

Just Not the Future: Electronic Literature after the Fall

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the position of electronic literature, as a disruption of traditional literary practice, in the context of the dominance of social media, and particularly their potential for social harm.

KEYWORDS

electronic literature; social media; e-poetry.

RESUMO

Este artigo examina o lugar da literatura eletrónica como uma rutura de práticas literárias tradicionais, no contexto do predomínio dos média sociais, e em particular o seu potencial para causar dano social.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

literatura eletrónica; média sociais; poesia eletrónica.

This essay comes at digital writing, an ill-defined and dauntingly large subject, from what once may have been its bleeding edge: e-poetry, net art, and other forms of linguistic experiment. These activities belong to what Alan Liu has called “the future literary” (Liu, 2003: 8). Like N. K. Hayles, Liu uses “the literary” in distinction to *literature*, reaching for a more expansive concept (Hayles, 2008: 4-5). The generosity of this impulse may be helpful. *Writing* is always a larger subject than *literature*, perhaps larger even than an augmented “literary.” “The literary” provides room not just for expansion but also transformation — a possibility that may have troubling consequences. Fresh inventions have ways of becoming household goods; poetry turns to advertising; revolutions are regularly televised, or worse. The extravagant and experimental inevitably collide with broader social interests. Lately that collision has turned ugly.

It now seems practically impossible to think about digital poetics in distinction from digital rhetoric. Those who write online, particularly in the social media, seem filled with passionate intensity that sometimes turns to murderous, meth-head rage. It is enough to make serious thinkers despair. Here for instance is Sandy Baldwin on the state of digital writing:

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. (Baldwin, 2015: 18)

Both of Baldwin’s adjectives matter — it is not just the mass or scope, but the articulation or *marking* of digital detritus: its effects, intended or otherwise. Baldwin is concerned with the larger, philosophical “subject” of electronic writing, not, he insists, with this or that text. With due respect to that abstracting impulse, which this paper partly shares, it bears pointing out that most people do not cruise at such lofty altitudes. No matter how unenlightening it might be to write online texts, such things regularly become “writing to be read” — sometimes with disastrous results.

When I began working on this essay in late 2016, there was widespread concern about fake news (in its original meaning), focused particularly on “#Pizzagate,” a fiction exploited by supporters of the incoming U.S. administration to demoralize and intimidate the other party (Aisch, 2016). Stories about a child-sex ring linked to Hillary Clinton and John Podesta started on 4chan, a nexus for Web hoaxers, then spread virally through social media channels, laced with phony reporting from nonexistent TV stations. The outrage ultimately inspired a man with an assault rifle to storm a Washington, D.C. family restaurant. At least one shot was fired, though no one was hurt and the man surrendered to police.

There is nothing particularly new in the toxic circulation of email blasts, Facebook posts, viral videos, and tweets. They update a longstanding tradition. American history is rife with witch hunts, plague blankets, cross burnings, and sundown towns¹. Europe’s record is hardly better. Episodes like #Pizzagate embody something terribly familiar: *blood libel*, the accusation of child abduction that spurred genocide against Jews in Russia and elsewhere, and similar lies spewed by not-so-silent majorities against other enemies. Behavior like this may indeed be more than we can take.

Facing the recurrence of these outrages (see Krugman), certain questions come to mind. Who set the WABAC machine for 1968, perhaps the last time our political and civic order felt this close to shattering? How did media, meant to connect and inform, become such powerful instruments for division and disinformation? Those who use those media in service of imagination might add a third question: *Do we want anything more to do with the Internet?*

Maybe we have had enough. Baldwin says, “take in,” but there is an even more troubling permutation of that phrase: *take on* — assuming responsibility, complicity, and a kind of ownership. Here is an outrageous claim: various forms of software culture circa 1975–2000, particularly electronic literature, net art, and tactical media (Raley, 2009), introduced discursive practices that now lie at the heart of our crisis. We could start with promiscuous linking, socialized media, and microblogging. These things have demonstrably changed social, political, and economic experience. What was once imagined (albeit in proto-practical terms) has become all too real. If as Baldwin says, “[t]he Internet is a work of literature” (Baldwin, 2015: 3), then some of us literary types have explaining to do. We broke (the news of) the Internet. Perhaps now we own it.

You may find this proposition laughable. After all, avant-gardist writers are generally not the digerati who matter. Thirty years ago, Judy Malloy invented social media narrative with her groundbreaking work on the Whole Earth ‘Electronic Link (Grigar and Moulthrop, 2015). Should we ask her to answer for evil, anti-social fictions on Reddit or Facebook? Certainly not, if we remember our high school Shakespeare. In *Julius Caesar* III.iii, Cinna the Poet comes to a bad end because he shares a name and social status with one of Caesar’s killers. The mob

1 See Loewen (1995).

seem unconcerned about having the wrong man. “Tear him for his verses!” they cry. No one should be torn for their verses, or for their online innovations.

To say some of us *own* the perversions of digital writing looks suspiciously like self-dramatizing. Yet anyone who works with data, code, and immersive media must feel a deep unease about the uses to which these technologies increasingly are turned. By one account, disinformation significantly outweighed legitimate reporting on Facebook in the weeks preceding the 2016 U.S. election (Silverman, 2016). Similar observations have been made about other countries (Mozur and Scott, 2016). Once upon a time, some of us embraced a culture of innovation, disruption, and creative destruction, assuming good things would rise from the wreckage. Not so much, it turns out — or at least not so simply. Looking back in regret may be foolishly narcissistic, but what about the view from where we stand at this very moment? How should one think about poetry and fiction from within the immanent house of lies?

To come at this question we need to recognize the notably small divide between poetics and rhetoric, or between literary fictions and legal (or criminal) fictions. If we are not the digerati who matter, perhaps we should look toward those who arguably do. Consider Whitney Phillips’s useful study, *This is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things* (Phillips, 2015), an account of Internet trolling on 4chan’s /b/ forum. Though the book gives only one of many possible accounts of abusive Web behavior — some of us bear scars from troll attacks in the 1990s or earlier — it offers a way to think about transgressions that in some cases edge uncomfortably close to art.

Let me be clear: I do not mean to recognize trolling as a form of digital art or electronic literature. Phillips repeatedly argues against a hostile distinction between ordinary Web users and trolls, but there is a limit to that appeal. In the end it will be important to understand the difference between trolling and net art — even the “tactical” or activist kind. That said, there are some perhaps unsettling similarities, particularly for those whose work is largely satiric.

The goal of trolling is *lulz*: “acute amusement in the face of someone else’s distress, embarrassment, or rage” (Phillips, 2015: 57). Trolls seek ridiculous over-reaction from supposedly sober, serious figures, to show that these people are hopelessly addicted to spectacle. It was for this reason 4chan trolls in 2008 planted a post in Oprah Winfrey’s discussion forum supposedly from an organization of pedophiles whose “more than 9,000 penises” were dedicated to child rape. The phrase “more than 9,000” began as a mistranslated bit of Japanese dialogue in Americanized anime series, spawning an Internet meme in the tradition of “All you base are belong to us” (see Phillips, 2015: 65). The phrase is essentially an in-joke among geeks.

As history has recorded, Ms. Winfrey took the bait and repeated the absurd language on air, thus “mark[ing] the trolls’ territory,” Phillips says (2015: 53). If one is inclined to be generous, this moment might be a critical coup, giving the hyper-emotionalism of infotainment a well-deserved smack. We might even call the prank *détournement*, an artful running of media bull into the brick wall of its

own foolishness. Doing this, of course, makes the trolls of /b/ look suspiciously like culture warriors, if not political heroes — a move that might well invite a withering blast of *lulz*. We need to remember, as Phillips points out, that 4chan is “the asshole of the Internet” (2015: 145) — hardly the place to look for sweet reason.

Had 4chan/b/ been primarily an art group or radical performance collective, it might have gone on harassing the blowhards and sob sisters of major media. But such was not to be. Before long the anonymous posters on the 4chan group became the hacking collective Anonymous, whose targets shifted from Scientology and Bill O’Reilly to the enemies of Julian Assange, tyrannical Arab regimes, and the one-percenters called out by Occupy Wall Street. The group became both more overtly political and more tactically ambitious. They spent less time pranking on-camera personnel, preferring infrastructure attacks such as Distributed Denials of Service.

As Anonymous joined the fray, the political sphere was itself undergoing similarly sweeping changes. The Tea Party movement morphed into an increasingly institutionalized alt-right. Data-driven operations of the Obama campaign, once groundbreaking, inspired even more ambitious social-media efforts on the other side, as in the 2016 work of Cambridge Analytics on behalf of Trump and the Republicans (Grassegger and Krogerus, 2016). These developments put the trolls in radically new circumstances.

As Phillips explains, clearest evidence of change came in 2012, when 4chan posters attempted once again to troll white suburban media types by concocting a Web site where fictional black looters supposedly traded household goods stolen during Hurricane Sandy. This time the pickup came not from Fox News but from Alex Jones of *Infowars*, setting up the very circuit that would lead to gunplay in #Pizzagate. The former scenario of asymmetrical combat — anonymous cyberkids versus kings and queens of media — gave way to something more like Sergio Aragones’ *Spy Versus Spy* cartoons, with bad actors on both sides of the equation (see Prohias, 2009).

The world had changed. Old-line 4chan trolls began to refer to the descent into political activism as “the cancer” (Phillips, 2015: 145). However descriptive, that metaphor should not be used lightly by anyone with, say, lungs or bowels or a prostate gland. What goes around as figure of speech may come back as diagnosis. Which is not to say mortal illness can never be used figuratively, just that no such usage should come anywhere near *lulz*. To illustrate this claim, please consider something that is utterly different from trolling, a born-digital work by the poet and artist Donna Kuhn. Called “THE LAST PARADE (for spencer),” the piece consists of 46 lines assembled from “cutup e-mail” and posted to Kuhn’s blog *Digital Aardvarks* in December 2016 (Kuhn, 2016).

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 bull-
shit 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.

The "i" in these spliced lines appears to be someone suffering, or at least concerned with, serious illness. The medical and biological references are unmistakable: breast, bladder, ovarian, cannabis, colonoscopy, x-ray. "My diary sleeps at the fear clinic." This is a death-facing poem. The first and last lines mark it as work of preparation, if not valediction.

Reading this poem is especially difficult in juxtaposition to the subject of trolling. A poetic *cri de coeur* is everything a troll's prank is not: honest, intimate, humane. Ginsberg's "Howl" may be the touchstone here:

"while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you're really in the total animal soup of time." (Ginsberg, 1956: 5)

Whether it is “total animal soup” or (perversely) a soup that “likes the system,” these poems drop us into it. Their witness to suffering calls on our common humanity: “while you are not safe I am not safe.” To respond with anything but empathy seems suspicious, as if in the mask of the critic there is too much of the troll. Maybe I have no business turning Kuhn’s poem to any kind of purpose, certainly not polemic. And yet there the work is, digitally deployed within the networked mass of expression. A blog is personal but hardly private; it is “writing to be read.” The trick is to read in good conscience.

Trolls live for sadistic delight in the discomfort of others. I hope I come to “THE LAST PARADE” with opposite affect, taking no pleasure in what its words suggest; though I have to admit my empathy displays a gap or limit. I cannot read the text as the writer or its dedicatee may do. The poem is made from cut-up e-mails, and I was not on the address list. I am outside the circle of actual suffering. I must inevitably be detached because (ironically) the poem moves toward that final, biological detachment that is still in my personal future.

Though we know it is coming, the living can only understand death under imperfect erasure. If this poem evokes someone who looks death in the face, the reader can only watch. Thus in evading the troll I assume the role of his victim: *Madame Winfrey, c’est moi*. I empathize, I project, I am moved. Here is where that leads:

“THE LAST PARADE” would be a hard poem in any season but it seems particularly bitter at the end of 2016, on the heels of Brexit and the U.S. electoral disaster. Read from that reference point, the poem asserts the cruelty of dying in 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, though no one knows his fate from the outset (Benjamin, 2006). Benjamin died not knowing the Nazis would be destroyed and his continent redeemed. No endings are happy. The voice in Kuhn’s poem says, “i’m just not the future,” peeling that bell that tolls for all of us. Perhaps, indeed, it resonates in more ways than one.

Yet Kuhn’s poem also contains this line: “i am objectively happy.” What are these words doing in such a dark meditation? They express resignation, maybe, or the last step in the familiar Kubler-Ross’s protocol. The phrase comes eight lines before the final sign-off, and given the general tenor of sickness and suffering, it probably marks no reach toward transcendence. It comes, after all, at the end of a triplet that refers to failure, Ukraine, and probably cancer. Perhaps the remark suggests comfort or palliation -- if not the pot or the Demerol, then the consolation of philosophy.

Yet while one may explicate this happiness, it seems harder to explain it away. Kuhn could have cut the phrase while she was dicing up her correspondence, but she did not. “THE LAST PARADE” thus leaves us with a question: how can a person be “objectively happy” if he or she is “not the future?” For some of us this may be the question of the moment; and it may reveal something about our relationship to trolls and the Internet.

As noted, Phillips appeals to readers not to ban trolls from the digital community. They are here for a reason, she says, and we need to understand the conditions under which they exist. As Phillips sees it, the goal of her work is:

... to call attention to the overlap between us and them, and to encourage readers to spin endlessly their sense of what has happened — a line of questioning that is as likely to direct focus inward as it is to cast blame outward, and that provides a framework for thinking carefully and critically not just about the what of trolling, and not just the how, but the *why*. (Phillips, 2015: 169)

Perpetual spin may mean something to astrophysics, and it may be the great dream of pundits, but it seems less plausible if one is concerned with art, or perhaps laundry. The cradle of our life might be a rock in space endlessly re-turning, but at ground level, cycles must eventually end. We must decide what we believe and what we refuse, who we are and where we stand. As writers and artists in the age of Internet, we will inevitably step outside the circle at some point, and when we do, we should hope not to land in Trollheim.

Trolls thrive within the Society of Spectacle. Even if some of them diagnose their condition as cancerous, they are locked into their disease. They are, as Phillips makes clear, spawned and nourished by Fox News and other sensationalist organs and exist in symbiotic relation to those hosts (Phillips, 2015: 52). Though 4chan users were outraged when their identity was appropriated by an ad campaign for men's cologne, one of their founders eventually ended up sharing a public stage more or less happily with the offending admen (Phillips, 2015: 127). It was all part of the show. In more ways than one, trolls make good copy.

Also, perhaps, their exploits provide important ground for controversy. Phillips has written a thoughtful book on a nasty subject and her argument needs to be taken seriously. I can agree that we need to maintain at least notional connection to the Internet, with all its ills. I am not for unplugging. The house of lies may be more than we can take, though it need not be more than we can handle. I also acknowledge that the way we negotiate the challenges and horrors of the digital is ultimately a personal matter. What follows is my view.

I hold that artists and writers should in strategic moments abstract themselves from the general pathology. As Kuhn's sorrowful poem teaches, we will all detach from futurity at some point. While time remains, we might spin that fact into metaphor. We can choose not to belong to a certain eventuated future, rejecting its trend lines as anything but inevitable. As people of imagination we can align ourselves with other futures, not through alternative-timeline fantasies, but in non-fictional acts of production, blog poems and essays and other writings-to-be-read. Since we work with digital media, this work will probably require practical engagement and maybe even the odd practical joke.

At times we may assume a certain troll-like demeanor; though in putting on the Fawkesian mask of anonymous discord, we should not become one of the Guys. Can there be good trolls, or counter-trolls? Certainly, as demonstrated by

the ongoing interventions of netprov, among other things (Marino and Wittig, 2012). Such undertakings will always involve a burden of transgression or invasion, in its nature as critical or progressive art.

To be happy one must be objective, enforcing a certain separation from spectacularly social media. For some reason, for someone's sins if not our own, we are doing time in the house of lies -- a place now full of dread, though some of us may once have raised a cheer at its raucous, disruptive opening. I will own the memory of that exultation, but not much more. I do not need trolls or Fox or even Oprah in my life. So long as Twitter, Inc. allows the current President of the United States to use their service for defamation and deceit, I will not use their product. Beyond this, total unplugging and other forms of technological asceticism remain for me unthinkable. Phillips is right: we are mutually in the soup, good and bad alike. Today's howl comes out differently: *If you are not safe for work, I am not safe for work*: and still the work continues. Engage we must, but not without stipulations and conditions, the maintenance of an essential and elective distance. Only across such gaps can we gain the perspective needed to figure out why our world is so broken.

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