

ALL THAT REMAINS UNNOTICED I ADORE: SPENCER REECE'S ADDRESSES

Eileen A. Joy

Affirm survival, he tells us, and suddenly I am orphaned, since he gives us no instruction, and we are not told how, in the face of suffering, in spite of suffering, this affirmation is to take place.

—Judith Butler, “On Never Having Learned How to Live”
(written on the occasion of Derrida’s death)

You’re not listening. I’m sorry. I was thinking
How the beauty of your singing reinscribes
The hope whose death it announces.

—Ben Lerner, “Mean Free Path”

all that remains unnoticed I adore
to the used furniture to the broken door
to the jalousie window slats I sing

—Spencer Reece, “xiv. Two Bright Rooms”

I. THE APOSTROPHE: IT IS IN MY OWN HEART

The poetic address, or apostrophe, as Barbara Johnson has written, is “the calling out to inanimate, dead, or absent beings.”¹ Important to recall here is the literal definition of ‘apostrophe’ as a ‘turning away’ [from the Greek *apo*, ‘away’ + *strephein*, ‘to turn’]. In the mode of ‘apostrophe,’ the poet *averts his attention*, looks *away*, from his supposed audience to address absent or imaginary beings. Quintilian described apostrophe as “a diversion of our words to address some person other than the judge” and he cautioned against it, “since it would certainly seem to be more natural that we should

¹ Barbara Johnson, “Toys R Us,” *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 6.

specifically address ourselves to those whose favor we desire to win.”² In this respect, I’m particularly fond of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*’s definition of apostrophe as “a figure of speech which consists in addressing a dead or absent person, an animal, or a thing, or an abstract quality or idea as if it were alive, present, and capable of understanding.”³ *As if it were alive, present, and capable of understanding*. In other words, as Quintilian understood: everything to lose here.

But one might also say that the apostrophe, or a diversion of one’s address, from a supposedly real and living and present (and one might imagine, proprietarily *judging*) audience to absent and imaginary (and possibly dead) figures, human and nonhuman, enacts a certain event, or *presencing*, of a speculative *being-with*, where both the poet and the objects she addresses, visible or invisible, alive or dead, real or imaginary, animate or inanimate, come together in a vibrantly materialist circuit of vocative speech, which is also a sort of vocal (if also written) commentary upon the text of the world, a counter-signature that, as Derrida might say, exercises a certain *faith* and leaves marks *behind*.⁴ As Johnson writes, “Apostrophe turns toward anything the poet throws his voice to, and in so doing magnetizes his world around his call.”⁵ Here, the poet’s call, or address, or ‘ring’ (as of a bell or telephone call) might even be only one thing among many other things that have gathered around her language which is, itself, once released into writing, suddenly detached, prosthetic, and thingly. The poetic address, which already has such a long history, would seem to have already been in sympathy with what is now referred to as ‘speculative reason’ and ‘object-oriented ontology’,⁶ understanding,

² Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1921), IV, i, 63.

³ ‘Apostrophe,’ in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger, Frank J. Warnke, and O.B. Hardison (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

⁴ See Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 141.

⁵ Johnson, “Toys R Us,” 10.

⁶ By ‘speculative reason’ and ‘object-oriented ontology’ I mean to invoke the recent work of Graham Harman and other theorists (such as Jane Bennett, Levi Bryant, Timothy Morton, and Steven Shaviro, among others) who have recently been working on non-human-centered, post-‘discursive turn’ and ‘carnal’ materialisms, metaphysics, phenomenologies, and ontologies (where the world is no longer merely the carrier of human signification), and who

as Jane Bennett has recently articulated, that poiesis does not aim to *capture* things (always other to representation) via description, but desires, rather, to “get close” to the ontology of things and to throw some “sand and grit” into the spaces where things might otherwise “slide” into our co-option of them.⁷ This might also be to understand, as Graham Harman has argued, that things themselves are no “seamless fusion,” and that each object in the world is “fatally torn between itself and its accidents, relations, and qualities: a set of tensions that makes everything in the universe possible, including

also hold, following Harman, that “[i]ndividual entities of various different scales (not just tiny quarks and electrons) are the ultimate stuff of the cosmos,” and further, “[t]hese entities are never exhausted by any of their relations or even by their sum of all possible relations” (“Brief SR/OOO Tutorial,” *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, July 23, 2010: <<http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/2010/07/23/brief-srooo-tutorial/>>). This group of thinkers is in no way unified in their thinking, but for excellent introductions to and overviews of the history and development of the recent critical turns to Speculative Realism (SR) and Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) see Kris Coffield, “Interview: Levi Bryant,” *Fractured Politics*, June 29, 2011: <http://fracturedpolitics.com/2011/06/29/interview-levi-bryant.aspx>, and Graham Harman, “A History of Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology,” podcast audio, Symposium: “Hello, Everything: Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology,” University of California-Los Angeles, December 1, 2010; available at *Ecology Without Nature*, December 2, 2010: <http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/2010/12/graham-harmans-talk-on-ooo-and-sr-at.html>. For important individual inflections of speculative and object-oriented philosophies, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011); Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, eds., *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011); Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009); Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011); and Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁷ See Jane Bennett, “Powers of the Hoard: Notes on Material Agency,” podcast audio, Conference: “Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods,” George Washington University, March 11, 2011: <<http://www.archive.org/details/PowersOfTheHoardNotesOnMaterialAgency>>.

space and time.”⁸ Calling to things, then, *addressing* them, does not so much make things appear, as it dives into the rifts and forks between ‘the things themselves’ and the apparitional, or sensual, qualities that stream out of them (what Harman terms ‘allure’).⁹ Like Xeno’s paradox, the poet would be a bard of splitting the difference.

The poet’s address may not really magnetize or halt the ‘slide’ of or dive into anything, of course, except her own desire, her own lovesickness or desperation for, or curiosity about, what no longer remains present or visible, or what seems mute, untouchable, incommunicative, obdurate, lonely, broken, abandoned, with-drawn, unloved. As Rousseau once wrote, “Insensitive and dead beings, this charm is not at all in you; it could not be there; it is in my own heart which wishes to draw everything back to itself” [“Etres insensibles et morts, ce charme n'est point en vous; il n'y saurait être; c'est dans mon propre Coeur qui veut tout rapporter à lui”].¹⁰ Here, apostrophe may understand, or insist: everything is lost, but I address it, anyway, in absent solidarity, or ridiculous hope. The poetic address then, as a form of hopeful yet foolish bravado, flowering on a ground of ruined shapes, of ruination itself. Apostrophe as the hailing of the ephemeral and the lost and inanimate of history *as if* they might understand and respond, as if *anyone* could. Poetic hailing as a form of being-with in which there is a wildly constructed (because fictitious) intimacy (but what other kind is there?) that retains, nevertheless, great distances, forever untraversable. Similar to commentary, the apostrophe as a ‘talking-writing’ to other ‘authors’ who have already left the building, but whose ‘signatures’ either remain as artifacts or as impressions of their absence, or of their muteness.

This is also to speak of the poetic address as a form of adoration (literally, ‘reverential’ or ‘worshipful’ address) for what has gone missing or been left unattended and unadorned, and which also pulls those lost and left-aside (and unloved) things into the temporal and shining Now of the poet’s address. As Jonathan Culler has written,

⁸ Graham Harman, “Space, Time, and Essence: An Object-Oriented Approach (2008),” *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010), 150.

⁹ Graham Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” in *Collapse, Vol. II: Speculative Realism*, ed. Robin Mackay (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic), 187–221.

¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Monuments de l’histoire de ma vie,” *Oeuvres autobiographiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 74; translation of Rousseau from Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, augmented edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 141.

addresses such as Wordsworth's 'ye birds' and 'ye blessed creatures' and 'Thou child of joy' ('Ode to Immortality') "locate [those items] in the time of the moments at which writing can say 'now.' . . . So located by apostrophes, birds, creatures, boys, etc., resist being organized into events that can be narrated, for they are inserted into the poem as elements of the event which the poem is attempting to be."¹¹ In this sense, the apostrophe, or address, also snaps things that might be dead or absent into present *being*, evoking [literally, 'calling forth' or 'calling out'] that which remains hidden or buried before being called out, or called *to*. Which is not to say the thing itself ever fully materializes, since, cadging from Julian Yates, its "exteriority" precludes its "ready processing," and the poetic address might ultimately be a form of a "nervous, attenuated," and "melancholy" attention to, or "screen" for, the "call" of the nonhuman.¹² A mating call.

II. SPENCER REECE: I AM A PART OF THIS FRACTURED FRONTIER

Spencer Reece is a contemporary poet who is particularly fond of the address as a poetic form (although it might be argued that all lyric poetry is address, or apostrophe, in one form or another),¹³ and a large part of his book *The Clerk's Tale* is devoted to a group of twenty "Addresses," many of which do not even utilize the vocative voice. Indeed, for this very reason, Reece seems to be implying that all poetry is address, in one form or another (a point made by many critics all the time), while at the same time he wants to signal a particular section of his book through the formal register of "Addresses," almost as if to ask his reader to pay special attention to the form of the call, and to the addressees themselves, human and nonhuman, who include his younger brother, the mute patients of a mental hospital, an old farmhouse in which he used to live, several landscapes, old lovers, empty rooms, a broken door, a hospital chaplain, three streets, the reader, a nurse, an apartment, Boca Raton,

¹¹ Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, 149.

¹² Julian Yates, "It's (for) You; or, the Tele-t/r/opical Post-Human," *postmedieval* 1.1/2 (April 2010): 225, 230 [223–234].

¹³ As Paul de Man once put it, "Now it 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 turn, be seen as paradigmatic for poetry in general)" ("Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory: Riffaterre and Jauss," in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985], 61).

Minneapolis, and so on. And what ties all of these objects together -- persons, things, and places -- is their impermanence, their fugitive nature, as well as all of the ways in which Reece is not sure "where I end and the dark starts,"¹⁴ which means he has a special propensity, as many poets do, for un-becoming, for getting lost, for going deep (or wide) into Otherness, into unlovable, or difficult, alterities. What also connects many of the addressees and figures of this group of poems, and what they share in common with other figures that predominate *The Clerk's Tale* as a whole, is their status as the untouchables of history, the unseen, the disenfranchised, the forgotten, the incarcerated, the disappeared -- in short, those who are difficult or impossible to love: transvestites, ex-cons, alcoholics, the retarded, suicides, sales clerks, the handicapped, mental patients, homosexuals, migrant workers, and everyone with whom the world has made "a thousand thousand vows," and "then broken" them.¹⁵ It is no accident that the collection as a whole is entitled *The Clerk's Tale*, which not only references the book's initial poem, about two gay men, one middle-aged and the other older, who work as mainly unnoticed clerks in a Brooks Brothers store in a mall outside of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota ("We are alone. / There is no longer any need to express ourselves"),¹⁶ but also Chaucer's story about 'patient' (and long-suffering) Griselda. The title also points to Chaucer's 'Clerk of Oxford,' the student and lover of books who tells the tale, and who is described by Chaucer in his 'General Prologue' to the *Canterbury Tales* as *holwe* ['hollow' or 'emaciated'] and wearing *thredbare* clothing, with "litel gold in cofre" ["little gold in his coffer"],¹⁷ thus signaling the spare and meager offices of those who read, reflect, and write. In Reece's case, the poet is also one who lives in bare circumstances and with whom the world has made and broken a thousand vows, and he depends often upon the kindness of strangers, such as the hospital chaplain Miss Grace who "blessed" him "with holy water / and always promised to return."¹⁸

¹⁴ Spencer Reece, "xix. I Have Dreamed of You So Much," *The Clerk's Tale* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 61.

¹⁵ Spencer Reece, "xvi. Loxahatchee," *The Clerk's Tale*, 58.

¹⁶ Spencer Reece, "The Clerk's Tale," *The Clerk's Tale*, 4 [2-4].

¹⁷ Lines cited from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), ll. 289-90, 298.

¹⁸ Spencer Reece, "vi. United Hospital," *The Clerk's Tale*, 48.

As Louise Glück has described Reece's poetry, “its longing for permanence is rooted in a profound sense of the provisional nature of all human arrangements . . . The scene ‘you cannot enter,’ the world denied, recurs.” She further describes the book as one

of deprivations and closures, each somehow graver than the external sign suggests. Expansive description is sealed off in terse sentences: houses are sold, dogs are given away. Against these cumulative finalities, the dream of permanence makes an alternative or correction. And beauty, especially remembered beauty, which is insulated against erosion, functions in these poems like a promise: it holds the self firm in the face of crushing solitude and transience.¹⁹

Because of Reece's ability to move deftly, at the same time, between a certain comic light touch and harrowing tragedy, between the affirmation, or loving notice of scenes such as “the rooms lavish with neoclassical beds” and the casual mention of a “retired stewardess with thick red lipstick” who “speaks of her umpteenth hospitalization,” Glück also describes his poems, with great wit, as “half cocktail party, half passion play.”²⁰

More than several times throughout the twenty “Addresses,” the phrase appears, “I am not afraid,” as when Reece recollects his “blue” time as a small child when President Kennedy was shot and in “a basement apartment / deep in dark Minneapolis,” his mother “is crying again why does she cry,” and the poet proclaims, “I am small but not afraid,” and when he leaves Minnesota later, as an adult, “the day I leave Minnesota I am not afraid,” and when he leaves the mental hospital, “I leave the open unit and I am not afraid.”²¹ In the initial poem, set in a more present tense -- perhaps the most present moment of the twenty addresses as a whole and thus its placement at the beginning -- Reece writes, “I am ruined but I am not afraid . . . from state to state I send out my report.” In “my report,” we get the

¹⁹ Spencer Reece, “xx. Vizcaya,” *The Clerk's Tale*, 62 [62–63]; Spencer Reece, “iii. To My Brother, 45,” *The Clerk's Tale*; Louise Glück, “Foreword,” in Reece, *The Clerk's Tale*, x.

²⁰ Glück, “Foreword,” x.

²¹ Spencer Reece, “vii. Blue,” *The Clerk's Tale*, 49; “xiii. Afton,” 55; “x. To Martha My Nurse,” 52.

multiple senses of the poet's *account* [a 'reporting'] of his own melancholy (yet also affirmatively optimistic) biography along with the *intelligence* [the clandestine, secret 'accounting'] he has conducted in certain small corners of the world (Minnesota and Florida, where he has lived), as well as his *claims* ['writs'] upon these places, and also the 'resounding noise' or musical 'notes' of his addresses, made in the room that is "empty at last" and where "the sound of the last empty lots" of a hyper-commercially developed and also dying (or disastrously encroached-upon and thus disappearing?) Florida "is in [his] spine."²² Both an itinerant, but also primarily rooted in two places (Minnesota and Florida), Reece dwells upon scenes of packing and unpacking, suitcases and vacated houses. And this is why he "sing[s] sacredly of suitcases and disappearances,"²³ and on the "dead end" of Divinity Avenue, with "Buddhists / nuns ex-cons," he "stood with suitcases / below that yellow sign,"²⁴ and in the locked unit of the mental hospital where Reece once lived, and where his "roommate's face is a peach that rots," he tells us, "we are all ambassadors carrying suitcases."²⁵

The poet, who is ruined but not afraid, and who, like an ambassador, is sending out his "report" from "state to state," swinging his "right hand up and down," is reminiscent of a certain prototypical fairy tale character who is subjected to the worst deprivations and abandonments, yet always emerges from the dark woods with a perverse optimism about everything, such as the Grimm Brothers' "maiden without hands" whose father's pact with the Devil leads to him having to chop off his daughter's hands with an axe: an act of mutilation she cheerily submits to, then gracefully takes herself off to the woods so she won't be a burden to anyone. Or Hansel who, even after his mother has abandoned him and his sister Gretel deep in a forbidding forest, and the birds have eaten all of the breadcrumbs they were using to mark their path, tells his sister not to worry for, "We shall soon find the way."²⁶ Perhaps one of the most extreme representatives of this figure is little 'Golden Heart' in the Danish fairy tale of the same name (*Guld Hjerte*), upon whom the film

²² Spencer Reece, "i. To You," *The Clerk's Tale*, 43.

²³ Reece, "i. To You."

²⁴ Spencer Reece, "ii. Divinity Avenue," *The Clerk's Tale*, 44.

²⁵ Spencer Reece, "viii. To Those Grown Mute," *The Clerk's Tale*, 50.

²⁶ See Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Grimm's Tales for Young and Old: The Complete Stories*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Anchor Books, 1983).

director Lars von Trier based the female protagonists in his trilogy of films, *Breaking the Waves*, *The Idiots*, and *Dancer in the Dark*, all of whom are expressions of a certain extreme, selfless, and yet perversely upbeat martyrdom. The fairy-tale from von Trier's childhood is about a little girl who embarks on a journey through the woods with pieces of bread and other things in her pockets. Along the way, she gives away everything she has, including her clothing (with nothing given to her in return), and whenever the animals of the forest question her risky behavior and impending destitution, at every bleak turn of the narrative, including one moment when she stands naked at the edge of the woods, she proclaims, "I'll be fine, anyway," or, in another translation, "But at least I'm okay."²⁷

I'll be fine, anyway. What moves in that phrase, in that 'anyway'? And also in that 'at least'? "Regardless of what just happened, I'll be fine." "Although I have nothing now, I'll still be fine." "That was close, but anyway, I'll be fine -- at least I'm still here." "Whatever happens next, I'll be fine -- at least there's that . . . for now." "Anyway, after all that, at the very least, I'll be fine." "Even if I'm killed in a minute, I'm fine now, anyway." "However anything might happen, in *any way*, at a minimum, I'll still be fine." "However I might have to go on, in whatever-any-way, I'll be fine." More ruefully, perhaps, with an emphasis on a certain caesura between the 'fine' and the 'anyway': "I'll be fine . . . anyway, it doesn't matter what happens to me," or, "I'll be fine . . . anyway, let's not think about that now." Or more hopefully: "I'll be fine (I'm fine right now) . . . anyway, what's next?" The 'anyway' operates here too as a kind of placeholder for probabilistic subjunctivity, or the 'as if': *as if* everything already was and will be fine; *as if* it were still possible to speak of *being fine*, of being still able to go forth, to give something, even with an empty basket, having already lost everything (maybe even one's own mind), and to still be *willing* to welcome someone or something, even if it might be your own end. The 'at least' says: something is always better than nothing. And the future tense of 'will' implies, all evidence to the contrary, that the self will somehow continue, go on, and: be *fine*, which is to say 'without dross,' polished and pure (despite the current despilments), *well*, good, or more plainly and humbly and

²⁷ See Stig Björkman, "Naked Miracles" (interview with Lars von Trier), trans. Alexander Keiller, *Sight & Sound* 6.10 (1996): 10–14, and Stig Björkman, ed., *Trier on von Trier*, trans. Neil Smith (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 164.

pragmatically: I'm 'okay' . . . for *now*, anyway. "How are we to master suffering?" Louise Glück asks, and her answer, relative to Reece's poems is that there is a "discipline" in "modesty . . . by which the desire to affirm can overcome repeated disappointment that threatens to become withdrawal or despair."²⁸ Or as Reece himself writes, "in my right hand I hold a key / my legacy is to leave the room empty."²⁹

There is a certain sympathy between Golden Heart's "I'll be fine, anyway," or "At least I'm okay," and Spencer Reece's conclusion to his first address ("i. To You"), after reporting that he is "ruined but not afraid": "I open my door I extend my hand / welcome."³⁰ And after nailing a crucifix on the wall of the "bright yellow" room he has rented after leaving the mental hospital, in the tenth address ("x. To Martha My Nurse"), he writes, "there is much to do much to see."³¹ And in the fourteenth address ("xiv. Two Bright Rooms), Reece *sings* "to the used furniture to the broken door" and to "all that remains unnoticed," which "I adore."³² Here, especially, we see a more explicit expression of the address, or apostrophe, as baroquely useless (yet somehow necessary as a hedge against creeping sadness and the decay of everything), futile (pace Quintilian), and also as a form of adoration, which, interestingly, is also a form of calling, or speaking, *to* an entity that is also being revered at the same time it is being saluted and addressed (the address itself is a form of reverence) [from the Latin *ad* 'to' + *orare* 'speak']: to adore something is to speak to it, to address it, with one's mouth [Latin *os*, *oris*]. Addressing then, also becomes a sort of 'facing,' whereby (again, pace Quintilian) the poet turns away from the audience who might be reading or hearing his work (either in present or belated 'after'-time) in order to speak *with his mouth* (which might also be a kiss) to imaginary, absent, present-but-not-human, and in Reece's terms, *unnoticed* beings and things, with whom Reece may even imagine a sort of solidarity since at one point he says of himself, "anonymity is at home on me."³³ And of the town in South Florida, Lantana, where Reece finds the "two bright rooms" in which he

²⁸ Glück, "Foreword," xii.

²⁹ Reece, "xiii. Afton."

³⁰ Reece, "i. To You."

³¹ Reece, "x. To Martha My Nurse."

³² Spencer Reece, "xiv. Two Bright Rooms," *The Clerk's Tale*, 56.

³³ Spencer Reece, "xv. Boca Raton," *The Clerk's Tale*, 57.

“sings” to “the used furniture to the broken door,” he also writes, “it is not Paris it is not Florence / but it has majesty in its anonymity / this town where people stop for gas.”³⁴

Again, similar to the heroes and heroines of fairy tales who are abandoned in landscapes of desolate, forbidding beauty, and where they often find their way by speaking to birds, stone walls, brooks, foxes, and juniper trees, the poet addresses the supposedly non-communicative and inanimate, of which, through his art, he also becomes a part – “I am a part of this fractured frontier,” Reece writes of one of the islands in the Keys.³⁵ And Reece’s addresses, to persons, places *and* to things, present *and* absent, but also always disappearing, under erasure (“this is the scene of what becomes of love when it is done,” he writes in the last address),³⁶ are also gestures of *welcoming* (which is a form of love-as-hospitality), all extended from austere rooms “leached of extravagances” and from the locked units of hospitals where “the bank clerk who went off Lithium to have her first baby / has a brain that will not work” and “lies on her bed like a snail without a house.”³⁷ In this scenario, the poet’s addresses become vocative holding areas designed to stave off, or assuage, the inevitable dissolutions, surrenders, and final acts, and thus could also be seen to move against the current of one of the signature philosophical movements of our time (which could also be argued to be a hyper-development of the Enlightenment image of a disenchanted world): the eliminative nihilism of Ray Brassier, who has written that,

Philosophy would do well to desist from issuing any further injunctions about the need to re-establish the meaningfulness of existence, the purposefulness of life, or mend the shattered concord between man and nature. It should strive to be more than a sop to the pathetic twinge of human self-esteem.³⁸

Brassier’s nihilist philosophy might best be summed up by the epigraph, from the Lovecraftian horror writer and cult figure Thomas

³⁴ Reece, “xiv. Two Bright Rooms.”

³⁵ Reece, “xvii. Summerland Key,” *The Clerk’s Tale*, 59.

³⁶ Reece, “xx. Vizcaya.”

³⁷ Reece, “viii. To Those Grown Mute.”

³⁸ Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), xi.

Ligotti, that he chose for his book *Nihil Unbound*: “There is nothing to do and there is nowhere to go / There is nothing to be and there is no-one to know.” By contrast, the poetic address, as *thrown* by Reece (and perhaps by all poets), is in fact, if even naively, trying to mend the shattered concord between man and nature (hell, between man, which is to say, ‘humans,’ and everything), insisting that there is always *something*, rather than nothing, as long as one can still call to it, and therefore, for every thing, human or otherwise, that *appears* into being and then ebbs and disappears from the world (which does, indeed, have a ‘reality’ that is always in surplus of and often beside the point of the human), the poet performs the office of yawping across the silence, and re-filling the world with the sounds of things, with their names, which is also a form of loving the world, however ridiculous. Until he can’t any more.

III. I LEAVE, I LOOK BACK

It has been said that the lyric is well-suited, and perhaps designed, for the private, the privative, and privation, for the enclosure and the enclosed. It is a gesture as well of address, from the poet to herself, to others, the world, all the items of the world, the dark crack of oblivion and everything that falls into that crevasse. This is an address, moreover, that often wells up from a deeply avowed sense of the disintegration of everything: “how did the island come to have no room,” Reece writes, “who ruined it with deeds / house after house and all the butterflies and parrotfish gone”?³⁹ Yes, we know that poetry has often been concerned, obsessed even, with death and nothingness, and with expressions of despair at the passing of everything (which might also then serve as the thin files in the cabinets of the counting-house of what came and went), and that poetry is also often discussed as a powerful and meaningful hedge against all of that (“the world ends, but the lines of poetry live!” cry the excited Shakespeareans). But let’s maybe agree, too, that there is no point any longer in burdening poetry with this job -- that sort of bravado and labor gets tiring after a while. We sometimes forget (and this is where the nihilists *do* come in handy) that when the world *really* ends, so, too, will go the poetry. Which is why poetry is not, as it turns out, for posterity (or at least, not a very long posterity): it’s for the present, it’s for us, now, while we’re still able to address the world, and each other, the living and the dead, the animate and

³⁹ Reece, “xvii. Summerland Key.”

inanimate, in all of their fragility, and also their terrible beauty, and even their indifference to us. But is the poet even writing, in his addresses, for, or to, *us*?

We might reflect, then, on the very present tense of the address: the apostrophe, by its very nature and inclination, is a transitive verbing – it seeks and hits its object at the very moment of its utterance, as if the object were actually there in the moment of being called, even when that object might be long gone, partially hidden, or withdrawn. As Graham Harman has argued, no object is ever exhausted by its relations, even when present to sight or touch (there is always something “in reserve” in the dark, volcanic recesses of things),⁴⁰ but the address has a peculiar faith in the vibrancy of the world in all its fullness (which includes all of its temporal dimensions) and it wants *relations* with that vibrancy. The address will call to anyone and anything, real and unreal: the wind, Eurydice, America, a flower in a crammed wall, a Grecian urn, a dead dog, a salt shaker, the Muses, one’s youth, a stream, a lost doll. The address vibrates, it rings, it rings up, it puts a ring on things – it *congresses*.

In his book *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions*, Michael Snediker argues for a queer optimism of the lyric that fully embraces and *learns from* death, pain, and suffering “to the point of saturation, and in an act of bravery so unfamiliar as to seem impossible, departs from them.”⁴¹ But with Spencer Reece, I might also ask: or, *stays with them*? In a radical act of hospitality, of welcoming, of *staying-on*? This isn’t to argue for poetry itself as a form of *staying-on* (i.e., traditional notions of literary posterity), but rather, for the poet himself as a figure, an actual living figure, who *stays on*, in spite of it all, as long as he can, who *cracks open* the door of the soon-to-be-earthquaked-or-otherwise-annihilated-room and extends a ruined hand, a ruined voice, a counter-signature, and engages in an experiment in affirmation within the site of ruin itself, offers a last gesture, a something rather than a nothing, an “I’m still here,” even with nothing, maybe even speaking to nothing.

The poetic address, also then, as a form of vigil, of keeping the light on, or as Reece himself writes in another sequence of poems in the book, “Florida Ghazals”: “I keep vigil by the light of my 60-watt

⁴⁰ Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 187.

⁴¹ Michael Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 39.

bulb. / The unmarked mass grave of the 1928 hurricane beckons me.” Vigil is a form of unmixed attention, which is how Simone Weil defined prayer.⁴² It always requires looking back, or as Reece writes in his fifth address, “v. Coda,”

this is the day I leave
leave the landscape I love
the way lovers love love
watch me how I leave
I have begun to shake
the hours are fleet
yet expansive as at death
I pack one suitcase
the lake plashes and hacks
Canada geese subtract
their gossip from the field
deer evacuate the sumac
their rough thick tongues
sandpaper the distances
they say *Don't look back*
I leave I look back⁴³

But vigil is also looking directly at the thing in front of you, and refusing to leave it. Even when it isn’t there. Because the poet has in fact left it behind. Or because it got left behind even before he got there. But similar to commentary, which is also a form of love, and which cannot stop speaking to (addressing) the thing that has itself stopped speaking, there is never any leaving anything behind with poetry like this. It keeps calling. Do you want to take this call, or should I?

⁴² “Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer”: Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (1952; repr. New York: Routledge, 2002), 117.

⁴³ Spencer Reece, “v. Coda,” *The Clerk’s Tale*, 47.

Eileen A. Joy is Associate Professor of English at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, where she teaches courses in medieval literature, contemporary fiction, and modern theory. She is the Lead Ingenitor of the BABEL Working Group (www.babelworkinggroup.org), Co-Editor of *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies*, and has published numerous essays and articles on medieval literature, cultural studies, post/humanism, and ethics.

