

“Let my readers go!” Freedom, the ‘post-’, electronic ‘literature’

Introduction

The concern that this paper keeps returning to is this: that literature has only one subject – freedom. Drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre whose claim this is originally, and John Cayley, and in an attempt to interrogate and problematise currently held understandings of the post-literary, I rehearse the following arguments. First, that the writer of literature holds out his freedom for the reader to reciprocate it with their own, thereby giving objective existence to the offering of writing with the gift of their generous reading. Second, that the interposition of the machine between writer and reader in electronic literature breaches the interhuman pact founded on freedom on which literature also rests. The machine as it is figured forth in this paper is both an object with no freedom of its own and a means of delimiting, through the choreography of code, the reader’s ability to deploy their freedom in the act of generous reading. Third and finally, that a literature no longer possessing freedom as its sole predicate must needs *be something* else or *occupy somewhere* else; must needs be *post-literary* in fact, if we consider the thought of literature gone elsewhere expressed by David Carroll, Scott Wilson, and the editors of the journal *CounterText* as an acceptable definition of post-literariness. It may well be, however, that electronic literature, in the guise of a miscellany of texts each demonstrating their share of promiscuity vis-à-vis genre, will have been found by the end of this paper to resist even the attempt at porous circumscription presented by the term ‘post-literary’.

A Generous Understanding of ‘Freedom’

What might the ‘literature’ in ‘electronic literature’ stand for and is this a precious point in the context of a paper professing a primary interest in the otherwheres of literature in a post-literary condition? I tend to answer the first part of the question by begging it, particularly, in the frame of my doctoral research from which the considerations in these pages chiefly arise, by locating electronic literature at the tail end of a line of prevenient genres and forms. Finding a start in the pattern poems of George Herbert (themselves gestures of Christian devotion extrapolated from the Hellenic and early Renaissance tradition of votive pattern poems), proceeding to Stéphane Mallarmé’s *poème Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* with its evocation of autonomous movement without itself being mobile, and culminating in the constrained writing and experiments with computer-assisted reading of the French group who call themselves the *Ouvroir de la Littérature Potentielle* (OULIPO), the extent of electronic literature’s analogies with this genealogy of canonised literature can be fairly estimated. Wherever there are straightforward analogues between these literary forebears and corresponding examples of electronic literature, they confirm the latter as a largely textual pursuit, broadly operating within the categories poetry – prose – fiction – drama, and roughly serving the artistic, recreational,

political, philosophical, edifying and humanising ends typically associated with these categories. My research, however, takes a greater interest in the irreconcilable differences subsisting between electronic literature and literature; in the insecurity and equivocality of certain analogies, especially and of particular relevance to the main focus of this paper, when it comes to modes of engagement and reading. A criticism of electronic literature informed by these differences cannot help but doubt the appositeness of the ‘literature’ in its name. From this initial apprehension, such a criticism may go in either of two ways: it may work to produce an acceptable alternative which will be free of the presuppositions attaching to the word ‘literature’, or it may fall prey to the desire to re-evaluate classical definitions of literature through the behaviour and assumptions that inhere in exemplary pieces of electronic literature.

This paper inclines towards the latter position, departing as it does from the hypothesis submitted in the greater body of my research that if electronic literature can be subsumed genealogically within literature, then it follows that what we know to be literature must be expanding so as to accommodate it. In order to get a quick understanding of the kind of retroactive qualifications of literature made possible by electronic literature, one could do worse than return briefly to the particularly outright articulation of the question, ‘What is Literature?’ in Sartre.

In Section II of *What is Literature?* (1947), Sartre is interested in the extending question, ‘Why Write?’ His answer is forthcoming and unambiguous:

To write is to make an appeal to the reader that he lead into objective existence the revelation which I have undertaken by means of language [...] the writer appeals to the reader’s freedom to collaborate in the production of his work.¹

This claim rests on a prior description of the writer who, in aspiring to reveal a world which is not of one’s production, “condens[es] relationships, by introducing order where there was none”,² only to watch this artificial unity “sink back” into non-relationality and disorder as soon as the creative activity is complete.³ Governed by the need to feel “essential” to one’s work,⁴ knowing full well that the literary object requires an act called reading to bring it fully into view, and acutely aware that one cannot authentically read one’s own writing, the writer issues an appeal for readerly attention.

Now already for Sartre, reading is much more than passive submission to a guided fantasy. “Reading seems, in fact, to be the synthesis of perception and creation”,⁵ Sartre claims – boldly, perhaps, for the mid-twentieth century but presciently from a contemporary perspective conscious of the demands electronic literature can make of the reader in terms of co-authorship and “wreading” (a blend of ‘writing’ and ‘reading’ frequently to be encountered in the critical essays of Jim Andrews and Charles Bernstein).⁶ But it were better not to let the argument get ahead of us here, especially as what Sartre

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), p.46.

² Sartre (1949) p.39.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sartre (1949), p.43.

⁶ See : Jim Andrews, ‘Games, Art and Play’, *Vispo*, 2009, available at:

has in mind when talking of creation is “directed creation”.⁷ Insofar as the literary object “though realized *through* language, is never given *in* language”,⁸ it falls to the attentive reader to “catch on”⁹ to the events, characters, qualities that the writing serves as repository for and “invent them all in a continual exceeding of the written thing”.¹⁰ This is not to say that the reader must invent it all from scratch. “To be sure”, Sartre pre-empt, “the author guides him, but all he does is guide him. The landmarks he sets up are separated by the void. The reader must unite them”.¹¹ Thus, what Sartre would paint as a simple act of conferring unity upon the distinct features of a literary object actually consists of three near-simultaneous events: first, the reader answers the writer’s appeal; second, the reader agrees to collaborate in the production of the writer’s work which has, since the originary act of creation, been left in suspension awaiting a second act of creation, this time directed by the writer but authenticated by the reader; and third, the reader has exercised their generosity.

For Sartre, generosity is born of freedom, or in his own words, “I call a feeling generous which has its origin and its end in freedom.”¹² His next move is to couple generosity (as a natural expression of freedom) with reading:

Thus reading is an exercise in generosity, and what the writer requires of the reader is not the application of an abstract freedom but the gift of his whole person, with his passions, his prepossessions, his sympathies, his sexual temperament, and his scale of values.¹³

Of course, the writer asks these things of the reader in order to better reveal the world to them through the feelings “wheeled out of” them by language.¹⁴ Sartre’s example is Dostoyevsky’s famously undecided and undecidable character, Raskolnikov whose “waiting is *my* waiting which I lend him. Without this impatience of the reader he would remain only a collection of signs.”¹⁵ The same is true not only of the whole gamut of feeling from contempt to amorous passion, Sartre assures us, but true of the subjective ordering of experience which the reader also lends to fictional scenarios.

That reading for Sartre constitutes nothing less than the generous lending of one’s personhood, which in turn arises from and brings into relief the reader’s freedom to do so, may upon reflection grate a little on the notion of directed creation. The phrase that Sartre later substitutes for directed creation – “the ordered play of the imagination”¹⁶ – instantly summarises the nature of the paradox lurking close beneath the surface in this section of Sartre’s book. Surely the attempt to order play, to give it a shape, a regimen, deprives play of the latitude and reliance on chance that makes it precisely play. And

<<http://www.vispo.com/writings/essays/artgamesplay/index.htm>>.

– Charles Bernstein, ‘Wreading, Writing, Wresponding’ in *Teaching Modernist Poetry*, ed. by Peter Middleton & Nicky Marsh (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp.170-178.

⁷ Sartre (1949) p.45.

⁸ Sartre (1949) p.44.

⁹ Sartre (1949) p.43.

¹⁰ Sartre (1949) p.45.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Sartre (1949) p.51.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Sartre (1949) p.45.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Sartre (1949) p.47.

surely the requirement that a free reader exercise their freedom generously in the act of reading is negated by the subsequent requirement that the same reader submit to direction. Sartre quashes any notion of a paradox, however, by locating the “highest degree” of the reader’s freedom strictly in the decision to accept the writer’s appeal and pick up the book.¹⁷ “The book does not serve my freedom; it requires it”,¹⁸ Sartre carefully distinguishes while intimating that it would be foolish to expect it to. “You are perfectly free to leave that book on the table”, and there, unopened, the book *can* serve my freedom, but Sartre cautions, “if you open it, you assume responsibility for it. For freedom is not experienced by its enjoying its free subjective functioning, but in a creative act required by an imperative.”¹⁹

What then, if anything, is to prevent the reader from being completely at the writer’s mercy? Sartre anticipates this too and in the latter part of Section II argues that the creative act required of the reader by the imperative *read* must be one which engages the reader’s generosity in an absolute minimum of two ways. First, the writer “cannot address himself to freedom as such by means of constraint, fascination, or entreaties”.²⁰ In other words, the writer must never force the reader’s decision to open the book but rather must choose to recognise and have confidence in the reader’s freedom to do so of their own accord. Second, the writer must also be sure to promote freedom for all men and women through the choice of thematic content and treatment. “It would be inconceivable that this unleashing of generosity provoked by the writer could be used to authorize an injustice”, says Sartre, and it is equally illogical that “the reader could enjoy his freedom while reading a work which approves or accepts or simply abstains from condemning the subjection of man by man.”²¹ Sartre makes the already pointed allusion even plainer when he says that he is thinking particularly of literature written to propound the racist and Fascist causes, just then so palpable to him living in post-Vichy France and with the tide about to turn with the Civil Rights Movement in America. It is with all this in view that he makes the claim this paper began with: that “the writer, a free man addressing free men, has only one subject – freedom”.²²

Given this statement’s moorings in a thoroughly humanistic contemplation of literature, it may be considered a stretch to suggest – on the strength of this statement alone, severed from its moorings – that another kind of writer, a free man *choosing to write in programmable media* and thus to interpose computer code between himself and the reader, takes another subject as his own – the prescribing of free acts of reading, or *doubly directed creation*. It is, as I have said, a stretch that passes through and leaps over several arguments that could be mounted to forestall it. For instance, one could see a counter-argument in Sartre’s aphorism that the book does not serve my freedom. It would be easy to extrapolate from it that the literary object presented in electronic literature merely requires my free choice to begin navigating it, but it never promises to serve my freedom. On the contrary, it may rely on disclaimers (typically in the guise of rules of engagement or self-reflexive interjections) to

¹⁷ Sartre (1949) p.51.

¹⁸ Sartre (1949) p.47.

¹⁹ Sartre (1949) p.48.

²⁰ Sartre (1949) p.47.

^a Sartre (1949) p.63.

²² Sartre (1949) p64..

make the reader aware of the ways in which their apparently free subjective functioning within the text is being progressively and inconspicuously delimited. Yet, the perspicacity of this counter-argument, far from taking exception to my retro-fitting of a decontextualised line of Sartre's text to a technologically determined literary object Sartre could not have held in mind at the time of writing, depends on repeating the performance. In time, I shall return to other arguments and objections, not so much to refute them as perhaps to embrace them; but I would first like to attempt to determine in what way this stretch could work and what bearing all this might have on electronic literature as a potential manifestation of the post-literary.

Doubly Directed Creation and Wrested Lection

John Cayley's 'The Advent of Aurature and the End of (Electronic) Literature', with its handy title suggestive of a disposition to contemplate those end-times that the 'post-' is habitually taken to name,²³ seems, ironically, like the best place to start. The essay, which has been collected in Cayley's *Grammalepsy: Essays on Digital Language Art* (2018), turns on three related interests: first, the relationship of literature with media; second and consequentially, the relationship between linguistic artefacts and digitisation; and third, the concept of aurature, the theorisation of which as distinct from both aurality and orality owes a debt (reflected in the collection title) to Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967).

Of these sets of relationships, the second set, or rather Cayley's elaboration on it conveniently enacts the Sartrean move of conceptualising reading as the 'making essential' of the literary object. Here the move is at its most evident:

There is no essential difference between any instance of language as it is embodied "here" and "now" on the page or surface in front of you and how it is encoded as a string of bits inside your machine. Its existence as language is entirely dependent on your ability to read it. If you are able to read traces (grammē) of this language on any other "surfaces" within any part of a computational system, your reading brings that language into being.²⁴

This assertion proceeds on the knowledge that computer code goes through many different iterations between the zeros and ones that code for voltage changes in the logic gates and the layer of high-level

²³ This 'endist' tendency can be seen in operation in: David Carroll's chapter in *The Question of Literature: the Place of the Literary in Contemporary Theory* (edited by Elizabeth Beaumont Bissell and Gerard Greenway) entitled 'The Post-Literary Condition: Sartre, Camus, and the Question(s) of Literature' (2002), and Marc Farrant's 'Literary Endgames: The Post-Literary, Postcritique, and the Death of/in Contemporary Literature' (2020) published in the journal *Critique*, among other important interventions on the subject. The logic behind endist interpretations of the prefix 'post-' has been rigorously examined by Stefan Herbrechter in the paper, 'Post-, Proto- and Ana-: Constructions of the Future' (2012) and more recently, by Brian McHale in his contribution called 'The End' to the second volume of *Post-Digital: Dialogues and Debates from electronic book review* (2020) with both writers drawing on Jean-François Lyotard's work on postmodernism (with particular attention to 'Note on the meaning of Post' from *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*) to offer alternative constructions on the prefix that putatively qualifies literature in our time.

²⁴ John Cayley, 'The Advent of Aurature and the End of (Electronic) Literature', in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Electronic Literature*, ed. Joseph Tabbi (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p.83.

programming language closest to what is outputted on the screen and generally modelled on the syntax of human language. Given that all of these iterations encipher one another as they are compiled and interpreted into a screenic projection, and further given the ability (usually exclusive to programmers) to read one or more layers of these mutually enciphering codes, Cayley is able to assert that strings of bits and plain-English sentences are – equally – language. He then drives the move home by adding: “Reading brings language into substantive being as instances of interhuman potentialities”.²⁵ The similarity with Sartre’s recapitulation of his argument in the following lines is remarkable: “Thus reading is a pact of generosity between author and reader. [...] There is then established a dialectical going-and-coming” between them.²⁶

Interesting to note that Cayley refrains from interposing the machine at this juncture, reserving it for the later part of the chapter and his fascinating cultural analysis of voice assistants like Amazon’s Alexa. However, he does proceed to sketch the affordances brought to literary language by digitisation, maintaining that “digitized typography” provisions print typography “with a wide array of dynamic potentialities.”²⁷ Seeking perhaps to redirect scholarly attention away from a narrowly conceived dichotomy between print and digital affordances, Cayley minimises the oft-cited differences and draws the focus to others: “Text in digital media can move and change. It’s as simple as that. It is important, however, to recognize that this is not a difference in *what* is or can be read but in *how* and *when* it is read.”²⁸ How exactly does this come about? What determines the how and when of reading in programmable media? Perhaps these questions are best answered by describing what happens in three exemplary cases.

The earliest of these is Claire Dinsmore’s *The Dazzle as Question* (2000), developed in Flash as a hypermedia prose-poem for non-interactive viewing. The standard pace of reading is established in a series of compressed scenes, each containing one or more sentences borne across movable tapes that enter the screen from left and right, snake across, and disappear. Often, the tapes take the overlaying white texts away so quickly that the reader is hard-put even to sight-read them. The images that complete the scenes early on establish the hand (flesh or wire-frame or merely alluded to via a row of fountain pens) as a key theme in a piece that hinges on putting on multimediatric display the differences between pre-digital craftsmanship, specifically hand-writing, and writing in programmable media. However, the hand is also instrumental in occasioning one to reflect on how much of the *when of reading* in electronic literary objects like this one has been pre-scripted, pre-programmed. When the instruction “grasp” emerges on one of the tapes, the image of the hand obeys and everything goes black to the sound of an ECG machine flat-lining. After this, a touch of the escape key is the only input accepted from the reader who can either choose to re-load and re-watch the piece or exercise their freedom to leave it well alone. Nor is this the only occasion in which the reader is left uncertain about how much or when they will be permitted to read next by the elaborately choreographed programming. Two minutes and forty seconds in, the piece delivers on its titular

²⁵ Cayley (2017) p.84.

²⁶ Sartre (1949) pp.55-6.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

promise of dazzling the reader. A blinding light briefly irrupts onto the screen, whiting out all the textual elements there. What is more, the piece refuses to reinstate the tapes with text on them for some time after suitable reading conditions are restored and when they are reinstated, the reader is met with a self-reflexive comment about “its brilliance, its brilliance”.²⁹ (The brilliance of the white light? The code?) The text even presumes to narrate the reader’s indignation at having been dazzled and denied the possibility of fulfilling their basic function: “the Light – the strain of it. All. rattled his o so sensitive being” [sic].³⁰

If the answers to how and when Dinsmore’s text can be read are: ‘with difficulty at moderate speed’ and ‘in between the dazzling whiteout and the total blackout’, then the answers returned about Anna Anthropy’s *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2013) are likely to be: ‘frantically, barely taking anything in’ and ‘in ten seconds’. Programmed in the free hypertext software, Twine, Anthropy’s text contrasts with Dinsmore’s in that it at least allows for a limited degree of choice while reading. As such, the reader can decide which one of the hyperlinked words (appearing against white sentences in a contrasting blue) they would prefer to usher in the next screenful of text. There is of course a catch. It is the end of the world. “It’s just the two of you together”, the landing page narrates, and “[y]ou have ten seconds”³¹ Getting this far has already taken one or two seconds off the countdown timer in the top-left corner and what began as casual reading devolves into a click race against the inexorable timer. Ultimately, this highly gamified experience of reading (at) the end-times is an exercise in the foreclosure of possibility, specifically of: accomplishing a full reading of a single screen; exhausting all the texts that all the hyperlinks could potentially furnish; and of the text serving one’s freedom – which the hyperlinks would do were it not for the fact that freedom to decide is forbiddingly time-consuming.

Whereas Dinsmore and Anthropy delight in accelerating reading impossibly, Jeremy Hight’s *Glacial, A Novel* (2020-) does the opposite, forcing it to move at the glacial pace indicated in the title. He proposes to achieve this by pledging to Tweet one word at a time every day between the 14th of November 2020 and June 2042. So far, Hight has accumulated a sizeable paragraph’s worth in which he sets a somewhat bleak and foetid scene and places a character named Elliott by a window, waiting for something with quasi-Beckettian stamina.³² Now, the first decision Hight’s reader must make is whether to wait a full twenty-four hours for a new word, or allow a few words to accumulate and then read them all together, or do as I confess I did and transcribe the novel word for word. In the first instance, the reader may occasionally face disappointment because commas, fullstops, and ellipses are sometimes counted as individual posts. But they may also be pleasantly surprised to find that Hight sometimes posts more than once in a day or posts phrases. The second method makes it somewhat easier to establish the flow of the syntax and make necessary connections between pronouns and their

²⁹ Claire A. Dinsmore, *The Dazzle as Question* (2000) Flash multimedia prose-poem, in *Rhizome: Artbase*, available at: <<http://classic.rhizome.org/artbase/artwork/2572/>>.

³⁰ Dinsmore (2000).

³¹ Anna Anthropy, *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2013) Twine hypertext game, available at: <<https://w.itch.io/end-of-the-world>>.

³² Jeremy Hight, *Glacial, A Novel* (2020-2024) Serialised Twitter novel, available at: <https://twitter.com/onewordbook1?fbclid=IwAR3yzD8CrcUM9UqNL6GKmn3rSiiqMe4oMDGUwMdWwBAo_aak7UDXkoNeylg>.

subjects, although this reader's rhythm is still likely to be interrupted wherever unexpected adjectival phrases emerge and neologisms are introduced. The last method is perhaps the most attuned to the eventuality of reading the piece as a finished novel, but apart from requiring almost as much as dedication to the project as its writer, losing one's place in the Twitter feed is a likelihood and scrolling aimlessly in order to regain it is a sore test of one's patience. Notwithstanding the selected approach, reading consists of a slow "going-and-coming" between writer and reader to use Sartre's turn of phrase, is obliged to stop short, and can only resume whenever and however the writer chooses to post content³³ – unless of course one is willing to miss out on the performative aspect and accordingly opts to read the whole thing in 2024.

I have lingered so long over the unpacking of these examples not to render their relationship to the question of what determines the how and when of reading in programmable media obscure, but to insinuate an answer. In all three cases, it is the writer exercising their freedom to write with or on programmable platforms and with the express purpose, no less, of forestalling and sometimes negating the reader's generous decision to comply with directed creation. That the pieces nonetheless desire to be read – we will recall that Dinsmore's text and Anthropy's timer goad the reader so as to wrest lection from them – is the residue of the writer's appeal to the reader. That the pieces make answering the appeal problematic or impossible for long periods at a time, however, must surely be the residue of the underlying code. This is not to say that blinding effects, unfairly timed readings, and word-by-word novel serialisation could not be carried off without code but they would probably seem like gratuitous distractions from the serious task of reading print literature as opposed to gestures at an underlayer of language carefully choreographed so that it itself will not be read and so that not much of what should be read can be. Our answer therefore ought to be twofold: the writer and the code determine the how and when of reading in programmable media. Or, for a more loaded statement, the interposition of the machine between author and reader leads to a best-case scenario in which the latter submits to *doubly* directed creation.

Conclusion or Where is the 'post-?'

Where is the post-literary in all of this? Cayley proffers an answer, albeit a partial one: "If literature is a practice that is determined, chiefly, by material cultural formations that orbit practices and conventions of reading, then it is literature that faces its ontological challenge with respect to digitization. Electronic literature is, precisely, no longer literature."³⁴ Hight, Anthropy and Dinsmore's work seems thus to be at the bleeding edge of the ontological challenge Cayley identifies; their work is no longer literature not simply or only because it is *electronic* literature but because it declines to orbit those accepted conventions, practices, and paces of reading which have so far determined the

³³ The word 'content' in this context presupposes words from the novel. This would be a painfully obvious observation were it not for the fact that the *Glacial* Twitter feed has, whether by accident or design, been commingled with Pringles ads, a retweet of Nimbus's publication of *Kafka's Metamorphosis as a Conversation with Alexa*, one of the author's personal photographs shared in response to trending calls to "share a photo that feels like a lifetime ago", gifs and internet memes sold as non-fungible tokens etc.

³⁴ Cayley (2017) p.84.

practice of literature. Perhaps it is for reason that Cayley refrains from re-designating electronic literature ‘post-literary’ although there is certainly room for it in a chapter co-titled, ‘The End of (Electronic) Literature’. Instead his diagnosis is that “if it is anything, then it is *digital language art*.”³⁵

That Cayley discerningly settles upon this phrase holds potentially discomposing significance for the arguments this paper has so far advanced (i.e., that electronic literature disqualifies itself as literature and migrates elsewhere insofar as the interposition of code between writer and reader breaks their pact of mutual respect for each other’s freedom to fulfil their creative imperatives). On one level, the yoking together of language and art accomplishes an exponential multiplication in the number of strategies that will be available to interrupt conventional modes of engagement and reading. What this means is that in contrast with electronic literary objects, digital language artworks are likelier to demonstrate disruptive strategies that rely less on the choreographies of code and more, perhaps, on directing the reader-turned-viewer in physical acts of creation designed to override the impulse to read.³⁶ On another level, the migration from ‘literature’ to ‘language art’, followed as it is in Cayley’s chapter, by a contradiction: “these strategies trouble existing traditions of literary reading without yet insisting that literature itself be called, seriously, into question”,³⁷ exposes the paradox that is bound to emerge sooner or later when thinking electronic literature as art, as literary, as *post-literary*, as anything but what it imperfectly is.

I would like to conclude by elaborating upon the problem of the paradox rather than pretending to solve it. Let us start by transposing Cayley’s contradiction into a question: how can it be that electronic literature frames and enacts the ontological challenge posed to literature by changed modes of reading *without* calling literature seriously into question? If on the strength of the foregoing discussion we resolve that this is a logical impossibility, we find ourselves inhabiting the space of the post-literary – not the vestigial after-literature of endist imagining but as it is defined by the editors of the journal *CounterText*, Ivan Callus and James Corby. “In that case, [...] what survives Literature” in the wake of its radical questioning “is the ‘post-literary’”, or

the accommodation to the idea that “the literary may be elsewhere”, whereby “it seems increasingly implausible to rely on the term literature to serve as an adequate way of naming the various diverse and evolving contemporary manifestations of the literary”.³⁸

Callus and Corby acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Scott Wilson’s ‘Writing Excess: the poetic principle of post-literary culture’ (2006). A single passage amid the steady flow of Wilson’s reflections

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ The implicit reference here is of course to pieces such as: Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv’s *Text Rain* (1999), Jim Andrews’s *Nio* (2001), Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Robert Coover, et. al’s *Screen* (2003), Zachary Booth Simpson’s *Mondriaan* (2004), Bruno Nadeau and Jason Lewis’s *Still Standing* (2005) and Philippe Bootz’s *Play Music for My Poem* (2015), all of which are tied together by their employment of the human body’s fascination with the effects it is capable of producing to distract from, impossibly precondition, and ultimately prevent reading from taking place.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ivan Callus, ‘... Literaturelessness ...’, *CounterText*, 5: 1 (2019) p.92 qtg. Ivan Callus, James Corby, ‘Editorial: Countertextuality and the Political’, *CounterText*, 1:1 (2015) p.v.

on the role of literature in techno-capitalist society is striking for its similarity to the *CounterText* definition:

Literature no longer operates most effectively in “literature”, but everywhere else. [...] Literature [...] is to be regarded, therefore, as a form of “writing excess” which operates in all discourses at the moment where discourse exceeds its particular disciplinary boundaries...³⁹

From the consensus emerging between Wilson, Callus, and Corby it seems appropriate to return full-circle to Cayley’s twin charges: that if electronic literature is anything, then it is digital language art; and that it is electronic literature on the side of digital language art, not on the side of say, the post-literary due to its tendency to frame the ontological challenge to literature without calling literature seriously into question. The problem with Cayley’s insight that electronic literature no longer operates well in ‘literature’ and would work better in ‘language art’ is of course that it cannot help but describe the quality of exceeding disciplinary and generic boundaries that makes electronic literature precisely post-literary (at least by the Wilsonian and *CounterText* token). We will recall that our three exemplary cases consisted of a multimedia prose-poem in Flash, a gamified hypertext in Twine, and a Twitter novel, and that these are but a fraction of the sub-genres and hybrids subsumed by electronic literature. So to call it ‘language art’ – or, indeed, to say that it marks the literary gone ‘elsewhere’ and ‘everywhere else’ – is to concede that the accepted forms of literature no longer coincide with or have descriptive purchase on what electronic literature generously embraces. Yet, Cayley’s express preference for his own term, which is the rule and not the exception in electronic literary scholarship, taken together with the field’s belated start to considering the post-literary in connection with electronic literature, seems to convey the message that electronic literature cannot be both post-literary and digital language art.

One final facet of the paradox of thinking electronic literature as, in this case, post-literary might be enough to settle things, albeit not enough to settle things one way or the other. On *CounterText*’s fifth anniversary, its editors sought to take stock of “whether the various pronouncements [...] carried by the journal add up to a richer, more evolved understanding” of the post-literary.⁴⁰ They did this by excerpting the most “trenchant and insightful pronouncements”, arranging them so as “to speak not only for themselves but to each other”, and interspersing them “with note-like reactions that a reader of *CounterText* might reasonably be expected to have”.⁴¹ One of these reactions reads, “Ah, is this where the ‘post-’ comes in? When literature ceases announcing itself as a question?”⁴² Of course, in framing the note as another question of and on literature’s behalf, Corby and Callus have answered themselves in the negative. But let us indulge the possibility that in the post-literary condition, the question of literature is – after decades of literary theory with this question at its centre – finally closed. How, then, can the idea of electronic literature as a manifestation of that condition be

³⁹ Scott Wilson, ‘Writing Excess: the poetic principle of post-literary culture’, in *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed., Patricia Waugh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) p.562.

⁴⁰ James Corby, Ivan Callus, ‘*CounterText*: On Its Own Terms’, *CounterText*, 6:1 (2020) p.33.

⁴¹ Corby & Callus (2020) p.34.

⁴² Corby & Callus (2020) p.37.

countenanced in the same breath as a defense of the idea that electronic literature repeatedly calls literature into question? The paradox is by no means resolved in a subsequent editorial reaction: “inversely, it might be said that that which is recognised as ‘literature’ is always, at least to some degree, ‘post-’literary”.⁴³ With this note an impasse is reached, not so much for the editors’ narrative as for this paper; an impasse between: dismissing electronic literature from considerations of the post-literary insofar as the latter renders literature unquestionable, and considering electronic literature, as at least to some degree, post-literary insofar as it names a genre which coincides analogically with accepted forms of literature at various points along the genealogical line. It seems it is pointless to try for a single verdict and so I will settle for this: electronic literature speaks to “the specificities of 21st-century compositions and practices that are *still and/or no longer* configurable as the literary”.⁴⁴

⁴³ Corby & Callus (2020) p.40.

⁴⁴ Callus & Corby, (2015) p.vii.