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Poetry without Poets

What if the poetic has left the poem in the same way that Elvis has left the building?

Long after the limo pulled away, the audience was still in the arena, screaming for more. Even after his death, *especially* after his death, Elvis is sighted, replicated, and imitated all the time, but in radically different contexts. If anything, his death was really the beginning of a wild proliferation and circulation of Elvisness beyond the domain of popular music. In that process, though, the form and meaning of Elvisness changed (and continues to change) dramatically, adapting to and eliciting new kinds of interpretive communities that are interested in having conversations about it, even organizing their entire lives around it. And none of this seems to detract much from the ardour of the original Elvis fans, even if the number of people still waiting in the arena continues to dwindle … and even if the arena itself is in precarious shape.

It's not that the poetic can't still be found in poetry; the vast and varied world of small literary presses, poetry blogs, magazines, zines, readings, and literary festivals attests that poetry qua poetry is still chugging along just fine. It's just that the official channels of poetry are not the first place that most people encounter poetic effects these days … and probably haven't been, for some time now. Reciprocally, what readers are encountering in the books published by poetry presses like Les Figues, Roof, BookThug, Coach House, The Figures, Housepress, Make Now, Truck, and so on is, increasingly, language that was previously considered to be unpoetic. Regardless of this reversal, though, the domains of poetic and public discourse remain largely separate from each other.

In blunt, numeric terms, most of what we read and write isn't poetry. Of all of the books sold in Canada in 2010, only 0.12 per cent of total market sales were poetry titles.[1] Nevertheless, the metaphors that poets and their critics have used over the last hundred years to discuss poetry's relationship to media privilege the primacy of poetic discourse, suggesting that ideas flow out from poetry to

culture at large. However, poetic language has always already been outside the poem. The inherently paragrammatic nature of language guarantees that it's always been possible to find poetic effects outside of poetry, and though it's impossible to fully document this phenomenon, there are a wealth of examples. Much of the avant-garde writing and art of the last century occupied itself by specializing in harvesting examples of paragrammatic poetic language from "outside" the normal channels of poetic production and redeploying it as art.

Two things changed over the first decade of the new millennium in terms of how poetic language circulates. First, when contemporary experimental writers appropriate large chunks of text for their own use, they don't necessarily do so because of the location in that text of qualities normally associated with poetry (rhyme, meter, unusual imagery, elegant prosody, etc.). Instead, they do so in order to focus attention on the qualities of the genres that we use to convey that peculiar invention of modernity called "information." This is significant because in order for such genres to convey information, we normally pretend that they have been flensed of all rhetoricity. The result is what Kenneth Goldsmith has called, at various points, boring, uncreative,[2] or conceptual writing:[3] a tendency that makes claims to its importance in the world of poetic discourse precisely through its use of previously nonpoetic language. The second is that this tendency to draw attention to the properties of information genres has also been occurring simultaneously outside of the channels in which poetry circulates, at a speed too rapid to argue that such practices are the result of a dissemination from Conceptual writing and its ilk. Poetry isn't currently a driver of culture but a symptom. What interests me is not so much how to read Conceptual writing – plenty of critics have already figured that out – but how to read the things that are occurring simultaneously with it, and bear a strong family resemblance to it. The question of what to write after the formalization of Conceptual writing also raises its head.

In his essay on the memo and modernity, John Guillory provides a startling reminder that although the modern epistemic order locates literature at one end of its axis and scholarship and science at the other, the great bulk of writing over the last century and a half has been neither literary nor scientific.[4] Instead, the dark matter of modern textuality is *informational* writing: memos, business letters, status updates, forms, executive summaries, lists, Web pages, reports, RSS feeds, classifed ads, indices, catalogues, howto manuals, and countless other hybrid "information genres" that we habitually ignore. Informational writing, especially in its megageneric form, the document, often eludes scrutiny because of its odd combination of ephemerality and permanence: it might be read once or never, but it must always be filed away somewhere, and, at least in theory, accessible.[5] As both a cause and effect of modernity's invention of the

category of information itself, informational writing aspires to be a mere conduit, to flense itself of all rhetorical flourishes; the more interesting the individual document, the less representative it is of its own genre.[6] As scholars, we are confronted with the exciting project of describing all of these suddenly visible hybrid genres, especially in terms of their roles and functions in constituting the modern, the postmodern, and the emerging world of the amodern. As writers, though, we are confronted with some genuine questions about how to proceed.

Of course, there is no zero degree of rhetoricity. As Umberto Eco joked many years ago, the best definition of the sign is that it is anything that can be used to tell a lie,[7] and art has always been a form of lying. I'd argue, in fact, that the long history of the twentieth-century avant gardes consists, for the most part, of artists and writers reasserting the rhetorical value of information genres by appropriating and recontextualizing significant chunks of them. But rather than thinking once again about appropriation as a practice within writing and art, I'd like to consider the implications of the proliferation today of poeticized information outside of the manifold forms and institutions of verse culture.

For most of the last decade, I've been noticing an increasing number of examples of what I initially thought of as "uncreative writing in the wild" or "conceptualism in the wild." The problem I now have with this term is that it prioritizes the "-ism," implying a flow outward from poetry into culture at large. This notion of influence and transmission has been one of the command metaphors behind the discourse of poetry and technology for about a century. In 1922, Ezra Pound declaimed that "artists are the antennae of the race."[8] Marshall McLuhan picked up on this metaphor, updating and expanding it many times. This passage is from the introduction to the second edition of *Understanding Media*:

> Art as radar acts as an "early alarm system," as it were, enabling us to discover social and psychic targets in lots of time to prepare to cope with them. This concept of the arts as prophetic, contrast with the popular idea of them as mere self-expression. If an art is an "early warning system," to use the phrase from World War II, when radar was new, art has the utmost relevance not only to media study but to the development of media controls.[9]

Christopher Dewdney's "Parasite Maintenance" updates the technology in McLuhan's metaphor for the late twentieth century (with a touch of Jack Spicer thrown in for good measure), imagining the poet as a satellite dish: "The radio telescope becomes a model of the *bi-conscious* interface between 'the mind' and signals from the 'outside' which the poet receives."[10] What these models have in common is that they imagine communication in terms of a more-or-less

linear transmission. As James Carey famously pointed out, the transmission model of communication is always wrapped up in "complementary models of power and anxiety."[11] Looking again at Pound's fascist wartime broadcasts, McLuhan's cold war conservatism, and Dewdney's lysergic paranoia, it's probably time to find another way to describe the relationship between poetry and the rest of contemporary culture. Teleological accounts of the "influence" of media and literature (and in this case, of their overlap) almost inevitably overlook the messy, contingent ways in which media, formats, and genres overlap each other. Rather than origins or influences, it might be more productive to consider, as Foucault suggests, institutionalizations, transformations, affiliations, and relationships.[12] As a corrective then, a better metaphor might be the poet as dosimeter – an index of ongoing exposure to something ambient that's already in the environment. Something, for that matter, that might actually have killed you before you even knew it was there.

More recently, I've started to refer to the objects appearing in culture at large that conceptual writing resembles as "findables." Here are a few:

The Diary of Samuel Pepys.[13] Since 1 January 2003, designer and programer Phil Gyford has been publishing and annotating entries from the seventeenth-century diary of Samuel Pepys on a daily basis. Gyford was one of the first to recognize the cultural significance of the blog as a form, and began this practice long before tools like Wordpress and Blogger were commonly available, and at a time when the content of the Web still skewed heavily toward nerd topics (*Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, Linux, etc.).

Harry Potter and the Well of Scammers.[14] 419 eater is a website dedicated to making miserable the lives of perpetrators of Advance Fee Fraud (aka "419 fraud" because of the section of the Nigerian penal code concerning the fraud schemes that originate within its borders). In 2006, "Arthur Dent" [pseud.] received a typical 419 letter from someone identifying themselves as "Joyce Ozioma," offering him $27 million USD to invest. Dent in turn offered the scammer the opportunity to earn $100 per page of handwritten text for inclusion in "a very important 4 year long research project on Advanced Handwriting Recognition and Graphology systems." In short order, he convinced them to write out longhand, scan, and email him all 293 pages of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* – now visible on the website.

The Leila Texts.[15] There are three ways to send an SMS on the Verizon network: entering a phone number manually, picking a contact from your phonebook, or typing in a name. If you type L-E-I-L-A, you send a message to novelist Leila

Sales. Since 2007, she's been saving and blogging the messages that have been sent to her (on average, five times a day) that should have gone to other Leilas. What's of interest to her, as the site's subtitle ("Small glimpses into strangers' lives, courtesy of a technological glitch") suggests, is not just the content, but the circumstances of its production and appearance.

Horse_ebooks.[16] @Horse_ebooks is a Twitter account associated with horse-ebooks.com, which is itself part of e-library.net, a clearinghouse for quickie ebook titles. Beginning in early 2011, the Twitter feed began to publish excerpts from horse books, mixed with other fragments of text. The combination is oddly compelling, in part because it's difficult to determine if the tweets are automated or the selections of a human intelligence. The Horse_ebooks Twitter feed caught the imagination of the Internet public late in 2011, and remains a media darling as of this writing.

Richard Dreyfuss reading the Apple iTunes End User License Agreement.[17] In 2011, CNET Reporters' Roundtable asked actor Richard Dreyfuss to do a reading of the iTunes EULA as part of an inquiry into why the prose of such licenses is so convoluted. This differs from earlier performances, such as Christopher Walken's dramatic reading of Lady Gaga's "Poker Face," because what's foregrounded in Dreyfuss's case is not poetic language, however banal without the accompanying music and performance, but the complex legal language of clickwrap agreements.

Casting the term findable as an adverb rather than a noun (the "found poem") is deliberate, because the findable is about *potential* rather than accomplishment. What that potential represents is a context for discussing the kind of amusing crap that surfaces in our inboxes all the time – altered and unaltered images, funny infographics, viral videos, even spam – in terms of the conditions of its circulability, iterability, and form. The "findable" is a genre, an empty container, a potential context serving many of the social purposes we used to attribute to poetry.

In order to understand why the notion of the findable might be useful, it's necessary to think about the found poem first. It has always been possible to "find" poetic effects in another text because of the inherently *paragrammatic* qualities of language. The most succinct definition of the paragram remains Julia Kristeva's famous note from *Revolution in Poetic Language*: "A text is paragrammatic, writes Leon S. Roudiez, 'in the sense that its organization of words (and their denotations), grammar, and syntax is challenged by the infinite possibilities provided by letters or phonemes combining to form networks of significations

not accessible through conventional reading habits.'"[18] This effect has always existed outside of poetry, and has usually been considered as an amusement at best and an annoyance at worst. In one of his "Mathematical Games" columns in *Scientific American*, Martin Gardner relates the story of Adam Sedgwick, a Cambridge geologist, discovering a "buried poem" on page 44 of the first edition (1911) of William Whewell's *Elementary Treatise on Mechanics*, and reciting it as an after-dinner speech:

> There is no force, however great,
> Can stretch a cord, however fine,
> Into a horizontal line,
> Which is accurately straight.

Whewell, himself the author of two books of verse, was not impressed, and changed the text in the book's second edition to eliminate the rhyme.[19]

Steve McCaffery expands on the notion of the paragram thoughout his critical writing, arguing that while findables and other sorts of paragrammatic phenomena can be intentionally embedded in a larger text, they are just as often fortuitious occurrences that arise inevitably and unavoidably because of the combinatory nature of writing.[20] McCaffery also specifies why a complete history of findables is technically impossible: "If form is, as Dennis Hollier proposes, 'the temptation of discourse to arrest itself, to fix on itself, to finish itself off by producing and appropriating its own end' …, then the paragram stands as form's heterological object, structured upon nonlogical difference and, as such, impossible to be claimed as an object of knowledge."[21] Looking for findables, then, is a tactical negativity that affords a number of possible outcomes. McCaffery lists three: a sophisticated form of artistic production (as in the Surrealist *objet trouvé*); an opportunity for found texts to become something like a critical or theoretical practice (as in readymades, situationist *détournement*, or the work of Bern Porter, found poet par excellence); or a reaffirmation of negativity that equates all meaning with the experience of loss of signification (as in a general economy, or the work of Vanessa Place).[22] The first two outcomes are the now-familiar tactics of the historical avant gardes; the third is that of Conceptual writing at its most uncompromising.

But I think that there is also a fourth possibility implicit in McCaffery's schema that describes the current cultural moment: a system of commercial production that is more than capable of churning out an endless stream of commodifiable objects saturated with effects that were once the privileged provenance of poetry. To the extent that poetry – however traditional or however conceptual – functions in such an environment, it is as a kind of inoculation:

poetry on the subway, National Poetry Month, etc. as something "good for us" that we encounter so that we can be excused from actually buying books of poetry or attending poetry readings. From the perspective of people ignoring that 0.12 per cent of poetry books purchased out of the total number of books published in Canada per year, there is no effective difference between the poetry world's various squabbling factions. This is because the differences between poetic and nonpoetic language are not material or inherent; the paragrammatic function of language means that any text will always hold poetic potential, however one defines poetry. The differences between what is poetic and what isn't at any time and place have to do with questions of *circulation*.

The category of the findable is helpful because what it describes are the conditions of a certain pattern of circulation. Findables aren't conceived of as poems; they aren't produced by people who identify as poets; they circulate promiscuously, sometimes under anonymous conditions; and they aren't encountered by interpretive communities that identify them as literary. Unlike their modernist literary cousin the "found poem," findables don't recover anything *for* poetry.

In this respect, they're also very different than the "Sought Poems" that K. Silem Mohammad describes. He outlines Flarf's database-driven method of poetic production, which consists of entering multiple keywords into Google and then "whittling and shuffling" the results.[23] Mohammad's term for the output of this method is the "sought poem," an apt term for "a process of aggressively *looking* for something, with the intent of *enlisting* it in some capacity."[24] This "enlisting" signals clearly that Flarf is still a literary activity. Flarf enlists superabundant content and then squeezes it into recognizable literary forms: poems that are lineated, arranged in stanzas, and so on. "Maybe," Mohammad writes, "sought poetry is a metrics after all": a rigorous control of form that enables "accidents of theme."[25]

And what of Conceptual writing? All of the findables I've just mentioned have analogues in contemporary Conceptualism. Long-form blogging of texts like the Pepys diary project became a common trope in Conceptual writing circles about three years ago; see, for example, Simon Morris and Nick Thurston's 2009 piece *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac's Head*,[26] in which they first blogged, then republished, all of *On the Road*, or Vanessa Place's Twitter feed of fragments from *Gone with the Wind*.[27] Both the tricksterism and the holography of Arthur Dent's 419-baiting find an analogue in the practice of Kenneth Goldsmith, who has at various times positioned himself as both scammer and scammed. In an early article, "May We Graft Chicken Wings to Your Head in the Interest of Aviation,"[28] he has written about the history of media pranking, and is currently working on a series of holograph manuscripts of historically significant

manifestos, such as *The Communist Manifesto* and the *S.C.U.M. Manifesto.* Like the Leila texts, Goldsmith has a series of letters that he has received since 1994 from people assuming – because of his role as WFMU DJ "Kenny G" – that he is the smooth-jazz musician Kenny G (b. Kenneth Gorelick).[29] The Horse_ebooks Twitter feed is a sort of superior hybrid of Flarf and my two automated web projects with Bill Kennedy, The Apostrophe Engine[30] and Status Update,[31] used to generate our books *apostrophe*[32] and *Update*.[33] In conversation, Kenneth Goldsmith has said for years that his conceptual writing isn't poetry, and that he's happy he's not a poet; conversely, other Conceptualists, like Rob Fitterman and Kim Rosenfield, are quite explicit that what they write is Conceptual poetry.

Such boundaries and distinctions are constantly moving, and serve a variety of purposes. However, Conceptual writing and Conceptual poetry alike circulate within the channels of poetic production, publication, and reception. In his blog post on an earlier draft of this essay, Christian Bök wrote, "The 'wildness' of poetry arises, perhaps, from such a willingness to court catastrophe through a kind of linguistic experiment, conducted on behalf of art itself, within a community of peers."[34] Fair enough, if you want to be a poet and produce things on behalf of art. But if Conceptual writing regularly produces what Susan Leigh Star and James Griesemer refer to as "boundary objects" because they "both inhabit several intersecting social worlds … *and* satisfy the informational requirements of each of them,"[35] why limit the discussion to the world of poetry alone?

Despite what Vanessa Place boldly claims in "Poetry Is Dead, I Killed It,"[36] Conceptual writing didn't kill poetry any more than postmodernism killed the author. It displaced what counts in the economy of small-press literature, perhaps, in the same way that postmodernism changed the function of the author. But for all its displacements in terms of what counts as a culturally significant text, Conceptual writing leaves its own authors largely intact, and oddly romantically inclined about their own effect on posterity.

As I write this, my friends are all very busy writing manifestos in response to Johanna Drucker's "Beyond Conceptualisms: Poetics after Critique and the End of the Individual Voice." The contentious line, for many of them, is "Conceptualism is probably over now, even in its newest iterations."[37] I believe that Drucker's thesis is essentially correct, and read "over" as shorthand for that series of institutionalizations, transformations, affiliations, and legitimations that Foucault invokes. Conceptual writing has been formalized and interpellated as one stylistic choice among the many that are available to aspiring young poets. To date, despite Bök's invocation of the outside, Conceptual writing has had nothing interesting or useful to say about the findables that very likely preceded it and have definitely kept pace with it every step of the way.

There's no point in claiming findables for poetry; that trick is now at least a hundred years old. Whether or not Conceptual writing gets a second kick at the can will depend on how it comes to grips with its own uncanny double on the outside of the poetic economy. Until then, it's still back in the building with all the other Elvis fans, oblivious to the limousine driving into the sunset.

Notes

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