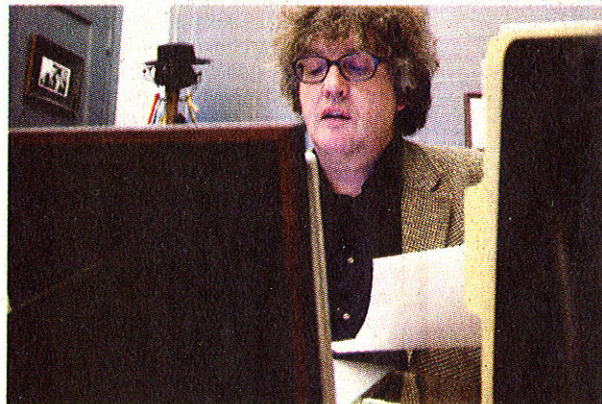


On Your Marks, Get Set, Poeticize: 15 Minutes, a Computer and Thou, O Muse

By DINITIA SMITH

Here's the setup: Two writers are given 15 minutes each to compose a poem based on a little inspiration furnished by an editor. They type their poems for posting on a Web site called QuickMuse (quickmuse.com). Fifteen minutes later the poems go up on the site, and can be played back so that readers see the keystrokes unfold second by second and follow each erasure and false start, all the little compromises necessitated by the constrictions of time.

QuickMuse held its first battle on May 17, pitting the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Paul Muldoon against Thylas Moss, author of 10 books and a professor at the University of Michigan. For inspiration the two were given a snippet of Elizabeth Bishop. "Writing poetry is an unnatu-



Laura Pedrick for The New York Times

ral act," it began. "It takes great skill to make it seem natural." It was not assumed that they would necessarily write directly to it. Being poets, they would end up writing what they wanted.

The two read Bishop's words, and

they were off.

Thirteen minutes 19 seconds later Ms. Moss was done. Her untitled poem played on the fact she had a headache:

my headache remains



Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times

*a kind of proof of the seriousness
of what is locked in my brain,
everything tucked there, fusing
there
into a feeling so tremendous it
hurts."*

Paul Muldoon, left, and Thylas Moss squared off in the first battle on QuickMuse. Though the contest has no winner, postings on the site's chat board were impressed with Ms. Moss's improvisational skill.

Mr. Muldoon used the entire 15 minutes for a poem he called "Aim," about where poetry comes from: "The sense of the poem as having always been,/as the redknot is bent on that selfsame patch/of tundra grass on which it was hatched." The image of the redknot, a bird, came to him, Mr. Muldoon said, because his son, Asher, was turning 7 on May 20, and on that day the redknot arrives at the Delaware Bay en route to the Arctic

from South America. Mr. Muldoon had used the same image in a poem commemorating Asher's birth.

"The image was there," Mr. Muldoon said later. "I was clutching at straws."

On QuickMuse there are no actual winners or losers, though on the site's chat board after the face-off between Mr. Muldoon and Ms. Moss, it was generally agreed that Ms. Moss's poem had a more improvisatory quality, in keeping with her general style. Poets are a contentious group, perhaps because of the small stakes, and poetry competitions go back at least to the Greeks, who called them agons. The founder of QuickMuse, Ken Gordon of Newton, Mass., calls his showdowns agons too. Keats and Shelley also liked to square off in sonnet contests.

Mr. Gordon, a poetry enthusiast

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who is editor of JBooks.com, a Jewish literature site, said he was interested in the general subject of improvisation in the arts. "Improvisation makes it fresher, more vital," he said. "It doesn't give poets a chance to be careful. It offers them the opportunity to surprise themselves, to say things they didn't know they wanted to say, things their fingers know but their brains do not."


And of course improvisation has a long history in American culture, especially in jazz. Frank O'Hara and Jack Kerouac wrote quickly, though Truman Capote famously derided Kerouac's work as typing not writing.

For her part Ms. Moss said that "the idea of writing a poem in this very naked way appealed to me."

"It gave me the ability to reveal some of the ways I interact with Elizabeth Bishop's words," she continued, "some of my patterns of thinking, without second-guessing myself."

The purpose of the project, Mr. Gordon said, is to give poets a chance to avoid what the lyric poet Louise Glück once described as "tortment: wanting to write, being unable to write; wanting to write differently, being unable to write differently." The poets are not paid for their ef-

ONLINE: DUELING POETS

 *A link to the Quickmuse Web site:*

nytimes.com/books

forts.

The next round, to take place tomorrow at 9 p.m. Eastern time, will pit the former United States poet laureate Robert Pinsky against Juliana Baggott, a poet and fiction writer. Visitors to the site will be able to see and play back the completed poems by 9:30.

Mr. Pinsky, the senior poet, said he was looking forward to his chance to risk all and turn on a dime. "My ambition was to be a jazz musician," he said recently. Writing poetry fast is like composing music, he said. "You should be able to fit a lot of sounds together quickly."

Not all the poets Mr. Gordon contacted were so eager to take part. Mark Strand, a poet known for his chiseled language, declined because, as he said in an e-mail message, he revises constantly, sometimes going through as many as 50 drafts of a poem. "Being spontaneous doesn't interest me nearly as much as getting 'it' right — 'it' being the poem," he said. "I write slowly, come to conclusions slowly, and for better or worse I am just a slow poet."

Andrei Codrescu, the Romanian

expatriate writer who has a tendency toward the surreal, also said no. "I'm all for improvisation," he wrote in an e-mail message. "I'm just not for improvisation online. There is a big difference between creating with your friends face to face in a bar or a living room, and typing away with strangers for Internet consumption."

Besides, "poetry is a rare commodity that pays next to nothing even in print," Mr. Codrescu added. "Why would I give it away for free on the Internet while playing footsie with strangers?"

QuickMuse uses a program created for it by Fletcher Moore, a Web designer in Atlanta, that captures the poets' keystrokes for eventual playback. (Mr. Moore calls it the Poematic.)

The participants take part from their offices, living rooms or bedrooms. "It's completely virtual," Mr. Gordon said. "Everyone is all over the place. The Internet hasn't done anything to advance literature. This is a chance, as Ezra Pound said, to 'make it new.'"

In Mr. Pinsky's opinion, the 15 minutes allotted is more than enough. He told Mr. Gordon he wanted even less time. "It's physical, like sketching," Mr. Pinsky said, "like modeling with clay." You may not write your best, he added, "but you should be able to write something that is memorable."