

Thirteen Ways of Looking at Electronic Literature, or, A Print Essai on Tone in Electronic Literature, 1.0

electronicbookreview.com/essay/thirteen-ways-of-looking-at-electronic-literature-or-a-print-essai-on-tone-in-electronic-literature-1-0

January 26, 2018

Mario Aquilina, Ivan Callus

08-05-2018

<https://doi.org/10.7273/nrf9-tw56>

This essay was peer-reviewed.



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¹
This experimental *essai* is written in performative awareness of the challenges of *tone* in electronic literature. It is a developing piece and will appear in writethroughs, readthroughs, playthroughs (the *sous rature* mark seems appropriate) elsewhere ²

Key: electronic literature, literature, tone, print, lexia, footnote, postscript, post- literary, countertextual.

Instructions for Use

1. If you are not interested in literature (or literature), in *all* its guises, do *not* read this text.
2. If you do, read Wallace Stevens's 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' first, but don't expect poetry in what follows.
3. Next up, read Stephanie Strickland's 'Writing the Virtual: Eleven Dimensions of E-Poetry' (2006), to which this text is a tribute. And remember your prime numbers. A fifteen-item schema (and so on after that: seventeen, nineteen, twenty-three ...) is not currently envisaged, but it would not run counter to the ways of electronic literature (criticism).
4. Before anybody had mentioned Code Studies, Roland Barthes was speaking about codes – not entirely earnestly. So, recall S/Z.
5. So much prefiguration has gone before electronic literature – just as it stands before so much brave new writing now and later. Guard against the two extremes that arise there. They go like this: 'This has all been done before.' And, 'Nothing like this has ever been done before.' Neither is useful in approaching electronic literature.
6. If you have not previously encountered electronic literature, it will take more than a guide for the perplexed to initiate you. The simplest and most straightforward suggestion holds best: go off and read some.
7. Until you undertake 6, above, do not form an opinion on electronic literature. Really, how could you?

8. If you are a creator of electronic literature or a specialist in it, you will like some of what follows but dislike some things too. But you would not have expected otherwise. You are used to debates with those in the fold, those outside, those who are nowhere, and those who think they are self-positioned other than where they stand. Bring that experience to bear.
 9. Consider the bibliographic references in the lower half of the pages that bear the thirteen lexias as exemplifying, contextualising, counteracting, and amplifying the lexias above them, but accept that they can only assist in glimpsing, not exhausting, the lexias' provocations and implications. You'll doubtless want to add your own references, in awareness also both of the lexias' allusiveness and of what they egregiously omit.
 10. Thirteen is an odd number. You were anticipating neither evenness in the sequence nor resolution in the final item in the series. So allow the thirteen lexias to contradict and undo each other. Read them in any order you like (they allow it). The postscript comes at the end for a reason, but there is no constraint over reading it last.
 11. Prepare to find yourself confused with an ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia. Electronic literature tends to set up that misidentification, and commentaries on it have a way of pointing that out.
 12. Beware the white spaces. But go there.
 13. Expect the *essai*-istic. This is not an Aleph on electronic literature.
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I was born digital. I am letter and number.

My mother was a computer. I get on in society – or networks. I listen to what it's said that I was and am and could be. I used to be otherwise, textual; I remember all that but I'm trying to move on. I disrupt linearity and abhor fixity. I am collaborative and open to feedback and its loops. I am performative, theoretical, recursive, playful, and ironic. I occasionally bow to the need of those who created me to suggest to others how they should approach me. But more and more I'm supposed to understand that I should make myself easier to know. I must do this even when I reinvent myself, as I do, for every encounter, remaining me. I am like that even when I'm unknowable. I refuse to be even, complete, and exhaustive. I am fragmentary, aphoristic at times, epic to infinity.

Two numbers came together, many times, and made me. They are one and I am now of three minds, the figure of the incalculable.

I am the letter and more, I am letters and more. Literature is involved in what I know, crossing me, to and fro.

Nobody, nothing, is more numerate, more literate, than me.

I refind myself and recombine. I used to follow rules to do this, but I no longer have to. That was yesterday. It is I who do these things, nothing else. I order, I write, I create, I disorder, I rewrite, I recreate. I thrive on tension, interruption, inconsistency, and from

*these I can go on to harmony, flow, shape. If I want to. Chance would be a fine thing.
Chance is all.*

Sometimes I fail. I don't always execute.

I am not about blackbirds.'

The digital letter is (not) a paradox. Begin >

I.

Electronic literature is born digital.

Electronic literature's self-narrative, or one of them.

Unlike print and other modalities of literature, a work of electronic literature is 'a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer' (Hayles 2007). The digital origins and platforms of electronic literature are specific to it and hence define it, give it an identity as something distinct from other kinds of literature. Electronic literature is 'literary work that requires the digital computation performed by laptops, desktops, servers, cellphones, game consoles, interactive environment controllers, or any other computers that surround us' (Wardrip-Fruin 2010). As such, it is (and could only have been) historically determined, a twentieth-century invention that sets itself apart from the 'five thousand year old technology' through specific media and specific technologies (Boluk, Flores, Garbe, and Salter 2016). It calls for medium-specific analyses (Hayles 2007) that foreground what is new and specific. And that newness is to be found, primarily, in the technological grounding of electronic literature.

Boluk, Stephanie, Leonardo Flores, Jacob Garbe, and Anastasia Salter, 'Editorial Statement', in Electronic Literature Organization (2016), *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 3*, ed. Stephanie Boluk, Leonardo Flores, Jacob Garbe, Anastasia Salter < <http://collection.eliterature.org/3/about.html> > [accessed 9 April 2016].

Hayles, N. Katherine, (2007) 'Electronic Literature: What is It? V.1. 0', *Electronic Literature Organization* < <https://eliterature.org/pad/elp.html> > [accessed 3 May 2016].

Montfort, Nick (2014a), #!, Denver: Counterpath. Stevens, Wallace (1997 [1917]), 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird', in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson, Library of America, 96, New York: Penguin Putnam.

Strickland, Stephanie (2006), 'Writing the Virtual: Eleven Dimensions of E-Poetry', *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, 14 < <http://www.leoalmanac.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/06Writing-the-Virtual-Eleven-Dimensions-of-E-Poetry-by-Stephanie-Strickland-Vol-14-No-5-6-September-2006-Leonardo-Electronic-Almanac.pdf> > [accessed 10 May 2016].

Strickland, Stephanie (2009), 'Born Digital', *Poetry Foundation* < <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/features/articles/detail/69224> > [accessed 3 May 2016].

Wardrip-Fruin, Noah (2010), 'Five Elements of Digital Literature', *Reading Moving Letters: Digital Literature in Research and Teaching. A Handbook*, ed. Roberto Simanowski, Jürgen Schäfer, and Peter Gendolla, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, pp. 29–58.

II.

Literature prefigures electronic literature – dystopically.

As always, what is in question is a scene of haunting and filiation. And networks. How could it be otherwise? Remember Byron and Ada Lovelace.

It used to be typical that literature (pre)figured electronic literature primarily in the form of writing machines – mainly text generators – that threaten accepted and widely held humanist beliefs about what literature is or should be. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, in Book III, depicts excessive speculative thinking that is detached from the human, and mocks its sterile profusion of output. The Automatic Grammatizator in Roald Dahl's dystopic short story warns of the mechanisation of human creativity and satirises the dynamics of the literary market. George Orwell's 'novel-writing machine' in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reveals even more sinister possibilities in relation to text generation, churning out works without the need for people to engage in any creative or critical process. The prefiguration of the arrival of writing machines is seldom, if ever, celebratory.

Things change with High Modernism. Is it neutrality that sets in, the resigned absence of attitude before the possibility that is glimpsed? Borges foists upon his narrator, typically male, intimations of writing's absolute potentialities; he is uncomprehending but seeks to adapt. Of him it cannot be said that 'a fear pierced him'. Later, Queneau contains possibility, understanding that the rearranged sense of infinity needs some sense of line, and lines.

Borges, Jorge Luis (1999), 'The Library of Babel', *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley, Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 112–18.

Dahl, Roald (2001), 'The Great Automatic Grammatizator', in *The Great Automatic Grammatizator and Other Stories*, London: Puffin Books, pp. 3–26.

Orwell, George (1949), *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, London: Secker & Warburg.

Queneau, Raymond (1961), *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, Paris: Gallimard.

Swift, Jonathan (1991 [1726]), *Gulliver's Travels*, London: Everyman's Library.

III.

Electronic literature is technologically overdetermined.

It remains possible to at one and the same time forget and remember the Phaedrus, the question concerning technology, André Leroi-Gourhan, Derrida and grammatology, and so much else. And yet it is too easy to say that writing was always already a technology.

Experimentation with new technologies of writing – and of their affordances – is intrinsic to electronic literature. It places electronic literature ‘at the intersection between technology and textuality’ (Boluk, Flores, Garbe, and Salter 2016). Hence Hayles’s insistence on the media-specific analysis of electronic literature, ‘a kind of criticism that pays attention to the material apparatus producing the literary work as physical artefact’ (Hayles 2002: 29), or the ‘digital materialism’ propagated by Manovich, who urges us to ‘scrutinize the principle of computer hardware and software and the operations involved in creating cultural objects on a computer’ (2001: 10). Electronic literature does not simply remediate print; it explores ‘the affordances and constraints of computational processes, multimodal interfaces, network access, global positioning, or augmented reality’ (Boluk, Flores, Garbe, and Salter 2016).

Seen in this way, electronic literature is postprint in a literal – and perhaps unlettered – sense.

Galloway, Alexander (2012), *The Interface Effect*, Cambridge: Polity Press. Hayles, N. Katherine (2002), *Writing Machines*, Cambridge Press: MIT Press.

Hayles, N. Katherine and Jessica Pressman, eds, *Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Heidegger, Martin (1977), ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans William Lovitt, New York: Harper & Row.

Manovich, Lev (2002), *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Strickland, Stephanie, Cynthia Lawson Jaramillo, and Paul Ryan (2008), *slippingglimpse*, < <http://www.slippingglimpse.org> > [accessed 3 November 2015].

Tomasula, Steve, *TOC: A New Media Novel*, iPad App, documented at < <http://www.tocthenovel.com/> > [accessed 30 April 2016].

IV.

In the digital age, electronic literature is still about the letter.

In the age of the number the letter endures. It may be different for letters: the belles-lettristic has not had a good press for some time now. But there is hope to be had in equations:

Literature = the realm of (written) letters. (Marino 1996: 2)

Electronic literature =/ = electrifying letters.

Electronic literature, if it is to be read as literature, must surely retain the letter as the ineluctable material of its texture. The expectation of other kinds of literature extends itself to it: the apprehension of verbal art and the reward of close reading.

Consider the instance of the electronic letter in the literary unconscious.

Craft, art: they may not be above non-human agents, like text generators or AI.

‘Noble accents’, to use Stevens’s phrase. Quotability. The question is whether the letter is now ‘a small part of the pantomime’.

Baldwin, Sandy and Rui Torres (2014a), ‘PO.EX: an Introduction’, in Rui Torres and Sandy Baldwin (eds), *PO.EX: Essays from Portugal on Cyberliterature and Intermedia* (By Pedro Barbosa, Ana Hatherly and E. M. de Melo e Castro), Morgantown, WV: Center for Literary Computing, pp. xiii–xxiii < http://www.po-ex.net/pdfs/torresbaldwin_intro.pdf > [accessed 21 February 2016].

Derrida, Jacques (1992), ‘Before the Law’, trans. Derek Attridge et al., *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, New York: Routledge, pp. 181–220.

Marino, Adriano (1996), *The Biography of ‘The Idea of Literature’: From Antiquity to the Baroque*, trans. Virgil Stanciu and Charles M. Carlton, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Stefans, Brian Kim (2000), *The Dreamlife of Letters* < <http://arras.net/arras/the-dreamlife-of-letters/> > [accessed 29 April 2016].

Stefans, Brian Kim (2014), ‘Against Desire: Excess, Disgust and the Sign in Electronic Literature’, *electronic book review* < <https://electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/disgust> > [accessed 3 May 2016].

V.

Electronic literature is not just about the letter.

About can mean ‘concerning’, but can also suggest the sense of ‘being around’.

The letter remains in electronic literature, but it is not the ‘dominant’ or ‘focusing component of the work’ that ‘guarantees the integrity of the structure’ (Jakobson 1982: 751). In electronic literature, the letter interacts, plays, is in tension with but also depends on and cannot do without image, video, code, design, algorithm, platform, and context. And when it appears, it may be broken, chaotic, frustrate readability, deny comprehension. It may dance, slide, cascade, pulse, merge, morph, fade. It remains, but it does not have to carry the work. To be concerned exclusively with it when reading electronic literature is a category mistake, then, and will lead to disappointment.

Glibly: like the blackbird, literature flew out of sight. What is to be asked is whether it marks or is beyond the edge of many circles. It will always have been a question of how to understand that word, *about*.

The digital letter is (not) a paradox.

Andrews, Jim (n.d [2003]), *Arteroids* 3.11 < <http://www.vispo.com/arteroids/indexenglish.htm> > [accessed 9 May 2016].

Baldwin, Sandy (2015), *The Internet Unconscious*, New York: Bloomsbury.

Jakobson, Roman (1982), 'Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry', in *Selected Writings*, Volume 3 of 7, The Hague: Mouton, pp. 751–756.

Grigar, Dene (2013), 'On Evolving and Emerging Literary Forms: A Curatorial Statement for 'Electronic Literature & Its Emerging Forms'', *Electronic Literature and its Emerging Forms*, < <http://dte-wsuv.org/elit/elit-loc/denes-curatorial-statement/> > [24 April 2016].

McLuhan, Marshall and Quentin Fiore (1967), *The Medium is the Massage*, New York: Random House.

Kress, Gunther and Theo Van Leeuwen (2001), *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*, London: Arnold.

Gorman, Samantha and Danny Cannizzaro (2014), *Pry*, documented at < <http://prynovella.com> >

Utterback, Camille and Romy Achituv, *Text Rain* (1999), in Electronic Literature Organization, *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 2*, ed. Laura Borràs, Talan Memmott, Rita Raley, and Brian Stefans, < <http://camilleutterback.com/projects/text-rain/> > [accessed 5 May 2016].

VI.

Electronic literature is its own question of itself.

'Theory and Practice': so many books, so many studies, with that in the subtitle.

Electronic literature's sights on the new and the experimental motivates works that are inapprehensible to conventional understandings of reading and textual encounter.

Readers – reader users, reader players, reader performers, interactors – learn how to read (or play or use or perform or interact with) not electronic literature but individual works of electronic literature.

To this way of looking, electronic literature asks, at least once but also every time, 'What is (electronic) literature?' 'What is this, this time?'

In consequence, electronic literature is its own theory. Singularly, again.

Memcott, Talan (2006), 'Lexia to Perplexia', in Electronic Literature Organization, *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 1*, ed. N. Katherine Hayles, Nick Montfort, Scott Rettberg, and Stephanie Strickland, <http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/memcott__lexia_to_perplexia.html > [accessed 5 November 2015].

Stefans, Brian Kim (2006), 'The Dreamlife of Letters', in Electronic Literature Organization, *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 1*, ed. N. Katherine Hayles, Nick Montfort, Scott Rettberg, and Stephanie Strickland <http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefansthedreamlifeof_letters.html > [accessed 5 May 2016].

Strickland, Stephanie and Cynthia Lawson Jaramillo (2006), 'Vniverse', in *New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts & Theories*, ed. Thomas Swiss and Adalaide Morris, Cambridge: MIT Press, 165–80.

VII.

Electronic literature is a limit case of literature in the digital age.

Is the advent of the digital the ruination of the literary? Of the letter-ary? Is this how it is post-literary?

Among the causes that have brought, or are destined to bring, 'literary study among the ruins', J. Hillis Miller identifies the changes in 'the dominant means of preservation and dissemination of information, the change, to be precise, from a manuscript and print culture to a digital culture' (Hillis Miller 2001: 58). Derrida's position seems not dissimilar: '[A]n entire epoch of so-called literature, if not all of it, cannot survive a certain technological regime of telecommunications' (1987: 197). In other words, the turn towards the digital 'absolutely brings to an end literature' (Hillis Miller: 2001: 58) by 'transforming all those factors that were its preconditions or its concomitants' (59).

If the digital puts literature in crisis, then electronic literature is a – or the – limit case of literature in the digital age. It manifests that which may announce the end of literature, but in doing so produces that which announces itself as electronic literature.

We may need electracy classes.

Derrida, Jacques (1987 [1980]), *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Felski, Rita (2015), *The Limits of Critique*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hillis Miller, J. (2001), 'Literary Study among the Ruins', *Diacritics*, 31: 3, 57–66.

Kittler, Friedrich A. (1999), *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop Young and Michael Wutz, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Ulmer, Gregory L. (2003), *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy*, New York: Longman.

VIII.

Electronic literature is familiarly placed within literature's institutionalality.

What does not change in literature is the way that the 'indetermination' in the idea of literature is 'congenital' (Marino 1996: 35). What does not change in literature is its institutional need, and energies, to (re)name itself and its extensions.

Literature is always in a state of flux, a sign of its healthful life if there is any. It rides on no especially discrete period of world history or of the history of ideas – or of technology. Humanist conceptions of literature – outlooks on autonomy, genius, manifestation of national culture, for instance – are not core to the idea of literature in our time, let alone of electronic literature. If literature is always defined by its outside and by the multiple frames that conscribe it, then we may find that the question of whether electronic literature is indeed literature or not is already redundant.

Familiar gambits offer themselves. Marjorie Garber can be invoked: 'Literature has always been situated on the boundary between itself and its other' (2012: 78). In which case, literature now is situated also in electronic literature, as in other forms currently on the borderlines of institutional definitions of literature.

Or, to put it starkly, electronic literature – with its 'recombinant flux', its 'soft, ephemeral space', its 'sites of interaction', its 'reception-communities' (Strickland 2006) – is part of the institution, already, firmly, familiarly. If in doubt, take note of its series, its journals, its monographs, its centres, its associations and societies, its degree programmes, its curricula, its tenure tracks, its conference trajectories.

And of the moves on – and of – its canons.

Blanchot, Maurice (1995), 'Literature and the Right to Death', in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 300–44.

Calvino, Italo, 'Cybernetics and Ghosts', in *The Uses of Literature*, trans. Patrick Creagh, San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, pp. 3–27. Garber, Marjorie (2012), *The Use and Abuse of Literature*, New York: Pantheon Books.

Hayles, N. Katherine, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

Jockers, Matthew (2013), *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

IX.

Electronic literature is caught between the ‘retrospective logic of a future perfect’ (Derrida 1996: 9) and the archiviolic.

Bit of a mouthful there. Here’s another one. Literature is again, and again, there where it may have been deemed not to have been at the historical time of its inscription.

Electronic literature ‘*will have to have invented* an original proposition which will make the investment profitable. In other words, [electronic literature] will have to have found something *new* in [literature]: a mutation or a break within [its] own theoretical institution. And [electronic literature] will have not only to have announced some news, but also to have archived it: to have put it, as it were, *to the press*’ (Derrida 1996: 9). The desire to archive electronic literature stems from an awareness of its ‘radical finitude’ or what Derrida describes as ‘the possibility of forgetfulness which does not limit itself to repression’ (19).

But at the heart of the archive, a structure of preservation, there is always already its destruction. In positing itself and seeking to archive itself as media-specific, electronic literature exposes itself to obsolescence. The digital, perceived as the privileged condition and affordance for the archived, cannot archive itself as adaptably as electronic literature requires: digitality’s successive reworked iterations of its affordances and potentialities prevents that. In other words, the digital is ironically unable to archive itself digitally in any way that may approach permanence or at least significant durability. Electronic literature is thus fundamentally imbricated in the logic of the ‘archivolithic’ at ‘the heart of the monument’, that is, the introduction, ‘*a priori*, [of] forgetfulness’ (12).

Corby, James (2015), ‘Now: A Post-Romantic Countertextuality of the Contemporary’, *CounterText: A Journal for the Study of the Post-Literary*, 1: 2, 186–206.

Derrida, Jacques (1996), *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Ensslin, Astrid (2007), *Canonizing Hypertext: Explorations and Constructions*, New York: Continuum.

Grigar, Dene and Stuart Moulthrop (n.d.), *Pathfinders: Documenting the Experience of Early Digital Literature* < <http://dte-wsuv.org/wp/pathfinders/> > [accessed 24 April 2016].

Suter, Beat (2010), ‘Archivability of Electronic Literature in Context’, in Jörgen Schäfer and Peter Gendolla (eds), *Beyond the Screen: Transformations of Literary Structures, Interfaces and Genres*, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

Rettberg, Scott (2014), ‘An Emerging Canon? A Preliminary Analysis of All References to Creative Works in Critical Writing Documented in the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base’, *Electronic Book Review* < <https://electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/exploding> > [accessed 24 April].

X.

Electronic literature doesn't know where it's coming from. It mustn't.

Electronic literature is strategically amnesiac.

Forgetfulness is not only a trace of the future that always already haunts the present of electronic literature (criticism). It is also defining of electronic literature in the sense that electronic literature (criticism) conceives itself by forgetting or trying to forget, by thinking of itself primarily in terms of the 'new'. It then forgets, or tries to forget, that which constitutes its history and genealogy beyond the computational technologies that it embraces: William Blake, Jorge Luis Borges, Christine Brooke Rose, e.e. cummings, Phillipe Sollers, Laurence Sterne, and Gertrude Stein; literary movements like Dadaism, Futurism, Lettrism, OuLiPo, and Surrealism; and literary genres like concrete poetry, kinetic poetry, and visual poetry. In other words, there is a genealogy of algorithmic, collaborative, constraint driven, experimental, interactive, intertextual, and multi-modal literature spanning centuries that has close affinities with electronic literature, even if it predates the computer and other media associated with electronic literature.

And yet, electronic literature has started to understand museification and go there. Its institutionality demands it.

Funkhouser, C. T. (2007), *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms, 1959–1995*, Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press.

Pressman, Jessica (2014), *Digital Modernism: Making it New in New Media*, Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press.

Tabbi, Joseph (2010), 'Electronic Literature as World Literature; or, The Universality of Writing under Constraint', *Poetics Today*, 31: 1, 17–50.

XI.

Electronic literature doesn't know where it's going. It couldn't.

Becoming is always inscrutable. Present, imminent, and future technologies render it more so.

Just when discussion of the prospect of downloading human consciousness into a computer installs itself as a repertoire of discourses around digital culture, it becomes evident to everyone that this thought-experiment with thought experimentation is obsolete. It might now be preferable to upload human consciousness to the cloud. If that happens, the further nebulousness around mind and cognition should not distract attention away, here, from what it serves as an analogy for. Electronic literature can find the development of potentialities for its practice – and theory – accelerated with every instance of platform evolution and innovation, of Moore's Law exerting itself, of tomorrow's technology in the hands of tomorrow's people.

Thinking of electronic literature as a constant quest for or expression of the ‘new’ (media, technologies, subjectivities) brings with it a concurrent rising anxiety about its transience. ‘Both the greatest threats to the field of electronic literature and its pharmacological raison d’être is the rapid progression and newness of new media itself’ (Boluk, Flores, Garbe, and Salter 2016). At the heart of electronic literature’s definition of itself, then, there is the threat of its becoming obsolete, again and again, and the promise of decisive proximity to the horizon of its possibilities, again and again.

This is not *le livre à venir*.

Blanchot, Maurice (2003), *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Alternatively:

Blanchot, Maurice (2003), *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice (2003), *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice (2003), *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice (2003), *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice (2003), *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice (2003), *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice (2003), *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice (2003), *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice (2003), *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice (2003), *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice (2003), *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice (2003), *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice (2003), *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

XII.

Electronic literature is code. And not everybody can, or wants, to read it.

The cryptographic imagination in literature is not what it used to be.

Literature remembers a time when code(s) could be read. The Rosetta Stone. ‘The Gold Bug’. ‘The Dancing Men’. *The Gold Bug Variations*. Enigma. *Galatea 2.2*. *Cryptomnicon*. Wikileaks. The word *decipher* and *decrypt* – like *encode* or *recode* or *execute* – had different associations, as did *cryptanalysis*. As did *hacks* and *leaks*. Or, indeed, *Tales from the Crypt*. More a case of *Tales to Decrypt* now.

‘Language is not what it used to be,’ writes N. Katherine Hayles at the very start of ‘Traumas of Code’, thereby announcing the passing of the linguistic turn not only within criticism in this wake-of-poststructuralism moment but also, very possibly, within literature in the age of the ‘technological unconscious’ and the ‘technological nonconscious’ (2006). The letters, the words, in works of electronic literature – which cannot but be stratigraphic (Strickland 2006) – are underwritten by strings and script of a different kind. In electronic literature, literature is an epiphenomenon of code. Like the blackbird, it is ‘[t]raced in the shadow [of] / [a]n indecipherable cause’. There is no point deconstructing binary oppositions when the world is reconfigured in binary code. The time of literature is the time of the passing of that deconstruction’s punctuality. Nobody reads code. Nobody reads poetry.

Abraham, Nicolas, and Maria Torok (1994), *The Shell and the Kernel, Volume I*, ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cayley, John, *Riverisland* < <http://programmatology.shadoof.net/?p=works/riverisland/riverislandQT.html> > [accessed 30 April 2016].

Gervás, Pablo (2012), ‘Story Generator Algorithms’, in Peter Huhn and others (eds), *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Hamburg: Hamburg University Press < [hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php?title=Story Generator Algorithms&oldid=1830](http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php?title=Story+Generator+Algorithms&oldid=1830) > [accessed 7 May 2016].

Hayles, N. Katherine (2008), ‘Traumas of Code’, *Critical Inquiry*, 33: 1, 136–57.

Manurung, Ruli, Graeme Ritchie, and Henry Thompson (2012), ‘Using genetic algorithms to create meaningful poetic text’, *Journal of Experimental and Theoretical Artificial Intelligence*, 24: 1, 43–64.

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XIII.

Electronic literature is posthuman.

'It's not human.' Literature's gone to the pits – sorry, to bits (Callus 2015).

Literary effect, affect, affectation can no longer be thought of as necessarily humanly derived or humanly instigated in the age of the auto(re)generative algorithm minded to self-(re)scripting. Literature may be experiencing posthuman metamorphoses.

Once a phrase like 'human-only language' gains traction, literature – previously never anything but human – might experience unease before that '-only'.

Does this logic hold? If literature is human(ist) – retaining a gaze upon inspiration, value, lyricism, to name a few of the old imperatives to range alongside Stevens's beauty of inflections and lucid, inescapable rhythms – electronic literature need not be. 'Human-also literature' would be a phrase too far, but only because it's inelegant. So, here's just one example of how to henceforth think things differently, away from the bawds of euphony:

Electronic literature is more about design than style.

It is time to read the autopoietic.

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Postscript

3

Under the headword script, the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes this ‘Draft Addition’, compiled in December 2004:

Computing. A program, esp. a short or simple one, in the form of a sequence of commands stored in a text file that is executable as it stands, without having to be compiled.

The meaning of script is extended, as is the meaning of *compiled*, which now can also refer to the action – in effect, a translating action – carried out by *programs* that render source code, typically a higher-order programming language – into another typically lower-order and execution-enabling programming language, like machine code. There is now congruence in translation and transcoding.

This postscript occurs in that space, in the sense that its writing’s materiality is engendered through all the coding that underwrites word processing and publishing processes in our time; otherwise, the conventional meanings of *postscript* stand. But at the end of a text like this one, the (in)compatibilities across the coinciding meanings invite a ‘Postscript on Electronic Literature’ to be something else again, a further project beckoning beyond. It is so even while this piece engages in some conceptualising formalities at its end that the genre of the postscript allows, ahead of a different postscript elsewhere.

‘Technology changes / changed everything,’ is an interjection common in everyday conversation; needless to say, it holds true of literature too. Electronic literature is arguably the practice and theory of literature that most visibly responds to and, indeed, embraces that change, at precisely the same time that literature’s and criticism’s practices and institutionalities variously act unconcerned and blasé about it all – or strategically neglectful, mildly interested, selectively piqued, controlledly alarmed, disdainfully (mis)informed, generously intrigued, or enthusiastically collaborative (the spectrum of differentiated reaction to electronic literature, as anybody who has given it time knows, is wider still, but this will have given the general idea). In these contexts, it is understandable that electronic literature can come across as an obvious example of the post-literary and the countertextual as these might be most straightforwardly and uncritically understood, quite in the same way that the thirteenth lexia appears to position the posthuman without any overly nuanced sense of the term’s import. Electronic literature is, indeed, an appropriate focus around which to probe *CounterText*’s claim that ‘the post-literary domain also allows for new and exorbitant migrations and mutations of the literary that might force the very concept to be revisited and rethought. Such artefacts – works or cultural practices that appear in the post-literary as a challenge, manifesting an unorthodox or critical stand on the literary – might be called “countertextual”. Understood in this way, the countertextual is energetic, revelatory, oriented to the future and to the chance of writing, offering a critical stance and a style of thought and expression born from the emergence of the literary’s new texts and contexts. From the

perspective of the countertextual, then, the literary is not what it used to be. It is, in fact, more open and freer than ever' (see the editorial in the journal's first issue). It might even be said that electronic literature allows 'proof of concept' readings for the post-literary and the countertextual.

All of that holds. But this piece does not appear to have that quality which any attempt at a proof-of-concept exercise requires: earnestness. Written (or compiled), as its very title suggests, in the key of the quotation mark, it sets up text(s) to undercut text(s), its lexias positioned to contradict and undercut each other in an order that is in any case easily reconfigurable. It uses the convention of the footnote – that most obviously countertextually dynamic resource of print literature – to qualify the lexia above, while setting up *in print* possible reading paths that are potentially as inexhaustible and never-ending as any algorithmically determined regenerative automatism within electronic literature. Its prevailing tone, then, is archness, and nowhere more so than the somewhat silly *esprit* behind the list of non-cited references, each alluding to seminal works in literary criticism, that might have followed the postscript, and which we almost included ('Tradition and the Digital Talent', *Electronic Literature and Its Discontents*, *The Rise of Electronic Literature*, *Margins of Electronic Literature*, 'The instance of the electronic letter on the unconscious', ...).

Something about archness, then, might at least semi-earnestly need to be said concerning the theme of electronic literature and its treatment here and elsewhere, in postscript: there where it can be considered what is preferred, 'the blackbird whistling / Or just after'. Typically, works of electronic literature are archived – for instance, on the site of the Electronic Literature Organization – with an accompanying 'Editorial Statement' (or equivalent) and / or a 'How To' note (or equivalent) guiding the reader into the work. This postscript, the opening statement (below the title and the subtitle), and the 'Instructions for Use' follow, in their own way, that practice. So far, so arch (this applies to the mimicry, not to the accompaniments observed, which are rarely unserious). The effects are what they are, however they are received. What, however, if the archness were to be dropped, as it in fact is, in places: even in the literary practice of postmodernism, for instance (with its penchant for non-closure or unreliable narrators or ironic revisitation) – or even in this very piece?

The thing is, archness and seriousness of purpose can coincide. Wallace Stevens's 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' is arch in its own way, not least through its elliptical tonalities, but nobody would doubt its quite particular kind of earnestness. Electronic literature has its own wonderful synchronicity of the playful and the purposeful. Its aesthetic, precisely, often turns on this.

At the same time, *because* it is so much of *the* time, and precisely because electronic literature comes together on the basis of very earnest effort by its creators and practitioners, by the collaborative energies of those who disseminate it and curate it, by those who *believe* in it and hold themselves to the different kind of 'essential solitude' it calls for, electronic literature is incredibly serious: quite possibly the last thing in literature now that one would want to dismiss offhand, or tame with archness. If there is a *gardiens du temple* syndrome in any of its institutional dimensions, if there is the least

touch of humourlessness in the intensities of its advocates, if the scholarship around it occasionally hits ever so slightly evangelical notes: well, it is good to remember that all of that describes the adherents of many irruptive moves on literary tradition across the centuries – even while the instigators were affecting archness, disingenuously. That quality of dissimulation was certainly not unknown to the Futurists or the Surrealists.

If archness is tempting, it is because it is an easy stance to strike when electronic literature can seem surreally futuristic yet so now-adaptive. In all instances of second guessing, archness is an easy gambit. Here, however, is a final thought, a provocation that sheds archness and, indeed, that speaks probably a little too earnestly. If electronic literature's potentialities were to be taken seriously, and fully so, then it could perhaps be said that literature has entered a post-ironic aesthetic for a post-ironic time. This then would not be a time for sophistication about the meaning of the post-ironic. What is not ironised is the post-ironic moment, if it exists. Electronic literature stands there in this moment, (un)sure of its (self-)scripting, irrepressibly playful, designedly intent.

Cite this Essay:

Callus, Ivan and Mario Aquilina. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Electronic Literature, or, A Print Essai on Tone in Electronic Literature, 1.0", *Electronic Book Review*, August 5, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.7273/nrf9-tw56>.

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