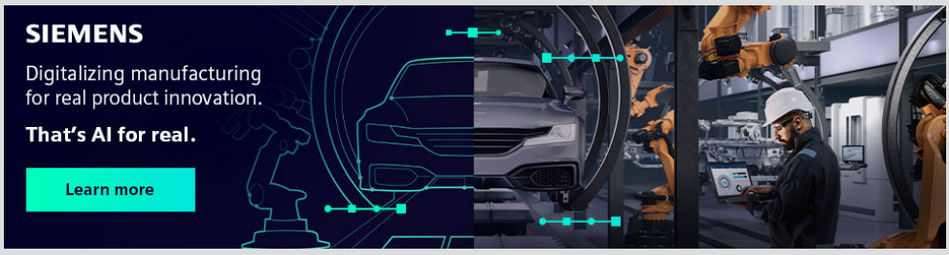

UNCATEGORIZED

A Conversation About National Poetry Month

My fellow CMS student, Amulya Gopalakrishnan, and I often appear to have little in common: I'm almost always wired to some device or other, she is a self-described "book person"; I talk about blogs and fan fiction, she talks about...

By Kestrell

May 1, 2005

My fellow CMS student, Amulya Gopalakrishnan, and I often appear to have little in common: I'm almost always wired to some device or other, she is a self-described "book person"; I talk about blogs and fan fiction, she talks about Marxist theory. She refers to literary figures like Susan Sontag, I refer to science fiction writers like Cory Doctorow and Charles Stross.

We are a literary odd couple (and I am sadly aware that I'm Oscar).

But our literary "odd couple"ness–which often seems a manifestation of the dichotomies between traditional print culture and new media cultures–always reminds me of another literary odd couple: that of poetry and the Internet. Amulya and I share an excitement for digital poetry, and, since April was National Poetry Month, I invited Amulya to collaborate on this post discussing some of the highlights and high points of what we've found online.

Kestrell: I have to mention, when I first got on the Net a decade or so ago, I was amazed at how much poetry was archived on it. This was long before every newspaper and magazine and television show had its own web page, but there were archives and archives of poetry, many of them affiliated with universities because of the use of university web page space, but being contributed to by non-academics.

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As a blind bibliophile, I could understand why some people might want to make educational literary material available to those who have trouble accessing print-and-paper books and magazines, either due to disability or lack of access to the books themselves. I could even see the purpose in the many medieval, Renaissance, and classical archives offering such texts asKit Marlowe's translation of Ovid's Elegies http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=1999.03.0016 .
But how do you account for the incredible popularity of poetry on the Net amongst people who could just as easily go check out the paper book from the library without spending time scanning or typing in poems by hand?

Amulya: I think accessibility is the crucial issue. In a time when poetry is either wrapped in this remote glamor, or entirely dismissed by far too many people, the Web has altered the idea of access to poetry in so many different ways.
Salman Rushdie often quotes an example from one of Saul Bellow's

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characters imagining that a dog barks because it is protesting the unpleasantness of being a dog: “For god’s sake, open the universe a little more!” This, he says, this is the very heart of literature: opening the world. So it is with the Web, and I think that it has flung many gates open for poetry.

Kestrell: The irony is that I used to be one of those book people who kept trying to close the book and keeep the universe contained within, insisting the experience of reading poetry was different when the reader held a physical book. But a funny thing happened once I started reading poetry online – for the first time I got to read poetry which other people were reading and commenting on outside of the classroom. Few of these conversations mentioned words like “metaphor” or “meter”; not from any ignorance of the concepts, but rather because we were too busy getting back to what had drawn us all to poetry to begin with: poetry’s ability to excite us. This despite claims by many critics and teachers that “people don’t read anymore, people don’t write anymore.” Of course, there is a certain irony that such statements can be found in forums and interviews archived all over the web.

Has society become so, like, totally…
I mean absolutely… You know?
That we’ve just gotten to the point where it’s just, like…
whatever!

And so actually our disarticulation… ness
is just a clever sort of… thing
to disguise the fact that we’ve become
the most aggressively inarticulate generation
to come along since…
you know, a long, long time ago!
“Totally Like Whatever,” Taylor Mali
http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4608329

Amulya: You know, it’s never bothered me, the medium that a poem’s cased in. To twist Borges’ line a bit, books are only an occasion for poetry. I could listen to poetry on the radio, read from a book or magazine or paper napkin or subway wall or a screen- the material background is immaterial.
I do think that the Web offers all these possibilities for biography and background, personal marginalia, audiolinks, digressions, oddly-shaped ideas and afterthoughts. It allows for overlapping trains of thought, adds layers that are difficult in a more formal medium.
It’s words that matter, words ‘that give glass-quality to glass, blood to blood and life to life itself!’

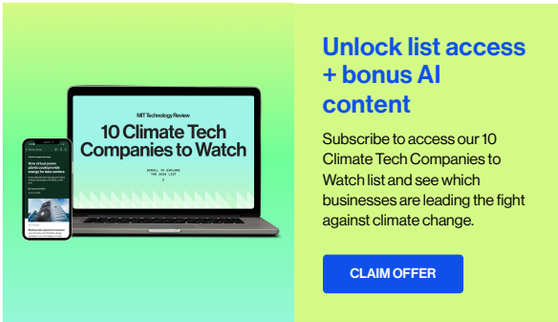
Kestrell: I can still remember how the nature of poetry seemed to change for me once I found there were these ongoing conversations and exchanges of poetry going on. Poetry for me at that time began to break out of the hard carapace of theory and began to breathe and flutter its wings again, to show itself as something new, something which could throw off the heavy weight of theory and criticism with which years of lit classes had smothered poetry. Actually, “new” is the wrong word: I got to appreciate poetry as something ancient, because this seemed much more how bards and troubadors and their audiences must have experienced poetry together, in public, without someone telling them how to “read” the poem.

Billy Collins has a funny poem about how he tries to teach kids in his classes about poetry but they’ve been so indoctrinated into “interpreting” a poem that they can only tie it to a chair and try to torture the poem into telling what it knows. Do you think poetry online has managed to liverate poetry at all?

Amulya: Wouldn’t you say so? You can go at a poem with pincers, take it apart but after that, like Dylan Thomas says, you’re still back with the mystery of having been moved by words.
I think online forums are mostly about celebrating the pleasure principle of poetry. Just like other fan communities, they take a feeling-oriented, middlebrow approach to poetry that is no less eloquent.
After all, readers aren’t born, they’re made- with help from an entire system of reference and recommendation. In return for some basic curiosity, online poetry forums introduce people to entirely new kinds of poetry.The letter C, for example, could be home to writers as diverse as Hayden Carruth, Raymond Carver, Catullus, Constantine Cavafy, Cempulappeyanirar, Mei Yao ChÕen, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Geoffrey Chaucer, and GK Chesterton.

Online poetry forums also provide a chance to break out of the circuits of global literary flows, in some tiny measure. For example, poem-a-day groups like The Wondering Minstrels
http://www.cs.rice.edu/~ssiyer/minstrels/

are individual, whimsical things based on a reader's love for a particular poem that they want to share. They're bound to be anarchic celebratory spaces that upset the stiff seating arrangements of most books on poetry. It's the shock of incongruous arrangement, the easy mixing of high and low registers that gives these online communities such electricity.
Another example that matters to me, personally- Urdu, once the language of the Mughal court, is sadly marginalized by the Indian schooling system. The poetry is inaccessible to many Indians who have never learnt the script, but yet have some idea of the gorgeousness of the language and the inadequacy of translations. Online Urdu literary salons come with options like the Roman script and a glossary, audiolinks to readings. I think that's an access issue too, that's been hugely improved by the Web.



This is a "book." That is, an audiocassette. This other "book" is a screen and a microchip. This other "book," the sky.
Library by Albert Goldbarth
http://www.poems.com/library.htm

Kestrell: What seems radical to me is seeing poetry as something alive, something which breathes through the everyday, something caught from person to person. I love thinking of poetry as something contagious, infectious, like laughter, but in order for that to happen we have to knock it off the pedestal, stop keeping it at a distance. One of the essays I ran across recently was
" Death to the Death of Poetry," By Donald Hall
http://www.poets.org/poems/prose.cfm?prmID=2582&CFID=36031251&CFTOKEN=43...
in which Hall distinguishes the difference between poetry as exalted experience and poetry as everyday experience with the admonishment "Worship is not love."

Billy Collins,
http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?45442B7C000C040D0D
a former Poet Laureate and and editor of Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry, an anthology of contemporary poems for use in schools
http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/
wrote this essay
" Is That a Poem? The case for E.E. Cummings"
http://slate.msn.com/id/2117098/
in which he associates the poetry of E. E. Cummings with text-messenging.

In the long revolt against inherited forms that has by now become the narrative of 20th-century poetry in English, no poet was more flamboyant or more recognizable in his iconoclasm than Cummings. By erasing the sacred left margin, breaking down words into syllables and letters, employing eccentric punctuation, and indulging in all kinds of print-based shenanigans, Cummings brought into question some of our basic assumptions about poetry, grammar, sign, and language itself, and he also succeeded in giving many a typesetter a headache.

…. These days Cummings is rarely mentioned. He has become the inhabitant of the ghost houses of anthologies and claustrophobic seminar room discussions. His typographical experimentation might be seen to have come alive again in the kind of postmodern experiments practiced by Dave Eggers and Jonathan Safran Foer, not to mention the coded text-messaging of American teenagers.

This willingness on the part of Collins to consider poetry as an extension of everyday human communication is no doubt one of the factors which has contributed to Collins' popularity. But more than that, he has, like Hall, neatly reminded those who would forget that changes in poetry, whether in the ways in which poetry is produced (typesetting to text-messenging) or received (in classrooms or by cell phones) has always been a chimera, an amorphous creature of changing forms and functions.

Amulya: That's cool, I think the Guardian has this great text-message poetry contest. Some of those entries were seriously good!
Like a friend of mine says about Cummings, I like the Voice of his sound.
Yes, poetry seethes with life today, you just look in different places as well.

Kestrell: Lastly, I just wanted to point people toward another online poetry site
http://www.ubu.com/sound/dial_index.html
recently featured in this New York Times article
http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/30/arts/30dial.html?ex=1115524800&en=92a6...
Dial-A-Poem Enters the Internet Age.

This web site is the newest incarnation of a poetry service originally begun in 1969 which also exploited the popularity of a medium to promote access to poetry. The web site, like all these digital poetry projects, reminds us that, if poetry has any "point" at all, it is the same point which led to the development of the Internet: to share words relevant to our everyday experiences.

by Kestrell

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