

When word equals world: The Kids of the Book-Machine Go Back to School

forces, pressures, intensities

It's been an interesting summer for poets and readers of poetry in Toronto. At the same time as Christian Bök's *Eunoia* is becoming the fastest selling book of poetry in Canadian history, the small literary presses, including CoachHouse Press, *Eunoia*'s publisher, have been involved in a highly publicized fight for their survival. And so we find ourselves in the strange position of seeing a fair bit of ink in the mainstream press spent on debates about the relative value of poetry, and just what kind of poetry should be written, and why.

I can't help but feel responsible for the answers that I read. I spend a good portion of my life with one foot in the highschool English classroom. I know where attitudes towards poetry are forged. We do a lot of damage. Sometimes I wish students didn't encounter poetry in the classroom from the age of 8 onward. The poetics of *Sesame Street* has a lot more to offer than the multiple choice tests on poetry interpretation increasingly used in the senior level classrooms. In this context, I pick up *Rational Geomancy* again, and realized that ultimately, this is a book with a strong pedagogical impulse. After all, what else do I do in the literary classroom other than calculate my students' probable access to the book-machine?

Scratch 'n Sniff Pedagogy

In the dialogic report on narrative, as they think outloud about the fact that they are thinking outloud, the Kids of the Book-machine, Nichol & McCaffery locate the reader's entry into their conversation in the process of mutual self-conscious interrogation (RG 151-2). The postmodern classroom is also a site of reciprocal interrogation, as pedagogues increasingly reject a naive view of the student-centered classroom in favour of one which acknowledges the historical, ideological and material forces and pressures which constitute the complex machinic assemblage that is the site of pedagogical inquiry. While the Toronto Research Group were obsessively concerned with the ways in which the material dynamics of the literary work shaped these encounters, in the highschool English classroom, the physical operations of the book-machine remain transparent, and will remain so, perhaps, as long as "media studies" is considered a separate activity. This omission is more ironic when one considers that these teachers spend an inordinate amount of time producing and reproducing texts in a variety of media- chalkboard, over-head transparency, photocopy, gestetner. What difference does the olfactory impact of the gestetner hand-out make in the reading of the text? Most students of my generation probably smelled their poetry before they read it, in vain hopes of getting high from the fumes of the fresh, damp pages. A hastily xeroxed version of a Walt Whitman poem prompts one of my own students to ask me if the poet intended for the end of the lines of each stanza to droop downward, and should he consider this in his reading of the poem.

xerox generation is a good example of.. an insistence on the piece's emergent self and through the agency of the mechanical means of composition an insistence of the piece's uniqueness at every stage. (RG 143)

Later, a class reading of *Scraptures* (1st Sequence), each page reproduced on overhead transparency, turns into a performance as one sheet left too long overtop of another reveals new forces and pressures in the layout of the letters of each page's compositional field.

Nichol and McCaffery end their exploration of the three dimensional book object in *Rational Geomancy* with a discussion of *Mindwheel*, an early hypertext narrative modeled on an adventure game. They stop short of considering the material implications of the digital text object, or the relationship between language and landscape in the text adventure, though they do note that in these texts the reader "move(s) from place to place." (RG 183) The emergence of new forms of digital literature has brought many readers and writers back to the entrance to the conversation begun in *Rational Geomancy*, as the popularization of internet technology has initiated conversations in the most unlikely places about the phenomenology of the textual encounter.

word equals world

My favourite book-machine is a dinosaur in the world of digital technology, always teetering on the edge of extinction. MOOs, Multi-User Domains Object- Oriented, and their older cousins, MUDs have been hijacking the productivity of undergraduate students for nigh on 20 years. Nichol and McCaffery lamented the narrative conservatism of the formally innovative Mindgames. MUDs, online text-based role-playing games, carried these traditional plot lines and notions of character into the networked world, recreating the pulpiest of science fiction scenarios for hours of hack & slash entertainment. But MUDs, whose development & authoring were controlled by a top-down hierarchy, were then developed into MOOs, object-oriented programming environments. MOOs afford users the ability to construct their own worlds, and in so doing, give them a direct experience of language as material object. Indeed, in a MOO, "No longer turning through a book nor looking at a canvas or panel, the reader exists inside a total linguistic environment... you bring your life into the book." (RG 66)

In order to sustain the consensual hallucination that is a MOO, most MOO authors or builders use linguistic metaphors that reference the "real world." The language in a MOO is used to represent objects from offline environments, and to sustain notions of Euclidean space. It is an ekphrastic project where verbal power is used to induce the visual. The goal is that "the sign should dissolve and leave the reader in the presence of the thing itself." (Bolter 265) Nevertheless, although an object in a MOO, such as a table, may have as its referent a physical table beyond the screen, this external signified is not only arbitrarily connected to the MOO object- it is utterly redundant. The word "table" need not refer outside itself to a material signified object. The very word is the signified object- in a MOO, the signifier and the signified are one.

bp Nichol's description of Norse runic activity echoes what's happening in the activity of MOO building:

what disappears in the notion of the Norse runes is any idea of a signified or referent. i have a mental image of the signifier but the act of writing it down does away with its referential value since i am in the act of invoking the thing itself i.e. literally bringing it forth into the moment of writing. ("Pata 95)

It is difficult to sustain an ekphrastic or transparent reading of the MOO for long, because the method by which one reads the MOO is not by looking through it, but by looking at it. Of course, this is the way one reads any text. But in the MOO, to read the description of any object- the room one inhabits, the objects in that room, another player- one must use the command "look." One might say there is a point at which LOOK an insistence on the physical activity of the reader becomes LOOK an obstacle into the entry of the MOO. (RG 73) The MOO continually reminds the reader of the shifting dynamics of her gaze:

there is notation. there is no tation. The word erases itself. No it doesn't. well yes it does but only if i read it that way. And that's not real. except, of course, that it is real. i can literally point to it- no tation. So i'm pointing to something which is erasing itself even as i point to it. ("Pata 80)

However, the digital semiotic object enjoys a much greater complexity than that of a mark on a page. N. Katherine Hayles speaks of the "flickering signification" of the digital sign which "exists as a flexible chain of markers bound together by the arbitrary relations specified by the relevant codes..." (Hayles 31) The sheer complexity of the textual dynamics in a linguistic environment like a MOO encourages a "kinetic" reading of the text. (RG 134). When my students move back from the MOO to the printed page, they bring with them a heightened sense of the intertextual codes that generate any text. They have experienced the arbitrary connection of word and object. They have played with language, lived within its skin. Suddenly the letters become galaxies. (RG 52)

Geomantic Evaluation

We come down to earth. A teacher offers me a copy of a poem with a series of guiding interpretive questions that he's going to use in his own class. "I'll run off the answers for you tomorrow."

The answers?

Of course, there's a multi-leveled system of sign-exchange value in the classroom, as there is in the production of literary texts in the consumer market. Students are expected to grasp "the hidden meaning of the poem," and faithfully reproduce it on their test page, in exchange for which they receive a numerical grade, a sign of their success or failure. Later, they will be able to translate these marks into scholarship money. Yes, there's a lot invested here.

Evaluation is perhaps the most difficult practical arena for the postmodern pedagogue, for evaluation implies a static standard against which to evaluate or assess. What signifies value in a classroom? In a text, it's meaning. In traditional curricular practice, it's the mark, the sign that meaning has been exchanged. William Doll proposes an evaluative process based on recursion where, "evaluation would be communal and interactive. It would be used as feedback, part of the iterative process of doing-critiquing-doing-critiquing" (Doll 174). Obviously, this model has great appeal for those wishing to re-position learning as an ongoing dynamic process of exchange, and is again, consistent with the desire to treat textual interactions as similarly dynamic. One might draw parallels between a recursive evaluative practice and paragrammatic reading/writing strategies, where texts are endlessly fed into another and regurgitated through acrostics, mesostics, anagrams, cut-ups, and homolinguistic translations. These practices position the production and reception of texts as necessarily communal activities, and again, this resonates with Doll's recursive evaluative practice that cannot exist purely within the walls of the structured classroom, but rather within "dynamic social communities." (Doll 174)

Doll contrasts his vision of evaluation with more traditional practices: "In a modernist frame, evaluation is basically used to separate winners from losers. This is what grades do and what state, national and professional tests do- they separate." (Doll 173) While this is indeed true, it is also true that grades are a language that perform a communicative function. They are merely signs. In order for any kind of meaningful communication about the nature of the learning experience to occur, the communicants must at some point resort to using language- shared points of articulation within the ebb and flow of dynamic energies. Whether these points of articulation are numeric grades or a series of written comments or a conversation, they are equally compromised.

Might one then think of evaluation as an act of geomantic translation, the imposing grid-like assessment chart nothing more than the teacher's reading of the work, as conditional as any other?

when words become worth

As our province implements new standardized literacy tests in elementary and secondary education, I look to Texas, the origin of this current wave of passion for "measuring accountability." There, they are considering using Artificial Intelligence programs to evaluate student essay writing. The demand for accountability has outstripped the supply of those willing to grade papers. We have long debated the merits of a machinic author- the machinic reader has been quietly going about its business for some time now. What interests me here, however, is the method by which these programs evaluate the relative value of an essay. Apparently, it all comes down to word length.

since poetry = 99 & prose = 73 then the difference between them is 26 or the
number of letters in the alphabet.
(Zygal, 72)

The draconian efforts to reduce the activity of literary studies to a pragmatic enterprise that translates into productive students for the market economy are generating a quite a number

of deeply important interrogative conversations. Teachers, students and parents are thinking about what it is all worth, and what constitutes a legitimate translation of writing into value. Administrators are showing more interest in the students that do not perform according to the standards, and although this interest is generally directed towards seeing a greater "compliance" on the part of these students, interest from administrators means funding. And, caught as I am between the poets and the pedagogues, I can't help but note the curious synchronous interest in non-standard language use in both communities. People are paying attention. People are asking questions. People are wondering what to make of it all. This feels like opportunity.

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