

Digital Poetics. Language as Transmission: Poetry's Electronic Presence

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Abstract

What writing is, becomes altered by how it is physically written through its production technology, its files, codes and URLs. Even the URL itself contributes in a small way to our experience of reading. (What are you thinking as you type in: /theories/hypertext.html versus theories/tomfoolery/hypertext.html?) To discover "poetry" in coming years one must learn to see through a new lens. The excerpt from Loss Pequeño Glazier's book gives an idea what is to be taken into account.

"Do rivers not render an increase in letters by going
where they're going and not stammering."
-- Jackson Mac Low ("See Them Together", n.p.)

"Poets understand texts better than most
information technologists."
-- Jerome McGann (*The Textual Condition* 14)

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
One clover, and a bee,
And revery.
The revery alone will do,
If bees are few.
-- Emily Dickinson (*Complete Poems* 710)

The Electronic Medium

Digital Poetics is an introduction to the making of the new digital poetries. From code to code, whether a Web page in Moscow, a speaking clock in Kentish Town, a computer-generated Buffalo, or a bot hiding in an archive in Melbourne, the making of poetry has established itself on a matrix of new shores. From hypertext through visual/kinetic text to writing in networked and programmable media, there is a

tangible feel of arrival in the spelled air. New possibilities stand out as intriguing while technologies that once seemed futuristic now have all the timeliness of World War II bunkers overlooking an unperturbed Pacific. But arrival where? It is argued here that this is not arrival at a place, but at an awareness of the conditions of texts. Such an arrival includes recognizing that the conditions that have characterized the making of innovative poetry in the twentieth century have a powerful relevance to such works in twenty-first century media. That is, poets are making with the same attention that they did through the movements of the previous century and they are doing so with new materials — and new materials alter what constitutes writing. Through recognizing the conditions of such making and by appreciating the material qualities of new computer media we can begin to identify the new poetics of the twenty-first century. Putting such a vision together is more than a simple concatenation of strings of practice; it involves recognizing the interwoven matrices through which e-writing makes its way. In this model, writing is not a single monumental totality that can be measured. Rather, what can be charted is writing as an overlapping, hybrid, and extendible terrain of *parts* of writing, parts that fit together at times awkwardly and out of joint, to compose a textual continuum through which writing practices weave.

Indeed, charting the production and circulation of poetry is germane to any study of poetry since poetry's circulation has always been related to its making. The same was true of poetry in the past century, when its means of production and distribution was a crucial consideration of writing. The rise of little magazines and the small press from hand presses of the Fifties through the mimeo, Xerox, and offset production of the following decades demonstrated not only poetry's ¹ engagement with its mode of production but its dependence upon its means of dissemination. It is important to note that, in the twentieth century, such previous engagements involved "discarded" technologies. As such the production and consequent distribution of poetry texts lagged behind publishing and distribution channels more current with production technologies². Distribution was also effectively limited by national boundaries, with the concomitant problems of postage costs, duty, and currency exchange. The nineties presented even greater challenges with the collapse of poetry distribution channels (Segue, Inland, and others) and the nearly totalizing rise of bookstore chains. The decade finished with an even more debilitating blow delivered by online book merchandising companies, companies bound neither to serve any community nor even to make a profit.³ Poetry's distribution problem was further compounded by the practically nonexistent means of distribution for poetry in other media such as sound, performance, and the visual.

The continued importance of print notwithstanding, poetry has a current engagement with electronic technology⁴. The electronic medium offers unprecedented opportunities for the production, archiving, and distribution of poetry texts, all possible with present technology. Several computer poetry production

efforts were made from 1980-1990⁵ yet during that decade poetry's victories in the electronic realm remained scattered and the texts themselves often proved elusive. (Divergent programs were required for operation. Further, some of the publishers involved were arguing the proprietary status of their texts and fighting distribution battles tougher than those of the small press.) The nineties also compounded the difficulty of access to specific electronic texts with the rise of the Internet and the Web. Though this might seem a contradiction, the sudden proliferation of electronic texts of all varieties has made access to specific types of writing even more challenging. What have become crucial in the climate of this textual dystopia are (1) gathering places or subject villages for texts with related engagements, and (2) a recognition of the materiality of digital poetry texts.

Sites

Central to the success of electronic poetry is the notion of a "subject village," a site for the access, collection, and dissemination of poetry and related writing. Such a site provides a gathering ground, flood plain, mortar for the pestle of poesis. It should be understood that such a subject village neither attempts to collect everything nor does it exert "control" in a traditional sense. Rather:

- It collects materials according to an editorial policy. Its contribution to the Web lies in its provision of an focused collection of texts.
- It facilitates the dissemination of print publications (resulting ultimately in royalties for authors) through the maintenance of bibliographic and promotional vehicles. It also makes possible other types of publications that may have been less than profitable in the print medium.
- It serves as a gateway to relevant externally available electronic resources.
- The circulation of texts becomes its primary mission.
- It exists in the context of the Web. That is, it not only delivers texts but also offers slow connect times, error messages, misgivings, and the megabytes of misinformation that typify a largely unedited textual space.
- Most importantly, the creation of a poetry archive of this order rests on the realization that the Web is itself an instance of writing.

Materials

Much as with earlier technologies, the electronic medium is not only a publishing and distribution means, but as a technology, enters the material of writing. What writing is becomes altered by how it is physically written through its production technology, its files, codes and URLs (sometimes called "earls"). We are living in a material world and these are material URLs⁶. The same material influences occurred in the media of clay tablets, papyrus, and the codex, and it is no different now. A parallel for such an engagement with the material in the twentieth century? Think, for example of film – not when it attempts to reproduce reality but when it functions as a medium conscious of being constituted of pans, camera angles, lens effects, and montage; i.e., there are certain limits and specific effects concomitant with the materials of a given medium. Further, the medium affects the materiality of the work. An example of this is the way distortion, once a by-product of electric instrumentation in rock music, has now become an aesthetic element in the music. (The rock group Orgy's use of distortion in their 1998 hit song "Blue Monday" is a prime example of this.) As a writing medium, online electronic space depends on the fact that the Web is itself an instance of writing. Not only do web pages contain writing but these pages are presented through the medium of the home page and are themselves written in HTML (Hypertext Markup Language)⁷.

In *Digital Poetics*, I look at such writing. Picture yourself with two windows open: in one you are editing pure ASCII text using the glistening, black Model T Ford of EMACS and sputtering through the black & white fields of VT100. In the other window you have Netscape open, that graphical but heinously sloppy browser that seems out to get you with its delays, bull-headed error messages, and proclamations that it just found you 750,000 items that match – exactly – your search for the term "phanopoiea". You are editing not on some back-up up system then uploading but on the server itself, every time you save your work in progress – improvements, tests, errors – it is immediately available to the world. The process has all the risks of live television but there is an added excitement since it is the act of writing that is the performance. In this investigation we will write, read, and breathe within the UNIX C-shell environment. A C-shell so efficient you swear you can hear the ocean if you put your ear to the monitor. This is a dynamic, expansive writing space, a pixelated meadow on a revolving disk inside a UNIX box. It is a field for which permission is an actual fact of the UNIX environment, in Robert Duncan's words (with the meadow representing creative space for Duncan):

Often I am permitted to return to a meadow
as if it were a given property of the mind
that certain bounds hold against chaos...

(Duncan, *The Opening of the Field*)⁷

The Web is a representational discourse cast from natural language cradled in the matted barbs of mark-up. If a field has it prose and versus, these are its verses, nested within a frame of webbed electronic poesis. Our task is to explore the texture of the clods the plow leaves behind; to celebrate its nitrogen, iron, and mulch, to furrow the "everlasting omen of what is" (7).

Digital Poetics attempts to take on a task different than its peers. First, this is a book about Web-based electronic writing viewed through the lens of poetic practice. It is not another book about "la vie en prose". Second, rather than idealize, hyperbolize, speak in the abstract, propose egolessness, waltz around conjectured possibilities, deny intention, postulate, berate, or generally irritate, the goal here is to argue electronic space as a *space of poesis*, to employ the tropes, hypertextualities, linkages, and static of the medium; to speak from the perspective of one up to the elbows in the ink of this writing machine. (Though in this metaphor, the ink in question would be less like that of the printing press and more like the obfuscating fluid of the squid.) It is also important to acknowledge that electronic writing has crossed the threshold into our common conversation. (Indeed, our collective vocabulary is steadily growing: by some estimates, 25% of the new words entering the English language each year are now related to computing.) I hope to suggest that one may go beyond looking at technology as something that should be on a shelf, labeled, and out of reach; there is much to be gained by simply investigating it *as writing*.

Indeed, the digital field is a real form of practice and immediately relevant to any informed sense of what we will call "poetry" in coming years. But one must learn to see through a new lens, one with expanded focal points. Trying to understand the digital work solely through codex practice is like trying to understand film, for the person that has never seen one, by looking at a still. It is this general lack of understanding of the electronic text file as a physical, visual, and verbal writing *material* (akin to a Pollack-painted, barn-sized wall of dizzying links, splotches of error, and black holes of hang time) that is addressed here. This study presents not a theory of electronic textual artifice, not emotion as represented by the emoticon (>), but an investigation into the materiality of electronic writing. It addresses, to varying depths, the three principal forms of electronic textuality, hypertext, visual/kinetic text, and works in programmable media. (Though by the end of this study the goal is to emerge with a clear sense of the relative importance of these three forms.) It does not try to determine what might occur under ideal conditions. Rather, it looks at electronic textuality as writing *per se* and investigates how the materiality of electronic writing has changed the idea of writing itself, how this writing functions in the real world of the Web, and what writing becomes when activated in the electronic medium. There is a sense of "active" being argued here similar to what William Carlos Williams argued for the print poem. As Robert Creeley mentioned at a reading in Buffalo (November 5, 1999), Williams's insistence was

not on the poem as afterthought (the classic concept of "recollections collected in tranquility") but on the poem as itself an instrument of thought. He has written:

I've never forgotten Williams' contention that "the poet thinks with his poem, in that lies his thought, and that in itself is the profundity ..." Poems have always had this nature of revelation for me, becoming apparently objective manifestations of feelings and thoughts otherwise inaccessible. (*Collected Essays* 572)

The poet thinks through the poem. Similarly, investigated here is not the idea of the digital work as an extension of the printed poem, but the idea of the digital poem as the process of thinking through this new medium, thinking through *making*. As the poet works, the work discovers.

Excerpt from the Introduction to Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001)

Notes

1. In general, the term "poetry" is used in this volume to refer to practices of innovative poetry rather than to what might be called academic, formal, or traditional forms of poetry.
2. For example, letter presses, mimeo machines, early photocopy machines, and daisy-wheel printers passed from businesses to small presses as they were superseded by newer technologies.
3. In this light it is surprising that some poets choose to list an online book merchandiser as a source for their books when they could as easily list a small press book store. (These often also offer ordering through e-mail, the phone, and the Web.) Since online book merchandisers have not committed to ongoing support of small circulation books, it might be naive for poets to support them without questioning the impact of this practice.
4. There is no agreed-upon term for digital poetry. It will sometimes be referred to in this volume as digital poetry, electronic poetry, e-poetry, or computer-generated writing. See the section "Future Tenses" in *Digital Poetics* for a fuller discussion of the terms and boundaries of electronic poetics.
5. These efforts included Jackson Mac Low and John Cage's use of computer programs to generate mesostic and diastic readings, the publication of Hugh Kenner and Joseph O'Rourke's *Travesty* program in the November, 1984 issue

of Byte, Charles O. Hartman's presentation of the program Diastext to Jackson Mac Low, and the development of Storyspace. See the chapter, "E-Poetries: A Lab Book of Practice, 1970-2001" for more on this topic.

6. The URL itself contributes in a small way to your experience of reading. What are you thinking as you type in those symbols, fragments of names, tildes, and guttural utterances that invoke Web screens? For example, how is your experience different approaching a writing at a URL containing the path `"/authors/glazier/theories/hypertext.html"` versus `"/authors/glazier/tomfoolery/hypertext.html"`? Such text strings are not transparent carriers of information; rather they form part of the material of the writing.
7. See the section, "Sidebar: On HTML" later in Introduction to *Digital Poetics*.