Lift This End: Electronic Literature in a Blue Light

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Since this is a paper about the computational context of literary writing, and to some extent poetry, I have invested heavily in metaphor, at least as far as the title is concerned. Taking key terms in no particular order: by *end* I mean not so much terminus as singularity or convergence of opposites, that defining, indefinable point where turn becomes return as one state gives way to another; from the imperative *lift* I take both the sense of elevation or burdening (lift up) and appropriation (shoplifting); and by the numinous article *this*, I will eventually mean the inescapable subject of electronic literature, the *this* of which (for which) some *end* may yet be *lifted*. As for that blue light, it is, for the moment at least, a retina-scorching light-emitting-diode on the faceplate of my personal computer, registering wireless connection to the empire of signs. To this shining subject we will inexorably return.

Meanwhile, some sad news. It seems that something important – perhaps the American conscience, or our national poetry, or some might say, the soul of art -- passed away in the last days of March 2008, after a long battle with history. In lieu of obituary, we find the following:

> *All you retards deserve to burn in hell. I would like to see you get crushed by a motherfucking bulldozer.*
>
> *Go fuck your syphilis-infected mother. Take your motherfucking ass and cry to your fucking pedophile slut. Go finish killing yourselves, you little pussy fucking liberals. Get it through your head: your government doesn't give a fuck about you.*

The lines above come from "Artist's Statement," the first poem in K.S. Mohammad's collection, *The Front* (2009). Preceding this tasty serving of political patois comes an even more intriguing colophon:

> ~~*Every poem in this collection accurately reflects the author's actual values, beliefs, and personal experiences*~~. *Every poem in this collection was composed entirely out of Google search engine text. The author has taken many liberties with selection, punctuation, spelling, recombination, and so forth.*

From now on, I will always read colophons: because this one really does bring good news, everybody, and reason to keep on killing ourselves no faster than one day at a

time. Mohammad's Google-eyed procedure, part of a sublimely self-ironized non-movement called *flarf* (Bernstein), holds important implications for writing, and perhaps for electronic writing in particular. Flarf shows how poems can, and in a sense now must, be made from contents of the commons, by fracking up its limitless deposits of crap, invective, and often astonishing other stuff. Flarf testifies that authors are still free to take liberties, perhaps thus insinuating, against better judgment, that there is something yet to liberate. The government may not give a fuck about us, but I would argue that K.S. Mohammad does, in his own, curious twisted way – or about our common situation in, or under, or as language. Poetry is dead, or whatever. Long live flarf.

1. Recycling works

The coming of flarf is no more a sign of end-times than anything else these days. According to no less authority than Marjorie Perloff, acquisitive or recycled poetry simply reflects the latest twist in literary aesthetics:

> *Inventio* is giving way to appropriation, elaborate constraint, visual and sound composition, and reliance on intertextuality. Thus we are witnessing a new poetry, more conceptual than directly expressive – a poetry in which, as Gerald Bruns put it with reference to Cage's 'writing through' *Finnegans Wake*, the shift is from a Chomskyan linguistic competence, in which the subject is able to produce an infinite number of original sentences from the deep structure of linguistic rules, to the pragmatic discourse that appropriates and renews what is given in the discourse that constitutes a social and cultural world. (12)

In addition to Bruns, Perloff calls upon Antoine Compagnon, who theorizes citational writing under the name *récriture*. This approach validates borrowing as the hitherto unacknowledged basis of literary procedure. As Perloff sees it, the arrival of this practice does not mark an existential end of the literary project, but an end to a means. In effect, citational poetics furnishes a contour or edge, an end in the sense of a limit at which the whole business turns back on itself – as in the following graphical admonition:

This sort of *end* referred to in this label is not terminus, but affordance: a point of engagement by which we may lift, translate, or rotate the object, replacing it in a new context. Of course, as the sign says, we may need to take some care about which ends we lift. The meaning of *this* does indeed seem to matter. We may also want to think about where we set things down.

As Perloff sees it, the portage of poetry via *récriture* passes through a full circle, moving from plagiarism through citation to "poetry by other means," which on inspection seems not that far from well known parameters. Perloff's analysis carries echoes of what we might call the Shklovsky Defense, after Viktor Shklovsky's observation that Sterne's sublimely disordered *Tristram Shandy* is "the most typical novel in world literature" (170). As Sterne's methodical chaos reveals the self-organizing mechanisms of prose narrative, so flarf, and even more so conceptual poetry, may confirm an essential truth of literary art. Mature poets steal; a poet who reaches majority in these ex-post-modern times will likely use the Google.

Though ostensibly the "uncreative" antithesis of creative writing, citational poetry could be said to re-discover the core functions of poetics, which include selection, arrangement, and some form of high concept: *ethos*, *kairos*, *ludus*, or the like. In the Eliotic idiom, to which Perloff turns early on, intention and specificity remain crucial. It is these particular fragments (not others) that a certain voice or agency has shored (not simply thrown) against some ruinous yet still intentional structure. Among the several writers and movements Perloff discusses, two stand out: Walter Benjamin of the *Arcades* project, and the conceptualist Kenneth Goldsmith. The former makes an inchoate attempt to capture an urban, bourgeois *dasein* within an "ur-hypertext" (31). The latter carries on the work of deep texturing, using for his *Trilogy* nothing more sophisticated than keyboard, radio, and audio tape, but enthusiastic, nonetheless, about

affordances of the internet. Perloff quotes Goldsmith at some length on the Brazilian concrete poet Decio Pignatari, whose work he discovered in the digital-boom year 2001:

> Everything [Pignatari] was saying seemed to predict the mechanics of the internet…. I immediately understood that what had been missing from concrete poetry was an appropriate environment in which it could flourish. For many years, concrete poetry has been in limbo: it's been a displaced genre in search of a new medium. And now it's found one. (50)

This post-Chomskyan turn from deep structure to "pragmatics" brings momentous changes, but apparently no deep disruption to the poetic project. In Perloff's view it simply recontextualizes, extending the mission of "genius" into fresh woods.

There is a certain irrepressible utopianism in this approach. It is hard not to think of the sentiments of the net artist Vuk Ćosić, who declared that "all art up to now has been merely a substitute for the Internet" (Galloway, 220). To be fair, Perloff uses her own citational practice to keep some distance from this sort of enthusiasm. She quotes, but does not necessarily endorse, at least not without a minimum of critical deparation. She is careful to emphasize continuities between contemporary practice and earlier modernisms. In fact, continuity is her main theme, not cybernetic displacement or irruption. However heretical "uncreative writing" may seem to others, Perloff insists on its integration with poetic history.

To the extent one cares about institutional recognition (and to read at least some of the flarfists, that may be very little), Perloff's historicism may seem good news. Perhaps, though, it is not good news for everybody. In the field of electronic literature, the implications of post-creative writing may be more problematic than they are for more general literary communities. Thanks to the new popularity of post-inventional practice, old digital hands face a strange turn indeed: *one of our favorite ideas has gone mainstream*. Though it may seem perverse to say so, that passage may not be entirely a good thing.

2. Interface and database

But first, the news: Back at the turn of the century, Lev Manovich usefully declared that "[a] new media object can be defined as one or more interfaces to a multimedia database" (37). Manovich addressed only digital productions, but as we can now see, his formula has greater reach. As the concept and form of the database moves toward the center of general literacy – it is apparently one meaning of the name *Al Qaeda*, for instance – the database/interface model has become available to a variety of discourses. Though Perloff does not cite *Language of New Media* and does not directly invoke database/interface terminology, the model seems implicit in her discussion of crucial examples. She refers to Benjamin's *Arcades* explicitly as a hypertext – a form of digital composition explicitly treated by Manovich. She also calls the project "potentially

digital," emphasizing its complex, multicursal treatment of a diverse body of writings (43). At an earlier point she identifies Cia Rinne's *Archive zaroum*, a digital work literally constituted as an interface to a database, as a key example of the new citational practice (14). In spirit if not in name, the database/interface construct appears at least closely homologous to Perloff's critical approach, if not its conceptual center.

To generalize this homology: *the work of citational composition may be regarded as creation of an interface to a database.* An interface, of course, is a sub-system. In cybertextual terms, it is a *machine*, one of many possible machines that could be brought to bear, and thus itself capable of multiple configurations or outputs. The poem in this view – quintessentially in the case of flarf – may be thought of as one of these productions, a recorded or inscribed *state* of the interface.

No doubt, there is a certain amount of lossy compression in these propositions. In most cases involving poetry, the databases in question are not properly "multimedia," as Manovich specifies, but stay within the medium of writing. Also, I am using *interface* in a way that will invite resistance from anyone who uses that word as a term of art, in say, user-experience design or software engineering. I confess to a certain poetic imprecision, which may not be the best way to approach the ostensibly rigorous subject of poetics. For the moment, I can only offer a low-resolution version of this idea, in hopes it may lead to some more sharply defined conception.

Meanwhile, to carry on the somewhat dubious metaphor: Considered as a state-reduction or interface unplugged, the poem emerges from and embodies a series of operations upon its target database (Google searches, personal audio recordings, and such). Its process of assembly, selection, and modification involves method, though in most cases, the nature of that method remains implicit and opaque. Yet for some, it will also be conventionally interpretable: a proprietary product of poetic "genius" (Perloff's word), intended for all those ordinary readers who ultimately receive the poem. Again, we are on very familiar ground here, even if *récriture* seems to lie outside the boundaries of conventionally creative practice. The reassertion of *genius* implies an ecumenical space where even the heretical is welcome.

The grace of this universalism might even extend to that literary heresy called born-digital writing. From the meliorist view, a poetics informed by database and interface might answer recurrent complaints that writers and theorists of the electronic do not engage sufficiently with a broader world of practice – or the other way around. Indeed, these critiques seem inaccurate for at least some currents in electronic writing. The community of interest around electronic poetry, for example, has always been linked to other experimental movements, from spoken-word performance to concrete poetry, conceptualism, and flarf. Maria Damon and Chris Funkhouser, well-known flarfists, were prominent contributors to the most recent conference of the Electronic Literature Organization.

Thus we are led into a certain temptation. It would be interesting to imagine an articulation of electronic literature that includes Damon and Funkhouser, Alan Sondheim, Oni Buchanan, J.R. Carpenter, and others who have made digital exploits part of diverse art practices -- along with writers for whom the electronic is less methodological than environmental. Could K.S. Mohammad, Michael Magee, or Katie Degentesh find parts in an augmented Electronic Literature Orchestra? Could there be room on the stand for Lane Hall, who politicizes the net (and the night) with hand-held, electric lights (cite for Lane)? Might the Michael Joyce of *Was: annales nomadiques*, also subtitled "a novel of internet," find his way back into the show, if only through a kind of involuntary (and *in vivo*) re-baptism? Broadening the base in this way could assert the importance of born- and genetically-digital writing within greater a cultural scheme. It might connect us more effectively to the project Manovich calls "cultural transcoding," in which non-computational activities become infused by forms, practices, and ideas from information technology (cite).

3. In arrears

Why, it seems fair to ask, would anyone object to such expansion? In volunteering to play such a skeptic, I imagine myself (not for the first time) as a certain kind of washed-up trouper, ready to repeat insufferable phrases: *After this, it's just Vegas*, or, *That was Burlesque*. Better no doubt to face facts and admit that some of one's favorite ideas have grown up and left the building, headed for Hollywood, Stanford, or other points west. Burlesque, after all, is alive and well and touring as Lady Gaga. (This is factual observation, though you may take it allegorically wherever you like.)

The problem implicit in the broader formulation of electronic literature sketched here ultimately centers on identity. Would a shift away from the radical *inventio* of born-digital writing, toward the Perloff-Goldsmith model of newly mediated "pragmatics" betray some core concept or commitment of electronic literature? If it does, should we care?

One possible focus for these questions might be the historical framework Perloff uses to integrate new practices with old. She bases her scheme on William Marx's notion of an *arrière garde*, a belated second front in the (always curiously militarized) struggle between tradition and innovation. She writes:

The *arrière garde*, then, is neither a throwback to traditional forms… or what we used to call *postmodernism*. Rather, it is the revival of the avant-garde model – but with a difference. (58)

The precise nature of this difference is understandably hard to define – to make such definitions requires entire artistic movements, after all – but key components seem to be changes in "materiality and medium" (59). According to Perloff, writers in the *arrière* echelon inherit the revolutionary sensibilities and to some extent the agenda of their

precursors, but inhabit a cultural milieu (what Pierre Lévy calls an *episteme*) radically transformed by technical change. So, Perloff thinks, it is possible to escape the ostensible dead end of postmodernism without being doomed simply to repeat the modernist enterprise. Having access to the internet, and its episteme of database and interface, makes all the difference.

It seems less than useful, however, to construct this difference as a generalized matter of "materiality and medium." Changes to those factors presumably bring concomitant or complicit shifts in other dimensions as well: aesthetics, genre conventions, constructions of identity, both at the site of writing and reading. Fundamentally, of course, the introduction of media like distributed networks, and materials like markup and programming languages, suggests changes in the status of language and text themselves. Nonhuman or posthuman actors, as we are now discovering, may also factor in.

Cybertextual formalists like Espen Aarseth and Markku Eskelinen, along with computational expressivists like Noah Wardrip-Fruin and digital materialists like Matt Kirschenbaum, regard these differences as *ontological*, requiring critical approaches that place the operation of the text-machine at the center of consideration (see Eskelinen, 15-46). Following this line of thinking – as I generally have up to now, in both critical and creative work – suggests a core definition of electronic literature emphasizing a craft-based encounter with computational structures. Such an approach would primarily address works that engage, expose, or intervene in computable instructions, or code. To some extent, this definition exaggerates or restricts actual practice. Not all works in either of the current *Electronic Literature Collections*, for instance, meet these terms in the same way, or to the same degree. The Electronic Literature Organization's self-descriptions speak of "born digital literature" and "the current generation of readers for whom the printed book is no longer an exclusive medium" (cite), suggesting a fundamental divergence from an old regime. They also allude to "literature as it develops and persists in a changing digital environment," which seems more inclusive.

For the moment I will hold the more stringent line. The crypto-canon I envision here for purposes of argument -- or as I am beginning to see it, the beginnings of an interoperable *kernel* -- might be composed of generative and permutational code-works, such as Montfort and company's *Taroko Gorge* (a poem-generator variously repurposed into something that seems more *fungus* than *corpus*; see Montfort 2011), the massively combinatoric *Sea and Spar Between* (Strickland and Montfort), and various cybertextual and generative projects by people like J.R. Carpenter (2010), Jim Andrews (2012), Chris Funkhouser (2007), and Daniel C. Howe (Undated).

In some way many if not all constitutents of this cybertextual core participate in Perloff's citational poetics. The various gorge-grabbings that have risen up around the original *Taroko* are clearly takings and re-makings. Such is also the rationale of J.R. Carpenter's *Generation[s]*, a collection of poems built from open-source Python scripts. Yet it is not

clear that *The Front* would fit into this exclusive circle. That work would not have been possible without significant computational affordances (Web browser as interface, Google's index as database), but Mohammad engages uses these elements without modification. He seems deeply interested in their performance – indeed, all of *The Front* can be read as a commentary on the great psychotic process that is current media culture – but he does not seem interested in more technical critique or intervention.

Having drawn this artificially tight circle, I now want to violate its boundaries: to think not about what electronic literature might be at its core, but how it might function with looser constraints. What if, at minimum, we recognized writing with search engines as an important digital-literary practice? What if our post-canonical crypto-canan included items such as *The Front* or *Generation[s],* which can and do exist in print?

In launching this subversive experiment, I do not repudiate the core, the embrace of code as writing, overtures to poetic interoperability, or the rigorous formalism required to understand these things. I carry more water for cybertext theory than most. If my enthusiasm for the 576 positions of the Aarseth Sutra has its limits, I do sympathize with the urge to systematize, being one of those people for whom art means making actual, executable interfaces to databases, which is deeply systematic work. I also share without reservation Eskelinen's conviction that "literature is perhaps the best aesthetic instrument to deal with the unfair, the uncanny, and the unbalanced," and his interest in making "metarules" a prime concern of computational art (387) – projects that invite, if not require, attention to various forms of code. Code-core cybertextualism has undeniable virtues: it usefully drives innovation both in poetic practice and critical thinking, and it builds a detailed foundation for understanding, and eventually teaching, next-generation digital literacy. Long may its models and schemas endure.

At the same time, concentrating on the core obviously does not help at the margins, where we confront more ambiguous encounters between writing and information systems. Beyond providing a dour reminder of forsaken rigor, hardcore cybertextualism sheds little light on my promiscuous confusion of *récriture* and database/interface poetics. To stick with the core means closing the door on practices that do not conceive their interfaces strictly as code, or whose textual machinations may not be directly conceived as machines. To walk through that door, however, entails a series of hard questions. If increasingly, almost all writing is born within a nominal embrace of the digital, what happens to our born-digital distinction? How to define a specific electronic-literature identity and practice, within the context of a larger orchestration? What is to be gained by thinking about Perloff's "poetry by other means" through the lens of electronic literature?

Perversely, it may be easier to find the value of this project by means of a limit case: an instance in which the approach to *récriture* as *cyberécriture* may afford a better understanding of the text and its function. What follows will be a tale of two liftings,

featuring an incidental brush with *Farbenlehre*. Anyone whose capacity for metaphor is affected by blue-green color blindness is hereby excused.

4. Green means

Perloff devotes an entire chapter of *Unoriginal Genius* to Kenneth Goldsmith's conceptual poem, *Traffic*, which consists of transcribed drive-time reports from WINS, an all-news radio station in New York. Her reading of this citational work is detailed, nuanced, and in many respects compelling, considered in light of the larger argument concerning *récriture* and the post-inventional turn. There is, however, at least one aspect of Perloff's reading that might be worth critical discussion. Perloff cites at length the final entry of the volume, which ends:

Looking down to the Williamsburg, Manhattan, and Brooklyn Bridges, it's one big green light. And over in Jersey, it's never been better with traffic flowing smoothly across the Hudson at both the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels. Even the GW Bridge which has been choked for what seems like the last twenty-four hours is now flowing like water. Remember, alternate side of the street parking rules are in effect for tomorrow. (159)

After a page or two of close attention to this passage, Perloff comes to broadcaster Pete Tauriello's colorful metaphor:

At the same time, the "plot" ironically turns out to be a perfect Aristotelian one with beginning, middle, and end, as the image of the nightmare city gives way to a momentary vision of the open road – "one big green light" pointing us into the future. (161)

We might set aside the weird assertion of Aristotelian perfection in a collection of traffic reports – this is after all the flight of transparently bizarre fancy Goldsmith's poem invites, and Perloff duly registers the effect as ironic. More troublesome, though, is where the critic takes this ironized, plot-minded sense-of-an-ending in the next paragraph: "Inevitably, too, this green light recalls the one at the end of Daisy's dock in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*" (161). After citing the final three paragraphs of Fitzgerald's novel – complete with blue lawn, green light, dream left behind, orgiastic future, boats against the current -- Perloff opines that "*Traffic* gives these memorable images of desire an interesting spin" (161).

At which point this writer, reading this reader, finds himself also in something of a spin: or, to change metaphors, wants to check the gauge on someone's Irony tank, which appears to have run seriously low. Perhaps any reference to a green light in New York must remind a literary critic of *Gatsby* – though less charitably, it could be noted that Tauriello's virtual gaze toward Bridge-and-Tunnel-Land points to a very different place than Fitzgerald's East and West Egg. Before going further, it needs saying again that Perloff's green-light effusion amounts to a minor flaw in what is on the whole a

courageous undertaking, an otherwise persuasive attempt to square modernist poetics with conceptualism. Nonetheless it is an interesting lapse, for several reasons.

First, the connection to Fitzgerald is laid on with something like the pop-rivetwork one recalls from undergraduate exam essays, particularly one's own. Since that is hardly the sort of performance expected from a senior critic, there is probably something of experimental significance in this moment. If this is an instance of failed engagement or category mismatch, we might learn something from the breakdown.

One immediate lesson needs to be taken internally. Perloff's questionable reading calls into at least local doubt my insinuation of a deeper investment in the language of new media. Clearly, that convergence is neither a universal nor an inevitable critical turn. In terms of my prior analysis, Perloff here mistakes the interface for its particularized reduction, or state. That is, she reads a contingent assembly of borrowed language as if it had the supposed inevitability of a traditional, intentional structure. She fails to recognize the text as one among many possible operations on a database, but instead takes it back to an older organizational paradigm, (quite literally) the Modern Library. The current of Goldsmith's borrowed language overwhelms us, and we are carried backward. Tauriello the newscaster and Goldsmith the conceptualist drop out of the scene, displaced by Fitzgerald, hero of modernism. It is as if one has crawled through a certain tiny door on the seventh-and-a-half floor, and found oneself in another headspace entirely. It is hard not to brace for that final fall onto the shoulder of the Jersey Turnpike (Jonez).

The larger lesson here may be that we step away from cybertext and its ontological assertions at our peril. I begin to hear the words, *I told you so*, in a certain Finnish accent. Perloff's happy motoring through that big green light furnishes a limit case or boundary point to which my expansion of electronic writing will not stretch. Correspondingly, as boundary markers always do, it also suggests some territory on the near side, just inside the point of collapse, that might be worth exploring. The main problem in Perloff's appeal to *Gatsby* lies in its concertedly closural architecture, creating a circuit or suture between the old *avant* and the younger *arrière*. This configuration diminishes, if not excludes, the crucial ground of difference between them.

As noticed, though, limit cases may be taken either way. The injunction DO NOT LIFT THIS END implies some other end more suitable for engagement. Is it possible to read a post-inventional text in a way that avoids the critical lapse just seen? Might it be easier to achieve such a reading with some texts than others? Could such texts lie in that transit zone between the cybertextual core of electronic literature and the old frontier of modernism?

5. Blue depths

Satisfying answers to none of these questions are assured, but it seems worth trying an experiment. However, we will need to change both our text, and more importantly, the lighting:

 "The child was never found"

Do you remember where you were on that January night
when blue lights and a girl in a long white dress made history?

Do you remember the family gathered there
pulling the dirt from the sides of the well-meaning road?

Did you watch their boots kick up Scoutmaster Randy Deavers
as they bounced across the lunar surface?

What a magical leap it was.

Legend has it that the cry of a baby
consisted of a number of joined panels
fitted and gored from Wylie, Texas to Twin Falls, Idaho.

Legend has it that a dancing blue light
gave the figure shape through seaming.

You know, there's always something
about history swinging like a pendulum.

These fifteen lines come at the beginning of a longer poem composed by Rachael Sullivan, working to a flarfical formula that rules out traditional verbal invention. As in Mohammad's *The Front* (a model for this project), every word beyond the title ("The child was never found") originated on the World Wide Web or other internet venues, brought to light by a search engine query. Like Mohammad, Sullivan allowed herself to change spelling and punctuation, and to arrange and combine the source material into an approximation of free verse.

Though most of its genome is shared with the flarf species, Sullivan's poem also displays at least one trace of conceptualism: it is part of a collaboration with eight other writers (including myself) making found-language verses on the same formula, each of us working from the results of specific search-engine queries. The queries are phrases we have selected at will from Joyce's "novel of internet," *Was*, which was the origin of the phrase "the child was never found."

So far, nothing in our post-inventional situation may seem all that remarkable: we are doing flarf or found poetry according to accepted canons of the craft, building our

interface-like texts on databases of discovered material, operating under specified constraints. Given that we are in Milwaukee, we might as well be brewing beer. Yet this is, arguably, a micro-brew with a difference. Early in our preparation for the project, as we were reading Joyce's text, a question presented itself. *Was* is a highly elliptical, discontinuous, polyglot work that clearly has its own genetic relationship to the experimental tradition of modernism, though more in the line of Stein or Pound than Fitzgerald. Here is how the work begins:

was thought not were the yellow the irrepressible ever who said who said ends Ashtoreth one Wednesday, one Wednesday in june the damp the dampness in everything (light, profusionist, no I mean heat)

forty times now, bowing, clogs along foggy bottom news from the front, wooden boxes neatly in rows

the last the lost wandering *allées* (lips pressed to the neonate's skull, powder scent) willows all now gone from their ripeness

and what of the stipple, the limp, the lost what-was, despite the damp odor of canvas, the salt-cracked lips, inordinate corridors? who can say who can say

distant machines growl through *die nähe* (*durch*) (Joyce 2007, 11)

For those in our writing group who had grown up with the Web, instant messaging, and other Net effects, this language seemed instantly familiar: in fact, it looked quite a bit like flarf. (I confess to being the only one in the room who thought it looked like more like modernism.) It was therefore decided that someone should ask the author of *Was* to what extent search-engine queries were involved in its composition. I did so, stipulating that my money was on *not at all*. As usual, I lost. Joyce replied:

…in some way all of the text came from search-engine queries in the sense that Google (about which in the preface to my Foucault novel…I write: "of course, ought be listed as a co-author here") has slipped into the center of the group picture, to wit: Clio, Thalia, Erato, Euterpe, Googlemena, Polyhymnia, Calliope, Terpsichore, Urania, Melpomene (and you can tell the grads that I *did* Google that.) (Joyce 2011)

The qualifying phrase "in some way" needs emphasis, since Joyce went on to explain in later correspondence that *Was* is not a flarf project and was written in the traditional, inventional way, not by any process of direct appropriation. However, it is deliberately inscribed "a novel of internet," and dedicated to the author's son Jeremiah, "'Electronic Boy' having become documentarian" (2007, 7). Both these paratextual moves strongly suggest the novel's address, if not affiliation, to the language of new media, either in the strict terms of Manovich, or the loose pragmatics of general practice. At some stage in the writing, Joyce made use of internet affordances, perhaps to research locations,

check addresses, maybe to troll for inspiration and narrative leads. *Was* is thus genuinely "a novel of internet."

Our flarfical project was conceived as a form of engagement with this self-described trans-medial hybrid. The scheme was hatched through a process of inquiry. First we asked the obvious question, *what is a novel of internet* (or in the novel's own polyglossia, *Was ist)*? Then we asked the object-ontological or New Aesthetic question, *How does a novel of internet see the world?* Which to my mind at least, brought us to our most promising query: *What does a novel of internet want?* On the assumption that a novel of internet wants company – desires, that is, to be part of an extended, continuing discourse – we undertook to extend Joyce's terms permutationally, and produce *poems of internet of novel*, which describes the high-level constraint or concept under which we operated. A poem of internet of novel is a flarfical composition beginning from a search term found in the novel of internet.

If this procedure seems decidedly loopy, you have grasped its essence. We operated in a system or network of feedback loops, out of which we generated states (poems) as interfaces to the common database. In some very rare cases this was the same database (body of internet materials) from which certain phrasings in *Was* originally emerged. In other cases, we were simply feeding back, and then upon, the same ever-expanding ocean of language in which we all swim, not so much against as within the stream, having long ago abandoned boat or ship.

6. Shape through seaming

To the main business, then, which is the promised attempt at interpretation, focusing on the first lines of Sullivan's poem:

Do you remember where you were on that January night
when blue lights and a girl in a long white dress made history?

  and also the two stanzas at the end of the selection:

Legend has it that a dancing blue light
gave the figure shape through seaming.

You know, there's always something
about history swinging like a pendulum.

It would no doubt be possible, even for a dimmer intellect than Perloff's, to construct a reasonably close reading of Sullivan's blue lights, which do indeed seem to illuminate at least the current excerpt, which is about a third of the poem as a whole. As will happen in lyrics, perhaps especially those of the flarf kind, there is pronounced semiotic or ontological drift, a riptide of signified under signifier. Perhaps the initial reference is to

something uncanny or supernatural, alien encounter or ghostly visitation. Later on, there is at least the implied glow of a TV screen, as the boots of Apollo astronauts surreally kick up "Scoutmaster Randy Deavers" while bouncing over the face of the moon. Finally "a dancing blue light" gives "the figure shape through seaming," which phrase offers a hanging fastball at which no critic in any league could resist a nice, fat swing, seeing here a most fetching metaphor for the poem itself and its chimerical, patchwork process of composition. Yes indeed, there's always something about swinging, or history as it swings, reliably like a pendulum.

7. Lift this end

So how do blue lights and (our new motto), Shape Through Seaming, confer any difference, or edge of superiority, against the green light of literary progress that Perloff finds in *Traffic*? Taken as just read, they don't. After all, the interpretation presented here is based on 15 of 57 lines, chosen by me with the same sort of undisciplined yet order-seeking intuition that no doubt guided Sullivan's selection and arrangement of the lines themselves. In an important sense, this reading rests on a tissue of pure contingency, as does Perloff's Gatsby getaway. It's fun and gratifying, and gives me an excuse to admire the work of a young appropriationist with first-rate skills. None of which changes the fact that it is also an accident, and less an act than an exercise of interpretation: a piece of interpretive *play*.

If we understand "The child was never found" as *simply* a poem, an object fixed on a particular page or a certain Web address, we lock ourselves into a decidedly closed circuit, or the backward-facing posture of a fundamentally repetitive *arrière garde*. To escape this position – and hopefully, the all too Prussian scenario of guards and salients – it is necessary to reintroduce Perloff's key term, *difference*. What is the difference between Sullivan's poem and Goldsmith's, and between what I take to be Perloff's lapse and my own comic fall?

We might begin the distinction with "materiality and medium," as both Perloff and the cyber-formalists suggest. It is at least initially a matter of textual ontology and mechanism. Though *Traffic* and *Was* are both part of "poetry by other means," both to some extent citational texts, they exhibit an important difference. *Traffic* is in a sense a singular (if not "unit") operation, defining its concept by exhaustion. As Johnson said of *Paradise Lost*, none ever wished it longer than it is. Probably few would see the need to repeat similar concepts at similar length. Many readers might say the same for Joyce's "novel of internet;" but again, some might find in its dance-around-the-planet attention deficit (the opposite, in a way, of Goldsmith's universal recording impulse) an invitation to further play. *Was* is largely a work of lacunae and withholdings, and some people find such architectures stimulating.

Drawing on Gregory Ulmer's latest update of heuretics or internet invention, Jan Rune Holmevik identifies this participatory impulse with *Chora*, "the generative game space in

which Being and Becoming melt together through what Aarseth called… ergodic activity" (Holmevik 2012, 21). Operating with full affordances, both technical and conceptual, of computation and networks, the poem of internet of novel occupies something very like this space. Properly understood, it is not simply an object of reading, but itself something put in place of a reading, or dispositive interpretation, of Joyce's "novel of internet." It is not an end but a means, or a discourse-extension.

The desires of a novel of internet, or a poem of internet of novel, are not the imperatives of earlier forms. No doubt, "The child was never found" can be read, perhaps inevitably must be read, in the finest traditions of critical baseball, humanist pastime of times past. If we must have a thematic reading, consider that blue light as a spectre haunting present-day poetics. However, the poem as choric procedure overflows this minimal contour – or lifts itself by its own end. It demands to be recognized as an interface to a database, and thus *one among a plenitude of possible interfaces.* Chora is a place of both being and becoming.

Any text "of internet" asks more than interpretation; it also at least implies, and perhaps incites, recirculation and re-engagement. To say this is to some degree to assert, no doubt *en arrière,* Barthes' notion of *texte scriptible.* Crucially, the poem of internet of novel is also something more – we might say *texte transcriptible* -- precisely because it is *something less*, only one state or evocation of the interface in process. It is not simply and finally a summary of its procedures. It is static text, but the text is unthinkable without certain dependencies and mechanisms.

Properly understood within its context – words which of course invite downpours of doubt -- the poem of internet of novel intends no definitive reading either of the novel of internet, or even of its own source material, but simply instantiates a certain procedure, not definitively or exhaustively, but in the choric sense of unfolding. The poem of internet of novel is a compound conception. It is not first-order flarf, but poetic finding in dialogue with another at least partly appropriative text, a tributary stream that points (and feeds) back to its source. Sullivan's poem is not meant to demonstrate and exhaust a proposition, but to extend a discursive practice (a loose approximation to Holmevik's "game").

So long as "The child was never found" remains duly attached to its provenance – and I say again, that is an ominous stipulation -- it might arguably be harder to take from this text the sort of misstep that Perloff suffers when racing to catch her light. The referentiality of the poem as reprocessed-reprocessing inscribes a conceptual architecture that is not simply the closed, before-behind loop of historicism, Fitzgerald-to-Goldsmith-full-stop, but something more like Galloway's numinous diagram of our times, the distributed-network graph (2004, 32). Its circulations do not converge, but continue.

The spectral shift from green to blue is arbitrary, accidental, but also definitive. The blue light in Sullivan's poem is the sign of Shape Through Seaming (remember, she did not invent that phrase), signifying the endless, corvic work of Googlemena, searching-muse of the finder-poet, who cannot resist diving down to pick up shining things. It is indeed also the blue beacon of this desktop, burning at the edge of vision, indicating ongoing flow of current and waves, photons out, electrons back. The circuit is open, not closed. In this dissipative economy, energy is liberated and consumed. Out of this activity comes, on rare occasions, a Web search, a series of links, a gathering of texts: ultimately, a poem. The poem is state, but implies an active interface. It is always incomplete. Interface is useless without its database, and even when assembled, this system is itself unfinished. It lacks one more crucial part.

Ontological mechanisms have no meaning without human effort and attention. That personal enterprise implies a meeting of minds, or community. Communities have a constant need to define themselves, enacting identity at the swinging door of belonging and exclusion. Passing through the door, we lift things up, or carry them away without paying -- we lift things. Eventually we must set them down again, and so occupy a position.

Points of rest or placement can be hard to find. Does the poem of internet of novel belong to electronic literature? Could the novel of internet also belong? Before pushing out the perimeter of identity, remember that these texts pose a significant problem: their need for contextualization creates a gap of assurance across which great, galvanic sparks of criticism must inevitably leap. Call it a matter of colophony. If I skip over the paratextual frame of Mohammad's "Artist's Statement" – and have somehow never seen a blog or a Twitter stream – I may assume it is nothing more than a nasty political screed. Likewise, without due notice that "The child was never found" belongs to an ongoing experiment in transcriptibility, I could legitimately treat it, too, as a conventional lyric. An interface to a database can never be properly represented by a single state; misrepresentation and misreading are much more likely.

Maybe we should therefore hold all writings-of-internet at the border, letting them form an existential buffer between core and cortical formations. Whether flarf, double-flarf, or N-tuple flarf, verses on a page can always be mistaken for something less than the contingent, playful process from of which they arose, and in which they may aspire to be re-membered. The poem of internet of novel is neither first-order flarf nor first-order cybertext. It is indeed dangerously mistakable for older and very different forms of writing. Perhaps this weakness should rule it out of more stringent discussions, and limit its value to limit cases.

On the other hand, maybe such exclusiveness is nothing more than scarecrow, straw man, or other imaginary problem, foisted in this essay on a community that is actually quite generous with its distinctions. For sure, strictures of identity seem less and less tenable in these light-fingered, end-lifting times. Why not begin to see practices of

electronic writing, variously considered, as (perversely) proper Chomskyan performances within the language space of new media? If we resist this turn, even as we see all writing bathed in the aura of the digital, will we ultimately find *electronic literature* itself less interface than state?

Things look different in a cool blue light.

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