

American BOOK Review

Introduction: *The Poetry Renaissance*

Rochelle Ratner

For several years now, I've been listening to people around me bemoan the sorry state of publishing. I couldn't agree more. The dearth of serious fiction is frustrating, while a dozen or two hastily written popular fiction titles cross my desk each week, not to mention the self-help and blockbuster nonfiction garbage. Independent bookstores are a dying breed, as are many of the distributors who worked hard to promote books by the smaller presses. Chain stores return unsold books with coffee stains, and many independent literary presses have either folded or are working with diminished resources.

Except...

Except I see poetry thriving, thanks to the availability of e-books, distributed over the Internet.

The Internet seems to be picking up where traditional poetry publishers left off, and going further. Much further. I see this as an exciting and productive period. Literally millions of people around the world have access to poetry books on the Internet—new works as well as long out-of-print titles (most of the Internet sites reviewed here also contain e-book archives of books that originally had limited print runs). Space is relatively cheap (Robert Duncan's 421-page *The HD Book*, in Acrobat format, for example, takes up less than two megs, while many Internet providers offer their users ten megs of free space, and various providers offer 1,000 megs of storage for under \$40 a month). Design is limited only by the author and publisher's combined imaginations. Colors and detailed artworks that would be far too costly to reproduce on the page are readily available, thus extending the visual possibilities, for creation as well as presentation.

The sorry state of publishing? Stop and look a little more closely at poetry publishing during the past half-century. In the 1960s, when the first onset of small-press frenzy began, many poetry books were mimeographed, often in editions of 100 to 300 copies. At St. Mark's Church in New York City, friends of the Poetry Project would gather to help collate and staple the latest offerings from Lewis Warsh and Anne Waldman's *Angel Hair* or Larry Fagin's *Adventures in Poetry*. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, as better technology evolved, print centers were opened specifically to provide low-cost offset and letterpress publishing alternatives, and the designers of these small-press publications quickly rose to the occasion. Government and corporate funding became available. New presses seemed to pop up on a weekly basis. Still, the majority of small-press poetry books were published in editions of 500 copies, or less. Few print runs exceeded 1,000 copies. And distribution, at least outside the circle of dedicated poetry readers (and the poet's friends) was always problematic, as was (is) warehousing unsold copies. Print-on-demand technology can be helpful in terms of storage, but I've been told it isn't really cost effective for poetry titles.

Writing in 1960, A.J. Liebling stated, "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one." (In the 1970s, I collaborated with a printmaker who was fond of reciting this quote again and again). But suddenly that "press" can be any online computer. Programs such as Microsoft's FrontPage (distributed free with full versions of Microsoft Office) or Macromedia's Dreamweaver enables anyone with basic computer skills to create a professional-looking Web site, and many Internet providers offer less sophisticated site-building tools (as does The Authors Guild). There are even new programs out there that convert Microsoft Word files into Adobe documents. As Louis McKee points out, "the proliferation of online poetry sites is staggering." Looking in the Yahoo Directory, there are 514 sites under "web-published poetry," while the Open Directory Project lists 2,461 "web-published" links.

Without any of us becoming the "thought police," it becomes more and more important for each writer, potential critic, or avid poetry reader to establish his or her own set of standards. The October 2003 Newsletter from Poets & Writers, Inc., develops this point further: "Although any writer could publish work on her own Web site (and many do—self-publishing has gotten much easier since Leonard and Virginia Woolf were setting type for their Hogarth Press books), where one publishes still seems to matter. So the challenge for online journals, and for print journals seeking to diversify, is how to establish

credibility."

Ah, *credibility*. That old horse from the past, a problem child of the university systems of yesteryear, rearing its head again. In what I see as a giant step toward the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, Poets House has begun accepting printouts of e-books in its annual Publication Showcase and including these digital works as their exhibitions tour the library circuit. And the writers can always make printouts for Grandma and Uncle Harold.

Uh, excuse me, but not only for octogenarians. As printers get faster and cheaper, many people are printing things out rather than reading them online. More than one reviewer or potential reviewer for this focus agreed to write on the condition that the text on the screen would print out well, since they have difficulty reading the screens. I asked one of the pioneers of hypertext poetry to contribute, only to discover she's had a hand injury and shouldn't be using the computer at all. It goes with the territory, I suppose, and I admit that my nineteen-inch monitor is more conducive to reading texts online than my fourteen-inch notebook screen.

But back up.

The current poetry renaissance started when Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.net>) began distributing electronic versions of public domain texts in 1971, long before the Internet as we know it today existed. As the project expanded, volunteers—lovers of literature with access to expensive, slow scanners, often prone to error—scanned and proofread the texts that had been important to them. There's nothing fancy here—mostly straight text, pica type, from a period when few computers could handle graphics well. Many works on Project Gutenberg use the academic library's index system—a reminder that the "Internet" was adopted early by universities as an information sharing tool. Also, as they point out, "99% of the hardware and software a person is likely to run into can read and search these files."

Gutenberg's sister site, <http://www.Bartleby.com>, began as a personal research experiment in 1993 and, within one year, published the first classic poetry book on the Web (Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*). Today, these two sites alone boast hundreds of poetry titles. A few authors included are Carl Sandburg, Robert Frost, Vachel Lindsay, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rupert Brooke, Sara Teasdale, Emily Dickinson, and D.H. Lawrence.

In a recent letter, responding to some of my questions, Karl Young (whose *Light and Dust Anthology of Poetry* is reviewed in this focus) talks about being part of the "the mimeo revolution" of the 60s and points to the new technology as something he'd have a hard time *not* checking out. He describes the reasoning behind his early efforts to put classic, public domain texts online:

I found myself in a town with a tacky library system and with not a single decent bookstore. This was part of a national trend of libraries losing huge amounts of their funding and single-owner bookstores disappearing on a mass scale at a fast rate. In addition, I found poets younger than I who lived in places with good library systems were less likely to use them than people my age....A solution to this seemed to be getting everything possible on the Internet—with luck seeing copyright disappear so that everything might be available electronically....I saw the possibility of [using] this medium to create a global distribution network.

The Gutenberg and Bartleby sites have met their contemporary equal, perhaps, in CAPA, which posts simple typescript reproductions of out-of-print contemporary poetry books. Other sites produce text in Adobe Acrobat format (also, by the way, often used for typesetting print books); the latest version of Acrobat even incorporates an e-book reader format. Various other e-books are produced in hypertext or Java formats.

Coach House Books (<http://www.chbooks.com>), a market specializing in Canadian writers, has been around since the late 1960s, publishing beautiful yet affordable editions of early work by Michael Ondaatje, bp Nichol, and Marga-

ret Atwood, among others. They offer e-book editions of many hardcopy books to readers for a small donation, which goes directly to the author. Asked if the print and digital versions of their books are the same, they responded:

Obviously the basis for each edition is the same, but the different media mean different formats, and sometimes different content. Some of our authors have been very involved in creating distinct electronic versions by taking advantage of the multimedia (or other) capabilities electronic publishing offers. Likewise, some of our print editions contain material that would not successfully translate to the Internet.

Not unexpectedly, many of the poets with e-books online write poems that veer toward the experimental, since these are also the writers who leap at the chance to work in the new medium. BlazeVOX (<http://www.blazevox.org>) introduced itself with the statement, "In every new age there comes a new method. Today the cyber culture sits on the brim of explosion. To many these methods are old hat, but to the majority, a book is only a paper product. We are proud to present our first round of electronic publications. Our mission is to bring a representation of fine pieces of textual art in economically feasible formats." (I'd hoped to include BlazeVOX in this focus, but their server apparently crashed just as it was in the planning stages, and a potential reviewer was unable to access the site).

The Internet is massive, and this focus is the tip of the iceberg. To give it some structure and boundaries, I limited it to full books

and chapbooks, available free of charge. Thus, some excellent e-book publishers that charge or ask for a contribution, such as Coach House or Rattapallax (<http://www.rattapallax.com>—which has published many well known poets, including F.D. Reeve and Daniela Gioseffi), were omitted. I also limited the focus to presses that specifically identify themselves as such (or zines publishing books and chapbooks). Thus I omitted magazines (even those that occasionally devote special issues to the work of one writer and those that regularly contain chapbook-length features). I also restricted the focus to poetry books, thus eliminating Alt-X/Black Ice (<http://www.altx.com>), which specializes in experimental e-book fiction, and MAG (<http://www.muse-apprentice-guild.com>), which has published the works of individual writers and media artists in special editions, most of which are highly visual. Hopefully, these can be covered in future issues.

Even given these limitations, there were more interesting sites out there than space would permit us to cover. Other excellent free poetry e-book sites are 2River (<http://www.2river.org>), which follows up with print versions of their chapbooks; Mudlark (<http://www.unf.edu/mudlark>); BlazeVOX, mentioned earlier; and Raunchland Publications (<http://website.lineone.net/~johnmingay/raunchland.htm>).

And, just to show how quickly things can move on the information highway, One Zero Zero (<http://www.ccca.ca/history/ozz>) is a site I discovered just as I was completing this introduction. Referring to themselves as "a virtual library of English Canadian small press," their offerings currently include books by Robert Duncan, George Bowering, Michael Ondaatje, and Fred Wah. It's a bit confusing, since their site also lists "projected" titles, 42 in all, and it's difficult to differentiate between links and potential links.

What one realizes as one reads these reviews is that the same names pop up (and on the sites themselves, there's even more overlap). Truly, Web literature has a life of its own, apart from print, and the work and personalities of some writers are better suited to it than others. The same, obviously, will hold true for readers.

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Rochelle Ratner has poetry chapbooks on the Tamafyhr Mountain Poetry site and out-of-print books reprinted on the CAPA site. Sugar Mule (<http://www.sugarmule.com>) recently devoted a special issue to her work, and a series of her photographs are published as a MAG special edition (<http://www.muse-apprentice-guild.com>). Marsh Hawk Press recently issued her new poetry book, House and Home.



Image from <http://www.chbooks.com>