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# A Critical Evaluation of Silliman's Blog

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by KENNETH GOLDSMITH

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Ron Silliman was the Cal Ripken, Jr. of the poetry blogosphere. He was a good player, but more important, he consistently showed up for every game. And by getting up and making the donuts each morning he enacted the Long Tail theory of the web, moving so far out in front of the other poetry bloggers that he, by default, assumed the power position he came to have. In truth, he didn't deserve it, but got it because no one else had the wherewithal to do the work. In his heyday, his output was remarkable. While he often got things wrong — very wrong — one couldn't help but admire the effort it took to do what he did.

Silliman was the poetry world's first online kingmaker and in his moment, he garnered tremendous power. The spin was amazing: a review or mere mention of a poet would spawn dozens of mentions on lesser blogs. A good review from Silliman was good, but a bad review was even better: more buzz, more controversy, more commentary. I'm not sure whether this added to up anything more than flattery, but with so little press or commentary for what we do, our oxygen-starved community quickly became addicted, checking each morning to see whether something we were involved with got a mention. Even a link in his endless list of links would result in the possibility of someone paying attention. Really, by driving traffic to obscure endeavors, Silliman was doing a lot of good. His devotion to our obscure scene gave us a little taste of what mainstream authors get all the time: hoards of media outlets actually paying attention to what they do.

But there was a price to pay. Because his — like most blogs — was a self-driven, unedited vanity project, he was free to air his biases and prejudices, his hostilities and myopia. Poets write excellent criticism all the time, but this wasn't particularly reasoned or informed criticism: shot from the hip, raw passion ruled the day. There was no editor telling him he was going too far, or perhaps gently suggesting he tone down a rant. But the problem was that he had, by default, become so institutionalized, that we began to mistake his cranky theories for real criticism. This, of course, wasn't Ron's fault; it was us who made him what he was. We were so desperate for someone to pay attention to us — and so unerringly grateful that someone was paying attention — that his words held a lot more weight than they should have. After all, Ron is just a poet and like most poets, he's got good reasons for his likes and dislikes. Nobody has ever — or should ever — accuse a poet of objectivity and even-handedness. And nobody — I'd even say Ron himself — ever accused Ron of

being a good critic. He simply fell into this position.

Yes, there was a lot of blowback, a lot of people who thought much of what he said was crap, but once the Long Tail had gone into effect, there was no stopping it, and little use rebutting it. Like a cookie-cutter question-and-answer session, the man at the podium always gets the last — and loudest — word in by virtue of the fact that he is the man at the podium. I recall an editor at a commercial publishing house — an editor who never would've read nor published Ron's own poetry — emailing me, frantic to know how he could get his books featured on Ron's blog. His lists of "Books Received" proved this: dozens of books every week, from far-flung and alien parts of the literary world were sent to him for review. He admitted that he couldn't possibly review even a fraction of them. But, dutifully, he typed them up each week. Again, it was an enormous amount of labor, particularly when he recorded the anthologies he received, sometimes running dozens of names long. And it was laudable, but it took its toll. I recall Ron querying his audience whether he should continue posting this feature. The overwhelming response was "yes." So he continued. Not good.

I believe that Ron's real goal was community service, but in exchange, we had to wallow through some distasteful moments. He had no qualms about parading his stats — the many "millions" of hits and page views he was getting — stunned that so many people would actually be interested in a marginal endeavor like avant-garde poetry. He would often comment that when he was starting out in the Sixties, such numbers were unheard of. And I think that Ron was so excited by these numbers that he wanted to share them with us, as if to say: "If they're paying this much attention to me, then they're probably paying more attention to you than you realize." Yet it left a bad taste in our mouths. It was egotistical and self-promotional, with an implication that he was primarily responsible for this uptick in interest. And these claims came to haunt him: the flip side was that those numbers only made the marketing mavens want him more. And of course, the more they wanted him, the more drunk he became with his own power. It got ugly. He shuttered his comments stream, unable to control the combination of vitriol and self-promotion of the trolls that were piggybacking on his fame. Be careful what you wish for.

The last year had been painful. The blog lost its focus, with the meatiest posts rambling on about inanities like Project Runway or mall-soaked Hollywood movies, surely not fodder for "A weblog focused on contemporary poetry and poetics." Eventually, even that ended, only to be replaced by morasses of links, upcoming events, and embedded YouTube videos. I still peeked from time to time, hoping to find something to get angry at or some ridiculous opinion to fume about, but it was clear that he had burned out. Silliman admitted as much on March 29th when he said that he was no longer going to do any more writing on the blog.

The trajectory of Silliman's blog is a cautionary tale for poets. By taking the easy love (the bounce) that came from power-blogging, he tarnished his career as a poet. By the time his monumental (and monumentally important) life work, *The Alphabet*, was published, few remembered him as a poet; "millions" instead knew him as someone who could make or break a book, one who could aid the promotion of a new work, someone from whose posts a snappy blurb could be extracted. In fact, what Ron Silliman needed for *The Alphabet* was a Ron Silliman. But there were none. Or maybe there were, but they were somewhere so far down at the end of the Long Tail of Silliman's Blog, that they never would've been able to give the book the attention it deserved had Ron Silliman himself been able to review it.

As I said in my previous post, a poet's trajectory is a long, slow, roll and this was an eight-year chapter in what already amounts to a decades-long career for Silliman. While it won't be a blip, it'll be a long time before we start to think of him first and foremost as a poet. Even he seems to acknowledge this. In his farewell post, he discussed his recent activities which include a conference devoted to his work, various readings, archival work, and festivals, declaring, "This is an intensive a period given over to the public side of my writing as I've had in years, literally, and I expect to end up quite winded by the process." There was a sense of excitement, a move to nimbler social media, a wise return to attempt his reclamation as an artist.

Like all critics, as a blogger, Silliman was either right or wrong; one could argue for or against his screeds. But an artist is never wrong — we may be misinformed about our own practice; we may be crazy — but we're never wrong. For this reason alone, being an artist is a unique and exalted position in our society, and is one, I can imagine, Ron Silliman will be happy to return to.

2011-04-08

Tags: blogging, Career, Ron Silliman

Posted in Publishing on Friday, April 8th, 2011 by Kenneth Goldsmith.

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## Original URL:

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2011/04/death-of-a-kingmaker/>