Toward a Diffracted Literature

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In 1999, the French publisher Autrement asked me to write a short story. I wish to begin by presenting a rather long excerpt thereof, because I believe that it is illustrative of my work, which consists mainly in the use of text generation within installations or as part of various artistic events such as shows or readings. The story's title is "The Bedrooms"; its subject, the "bedside book." In the story, Rebecca, the daughter of an old sleepless lady, offers to her mother, Evita, an indefatigable reader, an electronic smart-paper book of which, little by little, Evita discovers all the uses.

One night, after she had for convenience leaned her reading tool against the lamp on the bedside table, Evita put herself to bed. As she awoke from one of her usual nightmares, full of well-known faces, strange places and foolish acts, her eyes were drawn by the brilliance of the screen, which she had forgotten to switch off. She discovered then what she ought to have known but her old reading practices had forbidden her to understand: It was not necessary to have the object in her hands to look at what was displayed on it. The letters were indeed big enough that she could read them with ease from the other side of her bed; moreover, at such a distance—because she no longer had to hold the book or keep it open with her thumbs—her physical comfort was greater, and this was not inconsequential at her age. In fact, with her body separated from her book, she was no longer like a prisoner of a flat space to which she had to pay all her attention. She found that discovery quite pleasant. Indeed, it was enough to set her reading engine anywhere and choose the most comfortable position for her to read any of her beloved texts using her vocal interface or her keyboard. The very next day, Evita ordered brought down from her attic an old gilt frame that had been there forever: She ordered what she now called her reading sheet of smart paper inserted within it and had the frame affixed to the right wall of her red bedroom. Then, head in the depression of her pillow, lying comfortably on her left side, she was able to abandon herself to her much-loved activity: reading.

The first night was delightful, to such a degree that, overstimulated by her delight and inventiveness, she could not sleep at all, fascinated by these texts that waited to do whatever she wanted, raising or lowering their brightness, becoming like an everlasting show on the background motif or, on the contrary, stand out vigorously against it, imposing upon the eyes' laziness the strength of meaning. Text was no longer a dead space animated only by its reader's judgment but a living being with which she exchanged intelligence; something like an instrument for endless proposals and creations, especially in that clever algorithms hidden within its slight thickness seemed to learn to anticipate her desires by suggesting roundabout techniques of which she herself would never have thought. Entirely engaged in this novel stimulation, she decided to abandon for a few nights her bedside texts to explore surprising prospects: using the instrument's Internet connection, she explored the most creative sites: dynamic literature, concrete literature, generative literature, moving texts... All these curiosities concealed in the Net maze, because she discovered in them a new world, began to occupy much of her time.

But it is not so easy to change old ways: Evita was soon tired of these games that favored the fruitfulness of language and, for her, were too much involved in the dynamics of a future with which she felt not really concerned. What Evita enjoyed in reading was the friction of two living spirits lent to the culture of memory: one created by the proposition of the typographic signs and the other that her mind, with her reminiscences and her concern for the snapshots of life, could build. Evita needed texts that spoke to her, not that let her dream; texts that promised, first by means of an excerpted short story by the author and then in a theoretical discussion, to demonstrate and analyze some of the implications of the use of the screen in the field of e-literature.

ABSTRACT

Over a relatively short period of its history, literature has become closely linked to the book; but literature preceded the book, and today its creation, due to its digital form, is more and more linked to screens or to sound output interfaces. Because the screen is not a material object but a virtual one, it can take as many forms as its users wish. This article attempts, first by means of an excerpted short story by the author and then in a theoretical discussion, to demonstrate and analyze some of the implications of the use of the screen in the field of e-literature.

Fig. 1. PPpose (02), screen captures of a work in the author’s PowerPoint Cyberpoesies series, 2002. (© Jean-Pierre Balpe)
Another fact was often on her mind: if her bedside book, put in the place of a poster or painting, had many advantages, it also had some inconveniences. One evening, because of a pain in her left side, she would have liked to turn onto her right side, but the fixity of the sheet was a significant constraint, and she felt some regret that her bedside books no longer lay about. After several days, she felt herself upset: to sleep in the red bedroom had become unpleasant. She considered reversing herself and taking the book out of its frame; then she had an epiphany: her children were at least as rich as she, and her grandsons seemed to be well on their way in life. Nobody would need her savings except for some superfluous pleasures or to increase reserves. She found that she had no reason to deprive herself—an attitude that she had never adopted before. Via the Internet she contacted the smart paper book’s maker and asked him if it was possible to produce smart paper sheets to her specifications. The book-maker—who had never considered such a request—felt immediately that it could be done and proposed to study her problem. A few days later, he made her a proposal: he could realize plastic screens at the size she wanted, and at not too high a cost.

To test his designs, she ordered screens for three walls to extend from a height of one meter up to the ceiling for her pink bedroom, which her family had named the Wilde Bedroom. In the daytime, these wall screens could align with the appearance of any wallpaper. As a screen background, she chose the pink Greek border motif that had earlier been that of the bedroom, but the images didn’t interest her very much. Evita could have used her walls to display the numerous WebTV images that pulsed on the Net, but that didn’t truly mesh with her desires. Evita was a woman of text, and she entertained herself by exploring the universe of her texts. It was indeed enough to order aloud, “Right wall, first page of Ulysses with the word life... Left wall, second page of Mort à crédit with the word life... Front wall, first occurrence of the word life in the Sentimental Journey” to find some resonance that she had not suspected, as if the authors, through their works, would never cease dialogue, whether in harmony or in disharmony, responding eternally to each other.

She multiplied the games, asking for the reproduction of the same text on all four walls; making different texts proliferate on the different walls; stretching around the room a unique sentence readable on a background of text whose fonts were so small that they couldn’t be read; writing with offsetting colors new sentences within the uniformity of the old phrases; making of a dissimilar group of sentences a single text open to all interpretations: the possibilities seemed to her to be inexhaustible. Late one night, when her enthusiasm was at its height but when, in spite of that, her fatigue had slightly dulled her intellectual promptness, a mistaken order—she had asked for a word in a book while altering its title—gave as its result a work that she didn’t at first recognize. She then realized that it was nothing other than one of her old writings, which she had forgotten in the memory of her laptop.
then understood that all these writings were in communication and that she was herself the heart and the mistress of an infinity of thoughts. So she found herself in the same situation as a writer, because there were no real differences between what she had written and what many other people had also written; her words were occupying the walls exactly as did the words of other writers. It was a new experience for her to read herself as anybody else could have read her. It then became sometimes difficult to know if she had written something or if she remembered it, if some other writer had written or inscribed the words within her brain.

Her bedside texts thus divided into fragments and came to form a unique and multiformal work, in which a continual conversation replaced the ancient monologues.

The very next day, she called back the maker of the screens and ordered him to cover the walls of all her bedrooms. Very pleased with this customer who not only made an unusual demand of him but moreover through it obliged him to improve his techniques and made him consider a new market he hadn’t conceived of and that, to judge from the first reactions to his proposals, seemed to be particularly promising, the maker proposed, to thank her, to paper the ceilings, for the same price. Evita agreed with pleasure.

Today, in our technological societies, we privilege memory over creation, death over life. It is enough to compare the expenses incurred for heritage to those for creation to understand that our cultures preserve more than they produce. Literature, so long linked to its leading medium, the book, became like this symbol of itself to such an extent that it petrified itself in insane rituals of fixity. Forgetful of its oral origin, literature has so congealed itself in its conservation processes that its integrity and the unalterable-once-published text seem to have become the major qualities of writing. In its ultimate conceptions, it has become fractal. This is to say that because literature dreams of being a perfect form, with faultless intertwining of constraints and necessities, resisting any movement, its world, its form, its place are consid-

**Fig. 4.** PPPosie (01). (© Jean-Pierre Balpe)

cliquez
il clique
clique encore et
rien ne se passe rien
rien d’intéressant et il se dit

que rien
ne vaut
sa peine

peaceful. The whole space of the room was full of letters that seemed to extrude from the walls and the ceiling and that in turn reflected themselves upon the bed-sheets, the face and the eyes of the dead woman. The text forming that space, animated by a barely visible typographic variation, like a light breathing, read:

And now we are again alone. All these things are so slow, so sad, so heavy... I will soon be old. And finally it will be the end. So many people came in my bedroom, they didn’t tell me many things. They left. They became old, sad and slow each of them in a small spot of the world [1].

All the rest of her life, the fear that pursued Rebecca was that the computer had written there the last thoughts of her mother [2] [Fig. 5].

**Fig. 5.** Labylogue (01). picture of a part of the screen of an installation conceived by Maurice Benayoun, text generator by Jean-Pierre Balpe, music by Jean-Baptiste Barrière, Lyon-Brussels-Dakar, 2000. (© Jean-Pierre Balpe. Photo © Maurice Benayoun.) The text is generated in reaction to the speech of the spectators moving within a virtual maze.

...
ried impossible to modify, and nothing, once set in a text, ought any longer to move; each text is thus, in a certain way, the infinite repetition of a unique formula, as, for example, structuralist theory, in its more radical directions, tried to show (see Fig. 6).

This situation is only recent and localized. In its major geographical expansion and for most of its existence, literature has lived, developed itself and been handed down orally and in the human memory. This human memory is not a dead but a dynamic one, which—as shown by the numerous different versions of texts transmitted by tradition—rebuilt more than it repeated: so the same became always different. If literature forgot that for a while, it is today, with the new tools that digital approaches place at its disposal, what some creators are proposing to elaborate anew.

The book, that paper medium, product of a dated technique, has become a reductive matrix that we have to reform; to let go of the linearity and the fixity of its pages, to allow text to reveal itself by other means, in other contexts with other possibilities of expression. There is then for literature no fatality of paper. Moreover, how many writers today, even among the most conventional, already write, although without understanding all its creative implications, their manuscripts on the computer?

So, through the diversity of its manifestations, what literature wants to affirm today is the vital and infinite power of the “literary” communication as a central plexus of links among the subjects, their languages and cultures; a dynamic diffraction of relations, where the always-different text, diffracting itself in the optical-fiber nets, manifests its identities only through the infinite repetitions of its generation of the same, through its infinite changes more than through its halts (Color Plate B No. 3). What this process assumes is the fecundating power of language as it enriches itself within all the restraining particularities of any given context. It is this fecundating power of language upon which the receiving subject continually renews himself or herself.

At first approach, the digital text indeed pulls down all the material references that are the grounds of the reader’s “preparation”: the physical appearances of the book (volume, thickness, division into paragraphs and chapters, and so on). It affirms itself as radically new literature, in which all reading acts have to be reconstructed. Refusing the received conventions of reproduction, a “digital novel” is obliged to invent all its codes, those that the “paper” novel no longer creates but is satisfied with lightly altering and, as a result, leans strongly upon all that are preserving it: crutches. Digital literature wants first of all, then, to be something like a “literarization” of technique, because, in its multiplicities and its variations, what it first shows are its potentials and its changes (see Fig. 7). Even if that situation is not absolutely new in literary history, where the temptation of presentation through new technical apparatus has always existed, at least in the
margins, the digitalization of its technology has created within literature a drastically new situation: the immediacy of its generation and its infinitude set on stage the formalisms from which the texts come forth. The relation of the subject to his or her writing is thus a relation to time, and the functional concept of author is itself totally redefined, because what matters above all is the “historical” memory of forms and their displacement. There is no breaking down but a continuation to excess. The person who, for want of anything better, we can only call a “digital author,” needs not to deny tradition by means of a radical modernity but requires of it something like a new reading, or, at least, an unheard one. Digital literature’s only pretension is to enrich the text’s potentialities. It forsakes the fiction of fiction to be only interested in the subjective production and formalization of meaning. In that sense, it exists only through infinite literary production (see Fig. 8). Digital text rejects clotting, time’s dictatorial caricature; it presents a whim of eternity. But this eternity-whim truly differs from that of “classical” literature because it depends not on the duration of its memory but on the infinitude of its reproductions.

Out of the book, displayed on screens or, by diverse technical processes, on any object henceforth used as a displaying surface, text, now able to become time and space, completely changes its nature. It becomes picture-text, sometimes even text-universe or performing-text. That old temptation, long sketched in diverse historical attempts, now finds its fulfillment thanks to the possibilities that computerization allows it. Before all else, a screen is a picture, and text, without losing the fundamental distinctiveness that defines it as text, gains multiple dimensions once displayed.

According to George Steiner [3], the comprehension of modern art requires the acceptance of the fading of any conception of “culture” as having an immanent value, necessarily linked to hierarchical societies, and its replacement with a set of “cultures,” all regarded as equal. The computer—or the computer culture, the way of thinking that depends on it—is, in that sense, an absolutely new and absolutely up-to-date writing tool. Compelling the total obliteration of the reference marks of a culture with collective foundations, it represents an anti-hierarchical culture, something like a “post-culture.” From the viewpoint so produced, the collective culture seems to disappear not only behind a more individual one, but moreover for the benefit of a oneself-culture, or at least behind the scattering of a complex set of microcultures that are more or less impermeable, none of them able to proclaim the obvious truth of its supremacy. Digital literature makes no claim to the intangible and almost-divine universality of pre-digital literature, in which the only active role left is in the production of new glosses; it wants merely to be the ephemeral and temporary moment of a common literarity, revealing itself only in the instant of the creative stimulus. Spreading itself upon the contextual accidents where it has to act, it creates texts that diffract themselves through the innumerable splits by which the networks where it exhibits itself are perceived. Although identical, texts then come to differ in as many ways as there are contextual views of their source. The “old” writer, concerned with the text’s sanctification, because of the need for formal references, looks backward; the digital writer, as a scientist in search of progress, looks forward. Classical culture
originate from a bet on transcendence: “Art and mind looks toward what is not yet here, at the accepted risk of being ignored by the living” [4]. Classical culture is produced only for museums, for “conservation,” and thus is opposed to ephemeral consummation. The classical production of writings is aimed entirely at archives. To that way of thinking, the least “loss” is considered a cultural tragedy: any destroyed manuscript is a burning library; the obliteration of any draft scribbled on a tabletop seems a disaster. Against that museum art, that library-and-dust art, digital writing is an art of consummation, which refuses to look back on its tracks, which it considers no more than signs turned toward something else.

Happening, performing, real-time digital text, which exists only by its instantaneity, fights first of all against all this: “Everywhere the virus of potentiality prevails... see Fig. 9” Carrying us away toward a rapture which is also that of unresponsiveness” [5]. But the unresponsiveness that Baudrillard fears is, in fact, a positive one because it is unresponsive to an external hierarchy of values, to a culture of reverence. “The public is no longer the wise echo of talent, something like a referee and relay in transmission of an atypical attempt; it associates itself to the artistic elaboration inside of a set of sometimes uninhibited energies” [6]. The text, no longer literary, has now to annihilate all reverence, because what is in view is the movement of the literary itself and not such or such of its singular exhibitions. So the computer produces something like an infinite “diffraction” of its texts. Its culture is close to spreading, to dispersion. It introduces a new relation to memory, no longer “reminding” but (because a text, read a given moment, is nothing other than an image of another text read at another moment with which it maintains links of dependence and independence) at once diffracted and refractory, rebuilding remembrance. Active participation by the reader lies in its elaboration. Displaying on its screens the vanishing of the master, of eternity’s claims, digital literature engages the reader as a culture in itself.

While strongly individualist, the contemporary spirit is also gregarious, taking pleasure in the instantaneity of shared time, where the contemporary spirit formerly was collective inside the unchangeable cultural spiritual union. Digital literature (and this is also why it bamboozles) tries to be on the side of the effusive superficiality of show. It wants to reconcile the literary activity with that of play and the game: to separate literature from the sphere of reverential and deadly seriousness in which the whole classical tradition locks it. Not merely about a particular text, it questions itself infinitely about the aesthetic working of the human spirit (Fig. 10).

Like all new literary approaches, digital literature must first struggle with that resistance within itself, to find the ways that are peculiar to it by rejecting, even sometimes at the cost of provocation and error, at the risk of becoming illegible, what is inside it, enclosing itself within the gummy thickness of its moments of arrest.

References

Jean-Pierre Balpe works at the University Paris 8. A researcher and theorist of the relations between the computer and literature, he has written various scientific and technical books. Since 1985, he has created or participated in numerous exhibitions of art and new technologies. He has also had various interactive and generative shows.