

poetryfoundation.org

The Zero Degree of Blunt Expediency

by KENNETH GOLDSMITH

By Kenneth Goldsmith

Writing, like the new American business cycle, is unfolding today according to the logic of short-term efficiencies: agility, turnover, scale. Ever more scientific in means and pragmatic in its ends, the new writing seeks no other gradient but the one of least resistance: either the continuous predatory-stopgap activity of “efficient market theory” or the “fast cheap and out of control” breeder logic of self-regulating capital. In both cases, writers have discovered that they can fill niches far more quickly if their field of activity is cleared of any of the obstacles or drag associated with precious interiority or self-expression.

The result is that pure movement of language becomes the central, spontaneously defined goal, unhinged from any tradition or the specificities of place, time, or context. What emerges more and more is a kind of literary ethos that does not hesitate to declare itself a new mathematical sublime; this book, with its engineered words, sentences, paragraphs, linebreaks, and stanzas offers itself as a pure, one-dimensional result of numbers, algorithms, and protocols crunched... elsewhere: on the data-cloud, on the network, on the mobile phone, on the handheld device. Words now function less for people than for expediting the interaction and concatenation of other machines.

Styles of deployment and organization of resources for creating literary value have changed dramatically over the past few years. Enormous new technological mechanisms for synergy and cooperation have allowed language to concentrate in both new and unprecedentedly dense and narrow ways. Writing no longer fixes on the single masterpiece, but rather on extended, horizontal, non-locatable production units, cutting swathes through the digital landscape at scales that, until recently corresponded to centuries of development in time and entire literary oeuvres in scope. The sheer size and vacancy of our gestures without any doubt invokes — from a distance — a certain pathos and awe, yet it skips along so heedlessly in its oversize trajectories that it can leave behind nothing at finer scales but the inescapable poverty of small ambition, short forms, tiny sentiments and most importantly, human emotion. And it is here where the human entity formerly known as “the reader” enters nakedly and desolately into this arithmetical landscape.

This new generic horizon rising before us is one so saturated with embedded calculation that it sucks almost every prior mode of literary production out of view. A new ecstasy of language has

emerged, one of algorithmic rationality and machine worship; one intent on flattening difference: meaning and nonsense, code and poetry, ethics and morality, the necessary and the frivolous. Literature is now approaching the zero degree of blunt expediency — a chilling, thrilling, almost Darwinian opportunism in action. Writing it appears, at this scale at least, is dead.

2010-04-07

Posted in Group Blog, Uncategorized on Wednesday, April 7th, 2010 by Kenneth Goldsmith.

Original URL:

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/04/the-zero-degree-of-blunt-expediency/>