keeps in his unconscious, is that he is also a split subject,  $\$$ , the subject of desire. “Human, all too human.”

In the algebraic structure through which Lacan maps out the discourses, the lower right corner, the site of loss or production, is in some ways a blank spot, rather like the empty spot in a tile game; thus the discourses participate in a “revolution” in which the  $S_2$  shifts down to the bottom right,  $a$  to the bottom left,  $\$$  up to the top left, and  $S_1$  to the top right: now we have the hysteric's discourse.<sup>8</sup>

$$\frac{\$}{a} \rightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2} : \text{the hysteric's discourse}$$

Next we have the hysteric's discourse, the discourse in which the hysteric as split subject, as barred subject, as  $\$$ , speaks. When protestors gathered outside the Vancouver Art Gallery to declaim against provincial cutbacks to the arts (as I and a thousand others did in early September 2009) or to protest the 2010 Olympic games or when American right wing-

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same way, then, the supposition of the subject presumed to believe or desire or enjoy means that in order to produce new belief (to convert), or new desire, it is necessary to presuppose its existence in the other. This notion of transferential knowledge and meaning will be of great interest when we turn to the status of the open text.

7 See also Clemens and Grigg's introduction to their volume on *Seminar XVII*, where they lay out the origins of the master's discourse in “an original matrix that characterizes the signifier that represents a subject for another signifier” (3)—the originary formula for which is  $\frac{S_1}{\$} \rightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$

8 This discussion of the mechanics of Lacan's “revolutions” owes much to a presentation by Chris Dzierzawa, Lacan Salon, Vancouver, 17 November 2009.

ers packed town halls in the summer of 2009 to protest against health care reform, they/we/I were engaged in the discourse of the hysteric. We were addressing the master, the master-signifier,  $S_1$ —the provincial premier, the IOC, Obama. But the hysteric’s discourse also produces knowledge,  $S_2$ , a knowledge that is prized more here than in any other discourse, a knowledge that is also a matter of loss, from the oral histories that emerge from such ephemeral, political moments to the role of historical hysterics like Freud’s Dora, or Anna O, whose symptoms “produced” psychoanalysis. And what is also disavowed by the hysteric, it should be noted—and this is key—is the pleasure that he or she takes in their stance—the  $a$  below the barred subject. Protestors enjoy being protestors, right wingers enjoy having a liberal president, activists enjoy their activism. Indeed, as if to illustrate the dialectics of opposites (from Hegel’s infinite judgment to Jameson’s dialectics of opposing lacks), positivist psychology recently came to much the same conclusions, in a study arguing that activists are, indeed, happy in their activism (Klar and Kasser).<sup>9</sup>

$$\frac{a}{S_2} \rightarrow \frac{\$}{S_1} : \text{the analyst's discourse}$$

Next up is the analyst’s discourse, where we find in the driver’s seat *jouissance* itself, or the *objet a*. In the analytical situation, that is, the analyst is the object of inscrutable enigma for the analysand—the abyss of the other, the *Ché vuoi?* (What do you want?) moment. You go to your shrink, sure he or she is going to answer your questions, solve your neurosis, and he or she just sits there—perhaps you can’t even see her or his face as you prattle on about your father or your mother or the neighbour who woke you up. You want to please the analyst or, more accurately, your desire *qua* desire of the Other means that you want to want what the analyst wants, you want the analyst to desire you, you want the analyst: the analyst is the object of desire. And this *objet a* then addresses the analysand *qua* hysteric, *qua* \$ or barred subject. Analysis, as Fink remarks, following Lacan, hystericizes the analysand, “pointing to the fact that the analysand is not the master of his or her own discourse” (1997, 136). What is produced, then, is the master signifier, or  $S_1$  in all its ineffable mystery—the mispronounced proper name, the Freudian slip, the language that reveals more than one subject is speaking. Finally, what the analyst cannot know, what is unconscious to him or her, is knowledge *qua* knowledge,  $S_2$ . This position in the lower

And this *objet a*  
then addresses  
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*qua* hysteric,  
*qua* \$ or barred  
subject.

9 In a nod to Deleuze, Jodi Dean talks about protestors’ pleasure as “affective intensities.” See her blog: [http://jdeanicate.typepad.com/i\\_cite](http://jdeanicate.typepad.com/i_cite).

left of the formula is, it should be noted, truth; it is only in the analytical discourse that knowledge takes the form of truth.

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \rightarrow \frac{a}{\$} : \text{the university discourse}$$

The final discourse is the discourse of the university: this is in part because of Lacan's thinking that the university had replaced the master in late capitalism: now we are all technocrats, now we are rationalized subjects, now there is simply the demand for more and more knowledge, more and more scientific knowledge, rational knowledge, critical knowledge. In this discourse,  $S_2$ , or knowledge, is the agent. Knowledge speaks. And it addresses the subject *qua objet a*, the subject or human being reduced to bare life, to the quivering student before the professor, the vulnerable lab rat, the terrified human subject. Think of Sharlto Copley's character, Wikus Van De Merwe, in the 2009 film *District 9*, as he's being operated upon by medical researchers.<sup>10</sup> What is produced, or lost, in the university discourse is then that selfsame subject but as divided subject, hysterical subject, subject who acts differently than he or she knows:  $\$$ . Finally, what the university discourse disavows, what knowledge cannot bear to know is that it is underpinned by power, by the master-signifier, or  $S_1$ : the Foucauldian argument *par excellence*.

Two final aspects of Lacan's four discourses: as he famously remarked in *Seminar XVII*, the hysteric demands a master so that she can dominate him, that is, the hysterical demand is for domination. Then, Lacan commented of the student protests, "The regime is putting you on display. It says, 'Look at them enjoying'" (240/208): the protests *and* the state's response constitute that selfsame shift from the master's discourse to the university discourse, from an economy of restraint to one of consumerism, from the Super-Ego of the terrible "No!" to the obscene Super-Ego of the still more terrible "Enjoy!" But before we move on to thinking about how to read KSW poetry in these terms, it might be useful first to orient these categories or discourse with some canonical modern and postmodern poetry.

## The Discourse of the Canon

In this regard, then, I would like to begin with a genealogy of New American poetry: consider the work of Ezra Pound, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, and Susan Howe, for example. Evidently, Pound's poetry falls into the discourse of the master, as in the beginning of Canto LXXXI:

<sup>10</sup> Žižek argues that the *objet a* in the university discourse, addressed by knowledge, is akin to Agamben's *bare life* or the biopolitical (*Iraq*, 145).

Zeus lies in Ceres' bosom  
 Taishan is attended of loves  
     under Cythera, before sunrise  
 and he said, "Hay aquí mucho catolicismo—(sounded  
 catol*it*hismo)  
     y muy poco reliHon"  
 and he said "yo creo que los reyes desaparecen"  
 (Kings will, I think, disappear)  
 That was Padre José Elizondo  
     in 1906 and in 1917  
 or about 1917  
     and Dolores said: "Come pan, niño," eat bread, me lad  
 Sargent had painted her  
     before he descended (517)

Pound is speaking the master's discourse in both the obvious, common-sensical way we think of the master: one who knows, akin to the subject supposed to know, one in command of various languages (and how to pronounce them), poetic and mythological traditions, painting, as well as poetry. Too, the master addresses the slave (here, the reader?), is concerned with passing on this knowledge—and in so doing, produces that knowledge as an object, the *objet a* of desire—that desire to know Pound, to understand Pound and the modern tradition, the "Pound era" or epoch or episteme. Finally, this master signifier, this Pound, also disavows his own status as being, as signifying subject, as speaking subject or split subject. (We might think of this disavowal as that which returns to haunt Pound in his hysterical stage, particularly the Mussolini broadcasts). Part of this disavowal has to do with the master's relation to knowledge, which is, properly speaking, the property of the slave: "What does philosophy designate over its entire evolution? It's this—theft, abduction, stealing slavery of its knowledge, through the maneuvers of the master" (*Seminar XVII* 21 /21). Further, this theft of knowledge has nothing to do with the master wanting to know: "A real master, as in general we used to see until a recent era, and this is seen less and less, doesn't desire to know anything at all—he desires that things work" (*Seminar XVII* 23–24/24). To stay specifically with modernism, this theft of the knowledge of the slave can be seen in the appropriation of popular culture. Joyce's incorporation of newspaper styles and popular romances into the "Aeolus" and "Nausicaa" chapters of *Ulysses* and of folk rhythms converted into a nonsensical imaginary in *Finnegans Wake*; Pound's incessant turn toward the pedagogic (*Guide to Kulchur* and *ABC of Reading*) but also his and Wyndham Lewis's flirta-

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tions with fascism; or the moment in Woolf's *Common Reader* when she is tempted by the "rubbish heap" of popular fiction; Eliot's *The Waste Land* becoming, as David Ayers has remarked, "unreadable because it is familiar" but also, again, its incorporation of the popular ("HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME," "Ta ta. Goonight," etc.).<sup>11</sup>

With Ginsberg, then, we are firmly in the realm of the hysterical subject, the hysterical discourse (keep in mind that these are discursive positions and not clinical diagnoses: Pound as a historical being was certainly often acting as the hysteric). Ginsberg's poetry appeals to various masters, from Pound and Whitman to the U.S. itself, the latter in the blood-chilling "Moloch" section of *Howl*:

What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their  
skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?

Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtain-  
able dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys  
sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks! (6)

11 And this dance with the popular holds not only in canonical modernism but also in its avant-garde or radical other: Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, of course (and her writer's block after that success that was only resolved by writing another popular text, a mystery, *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor*), but also her indifference toward, as Bob Perelman puts it, "general ideas of exactitude, efficiency, and 'good writing'" (131) and her "domestication of modernist art and writing" when she has Toklas declare "I always say that you cannot tell what a picture really is or what an object really is until you dust it every day and you cannot tell what a book really is until you type it or proof-read it"; Louis Zukofsky's use of what Peter Quartermain calls "Brooklynese" in *A*, not to mention the appropriation of Marx's *Capital* and his letters in the interests of exploring aesthetic value (the kernel of the antagonism of high and low modernism); Lorine Niedecker's *New Goose* poems from the 1930s, which, as Jenny Penberthy writes, "explored folk models and, in particular, the short metrical rhymes of Mother Goose—poems of anonymous authorship, of proletarian origin, and of subtly subversive intent." Too, not simply this enlarged canon but the Black modernism of the Harlem Renaissance: see Langston Hughes's alliances with popular music. As he writes in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," "Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand"; Zora Neale Hurston's beginnings in anthropology—authorial voice as participant-observer in her study of Black folklore, *Mules and Men*; and Richard Wright's calls for a Sartrean engaged writing in his essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing." And if the high modernists sought to pump up their culture with the fresh air of the music hall and the minstrel show, the Black modernists sought to redeem their invocation of the popular with the academic gaze of the ethnographer, of the literary artist.

Here we have, evidently, the split subject speaking, the problem of subjectivity (not just “the best minds of my generation” but that “I have seen the best minds”) disavowing his own *jouissance* (the pleasure of the activist, of the denouncer), addressing the master, the U.S. (“Moloch”) and also producing knowledge, the knowledge of American in the 1950s, its horrible repressed citizenry. But the hysteric’s divided subjectivity, caught as Ginsberg was between the tradition of Kit Smart, Blake, and Whitman on the one hand and the fallen ruins of American subcultures (from the Burroughsian Times Square hustlers of the 1940s to the San Francisco Renaissance) on the other, is not, Lacan argues, motivated by a desire for that knowledge. Rather, “her truth is that she has to be the object *a* in order to be desired” (205/175–76).

With Olson, then, and especially in his documentary turn in *The Maximum Poems*, we have the discourse of the university: and so, after a listing of provisions, we read that:

The above is calculated from Capt Richard Whitbourne’s list of outfit and provisions for a winter station at Newfoundland as of 1622; it compares to Rev John White’s statement of the cost of maintaining the 14 Dorchester Company men at Cape Ann (119)

Here, knowledge is master but disavowing its own power position, its master-signifier (Olson’s troubled relationship with Melville and Shakespeare in particular); raw data becomes poetry, addressed to our desire for more and more knowledge (hence, in a way akin to how the master’s discourse works) but producing the split subject, the reader of postmodernism who now can no longer linger in the groves of a white male academe. The university discourse addresses, or works on, the subject as bare life, as *homo sacer* (in Žižek’s appropriation of Agamben). Here I think two moments from Olson’s biography are *apropos*: on the one hand, his attempts at working on fishing boats in his youth, when he was inevitably disgusted by the REAL fishermen’s non-Melvillean desires for women, for *jouissance* (“cunts and clap, crabs and syphilis,” Clark 32); then, in the obverse of this, in *Call Me Ishmael* (which really should be titled *Call me Male*: here is Olson at his most hysterical), when Olson reads Melville as having outed the truth in Shakespeare: “In his copy of the PLAYS, when Shakespeare muzzles truth-speakers, Melville is quick to mark the line or incident” (42). This is the university discourse: disavowing (or unconscious) of its own truth

but praising its discovery elsewhere (perhaps Olson is Oedipal in his relation to Melville, seeing him as murdering his own Shakespearean father).

Does this finally result, then, with the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement, in our overdetermined survey? Take this passage (the reproduction of an entire page, 7) from Susan Howe's "The Nonconformist's Memorial":

As if all history were a progress  
She was coming to anoint him  
A single thread of narrative  
headsstrong anarchy through  
Actual world nothing ideal  
  
In Peter she is nameless  
The nets were not torn  
  
The Gospel did not grasp

Now *pace* Howe scholar Steve Collis (see his *Through the Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism*), I would argue that Howe's position is not so much that of the archivist as of the analyst. The archivist is surely the obsessional, the neurotic who seeks to keep all of his or her papers, keep them in some order that compensates for a lack. But then in Collis's anarcho-scholastic take on the archivist (and the metonymic slide from archivist to anarchist is properly Lacanian; see Collis 18), the notion of using the words of others or "through the words of others" (the title of Collis's study of Howe), situates Howe properly in the status of the pervert (who seeks to satisfy, or be the instrument of, the desire of the other), that is, the passive-aggressive status of collage and appropriation art. But these are clinical designations; to return to our four discourses, with Howe we have the discourse of the analyst working in the following ways. First of all, her work on the page with the inverted lines—and note that in the pages following in Howe's book, the text is almost unreadable because of how Howe works with the page, laying lines of text upon one another—makes the text itself the object of desire, akin to the analyst whom we suppose to know our troubles. Then, in the address of the text to the reader, this is a readerly text, a text that is about reading other texts like the Bible and also about its own reading (all "open" texts are therefore the discourse of the analyst, although, as we will see, this has troubling ways of enabling neo-liberalism). What is then produced is the master-signifier, or the brand of "the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement" *qua* commodified literary object (here it should be noted that, while she has been anthologized as/with

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers, Howe herself resists the label), ceaselessly, in the case of Howe, providing an imaginary resolution of the contradictions of American capitalism by finding a dissenting tradition in the tradition *qua* tradition; finally, what is disavowed is that very knowledge, that very “tradition in the tradition *qua* tradition.”

This survey of the four discourses as a way to read poetry is not meant to be a historical or teleological one. As important as the relations between the four elements  $S_1$ ,  $S_2$ ,  $\$$ , and  $a$  within each discourse is the relationship between the discourses themselves; as Oliver Feltham has argued, Lacan’s account of the movement from one to another is both complex and contradictory. The hysteric produces the analyst and is a product of it; the master transitions into the university but also subverts it; “the analytic practice is, properly speaking, initiated by this master’s discourse,” Lacan argues (*Seminar XVII* 177/152), but also, earlier in the same seminar, discusses the progression from one to the other in terms of quarter revolutions. What I will now be interested in doing in this essay is to discuss the “social collage” tendency in  $\kappa$ sw writing in terms of the four discourses and, ultimately, in terms of the very neo-liberalism that not only gave birth to the school but turns out to be its secret love-hate object.

In her study of Lacan’s discourses for legal theory, Jeanne Lorraine Schroeder argues that in the hysteric’s discourse the marginalized subject finally speaks:

Now—and only now—the barred subject acts as an agent. Up to now she has been acted upon as the subject subjected to discourse. The master ordered her, the university lectured her, and even the analyst, supposedly on her side, interrogated her. Now she finally has a voice. The hysteric’s discourse is the discourse of the barred subject. (148)

Radical poetry, then, and especially radical poetry that takes the language of poetry or the language of power or the language of capital as its subject, speaks with the discourse of the hysteric. Radical poetry addresses the Master—the Master *qua* Master-Signifier and also the Master as Power itself. But writing in the  $\kappa$ sw vein does more than this. It also takes on the power structures of the university, assumes the trappings not just of institutional power but also the jargon of inauthenticity that characterizes the syntax and vocabulary of postmodernism. And this shift between the hysteric’s discourse and the university discourse may account, on the one hand, for the resistance to the  $\kappa$ sw registered in some left circles (Fawcett

and Wayman) and, on the other hand, the vexed internal contradictions that occasioned the role of feminism in/out of the ksw.<sup>12</sup>

But the ksw bears another, family relationship to the university discourse. Like psychoanalysis, the Kootenay School of Writing is and is not a school, has a vexed relation with the academy; like the Vancouver school of photoconceptualism, the ksw has, too, complex and problematic relations with counter-institutions in the region's artist-run centres and other formations.<sup>13</sup> That is to say, the ksw cannot be thought of simply as "outside" the academy; too, it cannot be dismissed as merely academic poetry. These claims are based both on historical context for the development of the ksw in the 1980s and on the theoretical perspectives (and parallels) offered by psychoanalysis. The parallels are both geographic and conceptual: from the 1950s to the 1970s Lacan's seminar moved from one medical or academic space to another: sometimes in a hospital (Hôpital Sainte-Anne: 1953 to 1963), sometimes at the ENS (Ecole normale supérieure: 1964 to 1969), and finally at a law school (Faculté de droit du Panthéon: 1969 to 1980).<sup>14</sup> Much more migratory was the ksw, originating as it did at David Thompson University Centre in Nelson and then shifting to various locations in Vancouver, beginning above a Vietnamese restaurant and taxicab office at Oak Street and Broadway and then to various locations in the Downtown Eastside.<sup>15</sup> And just as Lacan's and, indeed, psychoanalysis' relation to academic institutions has always been fraught with rue, beginning with Freud's battles with anti-Semitism in Vienna at the turn of the last century and continuing with Lacan's critiques of the IPA in the 1950s and 1960s, so, too, the ksw's status was always ambivalent, including classes taught by academics (especially UBC professor Peter Quartermain, on Stein and Zukofsky, in the 1980s), but also given as it was to situationist gimmicks like selling doctorates for fifty dollars as a fundraising gesture.

12 See, in this regard, the interviews with Catriona Strang, Dorothy Lusk, and Lisa Robertson in Eichhorn and Milne, eds., *Prismatic Publics: Innovative Canadian Women's Poetry and Poetics*.

13 See Culley, "Because I am always talking"; Douglas (ed.), *Vancouver Anthology*; O'Brian (ed.), *Vancouver Art & Economies*; and de Baere and Roelstraete (eds.), *Intertidal: Vancouver Art and Artists*.

14 Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, 529.

15 See Klobucar and Barnholden; since the early 1990s the ksw office and performance spaces have clustered around Hastings and Cambie and have included sharing spaces with Artspeak and the Or galleries; list of locations in Vancouver compiled by D. Mancini from ksw archives.

## Social Collage

The title of this essay indicates that I am asserting a connection between Lacan's theory and the KSW's trope of social collage. By collage, I mean work that operates with a high level of disjunction, and by *social* collage I mean that this disjunction operates as a critique of the hegemonic role of meaning in late capitalist society. Collage, then, also signifies the breakdown of the signifying chain, whether at the level of the sentence (for example, from sentence to sentence or phrase to phrase there is little narrative coherence) or on down to the word/signifier/phoneme. The argument then is that such writing constitutes an attack on how capital presents itself linguistically: that coherence is the ideological structure whereby capital interpellates the subject. Here, and with reference to an exchange between Steve McCaffery and Ron Silliman from the 1970s,<sup>16</sup> we can first of all make a distinction between issues of connectivity (syntax, narrative) and those of reference (variously, de-referential or postreferentiality). In what follows I wish to use two different critical methodologies. First, I will treat brief excerpts from poems by Colin Smith, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, Deanna Ferguson, and Jeff Derksen, ascertaining how their polysemy intersects with an anti-narrative stance. There are some references to and situating of these readings in terms of Lacanian theory. Then, I take a more (!) detailed look at a single poem, Gerald Creede's "neglect is no bother," reading it more thoroughly in terms of Lacan's four discourses.

Now, I am not interested in constructing a genealogy of disjunctive writing—such a tracing of its history in twentieth century poetics from Stein and Zukofsky to Andrews and Davies has been done (most exemplarily in Andrews and Bernstein's *Language Book* and Palmer's *Code of Signals*)—suffice it to quote two canonical statements: Bernstein's "No 'death' of the

I am not  
interested in  
constructing a  
genealogy of  
disjunctive  
writing.

16 In a ca. 1976 exchange with Steve McCaffery, Ron Silliman provides a succinct definition of the relationship between meaning and capital: "going to go into the social origins of referentiality (which are, of course, in the labor process of capitalism itself: referentiality is language serialized, its dual projection as product & commodity resolved by the repression of its product nature" (McCaffery et al., 64). Note that in the introduction to this correspondence, published in *Line* in 1985, McCaffery argues that while the "numerous contributors to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E have been frequently lumped together as proponents of a de-referentialist 'school' of writing. This is not the case. Though many contributors conceived the practice of writing to be primarily a social fact and saw the production of meaning as occupying, with a certain inevitability, a socio-political position within the politics of representation ... [t]he letters reveal many of the differences felt in the early struggles of post-referential conceptualization" (59).

referent—rather a recharged use of the multivalent referential vectors that any word has” (34; which is to say, polysemy) and Silliman’s “Word’s a sentence before it’s a word—I write sentences” (57; appropriately, while I am quoting from the authors’ collections of essays, both statements first appeared in the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine in the 1970s). Andrews, too, contrasts two kinds of writing: one of which has “assumptions of reference, representation, transparency, clarity, description, reproduction, positivism. Words are mere windows, substitutes, proper names, haloed or subjugated by the things to which they seem to point” (16). The other constitutes “a poetics ... of *subversion*: an anti-systemic detonation of settled relations, an anarchic liberation of energy flows ... an experimentalism of diminished or obliterated reference” (17). I return to this question below, after a discussion of Jeff Derksen’s “Interface.”

Here are some excerpts from four poems:

I am not *chosen*  
but have applied for the job.  
I’ve always wanted to be a Government  
of Canada Initiative. Starves his body down  
so his erection will be proportionally larger.  
(Smith, “Straw Man,” *Writing Class* 119)<sup>17</sup>

Forget it forget it & write about US. Despot a viscous mesh  
apparent; these walls return a favour—i.e. bum. Bum, I will  
meet him in 45 minutes my will disintegrate amen. Taken  
short shrift so change the lesser nouns, mewling— “Some  
job” i.e. weasel thrust apparent to talk around your ears “the  
world.” Totems of thought. The gorge. (Lusk, “Oral Tragedy,”  
*wc* 139)

Sometimes the subordinate clause is while you still have  
friends. Causality abets restless energy; ensues credit. If  
stool the size of an infant’s head is removed from one’s  
cadaver, it’s a sign. Adjust connective degenerations. What  
appears to the eye and touch after twenty or thirty years is  
the same after forty or sixty, singing, cords, casts, stuck to  
the bottom. (Deanna Ferguson, “Swoop Contract,” *The Relative Minor*, 51)

The Rocket Richard riots would be an example of spontaneous agency.

17 All other references to *Writing Class* appear parenthetically as *wc*.

“Jeanine is a living example of Noranda’s attitude toward employees.”

China 6.3%

This train.

The residual anger resides here [points with right hand] and accumulates here [points with left hand], I’m still looking for the spigot.

More American soldiers were killed by accidents during the build-up than by either the Iraqi army or so-called friendly fire. (Derksen, “Interface,” *wc* 203)

There are two ways of thinking about work of this ilk. First of all, we can locate this technique in terms of poststructuralist critiques of language: notions of intertextuality (texts are always referring to other texts, are palimpsests), of the “open” or “writerly” text (meaning is not some inert thing *in* a text to be discovered/consumed by the reader but is created or constructed by the reader), of language as a signifying chain (meaning is always being deferred, is a matter of *différance*). Then, we can locate a politics in this technique, a politics *both* at the level of content (references to or the incorporation of both state or corporate interpellation of subjects as well as the inscription of resistance, the latter often highly ironized) and as form (arguments that these very techniques, in their shifting of meaning from the author to the reader, are libratory manoeuvres: a textual politics). If these political gestures—both of form and content—place the poems in the realm of the hysteric’s discourse, the structural polysemy does so in the realm of the university discourse.

### Smith and Starvation Poetry

But let’s see how these ideas work on the ground, as it were, in reading these excerpts critically. Colin Smith’s text begins with the declaration “I am not *chosen*/but have applied for the job.” As with other pronouns in the poem (on the page before we read “At home he makes an ornament sandwich, perambulates while chewing, you *would* live in a cube” [*wc* 118]), it is best to think of the “I” here in strictly linguistic terms as a *shifter*, Roman Jakobson’s term (borrowed from Otto Jespersen; see Fink 1997, 37–38, 183 n3 and n5) for signifiers in a message which refer to the sender or receiver of a message. Shifters, as the designation suggests, only possess a meaning in relation to the message being sent: here the “I” in “I am

not *chosen*” refers to the speaker or writer of that message—not simply Colin Smith as the writer of the poem but instead, given the rhetoric of the poem (that is, its continual shifting references—again, earlier the poem reads “I am Buster Keaton with neuralgia, Henry/Spencer with a poisonous erection” [WC 118]—mitigate against a strictly autobiographical reading of the poem) to the possibility of someone saying this, to that concept, to its performative iterability.

This variable meaning continues in Smith: the “I” is not “*chosen*” but nonetheless has “applied for the job,” which is to say, the temporal narrative of the poem’s sentence seems skewed. Wouldn’t one normally say “I applied for the job but wasn’t chosen”? Is this a *defeatist* poem? But there is humour here too, isn’t there? The next lines read “I always wanted to be a Government/of Canada initiative,” suggesting an ironic identification with those large signs that appear on a subway or freeway construction site to let us know our tax dollars are at work. The poem works in two different ways here, again. First, the ludicrousness of identifying with the government-speak, of having *always* had as one’s ambition to be a government project, of, indeed, believing in such efforts. But we should also pay attention to the work of the line break here. “I’ve always wanted to be a Government” is its own phrasal or clausal meaning. It makes sense linguistically (I’ve always wanted to be a governing body) even if not actually (what does it mean to want to be a government? a government of one? here Smith’s anarchism creeps in). The line break works to defer meaning, or to add another meaning, to the sentence. Smith’s text works as a hysteric discourse: the irony disavows its very address to the master. Think, for example, of the upper half of the hysteric’s discourse: this relation of the barred subject, the subject of lack, the speaking subject (\$) could be seen as the capitalist subject as well as the political protestor. But if the four discourses typically feature a disavowed “truth,” *the hysterical discourse represents the truth of the master’s discourse*; that is, the return of the repressed: the miserable subject of the master returns in reproach.

In part what I am arguing goes on in this style of writing, in this social collage tendency of the ksw, in this disjunction both in the sentence and between sentences, is the hysteric subject at work. That disjunction operates partly here in terms of the line break but also between the three sentences that make up the verse paragraph I’ve quoted from Smith’s “Straw Man.” The first two sentences, for example (“I am not *chosen* / but have applied for the job” and “I’ve always wanted to be a Government / of Canada Initiative”), have some thematic continuity: the economics of looking for work, of government spending. So, too, we can locate a politics here

in terms of the subject position of the jobseeker, of the would-be recipient of government largesse (again, the hysteric beseeching the master). But there is also a greater disjunction between the second and third sentence, both in terms of content and linguistically. Now we suddenly jump from government initiatives to “Starves his body down so his erection will be proportionately larger.” The “his” here is, of course, indeterminate. We are not to suppose this is the same “his” as the “his” of previous lines (“Tempted to stick out/his ego” [WC 118], or “Goes to sleep / with cucumber slices all over his face” [WC 119]). Or, to be more precise, we should neither necessarily connect these possessive pronouns *nor* discount their connection. Dogmatic disjunction is as much an orthodoxy as dogmatic continuism, for we can also see connections of a thematic sort between this anorexic phallocrat and Henry Spencer (historically, a Victorian pornographer) with his “poisonous erection” or indeed sticking out one’s ego.

These formal concerns can also tell us something about the poem’s title, “Straw Man.” This suggests first of all the “straw man” logical fallacy or an argument in which one suggests an easily dismissed critique of one’s own position. Or, the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz* with his head of straw. Or, to wax canonical for a moment, T.S. Eliot’s well-known “The Hollow Men.” But surely the shifters, the poem’s shifting and indeterminate use of pronouns that aim at wrenching reference free from any monolithic meaning, and the poem’s concomitant—and often hilarious—critiques of male self-importance are, too, connected to this straw man, to this empty subjectivity, his barred subjectivity: his *hysterical* subjectivity.

But this disjunction is also paradigmatic of the university discourse. First of all, it effectively ditches the subjectivity of the poet as bourgeois artist: the barred subject is thus only the remainder, the excess. Then, disjunction reproduces and replicates at a formal level the gap between the expert (S<sub>2</sub>, or knowledge) and the subject (*a*: the subject either as subject matter or student). This gap is present in all four discourses (between master and slave, hysteric and master, analyst and patient), the gap between the rule of expert *qua* reader (a metonym for the rise of bureaucracies, non-democratic NGOs, and privatized police forces) and the democratic subject (student as client, as shifter, as consumer) is paradigmatic of the neoliberal state.<sup>18</sup>

18 See, in this regard, Dean’s *Democracy* and Harvey’s *A Brief History*.

## Lusk and Capital(s)

Disjunction works at a more fevered pitch in Dorothy Trujillo Lusk's "Oral Tragedy," which was first published in a chapbook of the same name from Tsunami Press in 1988. The opening sentence of our excerpt demands not only that the reader "write about us" (which could be read as "write about the U.S.") but that s/he "forget it" not once but twice. Now, forgetting is, of course, the modernist gesture *par excellence*: if one is to "make it new," one has to almost by default forget what is old. This demand is modernist, then, and also Freudian, forgetting being a type of repression. And the repetition of the demand here makes it both insistent and hectoring—tones or affects that are to be found throughout Lusk's work. Immediately, however, the next sentence retreats from sensibility or meaning: "Despot a viscous mesh apparent; these walls return a favour—i.e. bum." Replete with the punctuation marks of complex syntax—a dash, a semicolon—the sentence begins flirting less with meaning than with sound—the continued "s"s of "Despot," "viscous," and "mesh." And the words themselves flirt with contiguous signifiers: "Despot" with "depot," "viscous" with "vicious," "mesh apparent" with "heir apparent." Then, for walls to "return a favour" makes walls themselves into some kind of subject. This writing evacuates traditional subjectivity even while it shows how we attribute subjectivity to, or how we anthropomorphize, the inanimate world around us. Here we can imagine leaning against a wall and perhaps the wall leaning against us or at least against one's bum; the meaning of that last word then shifts quickly at the beginning of the next sentence. Now "Bum" is an interpellation, as in "you bum" or "that bum." Is this bum the "him" that will be met "in 45 minutes"?<sup>19</sup> This next sentence ends with a paraphrase, perhaps, from the Lord's prayer: "my will disintegrate amen" instead of "thy will be done ... amen." Subjectivity is evacuated and intentionality is eroded. But then agency is restored, in a sense, with the beginning of the next sentence: "Taken short shrift." This skews the normal usage of "short shrift," as in "I was given short shrift": now, a lousy pittance is taken, perhaps without asking.

But these reconstructions of meaning can blind us to how meaning actually never really resides in the work, in the writing. Every sentence

19 Exactly contemporaneous with Lusk's poem's publication in 1988 is Leslie Scalapino's book-length poem *way*, which includes the "bum series" and various disjunctive meditations on homelessness: "the men / on the street who'd / died—in the weather—who're bums" (51). This synchronicity of texts indicates a social text, the social text of rising homelessness under neoliberalism.

seems, as it meanders along, to have, indeed, forgotten it, to have forgotten, that is, what it started talking about: from mesh to bums, from bums to disintegrating will, from shrift to mewling to “the world.” Each sentence disintegrates under the force of association and the signifier, each sentence is given or takes short shrift, each sentence changes the lesser nouns—each noun becomes a pronoun, a shifter—each sentence quotes mindlessly, repeats heedlessly, talks around your ears as if they were not there, is a totem of thought both in the sense of badge of honour and of a stratified hierarchy. Each sentence makes the gorge rise in an acid reflux of regurgitated text.

And it is the text’s rapid relay of signifiers—always with meaning continually dissolving and reappearing—that places us firmly in the realm of the university discourse. Again, there is the demand to know, to consume or produce meanings, to understand however briefly before moving on to the next signifier: a planned obsolescence of meaning. Too, the “forget it forget it write about us” may be read as simultaneously the hysteric and the university. The hysteric demands of the analyst that he write about her (is this not the multicultural demand for representation?). Pay attention to me. Love me. The university discourse reading is to note the demand for more textual production, criticism, theses, essays, dissertations.<sup>20</sup>

This excerpt from “Oral Tragedy” that I have treated should also be considered in terms of the slightly expanded context of the poem itself and, especially, two formal characteristics of Lusk’s poem: its turn to capitalization as a form of emphasis and its descent into non-signifying textualism. The use of capitalization is important to reading Lusk’s work for a number of reasons. First of all, comparing variants of the poem (in the 1988 Tsunami chapbook of the same name, the 1990 book from Talonbooks, and the 1999 appearance in *Writing Class*) shows us two different degrees of attention paid to capitalization: in the 1988 and 1990 versions, words that are in all caps are simply presented as such, while in the *Writing Class* version, most words are set in small caps (OWN, SENTENCED [WC 134], ALPO, AFTER [135], CANADA, SOUTH, MATTER, MOVED [136], HALF, LACK, HERE, OWN, PCB [137], PLENTY, WHAT [138], BLOODY, THIS, ONLY, CLEPT, EVER [139], LOOKS, 2D, GET, YOU, AGAIN [140], WHY [also italicized], MINDING, NOT, WONDER [141], YET, STUFFED [142]) but most two-letter words (except “2D” noted above) are rendered in full-sized caps: OK (134), PC,

20 As Žižek argues in “*Objet a* in Social Links,” the university discourse means especially “the ‘excluded’ or ‘damned’ authors are the IDEAL feeding stuff for the academic machine” (108: he refers to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Benjamin, but we could also add Lacan and Žižek, and, perhaps, the ksw?).

And it is the  
text’s rapid relay  
of  
signifiers—  
always with  
meaning  
continually  
dissolving and  
reappearing—  
that places us  
firmly in the  
realm of the  
university  
discourse.

UNlike (136), OK, OR (137), NO, US (139), OK, MY (140). This variation is in some ways technologically (and therefore economically) overdetermined. The shift to a smaller font would have been more cumbersome for the DIY moment of Tsunami chapbooks in the 1980s. But as small caps make the capitalized words less jarring to the eye, arguably the use of small caps in the *Writing Class* anthology mitigated against the very purpose of such orthography in the poem. That is, we should see the use of capitalized words in “Oral Tragedy” as both a continuation of a new poetics strategy (at least since Olson) and as a critique of the disingenuously self-effacing strategy of the hippie poets to use the lower-case “i.” But both strategies (or all three) have now in turn acquired different social resonances with the rise of digital communication since the 1990s, when writing in capitalized words on email or discussion threads became synonymous with shouting (and, perhaps, being a “newbie” to some site or technology), and the use of the lower-case i and other affectations became part of how neoliberal capital spelled itself (from the “i” of Apple’s various consumer products to the “camel case” spelling of programs like WordPerfect<sup>21</sup>). If the latter showed that 1960s-era demands for inclusion could be met with a neoliberal fantasy, the former preserved, as it were, the anger that Lusk’s orthography signals via the very misrecognition of the “newbie” or the bulletin board “flamer.”

The textuality of Lusk’s poem, by which I mean the shift from meaning into a more indeterminate, metonymically linked, quasi-nonsensical meaning, is also worthy of attention. Consider these lines:

Shiftless foci wont observe an onus & left to OWN loss,  
drawl & stick up our chins. (134)

Jar down mine own gritty polish & wonder when saliva seg-  
ues patina. (135)

First: appeared unlike any other—unbidden from out th’mist  
and all to convey a sense of “to my home.” (136)

Too broke to impress myself, the turnstile too intimate by  
HALF & not ethic either but LACK. (137)

Litter spittle stubs bitter little grabby bugs.... As legs get  
tucked within thick spun lint knits & dubbin must, like salt  
prevention, be taught us. (138)

21 See Caleb Crain’s polemical essay “Against Camel Case.”

Trash resistant crack repellant drone infectant broom retardant ('s disjunct as my rod and my staff—they contort &c. (139)

There not so every passion as tactic as filmic sentience as cynic's catspaw as drone foil as tailor's chalk as what one gets as one another as one GET's through as municipal negligence as normal kid rash as an unidentified dominant life form as YOU as in sticking the ivories—that is, most gone suckered, deboned and unbidden. (140)

About taxi Krakow to denim conspicuously around consuming union suited Mississauga scale lacking that provided trust squished beside punctuation entirely. (141)

Caught up in sad tales wise up in due time shut up utterly. (142)

There are two variations in these sprees of textualism: those that work with some kind of repetition (either at the level of the word, as in “resistant ... repellant ... infectant ... retardant” [139] or syntax: “as tactic as filmic ... as cynic's ... as drone... as tailor's ...” etc. [140] and “Caught up ... wise up ... shut up” [142]); and those that shift from one signifier to another based sometimes on sound (from “onus” to “OWN loss” [134], or “Litter spittle stubs bitter little” [138]). But then, as with “Too broke to impress myself, the turnstile too intimate by HALF & not ethic either but LACK” (137), meaning wavers between the direct and the associative. First of all, “Too broke to impress myself” offers us a clue to the reading practice demanded by Lusk's writing, suggesting as it does a Lacanian split between the subject of the enunciation (the person making a statement) and the enunciated subject (the person in the statement: here, the “myself” of the utterance). That split subject is thus why the turnstile is too intimate “by HALF,” for where and how the turnstile is too intimate is by its chrome caress of our genitals, “halfway” up or down the body (the poem suggests, as well, the ideological phrase “too ... by half”). By “literalizing” the metaphor Lusk reminds us of how the phrase contains a common sense notion of excess, restraint: a commonsense notion that in true Gramscian sense is here made practical by this organic intellectual.<sup>22</sup>

It may seem from this riffing of mine that I am a hostile reader of Lusk's work or one given to focusing on its most formalistic aspects. But I think

22 Earlier responses to Lusk's work, and to “Oral Tragedy” in particular, appeared in poems published in *Buddyland* (2000) and *Rental Van* (2007) and in an unpublished essay from 1998 that somehow made its way onto the net.

that what this writing does, what a poetics sentence like “Taken short shrift so change the lesser nouns, mewling—‘Some job’ i.e. weasel thrust apparent to talk around your ears ‘the world’” (139) does is to free the sentence from its own imprisonment, from the linear thrust of meaning in which meaning is finally something one has to “get” and then consume and then know. And this works specifically in terms of a concept I will elaborate upon in my discussion of Deanna Ferguson: the idea of the signifying chain.

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