



Parliamentary Poet Laureate



POETRY CONNECTION: LINK UP WITH CANADIAN POETRY

Darren Wershler-Henry (1966–) is an experimental poet, non-fiction writer and cultural critic.

“A former grave digger, he was the senior editor of Coach House Books between 1997 and 2002, where the works he edited included several highly acclaimed books of contemporary innovative poetry, including *Fidget* by Kenneth Goldsmith (2000), both volumes of *Seven Pages Missing*, the collected works of Steve McCaffery (2001, 2002), *Lip Service* by Bruce Andrews (2001), and *Eunoia* by Christian Bök (2001).

Wershler is the youngest poet discussed in Marjorie Perloff's *21st Century Modernism*, which analyzes his second book of poetry, *the tapeworm foundry* (a Trillium Book Award finalist in 2000). He has instructed courses in Communication Studies at York University and Wilfrid Laurier University and currently is the Concordia University Research Chair in Media and Contemporary Literature (Tier 2). He has authored several books about the Internet, technology and culture, as well as occasional essays on pop culture for newspapers and magazines such as *Brick*, *Broken Pencil* and *This Magazine*.¹

The focus of Wershler's doctoral studies was published as *The Iron Whim: A Fragmented History of Typewriting* (McClelland & Stewart, 2005/ Cornell UP, 2007). This attention to “production” has extended into the digital context with several useful and entertaining works of non-fiction such as *Free as in speech and beer: open source, peer-to-peer and the economics of the online revolution* (Financial Times, 2002).

Wershler's interest in the innovative work of Canadian poet bpNichol resulted in *NICHOLODEON: a book of lowerglyphs* (Coach House Books, 1997 and online at www.archives.chbooks.com/online_books/nicholodeon). He has collaborated with Bill Kennedy on two other books of poetry: *apostrophe* (ECW Press, 2006) and *the tapeworm foundry* (House of Anansi, 2000).

¹ Wikipedia, “Darren Wershler”, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darren_Wershler.

Poem for discussion**You are misspelled...**

From *apostrophe*, ECW Press, 2006

In the tradition of the phonetic poems of Hugo Ball and the “ready-mades” of Dada, this exploration of the nature of verse straddles the line between form and nonsense, between intention and happy accident. An apostrophe is a poetic figure of speech in which someone, often dead or absent, is addressed.² The reader is encouraged to read the excellent afterword to the book, as well as the online review by Jason B. Jones at <http://www.ecwpress.com/review/popmatters-reviews-apostrophe>.

(you are misspelled in a grade six spelling bee by a kid who will eventually serve eight years in jail for manslaughter)

you are: a |_| reproachful look |_| college dropout |_| slimy little prick |_| proud of your work for dad's company |_| not the favourite child |_| first confrontation with a clown |_| punished for telling the truth |_| toilet overflowing |_| forced to kiss warty old relatives |_| forced to wear hand-me-downs |_| forced to perform in front of parents' friends |_| being put to bed when not sleepy |_| parents driving too slowly |_| receiving underwear for your birthday |_| scratchy new sweater |_| boring vacation |_| being family scapegoat |_| mom reading your secret diary |_| throwing up at school |_| insufferable brother |_| insufferable sister |_| being told to say "thank you" for the 10,000th time |_| being told to clean your room for the 100,000th time |_| cleaning your room |_| Republican parents |_| forced to wear totally stupid clothes |_| favourite TV show cancelled |_| dreaming about having no clothes at school |_| cleaning out cat box |_| parents calling you embarrassing nickname in front of friends |_| wetting your pants at school |_| being tattled on |_| tattling on someone and having it backfire |_| forced to eat spinach |_| forced to eat broccoli |_| parents threatening to send you to military school |_| military school |_| summer school |_| school |_| sunday school |_| dancing school |_| early bedtime strictly enforced |_| not getting dessert because you didn't eat your vegetables |_| grounded |_| allowance cut off |_| being told not to eat so fast |_| being told not to chew with your mouth open |_| being told to sit up straight |_| homework |_| socks as presents |_| handkerchief for birthday |_| parents telling you what you will be when you grow up |_| listening to parents fight in the next room |_| listening to parents fight in the same room |_| being hit by a parent |_| being kicked by

² Darren Wershler-Henry, Bill Kennedy, *apostrophe*, ECW Press, Toronto, April 2006.

a parent |_| slapped by a parent |_| spanked by a parent |_| beaten by a parent |_|
 burned by a parent |_| locked in closet |_| tortured |_| sexually molested |_| getting lost
 |_| being called "bad" |_| being called "lazy" |_| being called "selfish" |_| making your
 mom cry |_| meeting another kid with your name |_| being told "you are just not trying"
 |_| being forced to apologize when you don't mean it |_| not being allowed to go to a
 slumber party |_| being told "i know you could do better" |_| first time seeing dead dog
 in the road |_| first starving child seen on TV |_| first assassination seen on TV |_| first
 realization that death is permanent |_| first realization that death is inevitable |_| first
 realization that applies to you too |_| first ghost seen |_| being treated like a baby in
 front of friends |_| being chosen last for the team |_| not being invited to a birthday
 party |_| first bee sting |_| first booster shot |_| being forbidden to play with bad kids |_|
 fear of dogs |_| fear of vampires |_| fear of robots |_| fear of aliens |_| fear of sharks |_|
 fear of monsters |_| fear of bears |_| fear of lions |_| fear of psychopaths |_| fear of
 nuclear war |_| fear of dad |_| caught shoplifting |_| being told "you ought to be
 ashamed of yourself" |_| [fill in the blank] |_| ongoing nameless dread

For discussion:

1. A section of Hugo Ball's poetic work includes the so-called "sound" poems, which defy ordinary textual interpretation, and instead are designed to conjure rhythms and associations in the minds of listeners. For instance, Ball described the nonsense lyrics of "Karawane"—which features the line, "jolifanto bambla o falli bambla"—as evocative of the sounds of an elephant caravan.³ What is the relevance of sound poetry?
2. In 2001 (quite possibly the year history will decide was when search engines went from being our helpful tools to our overlords, the chief organizing systems of human life), a man named Bill Kennedy and a man named Darren Wershler-Henry took an old poem of Bill's called "apostrophe" (so named because it contained nothing but a series of addresses to the hypothetical, omnipotent "you") and turned it into a search engine. They transferred the text of the poem into hyperlinks (example hyperlink: "you are thrown out for lack of evidence"), then set up a website that used that phrase as the basis of an internet search, tailored to select and display only expressions that began with the phrase "you are" and ended with a period. Once displayed, every new phrase became its own search query, which then bore a full sheet of phrases, which all

³ eNotes, "Ball, Hugo - Introduction." Source: *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Linda Pavlovski, Editor. Vol.104, Gale Cengage, 2001, www.enotes.com/hugo-ball-essays/ball-hugo/introduction

became new hyperlinks, and so on, and so on, and so on. The result was a sort of perpetual-poetry-machine.⁴ What do you think of this idea?

3. How does Darren Wershler use the figure of speech “apostrophe” to address unknown and absent characters?
4. Is it possible to use “found lines” from the computer to create poetry? What is the message? What is the meaning?
5. Discuss the following quote:

“It seems an appropriate response to a new condition in writing: With an unprecedented amount of available text, our problem is not needing to write more of it; instead, we must learn to negotiate the vast quantity that exists. How I make my way through this thicket of information—how I manage it, parse it, organize and distribute it—is what distinguishes my writing from yours.”⁵

Writing prompts:

1. Create a list of characters from history, from the movies and/or from your own life. Speak to them using the form of apostrophe.
2. Sound poetry uses repetition for emphasis. Create your own “sound poem” with attention to echoes.
3. Create your own “computer poetry” using images from hyperlinks, search engines, hypothetical truths.
4. Write a “machine poem” with imagery from the world of robots.
5. The “ready-made” art objects of Duchamps and other Dada artists incorporated “found objects” into art. Create a poem by using a found object and humanizing it: Does a cloud show fear? Can a doorknob be fearful? What about forks?

(Notes prepared by Terry Ann Carter)

⁴ *Vox Populism: Seeing The World Through Poem-colored Glasses*, “Knotting-Off the Aughts: #8, Bill Kennedy and Darren Wershler-Henry’s Apostrophe,” Jacob McArthur Mooney, November 12, 2009, <http://voxpulism.wordpress.com/2009/11/12/knotting-off-the-aughts-8-bill-kennedy-and-darren-wershler-henry%E2%80%99s-apostrophe/>.

⁵ *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “It’s Not Plagiarism. In the Digital Age, It’s Repurposing,” Kenneth Goldsmith, September 11, 2011, www.chronicle.com/article/Uncreative-Writing/128908.