"Misshapen Chaos of well-seeming forms": Restricted and general economies in the concrete poetry of John Riddell, Darren Wershler-Henry and Steve McCaffery.

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In "Writing as a General Economy" Steve McCaffery approaches language as "an economy rather than a structure" (201) allowing the examination of

> the distribution and circulation of the numerous forces and intensities that saturate a text […] concern[ing] itself not with the order of forms and sites but with the order-disorder of circulations and distributions. (201)

These "numerous forces and intensities" (201) shift the poem from a finely crafted object with single monolithic intended value, to a text where the act of writing and reading pool around semantic and non-semantic devices. The two systems that McCaffery presents are the *restricted* economy and the *general* economy.[1] The restricted economy foregrounds meaning, logic, order and structure as a means of exchange "based upon valorized notions of restraint, conservation, investment, profit, accumulation and cautious proceduralities in risk taking" (203). In a general economy "networks of significance not accessible through conventional reading habits" (207) are exposed through disruptions of the "notion of an ideal, unitary meaning" (207).

Like the *paragram* and *metaphor* discussed in "Writing as a General Economy," the *clinamen* and *syzygy* challenge the "readerly production of meaning" (202). Alfred Jarry's 'Pataphysical concepts[2] of the clinamen – the "minimal swerve" of atomistic particles; and the syzygy – an astronomical term for "temporary planetary conjunction or opposition" ("Zarathustrian" 17) enable a reading of the "disappearance of stabilities" (18). The clinamen and syzygy disrupt readerly expectation by foregrounding what Harold Bloom refers to as "*a willing error*, a turn from literal meaning in which a word or phrase is used in an improper sense wandering from its rightful place" (qtd in.

"Zarathustrian" 18). In his discussion of poetics, Charles Bernstein suggests that this wandering error is a "question of humour" (154) where much like the eruptions of the clinamen in a restricted text, the libidinal emotional excess of humour is allowed to rupture through the expected tone of the thesis:

> Error in the sense of wandering, errantry, but also error in the sense of mistake, misperception, incorrectness, contradiction. Error as projection […] as slips, slides… (154).

When applied in a literary model, the clinamen and syzygy focus attention on the economic terms of the "surpressed or ignored presence within the scene of writing" troubling the linguistic controls which "privilege meaning as a necessary production and evaluated destination" ("General" 203).

General economic writing "transgresses the prohibition of semantic operation and risks the loss of meaning" (214) – meaning written in the terms of a restricted economy. In concrete poetry excesses and eruptions of a general economy are prioritized as "a return to the material base of language […] as a method of losing meaning, holding on to graphicism" (214). The "presupposed status" (201) of the restricted economy is troubled through ongoing general economic eruptions – much like the spread of acne on previously smooth faced pubescent. In concrete poetry the restricted economic meaning "complicate[d] and unsettle[d]" (209) by libidinal eruptions spreads both micro- and macroscopically to include systems of exchange from the graphic symbols of language (letters, punctuation, etc) through to the containers of this communication (the page, book, etc.). The matter of the restricted economy shifts from an investment in communication to an investment in the mark, the grapheme and the container of communication. The relationship of restricted to general is one of flux:

> often we will detect a rupture made and instantly appropriated by the restrictive. the meaningless, for example, will be ascribed a meaning; loss will be rendered profitable by its being assigned a value ("General" 203).

The shifting distinction between general and restrictive economies in John Riddell's *E Clips E*, revolves not only around the role of textual meaning, but also the categorization of text , the role of writer and machine in book production and consumption. Riddell's "Play" and "A Shredded Text" implicate business machines into textual production. These texts are photocopies (documentation) of the *waste* produced through the use of business

machines[3] – in this case a 3-hole punch and a paper shredder respectively. These machines were designed for use in an environment of economic production. The 3-hole punch allows documents to be effectively filed and transported while the paper shredder permits the destruction of documents to further confidentiality in the workplace. By swerving the use of the machines away from their intended purpose, Riddell proposes an eruption of "non-meaning" in the creation of "meaningful" (business oriented) documents. Riddell's general economic use of a machine created to be used in a restricted economy troubles not only the "use-value" of the machines but also that of the writer. *E Clips E*'s "in take," "play," "a shredded text," "illustrated poems," "rush," "watching," "critique," and "untitled" all directly engage 3-hole punches, shredders and photocopies in the production of text.[4] By engaging the machine so directly in the production of text, Riddell is more the *editor* than the writer of *E Clips E*.[5] Riddell fed sheets of paper through machines (3-hole punch, shredder) and has used another (a photocopier) to document the result. What Riddell presents to the reader is a record of the *waste* produced by the consumption (reading) of a text by machine. Riddell provides a source text to the machine who then 'reads' the text and excretes the waste material of that consumption; "a tangle of page strips excreted from the nether end of a paper shredder" ("Concatenation" 124). Riddell, as author becomes implicit in a restricted economy acting as editor to restrict the amount of waste that permitted to enter the manuscript of book. General and restricted economies shift as the normally restrictive site of creation (the machine) becomes creator of excess and non-meaning based writing. The author has become the voice of restraint and reason attempting to limit the presentation of continuous waste production as writing. The "cautious proceduralities" ("General" 203) of structural poetics are discarded in favour of the documentation of a reading machine's waste as textual production.[6] The paper shredder fractures the text through a "willing error" from a single united field of meaning with accepted social value to a series of pieces increasing "the rate and momentum of [...]disposal" ("General" 220) spreading value across a larger field.

Both the clinamen and the syzygy rely on the terminology of extra-literary fields for their definitions. The clinamen refers originally to the flow of atoms observed through a microscope, the syzygy refers to the movement of planets as observed through telescopes. The importing of terms based on micro- and

macro- sized objects as a means of describing the economic eruptions of texts is 'pataphysically swerved in the use of a photocopier in *E clips E*. Engaging the clinamen microscopically, the photocopier is used to magnify the smallest parts, the fragments of portions of *E clips E*; the typewritten mark of "in take" and fragments of "foldouts" in "untitled" – "the whole exists to generate its parts" ("General" 220).

Translation,[7] concrete poetry and the role of machine in the production of poetry are all actively engaged in Darren Wershler-Henry's *Nicholodeon: a book of lowerglyphs*[8] where the "job of [the] poems is to produce a vague sense of anxiety in the reader, fueled by the mistaken belief that they house some kernel of meaning that they desperately wish to communicate, despite nearly impossible odds" (*Nicholodeon*)[9]. As in Riddell's texts, technology is complicit in writing – the restricted economy of translation is infested with "polyps" and barnacles of general economic eruption. On the back cover of *Nicholodeon* is a swerved image of an UPC (Universal Price Code) or 'bar code' – where the lines usually used to scan the price of the book and thereby making the book complicit within an economic structure of commodity exchange[10] identified as a priced purchasable object uniquely coded 9-781551-450000 swirl out of the boundaries of the scanable image. The image works both within the restricted economy of the UPC as 'meaningful' consumable image "splinter[ed] into moving fields of plurality, establishing differentials able to resist a totalization into recoverable integrations that would lead to a summatable 'meaning'" ("General" 220).

Homolinguistic translation – as typified by Louis Zukofsky's *Catullus* and bpNichol's *Catullus* and *Apollinaire* translations – is the translation of a piece of writing from one language into the same language based on sound, shape, or other non-restrictive forms. Homolinguistic translation is typically executed not by meaning but rather by sound (as Zukofsky's translations are based); Nichol moved translation into non-lexical issues such as shape, reader recall and manipulative techniques such as alphabetization (at the level of line, word and letter). This type of translation foregrounds general economic issues of *materiel* and *play* where the restricted economy becomes the "surpressed or ignored presence within the scene of writing" ("General" 203). In homolinguistic translation the general and restricted economies switch positions of meaning and production "the meaningless, for example, will be ascribed a meaning: loss will be ren-

dered profitable by its being assigned a value" ("General" 203). Concrete poetry, like homolinguistic translation, is based on the treatment of the material of communication from the level of the grapheme through to that of the paragraph and beyond. The exchange between general and restricted economies in concrete poetry is one of continuous negotiation of normative and excessive.

Like Riddell's use of the machine as composer of poetry, Wershler-Henry's "Translating[n] Apollinaire 15: Deskjetsam" is the documentation of the waste of consumption by a mechanical reader. The text is produced through the rejection by a Hewlett Packard printer of a print request due to lack of paper. In economic terms, the printer produced this poem when it was left without the raw material needed for the production of a restricted economy text – text created and printed in line with the economically expected use of the Hewlett Packard. Traditional translation, due to the movement from one linguistic and cultural lexicon to another, is a natural site for the clinamen, but art in the age of mechanical reproduction posits another lexicon – the shift from one technology to another,[11] an intra-technological translation. Like the restricted economy, computer manipulation of writing gives us "the illusion that everything is potentially controllable" (*Nicholodeon*). This illusion is shattered by the "knobby and irreducible" (*Nicholodeon*) quality of reproduction. The limits of the technology presents a shift in forms from 'clean' to 'dirty' concrete – between the "'utopian' phase of concrete poetry and its later more iconoclastic version […] 'dirty' concrete" (Perloff, 114).

The book as consumable object is troubled in Steve McCaffery's *Carnival: the first panel 1967-1970* and *Carnival: the second panel 1970-1975*.[12] Each of the two panels were originally published in flip book form with specific instructions to the reader printed on a postcard inserted in each copy of *CARNIVAL: the first panel: 1967-1970*:

> INSTRUCTIONS
> In order to destroy this book please tear each page carefully along the perforation. The panel is assembled by laying out pages in a square of four.

There is no specific mention of *reading* the text as such but rather paradoxically of "destroying" the book[13] "carefully along the perforation." By regulating the destruction of the book, the

restricted economy asserts itself over the general economic idea of waste. The reader is told to "destroy" the book, rendering it useless in continued economic exchange, but only within the restrictions of the author's intention; "carefully along the perforation." The incongruent, misleading instructions purport to result in "a square of four," even through the resultant product is far from square. The consumption of *CARNIVAL: the First Panel: 1967-1970,* as potlatch, results in the destruction of the book as object as a means of "stress[ing] the infinite play of parts within the significatory whole" ("General" 221). The instructions for *Carnival: the Second Panel 1970-1975* differ in one major way from those for *Panel 1:* they begin with "Buy two copies. Keep one on your bookshelf. Take the other & tear each of the 16 text pages carefully along the perforation" (qtd. in "Walls" 39). Although the destruction of the book is necessary and promoted in both cases "the impetus in the later case is clearly on the side of profit and accumulation rather than that of destruction, waste and circulation." ("Walls" 39). The assembled text enlarges the traditional page four-fold to 34" x 44" to be read "spatially rather than temporally" (Perloff 111) challenging the "sequentiality of the normal book" (Perloff 111), treating the page in terms of painted composition, or Perloff's "Billboard Field" (93). *Carnival: The First Panel* engages solely the typewriter and its inherit compositional grid and "there is a tacit acceptance of the technological limits encoded in *Panel 1,* because it never strays beyond the use of the typewriter into other forms of inscription" ("Walls" 34); *Panel 2* however "places the typed mode in agonistic relation with other forms of scription: xerography, xerography within xerography (i.e metaxerography and distinctive seriality), electrostasis, rubber-stamp, tissue texts, hand lettering and stencil" ("Introduction" *Carnival: The Second Panel*). Another paradox is created within each panel of *Carnival. Panel 1*'s reading instructions revolt against the hegemony of the book structure by suggesting its destruction though accepts the limits of the typewriter as compositional tool. *Panel 2* supports a restrained consumer economy by suggesting the purchase of multiple copies but employs a more "explicitly agonistic textual landscape" ("Walls" 35).

Riddell, Wershler-Henry and McCaffery each employ a general economy to trouble the "cautious proceduralities" ("General" 201) of business machines and their production of normative, "readable" texts. The clinamen in *E clips E* suggests the microscoping use of the photocopier as textual composer

while the shredder and 3-hole punch become implicit in the act of composition. Used as a homage to the translative methods of bpNichol, the machine is a means of intra-technological homolinguistic translation in *Nicholodeon*. Concrete poetry has the tendency to move in "the direction of industrial design and the making of lovely objects […] for personal and social use" (Perloff 119) that are "as easily understood as signs in airports and traffic signs" (Eugene Gomringer qtd in Perloff 120). Without a critique of the forms of creation and exchange as demonstrated here – the author function, the page and the book as container[14], concrete easily lapses into merely "charming and witty" (Perloff 116).

Notes

1. And like the general economic eruptions in a restricted economic text, the footnotes in this text open discussions and ruptures in the restricted field of the paper by suggesting further texts and avenues of discussion.

2. A section of Jarry's writing on 'Pataphysics is online, as of Mar 17, 2002 at: http://www.alienated.net/modules.php?op=modload&name=Sections&file=index&req=viewarticle&artid=13

3. We could perhaps place Riddell's use of the business machine within the tradition of the "mimeograph revolution" in small press production as well as the work of Bob Cobbing the English concrete and sound poet who has been manipulating business machines for the production of textual and artistic objects since the 1950s.

4. See also John Riddell's "placid/special" in *a/z does it* (nightwood editions, 1988).

5. Further to this argument is a discussion of Christian Bök's essay "The piecemeal bard is deconstructed: notes towards a potential robo-poetics" and Darren Wershler-Henry and Bill Kennedy's "Apostrophe: Working Notes V.3 October 2001" both in *Object 10 : Cyber Poetics* as discussions of the role of on-line programs as poetry generators with minimal human / programmer involvement.

6. This differs from a text like Paul Dutton's *The Plastic Typewriter* where there is a direct swerve in the usage of a business machine (and in Dutton's case the destruction of the same) to create a concrete text of general economic writing.

7. See the Toronto Research Group's "Report 1: Translation," particularly their ideas on homolinguistic translation as well as Peter Jaeger's discussion of the TRG in his *ABC of Reading TRG*.

8. "[T]the world's most expensive colouring book" -- Darren Wershler-Henry, *filling Station* #18.

9. Both *Nicholodeon* and *Carnival* are unpaginated and all further references will refer to the title without any further mention of page number.

10. "Go ahead. Display your casual contempt for commodity fetishism and your commitment to a general economy by destroying this book (online readers; smash your computers. That'll help too). To paraphrase Nietzsche, that which does not kill us must have missed us." – Darren Wershler Henry, "Surplus Explanations" in *Nicholodeon*.

11. See bpNichol's *Sharp Facts: Selections from TTA 26* and its "generational disintegrations" of text as repeated copies are made, whereby the copier itself presents an lower 'quality' copy in terms of the intended restricted original by inserting an ever increasing amount of graphic static and 'interference.'

12. See Peter Jaeger's "Steve McCaffery's Visual Errata" available online at http://www.ubu.com/papers_frames.html for a Lacanian reading of the two panels of *Carnival*.

13. My copy of the special edition of Wershler-Henry's *Nicholodeon* includes a sticker placed opposite the "surplus explanations" stating "DAMAGE BOOKS / DAÑAR LIBROS."

14. The publishing of each of these texts is a site of economic negotiation as the published forms themselves both support and question the economy of the book-trade. Each text is published by a nationally distributed press supported by government funding and structure, however none of the books are priced for consumption. *E Clips E* and *Nicholodeon* are perfect-bound, typical looking books though *Nicholodeon* challenges the regular expenditure of book production with fold out pages and tipped-in texts acting as creative barnacles on the hull of the book proper.

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