ELO and the Electric Light Orchestra: Electronic Literature Lessons from Prog Rock

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ABSTRACT

Roughly a decade after having cycled off the board of the Electronic Literature Organization, Kirschenbaum returned to deliver, at the 2017 ELO meeting in Oporto, an eerily accurate juxtaposition of the Organization's affinities with the short-lived era of progressive rock. The result is an imaginative excess whose only precursor (in print scholarship) might be Mark Weingarten's and Tyson Correl's *Yes in the Answer* (2013), featuring acclaimed novelists of the 1980s such as Rick Moody and Joe Meno, musicians such as Nathan Larson, and Peter Case, and the music historian, Jim DeRogatis, cited here. This text is a lightly revised transcript of the talk. Not reproducible, in print, is the solid wall of sound that accompanied Kirschenbaum's presentation.

KEYWORDS

Electronic Literature Organization; Electric Light Orchestra; electronic literature; progressive rock.

RESUMO

Cerca de uma década depois de ter saído da direção da Electronic Literature Organization, Kirschenbaum regressou para apresentar, no encontro da ELO de 2017 no Porto, uma justaposição estranhamente precisa das afinidades da Organização com o breve período do rock progressivo. O resultado é um excesso imaginativo, cujo único precursor (em estudos impressos) poderia ser *Yes in the Answer* (2013), de Mark Weingarten e Tyson Correl, que incluía romancistas aclamados da década de 1980, como Rick Moody e Joe Meno, músicos como Nathan Larson e Peter Case, e o historiador musical Jim DeRogatis, citado aqui. Este texto é uma transcrição ligeiramente reescrita da palestra. Aquilo que não é reproduzível, nesta versão textual, é a potente parede de som que acompanhou a apresentação de Kirschenbaum.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Electronic Literature Organization; Electric Light Orchestra; literatura eletrónica; rock progressivo.

Maybe you've been there. You tell someone the name of the conference you're going to in Oporto or Bergen or Victoria and they say: "The ELO? I thought they broke up years ago."

For those not in on the joke, the Electric Light Orchestra is a British pop group founded in 1970 by Jeff Lynne and Roy Wood, both formerly of The Move. They have given us such hits as "Don't Bring Me Down," "Can't Get it Out of My Head," "Livin' Thing," "Mr. Blue Sky," and "Do Ya," as well as the soundtrack for the 1980 Olivia Newton-John film *Xanadu*. These and other of their most memorable songs were crafted from a line-up heavy on classical string instruments and arrangements. While groups like the Beatles were experimenting with similar sounds in the studio, the ELO's ambition was to duplicate the orchestral experience live, on stage. Jeff Lynne's biographer recounts how the group's name came about:

> [T]he three members discussed the possibility of having a large light show along the lines of the one that the Pink Floyd were using…. Roy [Wood] thought about the BBC Light Orchestra, 'light' in this case describing the style of music. If they were to include a light show—and they were using electric instruments as well as electric lights—why not call themselves the Electric Light Orchestra? (Van der Kiste 2015: 29)

The ELO went on to sell over 50 million records over the next sixteen years, earning the dubious honor of having the most *Billboard* Hot 100 hits of any band in US chart history *without* a number one single.[1] Their stage sets grew to feature enormous flying saucers as well as lasers, fog machines, flashpods, and other futuristic effects, all leading to their identification with the then-burgeoning progressive rock movement. In 2014 they reformed to tour under Lynne's direction sans Wood and original drummer Bev Bevan. And in 2017, they were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

This is George Harrison's son Dhani during the induction ceremony describing the opening of "Tightrope," the first track on 1976's *A New World Record*: "It starts so quietly, and I had it turned right up. And then the terrifying sound grew . . . straight into that giant orchestral arrangement with that choir and Bev's drums and that laser guitar and all the time punctuated with terrifying aleatoric string spikes."[2]

"*Aleatoric string spikes*?" People of e-lit, this is our starship!

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1 As per *Wikipedia:* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electric_Light_Orchestra.
2 Video available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkRa3CcjmgA.

But, to avoid misconceptions: I'm not about to argue that electronic litera- ture *is* progressive rock, not exactly, or that the one has overtly influenced the other. And I'm not going to argue that electronic literature should be more *like* progressive rock—quite the contrary in fact! But I do want to explore whether the origins, aspirations, and eventual legacy of progressive rock can offer any cautionary lessons for electronic literature as it has often been constructed and construed, particularly in the academic contexts that have been critical to sus- taining it as both canon and field.

Prog rock (as it is commonly called) was characterized by compositions that flouted radio-friendly song structures coupled with its musicians' intense inter- est in technical virtuosity, technological experimentation, and an unwavering seriousness of purpose or what one critic terms "conceptual density." (DeRogatis quoted in Martin Jr 1998: 85). Prog rock was nerdy, spacey, and intellectual. It was almost never danceable. Lyrical references ranged unabashedly from the English pastoral tradition to Tolkien and Robert Heinlein. If prog rock was ever cool it would have been in the first half of the 1970s, when British groups like Soft Machine, Genesis, Jethro Tull, Yes, King Crimson, and ELP were all at the height of their powers. And although the ELO favored traditional string instru- ments—amped up and lacquered in bright primary colors—other bands regarded Hammond organs, Mellotron keyboards, Minimoog synthesizers, and even more exotic equipage like the Theremin as an integral part of their ensemble. Here, for example, is Genesis' keyboardist Tony Banks on the opening notes of the band's 1972 anthem "Watcher of the Skies":

> It was an extraordinary sound. On the old Mellotron Mark 2 there were these two chords that sounded really good on that instrument. There are some chords you can't play on that instrument because they'd be so out of tune. These chords created an incredible atmosphere. That's why it's just an incredible intro number. It never sounded so good on the later Mellotron.[3]

As Banks was chording the Melletron, lead singer Peter Gabriel would stand bedecked in a cloak and mask, searching the firmament with a telescope mimed in his fingers. This, presumably, is what is meant by conceptual density. Tell Tchaikovsky the news: rock music wasn't just rebellious anymore, it was serious, serious stuff.

Serious. It is in affect, more than thematic, demographic, or even technolog- ical considerations, that I would wish to locate whatever overlap we're willing to grant between progressive rock and electronic literature. Recall: "aleatoric string spikes." Recall: Tony Banks on the irregularities in one specific model of the Mellotron keyboard—and think of the way we exploit frictions of interface, resistances of metal, and glitches of code with our own keyboards. Recall Peter Gabriel scanning the sky and now turn to look at those Victorian gentlemen in

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3 As quoted at http://www.genesismuseum.com/features/songbook77.htm.

their parlor with their instruments and apparatus gracing the covers of Eastgate System's catalogs for much of the 1990s: "Serious Hypertext" was exactly what the company promised. Or else here is Jeff Lynne on the MO of that (other) ELO: "I could write horrible hit singles, I'm sure I could do it, but I like to get my teeth into something *serious* . . . I like something a bit deeper than pop clichés." (Van der Kiste 2015: 74; emphasis added).

Though there are exceptions, e-lit, I would maintain, has also historically largely been defined by its seriousness of purpose, or if you prefer, by its "conceptual density." Lest anyone think I am unduly fixating on Eastgate, I could also commend you to GRAMMATRON, Mark Amerika's novel-length work of electronic literature published in HTML on the World Wide Web. "In Spring 2000," Amerika notes in his online bio, "GRAMMATRON was selected as one of the first works of Internet art to ever be exhibited in the prestigious Whitney Biennial of American Art." Meanwhile the *New York Times* proclaimed that "GRAMMATRON is grappling with the idea of spirituality in the electronic age." (Mirapaul 1997). The *Times* perhaps had in mind passages like this one: "It's like randomly accessing a dream-apparatus composed of oozing language-fractals that allow you to get in touch with that part of yourself that is mediumistic in its passing of the all-important love-energy." It is perhaps not *too* hard to imagine that line transposed to the falsetto vocal registers of Jon Anderson, who similarly meant it when he sang lyrics about how "A man conceived a moment's answers to the dream . . . / All complete in the sight of seeds of life with you."

As with prog rock, critics have more than occasionally knocked electronic literature for its perceived pretentiousness. And like a Yes fan expounding on the interlayered arpeggios of "Close to the Edge"—because you really *cannot* listen to it properly without headphones, you see—e-lit has embraced its own difficulty, nowhere more brazenly so than in the coinages of Espen Aarseth and what we might term the Scandinavian Ergodic school, besides whose mysteries the Temples of Syrinx would seem to pale: "If textons or traversal functions can be (permanently) added to the text the user function is textonic," Aarseth instructs. "If all the decisions a reader makes about a text concern its meaning, then there is only one [user] function involved, here called interpretation...." (Aarseth 1998: 64). Welcome, my son. Welcome to the cybertext machine.

Meanwhile, in North America, hypertext theory coexisted with a messy mesh of poststructuralist precepts that found expression in critical writing that more than occasionally seemed to aspire to the kind of transcendence promised by Roger Dean's iconic Yes album art. [If you cannot immediately visualize what I have in mind please Google for a Roger Dean Yes album cover.] Dave Ciccoricco, in an essay called "The Contour of a Contour," surveyed the deployment of this trope in first wave hypertext criticism, recalling us to utterances like this from Michael Joyce: "Previously stable horizons across my psychic landscape gave way to dizzying patterns of successive contours, each of which was most assuredly real, each of which did not last." (quoted in Ciccoricco 2003). But contour

was not only an attempt at a neo-Derridean coinage a la the hinge or supplement, it also has its roots in the spatial fixations of much of the criticism from this same era, when we also grooved on lexias and writing spaces and crazy quilts. (My own contribution to these efforts was a 3D-VRML space I dubbed "Lucid Mapping.") E-lit's back catalog is filled with more than its share of tales from the topographic oceans.

But there's also at least one striking difference between the e-lit tradition and the prog rock pantheon. Prog, as innumerable commentators have noted, was music made by men, and to a very large extent listened to by men, boys, and man-boys. E-lit's heritage, by contrast, includes a preponderance of essential women authors, as well as critics, scholars, editors, and archivists. At about the same time Mark Amerika was deploying GRAMMATRON, for example, Deena Larsen was publishing *Samplers*, subtitled *Nine Vicious Little Hypertexts*, prescient as a glimmering of things to come. M. D. Coverley's *Califia* is, generically speaking, historical fiction, and like Larsen's work draws on deep reservoirs of Americana in ways that few prog bands, save perhaps Kansas, ever would; Judy Malloy's essential works like *Uncle Roger* and *Its Name Was Penelope* strike me as less prog than New Wave. Unlike prog, then, e-lit is simply unimaginable without the contributions of these and numerous other women.

Nonetheless, I submit—and this also follows Rita Raley's thinking in her keynote here yesterday[4]—that difficulty, seriousness, and conceptual density are all characteristics that have served to gain e-lit a firm institutional purchase in academia, where difficulty and seriousness are rewarded. And the academy did have rewards: jobs for some fortunate few, but also publication outlets, grants, endowments, office space, conference facilities, graduate assistants, students who could be "exposed" to the work, and more. This is not far from what the music historian Jim DeRogatis says about prog rock in relation to the music establishment: "What . . . 'progressive rock' really signifies is music that self-consciously tries to elevate rock 'n' roll to high culture by embracing high culture values . . ." Then, speaking of the foundational influence of the Beatles, he adds this: "Many musicians in the first wave of British psychedelia were upper middle-class kids . . . *Sgt. Pepper's* convinced them that they could make music that was just as serious as the art they'd been studying before they tuned in, turned on, and dropped out." (quoted in Martin Jr 1998: 85).

Substitute logged in and logged on for tuned in and turned on, and we can begin to see the terms of the legitimation crisis that marked the reception of early electronic literature, say from the late 1980s through at least the early 2000s. That crisis was itself a symptom of the much wider phenomenon Mark McGurl named the "program era" in relation to the way writing programs served to institutionalize—in every sense of the word—poetry and fiction in American

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4 [Editors' note] A serious family illness has prevented Rita Raley from revising her talk into an article in time for inclusion in MATLIT 6.3 "Electronic Literature: Translations." A video recording of her keynote ("Machine Writing: Translation, Generation, Automation," July 21, 2017) is available online as part of the audiovisual documentation of the conference: https://www.youtube.com/embed/XOFOYVK_NfY.

universities throughout the second half of the twentieth century; the program in question being not source code but the MFA. Nor does McGurl fail to remark on the centrality of Brown's MFA program in particular for electronic literary practices, duly noting its great patron Robert Coover and its most famous student, Shelley Jackson (McGurl 2009). Put another way, the exceptionalism on which the electronic literature community has so often traded is completely normative in this wider institutional frame.

Similarly, Chad Harbach's widely circulated essay "MFA vs. NYC" serves to delineate two very distinct cultures of writing in the contemporary United States. It can't be hard for many members of the ELO, especially those who straddle creative and academic livelihoods, to recognize themselves in this, from Harbach:

> The MFA canon is a living canon not just by definition—it is, after all, 'contemporary' literature—but because the writers who constitute it are constant presences on the scene and active shapers of the canon's contents. They teach…; they advise; they anthologize; they travel from program to program to read. (2015: 22)

Canons and anthologies and syllabi are instruments by which many literary movements have sought to define and perpetuate themselves. Nearly a decade before the first volume of the *Electronic Literature Collection* (2006), excerpts from the classic Storyspace hypertexts *Afternoon* and *I Have Said Nothing* appeared in the Norton Anthology of *Postmodern American Fiction*, right next to work by William Gibson, Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, and Don DeLillo. Joyce and Douglas's work was positioned teleologically at the end of the Technoculture section (itself the penultimate portion of the anthology), and they were both lauded as "potentially the most striking" exemplars of its themes. More remarkable, though, is the actual method of inclusion: both works were excerpted as a series of print lexias, allotted just a few pages apiece; *I Have Said Nothing* was further augmented by a printed screenshot. Norton hired a Java programmer to reimplement more substantial excerpts of both pieces for the Web, even approximating the behavior of *Afternoon's* all-important guard fields. (Incredibly, after all that effort, these Web-based hypertexts could only be accessed by using a unique passcode affixed to the inside back cover of each copy of the printed Norton!)

In his first book *Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers,* Michael Bérubé gave us what is perhaps still our best account of academic canon formation in relation to the avant garde (Bérubé 1992). By way of case studies of the contrasting receptions of the famously reclusive novelist Thomas Pynchon and the long-neglected black modernist poet Melvin Tolson, Bérubé demonstrated that canons are never just one-way—they are reciprocating constructs, and just as e-lit benefited from its academic uptake, so too did the academy gain legitimacy—street cred, if you will—by demonstrating its awareness of the new technologies and what the Norton editors saw fit to call a "potentially historic transformation of literature." (Geyh *et al.* 1997: 511).

At his plenary at the 2016 ELO conference in Victoria, Stuart Moulthrop remarked "we specialize in building surprises," referring to the distinctive work of the e-lit community in the face of the multi-terabyte torrent that is daily digital culture. But just as prog rock traded on its overweening seriousness of purpose, so too have e-lit and its academic hosts more than occasionally relied on self-conscious experimentalism as justification—sometimes, I would venture, as perceived sufficient justification—for its inclusion in canons and institutions. Consider Moulthrop's comment, and then consider the members of Genesis in a tour booklet from 1975, the year Peter Gabriel left the group because the writing was already on the wall for prog: "Just when adventurous rock seemed forever moving backwards, Genesis began flirting with multi-media concepts," the band proclaimed (quoted in Weigel 2007: 174). Arguably, by then progressive rock had become, in the words of the Marxist critic Bill Martin, the "first popular avant-garde." (1998). Prog musicians saw themselves as an extension of Sixties idealism (and activism), not as a repudiation of it; and for that very reason, along with punk rock it would be the record industry itself—the real subject of Pink Floyd's "Welcome to the Machine"—that would sign prog's death warrant, as pressures for commercial success and radio-friendly singles mitigated against 20-minute album tracks with titles like "Tarkus" and "Siberian Khatru."

Should we be asking what punk e-lit looks like? Is it the Twine scene? Twitter bots? The new weird, like Jon Bois's *17,776*? Something else? Should we be asking what Top Forty or Album-Oriented e-lit looks like? Or maybe what matters is the continued growth and diversification of an e-lit that is not dependent on whatever contradictions or complications attend its status in relation to an academic valuation of the avant garde. There are encouraging signs that such a reexamination is already underway. I think about Dennis Tenen's recent book, *Plain Text*, which carries a political argument for what Tenen presents not just as a file format but an ethos and a poetics (Tenen 2017). Rita Raley's ongoing work on algorithmic authorship and what she has termed "machine writing" is equally relevant. These investigations in turn align with what Danny Snelson and James Hodges have termed the study of ordinary media—everyday, quotidian applications of electronic writing, an impulse that also speaks to my own work on literary histories of word processing and desktop publishing.

What would it mean, then, to think about the blue-collar poet Charles Bukowski as an e-lit writer? His habits with the Macintosh he got for Christmas in 1990 were as ordinary as could be (he used it mainly for email and MacWrite) but he was nonetheless enamored of the machine, and the following year his output of poems doubled. When a secretary cum poet named Patricia Freed Ackerman sat down in front of the Wang word processor in her San Francisco office tower in the late 1980s and composed a poem entitled "A Poem Written at Work on a Wang Word Processor Sometime in the Afternoon Wanting to Leave," was she making electronic literature? Or what about Gay Courter, who used an IBM Series 6 word processor in the late 1970s to publish a bestselling novel, *The Midwife*, in 1981?

Courter has attested that the word processor is what allowed her to complete her first book, something she otherwise couldn't have imagined given childcare responsibilities and the demands of the family business she ran with her husband. If electronic literature is literature that could not be written without a computer, wouldn't that make *The Midwife* e-lit in the most literal sense? Or what about the Barbadan poet Kamau Brathwaite, who used his Macintosh SE to design his own fonts and layouts for his books?

Some of what I am aiming for with these provocations can also be routed through the Maintainers framework that has recently emerged in technology studies and the history of computing. Conceived as an explicit response to Walter Isaacson and other big budget narratives of "innovation"—as also portrayed in well-meaning but ham-handed films like *The Imitation Game*—the remit of the Maintainers, as first put forward by Andrew Russell and Lee Vinsel, invites attention to unappreciated and undervalued forms of technological labor carried out by "those who repair and maintain technologies that already exist" or "that were 'innovated' long ago."[5] Or as they have it in a faux-alt-subtitle to the Isaacson book, "How a Group of Bureaucrats, Standards Engineers, and Introverts Made Technologies That Kind of Work Most of the Time."

I would place the ideal of innovation in roughly the same register as the experimental excesses of prog rock and the search for surprise that has marked e-lit as a literary and technological practice. But in fact, to its credit, I think the ELO community has been cultivating a working culture of maintenance and repair for some time now as a counterweight: I would point to Nick Montfort's multiple instances of reimplementing classic works of computational literature (some dating back to the 1950s) for today's platforms and environments, as well as the kind of documentary preservation pioneered by Dene Grigar and Stuart Moulthrop, the exhibitions curated by Grigar and Kathi Inman Berens, the often quite literally reparative and regenerative work undertaken by Lori Emerson and other media archaeologists, and the curatorial and editorial labors that have attended the production of all three volumes of the *Electronic Literature Collection*. This is, in fact, a remarkable body of work, and one that places key members of our community in conversation with neighboring fields like library and information science, comparative media studies, and textual scholarship. These are vital disciplinary allies, no less so now than creative writing and literary theory variously were at other points in e-lit's institutional past.

So I have tried to lay out some trajectories for the future of e-lit that eschew narratives of innovation, experimentalism, and the avant-garde; which are more focused on platforms, apparatuses, and infrastructure than on individual authors and savants; the ordinary, the everyday, and the plain as opposed to the exceptional or the surprising or the dense; and which are at least as quietly restorative as they are boldly and symphonically progressive. Computers, after all,

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5 See https://aeon.co/essays/innovation-is-overvalued-maintenance-often-matters-more.

don't *have* to be kinetic, interactive, multi-modal, non-linear, stochastic, or aleatory. But we associate them with such in order to validate certain institutionally amenable figurations of artistic form, figurations which we celebrate as "electronic literature." Though exceptions may abound, this kind of media essentialism has been electronic literature's primary purchase on the literary canon, as an example such as the Norton shows. This may also be why we don't typically talk about Michael Joyce as an Irish-American author, or Deena Larsen as a writer of the American West, or Infocom titles as young adult literature—or Kamau Brathwaite as an author of electronic literature.

Innovation has an edge that I would never want abjure: in his recent book on progressive rock David Weigel offers a vignette that has guitarist Allan Holdsworth wiring together a trio of amplifiers with a soldering iron, trying to coax just the right tone from the cabinets, "their guts spilling out onto the stage," right up until the very moment the audience walks in (209). No doubt the result was something wonderful—surprising.

Our community can conjure its own versions of those moments, whether in the fine-tuning of the guard fields of a Storyspace hypertext or the finessing of an ActionScript or a JavaScript or soldering the wires and traces of the *Salt Immortal Sea* right up until the exhibition opens in Oporto. But nowadays, superimposed over that imagery, we can also see a teen threading a Twine game in her bedroom; or an undergraduate English major using Kate Compton's Tracery to piece together their first cheap bot done quick; or a walk-in at an open house at the Media Archaeology Lab sitting down in front of a vintage Commodore computer to type 10 PRINT for the first time (or the first time in a long time). Because all of us already know that electronic literature is not a medium and not a genre. Electronic literature, like the ELO, is a livin' thing.

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