

The Mouse

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"Poetry in Peril? Is poetry on the page doomed or is it adapting to audiences of the next millennium?"

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I am quite excited that poetry publishers are working so hard to promote their poets to a wide range of audiences through new technologies. For example, the publisher Bloodaxe Books in the UK produces Linton Kwesi Johnson's CDs with his books, giving readers the poet's voice-recordings of his words, and makes use the World Wide Web to advertise its authors. Many e-zines have appeared on the Internet. And many have gone the way of Internet Death, their headstones reading: "No longer found on server". New technologies are wonderful for advertising and selling, and for sampling the work of poets. The electronic world can be a reasonably productive resource tool, terrific for libraries and for shared community use. But, I suspect that computers will become like television sets and cable tee vee — places where we pass the time in order to get our money's worth for the cost incurred in purchasing and maintaining them.

That in some quarters it is perceived that there is a need to embrace new technologies not only to reach existing audiences, but to reclaim ones believed to have fallen by the wayside, points to an interesting phenomenon in poetry publishing in the approaching years of the next millennium. It seems to me that poetry is working harder than any other print media to get off the printed page! And if it succeeds — Poetry is in peril!

Where song writers are again including lyrics with their albums, and filmmakers are selling their scripts through places such as The Dendy in Sydney, and novelists are publishing prolifically, many would have poets entirely leave the printed page for digitised records with the promise that this would raise the status, accessibility and acceptability of poetry. Some of us approach the technology as if it were a splendid guru that shows that using it will somehow project some additional enlightenment as to the nature of our art. There is a growing regard for wanting to quantify what a poet does, to place an economic value on the process, for a need to see that a lot has gone into it — to see the machinery in it. Grant application forms encourage by asking us to show how the costing of our work is significant in providing economic outcomes for other artists. Perhaps this is part of the general and studied contemporary interest with dissection and internal peeling away that dominates our thinking — this inspection of our bodies, of the 'body of things', of who we are as individuals, of how we appear "virtually" to each other. That there is a lot of bad and good in this is what makes the phenomenon even the more fascinating.

The irony, it seems to me, is that the further we think we are going forward into a new technological age, the more we are going back to a pre-book age of poetry and its audiences. The more we think that we are catching up with new forms of technical presentation, the more we could seem to be acting out a reclamation of poetry's birthright as an oral tradition when we consider the place of special effects in the e-poem and CD Rom — ways to raise us to tradition of troubadours once more (?). This is one reason why the new technology seems so magnetic, seems so good for us, I believe. It appears to be providing a way for the troubadour to reclaim his or her place in the round, to take on-board, once more, his or her own voice.

But, perhaps poets and publishers are too ready to embrace 'e-solutions' without figuring out why. Selling more poetry can't be at the forefront of the consideration, if we consider that computers plus internet connections cost more than an average poetry library. As we embrace new technology, are we trying to fill up space with peripheral sounds and images where in a printed book the readers fill up this space with their imagination? Are we taking away the reader's voice? Do we want to lose the power of the printed work on the page by giving power to others to change our texts as digitised records. So what is the attraction to the digital/electronic medium as a signal for the direction for poetry in the next millennium?

In taking such a direction, poets and publishers seem to be working more like museums and libraries, trying to place their written material in electronic modes with the expectation that this will increase not only access to the material but in the way we regard the printed material. It is this fundamental issue around the nature of poetry in terms of the growing interest in the preferred regard for 'the poem as an electronic book' that fascinates me.

By embracing electronic media so wholeheartedly what are we setting up our readers for? Setting up ourselves as poets for? Who are these readers that we are anticipating anyway? We are either expecting an audience of the kind that goes to the cinema, to the theatre or a cabaret. Does that mean that poets really want to be filmmakers, playwrights, directors, cabaret dancers? Now — there's nothing wrong with a poet wanting to be all these things.

But when it comes down to it, trying to figure out 'what a poetry audience wants in the next millennium' is really about addressing the question 'what is poetry?' Are we becoming multi-media poets so that we can eat properly or are we really 'transforming poetry'? If either is the case, poetry as printed words imbued with the intuitive spells of the poet's imagination is surely in peril.

Writers concerned with our technological progress are the most sceptical, if extreme in their vision in some cases. Short stories relevant to us today include Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* about a future society where books are banned, where a secret society takes up the responsibility to remember the words of literature. Take William Harrison's *Rollerball Murders* where you have to get permission to read, supplying acceptable reasons why you want to do so, in a world where all information is digitised and centralised. Or, more recently, we have the television sci-fi series *Babylon 5* — set in the 23rd century on a space station called "Babylon 5" — a series about the nature of leadership, power of the word, technology & cross-cultural ethics. In the final episode of series 4, the scriptwriter and executive-producer, J. Michael Straczynski, focussed on an interpretation of a set of events in earth's history just before the sun goes nova, about 1,000,000 years from now.

That episode introduced some issues on poetry and mythmaking in a world suspicious of science — the idea that science was useful as a transient tool; while, remembering poetic words was more lasting since it required at least only one human being who could remember. In a scene from the 34th century, monks are working day and night to remember and record earth's history using pen-&-ink and paper all that was held 'in the mind' of those who could remember. Above all, those of us who document the 'history of the world-as-a-poem', poets, are the primary carriers of this memory. As Brother Michael says to Brother Alwin, "We have only word of mouth to go on"; digitised records, shown by the set of events in the episode, to be less reliable for someone investigating true text and context.

The world of cyberspace as we approach the 3rd millennium appears to be more exclusive than it needs to be: hardware, software, chips and bits, money and more money. If we complain that people don't buy poetry books, how can we argue that they will spend more money to read poetry on the Web at several dollars per hour. As one Internet discussion-page user has said: "I could buy an awful lot of books with that". Albeit, you can read lots more things with that same computer, this user was saying that he would prefer not to use his Web-time to read poetry.

If we believe that the people who used to buy poetry books are now buying computers and CD players, how do we aim to bring them back to poetry? Will they expect the same from digitised poetry as they do of their Nintendo and PlayStation? And if we produce poetry in that form - as virtual games - is it still poetry? What is it then? Another computer game, perhaps? Will we have 'Poetry Tomb Raider' where Lara meets Anthony Lawrence in a virtual Townsville? And will users think that it is Poetry?

Give me printed books (including self-published volumes) over hardware merchants. I don't like the implications of the complicity I'm being drawn into, where, in order to view my new poetry e-book, I may need to go down to my local computer dealer to get some new hardware and software because my equipment now needs upgrading to read these wonderful state-of-the-art e-poems.

Give me something that keeps my voice alive as a reader. Give me something that reminds me of the fundamental privacy of being nakedly human. Give me something that I can literally take to bed with me without wires tracing magnetic elements to my brain. Give me poetry that enlivens me sensually — the poet's unencumbered voice and the poet's book. Save me from someone else's electronic-paraphernalia plan. This may well be attractive to some, for, as Pam Brown says in her latest volume *50-50*, "when it comes down to it, it takes a lot of effort to set your own curriculum".

With the apparent reclaiming of poetry as a publicly accessible record, through primarily performance-based electronia, the technological age does run the risk of tying us more and more to the medium of presentation and less to the human figure of the re-vitalised bard. Let's jump a few hundred years into the new millennium and speculate on what this could mean for a fully digitised society. The nature of reading poetry would be changed from 'a quiet read with a book with the familiar smells of the printed page' to 'a machine that you have to pay for by the month, the hour, the second', *if the thing works!*

When it comes down to it, I can't get past the printed book. I'm quite happy to start a writers' forest-planting project to sustain my habit for the printed book. I'd buy books printed on recycled paper, invest in a moisture-free cabinet to keep them rather than in a 20gig hard drive *with* peripherals. I can't seem to get past the freedom of taking that book out and exciting my senses with the touch and smell of it.

There is an *intimacy* that cannot be equalled by putting on earphones and pulling a CD player close to my favourite sofa, or trying to balance my expensive battery-operated laptop so that it doesn't fall off my knee while I try to manoeuvre my liquid-crystal screen in order to read the words from the right angle. Not to mention questions I'd

have to brace myself for when I take in my insurance claim to replace the thing after it fell off my knee just at the moment when I was enraptured by Dorothy Porter's "Nefertiti Rides Me".

If poetry is ultimately about self-discovery — coming to terms with my voice through the poet's words — the printed book goes a long way in allowing me to retain this voice as a reader, in realising the intimacy between myself and the poet's imagination; between myself and my *own* imagination.

The poet's words under the spotlight of our imaginations is as real as poetry is going to get for us. This kind of intimacy that I share with a printed book of poetry might best be expressed in these poems — "Hannigan's Hands" from *Acts of Secrecy*, and "A page from a dream diary" from "Dream Diary", in the collection *Camouflage*:

Hannigan's Hands

When I first met Harold Hannigan
I was attracted to his hands
their deep-stained purple nails
fresh from lifting the flesh of corpses
for brief exposure to grieving wives,
but in the hours of night his fingers returned
glistening with polished egg-shell half-moons
with hands with which you could cover your face
when living was predictably shifting
the dead rescued by deep-sleep

On halves of moons I would sail to Marseilles
on the books of Hannigan's hands
with yard-beards free to lavender skies
tables garnished with orange blossoms
inter-laces of Chinese mosaics
star wine goblets & Provençal pots
fish & olives on a petrin of fresh bread
a bateau lit for lazing on

Hannigan's hands dipping
from the gullet of laughing fish
to a millhouse curtained with sandstone
bringing Louis-edged plates crashing
to uneven floors and fallen petals —
to dawn swept in on deep mauve cloaks

A page from a dream diary

I have always been led to take long journeys:
or rather, pushed, like some stone
metamorphosed into brittle shale
on a cold-dry hillside
borne down a sheer valley
by a fatalistic wind.
If I must be that 'rock'
Erin rather be hornblende or feldspar
or some other non-precious stone
coloured in a futile greenness
that reminds me of mild,
drizzly summers — tearfully,
sensuously, snowless.
Or rather, I should say
(closer to my present state)
like this frost that must form
by the same force that
questions its very existence
into melting point
and later causes us
to long for it, frozen again;
the same force which

now icicles a half-tear, frozen
 with snow-spoken strange things
 as contrary as fire
 or running water,
 the undulant sea or
 mist-hazed mountains or
 God knows what.

I don't know
 whether to stand firm
 like the broken strand of hair
 frozen on my forehead,
 or succumb
 like the growth of slime
 in a pond of waterlilies
 on the horny backs of waterbugs
 and over the eyes of blotchy frogs
 or...either way,
 I'll be equal to the 12-hour bloom
 that neither chooses to blossom
 nor to fade.

In the outcome,
 my only 'freedom' is
 to acknowledge the chords
 of life and death,
 and what happens in between
 — something that sounds like —
 birds, twisted
 deformed in mid-flight;
 like the round multicoloured leaf
 calipered, pulled
 elongated to a tortured snap;
 like the first-born,
 short-lived, limbless,
 a birth ungratefully twisted,
 an abracadabra-mumbo-
 jumbo mistake.
 All around flounders
 the idiosyncrasies of my blotted past
 my fading present
 and no more.
 The wind-sounds take me back
 always back.

I can never know
 more than what I have known,
 than what, at the time of its occurrence,
 I added to the others
 lengthening the list of incompleteness.
 My only times of happiness
 are those spaces after start
 and before end of journeys, like this one,
 when I am mercilessly alone
 with the land, and I pause
 at some unknown spot
 where the snow drifts
 in a frame-by
 frame motion
 as in faulty
 cinematography
 or as in
 a dream.

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