SWIFT CURRENT

returns

> SwiftCurrent *has broken with archiving traditions of publishing to provide a site of intense textual activity.*

FRANK DAVEY

SwiftCurrent, the online literary magazine that Fred Wah and I have operated intermittently from York University since 1984, is now entering its second lifetime. The first version, which survives mostly in a tape archive and in the documentation of *The SwiftCurrent Anthology* (Coach House Press, 1986), was based on custom-made, author-focused software that gave participating writers genre categories within which they could create personal subdirectories and contribute to these their own texts. Within this structure of genre directories and author subdirectories, readers could shape their own "anthologies" of contributions by deleting texts or deleting entire author-directories from their personal view of the magazine. Although readers had no way of attaching responses to texts, they could could contribute comments under their own names in a "commentary" category or send private messages to the author. Although approximately 300 texts were contributed to this version during its three years of operation, more than 90 percent of its activity consisted of private messages, most of which had little connection to the texts contributed. Readers reported unhappiness at not being able to respond immediately to texts they had read — that the requirement of changing directories in order to submit public comments was inhibiting. They also reported that they had difficulty dealing with the the volume of ˙ texts that accumulated in *SwiftCurrent* — that they needed tools that would assist them in sorting and sampling these texts and in gaining some kind of overview.

The present *SwiftCurrent* is operating in an off-the-shelf conferencing programme, "Caucus," developed by Camber-Roth in New York primarily for public-affairs computer conferences. *SwiftCurrent* here offers separate conferences for genres ("scfict," "sctheory," "scpoetry," "screview"), plus a small press and little magazine conference ("smalpres") and one about *SwiftCurrent* itself ("scnews"). Within these conferences, participants may contribute texts as "items" for discussion, or append "responses" to the text they have just read. Search facilities allow users to locate author-names or specific words and phrases; a random-access facility within conferences allows readers to sample the opening page of one text and then move directly to another. Commands such as "list persons" and "list titles" enable new users to discover what kinds of material specific conferences contain. A "forget item" command still allows users to customise their own view of *SwiftCurrent*, and a built-in editor allows contributors of both items and responses to change or expand texts they have previously submitted. Users of this new version have generated long chains of thoughtful and disputatious responses to most items. Public response has now replaced private correspondence as *SwiftCurrent*'s major function.

Perhaps because of a six-month gap between the terminating of the first *Swift-Current* and installation of the Caucus software, or possibly because of changes in the nature of the project, most of the users of that first version have not joined the second. The approximately 40 regular users of *SwiftCurrent* "one" (plus about 60 occa-sional users) were about evenly distributed between Ontario and British Columbia, with only a few users in other provinces. Users at a distance from *SwiftCurrent*'s physical location at York University enjoyed relatively simple Datapac access courtesy of the university. *SwiftCurrent* "two" is accessible only through regular telephone or iNet, a somewhat more cumbersome cousin of Datapac, which — despite the fact that *SwiftCurrent* itself pays the iNet charges of participating writers — is reported to make outside-of-Toronto use awkward and discouraging. The approximately 40 users of the current project are almost all from southern Ontario.

THE WRITERS ACTIVE IN SWIFTCURRENT "TWO," with its production of texts that are quickly relativised by commentary, include, perhaps not surprisingly, very few who have established audiences for their writing through well-known presses and magazines. I personally suspect that the finality of the printed page plays an authenticating, if not idealising role for many writers — that the achievement of a stable printed text in a public context is for many the apotheosis of the writing project, and that these might find the kind of interactive publishing now offered by *Swift-Current* unsatisfying and necessarily preliminary to the validation book or periodical publication appears to offer. Many of the writers active in the current *SC* are ones who have worked in interdisciplinary contexts, with music or the visual arts, published their texts in chapbooks distributed mostly at Toronto's annual Small Press Book Fair, or presented their texts in readings and performances.

In both versions of *SwiftCurrent* very few women writers have participated. I have heard and entertained numerous hypotheses about why this has been so. Is it because women remain culturally conditioned to be uneasy with technology, or have associated it, as Margaret Atwood's fiction has, with patriarchal violence? Is it because some feminisms still model the feminine on a nature vs. culture dichotomy that locates technology in the "masculine" second term? Is it simply that the economic disadvantages of being female give women lower access to technology than men enjoy? Or perhaps that most feminisms encourage women to work outside contexts in which men are active? Or even that many women writers seek the legitimation of established systems, including book and magazine publishing, rather than seeking to interrogate those legitimacies? — that is, is it related to the explanations one occasionally hears for why many women writers prefer realism to postmodernism or prefer attempting to construct a female subject to the project of interrogating the possibility of the autonomous subject? My own view is that all of these factors occur and contribute. At any rate, *SwiftCurrent* is presently open not only to individual women writers but to any group that might wish to operate within *Swift-Current* facilities its own closed conference.

SWIFTCURRENT:

HOW TO GET ONLINE

SwiftCurrent communicates at 300, 1200 or 2400 baud. Set your communications software for 7 data bits, 1 stop bit, no parity, and full duplex. In Toronto, dial 736-5258. Outside of Toronto, *SwiftCurrent* can be accessed with iNet accounts, through the iNet numbers 79100067, 79100068, or 79100090.

Once you have a connection, wait a few seconds then ENTER (i.e., use the carriage-return key) twice.

At the prompt "Enter number:" ENTER *mithra*.

At the prompt "Call complete" ENTER twice.

At the prompt "mithra>" ENTER *nexus*.

The log-in code is *sc*, ENTER; the password is *shibumi*, ENTER.

SwiftCurrent will now instruct you how to get into caucus. Join any one of the conferences displayed in the list.

At the prompt "And Now?" ENTER *help* for further information or ENTER *add message* to send a private message to any of SwiftCurrent's participants for further help. Most users log-in daily.

For a list of caucus participants, ENTER *list person all* at the prompt "And Now?"

Compiled by Daniel Jones.

BOTH VERSIONS OF *SWIFTCURRENT* PROBLEMATISE the concept of publication. For the past few centuries western culture has equated publication, "making public," with printed paper, and has constructed from various social perspectives various hierarchies of value within the printed word. A poem, for example, acquires different value if it is published in a newspaper, a little magazine, a single-author book from a small press, a similar book from a commercial press, a "new poets" trade anthology, an academic anthology, or an Oxford national anthology. The function of text-publication appears to be doubly constructed both to preserve the text and to enter it into public dialogue at valued sites of such dialogue. Some "publics" have been "worth" more to some writers and readers than have others — the "public" of *Writing* magazine, say, can be of dramatically more or less value than that of the *New Yorker*, or of *Border/Lines* more or less than that of *Saturday Night*. Although mass media attempt to enforce particular hierarchies, in which large circulation and/or centrally located sites are privileged, individual constituencies still focus energy and value on sites which enable their own members to work and develop.

In most such constituencies, electronic publication is still constructed as "less" than paper publication, or as requiring the validation of paper publication to become "real." High-profile electronic publication projects — the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, the *OED*, *The Globe and Mail* database — have been marked as subsidiary to pre-existing print ventures. *SwiftCurrent* text files become the Coach House *SwiftCurrent Anthology*. What is interesting about the latter, however, is that it had much less impact than the *SwiftCurrent* project itself — much more discussion of text and correspondence about writing resulted from the electronic publication than from the print one. Fred Wah and I conceived of the print anthology not as validation for the electronic one but as promotion for it — the online texts were not to be preliminary to the book pages, the book pages were to be stimuli to additional online activity.

Both electronic versions of *SwiftCurrent*, and particularly the current one, have the potential to serve the functions of publication — at least to the satisfaction of those participating. Texts are preserved and archived, admittedly not as widely as are even small press publications, but systematically in the taped archives of *SwiftCurrent* activity and, piecemeal, in the material downloaded by individual users. Texts are disseminated and responded to, and a much greater percentage of that response is recorded and preserved than that which occurs (mostly orally) in the context of print publication. Despite the current limitations on electronic access and dissemination in Canada, *SwiftCurrent* compares well as a publisher to most literary magazines — it reaches fewer readers, preserves (initially at least) many fewer copies of a text in the public record, but each text published presently receives on average six recorded responses, with most of these responses participating in debates in which the text and earlier responses form the matrix of discussion. No print magazine could hope to achieve this.

This intensity of discussion most texts presently receive raises a further problematic concerning what is a literary text. Although contemporary theorists may argue that literary texts are to a large extent produced by their readers (whether these readers be the editors and anthologists that regulate a text's visibility, scholars who have offered readings of it, or individuals whose "private" readings are themselves partly produced by various cultural interpellations), textual practice in our culture has continued to isolate the text from these various readings. Editorial selection is concealed beneath the "natural" categories of great books and major authors; scholarly interpretation is published separately, signalled by footnotes and bibliographies. Changing and conflicting cultural influences on reading are rationalised under such categories as background, progress, interpretive communities, or denied through idealisations of authors and texts. In the Caucus-based version of *SwiftCurrent*, however, the text, the responses it has received, and the author's responses to these (which are often to expand or modi-fy the original text) appear to viewers as a growing and internally active body of text. To read a text here is to read the text as both written and rewritten by its readings, and often to participate in the text by appending one's own meta-readings. If, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith has suggested, the conventional "completed work" is one that marks the author's "point of exhaustion," "the literal depletion of the author's current resources," the *SwiftCurrent* text is made public at an earlier point, one at which the author is still active in its writing but not, significantly, relying exclusively on her own exhaustible "resources."

ONE THOUGHT FRED WAH AND I HAD WHEN establishing the first version of *Swift-Current* was that it might serve as a way of distributing texts in addition to being a place where writers could work interactively with each other and with their readers. Although the new version allows this function — readers, libraries and schools are still welcome to subscribe — our main interest now is to facilitate use by writers. The first *SwiftCurrent* had subscriptions from several libraries as well as from a number of artists organisations who wished to provide access for their members. We proposed to potential subscribers that they could download texts for academic use, or construct limited-edition print anthologies from *SwiftCurrent*, with voluntary payment of nominal royalty fees. Certainly this is still possible, and although at the moment labour-intensive not technically difficult. Our experience in the first version, however, was that the subscribers who might wish to print and publish online texts seem invariably to have difficulty with the technology, and that for us to try to assist such subscribers was beyond our resources. We had not the time nor desire to become printers or technical advisors — one of the most significant effects of electronic text-providers such as *SwiftCurrent* rests in their potential to shift both text selection and printing from the publisher to the reader. Our thinking now is that rather than seeking to encourage and assist our users to download and print, we should focus on making *SwiftCurrent* a site of intense textual activity — one that could motivate others to solve their own problems in distance publishing. ∎

Frank Davey is Professor of English at York University and editor of the advanced critical journal Open Letter. His most recent book is Reading Canadian Reading, a collection of essays and lectures published by Turnstone Press.

TEXTS CITED

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