

Chuck Guilford
Department of English
Boise State University

**Make It Online:
Reading, Writing, and Teaching Poetry on the World Wide Web**

“The bird, a nest. The spider, a web. Man, friendship.”

--William Blake

A Proverb of Hell from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

A quick web search for the word “poetry” with *Alta Vista* yielded 3,076,999 results. *Google* took .06 seconds to return about 6,790,000 listings. Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to review each of these sites, so I cannot offer you my definitive assessment of the current state of poetry on the World Wide Web. No doubt the situation could be worse--and probably it could be much better. But clearly huge numbers of people see the web as a place to make, read, and discuss poetry, and they are doing just that. Who can stop them? Who would want to? Certainly not me.

From a rather ordinary computer in my basement in Boise, Idaho, with a few basic software programs and an Internet connection, I can access, through sites like *Project Bartleby*, <http://www.bartleby.com/>, the greatest works of literature ever written: *The Iliad*, *The Inferno*, *The Mahabharata*. And I can access, alongside these works, small, quirky sites like *Desktop Poetry*, <http://www.desktoppoetry.com/>, or *There's a Cricket in My Blood*, <http://www.english.uwosh.edu/wolfangel/>. I can read poetry from Kabul, Dhaka, or Baghdad. These sites are not monitored, refereed, or hierarchically ranked

by any official international arbiters of poetic quality or political correctness. In this rapidly evolving literary medium, they exist alongside each other, woven together in a metaphorical web, where they survive or perish based on their ability to build and hold a community of users. And in a world with as much suffering and injustice as this one has, we need poetry. Because poetry is the language of the human spirit, secular and democratic, it can become a powerful catalyst for imaginative transformations of individual consciousness and of global communities, of our relationship to each other and to the planet, indeed even to the cosmos, a way, as William Carlos Williams has said, to “reconcile the people with the stones.” Yes, and perhaps even to reconcile the people with the people, apparently a much more difficult task. True, we need food for the stomach, but we also need food for the spirit, and for the imagination. Or, as Shelley puts it in his “Defense of Poetry”:

The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave.

To more fully appreciate how this condition could apply to poetry on the World Wide Web, we might consider Alpha 60, a large, centralized electronic brain that monitors and regulates the populace in Jean-Luc Godard’s 1965 film, *Alphaville*, which presents an ominous vision of a technocratic utopia ruled by abstract rationality, by means of appetite manipulation, and saturation level social conditioning. The city of Alphaville is both a futuristic projection of what Paris, or Boise, might become in some distant time, like say 2002, and also a parallel or alternate dimension of reality, somewhere across “intersidereal space,” a place where

Mr. Spock, chief science officer of the Starship Enterprise, might feel very much at home.

As the film opens, our hero, Lemmy Caution, arrives from the Outlands in his new Ford Mustang and checks into a vast hotel. Part James Bond, part Humphrey Bogart, part Don Quixote, Caution is also part terrorist, before that word had its present associations. He has come to Alphaville on a mission. His goal? To take hostage or destroy Dr. Vonbraun, the creator of Alpha 60, thereby bringing down the mega-computer that is the controlling intelligence and digital soul of this megalopolis.

“Do you know what illuminates the night?” Alpha 60 asks Caution during his initial interrogation.

“Poetry,” he replies, outwitting the machine.

Alphaville remains interesting today both for the ways in which it fails and succeeds as social prophecy. For instance, in its portrayal of Alpha 60 as a giant, centralized “electronic brain” watched over by faceless geeks, the film totally misses what many of us would probably see as the most significant development in computing between 1965 and the present: the evolution of networking and distributed computing, specifically the Internet and the World Wide Web. Yet while this is not foreseen, the film does quite effectively project a future in which the power of technology is totally divorced from and at odds with the deeper affective needs of society, which have been exiled to the Outlands, and are hence regarded as dangerous, subversive, absurd, “outlandish.” Feelings that cannot be demonized or repressed are sublimated into conventional and therefore non-threatening forms, or are commoditized and subsumed into the dominant cultural ethos.

In Alphaville, the Bible and the dictionary are one, and because the dictionary is tightly controlled by the state, discussion of emotions and feelings has become impossible, until the feelings themselves have lost their legitimacy, becoming mere vestigial remnants of a primitive past. If the only language in which citizens can express the inner life is a state-sanctioned repertoire of clichéd expressions poured into specious, pseudo-rationalistic thought processes, freedom of expression becomes meaningless. How can we conceive what we cannot imagine? How can we express what we cannot conceive? Residents of Alphaville can think whatever they choose, but they cannot choose the unthinkable. Nor can they utter the unspeakable.

In the course of his search for Dr. Vonbraun, Lemmy encounters just such a dilemma. Having resisted the advances of two Class 3 Seductresses, he meets and falls for Vonbraun's daughter, Natasha, and from then on divides his time about equally between trying to kill her father, a mission at which he eventually succeeds, and trying to convince her that her emotions are real, especially the emotion of love, which she denies vigorously right up until the final scene in which the two escape Alphaville by fleeing to the Outlands not in Lemmy's Ford Mustang, but in a commandeered Plymouth Valiant.

However close we who live in today's technocracies may be to such a society of mass cultural hypnosis, doublethink, and interminable war--and I sometimes think we are very close indeed--we would surely be much closer if not for poetry and the World Wide Web. Operating independently, both are powerful forces for individual growth and fulfillment; when combined, the resulting synergies can be liberating in ways that could not possibly have been foreseen in 1965, and indeed are only now becoming apparent.

This is so for several reasons, one of the most important being that the era of omnipotent, standalone master computers, like Alpha 60, has been superseded by the era of distributed networking, in which, as the folks at Sun Microsystems like to say, “The Network IS the computer.” Suddenly and unexpectedly, computers can talk to each other, or more precisely, and this is crucial, people can talk to each other, even write to each other, through computers. As a result, we see what should have been apparent all along, that computers are not malevolent, mutant machines at odds with all that is human, but tools created by humans, for humans, to store, manage, and share information. From the technology of the rock and chisel to that of the quill pen, to that of the typewriter, and finally the word processor is a long and profound journey indeed, but in the end, despite the technological transformations, which most assuredly impact every aspect of the communicative process, we still have a writer, a text, and a reader. And in the domain of spoken communication, we have a similar progression, from speaking through megaphones and bullhorns, to landline phones, to today’s digital handheld wireless devices, which combine voice messaging, voice recognition, visual iconography, data storage, and email in ways that defy easy categorization, but are somehow unified by a communicative telos.

As these technologies continue to converge and to become more ubiquitous, it becomes ever clearer that among the most important functions of computers are those of memory and communication. In their SDRAM chips, and in their massive hard drives and their more portable CD-ROMs and DVDs, computers are vast databanks. That much is obvious, but perhaps less often remarked is the fact that those bits and bytes of information contain not just Social Security numbers and train schedules, but music, movies, emails, articles, books—and yes, fiction and

poetry. True, the amount of fiction and poetry contained in digital format probably represents a miniscule proportion of the total content of all data stored in memory on computers throughout the world, but what does exist demonstrates the enormous potential of digital media as a literary milieu, a vast electronic library in which interested readers can access the poetry of Rabinindinath Tagore, or Issa, or Charles Baudelaire, or Denise Levertov from anywhere on earth with the click of a mouse. And this is not a movement that can be stopped by Alpha 60, or any other force that I am aware of, though some, I am sure, would like very much to stop it.

Not only is a substantial amount of literature already available on the Internet, more is made available all the time, as writers begin to appreciate the value of digital media as a means of communication. That is, writers are beginning to see that computers are useful not only in their mnemonic functions of storage and retrieval, but through their networking capacities. Through labyrinthine passageways of cables and hubs and routers and keyboards and monitors, today's computers connect writers and readers around the world. As these patterns become ever more pronounced, the privileging of printed text over digital text becomes more difficult to justify. If a writer composes on a keyboard, or via voice-recognition software, then transmits that message electronically—perhaps as an email, perhaps as a web page, perhaps as a file attachment—the recipient is free to interact with the text in a variety of ways that are not available with the printed word. One of those ways is, of course, to print the text, or to print some part of it. Or the recipient might open an attached file, edit it, reattach it to an email, and send it on to another reader, who would also have several choices about how to interact with the work, thereby giving new meaning to Baudelaire's lines, quoted at one point by Lemmy Caution,

“*Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frere,*” for the distinctions between writer and reader are increasingly blurred in such a collaborative scenario, as are the distinctions between written and spoken communication, or the distinctions between the literary arts and the visual arts, especially if the medium is the World Wide Web.

It has been primarily through my site, the *Paradigm Online Writing Assistant*, <http://www.powa.org/>, that I have come to appreciate both the political implications of the web’s global reach and also the ways in which this fluid and dynamic digital literary environment reconstructs the relations of writer and reader in the production and consumption of texts, as new and hitherto unimagined literary contexts evolve. But let me give a brief example.

In 1985, I published a writing textbook with a prestigious Boston publishing house. After a rigorous peer-review and editing process, the book came out. It received a few adoptions at universities in the United States and Canada, but not enough to satisfy the publisher, who quickly back listed it and then let it go out of print. Fortunately, especially in those days, I had a digital version of the book, which I used to make handouts for my classes, and which I continued to revise as I did so. In the early 1990s, before graphical web browsers were available, I converted the text to run digitally in the background of WordPerfect 5.1, a DOS program, through a series of macros. Then, with the advent of Windows, I reconverted the work to hypertext as a Windows Help File. In both of these versions, the words took on a digital life (I lost track of pagination, of a sense of a linear beginning and ending, etc.), but in both cases, also, distribution was largely restricted to a small group of students via floppy disk. In the mid 1990’s as graphic web browsing became more commonplace, I learned HTML, and right here in Paris, in 1996, at the Fifth World

Wide Web Conference, I had a vision of how I could convert this proprietary, static, standalone Windows Help File into a platform independent, scalable, distributed web of hyperlinked documents. With some difficulty, I did that, and published the results to my university's web server, with no East Coast publisher, no peer review, no fanfare, no cash advance.

Since then, the site has moved off campus and gained its own domain name. It has been revised numerous times, both in its overall design and in the details of specific sections. For instance, I have added a feature, by which users can download the entire site, which exists within a Zip file on the site, for use without a web connection. And I have added discussion forums in which users modify the site by adding questions and comments of their own. In intervening years, the site has won numerous awards and has had more than a million unique visitors from, at last count, 128 different countries.

Because I have my email address posted on the site, I frequently hear from users, either writing to say thanks or to request help with a pressing assignment. One such user, if you will indulge me in this a moment longer, was a man named Marko _____, a lecturer at the University of Belgrade during the Milosovic era. He wanted to translate *Paradigm* into Serbian and to publish it for distribution to teachers throughout Yugoslavia. Of course, I agreed. And shortly thereafter, I began to receive *Svet Reci*, or *World of Words*, containing excerpted sections of *Paradigm* in a language, even an alphabet, I could not begin to read. According to Marko, the work was popular with its new audience, but unfortunately, the story does not end at this happy juncture. I received one final communiqué from him. It reads, in part, as follows:

. . . you were addressee of letters that were written by my fingers and 'colleagues' Jasmina _____, syntaction and Ljiljana _____, pedagogyst, escorted by others, in other words by unwelcomed non-professionals in the field. Also, my email was constantly supervised by mentioned people. I don't intend to burden you further than this with my personal and professional problems, but I want to fill the other half of the content with my conscientious self now when I feel to be left alone for a while. Today, after years of pondering, I resigned from my job at University of Belgrade and I decided not to publish the articles submitted for *Svet Reci* No 5 for, now I see with myself, lots of reasons. Many of them are to deal with claustrophobic, xenophobic and homophobic culture. Fortunately, it is likely Paradigmica to see the light with non governmental publications, but before I get idea how to realize it, I shall first have to seriously heal myself after several months of putting up with torture by national 'psychoanalysts'. Once again, I am sorry, and I hope that Serbian stream in this once upon a time cosmopolitan city won't go further on in their destruction, not further than me and the mentioned method.

Sincerely Yours,

Marko _____

Although I have tried to contact him since then, that was the last I heard from him, and it saddens me to think that my work, and Marko's commitment to inquiry, learning, language, and communication—embodied in this case by his translation and dissemination of my writing—may have led in part to his persecution by the

authorities of the Alphaville that was Belgrade in 1999. It saddens me, and yet it inspires me. It inspires me because it reaffirms my belief that words and ideas are important, that they do make a difference, that they stand in opposition to repressive authoritarian institutions that maintain themselves by rigid thought control and enforced ignorance.

In addition to *Paradigm*, my web efforts have focused on three other areas: my classes at Boise State University, <http://www.boisestate.edu/english/cguilfor/courses.htm>; a website I have designed for the Log Cabin Literary Center, <http://www.logcablit.org/>; and most recently, *poetryexpress.org*, <http://www.poetryexpress.org/>, which debuted in August of 2001. This site offers inspiration, guidance, and instruction in writing, reading, and discussing poetry.

In my teaching, I use the course sites to supplement traditional on-campus classroom settings and use some, also, as standalone desktop classes, conducted entirely online. Right now, for instance, I have two different on campus courses in session. One is a literature course and the other a writing course. While I am here in Paris, both are engaged in a series of online activities centered on their class websites. In the British literature course, students are exploring the online companion site to their textbook <http://www.wwnorton.com/nael/> and also the *Victorian Web*, <http://65.107.211.206/victorian/victov.html>, and are conducting a web-based discussion in which I can participate while I'm physically away from campus. In my writing class, students are conducting an online writing workshop, in which they post drafts of their essays and comment on their classmates' drafts. Again, I can drop in on the workshop from any place in the world that has an

Internet connection. In the fall, this second web site will be upgraded a bit and used to teach a completely online version of the same class.

The Log Cabin Literary Center is a local, community-based, non-profit organization whose mission is as follows: “We exist to inspire & celebrate a love of reading, writing & discourse throughout the region.” They fulfill this mission by sponsoring a variety of activities that include an annual Bookfest, a Summer Writing Camp, a Writers in the Schools program, and numerous readings, workshops, writing groups, and book discussion groups. Their website is used primarily to communicate with local members about upcoming events and activities, and also to showcase their programs. Additionally, the site gives them national and international exposure, but its primary function is to enhance and complement their local and regional mission.

Since going online last August, my most recent site, *poetryexpress*, has had over 60,000 unique visitors from around the world. As in so many other areas, William Blake is an inspiration here, for his comment on webbing in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, of course, but also for his ingenious blendings of poetry and visual iconography, for his mastery of juxtaposition and nonlinear design, and especially for the audaciously libratory imagination at the heart of his work.

The underlying philosophy of *poetryexpress* is implicit in the following passages quoted from the site itself: “Making poems must be among the most natural and primitive human activities. For while it's true that composing poetry, like dancing or singing, rewards dedicated study and practice, we are all poets to some extent, especially when we feel our language open new ways of imagining and seeing . . . Like inhaling and exhaling, like listening and speaking--sharing and

making poems are two parts of a larger process. When we read or hear poetry, we absorb words, images, ideas, fresh perspectives, new insights. When we discuss or write poetry, we invigorate an ancient tradition that constantly evolves and reshapes itself. . . . The more poetry you read, write, and discuss, the more you'll appreciate the range of possibilities open to you. And your understanding of life, of what it is to be human, will keep growing, too.”

Key site components include *E-Muse*, a text-generating engine that uses Flash technology to construct poems from random words supplied by users. Another section, *15 Poems You Can Write Now*, is a collection of poetry activities designed to help aspiring poets use formal and conceptual schemata to generate poems. A representative activity here is “Talk to animals (and stars),” which focuses on the apostrophe and includes William Blake’s, “The Tyger,” and several other examples as models for discussion and emulation. Another section, “Write a one-sentence poem,” includes William Carlos Williams’ “The Red Wheelbarrow” and John Keats’ “Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art” as examples. *Tips & Techniques* is a concise, practical guide to such topics as “Figurative Language” and “Harmonic Texture.” These topics are linked to numerous definitions and include poetic examples from traditional favorites and contemporary writers—even one of my own poems.

Another important feature of the site is its emphasis on the composing process, which is broken into four stages—making, sharing, revising, and publishing. The pedagogy here combines a traditional writing workshop model with recent research on composing processes. Students first generate drafts of their poems, then share their drafts in peer response groups following the “No Praise/No Blame Method,” as described on the site. Having given and received feedback on their work,

students then revise it and finally submit it for publication. This publication may occur in traditional print media through a classroom publication, or in electronic form at one of the appropriate venues on the web, and there are many.

Because the site is scalable, it can keep growing. Over the next few years, I hope to add several new components. Among these could be poetry competitions, more sophisticated text generating engines, discussion groups, publication opportunities, as well as audio and video enhanced pages, like those at the *Favorite Poem Project*, <http://www.favoritepoem.org/>, a successful American site that has enormous possibilities for diversification and global development.

As a result of these Internet experiences, I have become increasingly convinced that the Internet, especially the World Wide Web, offers artists and humanists a powerful new medium for self expression and for helping to shape the social and political transformations that will inevitably occur in this era of globalization. For there is no escaping that the same tendencies we see operating in the world of trade and finance are also at work in the arts and humanities. This conference itself could be cited as evidence of that, as could the global writing communities established by trAce. When I review the statistics from my web sites and see visitors from places like Iceland, Pakistan, Ecuador, Zaire, Sri Lanka, Yemen, and Somalia, I have a greatly enlarged sense of mission, purpose, and responsibility. And when these international visitors become more than just statistics, as was the case with Marko, I am forced to rethink the personal, social, and political implications of my work in a global context. For just as economic globalization can be a mixed bag of material wealth purchased at the cost of individual dignity and local cultural autonomy, so can the dominance of the English language and of

Eurocentric values, propounded intentionally or not, devalue, drown out, and ultimately silence the local indigenous voices of others who do not have access to the same base of intellectual and technological capital as those whose cultures dominate the international stage. It is essential to tread lightly, to listen, to consider, and to enable others through two way communication and through efforts to bridge the digital divide by providing educational and technological empowerment to those whose voices are not being heard.

Yet while literary web building clearly has profound political implications, it does not and cannot have a specific political agenda. Certainly, individual writers will have strongly held personal and political convictions, which will inform their writing and designing, if not, why write? But in this distributed environment the keynotes will always be individuality and diversity, negotiation and collaboration. In chat rooms, listservs, and bulletin boards, one way information dissemination is transformed into polyvocal discussion and conversation. In contrast with the univocal, centralized, hierarchical communication structure of conventional mass media, the Internet thrives on multiplicity and interactivity.

But for all the changes wrought by the Web, some things have not changed. The poets among us retain their ancient mandate to stir and enlighten the spirit by giving form to our unvoiced needs and yearnings. What is new is the opportunity to use this astoundingly powerful new communication technology of the Internet to redeem and remake this wounded planet's literary consciousness, to illuminate the night while truly doing "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme."