

PAUL STEPHENS, *The Poetics of Information Overload: From Gertrude Stein to Conceptual Writing* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2015), 241 pp.

As the digital media affect ever greater portions of everyday life, scholarly interest in their impact on cultural production has increased as well. Poetry is not usually associated with technological innovation, and recent studies such as Wesley Beal's *Networks of Modernism* (2015) and James Purden's *Modernist Informatics* (2015) limit their focus to narrative texts. Yet Marjorie Perloff's seminal *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (1991) demonstrated at an early point that the challenges of the digital age have inspired a variety of responses among contemporary poets. While the medial and material dimensions of this strand of poetry have since been examined by various scholars, the more fundamental question of how poets have reacted to the abundance of information made available by the new technologies has not been addressed. Paul Stephens's study approaches this question by tracing the notion of information overload and the poetic strategies it engendered from the early twentieth century to the present.

The study opens with a comprehensive introduction that examines the concept of information overload from a variety of perspectives. While Stephens admits to reservations about the term, citing the "antidemocratic attitude toward the production of information" and the "rejection of popular and mass culture" it might be taken to imply (16), he argues convincingly that it captures a widespread feeling and is therefore a useful tool for cultural inquiry. Stephens defines information by distinguishing it from knowledge, which involves understanding, on the one hand and from data, which can be meaningless, on the other. He points out that anxieties about information overload are almost as old as literacy itself but have exponentially increased in recent decades, changing human behavior in general and cultural production in particular (16). The Introduction contextualizes the concept in related debates around issues like the archival dimension of poetry, the role of information technology and digital interfaces, and the economy and pathology of attention. Stephens approaches these issues in a thoughtful, nuanced manner. Both optimistic and skeptical voices on the abundance of

information and its social and psychological effects are taken into account.

The historical survey opens with a chapter on Gertrude Stein, whose psychological studies with William James and Hugo von Münsterberg acquainted her with the potential problems of information overload at an early point. The question of whether modernization requires a new kind of attention can be traced throughout her oeuvre, and Stephens identifies various answers to this question. On the one hand, Stein resisted the "pathologization of inattention" by her teachers and other researchers (41); on the other hand, she shared the modernist concern that the technologization of knowledge might threaten the "vital singularity" of the individual (47). Stephens insightfully organizes the chapter around Stein's distinction between "reading" and "reading at" (40). The selective attention implied by "reading at," he suggests, points to an early strategy of coping with information overload that Stein's poetry puts into practice. The rhythmic repetitions characteristic of her early work, for example, break up normative temporalities of reading in that they induce readers to skim the lines or else to stop and think about the materiality and opacity of language. They combine with other characteristic techniques—reduced punctuation, use of present tense and participial forms—to undermine the conventional conception of reading as a continual processing of knowledge. Ultimately, Stephens argues, these techniques both reproduce and challenge the condition of information overload in that they "create 'a continuous present' in the mind of the reader": a state in which, as Stein put it, "anybody at any moment knows anything" (56).

The chapter makes for an impressive beginning of Stephens's historical survey. By surveying Stein's entire oeuvre, from her early studies with James and Münsterberg to her resigned silence in the face of the nuclear bomb (which Marshall McLuhan influentially described as "pure information"), the chapter offers new perspectives not only on Stein but on the modernist period more generally. It reveals a new aspect of the role of William James in the emergence of modernism, positions Stein's productive explorations of information overload as a corrective to high-modernist aloofness, and traces the skepticism that creeps into Stein's work as historical developments confirmed the modernists' fears after all. The complexity and ultimate

accuracy of the modernist response is highlighted by the second chapter of Stephen's study, which examines a materialist counterpart to Stein's experiments in language. Bob Brown, a minor but well-connected figure in the literary field of the 1920s and 1930s, sought to change reading (and writing) habits by discarding the book in favor of a "reading machine." Brown envisioned a sort of Google Glass, an electronic headset connected to a database of texts, and called for a new kind of text adjusted to the fast-paced life of the modern individual. These texts needed to be short, captivating, yet challenging; in analogy to the newly popular "talkies" they were to be called "readies." Brown adopted or commissioned readies from numerous avant-garde writers, including Pound, Williams, Marinetti, and not least Stein, whose work he compared to "tape-tickers in Wall Street" (72). Since Stephens does not examine these readies in detail, their contribution to the poetics of information overload remains somewhat unclear. Nevertheless, the case study is well chosen: Brown's attempt to give the reader control over the flow of information contrasts instructively with Stein's attempt to implicate the reader in that flow.

The third chapter turns to another well-chosen example: Charles Olson's field poetics, which Stephens reads as a comprehensive "engagement with information" (88). While Olson no longer shared the modernists' aspiration toward knowledge, the chapter shows, he salvaged the epistemological function of poetry by exploring its ability to organize information. Stephens's astute readings of "The Kingfishers" and the *Maximus Poems* reveal a pervasive engagement not only with information but with information theory. A fierce critic of the mass media and mass bureaucracy, Olson decried not the abundance of information but its unthinking accumulation and dissemination by these institutions. He regarded the abundance of information as a productive challenge to the poet, who could turn information into meaningful ideas by virtue of his powers of "concentration" (101). The chapter introduces the intriguing question of the impact of information overload on the lyrical I, which in Olson's poetics becomes a crucial instrument for forging concentrated meaning out of the mass of data. As in the first chapter, Stephens's topical approach here results in new readings and a fresh understanding of a canonical figure in American poetry.

This tension between the theoretical approach and the subject matter disappears in the following as the study turns to poetry that makes information overload its primary theme and artistic impulse. The fourth chapter examines the influence of informatics on experimental poets of the 1960s and 1970s. It opens with an extensive review of the debate around information overload at the time and goes on to outline the responses of four quite different poets, from John Cage to Bernadette Mayer. The chapter offers many useful observations about these poets but remains somewhat fragmentary as their responses are not discussed in relation to one another. Also, perhaps because of the proximity of Stephens's thematic concerns and those of the poets he discusses, the poems he selects become mere illustrations of his argument rather than opportunities for close reading. This impression intensifies in the fifth chapter, on language poetry, which introduces new examples and new theoretical concepts at a breathtaking rate but does not offer much in the way of new readings. Even the organizing metaphor of the chapter, paradise, is by Stephens's own account borrowed from previous scholarship. On the whole, the chapter replicates both the abstract theorizing of the language poets and the condition of information overload rather than analyzing either of these phenomena from the outside. The postmodernist debate around the exhaustion and recycling of language, which Stephen outlines in the Introduction, might have provided a starting point for such analysis.

The final chapter is more tightly focused again, not least because it limits the number of concepts and examples. The chapter examines developments in recent conceptual poetry under the impact of the new media, particularly online databases. The large-scale appropriation of found material in conceptual poetry, Stephens argues, is a response to the instant availability of such material in the digital age, but also to questions of privacy, responsibility, and information asymmetry raised by the world risk society in general and the 2008 financial crisis in particular. The chapter forcefully returns to the poetological dimension of information overload and identifies a number of formal strategies explored by contemporary poets. The most productive of these strategies, it appears, is the "indexical appropriation" of seemingly random data, which generates poems ranging from Kenneth Goldsmith's retyp-

ing of a *New York Times* edition to Charles Bernstein's and Alexandra Nemerov's listings of everyday objects. While Stephens argues that in such poems "the writer/artist is dispersed into an amorphous, ahistorical mass of textuality" (171), he also points to activities that confirm the agency of the writer: defining the criteria for indexing, for example, or selecting information to be preserved in the poem. Even Goldsmith's seemingly random newspaper reproduction is preceded by an act of selection and enshrines a particular day in memory—not unlike Joyce's *Bloomsday*.

Another continuity between the literary tradition and conceptual poetry, the chapter reveals, is the writers' desire for book publication. Even poets whose work emerges from the digital sphere tend to offer their publications on print-on-demand websites, thus disproving Bob Brown's assertion that the book was outdated and needed to be replaced by reading machines. The afterword of Stephens's study, which discusses the impact of digital publication on poetry by the example of Robert Grenier's computer poems of the 1970s and 1980s, points to a potential reason for the persistence of the book: the short lifespan of electronic information technologies. Most of the machines, programs, and interfaces in which Grenier composed his poems a few decades ago are no longer available, so that Stephens has to resort to photographic reproductions—in a book. Overall, the poetics of information overload retains some core concerns of traditional poetry, in particular the Romantic belief in the shaping and organizing power of the artist. Stein's fear that the mass media of the twentieth century would debilitate the imagination;

Olson's fondness for 'negative capability' and his Whitmanian call on the poet to embody a broad range of contradictory information; the conceptual poets' preservation of artistic agency in the digital age: all of these concerns reach back to the Romantic period. They show that even in a time of information overload, poets compete for the role of unacknowledged legislators of the world, whether their rivals are the mass media, government bureaucracy, or internet corporations.

These interconnections and many others are made visible by Stephens's thorough knowledge of the poets he discusses, by the wide range of his study, and by his ambitious contextualization of individual case studies. Not all of the social and theoretical contexts he marshals have been thoroughly assimilated (nor has his French grammar), but in their entirety they help elucidate a trajectory in twentieth-century American poetry that traditional literary histories have overlooked. Poetry is not necessarily thought of as a technological genre, as Stephens points out, but his study conclusively demonstrates the contrary. Poets have negotiated the phenomenon of information overload from an early point, before a wider public became aware of it, and they continue to adapt to its permutations while at the same time subjecting it to critical scrutiny and offering ways of coping with its effects. By rereading major poets and introducing minor ones, *The Poetics of Information Overload* offers rewarding insights into these processes and establishes a compelling new perspective on the development of American poetry.

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