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Ryan Carr

Lyric X-Marks: Genre and Self-Determination in the  
Harp Poems of John Rollin Ridge

(Revise and resubmit at *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States*)

Cherokee writer and editor John Rollin Ridge is best known today as the author of *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit*, a historical romance sometimes identified as the first major work of American Indian-authored fiction.<sup>1</sup>

Comparatively little attention has been paid to Ridge's poetic output, even though the available evidence suggests that, prior even to his experiments with the prose romance, Ridge may well have been the first Native author to publish lyric poetry.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the lyric genre was a life-long preoccupation of Ridge's, as can be seen through an analysis of two poems, "My Harp" (1848) and "The Harp of Broken Strings" (1850). In these two works, poetry itself, figured through the apostrophized harp or lyre (the etymological source of "lyric"), is celebrated as a means of establishing a bond of deferred solidarity between a socially outcast poet and an indefinitely large community of readers. The two poems accomplish this end in two strikingly different ways. The first, composed in highly regimented tetrameters, defies and even insults its readers as a means of reveling in its own poetic virtuosity. The later poem, composed in liltingly irregular stanzas, envisions poetry as form of therapeutic reflection capable of transmuting historical and interpersonal traumas into a form of utterance that is both beautiful and true.

The rhetorical and formal heterogeneity of Ridge's "harp" lyrics testifies to their author's embeddedness in a history of exile and dislocation that forced Ridge (like many others caught up

in the removals and dislocations that shaped southeastern Native life in the Jacksonian era) radically to re-imagine, at various times in his life, the opportunities for political, personal, and literary self-determination available in his world. At the same time, for all the differences between the two poems, Ridge's turn and return to the lyric suggests that working in that genre provided him a measure of stability amid the vicissitudes of his lived historical experience. Writing lyric poetry gave Ridge one way of insisting that he was in control of his fate, even when political, personal, and indeed literary circumstances seemed to suggest otherwise. Ridge's harp poems are highly conventional in their argument, imagery, and mode of address; but they nevertheless defiantly insist that the experience of poetry-writing can be one of liberation and even redemption.

This paradox presents two problems for any interpretation of Ridge's lyric poetry. The first of these concerns the place of Ridge's poems in the history of Cherokee literature and American Indian literature more generally.<sup>3</sup> Like many of his other works in verse, Ridge's harp poems seem to have little to do, in form or theme, with Native history, culture, or identity. On the contrary, they seem keenly ambitious to participate in a genre of poetic composition that, ever since Aristotle's *Poetics*, has been seen as quintessentially "Western," in the Euro-American sense of that term.<sup>4</sup> Even as the poems strive to imagine poetry as a practice of freedom, they appear to do so in a way that effaces Ridge's particular cultural and historical situation in order to indulge in the escapist fantasy of a history-transcending poetic "voice"; and indeed Ridge's poetry has often been seen, along precisely these lines, as an act of literary self-assimilation undertaken by one anxious to secure the esteem of the dominant culture.<sup>5</sup> The second problem in interpreting Ridge's harp poems concerns the category of the "lyric" itself, which recent work in historical poetics has taught us to see not merely as a genre taken up by writers, but also (and

perhaps more importantly) as an ideology of reading that back-projects a seemingly eternal and universal concept of poetic utterance upon the heterogeneous verse compositions of the past. Instead of studying lyric poetry as stable genre of literary writing, scholars like Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins suggest that we should really study the history of “lyric reading” and the political, social, and ideological formations that have allowed that kind of reading to become predominant among modern critical approaches to all poetry.<sup>6</sup> With these problems in mind, a reader might be forgiven for abandoning any attempt to read Ridge’s harp poems as lyrics at all, let alone as lyrics that have something important to teach us about the history of Cherokee literature and American Indian literature more generally.

Fortunately, recent work in American Indian literary studies provides us with a way around this impasse. In *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent*, Scott Richard Lyons proposes that we read literary texts authored by Indian writers much as we read the signatures inscribed by Native individuals upon treaties between Indians and colonial powers. As Lyons writes, “An x-mark is a sign of consent in a context of coercion; it is the agreement one makes when there seems to be little choice in the matter. To the extent that little choice isn’t quite the same thing as no choice, it signifies Indian agency” (1). Lyons’s theory of the x-mark gives us a way of seeing how Ridge’s harp poems can be read as Native literature—as texts that reflect “Indian agency”—even though they were “made in the political context of discursive formations that never emanate from organic indigenous communities” (24). The point of reading Ridge’s harp poems as lyrics, from this point of view, is not to show how he assimilated his verse to a universal category of idealized poetic utterance, but rather to explain how and why Ridge assented, in a purely practical way, to a set of formal and thematic conventions historically marked as “lyric” within settler-colonial society. Reading Ridge’s harp poems as “lyric x-marks” can thus extend

historical poetics' recent excavations of the relations of political and institutional power underlying generic categories like the lyric, while offering a corrective to that work's sometimes one-sided insistence that genres are retrospectively "overdetermined" by ideologies and practices of reading.<sup>7</sup> As x-marks, Ridge's harp poems may be what Lyons calls "signs of contamination" (1); but only by reading them *as* lyrics can we see that they were also efforts at self-determination undertaken by an individual who, at various times in his life, seized upon a highly conventionalized genre as the best available option for imagining a place for himself within a complex and rapidly changing social world.

If writing lyric x-marks gave Ridge a degree of control over his life's history, then this form of control was fragile and highly contingent, despite the fierceness with which the harp poems assert their own self-sufficiency. Consider, for instance, these lines from the final stanza of "My Harp":

Then, off with ye! who coldly tell  
Me my loved harp to fling away—  
I'd rather bid all friends *farewell*,  
than have the folly to obey!

Even though these lines seem to welcome—and indeed to take credit for—the isolation from which the speaker of the poem seems so acutely to suffer, we do not need to take their strident individualism at face value. Part of Ridge's rhetorical strategy in his lyric efforts, and especially "My Harp," is the disavowal of the people and alliances upon which his performances depend. Such strategies of disavowal appear to have come easily to Ridge, especially in the earlier phases of his career. This may have been, in part, an effect of the Ridge family's elite position within Cherokee society and (especially prior to their departure from Georgia) American society more

generally. It is worth emphasizing at the outset that one of the enabling conditions of Ridge's lyric experimentations was capital—not just cash and other financial instruments, which were on hand only occasionally, but also the capital embodied in other human beings owned as property. One common characteristic of the two lyrics under consideration here is that they were both written by a person who owned slaves, and who brought his favorite black servant, Wacooli, with him when he moved to California in 1850.

To acknowledge Ridge's intertwined identities as post-Removal Cherokee exile, slave-owning aristocrat, and aspiring literary celebrity is to witness in a particularly visceral way the force of Lyons's insistence that x-marks are signs of both agency and "contamination." Lyons uses this latter term to warn us that, when we seek in the archive of Native literature for unadulterated expressions of indigenous identity, we are almost sure to be disappointed, because any text we happen upon in that search is bound also to be a negotiation with modern settler colonialism and with modernity more generally. While Lyons's main object of critique in *X-marks* is the discourse of nationalism as it has developed in Native writing since the eighteenth century, his argument also has surprising implications for the study of genres like the lyric, for it opens up a new way of thinking about literary convention in a context of political contestation and identity formation. The "x" marks inscribed by signers of treaties participate (even if not on equal terms) in the emergence of a new social disposition of law, even as they obscure the identity of the signer. Ridge's harp poems, analogously, participate in the emergence of a textually-mediated social imaginary even though the conventions those poems deploy, above all their self-obsessed mode of lyric address, conceal their author's social position. Following Lyons's invitation to see literary conventionality as a species of contamination, we can read Ridge's lyric conventions against the grain of their own attitude of defiance and abstract

individualism. Ridge's contaminated and conventional lyrics, even at their most individualistic, were also "signatures of assent" to a chaotic social world within which the reading and writing of poems, if nothing else, offered a measure of stability and self-determination.

Ridge's place within that social world shifted dramatically between the composition of his two harp poems, even though they were written within three years of one another. The period 1848-1850 was one of radical upheaval in Ridge's life. When he finished "My Harp" in February 1848, Ridge was still living with his family in Honey Creek on the eastern border of the Cherokee Nation, near the place where the state lines of present-day Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri meet. His family had moved there from Running Waters, their estate near what is now Rome, Georgia, in 1837, when Ridge was ten years old, and had spent the intervening years struggling to re-establish their accustomed position among the élites of Cherokee society. This process was fraught with difficulty. John Rollin Ridge's father, John Ridge, had made himself famous among the Cherokees as a member of the political faction known as the Treaty Party, which in 1835 had traveled to Washington to sign a treaty with the administration of Andrew Jackson agreeing to the removal of the remaining eastern Cherokees to territories west of the Mississippi. The social and political aftershocks of this treaty, which was signed without the authorization of the Cherokee government or its president, John Ross, would shape the history of the Cherokee Nation for decades to come, not least for the Ridge family. On June 22, 1839, agents of the Ross party assassinated Treaty Party leaders Elias Boudinot (who had edited the *Cherokee Phoenix* prior to Removal), Major Ridge (John Rollin's grandfather) and John Ridge, who was stabbed twenty-nine times and bled to death on his front lawn.

John Rollin was at home to witness his father's killing and would remain haunted by it until the end of his life.<sup>8</sup> In the years immediately following the event, he preoccupied himself

with schemes for a counteroffensive against the Ross faction, nursing what he referred to in an 1849 letter as “the deep-seated principle of revenge in me which will never be satisfied until it reaches its object” (Litton 64). Meanwhile, Ridge’s mother enrolled him in a recently-opened academy operated by the Andover-educated missionary Cephas Washburn. In an educational mission statement penned in 1843, Washburn explained the historical development of liberal education in the following terms: “In a Republican Government, where the equality of man is acknowledged—and where the art of War is regarded as one of the evils of the want of perfect civilization, the only road open to laudable ambition, lies in the path of letters, attainments of literature, or the acquisitions of science” (cited in Parins 42). Such a claim might be read as voicing a genteel New Englander’s disdain for the “want of perfect civilization” he sees as characterizing the tumultuous affairs of the Cherokees and, perhaps, their white neighbors. Yet in order to make his educational program seem enticing, Washburn draws attention to the capacity of “letters” and “literature” to fulfill the “laudable ambition” whose default outlet is war. Ridge’s writings from the 1840s echo Washburn’s insistence that war and “civilization” can both be valid outlets for human ambition, depending on the circumstances. In an August 1846 letter to the editors of the *Arkansas Gazette*, he bemoaned what he saw as John Ross’s ongoing tyranny over the Cherokee people in terms that bear a striking resemblance to those of Washburn’s educational prospectus: “it is vain to talk of the arts and sciences among us...when the whole country is under the law of the sword, and that wielded by the relentless hand of one man” (cited in Parins 51). Ridge’s letter demonstrates that the “arts” and war were closely intertwined in his youthful imagination, and in the verse compositions he wrote in the years preceding “My Harp,” war was a frequent theme.

One early poetic effort, which Ridge never published, but which survives in manuscript in the Ridge Papers at the University of Tulsa, helps clarify Ridge's understanding of his simultaneously warlike and poetic "ambition"; the composition, dated 1848 and entitled "Fame," is also Ridge's first experiment with the motif of the harp:

...I'll

String my Harp, and sound a note that years  
Shall echo back...

A Byron dared

Defy his God for fame, and Bonaparte  
Rode fearless in the midst of death, and, with  
His Sword dipt deep in gore, he wrote his name  
On History with blood! And some have sold  
Their happiness in life, their grace of form,  
Their health and youthful years for fame.

...My God! a soul,

When bent on deeds of fame, is set on fire  
By flames, which burn to ashes every joy.  
How true, that happiness is found in lowly  
Lives with sweet content! ...

And simple School-boys in their holidays  
Will shout a gayer note than he whose words  
Are treasured in the tomes of Nations.

“Fame” demonstrates the seriousness of Ridge’s thinking on the common attributes of poetry and war. Taking Washburn’s teachings in a wholly new direction, Ridge suggests that poets and warriors share not just an innate ambition, but more specifically a form of life in which one’s mortal existence must be risked for glory. Ridge’s figuration of Napoleon’s sword as a pen “dript deep in gore” casts violence as an enabling condition, indeed the very medium, of the writerly life, rather than a retrograde activity that one must abandon in the quest to become “civilized.” In order for one’s name to be “treasured in the tomes of Nations,” one must be prepared not only to kill one’s enemies, but also to renounce every form of corporeal and spiritual comfort: the seeker of fame is willing to “burn to ashes every joy” and “defy his God.” If there’s anything “laudable” about this kind ambition, then that laudability is not the sort of thing that one can experience in one’s own life time. On the contrary, according to Ridge’s extreme view, the achievement of fame depends, in the long term, on a willingness to be despised in the nearer term by other people, and even by God. This willingness distinguishes grown-up heroes like Byron and Bonaparte from the “simple School-boy”—that is, from the kind of innocent and immature being who Ridge, in this poem, is trying to convince himself he no longer is. Ridge’s invocation of Lord Byron is especially telling, for Byron (who had died in Greece in 1824 while plotting the siege of the Ottoman-held fortress of Lepanto) was not only the most famous poet-warrior of his era, but also the writer of the drama *Manfred*, a story of guilt and soul-selling that by Ridge’s time was already recognized as the greatest of the numerous Faust narratives produced by the Anglophone Romantics. In the final act of the play, confronted by an evil spirit who would deprive him of his soul, Manfred exclaims, “I stand / Upon my strength—I do defy—deny— / Spurn back, and scorn ye!” (406) It may indeed be that *Manfred* was a direct inspiration for “Fame” and, later, for “My Harp,” which pushes a Byronic attitude of defiance to one kind of

poetic extreme. In any case, Ridge demonstrates in “Fame” the allure of a Byronic conception of poetry as an outlet for a form of ambition so overwhelming as to find expression in a Faustian vocabulary of absolute defiance.

In “My Harp,” which appeared in the *Arkansas State Democrat* on March 31, 1848, Ridge went public with his Byronic attitude of defiance. The poem begins by contextualizing itself within an ongoing conflict over the speaker’s own poetic capacities—“Oh must I fling my harp aside, / Nor longer let it soothe my heart?”—and proceeds over the first two stanzas to elaborate the gravity of the poet’s situation as he defies those who would deprive him of his harp: “No! sooner might the warrior cast / His martial plume of glory down, / Or worshipt monarch fling in dust ; His royal sceptre and his crown!” The mystery of who, exactly, is behind this plot to deprive the poet of his harp provides the poem with its dramatic tension. Ridge leaves the question unanswered long enough to suggest that his commitment to his poetic art necessarily puts him at odds with the world in general, rather than any particular individual:

On no—that harp may be all rough  
And grating to another’s ear—  
So let it be—it is enough  
That unto me it still is dear!

Ridge readily admits here that his music “may be” repellent to his listeners; in fact, if it is, so much the better, for the poem’s purpose is to demonstrate that there is only one necessary and sufficient condition for the harp to go on making its music, and that is the gratification of the poet himself.

“My Harp” culminates, in its final stanza, with the poet’s Manfred-esque declaration that he is prepared to renounce even his most intimate friends in defense of his music-making capability:

Then, off with ye! who coldly tell  
Me my loved harp to fling away—  
I’d rather bid all friends *farewell*,  
Than have the folly to obey!  
For friends are but a fleeting trust,  
As transient as the evening’s blush;  
But, true to me in all my moods,  
My harp shall ne’er its soothings hush!

From the perspective of a reader, there is a tantalizing ambiguity in the “ye” of this final exhortation, one that complicates any reading of the poem as a lyric. Should we read this second person pronoun as an apostrophe addressed to an absent third party, a rhetorical technique that has often been associated with the lyric ode?<sup>9</sup> Or could it be addressed directly to us? If the former, then the poem’s readers are put in the position of innocent and perhaps supportive observers of Ridge’s imperious separation of himself from anyone who might be listening. But the ambiguity of “ye” leaves open the possibility that we ourselves are menacing Ridge’s music, since we (and, implicitly, any possible audience) threaten to deprive the poet of that which is more than anything else “true to me.” In recruiting us into his lyric audience, has Ridge turned us into enemies?

This fundamental question facing readers of “My Harp” is both historical and formal, since our attunement, as readers, to the intriguing indeterminacy of the poem’s mode of address

is in part the effect of a culturally specific way of reading that only came into being relatively recently. Over the course of the nineteenth century, as Virginia Jackson argues in *Dickinson's Misery*, a modern and distinctively Euro-American conception of the private individual transformed the way Anglo-Americans read, wrote, and published verse, with the result that the genre of the lyric came to be agreed upon as epitomizing what poetry in general was. What made the genre of lyric so broadly appealing to modern Anglo-American readers was that—unlike the ballad or the epic, say—it had been seen since at least the early modern period as “a genre of personal expression” in which the isolated poet speaks most profoundly by addressing his speech to no one in particular. As early as Sir Philip Sidney’s “Defense of Poesy” (1595), the lyric was figured as a kind of hyper-individualized expression requiring no special occasion other than that of a “tuned lyre and well accorded voice,” to cite the eponymous lyric trope of the lyre (or harp) that would be central to Ridge’s harp poems. In the nineteenth century, with the explosion of print as a cheap commodity circulating among far-flung strangers, a new kind of mass readership reached a collective understanding that the lyric, though seemingly addressed to no one, was really addressed to them; it was during this period that readers came to understand the figure of “the poet” in distinctively modern terms, as an atomized and essentially private individual, and back-projected this understanding of the poetic subject onto texts written in historical periods and social contexts in which lyric modes of address had little relevance. As Jackson shows, this modern, lyrical understanding of poetry as a form of speech that is both uttered and received in private had already achieved dominance in Anglo-American literary culture by 1851, when John Stuart Mill formulated his famous distinction between poetry and eloquence: “eloquence is heard; poetry is overheard. Eloquence supposes an audience. The peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener” (348). With the emergence of this kind

of lyric reading, poetry came to be seen as a consolidated and homogenized category of private inscription that, floating free of its original circumstances of composition was, as Jackson writes “thought to require as its context only the occasion of its reading” (7).

Jackson’s work on the history of the lyric allows us to see how eagerly Ridge participated in the collective fantasy that Virginia Jackson calls “lyric reading,” while cannily manipulating the conventions of address that made the fantasy work. More concretely, it suggests that a historically-informed approach to the interpretive puzzle of “ye” in “My Harp” might begin by asking to what degree Ridge understood the poem as a text that could be abstracted from the social context in which it was composed. Biographical factors can help us reconstruct such an understanding. We know from “Fame” that Ridge was drawn to a Byronic conception of ambition as something that drives the fame-seeker to “burn to ashes every joy,” renouncing worldly attachments and moral norms for the sake of a place in the “tomes of Nations.” And we have seen, in Ridge’s recollection of his father’s murder, that he was accustomed from an early age to look with suspicion and sometimes paranoia upon the “dark faces” of those around him, even those of individuals presenting themselves as friends. These and other surviving writings suggest that Ridge’s immediate social surroundings, in the 1840s, were a source of tremendous anxiety for him. With this in mind it becomes plausible to suppose that by adopting, in “My Harp,” the voice of a social outcast willing to “bid all friends farewell” in the pursuit of poetry, Ridge found a way of fantasizing about a way of escaping that conflictual social world altogether. As the speaker of “My Harp” writes in stanza three, his harp works best when he removes himself from the supervising eyes of the town and communes with the “voice” of impersonal nature: “’Tis sweet, when calmly broods the night, / To wander forth where waters roll, / And, mingling with the waves its voice, / To rouse the passions of the soul!” In writing a

poem about someone who wants to distance himself from his existing social relations in order to put himself in touch with more transcendent meanings, Ridge figures the lyric as an essentially private experience. The harp of the poem is “true to me” in the sense of being loyal in a disloyal world, which is the only kind of truth the poem’s outcast speaker seems to care about. “My Harp” is “true to” Ridge in the same way that an x-mark is “true to” a treaty signer: not because it generously discloses a self to a familiar and loving world, but because it reflects its writer’s “assent,” to borrow Lyons’s term, to living in a world different from the one that presently exists. The inscriber of the x-mark is a stranger to his social world; but he refuses to be wholly alienated.

The attitude of self-estrangement adopted by the poem’s speaker is confirmed by a peculiar fact about its publication. Following the close of the final stanza, the *Democrat* printed the date and place of the poem’s composition: “*Honey creek, C.N., Feb. 28, 1848.*” “C. N.” refers to the Cherokee Nation. Throughout the 1840s, the *Democrat* frequently published poems by both local writers and internationally-known celebrities, and it was the newspaper’s standard policy (along with most other papers) not to include such identifying information. One effect of this practice was to incorporate poetry into the everyday temporality of the news cycle: much like political commentaries and advertisements, compositions in verse were generally presented in nineteenth-century newspapers as everyday occurrences.<sup>10</sup> Newspapers offered a cross-section of prose and verse genres, presenting them under a common date—that of their collective publication, rather their individual composition—and thereby heightening their similarity as features of the present moment. By publishing the date and place of the poem’s composition, presumably in conformance with a directive from Ridge himself, the *Democrat* set the “My Harp” apart from the everyday talk published elsewhere in the newspaper. The interval between

the date of the poem's composition and the paper's publication gives the "My Harp" an air of gliding backwards into the mists of literary history. As originally published, "My Harp" thus encourages its readers to see themselves as spatially and temporarily removed from the speaker: to borrow the terms of John Stuart Mill lyricized theory of poetry, we are put in the position not of "hearers" but of "overhearers." In full awareness of Romantic techniques of lyric reading that construed poetry as universal only when it seemed to address no one in particular, Ridge presents "My Harp" along the lines of Keats's Grecian urn, as a mysteriously self-contained object, to be pondered by the curious in all places and times. In its mode of publication, as well as its rhetorical style, "My Harp" addresses itself to a universal context of reception, one in which the poet's name will be "treasured in the tomes of Nations" in the indefinite future.

So we might think, at least, were it not for the troubling "ye" of the final stanza, which seems to lump us, as readers, into the same social world to which the speaker of the poem wants to "bid...farewell." By interpellating his readers into his agonistic social world, and thereby preventing those readers from seeing themselves as "overhearers" wholly removed from the poem's scene of utterance, Ridge appears to turn his poem into a performative contradiction, renouncing the fundamental conditions of his poem's universality and his own fame. But this contradiction only intensifies the poem's lyric project, in a quite radical way. Consider the position Ridge puts his readers in at the beginning of the final stanza. How dare he tell us to be "off" after we have gone through the trouble of following him this far? If we had any self-respect, we would not finish the poem; but we do, in spite of ourselves, until Ridge's closing celebration of the harp as the only thing that is "true to me." As readers, we find ourselves sticking with this text that repels us, that declares itself not to have been made for us. Ridge thus uses the conventions of lyric address to gain a kind of leverage over his readers. Our presence, as

members of the collective “ye,” gives Ridge’s speech meaning, yet he claims to have nothing to thank us for and, indeed, that he is free to spurn us. We, as lyric readers who give meaning to the life of a being who would negate us, are little different from the political and personal foes against whom Ridge waged his obsessive vendetta in the 1840s. If we concede to the terms of the interaction Ridge offers, it is because we are willing to be made the objects of his aggression.

Although the lyric, as a genre thought to thrive on decontextualization and abstraction, has often been associated with ahistorical fantasies of transcendence, Ridge’s manipulation of lyric conventions re-inscribes “My Harp,” and us as readers of it, within a conflictual social world characterized by ambition and defiance. By persuading his readers to submit to his authority, Ridge puts himself in the position of sovereign in Lyons’s sense of a signatory authority negotiating with contending powers—in this case, his readers—over the microcosmic social world his poem creates. Working within the formal and rhetorical constraints of the Euro-American genre of the lyric, he inscribes an x-mark that, true to Lyons’s account, expresses Indian agency. At the conclusion of “My Harp,” where Ridge inscribed the time and place of its composition, he also included the pseudonym “Yellow Bird” and the abbreviation “C.N.,” for “Cherokee Nation”; this was because, even as he wished to distance himself from the Ridge family and their reputation, he wanted his readers to know that this was an Indian poem written in Indian territory. Although “My Harp,” in theme, has no obvious relationship to Native-settler affairs, it nevertheless reflects through its mode of address the colonial power relations of his time and place and, more than that, asserts a sovereignty over its readers that is explicitly marked as Cherokee. As we have seen, Ridge seems to have been intent on figuring the conspiracy confronting the speaker of “My Harp” as a displaced version of the “dark faces” of the Ross party’s assassins. Thus, even as the sovereign speaker of “My Harp” presents himself as a

Cherokee addressing the wider world of the *Democrat*'s readers, he does so in a way that reflects the unsettled internal affairs of the Cherokee nation in the 1840s.

In 1849, just over a year after "My Harp" was published, intra-Cherokee violence would transform Ridge's world yet again, when Ridge killed Ross loyalist David Kell in a dispute over a horse of Ridge's that Kell was alleged to have stolen. Though Ridge claimed to have killed Kell in self-defense, he spent the next year avoiding arrest at the hand of government authorities loyal to Ross, whom he suspected would treat him unfairly. Between 1849 and 1850, Ridge was frequently on the move, shuffling between safe-houses just beyond Cherokee Nation's borders. Unremorseful for what had happened to Kell, he devoted himself to plotting "to raise a company of some twenty-five or thirty white men and go and kill John Ross," as he explained in a July, 1849 letter to Stand Watie, to whom he looked for confirmation that the coup would be find support among the Cherokee people. "Whenever you say the word, I am there," he wrote to Watie. "I'd like it well, if we could finish matters pretty shortly" (Dale 64). Like the lyric speaker of "My Harp," who turns himself into a social outcast in order to enact the ultimate act of poetic defiance, Ridge understood himself during this period as everywhere as nowhere at the same time, ready to strike from his concealed location at a moment's notice. As the months passed and it became clear to Ridge that none of his allies within the Nation would sign on to help carry out his plot, he followed the advice of his family and arranged travel to the California goldfields; there, he hoped, he would make the fortune that would enable him to return to the Cherokee Nation, settle his scores, and finally establish himself as a self-sufficient patriarch.

On April 13, 1850, Ridge, together with Wacooli and his brother Aeneas, joined a wagon train on the first leg of their overland journey to Placerville (then Hangtown) in Yuba County, in the foothills of the northern Sierra Nevada. Uprooted from the dense network of friends and

enemies that had surrounded him in Honey Creek and Fayetteville—and diverted by economic necessities from his decades-old fantasies of revenge—he found his imagination captured by the peculiar society of “strangers” he found in California. As he explained in an account of the journey published in the *New Orleans True Delta* shortly after his arrival in Yuba County:

Having traversed, in the space of five months, the desolate region which lies between “the States” and this land of Pilgrim’s hope, I arrived in this city on the 25th of August last. I was a stranger in a strange land. I knew no one, and looking at the multitude that thronged the streets, and passed each other without a friendly sign, or look of recognition even, I began to think I was in a new world, where all were strangers, and none cared to know his fellow . . . . Not to be outdone, however, I persevered, annoyed and annoying, until I found a job which brought me a few dollars, and relieved my immediate necessities. (Trumpet 22)

This letter is the first in a series of writings in which Ridge starts to imagine the world around him as something other than an arena for the violent resolution of an unsettled conflict. This is not to say that life in California was easy for Ridge; on the contrary, getting by there required that Ridge become both “annoyed and annoying.” Still, this low-level social irritation was a far cry from the adversarial style of interaction that had characterized so many of his writings from the 1840s, including “Fame” and “My Harp.” Living as one of a “multitude . . . pass[ing] each other without a friendly sign, or look of recognition,” in a society where “none cared to know his fellow,” hardly sounds like a viable way of getting along in the world. Yet on the whole Ridge’s writings from this period suggest that he quickly learned to adapt to this “new world” of annoying Californians, and even to find in it new ways of imagining solidarity.

One important shift in Ridge's writings from the early 1850s was that he began to refer to himself less as the protagonist of a revenge drama, and more as a participant in a vast network of circulating money and information. This shift in self-conception entailed a certain disillusionment, but also, perhaps, a broader understanding of the structural forces impinging upon his personal history. Reflecting on the prospecting life for the New Orleans *True Delta*, Ridge wrote in late 1850 that "so many thousands a-digging puts an immense amount of gold dust into circulation, and if one can get into any business about towns, or on the rivers, it will come to him like magic" (Cited in Parins 70). This letter bears witness to Ridge's realization that a whole economic system had come into being in California, one whose principle of operation and expansion was the "magic" of "circulation." Being successful within this system had less to do with extracting a hoard from the hills than with tapping into capital's steady flow. One outlet for this flow was the burgeoning publishing industry that had grown up around the boomtowns. By the end of 1850, Ridge had taken a job as a correspondent for the *True Delta*, whose business model illustrates the geographical sweep of the communications networks of which Ridge was a part: published in Louisiana, the paper operated editorial offices in Sacramento, from which Ridge and other correspondents posted dispatches back to New Orleans, which were then shipped by sea back to readers in northern California. Ridge worked in the *True Delta*'s storefront office in Sacramento, a one-stop shop where customers could buy the newspaper, along with other periodicals and books, or exchange their gold dust for U.S. currency "in large or small sums at highest rates" (cited in Parins 74). Relinquishing his own dreams of glory in the goldfields, Ridge found that he could make a respectable living in the relative comfort of the city. A similar trade-off may have lay behind the composition of Ridge's novel *Joaquín Murieta*, a violent melodrama of revenge whose protagonist, as Parins observes, bore a striking

resemblance to Ridge himself (111-2). As a writer, Ridge not only found a way of earning a living, but of displacing (while also imaginatively indulging) the fantasies of glory and revenge that had motivated his conduct as a younger man.

Writing poetry, in this new context, became a way for Ridge to shed his self-understanding as an agent of defiance, and to affiliate himself in new and unexpected ways with the strangers that populated his social space. Around the same time that he wrote of his arrival in California for the *True Delta*, Ridge published a poem called “The Harp of Broken Strings” in his new hometown paper, the *Marysville Herald*.<sup>11</sup> Literary scholar Robert Dale Parker, who included this poem in his landmark anthology of Native poetry, *Changing is Not Vanishing*, has plausibly speculated that the poem is a rewrite of “My Harp.” True to this hypothesis, “The Harp of Broken Strings” takes up the two most important features of that earlier poem—its defiant mode of address and its concomitant assertion that “my harp” alone is “true to me”—and reworks them in the service of a poetic project of a quite different character (409). The first and final (eighth) stanzas of the poem convey Ridge’s sense of this new project and of the social world to which it was addressed:

A stranger in a stranger land,  
Too calm to weep, too sad to smile,  
I take my harp of broken strings,  
A weary moment to beguile;  
And tho’ no hope its promise brings,  
And present joy is not for me,  
Still o’er that harp I love to bend,  
And feel its broken melody

With all my shattered feelings blend.

...

Well may this harp of broken strings

Seem sweet to me by this lonely shore.

When like a spirit it breaks forth,

And speaks of beauty evermore!

When like a spirit it evokes

The buried joys of early youth,

And clothes the shrines of early love,

With all the radiant light of truth!

One immediate contrast with “My Harp” is apparent here in the sophistication of the stanza form. The irregularly distributed eight- and nine-line stanzas create a feeling of “broken” and involuted song, of memory and voice closing in upon themselves episodically and discontinuously. We are a long way away from the propulsive linearity of “My Harp” and the culminating “off with ye!” of its final defiant stanza. That linear thrust had been driven, in the earlier poem, by the oppositional logic implicit in Ridge’s assertion of himself as choosing between his harp and the rest of the world. Here, by contrast, we witness a mode of poetic self-awareness in which “feelings blend,” so that the function of the harp is to integrate and assimilate past experiences into a consciousness which (though deprived of “present joy”) finds itself empowered to see in the future the possibility of a “beauty evermore.” Whereas, in “My Harp,” the poet demonstrated his readiness to forsake everyone he held dear (“all friends”) in order to defend that harp which alone is “true to me in all my moods,” here he wants to use his harp to rescue his past attachments, making them newly relevant by “cloth[ing]” them “with all the radiant light of

truth.” And here, finally, this “truth” is pointedly abstract and enigmatic, much different from the concrete and straightforward fidelity signified in the earlier poem by the phrase “true to me.” In this later poem—as in Keats’s oracular dictum, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” which Ridge may well have had in mind—the truth is impersonal and seemingly universal. The truth of poetry is not in other words its fidelity, or “truth *to*” any one person (as “My Harp” had presented it), but rather something that should be able to be recognized by anyone. The value of this harp comes from its ability to communicate to “strangers” the poet’s life history in a way that makes that history seem quite objectively and irrefutably real. If the poet in “My Harp” renounced everything (including his readers) in order to prove his authority as a sovereign individual, this poem imagines a community of truth-seeking strangers who must acknowledge together the reality of the experience to which Ridge’s utterance gives voice.

This different understanding of “truth” corresponds, in “The Harp of Broken Strings,” to a very different deployment of the conventions of lyric address. Ridge’s relation to his readers in this later poem is one of generosity rather than defiance, a relation achieved through the poet’s laborious rehearsal of his own past trials for the sake of a truth that becomes a common good. The vision of community motivating this strategy of address is conveyed in the poem’s first line, which is undoubtedly the oddest line in the whole poem: “A stranger in a stranger land.” When Ridge, in his letter to the *True Delta*, had referred to himself as a “stranger in a strange land,” he was adopting a stock phrase that had been part of the common currency of Anglophone literature ever since its first appearance in the King James Bible. In “The Harp of Broken Strings,” Ridge meddles with that phrase by adding to it a second “-er.” The extra syllable means that the line conforms to the poem’s iambic meter, but in a highly awkward and ambiguous way. What is a “stranger land”? One could read it as a land that is even stranger than a “strange” land—an

unsatisfying proposition considering that we don't know what land the "stranger land" is being compared to. More profitably, perhaps, we might read "stranger land" as referring to a land of strangers, something akin to what Ridge described in his dispatch from California as "a new world, where all were strangers, and none cared to know his fellow." Here the genre of the harp poem becomes significant for our interpretation. The earlier letter, where Ridge used the phrase "strange land," was a prose composition written in a prosaic way that borrowed a tried and true figure of speech without drawing any explicit connection between Ridge and the people to whom he addressed himself. In "The Harp of Broken Strings," though, Ridge disrupts the common parlance with an extra "-er," which conveys simultaneously his sense of his own poetic license, and his desire, as a stranger, to be part of a broader community, a "stranger land." Ridge, in this later poem, figures himself as a stranger speaking to strangers, one who feels compelled to address himself to his listeners by virtue of their shared identity, much as William Wordsworth, in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, figures himself as "a man speaking to men."

The first line of "The Harp of Broken Strings" suggests that the supposed isolation of lyric speech has assumed a new kind of social significance. "A stranger in a stranger land" can address an audience of readers without having to defy or renounce those readers (as Ridge defies "ye" in "My Harp") for in such defiance there would be nothing at stake. In "My Harp," Ridge sought to persuade his readers to take the extraordinary step of recognizing themselves as his enemies, and therefore of conceding to Ridge's own self-sufficient virtuosity as a lyric poet. By contrast, the only "look of recognition" (to borrow a phrase from Ridge's travelogue in the *Democrat*) Ridge asks of his strangerly readers in "The Harp of Broken Strings" is the acknowledgment of his Harp's transmutation of "early love" into "truth." Ridge is confident that we as readers will grant this recognition because he assumes that we share with him a specific

understanding of the lyric as a genre of mass-circulated speech that puts universal truths into public circulation. This collective understanding is part of our shared identity as “stranger[s] in a stranger land.” The term “stranger,” therefore, refers not to someone who is totally unknown, but to the sort of person who knows how to read a lyric poem as a public manifestation of “the radiant light of truth.” According to the strategy of lyric address deployed in “The Harp of Broken Strings,” Ridge cannot afford to rebuff his readers as adversaries, as he had been inclined to do in his earlier “harp” poems. Conversely, he cannot in this later poem celebrate his harp as that which is “true to me” alone,” since that truth, in “My Harp,” could be made visible only through a wholesale renunciation of “ye.” In “The Harp of Broken Strings,” Ridge revises his poetic mission according to a new conception of truth that corresponds to the strangerly way of life that obtains in his new home.

In his California years, Ridge discovered for the first time that he was able (or forced) to take a degree of comfort in the notion that his readers were “lyric readers,” to return to Jackson’s terminology. If, as Jackson suggests, the defining characteristic of lyric reading is its transformation of historically- and contextually-embedded speakers into “abstracted,” “idealized” subjects, then it would seem that “The Harp of Broken Strings” gives us something closer to what Jackson calls the “fully lyricized idea of poetry and the fully abstracted idea of the person” than “My Harp,” whose mode of address is defined by the indexical and hence context-specific second-personal pronoun “ye” (Jackson, “Please Don’t”). Whereas the earlier poem seems to trouble any distinction between the turbulence of history and the serene abstraction of art, the latter poem embraces that distinction wholeheartedly. From this point of view, “My Harp” might be seen as an example of how Ridge, earlier in his career, cannily defied the norms of lyric address; or, alternatively, as a poem written with a non-lyricized understanding of verse,

according to which a poem about a harp did not have to be a “lyric” and could instead simply be a way of telling the readers of the *Democrat* about a harp. Were we to frame such a critique of Ridge’s “lyricization” as part of a critique of settler colonialism, we might further say that the onset of lyric “abstraction” in Ridge’s poetry parallels the tragic erasure of the techniques of versified vengeance and defiance that characterized his earlier efforts to wrong the injustices suffered by the Cherokees during the period of Removal. In “My Harp,” Ridge explicitly identified his speech as a dispatch from the strife-riven Cherokee Nation, and proved his determination to use poetry as a way of waging war by other means. “The Harp of Broken Strings,” by contrast, would seem to enact an a-political retreat into the more cerebral comforts of a strangerly life that is sometimes “annoying” but hardly receptive to existential conflict.

Such a reading, though not wholly wrong, would be incomplete if it did not take into account Ridge’s own understanding of how politics works in a “stranger land.” Historical poetics’ critique of lyricization might make “The Harp of Broken Strings” seem like a more “abstracted” and therefore less politicized lyric, but when we look at it in the context of Ridge’s other writings from his early years in California, we see that Ridge’s new strangerly self-understanding coincides with an intensification, rather than abandonment, of his commitment to anti-colonial causes. From this broader perspective, even Ridge’s most “fully lyricized” lyric becomes legible as an x-mark reflecting what Lyons calls “Indian agency.”

Prior to his move to California, Ridge rarely gave any indication of blaming the plight of his people upon the aggressions of settler society. As we have seen, he had spent the 1840s pursuing his “guerilla warfare” against the Ross faction because of his belief that “the whole country is under the law of the sword, and that wielded by the relentless hand of one man.” In his effort to free his people from Ross’s autocracy Ridge found no reason to impugn colonial

society; nor, in his plot to overthrow Ross, did he hesitate to forge alliances with the white landowners living just beyond the borders of the Cherokee Nation: as Ridge enthusiastically reported to Stand Watie on July 2, 1849, “the whites out here, and I have seen a great many, say, if [the Cherokee] Government would only hint to them to go in, they’d slaughter ‘that damned Ross set’ like beeves” (Litton 65). In his determination to fulfill “the deep-seated principle of revenge in me which will never be satisfied until it reaches its object,” Ridge’s political machinations in the 1840s arguably abetted the aggressions of settler colonialism by providing the Cherokees’ white neighbors a justification for violently invading native lands.

By the mid-1850s, Ridge had adopted a much broader perspective on Cherokee-settler relations. In an 1855 letter to his mother, he asserted that the long-term flourishing of the Cherokees would depend less upon overthrowing Ross than upon a coordinated campaign against settler colonialism—a fight in which Ridge thought other Indian nations ought to be allied. Ridge wrote in this letter about his plan of inspiring such a campaign by starting “a newspaper devoted to the advocacy of Indian rights and interests”:

If I can establish such a paper I can bring into its columns not only the fire of my own pen, such as it may be, but the contribution of the leading minds in the different Indian nations. I can bring to its aid and support the Philanthropists of the world. I can so wield its power as to make it feared and respected... What prouder object could a man propose to himself than the great idea of...handing down to posterity the great names of Indian history and doing justice to a deeply wronged and injured people by impressing upon the records of the country a true and impartial account of the treatment which they have received at the hands of a civilized and Christian race! (Litton 86-7).

In describing his dream of a pan-Indian newspaper, Ridge makes no mention of the lyric genre, or indeed of any other kind of verse writing; yet Ridge's experiments with the lyric were of fundamental importance for his awakening as an anti-colonial activist, for his "Harp" poems are the texts in which we see Ridge most deliberately exploring new strategies of address and new configurations of textual sociality. When Ridge speaks of "bring[ing] into its columns ... the fire of my own pen," for example, he is imagining himself taking up a rhetorical attitude of defiance and partisanship, comparable to that which he had adopted in "My Harp." And when he writes about soliciting "the contribution of the leading minds in the different Indian nations," we can see that he is picturing an Indian political movement built upon the cooperation of people who are "strangers" to one another, but who nevertheless share a common identity by virtue of the structural forces shaping their society. Ridge trusts that these "leading minds"—together with the broader cohort of Native strangers who will make up his newspaper's readership—will find common cause in their desire to displace the hypocrisies of a "civilized and Christian race" with a new, collectively authored history that shines before the public with what he had referred to in "The Harp of Broken Strings" as "the radiant light of Truth."

Ridge envisioned his pan-Indian newspaper as an endeavor that would allow him to bring together all that he had learned in his experiments with lyric modes of address. He relished the opportunity of returning to a more defiant version of himself; but he also saw the progress of his people as depending upon the kinds of strangerly social relations that he had learned to appreciate in California. Although Ridge never fully abandoned his Byronic aspiration for fame as a poet-warrior, he taught himself by writing texts like "The Harp of Broken Strings" to "abstract" himself from the in-fighting of Cherokee politics in order to see his writings as expressions of what Lyons calls "Indian agency." Reconstructing his lyric's shifting strategies of

address allows us to follow Ridge's reinvention of himself as a being who, later in life, was more politically engaged in anti-colonial causes, but also more estranged and "abstracted" from his Cherokee origins. This process of self-reinvention has been largely overlooked by a tradition of Ridge interpretation (mostly focused on *Joaquín Murieta*) that has tended to see Ridge's politics as "paradoxically" torn between the antipodes of nationalism and assimilation.<sup>12</sup> Reading Ridge's lyrics as x-marks gives us a more dynamic understanding of his writing as a process of adaptation to emergent circumstances during a life of exile; as Lyons writes, "x-marks are made with a view of the new as merely another stopping point in a migration that is always heading for home, always keeping time on the move" (10). Turning and returning to the lyric was, just as Lyons suggests, a way for Ridge of "keeping time," of imaginatively structuring his chaotic life according to a relatively stable (that is, generic) configuration of social space and literary history. Above all, Ridge's stranger-oriented x-marks suggest that reading a poem lyrically can also be a way of understanding, and indeed reproducing, the concrete social relations that informed that poem's composition. Self-consciously and with great ingenuity, Ridge adopted (and adapted) the abstractness of lyric address as a rhetorical tactic with concrete political-historical effects.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Walker, *Indian Nation*, 111. The other text sometimes described in this way is Elias Boudinot's didactic tract *Poor Sarah*; see Krupat and Swann, *Recovering the Word*, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Scholarship on Ridge's poetry has often focused on "Mount Shasta, Seen from a Distance" which Ridge embedded in the text of *Joaquín Murieta*; see, for example, Smith, "Crime Scenes," and Walker, 123-125. Arnold Krupat's brief discussion of Ridge's elegiac poems is one of the

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few studies of the genre of Ridge's verse; see *That the People Might Live*, 127-129. The only existing study of Ridge's poetic output as a whole is "Romantic Poet," ch. 5 of James Parins, *John Rollin Ridge: His Life and Works*. In *Changing is Not Vanishing*, Robert Dale Parker anthologizes all known American Indian poetry written prior to 1930. As Parker's work makes clear, there do survive Native poems whose dates of composition antecede Ridge's harp poems, including a large corpus of posthumously-published poems by Ojibwe writer Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, some of which, it could be argued, are themselves lyrics. What made Ridge distinctive among Native authors of his day was not just that he wrote lyrics, but also that he oversaw the publication of his early efforts. The significance of this fact has less to do with establishing literary-historical "firsts" than it does with Ridge's own biography and literary practice, as will become clear in what follows.

<sup>3</sup> For a defense of the idea of a coherent tradition of Cherokee literature, see Justice, *Our Fire Survives the Storm*. Justice's discussion of Ridge's father's collaboration with the U.S. government in the Treaty of New Echota serves as useful background for Rollin Ridge's own troubled relation to Cherokee nationalism; see Justice, ch. 2.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Jackson, "Lyric," 826.

<sup>5</sup> Walker (111) writes that Ridge, "though of Cherokee descent, was a metropolitan, acculturated Indian who...upheld views repugnant to those who wished to maintain traditional Indian cultural practices."

<sup>6</sup> See Jackson and Prins, "Lyrical Studies," and, for a more sustained analysis of the development of lyric reading in North America, Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Jackson, "Poet as Poetess," 63.

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<sup>8</sup> Ridge's posthumously-published *Poems*, edited by his wife Elizabeth, is prefaced by an autobiographical narrative by Ridge that recounts the event in vivid detail; see *Poems*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, "Lyric Address," ch. 5 of Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*.

<sup>10</sup>For a more detailed analysis of nineteenth-century newspaper poetry and its temporality, see Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America*, ch. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Publication date cited in Parins, *Literacy* 156.

<sup>12</sup> See John Carlos Rowe, "Highway Robbery," and Maureen Konkle, "John Rollin Ridge and the Law," ch. 5 of *Indian Nation*.

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