ELIZABETH BISHOP’S 1974 poem “Five Flights Up” describes a dog owner’s anthropomorphizing attempt to shame his pet. The owner’s statement “You ought to be ashamed!” works two ways—a speech act intended to produce the dog’s shame, it also, paradoxically, would like to claim that that shame already should have originated with the dog. Shame involves thinking about what others think of you and, as the poem wryly suggests, knowing that “you” are a “you.” The joke, that is, is that “obviously” the dog has “no sense of shame,” or, anyway, it would be difficult to verify whether it has the complex self-awareness that could help us decide whether it is “shameless” or not. It becomes more and more difficult to decide whose shame is whose here. The line “What has he done?”—its pronoun hovering, undecided, over both dog and owner—makes it possible that the shame that the owner expects and projects onto his dog’s submissive behaviors might in fact be his own.

Bishop’s lines emphasize shame as an importantly mobile, intersubjective emotion, evident in the strange grammar it requires. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls it a “transformational grammar,” for “the absence of an explicit verb from ‘Shame on you’ records the place in which an I, in conferring
shame, has effaced itself and its own agency.” Indeed, in Bishop’s poem, the “I” is effaced, the poet’s voice perhaps projected onto “his owner’s,” triangulating the dyad of dog and owner and subtly suggesting the possibility that her shame, along with his fantasy that he and his dog are watched, is also in question. After all, there are no quotation marks in the poem to mark the ownership of the statement, “Obviously, he has no sense of shame,” another example of the strange “transformational grammar” of I and you, perhaps a suspension of Bishop’s own agency (is she in or outside the poem?) and a gesture to shame’s lightning-fast mobility. As Sedgwick theorizes it, “Shame . . . is not a discrete intrapsychic structure, but a kind of free radical that . . . attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of—of almost anything,” a “fleeting emotion” that is nevertheless capable of instituting “durable, structural changes in one’s relational and interpretive strategies toward both self and others.”

The understanding of shame as a “free radical” that institutes changes in meaning has profound implications for a variety of interpretive situations: I am interested in the role of shame not only in instituting interpretive strategies toward self and others but also in institutions of literary interpretation. What if we interpret the dog that has no sense of shame, as he “rushes in circles in the fallen leaves,” as a figure for what poems do in the current literary culture, circling about amid the question of shame? How does our reading of this poem (indeed, of post–World War II American poetry) produce a sense of shame, especially if the “owner’s voice arises” (and here, we may read “owner” to include critics or the dominant interpretive culture) to call it a lyric poem, to make its I a “lyric I”?

This book revolves around a sense of shame involved in twentieth-century “lyric reading,” producing and describing what I call lyric shame. By “lyric shame,” I mean primarily shame experienced in identifications with modes of reading and writing understood to be lyric, especially as these have been determined by a diffuse “New Critical” discourse by now so thoroughly absorbed as to seem natural. At the risk of oversimplifying the New Criticism, it is fair to say that the dominant conception of lyric, and of poetic interpretation, derived from New Critical theories and established in American universities in the late 1930s (and so influential, many poets and scholars argue, as to produce a “canon of taste” thereafter) contributed to a view of lyric poems as expressive objects that “speak” to the reader without, paradoxically, the reader’s need to understand anything of the history of the work’s production, reception, or circulation. That understanding supposes
lyric to be a genre transcending time and history, and the lyric poem, as one poet-critic recently put it, a “message in a bottle” that “speaks out of a solitude to a solitude,” mastering the conditions of time and contingency.6 Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Poetry* (1938), widely distributed as a teaching tool that dominated poetic pedagogy for the next twenty-five years, also assumes natural connections between poetry, interpretive mastery, formal control, and a cure for existential dread, a cluster that has come to define both the ideal and anti-ideal of lyric in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. They write,

> For in so far as [the reader] appreciates the poem he has a sense of the conquest over the disorder and meaninglessness of experience. Perhaps this sense may be the very basis for his exhilaration in the poem—just as it may be the basis for the pleasure one takes in watching the clean drive of the expert golfer or the swoop of a bird in the air, as contrasted with the accidental tumbling of a stone down a hillside. It is this same sense of order and control given by a successful poem that confirms us in the faith that the experiences of life itself may have meaning.7

Brooks and Warren do not use the word “lyric” here, but as Steve Newman has argued, the Brooks/Warren close readings of even ballads in the opening section of *Understanding Poetry* seek to show a dramatic structure they assumed was inherent to “all poems,” illustrating an interpretive mode that draws its premises from nineteenth-century lyric theory. Indeed, one could say, with Newman, that Brooks and Warren’s readings of ballads, as of all poems, were instrumental to the making of “an American lyric subject.”8

Even if one only dimly senses the values and politics that attach to the ideal of lyric that Brooks and Warren espoused (one so successful that it determines how most poetry is read in universities today), one might have encountered the “ambient shame” of lyric among academic readers and writers in the United States, especially as it attends the writing and reading of “first-person lyric,” the Confessional, and “personal” poems.9 “Lyric” is a charged word and concept: in poetry circles, it is a word and concept disparaged, defended, repurposed, and much discussed. Canadian poet and blogger Sina Queyras’s recent call on her blog and on the Academy of American Poets blog for “New Lyric Manifestos” is characteristic of the lyric shame moment: despite many recent calls to hasten the “death of lyric,” she argues, “what we appear to want is poetry that retains that y as in lyric poetry. We want a speaking subject, or we want to be spoken directly to, . . . to speak.
about something more pressing than what we think others are speaking about. What exactly is that? . . . We aren’t about to move away from lyric, . . . but we can write to something else.”

Queyras’s ambivalent call for a new lyric depends on a host of assumptions about a coherent “old lyric” that have been powerful in determining the discourses of contemporary poetry in North America and that Lyric Shame will historicize and question. The broadest aim of this book is to explore the sources, dynamics, and consequences of that ambience of lyric shame, then, especially as it circles about and gets projected onto the work, critical reception, and reputations of three twentieth-century American poets: Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, and Bernadette Mayer. Each of these authors’ writing has been identified, by different audiences and in different spirits, with the expressive lyric (including that “speaking subject” to which Queyras refers). And given that “expressive lyric” is the chief abjection of a powerful and increasingly canonical avant-garde antilyricism now forty years in the making, it is an identification that opens these poets’ work to shame. But thinking again of Bishop’s little dog, whose shame is it?

Though poems “obviously” do not have selves, it is fair to say that in our tendency to anthropomorphize them (as happens if we think about their “speakers” or their “voice” or if we deem their supposed confessions shamefully narcissistic), they become subject to shame that is not, so to speak, theirs. The “lyric shame” of my title, that is, does not refer to expressions of shame in lyric or even shame about lyric. One of the broad premises of this book is that “expressive lyric” is an abstraction that gets projected onto some writing. More locally, my concern is the projection of “expressive lyric” onto some midcentury American work to produce its subjective voice. Such abstractions and projections can sometimes enable a positive identification, as when Helen Vendler imagines Robert Lowell to have been jealous of Elizabeth Bishop’s “lyric transparency.” In the current academic climate, however, aspects of Bishop’s identification with lyric, for one example of a broader trend, portray her as minor and conservative—articulating a form of public shaming. The lyric shame I wish to expose and explore here is that of poetry idealized as “lyric,” or the lyric shamed—shame attributed to, projected onto, and produced by readings that anthropomorphize poems as “lyric.”

The history of shame about lyric and (or as) poetry is long. For a brief example, the convention in Hellenistic poetry of recusatio (literally, “refusal”), by which a poet implicitly or explicitly refused a conventional
subject or style, tended most often to entail the poet’s halfhearted apology for his unwillingness (or purported inability) to write grand epic themes or meters, as opposed to lesser lyric or elegiac ones. Poetry’s regrettable marginality to public life is another ancient trope reasserted and histori- cized (as either a point of pride, a defense, shame, or a mix of these) by poets writing in English from at least the sixteenth century. Georgia Brown argues in her recent study of early modern poetics that English writers of the 1590s keen to imagine new political and literary subjects reference an ideal of lyric that is productive precisely for its “potentially shameful” associations “with the marginal experiences of privacy, and . . . distracting realms of emotionalism and desire.”

More relevant to this study is the present-day understanding of late-eighteenth-century “Romantic lyric,” which, as Anne Janowitz has argued, has been shaped by a “lyric hegemony” evolved from the 1840s that flattens that era’s idea of lyric into an image of a “secure poetic infrastructure for a transcendent self of lyric solitude.” Scholars such as Janowitz have worked in the past ten years to recast Romantic lyric as a “theatre of engagement for competing and alternate versions of personal, political, and cultural identity” and to complicate the potent, monolithic myth of a Greater Romantic lyric mode by showing the period’s varied and complex researches into identity as a mix of social determination and voluntaristic individualism. Much of the modern and postmodern shame of lyric identification assumes the caricatured figure of the Romantic lyric that Janowitz and others seek to complicate, supposing “lyric” to be defined by unmitigated individualistic subjectivism, self-absorption, leisured privilege, and ahistoricism.

That said, it is not my intention to retell the history of the formation of a “lyric hegemony”; Lyric Shame rather explores one small chapter of the recent history of lyric reading in the United States to consider its influences on the reading, writing, and canonization of poetry and poetics in the U.S. academy. My object in Lyric Shame is to analyze the shame of “lyric” without attempting to turn it somewhere else; I locate its dynamics in modes of reading rather than in individual poems or authors’ canons or in “bad” examples or phases of a genre. I do want to take stock of the canonical pressures that a New Critical characterization of “lyric,” in its latest manifestations as Language and (more diffusely) post-Language antilyric discourse about “expressive” lyric, has exerted—hence my choice of authors here: each of the authors to whom I devote a chapter of this book—Bishop, Sexton, and Mayer—has been identified with (or, in the case of Sexton,
LYRIC SHAME

asked to personify) the expressive “lyric” abjected by avant-garde antilyricism. What happens if we view that identification in terms of a history of lyric reading? What if instead of shaming their poems, we find the varied ways they register the pressure of midcentury literary norms, particularly the ideal of poetry’s expressive privacy that New Critics claimed is inherent to all poetry? Critics have tended to read the figure of the speaker in these writers’ works (even Mayer’s, though to a lesser degree) in such a way that aligns them with the shame of expressive lyric. In what other ways could that figure be read? What new forms of lyric reading might their works provoke?

What Lyric Shame proposes is that these writers, conventionally thought to be “lyric” (whether defended or shamed for it), offer us new inroads through the problematic and interesting interpretive limit of the personal. They only awkwardly fit the “lyric” ideal abstracted and projected on them by both their fans and detractors, and they can even be read to foreground writing and discourse as these disrupt the figure of the poetic speaker that is so often assumed as quintessentially “lyric.” Where does that get us? Even though Bishop and Sexton do not employ radically disjunctive techniques of avant-garde writing (and even though Mayer self-consciously tests the limits of disjunctive technique), we can identify, in heretofore-unimagined ways, their works’ awarenesses of the shame an identification with lyric might entail. Might poems register resistances to lyricizing readings of them without taking on the premises of avant-garde antilyricism? I will read putatively mainstream, Confessional, and expressive works that exceed and test the limits of the New Critical conventions that they supposedly exemplify, a move that opens up new chapters in the history of what Virginia Jackson has called the “lyricization of poetry.”

Much of the work I read here, and whose shame I have often felt as my own, is self-consciously (even ashamedly) marked as “lyric”—overdeterminedly “overheard” and often perplexed, sometimes stranded—revolving around and even pushing against the impossibility of the speakers it has been held to embody. We can read this work to foreground canonical attachments to “personal” utterance as a critical problem full of possibility, and one that neither has to be read to shore up the ideal of lyric (as New Critical lyric-reading norms would dictate) nor (as avant-garde norms would counter) has to serve as antilyric lyric scapegoat. This work is ineluctably involved with and thus invites our awareness of the shame dynamics that enter lyric readings in the late twentieth and early twenty-
first centuries. In this, I am arguing that lyric reading can be understood as, in its late-twentieth-century version, a kind of shaming. Poems are ashamed but have no sense of shame. What can we make of poetry if we try to unashame it, engaging (new? un-? something other than anti-) lyric readings of it?

READING FOR SHAME

In order to introduce some features of the poetic shame culture that this book explores and to preview the kinds of acute intersubjective critical problems that the idealization and anti-idealization of “lyric” raises within that culture, I would like to introduce you to a contemporary poem, “Anybody Can Write a Poem” (2010), by the young American poet Bradley Paul. Like much of the most contemporary work that this study takes up, Paul’s poem mobilizes the most ubiquitous, negative lyric stereotypes that get projected on some poems—solipsistic, rapacious ego, driven to mastery, narcissistic confessionalist, conservative both aesthetically and politically—that have made lyric a shameful identification in discourses of contemporary American poetics in recent decades. Paul’s poem unfolds as a first-person past-tense narrative (that drifts in and out of “interior” meditation) of an online argument “I” has had with “an idiot” who “says anybody can write a poem.” Here it is in full:

*Anybody Can Write a Poem*

    I am arguing with an idiot online.  
    He says anybody can write a poem.  
    I say some people are afraid to speak.  
    I say some people are ashamed to speak.  
    If they said the pronoun “I”  
    they would find themselves floating  
    in the black Atlantic  
    and a woman would swim by, completely  
    dry, in a rose chiffon shirt,  
    until the ashamed person says her name  
    and the woman becomes wet and drowns  
    and her face turns to flayed ragged pulp,  
    white in the black water.  
    He says that he’d still write
even if someone cut off both his hands.
As if it were the hands that make a poem,
I say. I say what if someone cut out
whatever brain or gut or loin or heart
that lets you say hey, over here, listen,
I have something to tell you all,
I’m different.
As an example I mention my mother
who loved that I write poems
and am such a wonderful genius.
And then I delete the comment
because my mother wanted no part of this or any
argument, because “Who am I
to say whatever?”
Once on a grade school form
I entered her job as washer.
She saw the form and was embarrassed and mad.
“You should have put receptionist.”
But she didn’t change it.
The last word she ever said was No.
And now she is in my poem,
so proud of her idiot son,
who presumes to speak for a woman
who wants to tell him to shut up, but can’t.

It is difficult not to notice how often the first thirteen lines figure poetic composition (anybody can write a poem) as saying and speech (“ashamed to speak”). This slip from writing to speech is most glaring in the awkward line, “If they said the pronoun ‘I,’” for we would more commonly think of “saying I” or “writing the pronoun ‘I.’” The line foregrounds the slippage between speech and writing, yet the poem as a whole can be read to proudly assert this idealization of poetry as “lyric”—as expressive speech. Statements by the author corroborate that reading: in an interview, Paul tells the poet Russell Bittner that the poem was “motivated” in part by his mother’s death from pancreatic cancer in 2006, followed by the death of his grandmother three months later, events that turned his aesthetic toward the personal and expressive, we could say: “I found I could no longer write as hermetically and ironically as I had in my first book.” Paul goes so
far as to insist in the interview that “poetry is speech,” invoking William Wordsworth (and thus an expressive theory of lyric often identified with Romanticism) to gloss Bittner’s assumption that the poem is about how crisis can result in an aesthetic turn toward “lyric” virtues understood to be natural—chiefly, the personal and sincere—in spite of their potential embarrassments. Paul argues that his aesthetic shift might be described by the idea that “an undue emphasis on artifice is lost because ‘a deep distress’ humanizes your soul.”

As the comments about artifice, hermeticism, and irony suggest, the very emphasis in Paul’s poem on the trope of poetic speech and its foregrounding of the identification of writing with speech is nevertheless not naïve: to the contrary, it seems knowingly informed by the understanding that first-person poetic modes can produce feelings of shame or the possibility of being shamed by others. It is no accident that this poem’s occasion is an “online” argument: Paul is no doubt aware of the variety of weblogs, most notably Harriet and Silliman’s Blog, on which, any day of the week in the past ten years, one could find invective-filled debates about “lyric” and “antilyric” poetics. Nevertheless, one strong possible reading of the poem is that the author-I’s argument with the “idiot” is that some people cannot write poems because they are too ashamed to engage expressive aesthetics: that is, to express themselves would be, in combination, so risky and self-indulgent as to result in something comparable to disaster.

However savvy the poem is to the lyric/antilyric debate, in this reading, its conclusion advocates a poetics of initially ashamed but finally triumphant self-expression; the impersonal, anonymous drowned woman transforms into the presumably dead mother because the opened floodgates of the personal have allowed such an imaginative transformation. Given what I know of Paul’s biography, this renders his poem’s “I” now not only genuine but autobiographical. The pathos of the poem in this expressive, psychological reading of it is that Paul is both the “I” who feels ashamed to write about his mother’s death and the “idiot” who does it anyway.

However, what happens to the expressive reading if we take the slippage between writing and speech in the poem more literally; that is, what if we read it without identifying Paul with the speaker, the idiot, or “I” (in any combination)? Rather than accepting as rote the idea that “writing a poem” is the same thing as speech, in the more literal reading, we could take “writing a poem” and “speaking” as competing models for the production and interpretation of a poem. Then the poem reflects the late-twentieth-century
concern about poetry’s identification (as a genre) with “absorptive” first-person subjective expression and reflects on the shame of that inheritance of a “lyric” ideal for contemporary poets and critics. What is “ashamed to speak” is not a person ashamed to reveal himself—one repressed or shy or reluctant to engage the personal—but a poem ashamedly entangled in an identification of “writing” with “speech” that has described but also informed conventions of first-person poetic practice and lyric reading since the early nineteenth century.

Paul’s poem suggests how fraught the taking on of tropes of the personal and “lyric” can feel at this historical moment—flagged by the grotesquely hyperbolized figuration of the consequences of “saying the pronoun ‘I’”: if the poem were to take on lyric-reading/writing norms, it would be disastrous—on par with a deadly shipwreck that is figured with connotations (“the black Atlantic”) of a history of patriarchy and racial oppression.19 Here, writerly acts of self-enunciation (saying “the pronoun ‘I’”) and acts of literary identification are not only personally shameful but figured as forms of culturally implicated violence: it is as though to say “I” and to “presume to speak” for this woman (indeed, to appropriate her as a Poe-like object for the expressive poem) will be to have caused her death.

That the hyperbole serves as more than a window into the psychology of Paul or a speaker is indicated, again, by what Charles Bernstein would call “antiabsorptive” effects, chiefly the foregrounding of poetry as writing to the point of ironizing what the poem “says”:20

He says that he’d still write
   even if someone cut off both his hands.
As if it were the hands that make a poem,
I say. I say what if someone cut out
whatever brain or gut or loin or heart
that lets you say hey, over here, listen,
I have something to tell you all,
I’m different.

Even as the semantic content of several lines encourages our identification of written poetry with expressive speech, they emphasize craft’s artifice to the point of ironizing the illusion of poetry as spontaneous speech. The line “I have something to tell you all, / I’m different” depends on italics to make us “hear” (read) this “spoken” difference and only calls attention to the lexical it suppresses by urging us to “listen.” Furthermore, the specialness
of “I” (its supposedly important difference from everyone else) is comically undermined by the fact that it wishes to make this claim on behalf of a universal “you.” In only thirty-eight lines, the word “say” appears twelve times, along with “mention,” “comment,” “speak” (twice), and “tell” (a remarkable total of seventeen verbal-expression words that stand in for the act of writing a poem). Of course, it is the hands that (literally) make a poem, unless one truly does not have hands, at which point the need for scriptural technologies to mediate “voice” or other clichéd figures for poetic inspiration—gut, loin, and so on—that allow one to be (metonymically) “heard” by more than a live audience becomes pointedly apparent.

In this, the poem quietly complicates the very figures—of speech and hearing—that have been so instrumental to abstractions about “the lyric,” figures that it nevertheless also seems (taken expressively) to advocate; “tone” is wayward at best through the next several lines, in which something that could be mocking irony (the mother’s view of the son as such a “wonderful genius”) gives way to a discursive oddity reminiscent of a John Ashbery poem (“Who am I to say whatever?”). Though messy in a way that mimics real speech, the poem nevertheless works against the ideal of “lyric” that the word “speech,” conventionally, codes. Indeed, despite Paul’s claim that poems in his second book forfeit his earlier work’s irony in favor of more straight communication, I have trouble seeing how “Anybody Can Write a Poem” evidences this turn. At the same time, given the revelation of pathos at the end, how can I not read the poem as sincere speech, given especially what I know of Paul’s life?

As Paul’s reader-interpreter, then, I am in an awkward and even uncomfortable position, one that mobilizes (and is mobilized by) the ambience of shame surrounding “lyric” as ideal and anti-ideal. At one level, Paul’s poem seems informed by the knowledge that shame now attaches to the supposed politics of thinking of poetry as the “lyric” expression of a person. However, it also touches on and seems informed by the shame of thinking about poetry without using an expressive-interpretive lens. Should not Paul’s testimony be proof enough that this is a personal poem? Can I not hear Paul’s voice urging me to “listen”? At yet, at another level, avant-garde modes of lyric reading would take Paul’s poem to be shamefully “lyric” or, in the words of the influential coauthored antilyric manifesto “Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry,” “a kind of metaphorized testimonial to the validity of one’s life and moral choices,” whose legibility at the level of the phrase and sentence, among other things, renders it shamefully “lyric.”
The background to this view is all too well known to those who are in the academic poetry world, but it may warrant repetition here. In the 1970s and 1980s, a group of poets now identified as Language poets brought the concerns of poststructuralism to the poetics world, not least through their critique of the “personal ‘expressive’ lyric.” Critiquing a form of isolated subjectivity that seemed to define the limits of both art and political life in the United States, they turned against the assumed naturalness of personal expression in a range of midcentury poetic modes: Beats, Confessinals, Deep Image, and New York School writing. As Craig Dworkin historicizes it, Language poetry “stood in contrast” to both the “raw poetry of the counterculture” and also “the cooked verse of the establishment,” as these depended on the understanding that “emotive expression was . . . the basis for poetry.” What they called for was “artifice” and “intellect” over “nature” and “sentiment.”

For one example, Charles Bernstein’s seminal lineated critical essay on the “new poetics”—the “Artifice of Absorption” (1986–1987)—argues for “artifice” as a poetic and critical value by thinking through a dialectic (informed by poststructural theory) of “absorptive” and “impermeable” qualities in texts. No poem is not a product of artifice, Bernstein argues (with notable emphasis on punctuation marks that cannot be absorbed as “voice”), but “the artificiality of a poem may be more or less / foregrounded,” and though “absorption & antiabsorption are both present / in any method of reading or writing . . . / one or the other may be more obtrusive or evasive” (Poetics, 22). One way Bernstein describes the difference between absorptive and antiabsorptive in his long “poem” is as follows:

By absorption I mean engrossing, engulfing
completely, engaging, arresting attention, reverie,
mesmerizing, hypnotic, total, riveting,
entralling: belief, conviction, silence.

Impermeability suggests artifice, boredom,
exaggeration, attention scattering, distraction,
digression, interruptive, transgressive,
undecorous, anticonventional, unintegrated, fractured,
fragmented, fanciful, ornately stylized, rococo,
baroque, structural, mannered, fanciful, ironic,
iconic, schtick, camp, diffuse, decorative,
repellent, inchoate, programmatic, didactic,
theatrical, background muzak, amusing: skepticism, doubt, noise, resistance. (29–30)

For Bernstein, absorptive and antiabsorptive works “both require artifice, but the former may hide / this while the latter may flaunt / it” (30). And though he imagines many paths to absorptive texts, he focuses heavily on “realism” and techniques that promote an “illusionistic” reading. Quoting Helen Vendler’s claim that a poem is first read “illusionistically; later we may see its art,” Bernstein accuses her of being “very much under the spell of realist & mimetic ideas about poetry” (40). Related to Vendler’s form of illusionistic absorptive realism is the version Bernstein attributes to Ford Madox Ford, wherein

the reader
(a.k.a. beholder) must be ignored, as in
the ‘fourth wall’ convention in theater, where what
takes place on the stage is assumed to be sealed
off from the audience. Nothing
in the text should cause self-consciousness
about the reading process: it should be as if
the writer & the reader are not present. (31)

With this reading of Ford, Bernstein overlays terms of nineteenth-century lyric theory and lyric reading with his account of prose realist technique: his “fourth wall” theatrical metaphor invokes the lyric theory of John Stuart Mill, a point made even clearer when Bernstein writes,

Many nineteenth-century lyric poems involve a self-absorbed address to a beloved, the gods, or
the poet her/himself: an address that, because
it is not to the reader but to some presence
anterior or
interior to
the poem, induces readerly absorption
by creating an effect of overhearing in contrast to confronting. (32)

Though Bernstein does not name Mill, his text draws on Mill’s influential lyric theory, as developed in the 1833 essay “What Is Poetry?” in which Mill reads Wordsworth and Shelley in order to argue, famously, that all
poetry is “overheard” (in distinction to eloquence, which is “heard”). The figure has been central (if even only sometimes tacitly so) to much Anglo-American lyric theory after Mill. Indeed, as I will argue in detail later, it is the Mill-inspired abstracted version of poetry, which attempts to figure poetry’s ideal existence as necessarily outside economies of “eloquence” and commerce (implied by the figure of the audience ideally ignored and ineffectual), that comes to be identified with modern lyric, largely in New Critical appropriations of it, and that a variety of poststructural literary theory identifies against. This Mill-inspired version of poetry, as I will go on to argue, greatly informs the Language critique of 1970s and 1980s expressive poetics, and both in turn contribute to the atmosphere of lyric shame in which Paul’s poem and my reading of it cannot help but participate.

And yet I hope my reading of Paul’s poem suggests some of the difficulty of locating its possible antilyric investments in its technical features, which Bernstein would probably find (to the contrary) primarily “absorptive,” not unlike the lyric of the nineteenth century. It is an interpretive conundrum that Sianne Ngai also raises in her chapter on paranoia in Ugly Feelings, in which she thinks about the irony of the fact that Roland Barthes produces his idea of “writerliness” (formative for Bernstein’s antiabsorptive category) from readings of the classic realist novel: even if the qualities of the writerly text “seem to describe twentieth-century avant-garde literature in its diverse entirety [this] still does not mean that concepts like writerliness can be used as criteria for distinguishing work produced in this cultural context from work that is not.”

One implication of Ngai’s assertion is the possibility that avant-garde or antilyric is, like lyric, a way of reading: thus the problem, as Ngai puts it, of an “excessive reliance on concepts like ‘writerliness’ to account for the qualitative differences between works produced under the material conditions that give rise to an avant-garde and those that sustain an official verse culture.” This matters to my argument insofar as I read Bishop and Sexton as very much part of a broad cultural shift that the antilyric/“lyric” binary obscures: though their works are comparatively “absorptive,” indeed self-conscious about their return to poetic techniques that resemble Victorian or Romantic verse more than modernist poems, they too were thinking both with and against the idealization of poetry as “lyric” in the Millean terms with which New Critics and Bernstein think. And this is a feature of their work that is less clearly seen if we incline to read it through either
a lyric or antilyric reading paradigm. As my reading of Paul’s poem proposes, I do not think we can resolve the question of my (or Paul’s) or the poem’s lyric shame except by turning to something other than the poem’s words to aid us—to the interview, for instance, or to a theory of how to read poems. Put another way, the poem’s words alone are not going to help determine where the shame of first-person “lyric” originates—with Paul? his poem? with myself as his post-Language reader?—for they participate in and perform a slippage between text and speech whose history and problems include Paul’s poem and my reading of it but clearly do not begin there.

My own close readings of poems in Lyric Shame will often work against the assumptions of subjectivity and identity adhered to by the “lyric speaker” model (to which Paul’s poem tacitly refers) that was consolidated and codified at midcentury by New Critics, particularly that the best interpretations of poems cohere around an identification with the image of a person divined through analytic interpretation. Nevertheless, those assumptions, or lyric-reading strategies, as recent work in historical poetics has theorized them, have been deeply ingrained by the New Critical pedagogical norms in place since the late 1930s. There can be pleasures that attend the entitlements native to old interpretive assumptions, which may explain why the exposure of those assumptions provokes shame. Glossing Silvan Tomkins’s work on shame, Sedgwick goes so far as to claim that “without positive affect, there can be no shame: only a scene that offers you enjoyment or engages your interest can make you blush. Similarly, only something you thought might delight or satisfy can disgust.”29 As thinking on shame’s affective dynamics since the mid-1950s has emphasized, shame involves the recognition that some aspect of the world or the self that one was not entirely aware of has been exposed not just to the world but also to oneself.30

Indeed, most interesting to me about Paul’s poem is its invitation to think about not only his shame but my own shame about lyric reading as it is activated by (and activates) the texts I imagine to have been shamed or to be thought shameful by antilyric modes of lyric reading. What a loop! As Sedgwick writes, “Shame . . . seems to be uniquely contagious from one person to another. And the contagiousness of shame is only facilitated by its anamorphic, protean susceptibility to new expressive grammars.”31 The text construed as “ashamed” or “shamed,” as Paul’s poem seems to know, is a space of multiple reflections, and multiple projections, perhaps “the lyric’s” last stand.
SHAMING THE LYRIC

Paul’s poem provokes awareness that antilyric discourse dovetails with and depends on New Critical modes of lyric reading, in effect constituting one of its most current forms. Though contemporary poetry and criticism can seem aware of this, it is a fact so far undertheorized in the world of contemporary poetics. What Virginia Jackson describes as a late-twentieth-century avant-garde “reaction-formation for and against a version of the lyric that could exist only in theory” will be all too familiar to most working poets and critics of contemporary poetry. What she gestures to is a decades-long discursive gridlock in the field of contemporary poetics, one in which, increasingly over the 1980s and 1990s, the call to account for oneself as either “for” or “against” “lyric,” identified (by both its celebrators and its detractors) with interpretive mastery and the expressive speaking subject, felt almost inescapable.

From the perspective of contemporary North American poetics, theories of lyric reading are especially exciting for the promise they hold out to scholars to see what opens up in the realization that the “lyric” tradition against which an avant-garde antilyricism has posited itself (whether implicitly or explicitly) never existed in the first place—thus my sense that poet Lucas de Lima’s phrase “ambient shame” is a fitting term for what I am describing: lyric shame floats free, everywhere and yet located nowhere, precisely because its cause célèbre is not a genre but an entrenched, common, perhaps inescapable way of reading. To recognize this missing lyric object is to open the space to read in new lights a more varied and richer canon of twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetries, one too often parceled into “lyric” and “antilyric,” or “avant-garde” and “mainstream.” And yet, however helpfully theories of lyric reading encourage us to lay to rest that oppositional critical culture, three decades of a “reaction-formation” to the hegemony of lyric reading (a reaction-formation made legible only recently by work in lyric theory) has powerfully shaped how the field of twentieth-century poetry in the United States gets read. Antilyric reading, the latest form of lyric reading, has been one of the increasingly powerful lenses by which to map and historicize twentieth-century poetry and poetics, one that distorts by exerting (sometimes tacit) pressure to read some abjected texts lyrically and with shame.

I could reframe the above to say that both a poststructuralist critique of unified subjectivity and of expressive aesthetics generally, and also aspects
of “Language poetics” specifically, inform my own approach to the work this book considers and (one even can suppose) the theory of lyric reading I draw on here.34 The cultural turn after World War II that informs skepticism of the “lyric” subject—or of the expressive and humanistic subject that the word “lyric” metonymizes—can be located in myriad sources: in psychoanalytic theories about self and subject, the post–Judith Butler emphasis on the performativity of gender, among a range of theories informed by the poststructuralist turn. I focus on aspects of a diffused, diluted version of Language poetics here because, from Language’s initial blend of poststructural theory, social critique, and an embattled advocacy of modernist poetic techniques, there emerged discourses with particular, local, and lasting influence on academic poetics in the United States that nevertheless cannot be located precisely in texts of Language writing or of poststructural theory.

Indeed, in invoking avant-garde antilyricism and Language, it becomes important to distinguish the discrete texts and concerns of various Language writers from the later, more diffuse critique of “lyric” that emerged, in part, in the wake of their initial oppositional writings. The oppositional discourse that emerged across the 1970s and 1980s in Language-oriented circles helped translate poststructuralism and other theoretical critiques of the cultural formation we call subjectivity into a form broadly, and pedagogically, useful to people thinking about poetry and poetics. Language critique of contemporary poetic tastes (largely focused on the “personal, expressive lyric”) and of literary institutions first formed and spread in small circles—avant-garde discussion groups, workshops, listservs, and DIY small-press publications such as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, Poetics Journal, and This. Ideas circulated among small groups of writers such as Lyn Hejinian, Charles Bernstein, Carla Harryman, Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten, Bob Perelman, and Bruce Andrews (to name a few). Gradually, a critique first received (and positioned) as local, radical, and incendiary entered academic and poetic discourses in both MFA and PhD programs, as well as in undergraduate anthologies and curricula.35 A process of gradual institutional dissemination and translation whose complex particulars are beyond the scope of this project saw aspects of that initial critique abstracted into a broad antilyricism that is now familiar in academic communities (some might even say it is passé) and that exceeds any particular Language texts. One somewhat-wearying result of the dilute antilyricism that has resulted is a set of weakly defended, widely circulated critical abstractions—“the
lyric ‘I,’ “the expressive poem,” “the voice poem,” “the confessional poem”—
that serve for many people as shorthand for a range of concerns about po-
etic ethics, aesthetic politics, literary institutions, and subjectivity, and yet
that often function as distorting critical descriptions.

While the process of the Language critique’s dissemination has helped
to make certain elements of poetic subject formation, reading strategies,
poetic institutionalization, poststructural and psychoanalytic theory, and
even lyric reading visible for poetics discussions, in its more diffuse forms,
the antilyric discourses that resulted tended to reinstall, in the abstract, the
very “lyric hegemony” (remembering Janowitz’s phrase) that Language
writers seemed poised to denature and, in effect, to historicize. Silliman,
Hejinian, Harryman, Watten, and several others argued in 1988 that the
then-contemporary celebrated mode was a “lyric of fetishized personal expe-
rience,” in which “experience is digested for its moral content and then
dramatized and framed.”36 They identify this lyric broadly as “New Critical,”
“voice” lyric, thus locating it in a set of institutions and historically located
tastes, and, in their descriptions, articulate aspects of a then-conventional
mode of writing that was all too visible at the time.37 But in subsequent
historicizations of and elaborations on such arguments (some by Language
writers, some by their academic advocates), came the less trenchant claim
that this lyric mode is “traditional,” previewed in the Confessional and a
major strain of post-Romantic lyric with origins in Romantic lyric. That is,
the argument lost its historical particularity, maintaining an abstraction of
“lyric” that unwittingly depends on modes of lyric reading.

Language writers were correct to recognize the interdependence of main-
stream poetic production in the 1970s and 1980s and New Critical tastes,
as the New Critical pedagogical model of lyric reading did influence not
only the reading of poems as lyric but also the way poems were written
thereafter.38 These pedagogical, interpretive modes were made broadly ca-
nonical in the midcentury in several widely distributed New Critical texts,
including Brooks and Warren’s Understanding Poetry.39 Brooks and War-
ren figured the poem as a “little drama” of a speaker whose features the
reader was charged with discerning as “value.”40 For Brooks and his later
collaborator W. K. Wimsatt, “the most fragile lyric has at least one char-
acter, that of the implied speaker himself, and it has a ‘plot’—an arrange-
ment of psychic incidents, with a development, at least of mood.”41 As
Scott Brewster points out, this was true also for Benedetto Croce in his
1937 definition of lyric for the Encyclopedia Britannica, in which Croce
defines the lyric as “an objectification in which the ego sees itself on the stage, narrates itself, and dramatizes itself.”

Yet in a way that resembles the New Critical tendency to assume these features as traditionally lyric, the antilyric readings that followed from Language critiques took those aspects of 1970s and 1980s poems that marked its embeddedness with New Critical interpretive strategies as endemic to a (bad) lyric tradition traceable in Confessional “voice lyric” and Romantic lyric. As with Bernstein’s “A Poetics,” for instance, the manifesto of Silliman et al. subtly locates (whether self-consciously or not) the roots of “expressive” practice in John Stuart Mill’s notion that lyric is private utterance “overheard,” and reproduces Mill’s assumptions. Silliman et al. describe the canonical mode against which they stand as follows: “In such work, a compacted persona speaks a kind of metaphorized testimonial. . . . It is as if a distant judge were being appealed to in modest tones intended to argue one’s case in a voice just loud enough to be overheard. Propriety is the rule.” Silliman and his co-writers’ program for rejecting this Romantic / New Critical lyric inheritance involves advancing an alternative tradition marked primarily by “the use of a language that is not immediately identifiable as speech.” Indeed, in establishing the importance of the avant-garde tradition’s emphasis on “the transformation of speech by writing” in binary opposition to canonical, New Critical “‘expressivist’ lyric” and its romantic tradition, they tacitly assume what this bad tradition is not: they intend to “lay bare language’s inherent capacity to construct belief” by “disrupt[ing] its convention as communicative transparency.” The essay goes on to identify who is in that avant-garde tradition—Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky; Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, and Jackson Mac Low; and themselves), but only very weakly who is out of it (Howard Moss and William Stafford are the few named in this manifesto). The oppositional stance drawn around the question of “speech” in writing marks much Language and diffusely antilyric poetics of the time, work devoted not only to describing an alternative tradition but also to seeing it validated in institutions and through forms of social visibility—new anthologies, new channels of distribution, and university curricula.

As effective as this critique was in changing and sharpening discourse about politics and arts in the United States and shifting the way poems in the United States were read and written, the who is in / who is out critical mode that has persisted post-Language too often depends on a regrettable shaming rhetoric and, especially in its diffuse forms, on what are sometimes
rather broad critical and historical brushstrokes. As Paul’s poem suggests and as I will go on to explore in subsequent chapters, there is need to think further about which techniques and kinds of poem get read as “speech” (and as what kind of speech) and why. Furthermore, the bracing force of the early Language critique was propelled by a hyperbolic alignment of the “literary status quo” not just with tired conventionality, or the inert isolationism of suburban life, but also with (at one extreme) “the new right” of the Reagan era and (more pervasively) “a hysteria that is part of the dominant literary code; . . . a delimitation of the aesthetically possible that has political implications—in the exclusion of difference from normative forms of communication and action.”48 Since the late 1980s, for one aware of Language and later antilyric critiques and primarily sympathetic to their concerns about the politics and economics of art production and distribution in the United States, to feel interested in or identified with a writer deemed in its terms canonically “lyric” or “mainstream” foists on one an identification that is ashamed and shaming—driven by the not unreasonable, if sometimes bludgeoning, claim that one’s poetic tastes and habits implicate political and ethical positions one has not consciously held. In short, to feel identified with a “personal, ‘expressive’ lyric” tradition (of murky origins) or poet might expose one, perhaps even to oneself, in ways that feel shameful and degrading.

One renowned and interesting instance of that enforced identification occurs with Ron Silliman’s term “School of Quietude,” perhaps the sine qua non of shaming critical terms in circulation and one that features prominently on his weblog (Silliman’s Blog). Launched in 2002, it is one of the best-known blogs on contemporary poetry and poetics in the United States. Silliman’s School of Quietude (SoQ) is always the ashamed other to his term “post-avant”—a mark of critical praise that bolsters the self-concept and self-esteem of any writer who feels comfortably identified with and by it. To be post-avant, in Silliman’s terms, is to be in step with an aesthetic advance that indicates the individual poet’s and reader’s political progress and, implicitly, his or her psychological maturity. It describes work that evidences a clear commitment to the politics informing both avant-garde poetics from the 1960s and after and the radical Brechtian modernist poetic techniques he sees as their prefigure.

Though Silliman would argue that both the School of Quietude and the post-avant accommodate a great variety of work (in one post he asserts that there are thousands of working post-avant writers), the two are almost
always invoked to advance an oppositional poetics and a history of “opposing poetries,” as Hank Lazer has put it, whose boundaries are vigorously defended but difficult to determine. Work in the SoQ, which Silliman defines loosely and with very little critical elaboration with reference to specific poems, is thought to be moribund in its faith in and emulation of “traditional” styles. The SoQ, as Silliman sees it, is marked by its claim that it is somehow more traditional than the “adjectival” poetry it takes as its other—that is, poetry that requires a qualifying adjective (avant-garde poetry, Beat poetry, New York School poetry, Language poetry, and so on). SoQ work conceives of itself, Silliman argues, as the “Unmarked Case,” simply Poetry, or the “traditional” norm: “its most characteristic—even defining—feature,” Silliman claims, “is the denial of its own existence. This in large part is because the phenomenon is invisible precisely to those who in turn are defined by it, just as the exclusionary maleness of ‘men’ was once invisible to guys.”

As correct as Silliman is to suggest the ubiquity of idealizations of “poetry” as such, his rhetoric in such statements, which abound in daily blog posts written over ten years, effectively negates possible dissent or even curiosity, rendering whatever difficulties might attend deciding what work qualifies as SoQ as the indicator that one’s tastes or practices are SoQ. It is as though the one who asks, “What makes the School of Quietude a school?” automatically enrolls oneself. Silliman admits that he refuses to specify its particular features (because it is not his “school” after all), arguing that he has no “stomach” for the task of elaborating it, and he claims that, if the label rankles, the rankling itself is symptomatic of the SoQ’s defensive unwillingness to admit its real features and its real tradition. The SoQ is marked by an ahistoricist sense of “denial”—the “pathology at the heart of their poetry.” In Silliman’s view, though SoQ writers try to claim Whitman and Dickinson as their heirs, the SoQ is in fact naïve to its real predecessor or tradition, which is the genteel tradition of nineteenth-century American verse: “Whittier, Holmes, Bryant, Sidney Lanier & James Russell Lowell, for starters.” Thus one of the few defining claims that Silliman makes about the SoQ is that it is antimodernist:

What these poetries have in common, with a very few exceptions (virtually all from the vicinity of ellipticism), is consistency of viewpoint, narrative or expository lines that are treated as unproblematic, language that integrates upwards to meta-levels such as character, plot or theme.
Most of these poetries are set up to avoid at all costs that which the Russian Formalists called ostranenie & Brecht later characterized as the alienation- or A-effect, the admonition to *make it new, make it strange*.\(^{53}\)

Silliman would have us see that, if the SoQ now attempts to claim affinities with the avant-garde, it is because the avant-garde has now become institutionally powerful. Which is to say, the SoQ is less a description than an accusation, meant to catch out writers in their conservative assumptions and in their unconscious pursuit of institutional favor. Silliman wants to keep the SoQ and its “tradition” separate and thus, more or less, refuses “third way” terms (such as Cole Swenson’s “American Hybrid”) as muddying the literary historical waters.\(^{54}\) Silliman’s anti-SoQ posts (and there are many of them) thus seem not least intended to shame out of effectiveness attempts to bring self-consciously “lyric” work under the umbrella of the avant-garde. As the poet Ange Mlinko put it in her defense of the important autonomy of “avant-garde” from “lyric,” “I find a great many different kinds of poems pleasing. But I don’t insist they are ‘innovative’ when they’re not, or that they have some magical relationship to mid-century avant-gardes when they do not.”\(^{55}\)

Mlinko’s claim that third-way terms “insist” on “some magical relationship” to the innovative indicates how powerfully “the innovative” functions in today’s academic poetry culture, not just as an accolade of taste and potential success on the poetry market (which it is) but, moreover, as an index of the poet’s maturity and good politics. Conversely, to feel caught having not known, and thus be identified by the term “School of Quietude,” is potentially shame inducing because the term is meant to implicate not just one’s literary tastes but one’s politics and social attitudes. Though few other poets or bloggers commit to this binary divide in poetics with quite Silliman’s fervor, his rhetoric has been quite effective, baiting many poets and critics into defensive postures and provoking years of debate, often vitriolic, on his blog’s comments thread.\(^{56}\) His willingness to assert categories and evaluative critical comments returns questions of taste to the critical agenda as politics, making its paranoia-inducing challenge all the more effective, for he knowingly “deploy[s]” it in a “strategic” and “tactical” manner; its shame-inducing qualities depend largely on hyperbole.\(^{57}\) Take for example Silliman’s account of the SoQ’s invisibility to itself in 2010: “[The SoQ’s] history & politics . . . should be apparent to anybody to the left of Glenn Beck.”\(^{58}\) What if its history is not apparent to me? I might wonder.
The term induces a mix of anxiety, shame, and paranoia for those who feel implicated by it. Poet Daisy Fried, for instance, seems defensive when she writes to Silliman, after a post of his identifies her (with praise, as it turns out) among SoQ writers, “So do you think it’s automatically conservative to value closure, to be generally accessible in traditional (which is different from conservative) ways, or to not be particularly interested in the opaque signifier? Is it automatically liberal on the other hand, to do the kinds of processes/practices/writings that are lately called experimental?”

As Fried’s question suggests, to be identified with or feel identified by the SoQ implicates more than behavior; it has bearing on the existential statements that make up one’s self-concept (such as “I am a liberal,” for instance, or “I am a great dancer”). To be challenged about the accuracy of the existential statements that make up one’s self-concept is to be invited into the realm of shame—in which the self-as-object is judged according to one’s internalized standards, or in which one’s imagination of how others might judge one is activated. For instance, if one believes, as Fried seems to do, that one is “a liberal,” or even radically left politically, what happens when one discovers that a host of others would regard one’s taste for a writer deemed SoQ as a decisive sign of just the opposite? Given that Silliman never clearly articulates a list of SoQ writers (indeed, he depends on the vagueness of the term’s boundaries) and implies that the school is predicated on acts of unconscious affiliation, this leaves the question as to who falls under its Glenn Beck-like light unnervingly open. As Silliman knows, the SoQ label is magnetic to the extent that it is vague, and even if one chooses to ignore it, according to the logic of its definition, one is (especially) encompassed by it—cast in the sallow light of its accusation of political backwardness.

Silliman’s inconsistency—he occasionally concedes to the possibilities of a “third way” in American poetics or the quality of this or that SoQ writer, only to reassert the importance of the post-avant/SoQ binary again—reiterates the extent to which the term’s popularity depends on its confidence to bring the dizzying world of American poetics into some neatly legible system. It is powerful in large measure for its sheer assertiveness, as the terms of one blogger’s skeptical willingness to take it on suggest:

OK, fine. I have mixed feelings about the “School of Quietude.” I’m pretty sure that, if Ron Silliman ever deigned to notice me, he would
be very disapproving and would probably label me a “quietist” of the worst and most shameful sort. But, it’s clear that this meme has taken hold. You could probably go on almost any lit blog you wanted, drop the abbreviation “SoQ” and people will know what you’re talking about.61

This reader seems to appreciate the consensus (however problematic the base for it) that SoQ builds. And this blogger is not alone in seeming to long for an arbiter of the post-Language poetic-politics who might judge them “in” or “out.”62 Why, otherwise, should writers who, it seems, have little faith in the real value of Silliman’s terms nevertheless engage him either to clarify or to attempt to argue against him?63 The poet Reginald Shepherd accuses the idea of the School of Quietude (and thus inadvertently Silliman) of “petty viciousness” typical of personal attacks by avant-gardes on anyone who “deviates from the party line,” and yet Shepherd’s deep attachment to that line, in wanting to blur it, is clear: he edited a whole anthology devoted to the concept of “lyric postmodernisms” and tried to revamp the term “post-avant” as a hybrid term joining lyric and “antilyric,” eliciting a record-breaking number of comments and a good deal of shamming vitriol in the process.64 Silliman advances an oppositional discourse that has radically changed canons, tastes, and the self-image of poetic practice in the United States and whose critical consequences and meanings are still being worked out.

Indeed, Silliman only represents one late and extreme example of oppositionality that has structured a good deal of academic journalism, reviewing, anthology making, and manifesto making about poetry, especially in the past fifteen years. The SoQ label is a marker meant to signal a failure to be “innovative” or to be grown from an avant-garde tradition, but it is just one late example of a rhetorical storm long in the making. Though some observers might say that the poetry wars are over, attested to by the presence of “hybrid” terms—including Shepherd’s “lyric postmodernisms,” Stephen Burt’s “ellipticism,” and the “third way” that Silliman himself both accepts and rejects—Silliman is still on the ground, policing the border and reminding us that poetic tastes and affiliations are not innocent and can be driven by often-unconscious allegiance to power or the status quo.65 This gives the lie to the frequent claim that the us-versus-them animosity has passed and shows how tenacious is the binary thinking of “outside” and “inside” that allowed the avant-garde to make
its position legible; the convention for many writers “in the field” is still to draw lines in the sand (it can feel impossible not to), if increasingly with an apology for rehearsing the oppositional terms. One might note the title of Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith’s new anthology of conceptual writing, Against Expression, which (for historically important reasons) asserts the history of that work’s oppositions to “mainstream,” “expressive” practice, even as the book itself, by its very nature as an anthology, seems geared for mainstream consumption and pedagogical absorption.

More important, perhaps, we can see the idealization of lyric that incited that oppositional culture, kept in play (paradoxically) by the entrance of antilyric discourse into the mainstream. We can see how widely the issue of the “lyric I”—as problem, preoccupation, and source of shame—shapes thinking about poetry in the field: for one example, take the Academy of American Poets website’s exhibit “Poetry Debates and Manifestos,” in which, as the headnote tells us, “the Academy of American Poets presents thirty-one younger American poets writing about the great debates and manifestos that have shaped our poetry landscape.” Of the essays in the exhibit, at least half focus or touch on topics we could gather under the tent of lyric shame: speech-based poetics then (Wordsworth) and now (Tom Thompson); the “I” in poetry (Rachel Zucker); “First-Person Usage” (Cate Marvin); Romanticism’s bequeathal of “inward-focused lyrics” (Rachel Galvin); “Language poetry,” “self-as-speaker,” and “Confessionalism’s . . . tired modes” (Dana Levin); “personality” and “impersonality” (Geoffrey G. O’Brien, Joshua Corey, Stephen Burt); or, perhaps most revealing, the prohibitions against narrative “closure” and expression in the dominant contemporary lyric culture (Richard Tayson).

This is to say that we are still very much engaged with the problematics and shame dynamics of something we would like to sum up as “lyric.” One consequence of this shame is how it perpetuates the tensions that created it: in the process of writing this book, I have found myself distracted by, and inexorably drawn into, rehearsals of what I risk reducing to “the Language critique” of lyric. I have become aware of how often I test poems, with interest but also too often with a sense of defensiveness, against those terms. This power of the ashamed or shaming mode of lyric reading has been productive, and yet there is an unwieldy pressure to defend writers abjected by those terms in those very terms. Sedgwick’s proposition that “political correctness” might be understood as a “highly politicized
chain reaction of shame dynamics” may be apposite here, and now that the academy has fully absorbed the importance of Fredric Jameson’s notion of the “political unconscious,” it might be time to think about the complex shame dynamics that factor into the formation of not just this but a wider variety of literary debates and norms. What productive possibilities come by reframing the antilyric aims of the avant-garde not as a formal accomplishment, or aesthetic-political progress out of the shame of “the lyric,” but as an ashamed mode of lyric reading—the uneasy twin to the New Critical lyric reading it meant to cast aside?

WHY SHAME?
This book might have been called “The Poetics of Embarrassment.” Recent research in psychology identifies both shame and embarrassment, along with guilt and humiliation, as subsets of what one researcher calls the “shame family,” and all are categorized as “self-conscious emotions.” Self-conscious emotions are distinguished from the more “basic” emotions, such as fear or anger or sadness, for requiring from the subject self-awareness and the ability to self-represent and because they “facilitate the attainment of complex social goals.” Jeff Elison and Susan Harter locate the key distinction between shame and embarrassment in intensity, context, or both, suggesting that “in many Western cultures, everyday usage of shame denotes high intensity and a (usually) moral context (i.e., related to an offense, crime, sin, or harm to others),” whereas “embarrassment denotes low-intensity (even humorous) emotional reaction and a public context.”

In everyday usage, embarrassment and shame are used loosely to mean the same thing, and while in places I feel it more appropriate to use “embarrassment” rather than “shame” or to add “anxiety” to the mix, the intensity of affective response around the abjection of “lyric,” and identification with that abject definition of “lyric,” seems best described by shame and specifically by what Sedgwick calls “shame dynamics.” Embarrassment’s lightness seems inadequate, given the specifically ethical concerns driving poststructuralist critiques of subjectivity and lyric and their avant-garde instantiations. Researchers Brian Lickel et al. claim that “people feel embarrassed when they think that others will see them as flawed, but feel ashamed when they personally fear they are flawed”; shame arises
from an overstepping of moral proscriptions, whereas embarrassment arises from a lapse in social conventions. Of course, poetic choices are social conventions, as Language poetry so smartly demonstrated: Language writing and its theorization brought to the poetics world the news that form can be read as the “political unconscious” of poetry and that we ought to be rethinking the institutionalization of some forms as “natural.” However, part of what interests me about the particular chapter of lyric history that I am endeavoring to contribute to is how it emphasizes poetic convention as involving, if not quite moral (if by “moral” we want to refer to Judeo-Christian ethics that accord with modern written laws), then ethical choices: it is precisely the reading of those conventions as ethical choices that makes them “shameful,” rather than just (as one can imagine certain outdated poetic stylistics that are less intensely cathected might seem) “embarrassing.” It is the weight of the assumption that to follow the conventions of narratively legible, first-person expressive poems constitutes an ethical stance that makes it possible for a poet, when asked in an interview if hers is a “narrative poem,” to answer, “Totally. And I’m not ashamed!”

Shame’s intensity is fitting for this study of modes of lyric reading, too, given shame’s psychological function not necessarily only to regulate but also to raise awareness about the self’s status in the minds of others. In an article presenting research on “the evolution of shame,” Paul Gilbert argues that “shame emerges from our complex evolved abilities to be aware of ‘how we exist for others.’ . . . [It] is a response to feeling an unattractive and undesired self.” And Jeffrey Stuewig and June Price Tangney argue that shame is focused “less on specific behaviors and more on the evaluation of the entire self against internalized standards.” Guilt, by contrast, Stuewig and Tangney argue, “reflects feelings about actions that are inconsistent with internalized standards. . . . When people feel guilt, they are motivated to make reparations for their behavior,” but when they feel shame, they want “to hide or disappear. . . . Shame emotions can act as warnings that we ‘live in the minds of others.’” The earliest psychological interest in shame’s importance as an affect had to push against Sigmund Freud’s promotion of guilt as a primary affect for the supposed “civilized” (and discontented) civilization and the mature subject. Gerhart Piers and Milton B. Singer’s groundbreaking 1953 “psychoanalytic and cultural study” of shame (followed by work from Erik Erikson and Silvan Tomkins) paved
the way for new interest in the emotion and indicated that the key difference between guilt and shame involves what kind of transgression and self structure precipitates the emotion: Piers and Singer argued that guilt occurs when a “boundary (set by the super-Ego) is transgressed,” whereas “shame occurs when a goal (presented by the Ego-Ideal) is not being reached.” Thus, as object-relations theorist Charles Ashbach put it more recently, with shame “the attack comes from the ego-ideal.” This is significant because it is through our ego-ideal, supposedly, that we “maintain our identities”; shame thus “threatens our very being.”

As Sedgwick puts it, glossing Silvan Tomkins, “shame attaches to and sharpens the sense of what one is. . . . The implication remains that one is something in experiencing shame, though one may or may not have secure hypotheses about what. . . . [Shame is not] the place where identity is most securely attached to essences, but rather . . . it is the place where the question of identity most originarily and most relationally arises.”

That shame focuses one on, even alerts one to, the question of having a self and of having one in the minds of others (not so intensely true in experiences of embarrassment or guilt) makes it an especially apt and productively complex term for the nature of the interpretive-affective dynamic I am trying to describe. From the perspective of the avant-garde critique of “the personal, ‘expressive’ lyric,” it is the supposed centrality and authority given to “self” in conventional lyric writing (such as the “early confessional ‘voice’ poem”) that makes it shameful. If the point of the shaming critique is to demote the prioritization of a too-stable image of self, then it would seem right to charge the lyric with shame: to ask it to stand down, to disappear. To be caught in and by a lyric reading intended to shore up the figure of that too-aestheticized “I” subject indeed incites for the writer/reader a desire to retreat from view. Put another way, exposing the priority given to self as shameful is meant as a check to the self’s priority in writing, so as to enable possible new ontologies. Thus, “shame” seems the correct word to describe the dynamic tensions between the critique of self and its hoped-for results: to say “shame on you” to a poet or poem is in effect to command the problematic “person” of that poem, or perhaps some claim for the self, to stand down.

And yet, as Sedgwick’s comments suggest, the shaming of a poem for being too personal, too credulous of its “I” (its importance, its reality), can seem in effect to produce the very “self” that the accusation of shame was
meant to identify and diminish—to construct, even in the hope of diminishing or denying it, the idealized self or ego-ideal. In a 1958 essay on the “nature” of shame, Helen Merrell Lynd describes the experience as involving “astonishment at seeing different parts of ourselves, conscious and unconscious, acknowledged and unacknowledged, suddenly coming together. . . . It is as if a self of which we were not aware” had asserted its power.\(^8\) Without wanting to take Lynd’s comments too far out of context, I would like to wonder to what extent shaming lyric readings of Confessional work such as Sexton’s or of Bishop’s might in fact be thought of as a kind of displaced shame.\(^8\) We may call both the shaming of “lyric” and the shame of “lyric” forms of severed identification, attempts to pull away from the identification with an image of a person. Yet the process of identification with a person has been so long a part of our reading culture that it can seem a sort of horizon or limit, one that the shaming of lyric reproduces in negative form. To say “this poem should be ashamed of itself!” is to grant it a self, after all. In the shaming of a lyric text, we are asked to identify with a self, and a version of selfhood, that we are also supposed to be giving up. Obviously a text has no sense of shame.

What happens when we see the pleasures and shames of lyric readings as rather more broadly “ours” (that is, belonging to some readers) than something to abject, to project onto (some) poems? Might the attempt to disavow and project “lyric” as outside ourselves, out there in the poem, mask a more complex dynamic? What does the abject devouring ego, once a sign of the “poetic” (and now unsustainable and abject), have to do with reading? In trying to disavow it, do we fantasize a lyric that will always be suspended in its preinterpreted, contingent state? Is it possible that what is repressed in shaming lyric readings is a tenacious idealization of lyric? Put another way, could an identification with the ideal lyric subject, one we wish to project somewhere else, explain the idealizing shame about lyric? Even when most disavowed, the idea of a lyric subject reasserts itself as readings of “backward” “personal” lyrics that shore up a definition of avant-garde impersonality as progress. Lyric readings that privilege one interpretive destiny get confused with abstractions such as Victorian poetics, the Romantic or post-Romantic lyric, as “personal” poetry, the Confessional, or the “voice” poem. It is as if something once a pleasure—the illusion of writing’s person—had returned, now in the guise of shame. And it is worth
mentioning that the New Critical idealization of lyric was made possible by cultural privileges we all may still feel shamed by and yet are unwilling to acknowledge or give up.

My sense of “shame’s” promise for opening up new thinking about the history of poetry writing and lyric reading has benefited from recent focus on the productive possibilities of shame and shame dynamics for queer and literary theory.84 For many queer theorists, the concept of “gay shame” (the title of a recent collection of essays edited by David Halperin and Valerie Traub) has been instrumental in imagining “an affirmative queer future unrestricted by the increasingly exhausted and restrictive ethos of gay pride.”85 To think with (rather than against) gay shame has enabled a productive resistance to narratives of progress that have informed sham-ing (and ashamed) readings of texts once held to be “backward” by the standard of “pride”—ones marked by queerness or ambivalences toward modernism and thus unredeemable in a narrative of queer pride.86 I am similarly interested in the potential value of allowing and exploring the shame of lyric reading, rather than repressing and projecting it elsewhere. What happens if we look at those midcentury texts deemed “lyric,” and in some sense “backward” to the project of avant-garde modernist progress, to wonder why they have been asked to serve as repositories of our lyric shame? As Ruth Leys explains in her study of “survival guilt,” the new prominence of shame as the “dominant emotional reference in the West” has involved its possibilities “as a site of resistance to cultural norms of identity,” which speaks to a larger trend, helpful for my work here, to consider the potential good of examining once-neglected “ugly feelings” (as Sianne Ngai has put it) and the cultural forms and subject formations to which they give rise.87

According to Georgia Brown, theorists following Freud had tended to “ascribe shame to the public and external world, and guilt to the private and internal world.”88 Postmodern theorizations of literature as cultural form allow us to rethink those distinctions, as does new work theorizing the cultural forms and identity formations that shame depends on and produces.89 Psychological theories of shame focus on its notably contagious qualities and on its importantly relational and intersubjective features. As Gilbert argues, intersubjectivity, an empathetic response “related to the moment-by-moment coregulation of participants as they experience the feelings of others directed at them,” is the “key process in shame.”90 Gilbert, as a psychological researcher, is not theorizing the reading process
or text, but we might extend his arguments to think about what part intersubjectivity plays in the shame dynamics of recent lyric and antilyric readings.

At the risk of being a bit plodding, let me say that reading can embroil one, to greater and lesser degrees, in moments of self-projection, fantasies about authorial intention, and ideations of the other and the self, whether one is figuring these as “speaker,” author, implied audience, or “meaning” of a text. Reading importantly cannot be the site of “coregulation” that Gilbert describes; nevertheless, if in reading, I experience a sense of shame (either my own or on behalf of the text), have I not done so by mustering the image of another through whom to constitute that sense of shame? Given that shame depends on the actual or imagined presence of a witness, the shame that occurs in either reading or writing would seem to involve a conjuring of either an audience or a supposed writer or speaker. To read (or to figure someone as writing) a text shamefully is thus to socialize the reading process in ways that work against the supposedly private, isolated scenes of production and consumption normally associated with lyric as a genre. As I wrote earlier, to shame the lyric (either to charge it with shame or to feel shame by identification with it, either as a writer or reader) is perhaps to have always already rescued it from its supposed hermeticism and inwardness, even as it is also to produce the “I” who is shame’s object.

What I am trying to formulate is that this often only internal conjuring of a witness that is so central to dynamics of shame and shaming suggest shame’s rich resonances for concerns that, since at least the Romantic era, have been central to theories of the lyric. For those who think about how lyric has been constructed across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, issues of audience and address have been paramount: Does lyric assume an audience for its supposedly private utterance? To whom (if anyone) is it addressed? Does it presume some distance from a social scene in which it might reasonably subject its supposedly “private” speech to shame?

**SHAME CONFESSIONING ITSELF TO ITSELF**

Here it may help to think in more detail about how the concept of American Confessional poetry has been constructed both to prefigure and in some sense to serve as the ultimate example of contemporary “expressive,”
lyric poetics often assumed to be rooted in Romantic practice. This view in effect affirms M. L. Rosenthal’s sense, in coining the idea of “poetry as confession” after he read Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* in 1959, that the Confessional took Romantic tendencies to new (shocking) heights. What we have forgotten, of course, is that much of the work identified as Confessional by Rosenthal and A. Alvarez in the late 1950s and early 1960s seemed new and noteworthy for the fact that, in its apparent willingness to air “shameful” details of the author’s personal life, it seemed to challenge certain modernist inheritances of Romantic ideas about lyric decorum. Chiefly, the Confessional seemed to challenge the widely held assumption that what makes a lyric poem effective is its universal, impersonal, transcendent subject, an “I” whose expression of feeling is more than a discrete self and that we take to heart as “our own.” This assumption had been promoted in the twentieth century, often with reference to John Stuart Mill’s famous figure for lyric poetry from his 1833 “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties”: poetry is “feeling confessing itself to itself” that is yet “overheard” by an uncountenanced listener. Still, the assumptions of this figure are worth drawing out in some detail, for if in some senses the Confessional seemed to challenge them, in other senses it has been credited—to its shame—with epitomizing them.

That for Mill lyric is “feeling” suggests its expressive and personal character as akin to Wordsworth’s famous 1800 postulation, in the preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, that poetry is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” Mill’s presumption that feeling in poetry “confesses” only to “itself” marked a notable demotion of the part that audience, verse culture, social mores, or economic pressures might play in the writing of lyric. Indeed twentieth-century uses of Mill, which are myriad if often tacit, have emphasized the idea that the effect of a lyric on its reader has little if anything to do with historical particulars such as its printing, circulation, performance, or address. Mill figures a peculiar space for poetry, as existing both in and out of the public world; though “printed on hot-pressed paper and sold at a bookseller’s shop,” poetry, if it wants to be *poetry*, nevertheless must aspire to an ideal disinterest, as if suspended in a radically private zone (Mill, “Thoughts,” 97).

What Mill’s figure wills away are the social contexts that might shape a piece of writing—both in its production and in its reception. The poet, ideally, should seem to address no one and yet affect “us.” That is to say, Mill tries to imagine a privacy at once radically untouched by social
concern and yet able to speak universally. If there is a sense of social directedness, even of particularity in the address in poetry, then the Poetry of the poetry is at risk: “But when [the poet] turns round and addresses himself to another person; when the act of utterance is not itself the end, but a means to an end, . . . when the expression of his emotions, or of his thoughts . . . is tinged also by . . . that desire of making an impression upon another mind, then it ceases to be poetry, and becomes eloquence” (98).

Still, the social world that Mill’s figure separates out from “poetry” and that various twentieth-century critics deemphasize in reanimations of that figure keeps winking at the margins of Mill’s page: again, poetry “is printed on hot-pressed paper, and sold at a bookseller’s shop,” which, if it is “a soliloquy,” nevertheless is one that is produced “in full dress, and upon the stage” (97). He concedes that poetry might be written with publishing in view, even for money. So while he argues that poetry needs to conceal or eradicate “every vestige of such lookings-forth into the outward and everyday world,” he nevertheless keeps having to admit the place of the social in the acts of writing and printing and circulating poetry (98).96

One underlying assumption of Mill’s self-contradicting figure as it has been taken up and (mis)read by twentieth-century academic readers is that good lyric poems will be emotionally and culturally legible to anyone who encounters them; the experience of reading lyric will, ideally, take on the immediacy and privacy of “overhearing,” so that lyric is, as Mill put it in an earlier version of the essay, “the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen, in the next.”97 Mill’s image of prisoners side by side turns the particular audience member into “ourselves”—into a generalized “we” who listen(s)—for it collapses the mediations and distance inherent in acts of writing, printing, and book circulation into a spatiotemporal present tense: the poet speaks and we hear. It is a radically dehistoricizing figure, for it is as if to say that, when I read John Donne or Anne Sexton or Leslie Scalapino or a translation of Charles Baudelaire, the material and cultural particulars of my encounter—finding the poem printed on a broadside at a National Poetry Month event, in an anthology or collection (and what kind), in a classroom or at a bookshop or at a reading—hardly matter; in all cases, I would be “right there” “hearing” the speaker’s “voice.” The figure implies that the power of “lyric” inheres in its ability to reach an “us” spoken to (indeed constituted by) an unproblematic, uniform reception of the poem.
The Confessional seemed to turn away from the abstract universalism of this figure (and in this, it is like a wide range of midcentury poetic modes). It did so by (infamously) identifying the historical author and his or her personal experiences with the poem’s supposed speaker—with the airing of personal shames understood as a breach of decorum. As Deborah Nelson puts it, writing of Robert Lowell (the poet whose radically “personal” work led Rosenthal to coin the term Confessional), “[Lowell’s] innovation was to make himself . . . available . . . as a particular person in a particular place and time.”

If this was the radical force of the supposed airing of personal shame in the Confessional, the shame of the Confessional—its reputed emphasis on the figure of the speaking voice—is what makes it a magnified version of the “lyric shame” that this book identifies. Whether in Mill’s claim (emphasized in misleading ways by later readers) that poetry is overheard or in Northrop Frye’s famous rearticulation of Mill’s idea of lyric as the genre in which “the poet, so to speak, turns his back on his listeners” or Helen Vendler’s description of lyric as a genre whose purpose is to provide a vocal script for the reader and to assist in the reader’s ability to “assum[e]” the represented “inner life” of an “abstract” consciousness “not engaged directly in social life” or Edward Hirsch’s assumption that the “lyric poem [is] a special kind of communiqué . . . [that] speaks out of a solitude to a solitude,” the prevailing assumption about lyric has been that it either blissfully leaves out or refuses the social sphere in which it might (or might not) come to shame. If it is “overheard,” the mode in which lyric is overheard is thought to effectively shield it from exposure to shame, for the reader’s solitude is parallel to its own.

This idealization of the lyric intersubjective space as paralleled forms of solitary confinement has been instrumental to both lyric and antilyric readings of poems and is what theorizing the shame of lyric reading might usefully help us revise. New questions arise, chiefly about ways in which we have underestimated the extent to which writers who get assigned to the lyric camp in fact struggled with twentieth-century Millean understandings of lyric and sought new forms of aesthetic and political agency in poetry in the age of high and late capitalism. If we neither attempt to rescue lyrics from themselves nor shame them out of the canon, we find new modes of lyric reading and writing available: What happens, for instance, when we put the lyric “solitary” prisoner in the panopticon, aware that his or her speaking will be witnessed by unseen others, aware that
every private utterance is also constituted by its participation in discursive norms? What happens to the idea of lyric privacy when we can no longer idealize poetry as a form of human connection that rises above the conditions of capital? To the extent that the desire for and shame of audience are both part of our inheritance of the New Critical reading of Mill, shame is both a diagnosis and an attempt at a cure, a method and a mood in which to read. The avant-garde self-conscious refusal to “speak” in poems constitutes a refusal of forms of lyric isolation, but in what sense might it perpetuate those forms?

However, with these new questions, we need to be cautious about reanimating and reprojecting shame. For instance, when Tiffany Atkinson (in an article subtitled “The Poetics of Embarrassment”) proposes “to mount an argument to the effect that avant-garde poetry enacts a kind of aesthetic/political ‘cringe’ away from the apparent facility of lyric and post-Romantic poetry, and as such, does not quite exempt itself from the discourse of embarrassment,” I am intrigued but long for more stress on “apparent.” Though Atkinson claims that she is interested in the productive possibilities of thinking about the embarrassments of lyric, I quarrel with how she also seems to want to reclaim her own lyric shame—outing herself as writing “narrative,” “expressive” “lyric” in her own practice—as a badge of pride. Rather than claiming ourselves “lyric” or not, can we recognize ourselves as all in a lyric-reading culture together, one marked by shame?

Here we might invoke Bradley Paul’s claim that his practice changed in part because he longed for an audience—“Once upon a time, I might’ve affected a pseudo-punk ‘I don’t care who reads it—it’s about the poetry, man, not the audience.’ But that’s not true any longer—at least not for me,” a point that his poem emphasizes, too (“listen” “I’m over here”). We need not read such gestures as either fully lyric or antilyric: Paul’s poem can be read, rather, to foreground the economy of reading and writing that is so problematic for Mill and often suppressed in readings of him, even as it also foregrounds the desire to be heard as a shameful desire to enter into a “first person” tradition. The fact that both poets (“I” and the “idiot”) are “online” is significant, for the Internet is a communicative medium that in many ways approximates the adjacent-cell metaphor so central for those who theorize lyric address through Mill, even as it constitutes a virtual verse community. Paul’s poem defines poetry as a frustrated longing for an audience of hearers, a “whatever” that “lets you say . . . I’m different.”