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You'd Better Start Swimmin' or You'll Sink Like A Stone

by KENNETH GOLDSMITH

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Stephen Burt is drowning in the digital deluge. He's up to his eyeballs in information and he can't take it anymore. It's just too much. Too many blogs, too many Facebook pages, too much discussion, too many Tweets: "I'm sorry," he says. "I just can't do it. I don't have the energy. Maybe I never did." Burt's complaint is a common one; after all, who hasn't felt that way? But instead of bemoaning what is inevitable, many poets are seeing this condition as an opening, a celebration, a new linguistic terrain, raw materials out of which they're mining an entirely new literature. While it's not the only response to the digital age (Robert Archambeau, has posited that "crawling into a cave and trying to write runic poetry on stones, if one did it now, would be a response to our times"), I will claim, once again, that it is the most relevant, contemporary, and engaged response.

These new writers are language hoarders; their projects are epic, mirroring the gargantuan scale of textuality on the Internet. While the works often take an electronic form, there is often a paper version that is circulated in journals and zines, purchased by libraries, and received by, written about, and studied by readers of poetry. While this new writing has an electronic gleam in its eyes, its results are distinctly analog, taking inspiration from radical modernist ideas and juicing them with twenty-first century technology. This ain't E-poetry or Net Art: this is all about a basic change in the ways in which we use language. We will never write the same way again.

Over the past five years we have seen works such as Simon Morris's retyping of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* in its entirety, a page a day, every day, on a blog for a year; Robert Fitterman's list poems that are often nothing more than reframing listings of stores from a shopping mall directory into a poetic form; an impoverished writer, Matthew Timmons, who has taken every credit card application sent to him and bound them into an eight-hundred-page print-on-demand book so costly that even he can't afford a copy; Craig Dworkin's parsing of the text of an entire nineteenth-century book on grammar according to its own methods, even down to the book's index; A lawyer, Vanessa Place, who re-presents the legal briefs of her day job as poetry in their entirety without changing a word; Caroline Bergvall, who spent days at the British Library copying down the first verse of Dante's *Inferno* from every English translation that the library possesses, one after another, page after page, until she exhausts the library's supply; Darren Wershler and Bill

Kennedy, who have built a spider to scoop status updates off social networking sites and assigns them to names of deceased writers (“Jonathan Swift has got tix to the Wranglers game tonight”), creating an epic, never-ending work of poetry that rewrites itself as frequently as Facebook pages are updated; Christian Bök, who ran PERL scripts through millions of sequences in order write a poem encoded into a strand of DNA; Chris Alexander, who has constructed a book-length poem by harvesting online references to Kung-Fu Panda; and my own appropriation of the complete text of a day’s copy of the New York Times published as a nine-hundred-page book. This is just the tip of the iceberg.

Yet while Burt has been fretting about this condition, entire movements celebrating information overload have already come and gone. Flarf was one of them (co-founder Nada Gordon recently proclaimed the movement dead), which was based on grabbing the worst of Google search results: The more offensive, the more ridiculous, the more outrageous the better. The Flarf Collective was active for over a decade.

In the face of this information torrential downpour, there’s at least one corner where Burt feels he’s safe: “I think I can keep up with books, more or less, which are countable, finite sets of things (especially since they do come in the mail).” Think again. There’s a ten-year old phenomenon called Lulu, that blows away the idea of paperbound finitude. Lulu allows any writer to publish as many books as they want as print on demand. Tan Lin has used Lulu to spawn dozens of remixes of his Seven Controlled Vocabularies, all in paper. Each week, I get dozens of books in the post of re-appropriated texts, from god knows where. My snail mailbox is stuffed with more books than it was a decade ago.

Vanessa Place has taken Lulu to an even more extreme level. She’s created what she calls The Factory Series, which she describes as “A series of chapbooks ‘by Vanessa Place’ whose content has been dictated by other artists/writers, who, in turn, have appropriated content from other artists/writers. Production is overseen by a writer’s assistant. The chapbooks are published as print on demand, and are uniform in appearance. No longer unique, no longer limited in edition, no longer touched by the authorial hand, bearing no necessary relationship to the writings of Vanessa Place, the Factory series simply preserves the place of poetry.” Thus far, “Vanessa Place” has “authored” paper books of the works of Andy Warhol, Charles Reznikoff, Herman Melville, Eileen Myles, William Carlos Williams, Aram Saroyan, Gertrude Stein and dozens of others are in the works.

While once easy to dismiss as yet another case of Goldsmith’s theoretical pranksterism, this writing has become as prevalent as the flood of data it is mining. And it’s only getting worse. The tide is rising: accept it that soon you’ll be drenched to the bone. You’ve got a couple of tough decades

ahead of you, Stephen Burt.

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