After Multimedia: Speed, Mass, and the Future Literary

Stuart Moulthrop
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

[1] Literature and "the literary"

Something about literary or cultural work seems to require radical doubt. We are never quite certain of our standing. One of my great teachers once theorized poetry as an anxious relation of living and dead, in which present poets struggle against the influence of precursors. In this view invention becomes a matter of willful misinterpretation or evasion -- if not outright denial, then a swerve onto self-made ground. Ironically, this retrospective poetics was itself overcome not by force of tradition but by changing present circumstances that eroded its canonical framework. There was a great deal of self-making as the century reached its end. What succeeded the old regime were various moves toward polyvocality and differential identity, efforts aligned with the expansion and revisionism of the times. These impulses shifted the vector of concern from the past to an ever-onrushing future marked by rapid technical and social transformation. We still have our anxieties, but they focus now not on influence but rather affluence or effluence, an apprehension of something vast, new, and unknown rushing in around us.

This tidal surge has many names. The conveners of this Forum invoke two: "*Globalization* has brought about the weakening of the idea of a nation/state based on ethnicity, blurring cultural boundaries, and enabling cultures to commingle and spawn 'hybrid cultures.' *Technological advancements* have given rise to a multimedia age, with opportunities for new genre experiments by fusing literature with other ways of creative expression." A third and perhaps general name for these phenomena might be *disruption*, a restless overturning of stable reference points, a relentless drive for fast innovation and competitive advantage. Swimming in the globalized whirlpools of media change, artists turn from personal to existential anxieties. We worry less about the struggle to create than about whether creative work will have any place in a reconfigured world. The conveners again: "the status of literature as a representative expression of the cultural life of a nation has suffered on the whole in comparison to the rising reputation of popular performing arts, for it has come to be relegated to the narrow sphere of cultural entertainment."

"Cultural entertainment" seems at first an odd expression. For the founders of critical theory (Benjamin, Gramsci, Althusser, et al.), popular entertainment and progressive culture were more often than not fundamentally opposed. Now no doubt these once adversarial forces have merged -- or *converged*, to use the Californian term (see Jenkins). Media flow together and intermingle, dissolving hierarchies. We live in a time of serious un-seriousness, where newspapers and broadcast networks have been replaced as primary information sources by late-night comedy shows, Facebook, and Twitter. What does culture mean now? In attempting a definition should we look locally or globally, east or west, or into the directionless spaces of the Internet? Perhaps the upheavals of recent years, revealing an insurgent populism, will force us to distinguish between an older popular culture, based on generalized mass consumption, and more narrowly tribal alternatives. Under such developments, could we begin to see ourselves not simply as post-canonical but ultimately post-cultural?

Do doubt that term is as problematic as the notorious "end of history" (Fukuyama) or forays into post-human philosophy (e.g., Bogost). For the moment at least, humans write for other humans, and it is

impossible to imagine ourselves anything but culture-making animals. It is probably pointless to invoke an end of culture; though there is always the possibility of an end that is not terminal – a limit or inflection point where one regime flows into another. Something along these lines has been proposed for literature. In the first decade of the new century, two leading critics, Alan Liu and N. Katherine Hayles, independently speculated on an alternative they called "the literary," or as Liu occasionally says, "the future literary" (8) . For Hayles this is a "broader category" grounded both in critical politics and technical change. The term encompasses:

> creative artworks that interrogate the histories, contexts, and productions of literature, including as well the verbal art of literature proper. The significance of designating "the literary" as central to literary studies is beyond the scope of my discussion here. Nevertheless, even a casual acquaintance with major movements in the literary studies in the last half-century will immediately confirm that the discipline, in embracing cultural studies, post-colonial studies, and many other fields, has been moving toward the broader category of "the literary" for some time. Now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we are poised to extend the interrogations of the literary into the digital domain. (4–5)

"The literary" is meant as an enlarged scheme for verbal art that escapes or eschews the conventional printed page, with instances including graphic novels, performed and spoken poetry, various types of "cybertext" (Aarseth), net art, and media forms yet to come. The term attempts a positive compromise between tradition and innovation, an enlargement of boundaries meant to maintain the relevance of critical study. This is an overwhelmingly positive development and a great step forward, but it still leaves a trace of anxiety. If nothing else, the term seems grammatically off-balance, pressing an adjectival phrase into service as a noun. For some, "the literary" may imply a verbal phantom limb, inviting a troubling question: the literary *what?*

No doubt we should simply take this uncertainty as intended, a necessary challenge. What can we say if we fill in the implied nominative blank -- the literary what indeed? The great advantage of omission or ellipsis is flexibility. Withholding specification allows for multiple solutions. One of these strategies, as the title of this session indicates, is the poetics of "multimedia," of which some of the best examples come from this very city: the Flash compositions of Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries.

[2] Speed

An inquiry into the *what* of any future literary might well begin with their celebrated work, *Dakota* (Chang and Voge). Like most examples of digital art, *Dakota* resists easy summary or encapsulation. As Johanna Drucker says of digital writing generally, we can expect it to be as much event as entity: something we need to experience in specific circumstances and a particular span of time (29). However, that experience may have distinguishable components. In Dakota, one of these is a 1,021-word narrative poem that opens with a boozy road trip in the U.S. state of South Dakota, ranges through various imaginary spaces in which Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, and the jazz great Art Blakey make appearances, and comes to rest in turn-of-the-century Seoul. However, this representation of the work is seriously problematic, because it completely neglects its non-verbal aspects.

Dakota is notoriously hard to capture on printed pages because it is a kinetic, time-based product, constructed with the multimedia tool Adobe Flash and designed for access through a Web browser. Like a film, its reception is intended not for unconstrained access but for a specific performance or runtime. Indeed, the work flaunts this cinematic signature by beginning with a numerical countdown, as if its contents consisted of frames on a reel instead of bytes in a digital record. As the work plays out, the words of its underlying poem appear only in fleeting, self-displacing bursts. They are available to critical readers in totality only because some unsung friend of literature painstakingly captured them, probably as a very large series of screenshots, and collated the results. In their intended state, the frenetic dance of verbal content is coordinated with Art Blakey's virtuosic drum performance, "Tobi Ilu." In other words, *Dakota* has as much in common with music video as confessional poetry.

As a multiply-mediated hybrid, *Dakota* invites various strategies of interpretation. Though clearly aware of the work's cinematic dimension, Jessica Pressman emphasizes its literary heritage, pursuing a claim by the authors (perhaps somewhat playful) that the work represents a "close reading" of Ezra Pound's early *Cantos* (Pressman). David Ciccoricco, while sensitive to the literary possibilities of *Dakota* and other works by Chang and Voge, places greater weight on media effects: "The radical model of reading and viewing prompted by [the works of Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries] makes us acutely aware of the function and limitation of our own perceptual apparatus and, in turn, unsettles what we regard to be literary and imaginative experience" (73). Both Pressman and Ciccoricco regard *Dakota* and its siblings as enlighteningly difficult works, Pressman tracing this quality to the modernist aesthetic of form-breaking, Ciccoricco to cognitive experimentation. As these critics explain it, the work seems deeply ironic. Its self-performance is exquisitely synchronized with Blakey's drumming, yet this carefully crafted effect ultimately disrupts our textual or literary expectations. Medium and message converge orthogonally: form serves dysfunction. As Pressman notes: "*Dakota* enacts this constitutive fact of digital information; it refuses to remain still onscreen, provoking an awareness of the effects its flickering or flashing has on the way we read" (305).

Digital words (or data) will not be still, and their embrace of the kinetic or kinematic introduces the relatively novel variable of speed to literary experience. Invested as it is in percussive synchronization, *Dakota* flirts with perceptual speed limits but generally produces a safe ride. Most readers will be able to see every word of the presentation, however briefly. However, variables are by definition changeable, so later works of digital poetry can and do break that speed limit. William Poundstone's 2009 Flash work, *Project for Tachistoscope (Bottomless Pit)*, discards even marginal legibility. A tachistoscope is a scientific instrument used to investigate visual perception by presenting an image for extremely brief intervals, far smaller than the 1/24 of a second used in traditional cinema. By the end of the first decade of the new century, advances in hardware and software permitted multimedia artists to emulate such devices. When a fully realized scripting language was introduced to Flash (an innovation not available for *Dakota*), artists could calibrate effects in milliseconds. As Pressman, Mark Marino, and Jeremy Douglass explain in their study of *Project for Tachistoscope*, Poundstone explores well beyond the range of conventional, screen-based verbal presentation, designing some of his words to appear below the threshold of awareness.

Why, one might ask, would anyone do such a thing? Can a work of more-or-less-invisible writing be included in even the most rarefied definition of "the literary?" If we confine ourselves to the framework of "multimedia," perhaps it cannot. That term implicitly assumes that the goal of art is still to communicate some *content* through an essentially secondary if not "transparent" technical system (see Murray). Even though multiply overlaid, media still pass intelligible messages. However, as Kenneth Goldsmith has argued, literature seems to have moved on these days "from content to context" (Goldsmith, 123). *Context* has many dimensions: social, economic, political, and these days also technical. Poundstone's acceleration beyond the speed of perception takes us into this last dimension, interrogating both the workings of the reading machine and, as Pressman and company show, the nature of the software that controls it. His tachistoscopic words become available for conscious inspection when the investigators examine the underlying code.

Poundstone's acceleration invites us to consider speed in non-human terms, as a matter of machinic operation. Computers are immensely fast adding machines. Our use of them has cultural impact because we can harness this calculating capacity for signifying processes, from alphanumeric display to the rendering of simulated environments. In fact, computational speed may not be harnessed not simply for presentation but ultimately for composition, as we will shortly see. From the speed or rhythms of multimedia, we turn to something different: the distillation of speed into mass.

[3] Mass

Commenting recently on the "subject of electronic literature," the critic Sandy Baldwin confronts the consequences of this change. In early days, when we were largely concerned with self-contained projects like *Dakota*, digital writing could be considered in more or less isolated cases, novelties and experiments. The tools were new: Adobe Flash was about five years old when Chang and Voge produced *Dakota*. In the decade and a half that followed, digital encoding and circulation have become the norm for writing. In the place of Flash movies and self-contained hypertexts, we now deal with productions in dynamic and social media. Through platforms like Twitter and Instagram, a vast swath of humanity have become engaged with fragmentary, disruptive composition. "Cultural entertainment" finds itself immersed in a greatly enlarged context. Long past the experimental stage, electronic writing has become a mass and massive phenomenon. Baldwin declares:

> You do not read writing; you cannot take in the mass of texts in the world. You cannot take it. The writings exceed you, they overwhelm you, and they bury you. You might write this text, or write that text, but you know nothing of writing, nothing of writing itself. No, our entire species is devoted to producing greater and greater explosive spasms of overwhelming printed matter. Is this not the network? Is this not the web? Not texts, not writing to be read, but writing as massed marked detritus. (18)

Here is anxiety of effluence at its most intense. While it is possible to question the novelty of Baldwin's complaint – no doubt some ancient Sumerian railed against the bewildering proliferation of clay tablets -- we may also need to invoke Kevin Kelly's concept of the "technological ratchet," a change in the way

of doing things that translates cyclical phenomena into a new space of possibility (74-75). People still spoke aloud and played music on the radio, just as they had in parlors and concert halls, but with the new technology they began to reach national and global audiences. Context matters. No doubt writing *en masse* as always defied comprehension, but the mass effect of writing on today's digital networks suggests a phase transition. To understand the full import of this change, we need to pay particular attention to the final phrase of Baldwin's indictment: "massed marked detritus." Both adjectives are important, and as we will see, they are also deeply related. The *marking* of digital writing may matter every bit as much as the mass.

If *Dakota* epitomizes a moment of hybrid possibility, we may set against it a second literary production in order to define the next phase. This is *Issue 1*, Stephen McLaughlin and Jim Carpenter's audacious intervention in contemporary poetry (McLaughlin and Carpenter). The work is an electronic book, distributed in Portable Document Format over the Internet in the fall of 2008, consisting of 3,164 free-verse poems, each attributed to an actual poet, living or dead. On first presentation *Issue 1* appears to be an enormously comprehensive anthology, though that appearance is deceptive. Nonetheless, at any given point of entry the work seems quite traditional. Here is one of the selections:

Scarlet words and mangy litanies

There is time for the
  surprised nature
They pause beyond the
  plans of the warmth
Out of their unsteady hand
  they dreams of someone, hearing, and out
    of their vein nature
      coming
They are
Whenever in late autumn they disrupt me
Since they interrupt me in the morning
Until they interrupt me
Because they disrupt me
Those are black
Those are horned
That which known to a
  mangy gourd bitterly comes, is unsteady
    and scarlet

Donna Kuhn

In form this would appear to be a lyrical or meditative poem. It has short lines of variable length, an apparently significant pattern of indentation, and what seems to be an attribution to the poet and art

critic Donna Kuhn. Given a poem, we might proceed to interpret. Attention could be given to the text's loose anchoring in a string of rootless pronouns, an undefined series of *they* and *those*. We might pause on the curiously symmetrical cluster of repetitions: "disrupt… interrupt… interrupt… disrupt," in lines 10-13. We could wonder about the phrase "they dreams" in line 6. Is it a deliberate solecism meant to destabilize readerly comfort, or a typographic error suggesting editorial slackness? In sum, we might describe "Scarlet words and mangy litanies" as a poem of un-knowing or resolute mysteriousness, made from a language artfully disrupted. In writing this gloss I am suddenly an undergraduate English major again – though arguably even more foolish now, because this interpretation is practically worthless. I have assumed that "Scarlet words and mangy litanies" was written by a human being. It was not, at least not in the ordinary way – and the woman apparently named as author was not involved.

Like every other item in *Issue 1*, this text makes use of a linguistic trick. The final line of the composition is not "and scarlet," but "Donna Kuhn." What looks like a traditional author attribution is in fact part of the literary creation, not paratextual but within the body of the pseudo-poem. The name is an impudent apostrophe – literally a shameless, unsolicited invocation – and it is one of many in this project. *Issue 1* is a grand prank. The 3,164 poems were not composed by the people whose names appear in their final lines, but by a computer program, a notably good free-verse generator. In this respect *Issue 1* reflects both of Baldwin's critical terms. It is massive, certainly, harnessing the speed of computation to produce thousands of poem-like compositions in a convenient span of time; but it is also crucially *marked*, in this case with false attributions, inviting controversy.

Kenneth Goldsmith, advocating for a poetics of appropriation and iconoclasm, finds much to like about McLaughlin and Carpenter's project:

> With one gesture, [the supposed anthologists] had swapped the focus *from content to context*, showing us what it might mean to be a poet in the digital age. Being a poet in any age – digital or analog – places one's practice outside normative economies, theoretically enabling the genre to take risks that more lucrative ventures wouldn't. Just as we've seen some of the most adventurous linguistic experimentation in the past century in poetry, its [sic] now poised to do the same when it comes to notions of authorship, publishing, and distribution as proved by the *Issue 1*'s provocations. (123)

Others have been less favorably disposed. Goldsmith reports that Ron Silliman, who is among the authors invoked, accused McLaughlin and Carpenter of "anarcho-flarf vandalism" and hinted darkly about legal action (122). The displacement of content by context can be painful, especially when the act reveals how attributions connect to brand names or trademarks. No one likes being reminded of his trade when his business is threatened with disruption.

For the less traditional, there might still be room for engagement. If we are generously minded, we might share something of Goldsmith's admiration for the stunt. It is possible to read in its iterated apostrophes at least a hint of homage: *Dear Donna Kuhn, this poem's for you.* Content aside, if one's inner English major can find no purchase on the verses, one's outward digital-humanist would love to

crawl the originating code. Algorithm is the latest object of critical desire. How was the apparently coherent vocabulary of the poem selected, from what underlying set? Where did that ABBA pattern in lines 10-13 come from? Does the generator have even a rudimentary model of poetic language, and if so, what?

To engage in these ways, however, risks setting aside *Issue 1*'s "provocations," its challenges to publishing, distribution, and especially authorship. Clever code is a thing of beauty, but *Issue 1* is not purely aesthetic. McLaughlin and Carpenter's prank is more than an exercise in conversion of computational speed to verbal mass. That mass implies (or unleashes) a measure of polemical energy: the work is also a weapon of class disruption. Intentionally or not, it strongly suggests Foucault's "author-function" can now be automated (Foucault). Again we are confronted with an almost sublime irony, as form serves disruption. Perversely hyperabundant, *Issue 1* is at the same time an emptying-out. It is hard to see how to proceed from its foundation. While there certainly could be an *Issue 2* – algorithms are inherently repeatable – what would be the point? The conceptual slap has landed and no other is required. Unlike industrial production, poetry seems unlikely to survive automation even in the short run. *Issue 1* might as well be *Issue* Ω.

What does one say after the last word? For some, this "massed marked" farewell and others like it may induce a desire for separation. Concerned about the impact of social media, software moguls in the San Francisco Bay area have begun to refer to smart phones as "WMDs" -- *wireless mobile devices* but also perhaps *weapons of mass distraction* -- and are signing up to attend "Unplug" weekends where their use is banned (Bosker). In the arts, prominent critics and practitioners have turned toward the "post-digital" (Berry and Dieter) rejecting the new-media fixations of the last two decades (Kember and Zylinska). Has the "detritus" of digital writing reached, for creative purposes at least, a point of diminishing returns? Might it be better to withdraw from "the literary" and return to "literature proper," to take up again a regime of words that keep still, and poems with actual authors?

Some will opt for withdrawal, though the choice may not be as binary as it seems. Another of my great teachers, Michael Joyce, did much in the 1980s and 1990s to define electronic literature as we now know it, with works of hypertext fiction including *afternoon* (1987), *Twilight: A Symphony* (1994), and "Twelve Blue" (1997). Yet at the turn of the century he amicably but definitively separated from the movement. His reasons were complex, though they reflected in part a judgement that multi-mediation was not as important for his work as it might be for others. So he went back to writing destined for the page, in 2007 publishing an intriguing work called *Was: annales nomadiques*, whose subtitle is "a novel of internet."

Was is a footloose, polyglot series of vignettes, a radically experimental fiction that might be mistaken for an impressionistic notebook if not for its subtly sustained theme of "refugee consciousness" (14). Indeed, this cosmopolitan dance-around-the-planet, touching every continent including Antarctica, offers a strong answer to Baldwin's anxieties about the explosion of globalized digital culture. One of Joyce's characters worries that we have "lost the epic sensibility but not its scope" (37); though on the evidence of this novel it might be more accurate to say that we instead find our way to a new sensibility

within the planetary scope of the World Wide Web. *Was* raises the possibility that an artist may contrive to be "of internet" without drowning, and that there are still important purposes for the human voice even as the machines tune up around us. To further explore this possibility, I want to turn to a text in which the intersection of voice and technology plays out with particular acuity.

[4] Not the future

If we take the name of Donna Kuhn not in gratuitous apostrophe but as starting point for a network search, we may find our way to her weblog, Digital Aardvarks. On December 10, 2016, Kuhn posted on that forum a deeply personal poem. Read at a certain slant, this text may tell us one (literally) final truth about art under digital mediation: what happens when being "of internet" – immersion in the flow of language as data, if not the larger planetary dance -- collides with that disengagement from futurity to which we all must come.

Titled "THE LAST PARADE (for spencer)," Kuhn's verses appear below a digital graphic credited to Spencer Selby (Kuhn). The poem resonates sharply against the charge of "anarcho-flarf vandalism" that Silliman raised against *Issue 1*. *Flarf* is a style of appropriative poetry that commonly uses digital text as source material (Bernstein). Kuhn tags "THE LAST PARADE" as "cut-up email correspondence." So whatever this poet may have thought of McLaughlin and Carpenter's name-piracy, we can doubt she would have used "flarf" as a term of abuse. Like many poets these days, Kuhn shows no hostility to digital media. Here is the poem she has, presumably, woven from archives of electronic mail, perhaps from exchanges with the person to whom it is dedicated:

THE LAST PARADE (for spencer)

i am worse inside than the last parade
i am not documentation
i am a mistake

anxiety bladder, he actually takes my world
u are down a shadow; winter breaks bullshit
my fear is amazing to itself, since itself

i.r.a. hell kitchen; i snapped at 8 am
this couldn't sleep, remember
be my sleep

another book end or traditions
i am fucking ahead of all the
cards

4 insomniacs were overdramatic

man, even my twilight is a catastrophe

the colonoscopy was scared
baby clinic, shrink sleep
all art is ovarian cannabis

my shitty potential escapes
i terminally fear your money
shadow blood, to hell with this

your face across fucking parallels
unforbidden pleasures against
your face

abdominal woman, the kind
that don’t get out of bed
sounds voluntary

i will die counting everything
fear spreads the world between
my sauna system

fanatical hate has nothing

my diary sleeps at the fear clinic
my rational juicer is overreacting
church stress

a drug greater than a drug
pelvic death charts inspiring
the town

i am failure, dying of ideas
breast wimp, ukraine science
i am objectively happy

chateau faith, overdramatic antihistamines
the church library kills, the magnesium worried
radiation glimmer

generic ham, know your soup likes the system
the x-rays were crazy, i’m done with way anymore

big bad wednesday

i'm just not the future.

If we can only wonder fruitlessly about pronoun references in the faux-Kuhn poem of *Issue 1*, here we can make a firmer assumption. The "i" in some or all these phrases appears to be someone confronted by, perhaps suffering from, a very serious illness: "I am worse inside than the last parade." Though this impression seems inescapable (perhaps in the terrible way of a diagnosis), we come to it indirectly. The words are after all cut up and reassembled. Their new arrangement hints at an unseen original even as it withholds that text. We must piece out the tesserae, which both brings us closer to the mortal predicament yet reminds us we are outside the immediate framework of address.

The picture the fragments form is sorrowful. This is a death-facing poem. The first and last lines mark it as a work of preparation if not valediction. We could not be further from the context of *Issue 1*, where the trope of negation is applied to an idea (authorship) or a class (poets), but only figuratively to actual persons – and then really as displacement (stealing names) rather than actual extinction. Setting aside is other virtues, *Issue 1* is not an especially humane work; or its humanism is complicated. The meaning of its poems attaches largely to their technical origins. We admire the cleverness of its robotics. Anything else we find amounts to projection. In "THE LAST PARADE," though, we are back in Allen Ginsberg's "total animal soup of time," confronted with friendship and sorrow and actual loss (Ginsberg). If we project anything it must be empathy.

This would be a hard poem in any season, especially if one has any experience of long and painful endings. It seems especially bitter fruit at the end of 2016, on the heels of Brexit and the U.S. electoral disaster and what seems likely to unfold elsewhere in the world. Taken in this context, "THE LAST PARADE" asserts the cruelty of dying during dark times, cut off from the arc of history before it bends another way. Walter Benjamin observed that a man who dies at the age of 35 is at all moments of his life a man who dies at 35; yet no one knows his fate from the outset (373). Benjamin died not knowing the Nazis would be defeated and his continent redeemed. No endings are happy, but some are especially sad. The voice in Kuhn's poem says, "i'm just not the future," sounding that bell that tolls for all of us. If we are ever graced with futurity, the gift is temporary and precarious. At some point we all must disengage.

Yet Kuhn's poem also contains this line: "i am objectively happy." What are these words doing in this dark meditation? They express resignation, perhaps, or the last step in Kubler-Ross's familiar march. The sentence seems curiously placed, eight lines before the final resignation. Given the general tenor of sickness and suffering, not even the most dedicated optimist could read it as a turn toward transcendence. It lands, after all, at the end of a triplet that includes references to failure, Ukraine, and (most likely) cancer. Probably the remark suggests comfort or palliation -- if not the marijuana or morphine, then the consolation of philosophy. However, if we can explicate this assertion of happiness, we cannot explain it away. After all, Kuhn could have cut the phrase while she was dicing up her

correspondence, but she – human being, not algorithm – decided otherwise. "THE LAST PARADE" thus leaves us with a question: how can a person be "objectively happy" if he or she is "not the future?"

Thus we come to another important difference between *Issue 1* and Donna Kuhn's blog poem. At least until software is granted personhood, we can interpret digitally generated text any way we like. Such a text is not a statement but an occasion, less entity than event. In reading "THE LAST PARADE," however, any attempt to generalize or exemplify works at cross-purposes to the poem's immediate context of personal loss. Especially given the currency of the writing, it seems incumbent to apologize before attempting a slantwise reading. What follows is in some sense inescapably insensitive to someone's real suffering.

And yet here the poem is, "of internet," digitally derived and part of the networked mass of expression, Baldwin's terrible detritus. A blog is personal but not a private place. So it might be possible (though inevitably callous) to set the trenchant meaning of Kuhn's poem in a wider frame. As distant readers, our loss is not (yet) personal. The email was not addressed to us. The sorrow it contains is not ours directly; yet it resonates with other losses. Eventually we will all suffer that severing from futurity as imminent biological fact. For the moment some of us feel it figuratively, as a matter of imaginative investment. All deaths diminish us, but all the more, perhaps, when they fall in rotten times.

The rot has lately grown acute. Some who once looked forward to the humane possibilities of media change can no longer do so with enthusiasm. We may ask how we can happily live in a world whose trend lines we reject. We consider unplugging, switching off our devices. There are tweets we will not read. To a large extent, digital writing now seems to serve class disruption and rogue contextualization, a regime where fraud is rapidly becoming the new normal. How can we remain committed to what we once called the future (literary or otherwise) if we know it's just not us?

And yet we still write and we still read. The way forward can be found simply by seeking, or in this case searching. The one digital difference that may suggest redemptive possibility may be (ironically) the point at which writing disrupts itself – when, through the indexical power of digital memory, it points to something else. In studying cybernetic texts we have learned to think about "traversal functions" (Aarseth, 2), operations that turn potentialities into expression. In a way, the logic of traversal applies to conventional texts as well, to poems and essays that spring directly from our brains without mechanical intervention. This essay is itself an excursion, a series of moves from point to point. It began as a set of traversals.

I came upon the prank Kuhn poem in *Issue 1* by searching that text for the word "disrupt." The poem is the only one in which that word occurs. From there, via Google search on Donna Kuhn's borrowed name, I arrived at her blog and "THE LAST PARADE." If context has not displaced content – a point Kuhn's poem ringingly contradicts – it has perhaps come onto equal footing. Context manifests as connection, the hypertextensive body of present and discoverable links. The excessive mass of text is marked, articulated, indexed for traversal. Some of those pathways lead out into the wilderness or into the ever-teeming house of lies; but other directions remain eligible. If we reject the present shape of

digital writing, that moment-formerly-known-as-the-future with which we no longer identify, we may yet still imagine an immanent future, an alternative that can be achieved, locally and with great effort, in honesty and grief and sorrow, even amid the detritus. We owe it to those on their actual last parade to hold that dream as long as we can.

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