

Both Communal and Private: Access and Subversion of Access to Poetry in the Virtual Environment

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Abstract:

Poetry is accessed and experienced according to medium, and the primary characteristics of that access change as the medium changes. If oral poetry is characterised by shared, communal access, and print poetry by private, individual access, then cyber-poetry is both a communal and private experience - one that is reinforced by the democratising, collaborative and immediate virtual environment. As the poetic medium changes, expectations of access change, and this can cause conflict when the traditional perceptions of one medium confront the new paradigm of another. A particularly interesting example of this conflict can be seen in virtual code poetry – including that based upon computer programming – which severely restricts meaningful access to a poem while publishing it in an environment where access is theoretically infinite.

Author and audience experiences of poetry are often reliant on the poetic medium. Access to poetry differs depending on whether a poem exists in an oral, print, or cyber environment, and with this access comes differing expectations of the poet's role and function. When a poet is caught trying to juggle their experiences of an entrenched environment with the development of a new medium, tensions can result. One particular tension is seen in the conflicting expectations of access within the different poetic media, and how these expectations are subverted by code poetry in a cyber environment.

With the development of cyber-poetry, access to poetry is undergoing a steady revolution. Technologies such as computing, information technology and the internet have increased potential access to poetry for both producers and consumers. The openness and universality of access inherent in this digitised, virtual environment conflicts with poetry as it is popularly perceived to be – a cloistered, intellectual pursuit that is literally a closed book to most, difficult to access and understand. This perception is a result of access being shaped by technological medium. As Newell (159) states:

The influence of technology on poetry began even with the invention of the first writing implement and the first material capable of being written on. Poetry, which before these inventions could only be spoken and heard, could afterwards be written by the hand and read by the eye. The technology of writing freed poetry from restriction to the memorizable and the pronounceable and altered its form and development.

As the form of a poem altered, so did its audience. While the development of science and technology expanded the possible subject matter of poems, they also both increased access and altered the characteristics of access in distinct ways from the preceding oral and print traditions.

Poetry was originally a public spectacle. In populations with low levels of literacy, poetry was something to be presented to an audience rather than produced in packaged form for private consumption. Moreover, it was presented as a performance, a recitation, rather than a reading. The *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, the *Kalevala*, *Beowulf*... these were all initially oral poems. Because of this, oral poems tended to be created in a form that aided memory; often with memory-aiding tricks such as very strong phonetic association and using techniques like repetition and alliteration (Havelock 189, Ong 34). Both for the performer and the audience, poetry was a highly aural, highly public event. Access to poetry was shared, communal.

This communality began to change when literacy became widespread, and accelerated with the development of the printing press. As people began to be able to buy individual packages that they could read themselves, poetry trended towards being a private affair. It became written instead of spoken. One read instead of listening – and people read more and more by themselves, and less in the company of others. The perception of the poetic experience began to be perceived as a solitary one. The stereotypical image of the poet in recent Western culture tends towards that of a loner locked in their room, or wandering over a lonely landscape, often in some sort of transcendent communication with the natural universe: Wordsworth, wandering around the Lake District, converting his experiences into a spiritual, literary form. Crucially, when readers recreate this poetic experience for themselves, it is most often done in mimicry of the perceived writing process, quietly and alone. Access to printed poetry is typically private, an individual act.

With the technological innovations of the information age and the development of cyber-poetry, access to poetry is changing yet again. Poetry is once more on the verge of becoming a public act, one shared with large audiences (audiences who sometimes actively engage in the creative process, working together to alter a poem as they experience it). However, because when we look at cyber-poetry we do it from our own individual computers, the privacy level characterised by the typical perception of the Romantic era remains. If the age of oral poetry was communal and public, and that of written poetry individual and private, then access in the age of cyber-poetry is simultaneously communal and private.

Poetry's appearance in popular cyber-culture, and the increased access of authors and readers to both, has had an impact on content as well as style. Fernández argues that "New multimedia artists are not interested in producing an atemporal art, but a universal art for today's audience" (152). The very immediacy of internet publishing – frequently self-publishing – has lessened response time between poets and the events they are responding to. While traditional, print poets have engaged in political and ideological reactions, the lag between catalyst and reaction-production may limit or change the resulting poem beyond the immediate, visceral response. In the age of the internet, when last month might as well be last century, artists "use TV, music, and mass media references as part of our immediate reality Bosnia, the Middle East, gender issues, marginal peoples, ethnic and religious subjects, the materialistic way of life, commerce and globalization, and many other political, artistic and cultural discourses" (Fernández 152-153).

The greater audiovisual possibilities offered to poetry by computer resources has undoubtedly also changed the type of access both authors and readers currently enjoy. Rasula comments that "Some of the material that passes for poetry online has a greater affinity with video games and cartoons" (667) and argues that this "animation and interactivity ... may well be a compensatory sop to a "readership" all too disinclined to *read* in the first place" (667). The sheer abundance of cyber-text may contribute to this tendency, with the text-rich environment contributing to an attitude amongst readers that text is disposable: "Digital writing is not writing not to be read as such, but browsed and searched, used and left" (Stroupe 267). On the other hand, Richey and Kratzert assert that the internet has helped to "demystify poetry

and return it to the everyday world” (42) and as a result poetry has “left the cloisters of academia and entered popular culture” (42).

While the traditional print poetry markets had a self-imposed role as the shapers of poetic taste and development, the sudden direct access of the masses dilutes this ability. If “the publishing industry and academia once controlled the publication of poetry, the Internet has allowed for the dissemination of wildly innovative verse” (Richey and Kratzert 42). Even though “there has been no global shift from poetry in print to e-poetry as there has been for instance, in photography and music” (Baetens and Van Looy), the “democratizing, decentralising World Wide Web” (Lennon 63) has resulted in a “radical enfranchisement of active readers” (Lennon 63). With the price of access being an internet connection, web-users soon find that the information highway is as much social networking and communication, and that professional publishers and editors only loom large over tiny fractions of it.

The rest is *tabula rasa*, and the user is invited, encouraged, to fill it. di Rosario (50) comments on how the technological advance of the internet, the new digital medium, increases access for authors of poetry as well as readers of it.

The advent of the net marks a breaking point with the past and opens up unexpected possibilities to literary creations as well: besides providing new chances to the literary (and poetic) productions, the WWW also allows being your own publisher. From then on, we have been witnessing and incessant multiplication of poetic creations published on the web.

This is a double-edged prospect to some: “The implications for poetry are harrowing, to say the least: now anybody who wants to get their work out there can, and probably will” (Rasula 671). Authorial access is so limitless in an online environment that the lack of barriers has inevitably led to the triumph of the mediocre: “...informal self-publishing sites do eliminate barriers ... but the sheer number of poems disseminated makes it difficult to separate new and exciting poetry from the unimaginative” (Richey and Kratzert 49). Yet questions of quality aside, the universality of access remains – both for the poet and the cyber-consumers. At least, it remains in most cases.

The classification and description of cyber-poetry within the literature tends to dismiss static text-based poems as being insufficiently interactive, or insufficiently mobile... in effect, as little more than transliterations unsuitable for inclusion in the amorphous genre cloud that is “cyber-poetry”. Zervos, for instance, comments that “The act of transferring of information (poetry) from print to digital [does] not make it virtual” and Baetens and Van Looy agree that “...it is widely accepted that e-poetry is not, or at least is not supposed to be, “digitized poetry,” i.e., not printed or handwritten poetry transferred to a digital environment, but poetry written specifically to be read on a screen.”

In a very real sense “... the digital medium is no longer the medium which one writes on, but a medium that enables to create. The originality and the specificity of the electronic poetry are both in the reading and writing (programming) practices” (di Rosario 58). Yet can we assume that writing and programming are indeed the same practice? Is there poetry “beyond the affirmation or reflection of technology”? (Block)

The assumption that writing and programming are the same is problematic. While there are poems written in code that are capable of being interpreted as both poem and functioning computer programme, the line is not always clear-cut. Authorship – and differentiation between writer and programmer – becomes diffused and democratic in internet projects such as *Un seul crayon pour toutes les mains* (<http://voote.phpnet.org/mambo/index.php>), where multiple users construct a poem by voting on each character added to the poem. Here, access

goes beyond reading and authorship; each participant gains access to a form of hive creativity, directed less by a queen than a calculator, in a programme designed as a tool for creating works of multiple authorship. Is the poem the resulting text, or the programme that writes the text? Does it make a difference if the output is a coherent whole, or if the characters voted in are nothing more than gibberish?

Simanowski describes one of his conflicting responses to digital literature, specifically digitised concrete poetry, as follows: “There are so many spectacular effects people program in digital media. If only they would find some meaning to hook onto it! But they can’t think of any because they are programmers not poets.” This privileging of spectacle above substance need not always be unintentional or without merit. “In an eagerness to investigate the superlative digital devices which proliferate around us, the actuality of lived embodied experience, aesthetics, nuance and story get abandoned. The result is art that is invigoratingly investigative yet meaningless” (Johnston).

The resulting reimagining of the poet as technician shifts the perception of the poet from a romanticised, privileged individual, a “divinely inspired human exemplar” (Emerson) engaged in what “seems on the face of it the most remote of the various literary genres” (Perloff xiv). This change in the perceived role of the poet in turn alters the way in which the production and packaging of poetry is perceived.

When cybernetics has effectively discredited the romantic paradigm of inspiration, poets must take refuge in a new set of aesthetic metaphors for the unconscious, adapting by adopting a machinic attitude, placing the mind on autopilot in order to follow a remote-controlled navigation-system of mechanical procedures... (Bök 11).

Mechanised authorship and technological production provides an access route to creation distinct from personal inspiration.

Yet if access to cyberpoetry has increased readership, authorship and publication, does this necessarily mean that this increased access is welcomed? Perloff argues that “Perhaps the most common response to what has been called the digital revolution has been simple rejection, the will, we might say, *not to change*, no matter how “different” the world out there seems to be” (Perloff 3). While critics such as Funkhouser respond to Perloff, saying that “By now, a more realistic perspective generally acknowledges computer hardware and software are tools capable of presenting vibrant poetic works” the tension between the new universality and the old exclusivity remains. Are there forms of cyber-poetry that deliberately limit access to themselves, thereby subverting the environment in which they are published? And can their existence be taken as a commentary on the open community of readership that the environments such as the internet foster?

An aspiring print poet can only dream of accessing a readership the size of the potential cyber-audience. Yet that poet can deliberately restrict access to their poems, even when that poem is placed on the internet, on an open site for all to freely visit. The poem might, for instance, be restricted by the language of its programming. “A work developed for a MOO will have very different qualities than a work developed for Macromedia Flash or HTML. A work meant for Perl presents a different poetic system than work to be transmitted through email” (Talan 294).

Language barriers have of course been a stumbling block for all poets through time. One cannot declaim to an audience that speaks a different language, nor can one expect the average English-speaking reader to buy a poetry collection written in Russian. However, the *potential* same-language consumer base is generally far larger than the *actual* consumer base,

and so the marketplace tends to be limited by inclination and not by ability. Many *can* read poetry, but few *want* to.

This is not the case with artificial languages such as those appearing in code-poetry. These are understood at a high level by a consumer base that is marginal at best – a base that is limited by inclination *and* ability. (This occurs primarily with poems that are heavily text-based, as even a foreign language speaker can gain some understanding of many concrete, kinetic or audiovisual poems.)

Code-poems are, of course, not necessarily digitised. Print poems written in binary code, such as those by the Czech poet and mathematician Ladislav Nebesky are an example of this, but any possible readership of these poems is so very tiny – the poems being completely incomprehensible to anyone who doesn't understand the code – that combined with the marginal marketing power of print poetry, such poems exist as much as exercises and in-jokes as anything else. Including a decoder, as some of Nebesky's poems do, does not improve things a great deal. *Meaningful* access to such poems approaches vanishing point, but this is effectively moot as in a print environment *practical* access to these poems is so marginal to begin with.

If a binary-code poem is published on the internet, access to the poem is available to anyone who has a computer. Yet the people who click on such a poem's page and don't hit the back button after a brief moment of confusion are likely to be rare. Meaningful access is again restricted to those with an understanding of binary code.

Binary is not the only artificial language used to restrict meaningful access in a virtual environment. Leet (1337) speak, an alternative internet alphabet derived from the term "elite", is used to confuse the unwary. 1337 poems^[1] are incomprehensible to the uninitiated. This is really poetry for the in-crowd, deliberately shaped so that only people who understand the "language" can experience the poem. In effect these poems are actively excluding a large portion of those people who might come across them. For instance most people over a certain age couldn't read or recognise 1337, and that is of course the point. It's written in code to keep people out.

Similarly the Vietnamese writer Duc Thuan wrote a sequence of poems known as the "Days of JavaMoon" (<http://www.ducthuan.com/JavaMoon/open.htm>) in the form of a computer code. The visual similarity to programming – the brackets, the other methods of punctuation – means that unlike 1337 poetry it is difficult to read aloud.

```
function dream() {  
  
    if (g[l]i[tt(l)e]r[ing]l || ange{beautif[al(ien)len]u}l) {  
  
        for (dream = 100; dream > 0; dream--) {  
  
            for (plot = n; plot > 0; plot--) {
```

As in concrete poetry (where the poem itself has a shape that reflects the subject matter) the impact works best when left to the purely visual literary form, and read silently by the individual from the linguistic in-group.

Other code-poems are less obviously poetry. As Hopkins observes, "A computer-language poem need not necessarily produce any output: it may succeed merely by fooling the parser into thinking that it is an ordinary program". Such was the case on the Jodi website

(www.jodi.org) – Jodi being a pseudonym for the Dutch-Belgian artists Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans. The Jodi website was temporarily shut down by its service provider because its source code poetry fragments too cleverly mimicked a computer virus (Cramer).

Cayley argues that code-poetry “represents not much more than the extension of the long-standing enrichment of natural language that occurs whenever history or sociology produces an encounter between linguistic cultures and subcultures” (312). This is undoubtedly the case most of the time, but the existence of these code-poems, utterly incomprehensible to most who see them, ring-fenced as they are by their nature, retain the exclusivity of print poetry in an environment characterised by the communal access of oral poetry and may illustrate an interesting subversion of access when placed in a cyber-environment. This is not to say that every code-poet is motivated in this way, or even that such motivation is conscious – and fumbling in the darkest recesses of another person’s motivation is fraught to begin with.

Yet the juxtaposition remains: in this age of information, of increasingly digital information, a virtual presence for a communicator of any kind becomes an increasing advantage. It is easy to publish poetry online, and easy to access poetry online. It is also easy to deny that access, by actively restricting meaningful access to a poem even though it sits in a public forum. Baetens and Van Looy comment that “E-poetry is not a logical successor to print poetry, but a new form, and its very appearance changes the poetic field as a whole, including the subfield of print poetry that “comes after” the digital revolution”. Yet in the space between “before” and “after” the digital revolution, there is a small, sniggering part of code-poetry that dances snidely along the very edge, thumbing its nose at its readers. The Romantic aversion of poets to technological progress has come full circle, as the code-poet uses artificial languages, technology, and the artificial languages of technology to give access to their poems with one hand, and then take it away with the other. Their poems, commodities in a communal marketplace of ideas, remain stubbornly private.

[1] such as that seen on the VISOUNDTEXTPOEM blog (<http://visoundtextpoem.blogspot.com/2009/12/4rry-0-p037ry-carry-on-poetry-leetspeak.html>)

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