

After Multimedia: Speed, Mass, and the Future Literary

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[1] Literature and “the literary”

Something about literary work seems to require radical doubt. We are never quite certain of our standing. One of my great teachers 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 tradition but by changing circumstances that eroded its canonical framework. There was much self-making as the century reached its end. The old regime gave way to polyvocality and differential identity, efforts aligned with expansion and revisionism. These impulses shifted our concern from the past to an ever-onrushing future marked by rapid transformation. We still have our anxieties, but they focus now not on influence but rather effluence, an apprehension of something vast 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... enabling cultures to commingle and spawn ‘hybrid cultures.’ *Technological advancements* have given rise to a multimedia age... fusing literature with other ways of creative expression.” A third and perhaps general name for these phenomena might be *disruption*, a relentless drive for fast innovation and competitive advantage. Swimming in the whirlpools of media change, artists turn from personal to categorical anxieties. We worry less about the struggle to create than about whether any creative work can have meaning 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.”

The phrase “cultural entertainment” seems odd at first. For the founders of critical theory, popular entertainment and progressive culture were fundamentally opposed. Now these adversarial forces have converged. As media flow together, hierarchies dissolve. We live in a time of serious un-seriousness,

where books, newspapers, and broadcast journalism are replaced by comedy shows and social networks. What does culture mean now? 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 also post-cultural?

The term does not seem useful. It is impossible to imagine ourselves anything but culture-making animals, and so probably pointless to invoke any end of culture -- though there is always the possibility of an end that is not terminal, an 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."

"The literary" is an enlarged scheme for verbal art not limited to the conventional printed page, looking toward graphic novels, performed and spoken poetry, various types of "cybertext" (Aarseth), net art, and media forms still to come. The term strikes a compromise between tradition and innovation, an enlargement of boundaries meant to maintain the relevance of criticism. This is a great step forward, but it 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*?

Perhaps we should just take this uncertainty as challenge. What can we say if we fill in the nominative blank -- the literary what indeed? Withholding specification allows for multiple solutions. One of these strategies is indeed 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.

[Go to browser for *Dakota*](#)

An inquiry into the *what* of any future literary might well begin with the celebrated work, *Dakota*. 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 **not just entity but also event**: something we need to experience within a particular occasion (29). 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 imaginary spaces where Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, and the jazz great Art Blakey all make appearances, coming to rest in turn-of-the-century Seoul. However, this representation overlooks the work's crucial 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 via the World Wide Web. Like a film, its reception is intended for a specific performance or runtime. Indeed, the work flaunts this cinematic signature by beginning with a 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 in fleeting, self-displacing bursts. The frenetic dance of verbal content is coordinated with Blakey's virtuosic drum performance, "Tobi Ilu." In other words, *Dakota* owes as much to music video as it does to confessional poetry.

As a multiply-mediated hybrid, *Dakota* invites various approaches. Though clearly aware of the work's cinematic dimension, the critic Jessica Pressman emphasizes its literary heritage, pursuing a claim by the authors that the work represents a "close reading" of Pound's early *Cantos*. David Ciccoricco, while sensitive to literary possibilities, places greater weight on media effects. He says the work's "radical model of reading and viewing... makes us acutely aware of the function and limitation of our own perceptual apparatus and... unsettles... literary and imaginative experience" (73). As these critics explain it, the work seems deeply ironic. The work is beautiful but also evasive. Its exquisite synchronization ultimately disrupts our 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 (as data) will not be still, and their elusiveness introduces the variable of speed to literary experience. *Dakota* flirts with perceptual speed limits but generally produces a safe ride. Most readers will be able to see every word of the presentation, albeit briefly. However, variables are always changeable, so later works of digital poetry can and do break the speed limit. William Poundstone's 2009 Flash work, *Project for Tachistoscope (Bottomless Pit)*, pushes harder against legibility.

[Go to *Tachistoscope* in browser](#)

A tachistoscope is a scientific instrument used to investigate visual perception by presenting an image for extremely brief intervals, potentially far smaller than the 1/24 of a second used in cinema. By the end of the first decade of the new century, hardware and software permitted multimedia artists to emulate such devices, calibrating effects in milliseconds. Poundstone moves beyond the range of conventional, screen-based presentation, designing some of his words to teeter on the threshold of awareness.

Why would anyone do such a thing? Can a work of more-or-less-invisible writing be included in even the most generous 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*. Even though multiply overlaid, media may be expected to pass intelligible messages. However, as Kenneth Goldsmith has argued, literature seems to have moved on these days “from content to context.” *Context* has many dimensions: social, economic, political, and these days also technical. Poundstone’s acceleration invades this last dimension, ultimately interrogating the reading machine and its software more intensely even than does *Dakota*.

As both *Dakota* and *Project* demonstrate, computers are extremely fast adding machines. Our use of such tools has cultural impact because we can attach their calculating capacity to signifying processes, from alphanumeric display to 3-D simulation. In fact, computational speed can 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 conversion of speed into mass.

[3] Mass

Commenting recently on the “subject of electronic literature,” the critic Sandy Baldwin confronts effects of this change. In early days, when we were largely concerned with self-contained projects like *Dakota*, digital writing could be approached through relatively rare instances of innovation. The tools were new: Adobe Flash was about five years old when Chang and Voge produced *Dakota*. But in the decade and a half that followed, digital encoding and circulation have become the norm for writing. In place of Flash movies and self-contained hypertexts, we now face the productions of dynamic and social media.

Through platforms like Twitter and Instagram, a vast number of people have become engaged in fragmentary, disruptive composition. “Cultural entertainment” finds itself in a very different context. Baldwin declares:

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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.

Here is anxiety of effluence at its most intense. No doubt writing *en masse* as always defied comprehension – one imagines an ancient Sumerian scandalized by the profusion of clay tablets -- but the mass effect of 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 in Baldwin’s complaint: “**massed marked detritus.**” Both adjectives are important, and as we will see, they are also 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 in contrast to it a different case of literary production. This is *Issue 1*, Stephen McLaughlin and Jim Carpenter’s audacious intervention in contemporary poetry. The work is an electronic book, distributed over the Internet in the fall of 2008, consisting of 3,164 free-verse poems, each attributed to an actual writer. On first presentation *Issue 1* appears to be an enormously comprehensive anthology of recent writing, which it is – sort of. At any point of entry the work seems quite conventional. Here is one selection:

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Scarlet words and mangy litanies

There is time for the
surprised nature...
Out of their unsteady hand
they dreams of someone, hearing, and out
of their vein nature
coming

...
 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

This would appear to be a lyrical or meditative poem. It has generally short lines of variable length, a suggestive pattern of indentation, and what seems to be an attribution to the poet and art critic Donna Kuhn. We might thus offer a reading, noticing the 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 this a deliberate solecism meant to deconstruct grammar, or a typographic error suggesting editorial slackness? In sum, we might describe “Scarlet words and mangy litanies” as a poem of resolute mysteriousness made from a language artfully disrupted. In this gloss I am an undergraduate English major again – though arguably even more foolish now, because this interpretation is in fact 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 exploits a certain linguistic trick. The final line of the composition is not “and scarlet,” but “Donna Kuhn.” What looks like an author attribution stands not paratextually outside, but within the poem. The name is an impudent apostrophe – a shameless, unsolicited invocation. *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 compositions; but it is also crucially **marked**, in this case with fictional attributions.

Reception of *Issue 1* has been mixed. Goldsmith celebrates the work, praising its challenge to “notions of authorship, publishing, and distribution.” On the other hand, the poet and critic Ron Silliman, who

like Goldsmith is also named in the prank, accused the authors of “vandalism,” with darks hints about legal action.

If we are generous, we might side with Goldsmith. Maybe all those apostrophes can be read as homage: *Dear Donna Kuhn, this poem’s for you*. Content aside, if one’s inner English major becomes the butt of the joke, one’s digital humanist would love to look at the generating code. Algorithm is the latest object of critical desire.

To engage in this way, however, risks neglecting the practical side of *Issue 1*’s joke. Clever code is a thing of beauty, but *Issue 1* is not purely aesthetic. The work does more than convert computational speed into verbal mass. That mass carries with it a quantum of polemical energy: the work is also a weapon of class disruption. The work strongly suggests that Foucault’s “author-function” can now be automated (Foucault). Perversely hyperabundant, *Issue 1* is also an emptying-out. It is hard to see how one might proceed from its foundation. While there certainly could be an *Issue 2* – algorithms are always repeatable – what would be the point? 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, eruptions like *Issue 1* may induce a desire for separation. 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 absolute as it seems. Another of my great teachers, Michael Joyce, did much in the 1980s and 1990s to define electronic literature as we 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 separated from the movement. Joyce’s reasons were complex, including in part a judgment that multi-mediation was not as important for him as it might be for others. He went back to writing for the printed page, in 2007 publishing an intriguing work called *Was: annales nomadiques*, subtitled “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, answers Baldwin's anxieties about globalized digital culture. One of Joyce's characters worries that we have "lost the epic sensibility but not its scope" (37); though the novel suggest we have instead found our way to a new sensibility within the scope of the World Wide Web. *Was* raises the possibility that an artist may be "of internet" without going insane, and that there are still important uses for the human voice even as the machines tune up around us. To further explore this possibility, I turn to a text where the intersection of voice and technology plays out with particular poignancy.

[4] Not the future

If we take the name of Donna Kuhn not gratuitously but as starting point for a network search, we may find our way to her weblog, Digital Aardvarks. On December 10, 2016, Kuhn posted there 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" 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 the artist Spencer Selby (Kuhn). Kuhn identifies the work as "cut-up email correspondence" -- like many poets these days, she embraces possibilities of 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:

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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...

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

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

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

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 reference in *Issue 1*, here we can make a firmer assumption. The "i" in some or all these phrases appears to be someone confronting 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 frame of address.

The picture the fragments form is sorrowful. This is a death-facing poem. We could not be further from the context of *Issue 1*, where negation is applied as displacement (stealing names) rather than extinction. Setting aside its other virtues, *Issue 1* is not an especially humane work -- or its humanity is complicated. We admire the clever robotics of its output, and 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. If we project anything, it must be empathy.

This would be a hard poem in any season, especially if one has experience of long and painful endings. It seems especially bitter at the end of 2016, with its crises of leadership here and abroad, including Brexit, and the U.S. electoral disaster. 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 a man who dies at 35; yet no one knows his fate from the outset. 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. When we are 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 with references to failure, the menaced nation of Ukraine, and (most likely) cancer. Probably the remark suggests 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 things are not statements but occasions, less entity than event. In reading “THE LAST PARADE,” however, any attempt to generalize grates against 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 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 private. 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. I know almost nothing about Donna Kuhn or Spencer Selby. Their email was not addressed to me. The sorrow it contains is not mine or ours directly; yet it resonates with other losses. Eventually we will all suffer that severing from futurity as biological fact. For the moment some of us feel it figuratively, as a matter of imaginative dis-investment. All deaths diminish us, but all the more, perhaps, when they fall in rotten times.

The rot has lately grown acute.

[Go to “Resistance” prototype](#)

Some who once looked forward to humane possibilities for 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 cannot bring ourselves to read, or which read, move us to rage. To a large extent, digital writing now seems to serve a regime where libel and fraud become 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, by 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 speak of “traversal functions,” operations that turn the potentialities of code or design 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 as such. 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 movingly 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 an 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 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 pursue that dream as long as we can.

URLS:

Dakota: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fa17cehlcMQ>

Tachistoscope:

http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/poundstone_project_for_tachistoscope_bottomless_pit/Tachistoscope.html