

# Materiality, Intentionality, and the Computer-Generated Poem: Reading Walter Benn Michaels with Erin Mouré's *Pillage Laud*

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**I**NTERTWINED WITH THE EMERGENCE of what Ihab Hassen first called “the posthuman,” the genesis of digital poetry can partly be traced to attempts, beginning in the 1950s in Europe and the 1960s in North America, to generate poems via computer in order to demonstrate that poetry need not be the result of a romanticist notion of inspiration. There are, of course, many competing genealogies of computer-generated and digital poetry—Friedrich Block argues, for example, that the first random or probabilistic texts were written by Theo Lutz in 1959 (his “Stochastische Text” which appeared in the German avant-garde literary journal *Augenblick*) using a Zuse Z 22 mainframe computer; such experiments in computer-generated poetry were then taken up by Nanni Balestrini of Italy, Jean Baudot of Canada, and Brion Gysin and Emmett Williams of the U.S. (Block 19). Kenneth B. Newell, on the other hand, cites R.M. Worthy (U.S.) as the first to compose poetry with a computer nicknamed “AutoBeatnik” in 1962—efforts that were duplicated in 1984 by William Chamberlain and Thomas Etter’s program “Racter” and Hugh Kenner and Joseph O’Rourke’s “Travesty” and then duplicated once more in 1992 by Neil Rubenking’s appropriately named “Brekdown.”<sup>1</sup> The methods of Oulipo (a group founded in 1960 by French writers and mathematicians)

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for generating poems are also frequently cited as progenitors of digital poetry; originally paper based and often using the mathematics of Boole and Fibonacci to create poems, such works were among the first to be literalized with a computer. As Italo Calvino infamously puts it, “[T]he aid of a computer, far from replacing the creative act of the artist, permits the latter rather to liberate himself from the slavery of a combinatory search, allowing him also the best chance of concentrating on this ‘clinamen’ which, alone, can make of the text a true work of art” (13). For example, the rigid set of rules at the heart of fellow-Oulipian Raymond Queneau’s *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes* (a matrix of ten sonnets which generate one hundred trillion poems) along with its unreadability—as Queneau himself puts it, if one read a sonnet per minute, eight hours a day, two hundred days per year, it would take more than a million centuries to finish the text—make it, in Calvino’s terms, a “true work of art” and an odd variation on postnineteenth-century anti-romantic poetics.

Despite Calvino’s emphasis in the quotation above on the expression of an artist’s intentions in relation to the computer, most accounts of computer-generated poetry assume the neutrality of the machine<sup>2</sup>—an assumption which produces debate not about the production process but about what has been produced. That is, the question repeatedly asked is if the computer-generated poem is in fact a poem and if it shows that, as one critic puts it in the title of his article, “an author’s intention is irrelevant to the meaning of a literary work” (Juhl 481). Further, and not surprisingly, the answer to these questions is invariably a no—a computer-generated poem is not a poem and neither, in contrast to Calvino’s assertion above, does it reflect authorial intent nor, therefore, does such a poem have any meaning. For instance, rather than interrogate the relationship between intention and meaning, Juhl circumvents the issue altogether (and reinstates the conventional view of poetry as an insightful message delivered to us by poets who are human exemplars) by claiming that “to ‘interpret’

1 Christopher Funkhouser’s impressive *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archeology of Forms* provides the most recent and definitive history of the origins of digital poetry—one that generally outlines the same history as Friedrich Block. For explanations of the workings of, in particular, Racter, Travesty, and Brekdown, see (respectively) Racter’s *The Policeman’s Beard is Half-Constructed*, Kenner’s “A Travesty Generator for Micros” in *Byte Magazine* (November 1984), and John Tranter’s “Mr. Rubenking’s ‘Brekdown’” in *Postmodern Culture* 3:1 (1992).

2 A statement by poet Marc Adrian, which opens the section in *Cybernetic Serendipity* dedicated to “Computer Poems and Text,” reads as follows: “To me the neutrality of the machine is of great importance ... it allows the spectator to find his own meanings in the association of words more easily, since their choice, size, and disposition are determined at random” (53).

a computer ‘poem’ is not to interpret a poem” (481).<sup>3</sup> In fact, as I will discuss, critics have so resoundingly rejected the very idea of computer-generated poetry that it has not been until recently that issues about the intent of these poems (as well as their treatment as material objects) have re-emerged. This essay, then, addresses the overriding need for an alternative set of literary terms for the interpretation of computer-generated texts—more specifically, it is concerned with the need to focus not on the object of interpretation (on what these poems are) but on the interpreter. However, before we can effectively begin the work of accounting for these texts, or for our experience of these texts, we must first rethink not only the foundational terms “text,” “reader,” and “writer” but also the even more fundamental (and, as I will discuss at the end of this paper, frequently masculinist) terms “human” and “machine” upon which any definition of a text/reader/writer rests.

While there have been many poets since the mid-1950s and 1960s who have taken up the challenge of generating poems with a computer,<sup>4</sup> Erin Mouré is particularly relevant to this discussion as her creative work is especially noteworthy for the ways in which it has gradually moved away from the lyric and, in service of her dedication to a finer focus on the workings of the word itself, in 1999—right at the beginning of the development of the largely American-dominated conceptual writing and flarf poetry—turned to writing poetry that is both algorithmically produced or computer-generated and comes to us in book form. It is as if Mouré were

- 3 There is an abundance of such critics who easily dismiss computer-generated poems on the basis that they do not resemble real poetry written by “the true poet”; writes Margaret Masterman and Robin McKinnon Wood for the *Times Literary Supplement*, “The true poet starts with inspired fragments, emerging fully formed from his subconscious; only at a quite late stage ... does he choose his frame ... Moreover, the true poet will never have a fixed thesaurus” (668).
- 4 For example, Jackson MacLow came to rely almost entirely on computers to generate poems such as “34th Merzgedicht in Memoriam Kurt Schwitters” which is the result of a text-selection program called “DIATESTX 4.” John Cage, too, relies on a computer program to write his mesostic poems. Further, poems that, as Darren Wershler puts it, engage in “data harvesting and selection” and consist of the computer-assisted output of a procedure or algorithm include, among many others, Ron Silliman’s *Sunset Debris*, Bruce Andrews’s *Index*, and Kenneth Goldsmith’s *No. 111 2.7.93–10.20.96*. As I mention above, any number of conceptual and/or flarf poems (generally speaking, poems mined or generated from internet searches) are recent examples of loosely or strictly generated poems from the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century by Goldsmith as well as (to name a few) Robert Fitterman, Nada Gordon, and Gary Sullivan. However, in the case of flarf in particular, while these poems are compelling in their bawdy critique of internet memes, few seem engaged as much as Mouré in a critique of the generative process itself.

showing us that we need to return to the stasis and surety of the book to understand the digital, the human/machine in relation to the digital, and certainly other Canadian women poets such as Rachel Zolf, Angela Rawlings, Sina Queyras, and Natalie Walschots have since followed Mouré's lead in writing if not computer-generated then computer-aided poetry. In contrast to the poems described by early accounts of computer-generated writing, Mouré's poems are material objects devoid of authorial intention at the same time as they are material objects that reveal her intentions or the intentions of the programmer/writer.

1.

Where so machine a vision studio furnishes a woman's  
throat,  
our utopia shifts to prepare a window.

The computer mystery is arising.  
Might the core of verse park its hat?

Her focus of flesh between certain equations and every  
desire tests us.

Where we surrender to its practices,

the physician of mind there burns.

Erin Mouré wrote the above, with the help of the text-generator MacProse, for the back cover of her 1999 *Pillage Laud*. But why she has chosen to write such computer-generated lesbian sex poems? Why, when the popularity of computer-generated poetry reached its height in the early 1960s (documented, and perhaps partially answering the preceding question, by Hugh Kenner in his 1962 "Art in a Closed Field" which opens with lines generated by Autobeatnik: "All girls sob like slow snows. / Near a couch, that girl won't weep ... This girl is dumb and soft" [597])? Likewise, why write computer-generated poems when the debates over Artificial Intelligence peaked several decades ago in the early to mid-1980s (exemplified by the debates between John Searle and Daniel Dennett over whether or not computers have intentionality) and have since been replaced by quieter deliberations over the status of Artificial Life? Further, it is worth considering how Mouré's *Pillage Laud* might stand in relation to *A Frame of the Book*, the latter published in the same year as the former and striking in its literal, visual markings—markings that one would think stand opposite the intentionlessness of (un-visual) computer-generated poems in their emphasis on singular, human createdness. What is generally at

issue in these two books of poems, then, is the relation between machine and human, intentionality and intentionlessness (and, inevitably, technology and gender). As a way into understanding how exactly Mouré's poems work through such broad-ranging issues, rather than begin with well-known theorists such as Gerald Bruns, Michael Davidson, Johanna Drucker, Jerome McGann, and Marjorie Perloff (all of whom have long been engaged with the ways in which materiality—of the word, the text, the page—provides insight into authorial intent and whose work I wholeheartedly take on as an ineluctable foundation for my discussion of computer-generated and digital poetry in general),<sup>5</sup> I draw from Walter Benn Michaels as a useful, if problematic, theorist of the material. Michaels explicitly separates an interest with materiality from an interest in authorial intention, claiming that contemporary writing mistakenly pits the one against the other.

Gerald Bruns's *The Material of Poetry: Sketches for a Philosophical Poetics*, thoroughly inflected as it is by Stanley Cavell's philosophy of the ordinary, sets out a framework by which we ought to read and care for those poetries that "still defeat our ideas and expectations of what poetry is":

[F]irst, poetry whose language requires us to invent new concepts of what language is; second, sound poetry and its material counterpart, visual, or concrete, poetry; and third, poetry that seems to insert itself into the everyday world of banal objects, where it abides as one thing among others. (4)

It is patently true that many contemporary poetries—visual poetry, computer-generated poetry, computer-mediated poetry, algorithmically-generated poetry, conceptual poetry, etc.—force us to re-evaluate what counts as poetry, what may be acknowledged as poetry. However, with respect to what comprises the "material of poetry," Bruns's astute description of the page as "a place of occupation and activity and not simply one

5 Also note that now-neglected but crucial forerunners of such contemporary accounts of the materiality of the word include critics and theorists such as Joseph Frank (for example, his *The Widening Gyre* in which he first proposes the study of "spatial form in modern literature"), W.J.T. Mitchell (especially his work before the well-known *Picture Theory* such as *Blake's Composite Art* and the edited volume *The Language of Images*), and Cary Nelson (his *The Incarnate Word: Literature as Verbal Space*). Also, Michael Fried's *Art and Objecthood* stands as a crucial corollary in the art world to the work represented by Frank, Mitchell, and Nelson. As I will discuss, Walter Benn Michaels singles out Fried to argue against his approach to texts as material objects.

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of perception, observation, voyeurism” (67) glosses over the degree to which authorial intention *as well as* readerly experience (which, as I will argue, Michaels problematically understands as being in contradiction with each other) alters—even de-emphasizes, although never wholly effacing—the poems’ materiality. Likewise, while Michael Davidson’s *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word* is concerned with the material meanings of poems by Gertrude Stein and Susan Howe, his self-declared interest is in “the meanings given to materialization in various types of textual practice” (5) and not in the “relationships between technology and literature” (4); it is precisely the nature of the relationship between technology and literature (a relationship that I also believe firmly cannot be separated out from the meaning of the materialization that results from the relationship between technology/literature), whether it is the technology of the page, the computer, or the screen, with which this essay is concerned. Further, the reading methodologies proposed by Johanna Drucker, McGann, and Marjorie Perloff to understand poetics concerned with materiality are ones that undeniably make a valuable contribution, as no other critics have yet written so thoroughly of the historical and philosophical underpinnings, the material conditions of “the visible word,” of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century poetry. In fact, Jerome McGann is the unheralded foil against which Michaels (whether knowingly or unknowingly) pits himself. That is, McGann has been writing about the entwinement of texts with their material conditions of reading and writing, the authorial intention behind their production, and the necessity to view texts not as material things but as material events<sup>6</sup> since Michaels and Stephen Knapp first argued in 1982 against any axis of interpretation that serves as the premise for the pairing of intentionality/materiality. However, Drucker and Perloff’s implicit understanding of the way in which the materiality of the word (or poem) is intertwined with the intentionality of the author (or the experience of the reader) needs to be made explicit and McGann’s thinking needs to be further extended to the realm of the digital—in part because their intertwining is precisely at issue in computer-generated and digital poems. But, perhaps more importantly, an

6 *In The Textual Condition* (1991)—the more lucidly argued follow-up to McGann’s groundbreaking *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (1983)—he writes that “[T]exts are produced and reproduced under specific social and institutional conditions, and hence that every text, including those that may appear to be purely private [such as those by Emily Dickinson], is a social text. This view entails a corollary understanding, that a ‘text’ as not a ‘material thing’ but a material set of events, a point in time (or a moment in space) where certain communicative interchanges are being practiced” (21).

unambiguous explanation of these poems is also needed as a pre-emptive response to aesthetic conservatives such as Michaels who intone that “this” (in this case, the computer-generated poem) “is not poetry.”

So while Michaels’s work may hardly seem an appropriate frame by which to understand a writer such as Mouré,<sup>7</sup> who has a nuanced understanding of how materiality and intentionality go hand-in-hand, his 2004 *The Shape of the Signifier* can still be used effectively to demonstrate that, first, Mouré’s writing exemplifies fresh thinking about the continued relevance of materiality alongside intentionality and, second, that she points to the importance of extending the boundaries of this debate over intentionality/materiality to conventional science practices (particularly those undergirding technological innovation) and literary appropriations of such practices. The poems of *Pillage Laud* are not simply evidence of a(n) (intending) computer “thinking” (they’re evidence of thoroughly human, thoroughly gender-inflected thinking *through* the machine), and neither are the visually marked poems of *A Frame of the Book* simply evidence of a fully intending author or a series of material marks independent of their making (they’re evidence of the markings of an author who can always only be partly intending). Rather, in both books there is a sophisticated investigation of the limits to such an approach as Michaels’s which either artificially separates intention from materiality or conflates the two to posit an overwhelmingly intending author.

## 2.

Walter Benn Michaels’s *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (2005) stands in relation to an ever-increasing number of posttheory or postcritique books which, at their most ambitious, seek to rehabilitate the left in the wake of the impossibility of political action under post-modernism; failing that, such posttheory books simply try to find a way to make judgments without drawing on norms, universal principles, or, as Jean-François Lyotard famously puts it, metanarratives. In fact, the most

<sup>7</sup> I say that Michaels may seem an inappropriate choice for a theoretical framework for computer-generated poems given what I call his longstanding and now infamous aesthetic conservatism—particularly evident in his response to Marjorie Perloff in an issue of *Modernism/Modernity*: “[A]lthough Perloff characterizes me as ‘an anti-aestheticist’ (103), I agree with her that some works of art are better than others. It is, of course, a little disconcerting to be lectured on aesthetic value by someone who thinks that Charles Bernstein is a major poet, but the fact that Perloff herself can only occasionally tell the difference between a good poem and a bad one doesn’t mean that she isn’t right to maintain that there is a difference” (126).

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importance of  
the physicality  
of the text you  
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crucial for  
registering the  
physical aspects  
of the text.

recent addition—Terry Eagleton's *After Theory*, a book which supposedly deals a death blow to the field of cultural studies—is by the very same author who brought us *Literary Theory*. Although deliciously shallow in its nasty assessment of the new breed of student whom, he claims, is obsessively and uncritically interested in sex, the body, and *Friends*, Eagleton does touch on one of Michaels's primary preoccupations: if, according to high theorists such as Foucault and Derrida, we live in a world of pure difference, and if we therefore must make subjectivity, identity, and culture primary, then we are left without a way to account for, on the one hand, class and poverty and, on the other hand, meaning and interpretation. While Michaels's account is significantly more sophisticated, the main difference between Michaels and Eagleton, of course, is that the former has been against theory and so has been writing posttheory since the height of theory in the 1980s.

His latest book, then, combines his 1985 defense of intentionality in *Against Theory* with his 1997 critique of identity in *Our America* to delineate a general cultural movement from questions about the ontology of the text to an insistence on the primacy of the subject (10). The argument, briefly stated, is that the simultaneous commitment to materiality and identitarianism is both inconsistent and problematic. As he states in an interview that appeared in *The Minnesota Review*, such a commitment is real and is bad—strikingly real and bad in that, following Michaels's way of thinking, if you hold, say, Susan Howe's and, as I will make clear, Erin Mouré's views on the importance of the physicality of the text (and, by extension, Drucker, McGann, and Perloff et al.'s views), you must hold that the subject, the identity of the subject, is crucial for registering the physical aspects of the text; therefore, by this logic, you must also hold George Bush's views on terrorism as a war not of (political) beliefs but of identities, and since terrorists follow what's being called a perverted form of Islam, theirs is an identity we do not even have to acknowledge. It is precisely Michaels's ability to put forth such well-oiled, even seductive, inferential arguments that makes his book fascinating, intellectually and personally challenging, yet also troubling. In fact, Michaels's reading of Howe en route to his reading of de Man is particularly revealing of the shape of his argument in *The Shape of the Signifier*.

He begins his book by turning to Howe's *The Birth-Mark* (1993) and her concern with editorial control and authorial intention vis-à-vis the often overlooked physical aspects of the text: the eighty-six blank pages in the manuscript of Shepard's *Autobiography* and the smallest physical details of the page (142) in Dickinson's fascicles. For Howe, the problem

is, first and foremost, the imposition of editorial control that limits both authorial intention and meaning, but the problem is also that of discerning the accidental from the intentional as well as—even more radically—how to preserve the text when an editor cannot possibly discern the accidental, the purely random “[c]ancelations, variants, insertions, erasures, marginal notes, stray marks and blanks” (9) from the intentional. In other words, a lurking skepticism (or the fact that we may never know whether or not Shepard meant for there to be eighty-six blank pages separating the two texts) as well as a dedication to the belief that poetry is a physical act (Interview 157) keeps Howe astutely between a defense of Shepard and Dickinson’s intentions and a defense of what may be purely random, purely meaningless stray marks; it also results in her assertion that the only acceptable edited version of a writer’s work is a facsimile.<sup>8</sup>

Although Michaels may think of himself as an admirer of Howe’s work, the same dedication to text and author that drives Howe also drives him to point out that once a text such as Shepard’s or Dickinson’s becomes a material object that must be preserved and once all of its physical features are equally important, the work not only ceases to be a text that can be edited but it also ceases to be a text. Moreover, once the text ceases to be a text, the author’s intentions become beside-the-point. While Michaels never directly says as much, clearly and taken to its logical conclusion, a strict adherence to materiality simply does not reflect the way we actually think about texts and readers (and he doesn’t directly state his argument since, on the one hand, he assumes that readers are familiar with his earlier defense of intentionality and argument against identitarianism and since, on the other, the force of his argument comes from unpacking the deeper implications of not appealing to authorial intention in favour of the reader’s subjective experience [call it reading] of the text). For what careful readers of Dickinson, for example, would say they are not reading a text? What readers would claim they do not think there is such a thing as a text? Further, given such a strict materialist stance, there is the issue of meaning—for if a defense of the purely random mark for the sake of treating the text as an object is an effacement of intentionality, it is also

8 It is worth pointing out here that the issue (if an emphasis on the material aspects of a poem leads to an indifference toward authorial intention) is not limited merely to the realm of textual theory; not only has Howe’s (and, as I will shortly make clear, Mouré’s) creative work all along created a dialogue between poet and poetic material but so too have a long lineage of poets going back at least as far as George Herbert and William Blake, thereby already countering Michaels’s claim that the interest in the materiality of the word is somehow tied to a particularly postmodern, Derridean world of pure difference.

a turn away from meaning (at least as Michaels understands it) for the sake of what Paul de Man calls the text's sensory appearance. But again, we need to ask: What reader would say that there is no meaning in the lines "My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun —" outside of the appearance of the lines in the poem-as-object? Another way of putting what concerns Michaels here might be that if every single feature of a text matters, then no features matter because to matter (or mean) there has to be defining criteria for what matters and what does not matter; without such criteria, we are left with a potentially endless collection of readers' reports on their experience of the so-called text and on what meanings they derived from this experience. And, to complicate matters (and meanings) even further, Michaels also points out that the text as object is constituted not only by all of its physical features (a kind of objective, scientific enumeration of its attributes) but also by everything that can be seen by the reader (6). So we're left with a text as an object that generates effects rather than meanings, a text that simply does and a reader who does not interpret so much as experience the text.

Michaels may indeed be guilty of using Howe as a straw man. No matter how satisfying Michaels's logic or the tightness of his argument (taken solely on its own terms), and whatever the stakes for literary theory in the attack on de Man, crucial nuances are overlooked in Howe's work. The problem here is not just that he ends up inaccurately representing Howe; rather, the overlooked nuances may be just what are needed both to call into question the larger argument that Michaels wants to put forward and to make explicit the poetics undergirding work by writers such as Howe and Mouré. In particular, when he argues that the preservation of Shepard's or Dickinson's texts as a way to protect authorial intention actually obviates intention for the sake of the text as object, he neglects the fact that attempts to preserve the object are also attempts to keep alive the author's intentions;<sup>9</sup> that is, such critical accounts draw attention to the impossibility of ever closing a text off to a single interpretation which also means that the text is what the author intended as well as what the reader reads.

9 This view is perceptively anticipated by W.J.T. Mitchell in 1980 when he writes that, "No one seriously argues that a poem is nothing but its physical existence as a text, or an aggregate of words, but neither should we utterly detach the ontology of literature from its material incarnation" ("Language" 279). Further on, he adds, "The postulate of literal or physical spatiality encourages us to view every text in terms like those we apply to concrete poetry. With poets like Herbert or Black, this postulate will lead us to reconstruct intentions, since each poet has exerted considerable control over the physical space of his work" (283).

What's at stake, then, is a fundamental difference in Michaels's and Howe's (and again, by extension, Mouré's) attitude toward what constitutes a text, a reader, the act of reading and interpreting texts, not to mention meaning. Howe and Mouré understand a text as that which must be read as an artifact of the author's act of writing and as that which bears meaning on countless different levels (from the paper on which it was written, the way in which it was written, in addition to the many vectors of meaning carried by each word, each combination of words); further, meaning here is also inevitably created as much by the author as by the text itself and the reader. Given this multi-layered complexity to texts, there is no reason to believe that a text cannot be an object. Michaels, by contrast, seems to want a text, a reader, and a model of reading or interpreting texts that is considerably more conservative: first of all, from his point of view a text simply is understood to consist in "certain crucial features (e.g. [and minimally], certain words in a certain order), and any object that reproduces those features ... will reproduce the text" (3); likewise, a reader is understood to read texts for meaning which in turn simply is understood to be identical with what the author intended—a position that, as far as I can tell, Michaels first outlined in *Against Theory* and that he continues to hold in *The Shape of the Signifier*.

For the sake of clarity, again, the argument in short: if you believe that an author's intentions are important in the interpretation of the meaning of a text, then you do not believe that language can be approached as a material object, and if you believe that language can be approached as a material object, then you do not believe that an author's intentions are important—thereby believing in meaninglessness and the non-existence of texts. This is an argument whose roots partly extend back to an impassioned controversy that erupted in 1982 after Michaels and Steven Knapp published their essay "Against Theory" in *Critical Inquiry*. Here they argued, as Michaels does in 2004, not for a different position on this axis of intentionality/materiality but, rather, that the axis itself is both misleading and problematic—one reason being that there is no such thing as intentionless language for if, Michaels and Knapp propose as an example after John Searle,<sup>10</sup> a computer produces language it is actually only producing something that appears as language (and so it is not language at all).

10 See John Searle's "Chinese Room Thought Experiment" in *Minds, Brains, and Science* for his controversial attempt to refute the claim that computers have minds and thus can think and use language as humans.

The attempt to make a distinction between computers thinking (or computers simply producing what appears to be language) and computers having a mind (or computers actually understanding the language they produce) is at the heart of the materialist theory of strong Artificial Intelligence. As Searle puts it, “[A]ccording to strong AI, the computer is not merely a tool in the study of the mind, rather the appropriately programmed computer really *is* a mind in the sense that computers given the right programs can be literally said to *understand* and have other cognitive states” (417). Those who believe in strong AI, then, believe that with the right program a computer can be said to have a mind and thus with the right program the computer can produce (intentional) language; likewise, since what matters for these proponents of strong AI is not the matter (human or machinic) but the organization of the matter (again, the right or wrong program), such a position is inherently dualistic: mind is wholly independent of body. In fact, the mind is both so independent from and of greater consequence than the body that the body can be dispensed with altogether. Searle attacks this view not by turning our attention back to the primacy of the body (in the way in which Katherine Hayles, Mark Hansen, and other theorists of the posthuman do) but by arguing that computers only *appear* to have intelligence and to understand their inputs and that the simulation of intelligence is hardly what counts as intelligence (which, for Searle, is demonstrated by intentionality and/or the semantic, rather than syntactic, content of language). Such a position, while materialist, is clearly a caricature of Howe and Mouré’s interest in preserving or exploring the material aspects of the word.

Now, while the “Against Theory” essay along with the debates between John Searle and proponents of strong AI are well over twenty years old (although still well-represented by such thinkers/scientists as Ray Kurzweil and Hans Moravec), Erin Mouré’s work since at least 1996 stands as a testimony not only to the continued relevance of thinking through intentionality alongside materiality (I could even argue that her work stands as a testimony to the fact that the axis which so perturbs Michaels has either been displaced or that it never existed, that the two ends of the axis fold in on each other), but her work alongside others producing computer-generated poems is also a testimony to the fact that the relevance of the issues raised by Artificial Intelligence has hardly waned.<sup>11</sup> Beginning

11 In addition to the aforementioned flarf poetry, Nobel-prize winning neuroscientist Gerald Edelman insistently continues on the work of demonstrating the inseparability of mind and brain and thus the wrongheadedness of proponents of strong AI in such works as *Wider Than the Sky: The Phenomenal Gift*

with *Search Procedures* (1996) and moving to the forefront particularly in *Frame of the Book* (1999) and *Pillage Laud: cauterizations, vocabularies, cantigas, topiary, prose* (1999)—only less obviously so in *O Cidadán* (2002), *Little Theatres* (2005), and *O Cadoiro* (2007)—Mouré is engaged with both intentionality and materiality in such a way that demonstrates how interpreting or reading (computer-generated or digital) texts should not be wholly based on the author's intentions but neither should it wholly disregard the author's intentions for the sake of treating the text as a series of material marks that must be experienced. Her work also suggests to us that the focus on the author's intentions should be shifted to include the reader's experience—what I earlier quoted Bruns as calling a focus on the page “as a place of occupation and activity and not simply one of perception, observation, voyeurism” (67). And although Michaels's axis of materiality versus intentionality may not be an accurate one, what his theory lacks (that is, nuance) can be used to delineate Mouré's poems. I also want to argue that we can approach her work as a critical account of computer-generated poems in general: a commitment to *wholesale* intentionlessness (also a commitment to the materiality of the signifier—the word as a thing unto itself, existing as independently as possible from the writer) is problematically part-and-parcel of the myth of intentionlessness that both fuels those science practices aiming toward objectivity and masks what feminist scholars of science and technology would call a masculinist intent.

### 3.

“Starting new, are the landscapes of poems intentional, the grass blades out of, light” (*Search* 3). So begins Mouré's 1996 *Search Procedures* in “The Life of St Teresa”—“Starting new” as a signal of her renewed attempts to disrupt the lyricism, the hints of a seamless grammar and syntax, and the slight lean toward transparent meaning in her 1992 *Sheepish Beauty*,

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*of Consciousness* (2004), *A Universe of Consciousness: How Matter Becomes Imagination* (2001), and *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of the Mind* (1993). It is thus no coincidence that in an email correspondence Mouré reveals that her prior reading of Edelman fed her fascination with “studying the limbic system and studying brain mapping and descriptions of mental processing”: “the effect on the limbic system of reading repeated speech structures ... there's an effacement of the difference between material and biological, or mechanical and biological.” It is also no coincidence that much of the question-and-answer period following Edelman's plenary talk at the 2005 meeting of the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts was taken up discussing computer-generated poems.

[It is] a new  
landscape where  
the “blades  
of grass” that  
opened the  
poem have been  
dispensed with  
for an  
unsettling, will-  
fully active grass  
and a disruptive,  
incomplete  
syntax.

*Civilian Love*. Such renewed attempts are also mirrored in: the abundant space between prose lines that creates a visual landscape of the poem and thwarts a paratactic accumulation of meaning—meaning instead must be generated by the reader or left hanging, so to speak; the sentences which are marked by (unexpected, oddly placed) commas as in the passage quoted above, leaving semantic content determinedly open and foreclosing on a lyrical tightness between signifier and signified; and a description of landscape that is accurate only in its acknowledgement of the limits of description, the inevitable influence of perceiver on what is seen, the perceiver’s unavoidable position as intermediary between themselves, the thing as observed, and the thing itself. Mouré writes, “Why should the loons mistake you for another woman her yellow hair tousled from the top seen scene on the slough or beside” and further on she states, “Impeccable bearing she said ‘nonsense’ trying to write the poem in one fell swoop & failing, cast it out forever” (*Search* 3). It should come as no surprise, then, that the historical figure of St Theresa who appears in the opening poem is renowned for describing nature not only as if it were a book to be read set before her by Jesus, but that—in its godliness—nature is also unknowable and so infinitely open to study, interpretation, and description.

In the opening poems of *Search Procedures* we are also immediately brought into a poetics that does not emanate from the individual creator but rests unsteadily between a relinquishment of control over the imaginary landscape and the creation of a landscape—a new landscape where the “blades of grass” that opened the poem have been dispensed with for an unsettling, willfully active grass and a disruptive, incomplete syntax. Further along in “The Life of St Teresa” (also the section title of a series of six poems), we arrive at “Migratory Path, or Monarch Butterflies” which, except for the last line of the poem, is comprised of lines culled from other poems in the series (now referred to in quotations). What better way to simultaneously reveal authorial intent by making it clear how the poem was created and undermine authorial intent by making it clear that the poem was created out of a kind of generative mechanism? In other words, by not generating a poem as one could do with a computer—where the programming rules and source text are normally invisible—and instead generating a poem out of her own poems, Mouré neatly collapses the line between intention and intentionlessness to demonstrate that (at the risk of invoking a cliché) it’s always both.

It’s also worth pointing out that it is no coincidence that, alongside the engagement with intent, this book also signals the beginning of Mouré’s use of visual disruptions (or gestural eruptions) on the page. Looking

through *The Green Word*, a selection of her work spanning 1979 to 1992, there is a distinct lack of the boxes, lines, and shadings that find their way into *Search Procedures*. In particular, following “The Life of St Teresa,” in “Memory Penitence / C o n t a m i n a t i o n É g l i s e”—the empty spaces between the letters drawing attention to the page as a plane of inscription rather than a transparent backdrop for meaning—she writes underneath an unsettlingly incongruous grey rectangle that “gestures words are.” Likewise, in “Human Bearing” she writes:

The argument extends over several planes  
Planar approaches to the word, mot, palabra, an idea  
The ideas in words, not things  
Speak of these interruptions! (27)

Reworking William Carlos Williams’s “no ideas but in things” such that the materialist emphasis is on the word itself rather than on the things of the world which are then translated into words, Mouré then turns away from the possibility of a direct treatment of “the thing” and turns toward a situated, relational (or “planar,” as in neither pure nor objective) treatment of the word as a material object. Further, as if anticipating a too-easy account of her work as non-referential, meaningless, and as only interpretable by an appeal to the reader’s perceptions and experiences, the invocation to “Speak of these interruptions!” reminds us that the subject (reader or author) unavoidably stands between the word-as-thing and its representation. Demonstrating that a text’s physical features are as important as its author’s intentions, the text also collapses Michaels’s problematic axis and brings us to question whether or not, in his zeal to critique contemporary writing, he creates a false binary between (1) contemporary readers/writers who are so embodied (or situated) in their approach to the text that the text is effaced by readers, their perceptions, their bodies and (2) contemporary readers/writers that approach the text as an embodied entity so that they, their perceptions, and bodies, are effaced by the text. Mouré shows us that—not surprisingly but in contrast to Michaels, critics of computer-generated poems, and strong AI theorists—the actual state of readers/writers lies somewhere between.

Returning to my claims above, Mouré is also one of the few women to, first, have adopted a generative writing practice commonly associated with a distinctly male-dominated literary lineage that includes Americans John Cage, Jackson MacLow, William Burroughs, Harry Mathews, and con-

tinues with certain contemporary digital poetry practitioners who, again, are mostly men (for instance Simon Biggs of England, Kominos Zervos of Australia, and Jim Andrews of Canada). Further, there are, of course, many women currently writing and publishing poetry online that is interactive, Flash-based, hypertextual, or simply algorithmically produced—a few examples are Annie Abrahams of France, Caroline Bergvall of England, Mez (or Mary-Anne Breeze) of Australia, and Aya Karpinska of the U.S. There are very few women indeed who are publishing algorithmically-produced poetry in book form—an odd fact given the vast numbers of men who have done so at least since the 1960s. Secondly and more significantly, Mouré has also appropriated such a practice as a way to reveal how, on the one hand, any writing that effaces the material presence of both the page and the word in an attempt to provide unencumbered access to meaning lacks an acknowledgement of certain ideological underpinnings—a stance that is clearly derived from language poets such as Ron Silliman who, in his early essay “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World,” argues that referentiality in general carries with it the unacknowledged ideological influence of capitalism (123). And, on the other hand, Mouré highlights how generated writing in particular often fails to acknowledge both the impossibility of a purely generated, purely intentionless writing (free of ideology) and the masculinism in having such pretensions to purity. This latter aspect of her work is bolstered by a substantial number of feminist critics, philosophers, and scholars—among them Donna Haraway, Sadie Plant, and Alison Adam<sup>12</sup>—who have shown how myths about Man go hand in hand with myths of objectivity and scientific progress, understood here to similarly go hand in hand with generated writing that is supposedly free of intention.

*Search Procedure's* “Migratory Path, or Monarch Butterflies,” which leads into the computer-generated poems of *Pillage Laud*, shows us how such poems are not (in Charles O. Hartman’s words) “thought devolving into mechanism and a machine struggling toward what looks like thought” (65); rather, these poems are instantiations of how machines are culturally encoded, of how machines can mask both the maker’s and the user’s intentions, and therefore of how Artificial Intelligence tools such as text generators embody not machinic thought but thoroughly human, thoroughly gendered thought. Thus, to counter Michaels once more, rather than claim

12 See Donna Haraway’s *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), Sadie Plant’s *Zeroes and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (1997), and Alison Adams’s *Artificial Knowing: Gender and the Thinking Machine* (1998).

that “marks produced by chance [or by the computer] are not words at all but only resemble them” (“Against” 20)—a claim he makes to protect language from the encroaching machine and to restrict linguistic meaning to that which is identical with the author’s intentions—I argue that marks produced by chance are in fact produced by humans using language, using words. There is humanness and language all the way through.

#### 4.

“The seizure of speech tonics the her traits. // What about the trait produced by machine, / is it without intention?” (4). So Mouré writes in the opening poem of *O Ciudadán* (2002), creating an uncomfortable juxtaposition between the first and second lines of scientific discourse on language—turning pronoun into adjective, making language work against itself—with a syntactically straightforward question about the status of machinic intention. This question, however, is not one that the later books answer—instead the question is a clear articulation of a lurking preoccupation in *Search Procedures* that, while never explicitly named as such, becomes a full-blown fascination in the pair of pre-millennial books *A Frame of the Book* and *Pillage Laud*. However, because *Pillage Laud* stands the risk of being passed over as gimmicky, unsubstantial, or, as one reviewer narrowly describes it (and in my mind an even worse fate), as “an emotional story of lust, frustration, and political intrigue” (Blomgren 43), I want to suggest that a thorough reading of this book (and, more importantly, of computer-generated poems in general) is a pre-emptive necessity—one that can in turn be used to read *A Frame of the Book*’s investigation of the problems of description, perception, and “facticity,” as well as the book’s generated poems such as “Thrum” (with its Dickinson-inspired variants) and “14 Descriptions of Trees” (with its mixing, remixing, and rewriting of its own lines).

Beginning with its method of composition, Mouré writes in the epigraph:

*Pillage Laud* selects from pages of computer-generated sentences to produce lesbian sex poems, by pulling through certain found vocabularies, relying on context: boy plug vagina library fate tool doctrine bath discipline belt beds pioneer book ambition finger fist flow.

In the final page of the book, titled “Pillage’s Lauds,” the sentences have been generated using Charles O. Hartman’s MacProse, freeware dating back to 1996 that generates grammatically correct English sentences. Why

With such lines  
that at most  
bring us to the  
brink of sense,  
surely we are  
also led out  
of the domi-  
nance of the  
author-centred  
paradigm of  
intentionality/  
materiality and  
toward a reader-  
and-writer-  
centred  
paradigm.

Mouré chose Hartman's prose-generator for a book of poetry might be explained by his statements on Autopoet, a poetry-generating program on which MacProse is based and that comes out of Hartman's belief that "Language is sentences, not words, and not simple word frequencies" (68); he claims that Autopoet failed because it attempted to imitate "a human poet" and that, disappointingly, in writing and reading the generated poems, "All our habits of reading are called upon, all the old expectations, and then let down" (72). Clearly, then, since an inappropriate poetry that consists of sentences as much as words and word frequencies and that does in fact let down habits of reading is precisely what Mouré works toward, she not only appropriates MacProse as a poetry generator but she does so by reworking the program's dictionary and grammar. Far from Blomgren's "emotional story," we're met with lines simultaneously full and empty of sense, lines about their construction as well as their breakdown: "She is their watcher during the rules' restriction when / the clarinet dreamed, the noun would surrender" (13) or "To read was so comfortable a strip between / the version and your trick" (12) or "What was I influencing? To form / is the music between your restriction and my industry" (20). With such lines that at most bring us to the brink of sense, surely we are also led out of the dominance of the author-centred paradigm of intentionality/materiality and toward a reader-and-writer-centred paradigm that inevitably brings us to question not only our own reading habits (and the ways in which we make sense out of a given piece of writing) but also our own assumptions about authorial intent (as revealed or not revealed through the material conditions of the word or poem).

Thus, there are not many lines in the book that can be used to bolster an argument. As if to also steer us *away* from focusing on the book's semantic content at the cost of the semantic content of the book itself, the very situatedness of the act of writing and the process of book construction, what, for example, is a reader to make of the following: "You are the radiation charm. You are her students. Darkneses / between the victor and the incident upon a packrat have competed, and / every section vacillates" (32). An argument cannot be gleaned here solely from the content—although admittedly there are glimpses of a love poem in the address to a "you" who not only is a "radiation charm" but is also the "students" of a "radiation charm." Instead, the more obvious markers for interpretation (which in turn serve as a necessary frame for our reading of the poems) come less from the content of *Pillage Laud* than from the title of the book (with its emphasis on construction as an act of plunder, praise, searing, and the art of training organic matter into artificial shapes); the front cover (with

“poems by ‘Erin Mouré’”); the back cover (with a picture of a startled author below which is written “Erin Mouré has not separated out ‘intent’ yet”); a loose page titled “HER INSERTION” (with instructions in French to insert the page between the two sections “Burnaby” and “Rachel-Julien” that, depending on whether or not you include the title pages for the sections, gives the reader five or six pages from which to choose); and the epigraphs from Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Samuel Beckett, and the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

To my mind the epigraphs by Derrida and Deleuze provide substantial intimations of the book’s preoccupations—all of which are from books that are resolutely not expressions of original thought but, rather, are expressions of relationality or, again, situatedness; they represent thinking in relation to other books, other authors, other words. The first epigraph comes from Derrida’s *Demeure: Maurice Blanchot*:

Allow me, since there’s not much time, to blurt it out: without the *possibility* of this fiction, without the spectral virtuality of this simulacrum and, as a result, of this lie or this fragmentation of the truth, no accurate testimony, as such, would be possible.

Recall, first, “14 Descriptions of Trees” in *A Frame of the Book* which contains only seven descriptions and one mention of trees; also recall the book’s “Thrum” and the lines “Unable — henceforth — / To decry ‘facticity’ in the line / where she entered through a sound door / the door frame squared off / perfectly / ‘& all that’” (3), followed on the next page by “objectic / eidem” (4). In other words, there are facts, there are words that are facts, and both find their way into the poem, but given the nonsensical “objectic” that is closely related to eidetic (or the ability to clearly visualize previously seen objects) which also leads into “eidem,” a dative form of Latin which denotes an indirect object, Mouré also wants to insist that the perception and description of facts can always only be indirect as both are inflected by the perceiver and their culture. Further, while we may never know which is fact and which is fiction, this element of undecidability does not mean that we must do away with fact or truth altogether—although Derrida is often criticized for being the progenitor of a dead-end relativism, clearly his use of the politically-charged “testimony” indicates the hard necessity to retain ties with at least the possibility of truth.<sup>13</sup> Likewise

13 It is appropriate to mention at this point that the dead-end relativism I refer to above—what might result should the myth of objectivity be displaced—is partly what Michaels is so concerned to argue against in *The Shape of the Signifier*,

Mouré's argument is that while it is not possible to adequately describe the things of the world because one-to-one representation is not possible, this impossibility does not bring us to where everything is equally true (or, conversely, where nothing is true) and where language, a material artifact, can only rest beside the other things of the world. Rather, in a manner that one may call "post" postmodern and that again recalls the philosopher of the ordinary Stanley Cavell, she presents us with a world in which we may arrive at truth, or an understanding of the things of the world, through a particularized accounting that includes the counter as much as it includes that which has been accounted for. Unlike accounts of computer-generated poems that posit the existence of overwhelmingly intentionless linguistic artifacts, Mouré's model of accounting through writing both includes and excludes the author and the author's perceptions and intentions (with, for example, a machine) since the author, the author's perceptions and intentions, are the very things that may occlude access to truth.

To return to the epigraphs, it is therefore not surprising that the second passage that Mouré quotes (from Gilles Deleuze's *Dialogues*) reads: "[E]xperimentation on ourself, is our only identity, our single chance for all the combinations that inhabit us." To create a flexible, ever-changing identity that undermines the conventional view of identity as self-sameness or as singular, intending being, Mouré experiments on herself in *Pillage Laud* by merging with a machine.<sup>14</sup> As she again confirms in "Pillage's Lauds":

"Erin Mouré" is a biological product in the usual state of flux, containing organic and inorganic elements extending backward and forward in time, but tending as do all organisms toward homeostasis, in spite of entropic forces. Erin Mouré is an indicator of a social structure projected onto this organism.

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but where Mouré wants to propose a model of language, texts, readers, and reading that's delicately poised between conflicting poles (between the word or text as both material object and carrier of meaning, between readers as gendered humans and as machines, between reading as interpretation and as perception), the impetus behind Michaels's argument is very different. So while, again, his reading of the tendency in contemporary writing to pit materiality against intentionality is useful for foregrounding what is actually (not) the case in works such as *Pillage Laud*, it is ultimately neither accurate nor compatible with the flexible, continually evolving dynamics in Mouré's poetry.

14 Note that her clear attempt to trouble the notion of a single, unified authorial identity—to embrace the in-between—is carried over into her later 2005 *Little Theatres*, written this time by Erín Mouré rather than Erin Mouré.

Naturally, Donna Haraway is mentioned as a “debit” in *A Frame of the Book*, for Haraway infamously writes in “A Cyborg Manifesto” that “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction ... The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women’s experience in the late twentieth century” (149). In other words, it is the very in-betweenness of being part human and part machine that makes it possible to create new identities, new ontologies; likewise the in-betweenness of cyborg writing, the seizure of “the tools to mark the world that marked [women] as other” (175) makes it possible to create new stories out of “phallogocentric origin stories” that are “built into the literal technologies—technologies that write the world, biotechnology and microelectronics—that have recently textualized our bodies as code problems” (175). And what better technology to rewrite than programming—an essential tool of science that codes the world and that, since its early days of success in the 1950s, also has a reputation of being, as Michael S. Mahoney puts it, “a hard-drinking boys’ club” (170) which couldn’t possibly *not* produce an “overwhelmingly masculine” (172) machine?<sup>15</sup> Surely this masculinism is nicely exemplified by Hugh Kenner’s computer-generated lines that opened this section—“All girls sob like slow snows. / Near a couch, that girl won’t weep ... This girl is dumb and soft” (597)—or, more uncannily appropriate to this discussion, exemplified by the following lines generated by Racter:

Helene spies herself in the enthralling conic-section yet she is  
but an enrapturing reflection of Bill. His consciousness  
contains a mirror, a sphere in which to unfortunately see  
Helene. She adorns her soul with desire while he watches her

15 In her essay “Knowing Subjects: AI from Feminist Philosophy,” Alison Adam pinpoints one crucial way in which gender bias finds its way into AI research: “I argue that the major part of symbolic AI research is predicated on the ‘S knows that P’ of traditional epistemology ... Traditional epistemology emphasizes that examples of true knowledge are only to be found in propositional knowledge, or ‘knowing that,’ rather than in ‘knowing how’... knowing how is seen as subordinate to knowing that ... Without trying to universalize women’s experience, there are a number of examples of women’s knowledge, from the past as well as the present, that cannot attain the status of knowledge because they are not and often could not be written down in propositional form. Much of this type of knowledge has to do with bodies and the looking after of bodies, the traditional domain of women as opposed to men’s life of the mind ... This emphasizes the historical connection between women’s ways of knowing as irrational and masculine knowing as rational and therefore superior. It is the rational component that is formalizable in AI systems” (329–31).

and widens his thinking about enthralling love. Such are their reflections. (unpaginated)

Intentional or  
not, politically  
progressive or  
not, such  
computer-  
generated  
poetry  
ultimately does  
not escape from  
the masculine  
machine.

While Racter tells a sympathetic tale of a woman who, à la 1980s feminism, is oppressed by a ubiquitous patriarchal gaze that can only see her as an “enrapturing reflection of Bill,” Helene never emerges as more than a rather pathetic figure who “adorns her soul with desire.” Intentional or not, politically progressive or not, such computer-generated poetry ultimately does not escape from the masculine machine.

Given lines such as “To intend forms me. The beauties’ fevers / are the velocity—a brilliant library—to my device” (59), Mouré’s computer-generated poems strike at the heart not only of the masculinism lurking in the machine but also of the so-called strong version of Artificial Intelligence (exemplified by standard poetry generators) which involves believing that “an appropriately programmed computer really is a mind” (Adam 50). Not only is the computer not a mind because it lacks its own intentionality outside of the user’s but so too is it not a mind because it is divorced from a perceiving and, especially, gendered body unavoidably enmeshed in culture. However, we must be wary of granting a (romantic) specialness to human intentionality—after all, the point of dividing the responsibility for the creation of the poems between human and machine is to disrupt the singularity of human identity, to force human identity to intermingle with machine identity. Rather, I want to suggest that—just as the answer now must be “yes” to the question “Might the core of verse park its hat?” posed in the passage that opened this section, and insofar as “the core of verse” is no longer the direct, controlled expression of a human exemplar—the core of the machine is also shifting, transforming into a practice thoroughly and self-consciously imbued with the human, with all of the human, in all of its variability.

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