

Website Review

Brief Tendencies: A review of the *McSweeney's* website



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TIMOTHY MCSWEENEY'S INTERNET TENDENCY, the website of the literary journal *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, specialises in short humour pieces.¹ The journal, to which the website is ostensibly a companion, mainly publishes short fiction. Comparing the outputs of these publishing organs invites a consideration of the various purposes that 'short' has for/in literary culture.² The fiction of the journal is short in the sense that all short stories are short: somewhat indefinably. An agreement of what constitutes the 'short' in a short story has and never will be reached in literary studies: perhaps the only workable definition of the form is that a short story is shorter than a novel -- though the question then inevitably becomes, how long (or short) does a text have to be to be considered a novel? The shortness of the short story form is often associated with its potential to appeal to the reading public -- the presumption being that this shortness should be preferable to a novel for readers short on free time. With the *Quarterly*, *McSweeney's* have found a dependable readership for short fiction and non-fiction.

The *Tendency* offers a different experience to the *Quarterly*, one that may be more reflective of twenty-first-century culture. The *Tendency* has a larger readership than the *Quarterly*, and has published the writing of hundreds of writers, compared to a more modest estimate of dozens in the issues of the *Quarterly*.³ The *Tendency* provides content that is readable in a single sitting to an internet readership unconsciously trained to be impatient and desire brevity. This is not to imply that the *Tendency* and *Quarterly* are rivals in any sense. Rather, they are complementary: the *Tendency's* approach to humour content can be considered an extension of the first issue of the *Quarterly*. As well as several pieces of fiction and non-fiction, Issue 1 of the journal contained a large selection of humour writing. The first issue's 'Television Advertisements, Reviewed with Great Passion' feature, for example, is an obvious analogue for the *Tendency's* 'Reviews of New Food' section. Issue 1 also featured verbal cartoons, a postmodern take on the *New Yorker's* cartoon tradition -- a

paragraph of text in the centre of the page describes a visual image and a caption is featured below. This form is adapted for the *Tendency* in the Dan Liebert series 'Verbal Cartooning'. The website, launched soon after the publication of Issue 1, developed this type of publishing, and the *Quarterly* began to focus more on fiction and non-fiction.

As the journal began to publish less humour content, so the website came to develop a fuller set of categories in which to publish the great variety of writing it was receiving—from the umbrella category 'Lists' (e.g. 'Important Instructions for the Babysitters of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Children', 'Literary Symbols I Fear I Over-Use', 'Types of People and Things That Have Been Shot by Charles Bronson') to more specific sections like 'Non-Essential Mnemonics' and 'Dispatches from the Napoleonic War at the Met'. Their use of the short form flourished online, and the website is now an extensive archive of over a decade's worth of humour content.

McSweeney's's founder Dave Eggers has provided a narrative of how the *Tendency* selects its content:

If people send me stuff and it's good, I just put it up. If it isn't, I just send it back.⁴

This displays Eggers's habit of discouraging any critical attempt to reveal or uncover an agenda behind the work of *McSweeney's*. In the same interview he also, more helpfully, discusses the *Tendency's* capacity to be 'reactive' as a contributing factor in its success. The *Quarterly* is published, at best, once every three months. That the *Tendency* is updated daily makes it a more logical outlet for humour content, which is traditionally more topical than conventional literary writing like fiction and poetry. The *New Yorker's* humour content is an obvious predecessor of the type of humour that *McSweeney's* writers engage in; the *New Yorker's* weekly publication format enables it to respond with greater facility to current events.

This potential to be topical seems to have combined with the *Tendency's* use of its internet format to develop a new space for humour writing in the twenty-first century. One of the main changes in moving humour content from print to web comes in the greater involvement of the reader in both the production and circulation of the *Tendency's* content -- both of these are facilitated by the internet. The *Tendency* accepts email submissions, a fact that makes it more accessible. Many print journals still restrict their potential writers to postal submissions, presumably to cut down on the volume of unsolicited content to be read. The *Tendency's* policy doubtless increases the quantity and dilutes the quality of their submissions, but it serves the function of making the website more open.

In addition, there are two distinct types of activity (most evident on Twitter) that show how the internet has contributed to the success of the *Tendency*: people sharing articles they like and people announcing the publication of one of their articles. This is not directly attributable to the *Tendency*, but is something facilitated by their chosen form. The internet transforms word-of-mouth publicity into a more tangible, traceable phenomenon -- this soft network is solidified into electronic form, rendering it permanent, a

literalization of a community surrounding the *Tendency*. The shortness of its form is what enables so many to write, submit, and be published on the site. It is also what encourages its readers to share its content across social networks like Facebook and Twitter -- the shortness of each post make it quick to read and there is less reluctance on the sharer's part that their friends' time will be wasted. This shortness may constitute an argument against the literary value of its content, but a consideration of the literary value of this endeavour must be postponed for discussion in a forum with less emphasis on shortness.

The *Tendency* functions as a useful advertisement for the *McSweeney's* project. The website is more popular than the journal. It is connected to the *McSweeney's* online store and regularly promotes its journals and books. One way to consider the *Tendency's* humour content would be to view it as a strategy to draw visitors to the site. While this would be a cynical approach, it is nonetheless worth observing that announcements of new *McSweeney's* books are often situated at the top of the *Tendency's* homepage. The site features no other advertising, and if it is to survive as a website it needs to pay for its servers somehow. A healthy *McSweeney's* ensures that the *Tendency* can continue publishing. The site attracts visitors to the *Tendency* and has the potential to introduce them to the *Quarterly* and other projects. Is there a discrepancy between the offer of the *Tendency* and that of the *Quarterly*? It is obviously possible that readers interested in the *Tendency* would not be interested in reading the *Quarterly*.

The *Quarterly* offers readers many things that the *Tendency* (due to its chosen form) cannot. It offers long(er)-form content, play with physical form, and is a concrete manifestation of the *McSweeney's* community, which allows readers to participate and engage with it in a traditional way. It is ownable, corresponding with the book-as-object paradigm. The *Tendency* does offer part of its experience in ownable form -- the anthologies *The McSweeney's Joke Book of Book Jokes* and *Created in Darkness by Troubled Americans* collect material from the website. However, these seem incongruous in a way, not capturing the spirit of the website (by trying to fix it in place). Its existence is more to be found in the loose network of internet sharing. The community of the *Tendency* cannot be found in the traditional forms of the print media. This community exists through retweets, pings, and link trackbacks.

McSweeney's uses their website for various purposes: to reinforce the ironic component of the *McSweeney's* literary-cultural identity; to engage and involve readers in the production and distribution of content; to disseminate its identity; to provide a place for the development of short form humour content into a more commercial and sustainable format. There appears to be something about the shortness of this short form that facilitates all of the other purposes. The *Tendency* has exploited this potential to repurpose the tradition of humour writing for the internet age -- there is something truly new and modern in how this content is distributed and experienced.

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Notes

¹ I will refer to the journal *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* as the *Quarterly*, and the website *Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency* as the *Tendency*.

² A gloss on my conception of 'literary culture': this is the background, the context of literary production. I conceive of it as everything with a connection to literature that is not a literary text. A reader participates in literary culture in various ways: by reading a review of a novel in the *New Yorker*, by attending a poetry reading at their local independent bookshop, by posting photographs of their latest used bookstore finds on Flickr, by telling a friend about an interview with a writer in the *Guardian*. I consider texts as both producing and produced by literary culture: they are not simply expressions of literary themes/ideas/values but contribute to how they are shaped and disseminated. For the purpose of this review, for example, the *Tendency* and the *Quarterly* are both articulations of ideas I identify/describe as belonging to a *McSweeney's* literary culture. However, these texts do not simply emerge *from* this culture, these texts *create* the values that are central to it. This perspective is particularly useful for thinking about serial texts like the periodical and the website. I believe the appeal that serial texts hold for literary studies is to more fully understand this annular process of production/reflection.

³ Rough figures of respective readerships provided by Eli Horowitz (former Managing Editor of the *Quarterly*), Letter to author, 31 December 2008.

⁴ Matt Goldberg, 'Mighty McSweeney's', *Village Voice*, March 23-30 1999, <http://www.villagevoice.com/1999-03-23/news/mighty-mcsweeney-s/>