

Research Overview

tickertext1: New Media Poetics of Occasion

Jason Camlot
Concordia University

Digital communication technologies provide new possibilities for the poetic mode known as “occasional poetry.” Understood by literary scholars to mean poems written specifically for occasions of note, this kind of poetry is traditionally public, communal, and written with the intent to be shared in performance, and it has numerous generic manifestations. The generic category includes Greek odes praising the feats of Olympians (performed with choral arrangements and bodily movement), wedding songs (epithalamia), and funerary songs (dirges), as well as poems written in quick response to events of seemingly historical import—for example, Alfred Tennyson’s narrative poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” published in the *Examiner* not too long after the notorious, ill-fated campaign of the British cavalry during the Crimean War (1854). Tennyson composed that poem while holding the station of Poet Laureate to the British monarchy. One of the roles of the poet laureate (in Britain, in particular), has been to generate public poems commemorating significant state occasions; for example, Andrew Motion’s poem for the Queen Mother on the occasion of her 100th birthday, which is a birthday poem framed as an epithalamium, opening as it does with the lines, “My dream of your birthday / is more like a wedding” (Motion, 2002, p. 55). Similar occasional poems for “official” occasions composed by American poets (if not always poets laureate) include Robert Frost’s poem written in commemoration of John F. Kennedy’s 1961 presidential inauguration and Maya Angelou’s more recent inauguration poems for Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. The opening lines of Frost’s (1961) poem for Kennedy articulate the public, official spirit and dutiful sense of purpose informing this mode of occasional poetry:

Summoning artists to participate
In the august occasions of the state
Seems something artists ought to celebrate.

(Frost, 1969, p. 422)

In Tennyson’s century (the Victorian period, my primary area of research), a more private form of occasional verse was a very common feature of scrapbooks and albums, in which family members would copy meaningful stanzas from favourite verses or

Jason Camlot is Associate Professor and Chair, Department of English, Concordia University, 1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. West, Montréal, Québec H3G 1M8. Email: camlot@alcor.concordia.ca . Website: <http://jasoncamlot.com> .

compose their own poems on occasions of familial significance, such as when the cousins from Germany were in town for a summer visit. A more public version of this last, decidedly amateur mode of Victorian occasional verse can be found in the numerous poems written by citizens of the empire in praise of momentous events of national pride, such as the Great Exhibition of 1851, which inspired dozens of poetic efforts, including such anonymous works as *The Great Exhibition: A Poetical Rhapsody By a Visitor* (1851), *The Exhibition Lay* (1852), and *The Year 1851* (published in 1852).

It was an opportunity that arose during Concordia University's preparations for what may be the Canadian academic's equivalent of the Great Exhibition—i.e., the annual Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences—that led me to consider how texts sent across short message service (SMS) systems, Facebook updates, and Twitter entries (tweets) possess, in new media form, certain elements that I associate with the occasional poem and the public/private divide that informs its history. What is a Facebook update or tweet if not a ubiquitous manifestation of occasional near-haiku, written to mark a (time-stamped) moment in words, shared with a specific public or community of readers in mind, and composed within specific formal constraints (140 character spaces) defined by the medium? That is what I was thinking when I was offered

**View of LED stock ticker as seen from
boulevard de Maisonneuve**



the opportunity to “do something with” the LED stock ticker that overlooks the mezzanine of Concordia University's John Molson School of Business (and is visible from the busy thoroughfare of rue Guy and boulevard de Maisonneuve) during the 10-day period of the Congress (May 28–June 4, 2010). When someone offers you a huge LED ticker to do with as you please for a couple of weeks, you do not say no.

I sketched out a concept and developed it with the coding and design work of computation arts student Matthieu Tremblay and assistance from members of Lab 6 ½. While the poetic “occasion” defined the logistical parameters of what I would do and certainly came to inform the scenario of textual production and exchange that we worked to set up, other key organizing concepts that informed the initial development of the interface and communication circuit that became *tickertext1* were remediation, compositional constraint, and live solicitation.

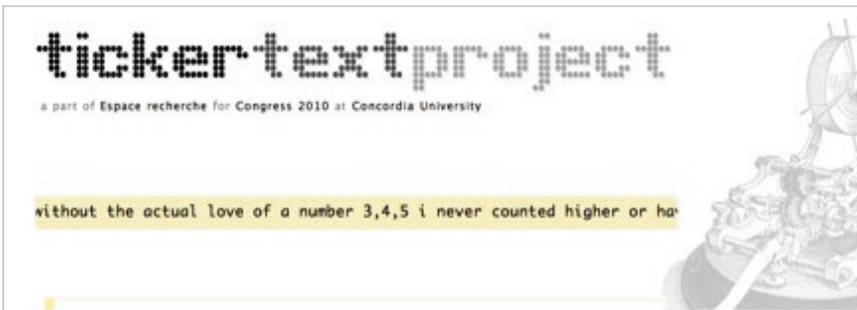
Remediation

tickertext1 approached the production and dissemination of “poetic” texts in relation to informing elements of the historical stock ticker: moving text, instantaneous or live telecommunication, the periodic update, and telegraphic brevity. We were inspired, initially, by what the original stock ticker was as a communication technology. Ticker

tape was a means of transmitting stock-price information over telegraphic lines (circa 1870-1970). A narrow paper strip ran through a stock-ticker machine and printed abbreviations of company names with price and trade-volume information using a special alphanumeric typewriting machine. It was called the “ticker” because of the sound the machine made as paper passed through it, but also because of the machine’s temporal relation to information. Thomas Edison’s Universal Stock Ticker (UST, developed in 1869) has obviously left traces in contemporary digital stock tickers, insofar as the linear delivery of stock quotes across an elongated, horizontal plane preserves key formal elements of the medium as it was originally developed. In the digital world, there is no practical reason trade information needs to be communicated in this particular format. The stream of digitized text and numbers moves across a tape-shaped screen as if in homage to the paper tape that once curled off the old stock-ticker machine.

Content for *tickertext1* was generated using a Twitter-like Web interface that allowed a user to enter only text up to 140 characters. The text box replicated the shape and look of a horizontal piece of tape and thus did not allow for lineation (line breaks), paragraphs, or any tiered interruption of the text entered. Contributors needed only to log on to the *tickertext1* site, compose a text within the constraints set by the com-

Detail of the streaming online *tickertext1* ticker



position box, and submit it. Once submitted, the text was reviewed by a ticker-tape monitor (me), authorized, and sent up “live” to stream both on the Web-based ticker and on the publicly displayed LED ticker of the business school.

Constraint

While Twitter is presently used by celebrities to tell us what they are eating for breakfast and by individuals to report upon public news events as they unfold or simply to share personal thoughts and information, it has also become a venue for literary experimentation.¹ Just as American poet A.R. Ammons (1993) can be said to have explored the formal implications for the long poem of paper tape in *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (which was composed on a single roll of adding tape), contemporary writers have approached the medium as a creative interface of constraint. Writers of Twitter poetry and fiction work within the limits of the medium to explore its implications for poetic and narrative expression. Contributors to *tickertext1* were asked to think about their work in this vein. And, in addition to the SMS character limit, I imposed another formal constraint upon users, demanding that any *tickertext1* entry must, in some way, enact

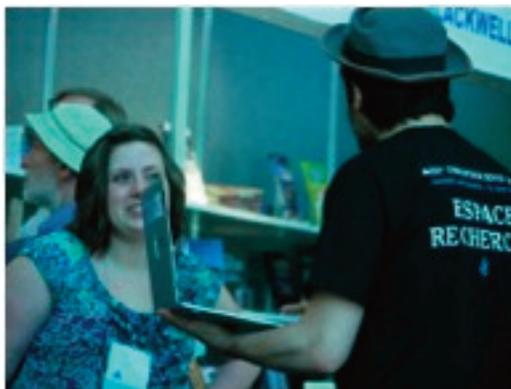
the spirit of the alphanumeric content generated by Edison's original UST system. Thus, a poem or story had to have something of a mixture of letters and numbers to it. It could have actual numbers integrated into the words. It might refer to numbers, count things, evaluate experiences numerically, or engage with this conceptual constraint in novel ways. Submissions ranged from the instrumentally banal (book vendors calling for delegates to come to booth number such-and-such) to poignant and powerful alphanumeric meditations on interpersonal communication, love, and temporality.

Solicitation

Submissions were actively solicited from users, and again, this is an idea that intrigued me. As consumers we are used to being solicited either to consume a product or to provide information on our preferences within circuits of consumption. As scholars and writers, we may occasionally be solicited to contribute work toward a special issue of an anthology or journal. But for the most part, we are not approached to produce a brief poem, on demand, for immediate publication within the context of a shared, communal event. For *tickertext1* I employed "tickertext monitors" (student volunteers) to carry MacBooks and circulate among the vendor booths of the large Congress book display with the aim of soliciting contributions from Congress attendees. This resulted in a continuous stream of live content generated by delegates of the Congress and provided a sense of urgent personal and literary communication tied directly to the occasion of this time-specific gathering.

During the 10-day period of this project, over 500 ticker-texts were submitted and streamed for public viewing on the LED stock ticker and on the Web. A site archiving

A tickertext1 monitor solicits a poem from a Congress delegate



the entire project, including photos, video, and the full set of submissions can be found streaming online at <http://tickertext.concordia.ca>.² There is much to say about the different kinds of texts that were submitted, the way the constraints were approached, and the effect of having the alphanumeric, poetically conceived texts of numerous individual contributors streaming in a very public venue alongside each other. Key tonal and generic categories that

emerged include imaginary propositions ("Meet me on the 165. We'll go up to the mountain and down again in no time [Anonymous]"); time-specific, quotidian observations and questions ("I wonder how many bicycles there are in Montréal? [Anonymous]"); quirky personal declarations that seem rooted in recent activities ("Chicken nugget lover since 1988. [Goldie]"; "2 people just got Fabio-ed by 2 birds. [Jordan T]"); and statements that pertain specifically to the events of the Congress, as when ex-

hibitors announced (via the ticker) sales on specific books at a certain booth, or when students lamented having missed one of the many opportunities to eat for free at scheduled society cocktails (“2bad I missed the free food. I am one unlucky guy. [Brian Li]”). Many of the contributors became very self-conscious of their numeric obligations and of the SMS-based character constraint that limited what could be written, as in this entry that conflates the constraint of amorous relationships (and the possibilities of escape from them) with the number of character spaces available to write a ticker-text poem (and, of course, echoing a Paul Simon lyric, as well): “One hundred and forty ways to leave your lover. I’m at number seventy-two. [Anonymous].” Such a contribution seems to want to assert that each keystroke represents a choice, an action, that will have real-life meaning and consequences, even as it occurs within a set of platform-based procedures and protocols.

One of the primary and most interesting generic characteristics that seems to emerge from the bulk of the contributions is a kind of personal abstraction that is vaguely defined in Frank O’Hara’s (1973) tongue-in-cheek (yet not flippant) “Personism: A Manifesto.” Personism, O’Hara writes, “does not have to do with personality or intimacy” but is defined minimally in a formal sense, by the fact that it is designed “to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself)” through the medium of poetry (p. xiv). The immediacy of the occasion, combined with the opacity of the genre of communication (a poem, instead of a phone call, for instance), results, according to O’Hara’s account, in a mode of personal expression that “is verging on a true abstraction for the first time” (p. xiv). O’Hara locates his “discovery” of Personism in a moment when he was writing a love poem to someone: “While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born” (p. xiv).

One of the serious points O’Hara was trying to make in this less-than-serious manifesto about the mode of poetry he was helping to introduce (and which has since been described as New York School poetics) was that the poetic equivalent to action painting and abstract expressionism might just be the temporally located speech act, directed toward an interlocutor, but abstracted from its grounded discursive occasion. So, a declaration of love captured in a poem, rather than spoken in a phone conversation. The proliferation of mobile media that can be used for the expression of immediate occasions of experience may represent an elaboration of O’Hara’s example of the love poem. The ticker-text, as a genre, seems to possess a tone of the abstracted occasion that informed much of the poetry of the New York School, just as the tweet or Facebook update can be understood to represent a new media extension of the contemporary avant-garde’s conception of abstraction in poetry as a novel form of “personal removal” (O’Hara, 1973, p. xiv). The pleasure of the *tickertexts* installation—what made it fun, and quite often funny, to read from the LED ticker—was the abstracted nature of the often personal declarations that appeared, relentlessly, as a streaming public feed. In this sense, the ticker-text, which I have been describing as one formal manifestation of a new media poetics of occasion, may also be understood as a mode of new media Personism.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. See, for example, stories about Ian Bogost and Ian McCarthy's Twitter performance of a chapter from James Joyce's *Ulysses* ("Twitter goes literary," 2009) or Arjun Basu's use of Twitter to compose a genre of microfiction he calls "twisters" (Hibbs, 2011).

2. A second iteration of the project—*tickertext2*—which deployed the ticker-text interface within a very different set of concepts and constraints, developed in collaboration with DHC/ART's Jenny Holzer exhibit and Concordia University's FOFA gallery, ran successfully from September 14 to November 14, 2010. For more information about *tickertext2*, see <http://tickertext2.concordia.ca>.

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