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“Not I!”:

Strategies of Post-Millennial Confessionalistic Poetry

In this post-millennial age, the line between the private and the public is increasingly being tested to the extent that the public persona and its broadcasted epiphanies, activities, and confessions sometimes serve as a stand-in for self-reflection and personal authenticity. Through multi-media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and reality shows that chronicle everything from one's lunch choices to Senate floor deliberations, personal space is increasingly public space. As cultural critic Jonah Lehrer phrased it: “You are who you pretend to be.”¹

With the technological ability and pop-cultural fascination to record private moments and distribute them, poetry that reveals personal details and conflates the identity between speaker and author must feel the effects of what could be viewed as an over-saturation of the confessional — which was during the 1950s and 1960s with Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath a political, rebellious act. It is far from that now. In this Kim Kardashian era, revealing sex tapes are used as marketing tools to launch careers whereas once they destroyed careers.

Considering the hyper-confessional climate of our era and that “Confessional” is something of a derogatory label among poets, what are some ways a post-millennial confessionalistic book can transcend the personal and its particulars? In other words, what options are available to poets who do wish to write about a personal subject matter, but who are aware of the barbs and pitfalls of doing so?

The answer is, of course, that there are multiple ways — from redefining what is experience to redefining what is the authorial “I.” One strategy is to avoid first-person autobiographical perspectives all together as we see with the increasing popularity of persona poems. Another strategy is to focus on language as subject rather than self as subject. The strategy I would like to consider concerns the recent proliferation of concept collections² in this era of authorial mistrust. Many of these books are worthy of analysis, but the three that I will discuss represent different degrees of distancing the self from the Confessional while at the same time delivering

a personal narrative: Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard* (2006), Anne Carson's *Nox* (2010), and Joseph Harrington's *Things Come On* (2011). To clarify, the poets I am discussing are not ones who anyone would label as Confessional. The intent is to analyze how poets treat confessionalistic material — specifically confessionalistic material that is placed within the larger context of a concept collection.³

So, how is the authorial “I” downplayed and subverted within these three books? What are their strategies to move beyond the narcissistic? To universalize rather than particularize personal experience? These books use a combination of the following strategies: an inter-disciplinary weave between the personal with another subject such as a specific historical period, political event, or genre other than contemporary poetry; a creation of a “concept collection,” meaning a tightly unified grouping of poems that often features the aforementioned inter-disciplinary subject; an intense focus on form — be it using received form or creating forms specific to the collection's concept; an undercutting of the “I” through direct omission of the “I” or questioning the “I;” and finally, a polyvocalic concern to include multiple speakers.

A brief history of the Confessional poem might help situate how we have moved from such a stance being revelatory to being rehashed. M.L. Rosenthal first used the term “confessional” (but did not elaborately define it) in 1959 during a review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*. What Rosenthal finds to be distinctive about *Life Studies* — and what is now tied to the Confessional school — is the conflation between poet and speaker. As Rosenthal explains, “Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal”.⁴ Granted, one could argue that many poems are *ipso facto* “Confessional,” but typically the term is confined to characterize the work by Robert Lowell, specifically *Life Studies*, Anne Sexton's four volumes, and some of Sylvia Plath's poems including “Daddy,” “The Colossus,” “Lady Lazarus,” and “Witch Burning.” Many sources will argue that Confessionalism began before *Life Studies* — which is only logical as no period or poet performs within a vacuum. A few of the significant works also regarded as Confessional include Ginsberg's *Howl* (1955), W.D. Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle*, which was published the same year as Lowell's

Life Studies in 1959, Berryman's *The Dream Songs* (1969), and many other works by Elizabeth Bishop, Delmore Schwartz, and Theodore Roethke.

Each of these works shares certain characteristics that later would help define the porous boundaries of this genre called Confessionalism. These works invite the reader to conflate the speaker with the poet through autobiographical detail. Furthermore, the works sometime present an unflattering portrayal of self and family. Moreover, the speaker implicates him or herself within the poem's woes by admitting to mental illness, suicidal thoughts, such as with Lowell's famous admission that "my mind's not right" in "Skunk Hour." And finally, the poem moves beyond a sense of propriety, and reveals shameful, personal confidences that are otherwise considered impolitic or impolite.

Confessional poems owe much of their existence to Romanticism and its personal epics that include Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Coleridge's "Dejection Ode," and what M.H. Abrams terms "The Greater Romantic Lyric" and "crisis autobiography" as represented by Keats's odes and Shelley's *Mont Blanc*. All of these works represent a larger shift within poetic sensibilities. As Abrams establishes in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, the Romantic poets rejected the more pragmatic poetry of their predecessors (meaning poetry whose intent was to teach, unify, persuade, or solidify communal beliefs) and emphasized a more expressivist lyric. In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M.H. Abrams details the criteria of composing from an expressive theory, which includes:

1. It is "the internal made external ... operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of poet's perceptions, thought, and feelings."
2. The "poet's own mind" is the "primary source and subject matter of a poem."
3. The cause of poetry is a desire for the poet to express.⁵

One can readily see how the Romantics' insistence on the poet's mind for his material — hence the Romantics' emphasis on imagination, the primitive, and consequently the sublime — influenced Lowell, Plath, and Sexton. The Romantics, however, were not Confessional. Yes, the Romantics artic-

ulated their feelings, yet the particulars of those feelings remain shrouded in dream visions, imagined worlds of Albion, and Aeolian harps.

This tidy history, however, undercuts the complexity of the situation. After the publication of *Life Studies*, Robert Lowell returned to his poetic voice before that collection, a voice marked by elevated diction, heavy alliterations, and received forms. With Plath, no one can deny that for all of her poems' "confessions," the poems also do fictionalize as in "Daddy" with references to her father being a Nazi and she a Jew. And much has been written on how Sexton confessed to more than what actually happened to her, specifically regarding the accusations of sexual molestation by her father.

Some well-known reactions against Confessionalism in the 70s and 80s are embodied in Language poetry and New Formalism, two schools who present entirely different antidotes to cure the same woe. Formalists such as Anthony Hecht, John Hollander, Richard Howard, and James Merrill investigate how received form could temper the I-gone-amuck and emphasize self-preservation and effacement. Language poets such as Lyn Hejinian, Bruce Andrews, Ron Silliman, and Charles Bernstein question the actual existence of an authorial "I" and investigate how the self and experience are constructs that are part of larger, signifying systems. Language itself is part of a constructed system, words being "bottomless pits" as Hejinian calls it. In turn, language becomes both the war and the weapon, so that language is foregrounded to reveal its constructs, duplicities, and commercialization.

In general, however, the overuse of the Confessional manifests itself more in mistrust than in movements. Some critics have gone so far as to say the authorial "I" is dead, but the smug presence of the authorial "I" requires no response. To catalog all that has been deemed dead (poetry itself, for instance) would be far too lengthy and problematic. Perhaps this is simply an issue of rhetoric, for to say the authorial "I" is problematic and overused is not that catchy. But that is more the truth of the matter. The authorial "I" that is being challenged is the authorial "I" that purports to convey an actual self, an actual experience, and/or an actual transcendence or truth. These are all qualities that William Wordsworth cultivated in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800 — which is exactly why challenging some of these ideas is timely. So, the question remains: considering the

over-saturation of the authorial “I,” what are some strategies a poet can employ if he/she wants to discuss personal experiences?

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Natasha Trethewey’s *Native Guard*, which received the Pulitzer in 2007, exemplifies strategies now frequently employed in the post-millennial collection — strategies that for the most part seek to downplay the authorial “I”. *Native Guard* maintains a tight focus around the interlinked subjects of Trethewey’s bi-racial heritage, her complicated relationship with the South, her mother’s murder, and the experiences of the Native Guard, one of the first black regiments in the Civil War. The emphasis on history within the collection represents a decidedly post-millennial confessional strategy that reflects the hyper-linked epoch that we live in. To imagine this collection without the added developmental layer of the Civil War is to imagine a collection that presents less conflict. Further, the layers remind us how one’s personal history is a product of our larger history. In Trethewey’s concept collection, the soldiers of the black regiment must grapple with feelings of alienation and exclusion within a community — the army — that supposedly embraces them. In many ways, Trethewey’s own childhood a century later mimics that of invited outsider. Through the juxtaposition of diverse subjects within one body of work, readers grasp the connections. Also, close attention to received forms such as pantoums, ghazals, sonnet sequences, and blues poems harness what could be private wonderings gone amuck. As one reviewer explains: “By setting the jewel of rage in a formal ring, she suffuses and subsumes it, coloring many of the poems here with pathos.”⁶ Since Trethewey writes about unruly and all-encompassing subjects such as miscegenation and racism, received forms help counter such vastness and provide shape.

The effect of the multiple topics and forms unites rather than splits her poetry. As Randall Jarrell explains in his essay, “Levels and Opposites,” “It is the easiest thing in the world for the poet to take one subject, to say a few homogenous closely related things about it, and to end with a beautifully unified poem.”⁷ Simply put, unity and clarity are not enough to be effective in a poem. According to Jarrell, it is the *dis-unifying* forces in the poem that create the necessary tension, surprise, and originality to grab the reader: “The organization of a good poem, so full of strain and tension, is obtained not merely by intensifying the forces working toward

a simple unit, but by intensifying the opposing forces as well.”⁸ In fact, post-millennial confessional poems that fail to rise from their de-politicized state fail because of this lack of dis-unifying forces. The wide historical net that Trethewey casts in *Native Guard* nicely works with and against her personal story. The sense that history is layered — both in temporal, objective, and subjective senses — provides much of the book’s intrigue.

What also provides intrigue are the multiple voices — and genres — that help reveal Trethewey’s family history. “Scenes from a Documentary History of Mississippi,” are lyrical interpretations of photographs. Plus, the six-page title poem is told from the point of view of soldiers in the Native Guard. “O how history intersects — my own” begins one poem from this section.⁹ The long “o” sound of “O” and “own” suggest calling out to a person divided from one’s community, one’s nation — and one’s self. It is a vowel sound connected to the howl of a lone wolf in the night. The impact of this line is augmented by the poem that precedes it where the soldier, once a slave, uses a Confederate soldier’s journal to write in, his thoughts intersecting and covering up another man’s life. This soldier’s literal act serves to figuratively efface the first-person persona in the other two-thirds of the book. In a sense, the polyvocalic impulse reflects the multi-media experiences of our time. Perhaps the trend toward docu-poetry as seen with Brenda Hillman, C.D. Wright, and Natasha Trethewey, is a way to supplant figures with form, subjective image with objective image, and personal with universal in an attempt to encompass the multiple voices that speak to us and for us. ✱

Undercutting the “I” by means of unreliable narrators, admissions of failure, memory lapses, or displays of unenviable character traits help provide contrast and range in contemporary poetry. What is gained by undercutting the “I” is a sense of difference from the current babbling brook of personal bulletins. In *Native Guard*, such undercutting is not as prevalent as it is in the other two books to be discussed or as strong as with other practitioners such as Tony Hoagland, Karyna McGlynn, and Frederick Seidel. (Keep in mind the book was published in 2006.) Still, undercutting the “I” is present in subtle ways as with the decision to bring in voices other than the narrator’s. Also, the poem “Pastoral” is a fascinating study at offering conflict without any resolution, which serves to muddle the narrator’s omnipotence: “In the dream, I am with the Fugitive / Poets. We’re

gathered for a photograph. / Behind us, the skyline of Atlanta / hidden by the photographer's backdrop."¹⁰ What is interesting here are all the different types of cover-ups: the hazy gauze of the dream; the backdrop covering urban Atlanta for a pastoral never-existent one; the bulldozers' drone and its ability to raze the earth; and Trethewey in blackface. These multiple concealments remind readers that everything is a presentation, even a poet's personal story — and that such stories can often be a paint-by-numbers portrait that serves to remove undesired and complicated subtleties. The poem ends with Trethewey telling the Fugitive Poets: "My father's white ... and rural." The final line is their response: "*You don't hate the South?* they ask. *You don't hate it?*" No answer is given, leaving readers to wonder how the speaker does negotiate love and hate, connection and disconnection, self and landscape. There can never be an answer to such complicated questions, and the poem is right to acknowledge the speaker's lack of ability to resolve these concerns.

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"My personal poetry is a failure. I do not want to be a person. I want to be unbearable."¹¹ This quote by Carson succinctly describes the shape-shifting, intellectual, yet intimate work of hers. As a poet who suffers from severe stage fright and who has to be prodded to provide a bio longer than what could fit on a clothing tag, Carson has created inimitable strategies in her poetry that allow for personal exploration. At the same time, her work often directly addresses the fallible nature of confessionalistic poetry. Like other poets who seek to enlarge the personal to a universal experience, Carson heavily relies on weaving personal subjects with other genres, be it television or tangos. She especially draws upon her expertise in classical literature. The focus on classical literature centers *Vox*, which is about the death of Carson's brother and considered her most autobiographical work. In *Vox*, Carson exchanges the use of two subjects for three: her brother's death, Catullus' elegy about his brother, and Hekataios' and Herodotos' discussions on history. She builds tension, depth, and most of all surprise by fragmenting her narrative and then reassembling it through what Megan O'Rourke describes as "triangulation — or what [Carson] once called 'a third angle of vision.'"¹²

The triangulation of subjects requires an innovation of form, and Carson presents readers with a book that looks like no other they have ever read.

(Admittedly, part of the pleasure of reading Carson is being a bit confused at first, akin to a dizzying, yet sought after carnival ride.) Arriving in an elegant, yet understated gray box, the book is a facsimile of a homemade scrapbook Carson made, an “epitaph” she calls it, for her brother whose ashes were scattered at sea. The scrapbook is unlike contemporary albums that feature a carnival of smiles and staged moments. No, Carson’s book is plain, with the tape and ripped edges showing. (The story of how the book came to be duplicated is an essay unto itself.) Instead of a perfect binding, Carson creates an accordion page, a decision that speaks to the ongoing nature of grief. As Carson writes, “I guess it never ends. A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end.”¹³ Included here are childhood photographs, a heartbreaking letter from a mother who lost her son long before his death (he left Canada to avoid drug charges in 1978), quotes from Herodotus, crude paintings, and perhaps most importantly Catullus’ elegy for his own brother. This classic elegy shapes the collection as Carson breaks down the poem word by word and provides lexical entries (often with added poetic phrases) on the left-hand side of the book. The right-hand side is usually reserved for the family’s and Carson’s elegiac scraps.

Not only does the accordion-page suggest the connectivity between her three subjects, the unrelenting quality of grief, and the porous boundaries of history, but the accordion-page highlights ones of Carson’s great skills: juxtaposition. Carson’s use of the accordion-page hints that the reader should not read from left to right, but play between the pages. I found myself reading the right-hand page first and then reading the left-hand page where the lexical entries tended to reside. Usually, the word defined on the left added layers to the information being presented on the right. For example, Carson describes her brother’s widow, a woman who was his second wife and not his great love, alongside the Latin word “*postremo*”, an adverb meaning “last of all, lastly; (in a logical sequence) in the last place.” The sense that this widow was simply the last one standing, so to speak, is cemented with the juxtaposition of the adverb. Another richly layered coupling is found alongside the one letter from the mother to Michael. She has not seen her son in “five years four months” and does not chastise him, but attempts to console him from afar about his great love’s death. She ends by asking for the simplest thing — and in fact doesn’t even dare to ask. She hopes. “I hope I have an address for you where I could mail a box for Christmas.”¹⁴ A mother has reduced her expectations of

seeing her son, holding her son, conversing with her son to this one wish: an address to mail a box. Facing this letter is the lexical entry for the word *donarem*, meaning, “to present.” Carson writes multiple definitions, and each one hints at the motives behind her mother’s seemingly simple, even pathetic, desire: “to present, endow, reward (with); to provide, to honour; to present grant, give (to); to confer; to grant power (to) ... to condone, excuse (faults in); to forgive.”¹⁵ The mother wants to give a gift so as to provide for her destitute son; to show that she still honors him and bears him no ill will; to share an act with him; to keep him — and her memories of him — alive. Herein lies the genius of Anne Carson; somehow, the lexical entries with their impartial, scholarly distance manage to convey the complexity and immensity of the characters’ emotions.

Juxtaposition allows Carson to imply stories rather than narrate them. Getting all the facts right, “confessing” if you will, are not the goals here. For example, the book never discusses how her brother died and doesn’t need to as a memoir would. Instead, Carson’s use of juxtaposition reminds one of how other poets manipulate images. Robert Hass, for example, once explained that poetry is the “sensation of clarity and sensation of perceiving it.”¹⁶ In other words, a poem — and the images within the poem — are not about the summation of clarity, but the process of receiving such clarity. By juxtaposing personal material with dictionary entries, old letters, and a classical Latin poem, the reader is allowed to experience the moments of clarity for him or herself. No pithy conclusions, numbing transitions, or explicit editorializing are necessary. Instead, the reader re-experiences what the poet does, which is why we go to poetry. It is about recreating a moment, a private moment; if not that, then why not read the CliffsNotes¹⁷ to Shakespeare’s sonnets instead of the sonnets? We want to re-experience the moment of insights *with* the poets. Poets know one pitfall to Confessionalism is that retelling without re-experiencing is not a satisfying experience in poetry. Therefore, the better poets ask: what will I strive to re-experience? Carson chooses not the guns-a-blazing moments, but the quiet ones where she “swept my porch and bought apples and sat by the window in the evening with the radio on.”¹⁸ In other words, she defuses the sensational experiences and emphasizes the interior ones, using juxtaposition and an innovative form to allow readers to experience moments of insight with her.

These moments of insight, however, are nicely undercut by admissions of unknowing. Throughout the book, Carson alludes to how attempts at remembering and recording are fascinating, yet futile, for true recording can never happen. She quotes from two founders of history, Hekataios and Herodotos, who acknowledge the fruitlessness of such activities: "Now by far the strangest thing that humans do — [Herodotos] is firm on this — is history. This asking. For often it produces no clear or helpful account, in fact people are satisfied with the most bizarre forms of answering."¹⁹ Readers start to see how one of these "bizarre forms of answering" is the book that they hold. For example, Carson chooses photographs that obfuscate the brother's face (I don't really know what he looks like despite all the pictures of him); photographs that focus on shadows of figures rather than figures themselves; and photographs that are marred by telephone poles that slice the sky and people in odd ways — an ironic nod toward the slim five or six phone calls Carson received from her brother during his exile. These photographs that reveal as much as they conceal are juxtaposed with explicit admissions of failure. For instance, Carson claims not to have effectively translated the Catullus poem: "no one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullan diction, which at its most sorrowful has an air of deep festivity."²⁰ Carson also readily admits, "In one sense it is a room I can never leave, perhaps dreadful for that. At the same time, a place composed entirely of entries."²¹ What is the "it" here that is unmodified — a syntactical gap similar to a Sappho fragment that Carson would analyze? Is the "it" grief, solace, translating, the book itself? The answer, of course, is all of the above. The word choice of "entries" also relates to the inclusion of dictionary "entries" and the ongoing singular page of this book. Technically, we can't forget that this book has only one page (or one entry), be it 87 and ½ inches long. Furthermore, adjacent to the above quote is the word "now," another suggestion that "it" is ongoing — that grief provides no exits.

Like the other books discussed here, the inclusion of multiple voices acknowledges that the story told is simply not the poet's story. Carson shares her grief with Catullus, with her mother, with her brother's widow — and does so by quoting from them in their own words and pasting in their own writings when she can. (Carson even soaked Catullus' poem in tea to make it look more authentic.) The lexical entries offer another voice, too, one that uses a neutral stance of lexicographer. This

inclusion of voices and ephemera is key because it diffuses any sense of the grief being a singular grief; instead, her grief is one of many. In an interview with *Publisher's Weekly*, Carson affirms this collective sense: "I didn't want [Nox] to be about me mainly."²²

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Another inventive post-millennial collection is Joseph Harrington's *Things Come On: An Amneoir*. When I first read the jacket that explains this book's concept, which is a combination of memoir and amnesia reflecting on the poet's mother's breast cancer and the Watergate scandal, I have to admit that I was skeptical. With concerns regarding the over saturation of the lyrical "I," this book seemed to be a logical extension of a poet reaching too far outside of the self to legitimize the self. It became immediately clear, however, how the post-millennial confessional can best reveal the personal narrative by subverting it. Within the epigraphs, one sees two arguments for and against confessionalistic poetry. "The world is everything that happens to me" by Jean-Michel Espitalier asserts that personal concerns are one's universe. Yet, directly after this epigraph, and placed last as if this epigraph has the final say is: "I prefer to say: I know that I am a human being, and I know that I have not understood the system" by Soren Kierkegaard. Instead of aligning the collection with either epigraph, Harrington aligns the collection with both, resulting in an intellectual yet emotional reading experience.

The multiple voices within the book create resonating juxtapositions that embody the full conflict and contradiction regarding our unsuccessful attempts to survive. The traditional definition of polyvocalic refers to the use of multiple voices in a work, and this book certainly does include other voices — in fact, directly quotes — from the author's mother, father, medical doctors, and a spate of political figures such as Nixon and his aides. I would argue, however, that the book not only uses multiple voices but multiple types of documents that embody different voices as well. The documents present messages, biases, manipulations of meaning and sense, and convey arguments not only in what they present but also in the presentation of themselves. For example, early in the work is a copy of an indexed card that charts all of the mother's sizes down to her ring, glove, and girdle. The card is carefully filled in to help others buy for her and to help herself buy fabric to make her clothes. The penciled, faint writing

suggests an agreeable, meticulous woman who follows the rules. What's more, the existence of such a card succinctly conveys a different time period's gender expectations. Another striking section arrives early in the book with a black and white detailed drawing of a woman, face covered, undergoing a mastectomy — an operation described earlier in the book as one of routine insensitivity from the patriarchal medical staff. A woman would go in for "treatment," and would not know, nor have a say, if she would awake with one or two breasts. To imagine a woman having no say in such a decision and then to see the brutality of the cut reaching all the way into the upper-third of the arm is more than upsetting. Furthermore, the disregard for the female experience is underscored by what directly follows this picture: namely transcriptions of Nixon complaining about the difficulty of his self-created problem in terms of death, survival, and divine intervention:

Nixon: It's almost a miracle that I've survived this, you know. 'Cause I came out of this year '72 terribly tired.

Rosemary Woods: I don't know how you've survived it.

Nixon: And then to have this brutal assault, brutal, brutal, brutal, brutal assault — day after day after day after day — no let up.²³

The juxtapositions do much of the work, allowing for the reader to intuit the connections. In fact, this book reads like the model for what Brenda Hillman discusses in "Cracks in the Oracle Bone: Teaching Certain Contemporary Poems." In this lecture, she discusses how one can approach "difficult" poetry by understanding what "difficult" poetry offers: "an ability to think through emotion on many levels — literal, abstract, concrete, metaphysical, figurative" and an awareness of "how particular and odd everything is."²⁴ This sense of compressed time and its weaknesses is poignantly displayed through the personal testimony of the father who muddles timelines, emphasizes the trivial, and downplays the significant, as when he describes learning about his wife's breast cancer. He had received a speeding ticket around the same time and ends up talking more about that.²⁵ Another example of the excellent use of juxtaposition concerns a conversation between father and poet about whether the mother cried. The father says no; the mother would "get frustrated" but that "would pass."²⁶ This conversation is then followed by a doctor talking about

how “in order to keep [family and friends] from falling apart, the woman tries to keep her chin up and have a smile plastered on her face.”²⁷ All of this is juxtaposed once again against another’s doctor’s opinion that “the President did not seem to understand the implications of what was going on.”²⁸ What follows is more conversation between the father and poet on how the mother’s two sisters had died of cancer. Finally, the page ends with the mother’s once again painfully chilling cheerfulness: “June 20 — Saw Dr. Fleming. All OK. Increase medication to 3 a day.”²⁹ It is exactly what is not said between these passages that renders such complex and multiple meanings.

What is also being omitted in many of these poems is the use of first-person to tell a personal story, which is one of the many strategies used to undercut the authorial “I.” Harrington further subverts the authorial “I” through his own admission of fallibility. He does so immediately with the title and early in the collection where the dates of his mother’s cancer are intentionally confused to the point of error. Another strategy to undercut the “I” is to privilege the reader in making meaning — a fundamental tenet of Language poetry. Granted, many poems other than the mawkish Hallmark-style or doggerel do not simply give readers meaning, but have the reader intuit meaning through layers of particulars: tone, image, specifics, etc. Still, this collection particularly strives to privilege reader as participant. The poem “Table. The Desperate Making of Lists” brilliantly involves the reader in that it quotes what appears to be the outside reader’s report of this book. In this case, the reader’s report, if that is what it is, undercuts the “I” and presents the opposing case to a book structured like Harrington’s: “The documentary materials ... seem to function only as distancing devices, a strategy to escape the overwhelming pathos of the personal story....”³⁰ Yes, the documents may serve to distance writer from subject to object, but what’s interesting is what the documents add by doing so. *Things Come On* and the other books discussed here illustrate the multiple options available to poets to pursue personal material through the medium of disunity and its means of juxtaposition, collage, and subversion.

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While some post-millennial concept books are exceptional in their execution, such as these that are discussed, others can seem stale after page

twenty. Another concern regarding concept collections is that some of the poems within a collection may not function as well without the context surrounding them. But that fact speaks more to this epoch of hyper-links and interconnectivity as much as it speaks to poetic technique. We are aware, perhaps too aware, that our worlds are small, blind animals connected to something much larger than ourselves. Post-millennial confessionalistic concept collections seek to encompass the larger connections that we perceive and also provide an alternative when a subject is much too large for any one poem. The books are not as much collections of poems as they are “a community of poems,” to borrow a phrase from Jack Spicer, that echo and respond to one another. As Spicer explains, “Poems cannot live alone any more than we can.”³¹

Notes

1. Jonah Lehrer, “We, Robots,” *The New York Times*, January 21, 2011.
2. The term “concept” book, as opposed to the slightly more pejorative term “project” book, suggests a shared sense of history and purpose with musical concept albums such as one of the first, The Beatles’s *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Heart Club Band* in 1967. Hip-hop artists continue to use the concept album in most of their work as well. Poets, like musical artists, use the concept album as a way to explore different themes, material, and personas in a sustained body of work. Also, concept collections allow for the next collection to be radically different.
3. In the essay, “Confessional” refers to the specific poetic movement whereas “confessionalistic” refers to poems that borrow a few, but not all, of that movement’s characteristics.
4. M.L. Rosenthal, *Our Life in Poetry* (New York: Persea Books, 1991).
5. M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).
6. Nicholas Gilewicz, “Native Guard by Natasha Trethewey.” *Bookslut*. April 2006. www.bookslut.com/poetry/2006_04_008405.php
7. Randall Jarrell, “Levels and Opposites: Structures in Poetry,” *The Georgia Review* 50, Issue 4 (Winter 1996).
8. Randall Jarrell, “Levels and Opposites: Structures in Poetry,” *The Georgia Review* 50, Issue 4 (Winter 1996).
9. Natasha Trethewey, *Native Guard* (New York: Mariner Books, 2006).
10. Natasha Trethewey, *Native Guard* (New York: Mariner Books, 2006), 35, lines 1–4.

11. Anne Carson, "Stanzas, Sexes, and Seductions," *The New Yorker*, December 3, 2001, p. 6.
12. Megan O'Rourke, "The Unfolding," *The New Yorker*, July 12, 2010.
13. Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions Books, 2010) sec. 7.1.
14. Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions Books, 2010) sec. 4.1.
15. Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions Books, 2010) sec. 4.1.
16. Robert Hass, *Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry* (New York: HarperCollins, 1984) pg. 285.
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