

THERE HAS BEEN MUCH TALK LATELY about the effect of the internet on our reading habits: is using the internet rewiring our brains and making it harder for us to sustain attention in reading? I am glad, faced with the endless diversions of being ‘connected’, of Google, and of the constant news feed updates of Facebook, which feel at times like the unstoppable cogitations of some massive superbrain, that I grew up and did a lot of my formative reading in poetry when the main access to information was via books. What did it feel like? Though it was less than 15 years ago—the Horse only got email in 1999, and a first website in 2003—it is, frankly, difficult to remember. Now, one has to create such conditions by acts of exclusion: switching phones off; disconnecting broadband. Back then, the morning’s post created a little flurry of excitement: it was the only real stimulus, beyond your immediate environment, from the outside world. Writing letters, for instance, was a necessity. Now, a real letter has taken on almost talismanic qualities; more than ever, Emily Dickinson’s words—‘A Letter is a joy of Earth—/ It is denied the Gods’—seem true. Knowledge was harder to obtain and one had to know where to look for it. It felt more like a *possession*. This is not necessarily a good thing, but it cost, even if just in terms of time expended, to learn something; consequently, perhaps one valued that knowledge more. In 1985, for example, I remember reading for the first time about John Crowe Ransom. Ted Hughes had remarked in a print interview that Ransom’s best poems were ‘very final objects’. I was living in the sticks in Ayrshire. I discovered—doubtless by phone—that Glasgow’s Mitchell Library, the largest public reference library in Europe, had a single copy of Ransom’s 1947 *Selected Poems*—perhaps one of only a handful of copies in Scotland at that time. It took a day to make the trip to Glasgow and photocopy, surreptitiously but, under the circumstances understandably, I think, a fair proportion of this unobtainable book. I read those smudgily xeroxed pages to rags in the months that followed.

Now, of course, ten seconds on Google would throw up dozens of references to this remarkable poet and his work. And this is, surely, astonishing. It makes me wonder if this ease of access affects not only how one values or reads poetry, but how one writes, or will be able to write, it—whether all this connectivity will affect the individuality out of which, one part of me insists, poetry comes; will affect, even, the depth of our relationship with words themselves. As an analogy, an old crofter, like some I have known, may have a narrower vocabulary but a more intimate relationship with it, using words with all the deliberation of stones in a dyke, than a business executive with a flashier vocabulary but less verbal depth. I look back on that disconnected time as being, at least in regard to books, a seemlier world. Yet certainly not one to be romanticised.

I daresay this is just as well. The unstoppable rise of social networks such as Facebook, which the Horse signed up to last summer, provide an unprecedented way of reaching new readers. Even after a few months, it’s hard to think of being without it. A brief posting about Katrina Naomi’s conversation with Sharon Olds in this issue, for instance, resulted in a flurry of comment and new subscriptions, and the magazine’s subscriptions currently stand at over a third more than they were this time last year. So here is to the continuing fruitful marriage of the time-honoured and the new.