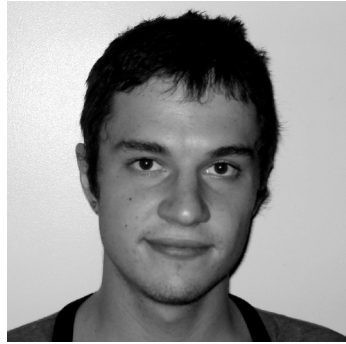


Blizzard Poetics: Kenneth Goldsmith's Textual Wonderland

COLLIN BRENNAN



WRITER'S COMMENT: You might wake to your cell-phone alarm clock, in your twin-sized bed, on a nondescript morning in the 2000s, and wonder: What happened to poetry? If you harbor the irrational aspiration to actually write poetry in this newly-minted century of the digital, this question is at least mildly troubling. And so it was to me around the time when, in Joshua Clover's 100PA workshop, I was asked to research and write about a 21st-century American poet. I assure you, they exist. And none, perhaps, is more challenging and rewarding than Kenneth Goldsmith, whose linguistic and textual experimentation has breathed fresh air into the American avant-garde and shown me that poetry still occupies an important niche in this world, no matter how small. What follows is a critical analysis of the poet's major works. Poets don't need money so much as they need an audience, so it is my opinion that any critical piece regarding poetry should paint an interesting enough picture to warrant further firsthand reading. My hope for this piece is its success to that end. Finally: my thanks to Joshua Clover, whose infectious enthusiasm for language reflects and inspires my own.



—Collin Brennan

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Collin Brennan's essay is exceptional in many ways—not the least because it came from a Creative Writing workshop of the sort usually not devoted to serious analytic work. The assignment to which he was responding was open to the point of vagueness: students were asked only to write an essay about a poet from a contemporary anthology which said something new about that poet. Despite these laissez-faire guidelines, several students submitted outstanding work. Collin unhesitatingly chose the most challenging subject, a “conceptual poet” of avant-garde proclivities, and unfolded an eloquent account from the poetry's own terms, rather than

applying a set critical apparatus. Again, this is particularly impressive in that the poetry in question is pointedly designed to resist “close reading” strategies. Collin’s investigation of the poetry gets superbly at the ambivalent pleasures of the work (including the paradoxical place of pleasure itself), both testing and honoring the poet’s aesthetic project and invention without ever falling into mere appreciation or easy skepticism.

—Joshua Clover



IN THE POSTSCRIPT TO HIS *SOLILOQUY*, an unedited regurgitation of every word he uttered one week in 1996, poet Kenneth Goldsmith provides a metaphoric phrasing which could just as well double as his poetic statement: “If every word spoken in New York City daily were somehow to materialize as a snowflake, each day there would be a blizzard” (489). After one trudges through 487 pages of Goldsmith’s own contribution to that snowstorm, this comes to seem an understatement of the sheer mass of language added to and lost in the world each day. Though we cannot see them, he attests, our own words overcrowd us. It’s a fairly simple observation. Goldsmith, however, cannot be content with the idea in the abstract. His obsession with language—not only its prettier points, but “every piece of shit word” (15)—has led to a number of intimidating accumulations and reconstructions of text he has grabbed, borrowed, or stolen from everyday life.

The practical risks and concerns in undertaking this extreme kind of poetic experimentation are many. How many people turn to poetry, after all, to be immersed in mundane reality rather than to escape from it? Goldsmith doesn’t care. His concern is not to entertain, though for the most part—and to his credit—he often finds ways to amuse. Each of his works presents a generally related idea in a physically unique construct, the former always more essential than the latter (“I like the idea that you can know each of my books in one sentence,” he says (“Poetics” 363). By drawing almost exclusively from the cloud of words floating in the air around him and on the page before him, Goldsmith takes the notion that the best poetry must be written from personal experience to fanatical new heights. His works smudge the pretentious line separating language into “literary” and “non-literary” types and, in doing so, implore the reader to value and pay attention to all of language as an unclaimed cache of inspiration.

A chronological overview of Goldsmith's projects suggests an ongoing recalculation of what constitutes poetry. Gleefully breaking all the conventional rules surrounding the genre while adhering inflexibly to his own often ridiculous terms, Goldsmith seems to derive a sadistic pleasure from his process of converting simple premises (words that end with the letter "R," etc.) into impossibly dense works.

No. 111 2.7.93–10.20.96, from which the above example is taken, is the first of his projects to garner widespread attention for its exploration of this method of composition. With its systematic groupings of phrases based exclusively on a shared phoneme and syllabic count, the project seems both an impressive and inane undertaking. However intolerable of a read *No. 111* can be, one must credit Goldsmith with casting a brighter spotlight on the language itself than the majority of his mainstream peers. While this comes at the expense of nearly everything else we have been taught makes a poem "good" (narrative, sophisticated technique, capacity to excite and entertain, etc.), the project still delivers the words and, if we are to adapt the poet's stance, that's more than enough. Besides, to refute his critics and the poet himself, who bestows upon himself the superlative of "most boring writer that has ever lived" ("Poetics" 361). *No. 111* is not without its pleasures and revelations. Take, for example, this passage from section CXXXII, in which the poet describes an encounter with a van driver who doubles as a preservation ornithologist:

He described his fieldwork where his team went to wild areas and suspended a net between two trees that was invisible to the birds. In this manner he captured the specimens that he wanted. I asked him what he did with all the things that he captured in the net that he did not want. He said he simply threw them back. I then told him of my similar project—that of capturing certain sounds out of the air. ("CXXXII")

This is only one of the numerous instances in which Goldsmith directly hints at the driving force behind his obsessive compilations within the works themselves. He intends not to hide these pure and simple objectives beneath a shroud of meaningless words, but to engage and invite the reader to share in the inevitable questions his tackling of these objectives raises.

Published in 2000, three years after *No. 111*, Goldsmith's aptly-titled *Fidget* is a painfully detailed account of his bodily movements—and not much else—over roughly the course of one day. With a more complete exploration into the depths of tedium than found in any of his previous works, *Fidget* comes across as Goldsmith's resounding “fuck off” to the expectant, newly-minted era of twenty-first century poetics. Here, the poet's initial aim is to create a text so dry and nonliterary that it almost becomes inconsequential, taking a permanent backseat to the physical actions described. Goldsmith also removes all outside agents necessary for a narrative, mentioning his surroundings sparingly and only if they have bearing on his body's movements. We are left with perhaps the most monotonous account of Goldsmith's day possible and a description of the body that, in its impersonality, strangely resembles that of a machine. No need to count how many times words like “finger” and “tongue” are used, though one imagines each number is at least in the hundreds.

Most remarkable about *Fidget*, however, is its utter failure in sustaining this complete objectivity. The project descends into madness as the evening wears on; by 20:00 the recorder has reached the point of insanity or inebriation—probably both—and no longer bothers to adhere to his stated goal, spewing out lines such as “loose breath is taken and death through nose” (72) and “it's a hundred percent head pulp” (73). While this gradual shift to absurdity betrays *Fidget* as less controlled than most of Goldsmith's experiments, it is by no means unsuccessful. What we are finally left with, no matter its intentions, is as well-wrought a testament to the dual powers of language and creativity as any in recent memory. By supposing detachment to such an extreme, Goldsmith commits himself to an unsustainable approach. The mind, essentially, overcomes the body. It is madness, to be sure, and still not exactly a reader's delight, but *Fidget* is justified by its willingness to follow where the mind takes it. It's also not the last of Goldsmith's textual experiments to push the limits of readability and attempt to redefine poetry's borders as more universally inclusive.

A consequence of Goldsmith's preoccupation with the conceptual (as opposed to the formal) aspects of textual language is his willingness to adopt and exploit artistic mediums ranging from music and radio to his website, UbuWeb, which supplies different formal experiences of much of his written work. Though the presentation of a single work in mul-

tiple mediums makes for a difficult, one-way conventional criticism of that work, Goldsmith's online publications tend to represent wonderfully singular experiences for the reader and listener and might be taken for more than just subtle variations on their material counterparts.

Take *Soliloquy*, for example. In book form, the work presents the reader with a voluminous 500 pages of justified text separated into seven acts. The intended effect of the book's visually perceptible length is a fascination (akin to Goldsmith's own, which caused him to embark on the project in the first place) with the sheer number of words a person utters within a single week.

In its digital reconstitution, *Soliloquy* leaves a decidedly different impression. Here, the project is divided into days of the week, the text presented one sentence at a time rather than as an intimidating block. The reader must point and click on each sentence to make it appear on the otherwise washed-out webpage. The aesthetic experience calls for an active engagement in the creation of the text and is therefore nearly antithetical to that of the printed work.

This signifies a remarkable achievement on Goldsmith's part and answers those who might accuse him of ignoring form entirely in his mad pursuit of textual reconstruction. He has managed, essentially, to make two poems out of one—the first a testament to the vast quantity of language, and the second a demonstration of how people organically call that language into being. Indeed, Goldsmith is careful and deliberate in his use of form as a means to convey his conceptual design, though it must be remembered that his is a poetry in which that initial design dictates all.

Goldsmith seems to have further embraced his unique limitations as reigning champion of boredom over the years, his practice of experimentation evolving (or devolving, one might otherwise claim) into as uncreative a mode of composition as humanly possible. His projects have become increasingly antagonistic to that bold reader who might venture to tackle them in their entirety, as well as to those who might define poetry solely by evidence of the creative process. Goldsmith's emphatic deletion of the subjective and personal has pushed the working "idea" behind each of his projects to a new level of eminence. As a result, his lengthy publications have come to depend less on the words themselves and more on an understanding of the poet's methodology

and masochistic tendency to document and represent even the most disregarded of texts.

Following 2002's *Head Citations*, an immediately entertaining romp through 800 misinterpreted lyrics from pop songs, Goldsmith's projects have taken on a stricter, more unified task of transcription. Day (2003) is a 900-page, word-for-word presentation of a single issue of the *New York Times*, while *The Weather* (2005) is a comparably thorough gathering of weather reports from a broadcast news station over the course of a year:

We'll take it, huh? This is a beautiful day and, uh, actually, we've got nice weather for much of the, uh, coming week, uh, we've got, uh, mostly clear skies tonight, temperatures heading for the mid, upper fifties, uh, even warmer tomorrow, eighty-two under a partly sunny sky. Uh, we will cool it down a little bit on Wednesday, there's going to be a front slipping through here tomorrow morning, uh, Wednesday will be in the upper sixties, but that's still a nice day, lots of sunshine.

Imagine 364 more of those, grouped by season and chronology, and you have the idea—which is all Goldsmith really expects, anyway. He knows it would be a crazy endeavor to read all the reports, all the headings, all the classified ads he so meticulously retypes himself, so it is enough that we know they are all there.

Goldsmith's most recent works expound his equation of language and "blizzard," and while his creative output (minimal in the first place) has been reduced almost to oblivion, his technique and demonstration of the blizzard aphorism have matured considerably. Textual language, of course, is central to everything he does, but it is that language's volume rather than its specific use that fascinates Goldsmith and ultimately compels him toward such mind-numbingly "boring" projects. His conceptual work is unrivaled in its ability to create and sustain this boredom, though it is just as notable for its willingness to interrogate and examine the immovable constructs of poetry and poetic language. It isn't fun work, as the poet will readily attest, but something about it feels important. As such, it is no wonder that Goldsmith might occasionally struggle to find the distinction between art and obligation. He writes in section LXXV of *No. 111* that "even activities that are supposed to be considered 'pleasure' or 'leisure' become responsibilities" ("LXXV"). Poetry, it seems, is no exception.



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