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The Bounce and The Roll

by KENNETH GOLDSMITH

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Marjorie Perloff has claimed that, often, a poet's career is rarely made on one book, rather it's the long and slow accrual of publications, activities, community service, and so forth that firmly establish one's reputation. A perfect example of this would be the career trajectory of Charles Bernstein. While it's hard to name Bernstein's "best" or "iconic" book, it's the decades-long tireless life in poetry which has made him one of our most important and beloved poets. His activities in support of poetry — be it his pedagogy, his work on cross-cultural poetics, his many volumes of criticism and essays, the founding of both the Electronic Poetry Center and PennSound, his tireless advocacy for poets, in addition to his own poetry — all add up to an admirable and solid career.

But these things take time. The cycle of book writing itself is a slow roll. A book can take years to write, more years to get published, and finally just as long to be received. Once they're published, they don't disappear: they hang around shelves, are passed on to friends, or sold to used bookstores. How different this is, say, from the visual arts, where the art-going public is focused on what's in front of them at the moment. Often people don't remember individual shows (yet they do recall specific bodies of work). After an exhibition, visual art works disappear: into collections, into warehouses, into museum basements, back into studio storage, often never to be seen again. The slowness of writing is an occupational hazard, although it's a pace that I suppose many writers prefer. There's something far-ranging, even transcendent, about it; by placing the work and career outside of normative cultural modes, poets are freed from quick-paced cycles and seasonal fads & fancies, something that even visual artists are not immune to.

And yet, we now live in a moment of the bounce, where Google Alerts are triggered at the mere mention of an author's name or work, or tweets can ricochet information about a book to thousands of followers in an instant. It's certainly gratifying for authors — often working alone — to know minute-to-minute that someone out there is engaging with the work. And it can be addictive. I have a poet friend who has every type of search term and alert set up, not only for his name but also for the names of his books. Every morning, he harvests even the most minuscule mentions and PDFs them for his archive. He enacts what Andy Warhol said, when asked how he feels about his reviews: "I don't read them. I just measure the column inches." Like a marketer crunching his numbers, Warhol was obsessed with the quantification of taste, which, in Warhol's

case, often resulted in higher financial returns. And yet my poet friend is just like Warhol with a profit motive replaced by the ego. In this era of statistical obsession, writers can literally quantify their reception in terms of hits, retweets, “likes,” “followers,” and “friends.” Every day, he checks the number of his Twitter followers, angling on how to better drive traffic to his feed. The more followers he has, he argues, the more visibility he has as a poet, thus increasing his power base and name-recognition.

Now whether you feel this is a silly game — all of this for, really, no verifiable return whatsoever — or not, a significant change concerning a poet’s career and self-esteem is underway. So much so, that I’m beginning to suspect — definitely, in the case of my friend — that this cyber-steam is starting to become more important to him than his actual poetry. In fact, it’s crossed my mind that this may actually be his new literary production. While we saw this coming years ago, with writers obsessively checking their Amazon ranking and often trying to finagle it higher, we might have turned a corner where, in fact, for many people, the marketing, accounting, and management of their career has actually become their art. And who can forget Ron Silliman’s obsession with his blog’s stats — the millions of hits and users — something he loudly trumpeted for years?

The first glimpse of this was the controversial 3,785-page Issue 1 [PDF, 4mb] anthology, when a few years back, the poetry world awoke one Saturday morning to find that most of us had been included in an anthology of which we knew nothing about. How did we know this? We all received a Google Alert telling us of our inclusion. Rushing to find out what it was all about, we downloaded a massive PDF, searched for our name, and found that the poem attributed to us bore no resemblance to our work. Upon further investigation, we learned that our poem was, in fact, generated by a computer and randomly assigned to our name. The responses were numerous and varied: some were upset that they were included, others equally upset that they were omitted.

What was lacking, though, was any discussion about the poems themselves. But to discuss them would have been besides the point. As there really wasn’t much to discuss about the poems—in regard to everything else going on about this gesture, they seemed pretty irrelevant—we were forced to consider the conceptual apparatus that the anonymous authors had set into motion. With one gesture, they had swapped the focus from personally-forged content & meaning, to anonymously-generated context & distribution. Its as if *Issue 1*’s creators were saying that in the age of Google Alerts, what is written has become secondary to how a literary work makes its way out into the world.

And they may have a point. In the new information landscape, it’s the re- gestures (the retweet, the reblog) that seem to carry the most weight. For example, the popular blog Boing Boing doesn’t create anything: they simply point at cool things. And the gesture of Boing Boing pointing at

something always trumps the thing at which they are pointing, making us aware that the new power-base is in the filtering, distribution and management of information, not in the original creation of it. For example, If I tweet something that I know takes a long time to digest — say, a lengthy experimental abstract film — a minute later, I find that it's been retweeted by dozens of people. Now while many may be familiar with that work, most aren't. And most haven't even engaged with it. But rather, it's the name-check and the cool-factor of the information combined with the passion for sharing it, which creates a bounce. The citation, the act of moving that information, has more cache than the object to which its referring.

All of this is to point out the new quandary that writers — whose notions of literary production and reception were forged in the age of the slow roll — face in the age of the bounce. To construct a career based on the ephemerality of the meme is at once thrilling and terrifying. Embracing it is like jumping off a cliff and freefalling, throwing away the script that we've come to know so well. Yet it seems inevitable; it's clearly the next move; it will happen. The question is how it will happen and how much human intervention will be necessary to successfully sustain it as a viable literary practice. If *Issue 1* is any hint, then it's clear that machines will need to play a much more central role in the discourse; although it was curated and collated by humans, what made it possible was the fact that a computer wrote all the poems and then they were distributed and propagated electronically.

But we're not there yet. Even though many writers may derive works from those (Google searches, data-scraping, etc.), I think you'd be hard-pressed to find a writer who doesn't have their eye on the bigger picture; I can't name a writer — even the most radical and “uncreative” — who would choose the model of a bouncy meme over the slow roll of literary history. But that too will soon be changing.

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