

Notes towards a supreme Internet literature: A creative writer's perspective

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Abstract

The article adapts the headings of Wallace Stevens's poem «Notes towards a supreme fiction» to describe what the author believes a «supreme Internet literature» will eventually look like. Drawing on his own experience as a writer who has published in both print and electronic formats, he surveys contemporary creative writing on the World Wide Web and comes to the following conclusions about Internet literature: 1) it must cut to the chase; 2) it must be postmodern; 3) it must be brief; 4) it must have «whistles and bells»; 5) it must be idealistic; 6) it must not live up to its ideal; 7) it must side-track; 8) it must be free; 9) it must be seductive; 10) it must not be read; 11) it must attract writers who are suspicious of web publication; 12) it must invite immediate feedback; and 13) it must resist closure.

Key words: Internet, World Wide Web, Literature, Creative writing.

1. It Must Cut to the Chase

The Web is no place for lengthy introductions. Readers cut no more slack to creative writing — no matter how grand its intentions — than they do to *USA Today*. The story or essay must hook us immediately; the poem must pay off by line five. Even the critical essay, like this one, must from the start promise far more than it's going to deliver. Otherwise, the reader will bid it a quick and remorseless goodbye. There are, engineers at the major search engines believe, about two hundred and twenty million other screens out there waiting, a billion other words.

2. It Must Be Postmodern

It must be fragmented. It must be able to encompass contradictions, like the many which are about to follow. It must critique traditional notions of authorship. It must change our definitions of «text». It must yield to the demands of popular culture. Because the sentimental and sincere poem and story are even cornier on-line than they are on paper, literature on the Web must be parodic, like this article, which breezily alludes to Wallace Stevens's

«Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction», yet implies, through its tone, that both author and reader know nothing *truly* supreme exists.

3. It Must Be Brief

Granted, it's not hard to find sites with 10,000 word stories that seem as though they are going to scroll down into infinity, although I don't know if anyone actually reads past the first few paragraphs. I know I never do.

For me, the most interesting prose pieces on the Internet appear screen-by-screen, in short sections — a page, perhaps, or a paragraph, or only a sentence — one small block of writing leading to the next. In the realm of creative non-fiction, *Feed* is particularly good at this. And *Suck* and *Salon* and *Word*.

The ideal literary form, at least so far as terseness goes, is lyric poetry. Although the cynics are probably correct that no one reads poetry, if Internet literary prose hopes to be read, it must approach the density of poetry. We are likely to see many more Webzines like that edited by Dinty Moore. His journal, aptly titled *Brevity*, only accepts short essays of less than 750 words.

4. It Must have Bells and Whistles

Recently, I was talking with the faculty member of a large, mediocre Mid-western university. He was in the process of putting up a Webzine. «You've got to have lots of graphics», he said. «Otherwise, nobody will read it».

«What about the quality of the work?».

«Doesn't matter that much».

«Are you serious?».

«More or less. People are in a hurry. They're not going to stick around for a big block of text».

He was right, of course. Alas. In this regard, words on the screen are infinitely inferior to words on the page. We linger over books, not screens. Unless, there are lots of pictures. And different coloured type. And something moving: a winking eye, a spinning coin, a whirling dervish.

As I write this, the New Age Muzak of Web Del Sol — a sort of clearing house for Webzines — plays on my computer's speakers. First there is the sound of ocean waves. Then a muted jazz organ. Bass. A drum machine. The Muzak comes unbidden every time I open Web Del Sol's home page. The link to the Webzine's E-mail says: «Mail the Editor, OK? And tell him the music's great».

5. It Must have Whistles and Bells

Or take, as another instance, the essay in an undated (but apparently early 1998) issue of *Word*; «Blood Brothers», by Tom Andrews is about being a «classical haemophiliac». Everything — type and background — is in red. The text appears, slightly off-centre, in the middle of the page. On either

side, red Os resembling platelets scroll slowly down, as though an elaborate blood test were in process as you read the piece.

At the Academy of American Poets «listening booth», you can listen to famous poets (many of them dead) read their verse while you follow along on the screen. On the whole, even a fan would have to say that most of this lot — Frost, Eliot, Ashbery and so on — work better on the page. Perhaps the worst is Elizabeth Bishop, one of my favourite poets of the century, who sounds like an Oklahoma housewife just waking up from a long nap.

Much more successful is *Linebreak*, archived programs from Charles Bernstein's interview program at SUNY-Buffalo. Among the many other sites devoted to incorporating whistles and bells into text are *Poetry Hi-Fi*, which highlights spokenword poetry, *Hyperizons*, which lists hypertext fictions, and Freespeech Internet TV, which lists poetry video sites.

Probably the best thing of its kind that I've seen is T. Dunn's video-poem «Correspondences», in the Spring 1998 issue of *The Blue Moon Review*. The text is fairly short and is accompanied by simple, direct images. The poem is set in the Islamic Middle East, where «even the air is different», where «the wives, shaped like amphora, / [are] voluptuous but silent, / their husbands feasting on charred lamb / in cafes where women must not go». Doug DuCap's soundtrack is predictably New Age, but the videography — words and images fading gracefully into one another — is nothing short of striking.

Problems, though. Always problems. I found the herky-jerky streaming of the RealPlayer video inadequate, so I clicked on Quicktime instead. It took my computer 35 minutes to download the two minute clip.

6. It Must Be Idealistic

Any new media demands new apostles. The International Poetry Webring, for instance, which features «over 2,600 poets, authors, playwrights, and lovers of poetry and literature», is a marvel: so many enthusiastic neophytes, so much wretched (or just plain boring) verse. Several random sites will give a flavour of the whole: «*Mandy's Poems*: Lots and lots of my original poetry . Of course, it's always under construction». Or: «*My Sucking Chest Wound*: Come enjoy my poems while listening to my jukebox. Lotsa stuff about me also». Or: «*the cyberbook of nihil*: Existentialist and Nihilistic poetry, at the moment it includes just my work, but I intend to publish other people's contributions in the same vein». This sort of enterprise insists on a particular aesthetic: *It Must Be Inclusive*.

The Literary Arts Webring is idealistic in an entirely different way. There are currently only fifteen members, and one can easily intuit that the guardians of this gateway would feel that just about all the of the 2,600 ventures on the Poetry Webring don't quite measure up. A burning fire videographic next to the title of each magazine gives the journals an air of Olympian dignity. The Internet *can* be a place where real literature hap-

pens, the editors of *Atlantic Unbound*, *Grand Street*, and *The North American Review* seem to imply, provided someone checks for proper credentials at the door.

It certainly helps to establish the journals' authority that most of them also appear in paper. There isn't necessarily any expense involved in publishing literature exclusively on the Web —GeoCities and Angelfire and MindSpring have seen to that. Therefore, if money equals prestige, as it usually does, Web publication must be less prestigious than publication in paper. Indeed, the motto of the Literary Arts Webring journals could be: *It Must Be Exclusive*.

7. It Must not Live Up to its Ideal

One of my favourite surfing pastimes is to visit sites where Netizens argue vigorously about the death of the Net. Any half-way sophisticated conversation on any electronic bulletin board, especially those devoted to literature, sounds like it's being conducted between burned-out tenured professors with a decade of grind ahead of them before retirement. Newton's first law apparently applies also to the World Wide Web: $F=ma$, where Force is the power of human curiosity, mass is the number of people surfing, and acceleration is the measure of their impatience. *Boom!* in other words.

One problem is that the editors of many of the less distinguished Webzines are too idealistic; consequently, they accept too much dreck. They are so much more ambitious than their counterparts working in paper that they publish bimonthly, or monthly, or sometimes *weekly* editions, evidently full of a clearly misbegotten faith that they will be sent enough quality material to justify the labour that goes into creating a new issue.

Another problem is that publication in «small press» magazines, whether electronic or paper, is usually disappointing. The other writers in the journal, whether they are more or less accomplished than oneself, are in any case probably not especially good, and I usually come away from reading such magazines feeling as though I probably should have gone into insurance.

8. It Must Side-track

For me, at least, another source of dissatisfaction stems from the distractive nature of reading *anything* on the Internet. There is rarely a straight line from beginning to end. In fact, it is often difficult to tell the difference between beginning and end. One link always leads to another, more promising link. But that promise is hardly ever fulfilled.

I do all my serious writing at home, and for years I confined my Web surfing to my workplace. (I've read the Bible: I know about temptation.) I'd hunch over my screen during office hours, ignoring the «to do» piles stacked around me, mildly annoyed when students dropped in to ask questions and interrupt my browsing. Once I stepped into my office, I knew I wasn't going to get much done.

My misgivings about unfettered Internet access have proved to be well-founded. Since February, when I finally upgraded my home computer, I've done less writing than at any time during my writing life. With the best of intentions, I sit down and boot up. Perhaps I plan to write a new poem, or revise the problematic climax of that long short story I wrote during Christmas. Then I glance down at the icons. Frankly, the little telephone connected to the little computer screen is more appealing than the little ball-point pen superimposed on the globe. The one represents carefree distraction; the other, hard work.

I dial in. Yet once I'm on-line, I feel guilty about straying from what I, rightly or wrongly, consider my vocation, so I gravitate towards literary Web sites, knowing all the while that to read literature on the Web is to be distracted from one's own writing. I scoot from Webzine to Webzine, reading a little poetry, perhaps jotting down the name of a new site for a future submission. Two hours later, I log off, unsatisfied. A good deal of my time has been spent waiting for my computer, which is relatively fast, to switch from screen to screen. Meanwhile, I have stared at the blinking cursor, tapping my fingers, wasting time.

9. It Must Be Free

In the summer of 1995, I was directing a writers conference in South Carolina. Two of our guest speakers that year had just formed an electronic book company. I had a collection of poems that I'd been sending around for about six months without much success. I asked them if they would be interested in publishing in it. They were.

They believed back then, and, I think, to some extent still do, that eventually everyone will access every sort of media —movies, music, literature— via the Internet. To that end, they charge \$7.50 to download each of their books. The customer calls an 800 number and gives an operator his credit card information in exchange for a password.

Time has, at least so far, shown that my publishers miscalculated where the money would come from. People don't buy electronic books. (I know that if I hit a screen asking for money, I'm on the back arrow in a second.) Instead, revenue comes from advertising. Yahoo!, for instance, a company which can hardly be said to exist at all in traditional terms, is a Wall Street darling because so many people are exposed to the ads its posts on all its pages.

In any event, unless there has been a sudden run on my work, sales for *Starkey's Book of States* are in the low single digits. Thanks, Mom. Thanks, Aunt Helen. Thanks, Whoever You Are.

10. It Must Be Seductive

Of course, stories, essays and poems on the Web are not just competing with other stories, essays and poems. They're in competition with everything else out there: the mind-numbing variety, the cybersex.

Attached to the Magellan search engine is a site called Voyeur. Every fifteen seconds, Voyeur shows twelve real-time searches that are currently being conducted on Magellan. Of course there is much computer-oriented activity—folks trying to download games or learn HTML—as well as the hodgepodge one might expect: chat rooms, golf, pancreas, Pearl Jam lyrics, Bahama vacations, Rare Reptiles Inc. «What are neutrinos made up of?» one budding, but ungrammatical, physicist wanted to know. Someone was even looking for John AND Steinbeck. But the twenty screens I saw in five minutes on a Monday night revealed that one topic was foremost on people's minds. Voyeur showed searches for the following topics:

handjob, preggos, erotic old women,
big bras, vulva, freaks of nature
largest breasts, Italian hookers,
hot gay love, bestiality, masterbate,
bare butt spankers, handsome boys,
preteen pics, escort services Rochester, NY, lesbians, Asian Women,
jessicahahn.com.

There's a poem for you. And the creative writer who doesn't acknowledge that, at the very least, Web surfers want instant gratification and will go elsewhere if they can't find it, is, as it were, wanking in the wind.

11. It Must Not Be Read

The *Mississippi Review*, one of the more prestigious American literary journals in both its paper and Web versions, publishes the statistics for the number of hits it gets each day. On May 19, 1998, «there [were] a total of 931 accesses by 245 unique hosts... related to *Mississippi Review Web Pages*. Of these, 0 (0%) have been from University of Southern Mississippi, and 931 (100%) have been from outside hosts. There have been 44.5 accesses per hour, and at this rate, *Mississippi Review Web Pages* will get 1068 accesses today». At first glance, this look impressive. However, I've left out one key statistic. Readers «view an average of 3.8 pages» before leaving. There are only seven stories here, so that might not sound bad. But there are 16 separate pages one can visit, including the contents page, back issues, links, the stats page, and the «\$1500 MR Prize!» The page-by-page breakdown shows that these «peripheral» pages are, in fact, accessed much more often than the works of literature themselves.

Hats off to the *Mississippi Review* for being so honest, but the statistics are discouraging nonetheless.

12. It Must Attract Writers who are Suspicious of Web Publication

Despite the fact that there are no *real* readers, the Web has a *potential* audience of millions. For most writers, who are ecstatic if they sell ten or twenty thousand books, this vast untapped readership, which far exceeds anything they are likely to find in print, is tantalising.

Yet I know that, for me, it took a leap of faith to begin submitting to literary magazines on the Web, in part because my experience with electronic book publication had been so disappointing. Moreover, many of the sites I stumbled on were like those in the International Poetry Webbing: slapdash efforts by obvious amateurs.

However, I can withstand the siren call of publication for only so long. Before submitting, I spent nearly a month visiting sites, jotting down the names of those which looked decent, going back to visit them later on. Eventually, I found about twenty Webzines that seemed relatively selective and whose production values were high. I sent my work to all of them.

One of the most attractive aspects about submitting creative work electronically rather than the through mail is the speed and convenience. To submit, say, a group of four poems to an American literary magazine, I need to print new copies of the poems, readdress and print my cover letter, address and print outgoing and return envelopes, then complete the process with two 32¢ stamps. There's a lot of piddling paperwork involved.

Submitting the same four poems to a Webzine simply means clicking on the E-mail address at the journal's homepage, then pasting the poems and a cover letter into the message. And it's free. When I got my first Webzine acceptance, just a few days after I emailed my work, I thought: *Uh huh*. This is a pony I can *ride*.

Even rejection is generally swifter. One editor wrote back four hours after I'd submitted my poetry. «We'd like to hold onto your work for further review». The next day he wrote: «After careful consideration, I'm afraid we can't use it». I wondered how careful his consideration could be, but I was glad to get the work back into circulation so quickly.

13. It Must Invite Immediate Feedback

In contrast to most paper magazines, which rarely list an author's mailing address, Webzines nearly always have the author's E-mail address at the bottom of the page. The reader isn't quite so anonymous anymore. Love it? Hate it? The reader can easily let the author know how she feels.

And there are all sorts sites where writers can go to show and discuss their work with other writers. Web Del Sol, for instance, has three bulletin board services: The Writers Block, where «New and established poets and writers gather... to learn, critique, post works, and debate», Zine and Web Jaw, «a forum for Web and zine editors» and Literary Arts Forum, «the philosophy of literature must be created and reinvented here». (Interestingly, when I visited this last site, there were only three messages posted, all test mails from the editor.)

Not long ago, I received an E-mail asking if I wanted to join a new listserve: «The Flash Fiction Writing Workshop is for serious writers of short short pieces...». The message went on to describe the sort of work that would be discussed and ended with the following caveat: «To join

FLASHFICTION-W you must be over 18 and you must use your real name (no aliases, pseudonyms, or use of the conceal function). Participation is mandatory: no lurkers or browsers». That final sentence caught my attention, insisting as it does, on the collaborative, interactive nature of writing on the Internet.

14. It Must Resist Closure

Although the books in a reader's study or her library or in her favourite bookstore necessarily change from time to time, literature on the Web is far more mercurial. Webzines pop up and disappear on a daily, if not hourly basis. It is impossible to completely catalogue or quantify Internet creative writing. It is quantum logorrhoea, Gutenberg on garbage windowpane laced with speed.

Moreover, the experience of reading most Webzines is overwhelmingly inconclusive. We point and click, read a few stanzas, a few paragraphs, get bored, go somewhere else. With so much more to see, there's little motivation to follow a piece through to the end. Instead, we fickle readers tend to give up on a work of Internet literature long before it declares its own end. In fact, I prefer to stop in mid-sentence, as though.

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Note: All these websites were opened at the time of writing (May 1998). Some may no longer be available.

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