

“Talk Poetry” as Genre : David Antin, Apostrophe, and the Institution of Poetry

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There is a small corpus of criticism dealing with the question of apostrophe, primarily in romantic poetry. That explorations of this rhetorical figure should nearly always result in readings of romantic texts suggests the larger issue that looms behind these discussions, that is, the romantic quest to uncover the very nature of poetry itself, how we can know it when we encounter it, and how the poet, by figuring the vocative in a particular way, succeeds in reinforcing his position as the locus of a transcendent (that is, unmediated and un-rhetorical) lyric experience. This is the crux of the argument made by Jonathan Culler in his essay entitled “Apostrophe,” the text from which most contemporary discussion surrounding the issue springs. (1981 : 135)¹ Culler claims that there has been a significant blindness in poetry criticism regarding this particular figure, remarking that when critics do treat apostrophe they attempt to turn it into description, and suggesting that this is so because apostrophe may be taken as the figure “of all that is most radical, embarrassing, pretentious, and mystificatory in the lyric, even seeking to identify apostrophe with lyric itself.” (*Ibid.* : 137) This blindness subsequently allows the critic to proceed in an analysis of poetry without needing to recognize that the very constitutive element of what is being analyzed may be a rather clumsy gesture, often signaled explicitly by the letter O, the purest figure of “undifferentiated voicing.” (*Ibid.* : 142) As Paul de Man once argued in a similar vein : “[I]t is certainly beyond question that the figure of address is recurrent in lyric poetry, to the point of constituting the generic definition of, at the very least, the ode (which can, in its turn, be seen as paradigmatic for poetry in general).” (1986 : 47) Recognition and discussion of apostrophe, then, will always have the effect of demystification. By revealing exactly how apostrophe works to establish the genre of poetry and simultaneously

the privileged role of the poet, or lyric "I" of the poem, the critic is in effect highlighting the primary mechanism by which poetry establishes its own generic parameters.

Problems arise when one asks such basic questions as why romantic poetry should stand as the paradigm for all poetry. Balz Engler puts forth this objection to Culler's essay, noting that Culler "generalizes the use of deictics in poetry from the way they are used by Romantic poets," and remarks, further, that Culler does not so much provide a definition of apostrophe, as a reading of Keats. (1987 : 67) J. Douglas Kneale, in his comprehensive essay "Romantic Aversions : Apostrophe Reconsidered" similarly finds a lack of a convincing definition, yet manages, from the examples provided by Culler, to reach the embarrassing conclusion that Culler is not talking about apostrophe at all, but rather is describing the effects of ecphrasis and prosopopoeia. Kneale wishes to reclaim the distinction between the gesture of turning away from one recognized audience to address another (apostrophe) from other kinds of address, such as that of "addressing a dead or absent person, an animal, a thing, or an abstract quality or idea as if it were alive, and capable of understanding" (prosopopoeia), and poetic outcry or exclamation (ecphrasis). Kneale argues that in applying the blanket term apostrophe to all modes of address, one risks associating apostrophe directly with voice "rather than with a movement of voice." (1995 : 150) If the examples that Culler provides ("O rose, thou art sick !" ; "O wild West Wind, thou breathe of Autumn's being !" ; "Thou still unravished bride of quietness", etc.) are taken to represent apostrophe, the definition will then concentrate on the presence of voice as such, rather than on the shifting gesture of voice enacted by the turning from one addressee to another.

The confusion surrounding apostrophe — where it is located in regards to the speaking voice in poetry — reveals an interesting problem about the definition of lyric poetry in general. Engler's criticism of Culler's derivation of a general definition of poetry from a particular (Romantic) specimen of it, is a critique of the assumption that the first audience for poetry is always the poet himself. According to this romantic definition, which was neatly formulated by John Stuart Mill ("Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling : but...eloquence is *heard* ; poetry is *over heard*" [1967 : 56]) and introduced into contemporary critical discourse by Northrop Frye,² any mode of address will be a *turning away* from the primary state of poetry — which is "feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude" (Mill 1967 : 56) — to an *other*, for the poet, according to this paradigm, is the original listener in the lyric situation, and the invocation of any other potential listeners via the trope of apostrophe (the poet turning to address an imaginary presence) only work to undermine the necessary conceit of solitude. Or, to reinforce it, if one senses the immanent fail-

ure of the invocation (as one often does). Thus the confusion surrounding apostrophe seems to lie, in the broadest sense, in the issue of audience. Who is listening in the first place, and who is being asked to listen subsequently, when the poet turns away from the first addressee to address another? I will return to this question of audience in a moment.

Beyond this tropological definition of the lyric, Northrop Frye has defined lyric poetry with reference to two additional kinds of turning away:

1) the poet's turning away from "normal activity", from a regular temporal and spatial order towards a more urgent, abstract and timeless one (this turn classically resulting from frustrated love), (1985 : 32) and

2) the lyric's turn "not merely from ordinary space and time, but from the kind of language we use in coping with ordinary experience." As Frye says: "Didactic or even descriptive language will hardly work in the lyric, which so often retreats from sense into sound, from reason into rhyme, from syntax into echo, assonance, refrain, even nonsense syllables." (*Ibid.* : 34)

David Antin's work of the past twenty years has explored with great ingenuity these apparently defining characteristics of poetry with the ultimate aim of dissolving each one in its turn. He might be known best for proclaiming his mixed feelings about being considered a poet at all, by saying:

if robert lowell is a poet	i dont want to be a poet
if robert frost was a poet	i don't want to be a poet
if socrates was a poet	ill consider it (1976 : 2)

To pit Lowell and Frost against Socrates is, in the first instance, to pit the written against the oral. But this opposition is not upheld in Antin's work as a case for authenticity (the oral) versus artifice (the written lyric performing a false drama of the oral.) Antin's talk poetry is an artifact that emerges first as ephemeral speech that is simultaneously rendered from the oral into the "literal" by a tape recorder (so the speech is not-so-ephemeral as all that), and then further fixed into the "literal" as opposed to the oral, when Antin later transcribes the talks and re-works them onto the printed page. He employs certain techniques of typography in the print versions of his talks (for example, he avoids traditional punctuation, capitalization, and left-justified margins) in part to imitate the immediacy of the original, improvised performance,³ and yet, this scrupulous performance of immediacy in print has the reciprocal effect of highlighting the impossibility of such a translation across media. In this work we find a persistent engagement with the idea of the relationship between what is private and what is public performed in different media (live talking, audio recording, printed poem) as a series of contradictory possibilities. His talking in one sense unfolds as pri-

vate thoughts delivered publicly (thinking aloud), and so, as poetry overheard (as Mill put it). At the same time it is clearly delivered to an audience (and with an audience in mind), as either a lecture, a stand-up routine, or as a public talking that shares affinities with private conversation (there being at least the potential of a dialogical encounter at the time of his speaking), but which has little to do with what Frank Lazer has called "the more standardized and university-accredited poetry reading." (1995 : 119)

Antin's refusal to be identified with Frost and Lowell represents his resistance to a certain kind of poetic form, but more importantly, it represents a critique of a broad, hegemonic, institutional definition of "the poet" and "poetry." Antin reveals our unexamined assumptions concerning poetry by performing from the edge of our acquired expectations about the genre. It is legitimate to ask what makes Antin's work poetry at all. In its oral form it can easily be mistaken for mere "talking" rather than "talk poetry." And in its printed form, it might just as easily be perceived as "criticism" or "philosophy" rather than poetry. In one essay on Antin, the critic, Frederick Garber, discussing the significance of "remembering" in Antin's work, cites an Antin talk poem as though it is a critical reference for his own creative work : "For a rich and partly experimental reading of these issues," Garber writes, "see 'the sociology of art' in *talking at the boundaries*." (1987 : 238, n. 9) The poet's work becomes the critical source to refer to when developing an analysis of the poet's work. Antin's pieces, in this sense, are not simply talk poems ; they are philosophical studies, and essays in poetics. So why limit a discussion of Antin's work to the disciplinary and generic boundaries of poetry ? What keeps his work from being philosophy, or criticism ? It is not merely due to the generic affinities (despite the many dissimilarities) that Antin's work has with what we call poetry that I have framed my discussion of Antin in terms of poetic practice, and the trope of apostrophe in particular.⁴ Antin has published talk poems in critical and philosophical journals at the same as he has published more generically recognizable critical essays in critical journals. The talk poems "Fine Furs," (1992 : 151-163) published in *Critical Inquiry*, and "The Price," (1989 : 14-33) published in *Representations*, explore questions surrounding the genre of poetry and the nature of the self, just as his essays "Modernism and Postmodernism : Approaching the Present in American Poetry," (1972 : 98-133) and "Is there a Postmodernism ?" (1980 : 127-135) (both printed with the familiar, justified margins of critical prose) do. In terms of content, they are equally expository, and critically enlightening. Yet, as one of Antin's friends said to him after he completed his performance of the talk poem titled "The Price," "*its not really criticism*." (1989 : 14) Why is it not really criticism ? In part, because the primary institutional frame that confers meaning upon his work (and in which his work functions as a most controversial intervention) is that which defines poetry, not criticism.

The main difference between his critical essays and his talk poems published as critical essays is the way they look on the page. So even when "The Price" appears in *Representations*, a reader who is familiar with Antin's work will look at it, read the standard Antin preface that describes the event from which the text emerged ("back in 1986 when i went up to san francisco to give this talk..."[*ibid.*]), see the text's peculiar layout on the page, and say, "Antin has published a talk poem in *Representations*" (despite its appearance alongside essays on Chaucer, Shakespeare and Kant). Antin's work asks us to consider poetry as a situational designation much as Marcel Duchamps invited us to think about how a urinal, placed in a museum, can become a sculpture. The situational and typographical precedents that have served to define Antin's texts as talk poems makes a text like "The Price" maintain its identity as poetry despite its publication among critical articles ; despite the "found" urinal sculpture finding its way back into the men's room, so to speak.

As Arthur Danto explains the difference in value ascribed to an artist's sculpture made of stacked Brillo boxes, and a pile of Brillo boxes stacked by the stock boy : "a stockroom is not an art gallery." (1989 : 180) To a certain degree, Antin's work can be explained according to the same logic : his performances take place in venues where poetry readings might occur, the print versions of his poems appear mostly in poetry journals, or else in books that are displayed in the poetry sections of bookstores. Significantly, though, Danto's argument does not finally suggest that venue confers the generic status upon an artifact, rather, he says it is the conceptualization of something as an artwork that makes it so : "what in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo box is a certain theory of art." (*Ibid.*) According to Danto, artistic theories make art possible, and aestheticians make artists. This is not a new idea, of course, and when Matthew Arnold turned from writing poetry to criticism because he believed "a current of ideas in the highest degree" was required to animate and nourish the creative power, he was underscoring the distinction between theory, on the one hand, and art, on the other. (1865 : 7-8) I will return to the significance of Antin's conflation of the sides of this criticism/poetry binary in a moment. But first it is necessary to address another conundrum arising from the affinities Antin's work seems to have with yet another non-poetic discursive form, in this case the discursive form of talk itself.

Sure, the talk poem is not really criticism, but then again, one might say, it's not really poetry, either. It is mere talk. What makes Antin's talk *poetry*, and someone else's talk *chatter* ? Antin is asking us to accept everyday talk as something at least as poetic, present and important as "poetry", and yet one might justifiably claim — as Canadian poet Robert Kroetsch admitted was the case for him — not to "*hear* his significance." (Antin 1975 : 617) The listener's ears may be resistant to

the poetic worth of Antin's talk, because, well, talk is cheap : it costs little labor or effort, and is easily produced or obtained. Antin's work attempts to prove otherwise. He means to demonstrate that talk is actually *dear*, when it is the kind of talk that makes something happen (this being the only kind of talk for Antin). Antin claims that he "used to go around complaining nobody could talk/ any more," (1976 : 241) and then decided, in his work as a poet, to make us hear "talk" as something other than speaking back and forth without the ensuing transformation of either party. In a talk poem entitled "dialogue," Antin explains that when true talk happens,

people talk in a way that leads to the construction
of new things discovery of new things and to the articulation
of things that people had never recognized before (1984 : 220)

Talk leads to the construction, discovery and articulation of previously unrecognized things, but is talk itself a thing ? In one sense, talk happens only in the moment of utterance, and is thus difficult to identify as a firmly constituted *objet d'art*. Aesthetic philosopher George Dickie argues that for something to be a work of art it must be an artifact, which he defines as "an object made by man, especially with a view to subsequent use." (1989 : 197) Dickie's assertion that works of art are artifacts is complicated by Antin's practice of talk as poetry, and by the various media in which Antin's work is rendered material, because, although a talk poem is in one sense made "with a view to subsequent use" (in its tape or printed version), the actual performance/creation of the piece, which is inseparable from a sense of the artifact that Antin has made, is ephemeral, and explicitly defines itself as such. Antin insists upon presence as a constitutive aspect of his art, and asserts that poetry is most real in the moment of performance.⁵ His poems are made not only with a view to subsequent use, but as a way of proclaiming that true poetry exists only in the perishable present, the book and audio tape versions of his performances described by Antin as "imperfect recordings/ of transactions that occur in real time."⁶ (1984 : 54) The text versions of Antin's talk poems are presented as notations or scripts of speech, but finally they do not really function as an Olson-like attempt at the transcription of body and breath, mainly because the texts and spacing of the words do not necessarily replicate caesura as Antin actually talked in the first instance, nor as we might expect to have heard him. So while the effect of Antin's typography is to suggest immediacy, it simultaneously highlights the text's estrangement from voice, forcing the reader to pay closer attention than he otherwise would to the act of en-voicing the printed words on the page. His manner of printing his poems obliges the reader to slow down and to concentrate upon reading a living voice back into the dead letters, all the while highlighting the complicated relationship of ephemeral, everyday talk to the material forms that might transform talk into artifact.⁷

In other words, the particular rendering of talk that Antin's poetry performs results in what Danto calls "the transfiguration of the commonplace." Again, according to Danto, "works of art are symbolic expressions, in that they embody their meanings," and "[t]he task of criticism is to identify the meanings and explain the mode of their embodiment." (1992 : 41) The work of art comes into being when the institution of criticism approaches it as an embodiment of artistic meaning. As Danto says, "to see something as art is to be prepared to interpret it in terms of what and how it means." (*Ibid.*) By the same token one might say that Antin's talk becomes a kind of poetry ("talk poetry") when the institution of poetry criticism hears it as such, and attempts to explain its relation to other, more familiar modes of the genre. In Antin's work, though, the binary of criticism and art that together make up the "artworld" for Danto is collapsed. One of the unnerving and exciting things about Antin's work, then, is that the theory of poetry that finds poetic meaning in his work, and thus confers the status of poetry upon it, is articulated in the work itself. Talk, as he practices it, is poetry and theory at once, and thus, talk poetry is a practice that actually consists of the performance of an institutional definition of poetry. Or maybe it is more accurate to say that talk poetry enacts the institution of poetry itself, institution here meaning : a bringing into use, an act of establishing, a setting into operation, and even a giving of a new form or order to something.

Antin institutes his talk poetry by focusing on the situations that determine the import and direction his talk will take. In the title poem of his collection, *talking at the boundaries*, he describes how the title for that talk poem came to him in the mail "on a voucher i had to sign to collect my check," thus identifying as one of the determining situations for this particular poem, the requirement by an institution (in this case Indiana University) for an event to have a title before it can be sanctioned (and funded) by the departmental speaker's committee. (1976 : 55) This voucher with the title chosen by one of the committee members (no doubt to expedite the process of paying the speaker) represents for Antin one of the occasions that would modify the import and direction his talk would take, just as his present discomfort in assuming the identity of poet, linguist or art critic, "all of which" he says "i had so clearly been," meant that his work "was therefore no longer so/ clearly a poem a criticism an investigation but somehow lying/ between them or on the borders." (*Ibid.*) While there are always specific situations (like the visiting speaker's voucher) that influence the direction of his talk on any given occasion, the two determining situations that Antin will consistently acknowledge as primary are those of where he is speaking, and to whom. "[T]he whole problem of our literate and literal culture" Antin remarks, "has/ been to some extent the problem of the totally dislocated/ occasion" — resulting from the print book — "which goes out into a/ distributional system unknown to us." (*Ibid.* : 56) What if

my book is distributed in Fort Wayne ? Antin asks : “i hadn’t thought about what it was going to be in fort wayne that i should address/ or how.” (*Ibid.*) Thus, the institution of the talk poem depends upon a “located occasion”, a “known distributional system”, in short, a well defined sense of place and object of address.

So, if in the romantic conversation poem, the trope of apostrophe is a key device for the procedure of an imagined (artificial), private mode of meditation and internal dialogue, the rhetoric of address as it is heard and performed in Antin’s work is particularly interesting because of the implicit need for a well defined sense of locale that seems to accompany vocalization, and the explicit connection he makes between talking and being :

	the self	itself	is emergent
in discourse	in some kind of discourse	it is probably available	
	but it comes up under dialogue	and the dialogue	is
conducted with it	and then the self emerges	even though the	
self	may not have been there until you called upon it	you	
were always under	something	of an assumption that it was	
available for discourse	(<i>Ibid.</i> : 10)		

As Antin elaborates in the piece I have just quoted from (entitled, “what am i doing here ?”), the first part of the question, “what am i”, cannot be answered without identifying what I am *doing* (talking), and *where* I am talking (“here”, in this particular discursive context). Another experimental poet, Charles Bernstein has identified location to be the auditory version of visual perspective, and argues that this sense of location is “a constitutive element of the medium of the poetry reading.” (1998 : 11) It is as though the trope of apostrophe is automatically literalized, and the object of address materialized in a live performance before an audience, and consequently in a taped or written record of that performance. Antin’s talk poems exemplify this point, for in these poems, when he is addressing someone, he may be addressing quite literally someone present in the hall with him, and when he is speaking in his poem, he speaks from an identifiable, grounded “here.”⁸ These poems remain deeply dialogical and concrete in their sense of locale and direction across the different media in which they are delivered. They work to translate the fictive procedure of apostrophe into the literal gesture of “direct address”, and yet, simultaneously, to demonstrate that the implications for the assertion of self dramatized in poetic apostrophe are equally pressing and interesting in the act of talking “live” before an audience.

So in lieu of all three senses of "turning" that I referred to earlier in my essay as a means of suggesting a working definition of lyric poetry — the turn of the poet/speaker from his meditative preoccupation toward an imagined interlocutor (i.e. the trope of apostrophe), the poet's turn from "normal activity" as Frye called it, in a regular sense of place and time toward a more abstract sense of space and eternal sense of time, and the lyric's turn from the vernacular to the musical — David Antin has developed a poetics that has him face his audience, in a concretely identified space, at a specifically designated time, and address it directly in his everyday, talking language and voice. Again, in *talking at the boundaries*, Antin explains what is at stake for him in the distinction between writing poetry and improvising talk poems :

as a poet i

was getting extremely tired of what i considered an unnatural
 language act going into a closet so to speak sitting in
 front of a typewriter because anything is possible in a closet
 in front of a typewriter and nothing is necessary a closet is no
 place to address anybody or anything and its so unnatural
 sitting in front of a typewriter that you dont address any-
 one what you do is you sit at the typewriter and you hang out
 the anticipated in front of the unanticipated people who
 may be of any sort short round blue though
 usually not so marked being a general figure you talk to so
 generally that you dont have to anticipate his answers
 (1976 : 56)

In Antin's talk poems there is always, automatically, an occasion for speaking, and the audience is not a generalized abstraction, but a known quantity. And yet, to draw such a thick line between traditional lyric poetry and Antin's talk poetry — a line between the unnatural and the natural, between closeted and open, between abstract and concrete — is probably misleading. Antin's work, and the significance of its manner of drawing our attention to the generic boundaries that define it, emerges not only through its oppositional gestures against a certain kind of lyric poetry, but necessarily through its affinities with the genre he is not so much rejecting, as attempting to redefine. He is talking at the boundaries of the form, and from this position is both revealing the mechanics of the form and yet (still) drawing upon the form's hidden powers ; powers that depend upon the concealment of their mechanics.

The power of apostrophe to summon absence, for instance, and in turn to consolidate the poet/speaker by positioning him in relation to the being or artifact that has been summoned. In most examples of romantic apostrophe, the trope signals an urgent motive on the part of

the speaker toward finding a new relation of the speaking self to the world around him, and thus, ultimately of finding a new version of the self, period. And this self-constitution depends upon a certain degree of confidence in the power of the trope to bring a response, and in a grounded dialogical context within which any given gesture of address can function and be understood. Here I have in mind Mikhail Bakhtin's helpful essay, "The Problem of Speech Genres," in which he argues that the expression of an utterance must not be understood only in terms of thematics. "The expression of an utterance," he writes, "always *responds* to a greater or lesser degree, that is, it expresses the speakers' attitude toward others' utterances and not just his attitude toward the object of his utterance."⁹ (1992 : 92) If address (and here this general term would be synonymous with apostrophe) is regarded as a gesture that results in the immediate revivification of the absent voice, and an utter poetic control over that which has been called into a living dialogue, then much is demanded by the trope. Invocation is here (in Culler's argument) a figure of vocation and becomes as much concerned with the invocation itself for automatic results, and self-dramatization, as with the object toward which it is directed.¹⁰ (1981 : 142) Further, apostrophe, insofar as it is a movement of the vocative, implies the conceit of a belief in the dialogic nature of the trope, and is employed with a confidence (which is itself a response to previous uses of the figure) that it will evoke a response, have an effect. A confusion of the movement of voice with other kinds of address which establish the speaker's position by successfully erecting a desired interlocutor (the confusion between apostrophe, ecphonesis and prosopopoeia that Kneale mentions) will result in a particular kind of nostalgia, one which aligns the loss of the revivifying powers of address (the failure of deictics) with the absence of a discursive context for the poetic utterance.

The preceding discussion of ways of describing Romantic apostrophe, then, stands as a necessary prelude to a discussion of the trope(s) as they appear in poems written without the same motivation of belief in Nature as a viable interlocutor, and which might thus be called manifestations of post-Romantic apostrophe. Again, Bakhtin's ability in categorization will prove helpful. He writes :

[A]ny word exists for a speaker in three aspects : as a neutral word of a language, belonging to nobody ; as an *other's* word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other's utterance ; and, finally, as *my* word, for, since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a particular speech plan, it is already imbued with my expression. (1992 : 88)

Within Bakhtin's model, the individual's speech experience is one of continuous interaction with the utterances of others, and the experience is characterized as a process of *assimilation* of others' words. One way into the problem of modern apostrophe is to consider the varying degrees of otherness or "our-own-ness" that inform the uses of this

trope, in a sense, to bring to an analysis of apostrophe a consideration of the varying degrees of "awareness and detachment" from an assimilated utterance as it appears in a poem. (*Ibid.* : 89)

One gets the sense of an increasing disassociation of the trope from active and located dialogical expression as we move from examples of apostrophe in romantic poetry to modern and contemporary instances. In the case of Wallace Stevens's *Botanist* (from his poem "Botanist On Alp [No.1]") for instance, we sense a world that is less welcoming to the trope of apostrophe when he declares that "apostrophes are forbidden on the fu-/ nicular," (1982 : 134) or when, in "This Solitude of Cataracts," the atmosphere of a man visiting Nature is described with the line : "There seemed to be an apostrophe that was not spoken." (*Ibid.* : 424) It is as if the post-romantic poet has grown so aware of the trope as an "other's" discourse (a Romantic discourse no longer possible) that the trope is no longer assimilated into the discourse of the addressor, but observed *as an other*. In the case of Stevens, it is forbidden or repressed. Similarly, in the context of the longer passage from Bakhtin cited above, it can be argued that in T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," utterances are not embedded in the poet's expression *per se* (as a lyric subject's utterance), but instead are appropriated by a discourse that is not dialogically engaged. The overall speech plan of Eliot's poem consists in the re-placement of voices and apostrophes into other, and othering contexts. For example, the sequence of prosopopoeia (signaled by the letter O) intended to revive the dead Desdemona in Shakespeare's play *Othello*, uttered by her maid Emilia, "O lady, speak again", "O sweet mistress, speak !" (Shakespeare 1972 : l. 120-121), and by Othello himself (O Desdemon ! dead, Desdemon ! dead !/ O, O !) [*ibid.* : l. 280-282] etc., are wrenched out of context and inserted into a Zigfield Follies show tune :

But

O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag ---

It's so elegant

So intelligent

(Eliot 1985 : 31, l. 128-130)

The appearance of the trope in this emphatic manner at this point in Eliot's poem (amidst a series of disembodied, freefloating questions and answers¹¹) may thus be read as an indication that apostrophe has been removed from the dialogic network that it might imply (one wants to call upon Shakespeare, or the deceitfully used handkerchief which results in the death of Desdemona, but one gets the rag or Rag-tune) and as a sign of the failure of the revivifying powers generally allowed prosopopoeia. When Shakespeare is made to appear, it is only to display the trope's powerlessness. The O is employed, not as an assimi-

lated aspect of the poet's discourse, but rather as a trope (with powers) from which its employer has been distanced.¹²

It is against both the romantic overconfidence in the vocational and self-defining implications of poetic address, and the skeptical, modernist malaise surrounding the lost powers of apostrophe and prosopopoeia that Antin dramatizes the situation of address in his talk poems. Antin's talk poems can in themselves be understood as extended performances of the trope of apostrophe with the aim of displaying its (still) living status, as a localized fact of being, but not as a transcendent mode of poetic vocation.¹³ He articulates communal situations with his address, rather than objects or objectified interlocutor-figures. The audience/listener/reader becomes the figure addressed by the speaker, the talk poem thus placing us into the position of the summoned, and leading us to think about how to respond, and, in a more formal manner, about the significance of response itself. The literal presence of the audience is also what allows for an Antin talk poem to materialize in the first place.¹⁴

He will generally begin his talks with a "warm up" period during which he describes how he came to be invited to this place to give a talk, and speaks directly to those individuals in the audience that he knows personally. During such moments in his talks (and they are not restricted to these opening warm ups) a distinction between a more generalized "you" — referring to the audience (and subsequent reader) — and a more specific "you" — referring to the friends in the audience about and to whom he is talking emerges, revealing the charged sense of danger that comes with a private address made in a public hall before a mixed audience. Thinking back on the effect of speaking in this way to individuals as a talk poem is being made (in this case when he did it the piece called "what am i doing here"), Antin has remarked that it seems to make people nervous because everybody is worried about what he might say about them. (Antin and Bernstein 1989 : 44) He elaborates upon this effect in the final piece of *talking at the boundaries*, entitled, "a more private place" : "when i speak if i speak about people who are real and are/here...you hold hostages in your mouth." (1976 : 244) This quote is revealing not only for its description of the urgency-effect created in Antin's employment of address in his talk poems, but also for of the inadvertent article shift (common in colloquial speech) that occurs in his description of what happens when he talks about/to people who are present in this context : "if i speak about people real and here...you [meaning i] hold hostages in your [my] mouth." All of Antin's talk poems explore very explicitly the i/you relationship that emerges in such live talk situations, and specifically its significance for the consolidation of the poet's sense of self (the poetic "i").

In this particular poem ("a more private place") he moves from his warm up discussion about how he is holding his friends hostage in his

mouth to develop a string of metaphors about how people set up a view of the self, and about how an individual can possibly change, making the analogy between personal change and the derailment of a train, the sporadic occurrence of irrational numbers, the choice of something other than a monogamous heterosexual marriage, and finally, of the idea of re-learning one's own language, of talking differently from how one does. To relearn to speak his own language — in Bakhtin's terms, to relinquish the word as it is imbued with his own expression for the word that is "filled with the echoes of another's utterance" — would be a life changing lesson, but it is an impossibility within Antin's aesthetic :

...its easier to learn another language and come on
differently in another language than it is to relearn you [sic] own language
im sure it would be easier i mean if i want to change my
life i don't think i could unlearn the way i speak english it would
be a disaster theres no way i could learn to speak english say
like an academic poet...it would be easier to go and learn
french much easier (1976 : 264)

He elaborates upon this possibility, imagining himself learning to talk French with a Marseille longshoreman's accent so that he could go tell Parisian intellectuals that they're full of shit, but in the end he reflects upon this fantasy and asks : "can i find a way to be/ somebody other than i am now ? in principle yeah but/ in practice who would that be ?" (*Ibid.* : 267) The difference between traditional uses of apostrophe by which the poet can transcend his present being ("in principle") by bringing himself into dialogical contexts with the most unlikely things (nightingales, skylarks, lost best friends, etc.), and Antin's mode of address lies in his insistence upon grounding his talk in a concrete place (a "here" that he will usually foreground throughout the talk), with an actual someone. In short, his meditations always come back to the query, "in practice, who am i ?" for there is no identity but the one that emerges "in practice." As in most lyric poetry, his talk poems dramatize the poet in the making, and his use of address (if we can call it a "use," for the whole talk is in effect an address to "you") is the primary means of self-construction. This is typical of apostrophe, too. As Culler remarks : "[T]he vocative of apostrophe is a device which the poetic voice uses to establish with an object a relationship which helps to constitute him." (1981 : 142) But the relationship that is enacted in an Antin talk poem is not so much an object relationship as a social relationship, one that is based upon the conflation of public and private models of communication. In one of his talk poems he asks :

how is it possible to imagine that you can continue to answer to
your name whatever name that is in a serious way or that you can
maintain a continuous consciousness and have a sense of its boundaries

unless its tested against something that opposes and isnt it (1989 : 15)

Antin's work suggests that it is impossible to imagine oneself without the distinguishing boundaries that emerge in the event of the dialogical situation — which is always an existential situation. As Marjorie Perloff has noted, it is mainly when the idea of audience is lost that abstraction in discourse ensues. Commenting upon "the level of abstraction to which the dream of a common language descends" in the age of media (with reference to Wordsworth's "Preface"), she states that "poets are precisely those who, faced with the abstraction and emptying out of...media speak..." strive to reaffirm a grounding of language. (1991 : 40-41) The performative situation inherent in Antin's live talks, combined with the sign of their simultaneous recording in the presence of his tape recorder, and the knowledge of their eventual transcription into print poems, keep his work from gravitating toward this kind of abstraction, on the one side, and toward too innocent an impulse for naturalization, on the other. Self-definition in his art is dramatized not by the traditional poetic trope of turning to address someone or something, but rather by his performance of direct address through which we may observe him being and constantly becoming a speaking subject, and maybe even turning into a poet before our eyes.

Notes

- 1 Culler's two other essays which address the question of apostrophe essentially restate the argument of this first piece. The other two essays are : "Changes in the Study of the Lyric" (1985 : 38-54) and "Reading Lyric" (1985 : 98-106).
- 2 The popularization of Mill's assumption via Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* is pointed out by Engler (1987 : 69).
- 3 This is Bob Perelman's argument in his essay, "Speech Effects : The Talk as a Genre" (1998 : 203).
- 4 Garber has noted that among the similarities between Antin's talk poems and the tradition of meditative lyric poetry, are the initial "composition of place, a meditation of the meaning of that place in the life and times of the meditator," subsequent speculations inspired by the place, and a final return to the scene where the speculation began. (1987 : 219).
- 5 See, for instance, "gambling" in *tuning* (1984 : 147-149), and the following passage from "real estate", also in *tuning* : "im here now and im/ trying to make a piece the way artists have probably/ always tried to make real work once and at some point/ ill take an imperfect record of what ive done and it will/ be an imperfect record because it will only be a tape recording/and it will only get some of the effect of being here because/ what i say to some degree is determined by what you/ think and my sense of it otherwise id have to do an/ entirely separate berkeleyian ego trip where i would/ talk about anything independently of who i think you are/this is not my approach to poetry i suspect that the approach to poetry/ of poets in their natural habitat which is in/ performance and in performance improvisation has/ always been a response to some specific set of urgencies" (Antin 1984 : 54).
- 6 Frederick Garber argues that one feels from the print and tape recorded versions of Antin's talk poems, "the loss of that *Gesamtkunstwerk* which is the

- original performance," and elaborates upon the different senses of the present that emerge in the different media versions of an Antin piece. (1987 : 230-237).
- 7 Daniel Tiffany's recent critical thinking on how "the technics of poetry (by which [he] mean[s] prosody and the craft of ordering words, but also the poem's image-making and rhetorical apparatus) might yield a consistent and coherent doctrine of "lyric" substance" is interesting in this regard (2001 : 77). He asks whether there are "corporeal phenomœna analogous to the qualities in language that we judge to be obscure" (*ibid.* : 83), thus focusing on the possible corporeality of specific organizations of language, but his line of inquiry would be further complicated by Antin's attention to the specific media through which language can be rendered material, not only in his talk pieces, but in his other poetry experiments, such as the sky poems he wrote in the late 1980s.
- 8 The sense of "here" is usually acknowledged in words at the outset of his talks : "i would appreciate it if youd come closer..." ("a private occasion for a public place," *talking at the boundaries* [1976 : 211]) ; "i assume that we are all here to figure out..." ("the sociology of art" [*ibid.* : 157]) ; "i came here with an intention to do a piece relating to something i'd been thinking about..." (opening lines of sound recording, *the principle of fit II*, Watershed, C-145, 1980.)
- 9 The supposed confusion between apostrophe, prosopopœia, and ecphonesis is not irrelevant either in the context of a discussion of modes of address in post-Romantic poetry, for it may be that this confusion informs later uses of address and marks drastically the subsequent function of these tropes.
- 10 Culler elaborates on the same page : "This is obvious when one thinks how often invocations seek pity or assistance for projects and situations specifically related to the poetic vocation, but it can also be inferred from the functionally gratuitous invocations which mark so many poems. If asking winds to blow or seasons to stay their coming or mountains to hear one's cries is a ritualistic, practically gratuitous action, that emphasizes that voice calls in order to be calling, to dramatize its calling, to summon images of power so as to establish its identity as poetical and prophetic voice."
- 11 From the section entitled, "A Game of Chess" : "What is that noise ?/The wind under the door./What is that noise now ? What is the wind doing ?/Nothing again nothing." etc. This series of questions and answers envelopes the "Shakespearean Rag" song. (Eliot : 30-32, l. 117-138)
- 12 In her consideration of the role apostrophe plays in four lyric poets of the 1990s, Ann Keniston remarks that contemporary poetry may downplay "the optimism (or perhaps the delusion) of traditional apostrophe — the faith that the other is there and can hear — by foregrounding the absence of its addressee," she ultimately argues that nineties lyrics "not only affirms the desire central to all lyric invocation but radically extends it : what apostrophe in these poems ultimately exposes is a desire not only for an embodied other but also for lyric itself." (2001 : 298-299)
- 13 Henry Sayre suggests as much when he writes, "Antin's talk poems are a form of address." (1982 : 450)
- 14 As he remarks in his most recent book, *Conversation*, consisting of an extended email interview/conversation between himself and Charles Bernstein, the difference between writing a talk poem as he would imagine doing it (Bernstein asked him to imagine this activity), and talking one, "is the presence or absence of an audience that gives the work its sense of address." (Antin and Bernstein 2002 : 55). And in "The Price," Antin has remarked how, before he goes to give a talk, he thinks about who might be there in the audience because, he says, "I always like my pieces to have some sense of direct address" (1989 : 14).

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Abstract

David Antin's work explores the continuum between live speech and printed poetry. This essay considers the implications of Antin's approach to poetry both for an understanding of that genre, in a general sense, and more specifically, for the trope of apostrophe which traditionally underlies any definition of lyric poetry. If, in the romantic conversation poem, the trope of apostrophe is a key device for the procedure of an imagined, private mode of meditation and internal dialogue, the rhetoric of address in Antin's work is aimed at revealing the situations that determine the import and direction of a poet's expression. By "talking at the boundaries" of several identifiable modes of expression, Antin's "talk poetry" enacts an institutional definition of poetry, and thus challenges basic assumptions about the nature of poetry and the rhetorical tropes that are usually used to define it.

Résumé

Le travail de David Antin explore le continuum existant entre la performance poétique orale et la poésie imprimée. Cet article examine les implications de l'approche antinienne de la poésie, en regard de la compréhension du genre, au sens large, et plus particulièrement, en regard de la figure de l'apostrophe, que sous-tend traditionnellement toute définition de la poésie lyrique. Si, dans le poème-conversation romantique, la figure de l'apostrophe est le procédé clé d'un mode imaginaire et privé de méditation et de dialogue intérieur, la rhétorique de l'adresse à l'autre dans le travail d'Antin vise à révéler les situations qui déterminent le sens et la direction de l'expression du poète. En "parlant à la frontière" de plusieurs modes d'expression identifiables, la "poésie parlée" de David Antin incarne une définition institutionnelle de la poésie, et de ce fait lance un défi aux a priori au sujet de la nature de la poésie et des figures rhétoriques habituellement utilisées pour la définir.

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